

By: Jenny Whittle, Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services
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To: Cabinet 20 June 2011

Subject: Children's Services Improvement Plan

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary Provides Cabinet with the first Ministerial report from the independent chair of the Improvement Board.

1. Introduction

1.1 Cabinet received a report on 4th April on the governance arrangements for children's social care improvement, including the role of the external Improvement Board. On 23rd May Cabinet endorsed the Children's Services Improvement Plan, and agreed the workforce strategy and compelling offer to improve recruitment and retention of social workers.

2. The Improvement Board

2.1 One of the requirements of the Improvement Notice issued by the Secretary of State for Education to the County Council in January 2011 was to "put in place an Improvement Board which shall have an independent chair agreed by the Department for Education, which shall meet once a month and include in its membership key partners and agencies". The purpose of the Board is to ensure effective, cross-partnership oversight of the Improvement Plan in order to ensure delivery of all requirements outlined in the Improvement Notice.

2.2 Liz Railton was jointly appointed by DfE and KCC as the independent chair of the Board, and its first meeting was in February. Ms Railton is required to report progress on a quarterly basis to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Education, and to the Leader of the County Council, including specific commentary against the targets set out in the Improvement Notice. Her first report was completed in early May and this is attached at Appendix 1. Although the report is confidential, Ms Railton has agreed to a request by the Leader to make it public in the interests of transparency and openness.

3. Recommendations

Cabinet is asked to NOTE the first Ministerial report of the independent chair of the Improvement Board.

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CONFIDENTIAL**FIRST QUARTERLY REPORT TO THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AND TO THE LEADER OF KENT COUNTY COUNCIL FROM THE INDEPENDENT CHAIR OF THE BIRMINGHAM IMPROVEMENT BOARD****Introduction**

The first meeting of the Kent Improvement Board took place on 21 February and there have been two further meetings since that date. This is therefore the first quarterly report of the Independent Chair. The Safeguarding and Children in Care Improvement Plan was presented in draft at the first meeting and approved at the second meeting. Substantial monitoring data and other evidence to demonstrate progress in implementing the plan have been available at the March and April meetings. There has been significant transparency in the reporting of performance issues in social care services and about the ways in which the improvement plan is being progressed.

Compliance with the Improvement Notice

There is evidence that the Council is taking action to “improve the areas of weakness identified in the Ofsted inspection report”. The Improvement Plan is comprehensive with a strong focus on 10 core tasks considered to be essential to making the service safer in the short to medium term.

The Council does not yet have in place “robust arrangements to sustain and build on the improvements secured”. This is to be expected at this stage.

Sufficiency of progress

The Council has taken a number of positive steps to secure effective strategic leadership of a very challenging improvement programme. In February the Leader appointed a new Lead Member for Children’s Specialist Services, Jenny Whittle. An Interim Director of Children’s Services, Malcom Newsam, was appointed in January and is now, following a corporate restructure, the Interim Corporate Director for Families and Social Care. In January an Interim Director for Children’s Specialist Services was appointed followed in March by the appointment of a new Independent Chair of the Kent Safeguarding Children Board (KSCB).

There have been high level changes to the officer structure in Kent as the organisation establishes a new leadership team and focuses more on commissioning, collaboration and more integrated approaches as the means of achieving an ambitious agenda of improvement. The statutory Director of Children’s Services role is now embedded within the role of the Corporate Director for Families and Social Care. The role includes accountability for Adult Social Care. There is a separate Education Directorate. It is too early to assess the impact on children’s social care but there is an explicit intent to make the delivery of the improvement plan an early test of the success of the new organisation and culture. It has been good to note the efforts made by the political and officer leadership to make contact with front line staff and to ensure regular communication with the service.

The Council has committed itself to making rapid progress. However, the scale of the challenges that continued to emerge after the publication of the Ofsted report has absorbed considerable capacity and this has slowed progress. It is to the Council's credit that its early activity was focused on establishing the full extent of risks within the service. There were significantly greater numbers of unallocated cases than had been previously identified. Problems with the accuracy of the activity and performance data made it difficult to assess how much work might be required to address backlogs and, more importantly, the full extent to which children might be at risk.

Much of the activity reported to the Board during this first quarter has been about getting accurate information about the types of cases within the backlog and responding to them appropriately. There has been marked progress on this. There are no unallocated child protection cases and the total numbers unallocated have reduced from over 2269 at the end of February to 973 on 10 April. However, referral rates, numbers of children subject to child protection plans and numbers of children looked after have continued to rise. Although recruitment strategies have been successful and, with the help of agency staff, vacancy levels at the front line are relatively low, the service is highly stressed by these high levels of activity. There is also a significant retention issue which results in lower numbers of more experienced staff. This places additional pressure on management and supervision creating a vicious circle of poor workload management and lack of attention to the quality of practice.

