

By: Peter Gilroy, Chief Executive
To: Children's Champions Board – 21 July 2009
Subject **Protecting Children in Kent**
Classification: Unrestricted
Ref.

Summary: The report sets out the findings from the staff self-assessment questionnaire and the extended child protection plan case-file audit, in the context of wider national policy developments since the meeting on 12 February 2009.

FOR DECISION

Introduction

1. The report marks the second stage of the review of child protection services in Kent, commissioned of the Chief Executive by the County Council at its meeting on 11 December 2008. This was prompted by the publication in November 2008 of the urgent Joint Area Review following the Baby Peter case in Haringey. This, in turn, had prompted the Secretary of State for Children, Families & Schools to instruct all councils with children's social care responsibilities to undertake their own quality-assurance audits, with an emphasis, as he put it, on "getting behind the headlines of performance monitoring data".
2. The first stage of the review was reported to Members at the special meeting of the Children's Champions Board on 12 February 2009. The key findings of that review were:
 - a. sound professional practice in Children's Social Services, with appropriate child protection plans in place, demonstrating satisfactory risk-assessment and multi-disciplinary and inter-agency working;
 - b. Children's Social Services learns from and applies the lessons from Serious Case Reviews (SCRs);
 - c. the effectiveness of professional competence of frontline staff was blunted by caseloads (in some teams) but particularly by the recording requirements of the Integrated Children System (ICS) and also from more onerous requirements as a result of changes, from April 2008, associated with court proceedings;
 - d. Children's Social Services can be deemed as complying with the recommendations of the Climbié Inquiry, save for some specific identified exceptions, which are not of themselves indicative of unsafe practices.

3. These findings were based on the small number of cases which were audited by the Review Team – that is to say, the few cases in Kent that met the criteria set by the County Council in its resolution on 11 December 2008. Those early findings were also based on the preliminary results of a questionnaire designed to ask the same questions as the urgent Joint Area Review in Haringey. The questionnaire was completed in late January/early February by a cross-section of professional, supervisory and managerial staff in Children Social Services.
4. The Review Team were invited to give an oral update to the Children's Champions Board on 20 May 2009. At that meeting Members were informed of the progress that the Senior Management Team of Children, Families & Education and senior managers and staff in Children Social Services have already made on taking forward the recommendations from the initial report, particularly with regard to the Integrated Children's System and deployment of support staff, as well as giving a verbal 'work-in-progress' report on the extended case-file audit.