The current focus on 10 core tasks is aimed at breaking this vicious circle in the short and medium term. It is the right approach. The work done thus far has been impressive and it begins to address all the requirements of the Improvement Notice but it is not yet possible to assess progress as being sufficient to give confidence either that children are consistently safer in the short term or that improvement can be sustained over time.

Challenges in the next stage of work

Notwithstanding the excellent strategic leadership that is now in place, there may be issues of pace and capacity in relation to the scale of what needs to be done during the next stages of work. The plans to continue delivering shorter term "fixes" on the backlogs of unallocated cases and the delayed assessments look robust as a peripatetic team of 30 social workers and 6 managers has been taken on for 6 months.

The Council is aware that, without these inputs from additional staff, reaching a more sustainable position on workloads and the quality of practice is highly dependent on some significant changes:

- ***A new operating model for the service*** will be required as there is already evidence that the current model impedes good practice. There is a substantial risk that backlogs will grow again if the existing operational model remains in place.
- ***The implementation of a new Performance Management Framework and a new Quality Assurance Framework*** will require both capacity and capability if it is to be successfully embedded within the service. Experience in other LAs suggests that this is challenging work because it requires staff at every level in the organisation to record and make use of performance data, to understand what good practice looks like, to

scrutinise it on a systematic basis and to take positive action whenever there are weaknesses in practice.

- ***A recruitment and retention strategy*** that focuses on the urgent need for experienced practitioners within the service. Although there is a positive story about improved recruitment of front line staff, there is significant risk arising from a pre-dominance of newly qualified staff. Given the national context of shortages in the social care workforce, this will not be an easy issue to address and will require a highly pro-active approach to delivery as well as good strategies.
- ***A much improved IT system*** that enables accurate and timely data about activity and performance to be available throughout the service. Again there is a national context for this and Kent needs to ensure that it is well networked with peers who are also addressing this issue. The current system has not served Kent well and continues to hold back progress in making improvements.
- ***Working with partners*** to clarify and operate effective thresholds for access to the social care service. The high rate of referrals to the service is unsustainable. However, this issue is not easily addressed as the Council needs to work very closely with partners so that there is full understanding of thresholds and genuine realignment of the resources and priorities of all agencies working with children and families. Health partners have engaged with the Improvement Board and are reporting both good progress and some significant challenges in delivering the improvements that have been required by the Care Quality Commission. However, there are some issues about the extent to which partners feel ownership of the Common Assessment Framework and the implementation strategies in Kent. There appears to be a significant legacy of silo working with the LA now needing to reach out to partners in a more inclusive way.
- ***The Kent Safeguarding Children Board also needs to secure more meaningful engagement from partners.*** The new Chair has moved quickly to strengthen the Board. There have been changes in local health organisations and there now needs to be more alignment between senior health staff and the membership of the Board. There also needs to be fuller participation in the leadership of the Board's business through the chairing of Board sub-groups. Although a new multi-agency performance framework is nearing completion, there has not been sufficient capacity for analysis of performance management information with the result that the important multi-agency scrutiny role of the Board has not been rigorous. There is a recommendation that this capacity issue should be addressed.
- ***Succession planning for the leadership*** of the service is a current issue. There are a number of senior positions filled on an interim basis, partly due to the corporate organisational changes and partly in response to the particular improvement challenges in children's social care. Malcolm Newsam, now the Interim Corporate Director for Families and Social Care, joined Kent on an interim basis in January 2011 and has driven forward a well focused programme of immediate improvements. He has undoubtedly given the Council and its staff leadership and a sense of direction at a critical time. Similarly the commitment of the new Lead Member for Specialist Children's Services, Jenny Whittle, has reinforced the priority given to the

improvement agenda by the political leadership of the Council. Malcolm's initial appointment was for a 6 month period but the efforts during February and March to recruit a permanent Director did not attract a sufficiently strong field and Kent is actively continuing its search. Clearly this situation has the potential to impact on the sustainability of improvements so this is a major issue for the Council to resolve although it is likely that Malcolm will be prepared to continue his interim role for longer than 6 months.

Concluding Comments

The Council, through its Leader and Chief Executive, has ensured political and officer leadership for the improvement agenda, committing resources to making immediate changes and recognising the levels of risk to children inherent in the current service. In the context of a large and diverse County, a great deal remains to be done to achieve sustained impact. This will test the Council's ongoing capacity and capability given the major challenges listed above. The Lead Member in particular has been active in looking at examples of good practice in other places that can be adapted to the Kent environment. She and the Interim Corporate Director have been securing external support. In order to secure sufficient pace in taking things forward the Improvement Plan would probably benefit from a stock take of the internal capacity available to support the next stage of work so that early decisions can be made on the sourcing of any necessary support.

Liz Railton CBE

Independent Chair of the Kent Safeguarding and Looked After Children Improvement Board

9 May 2011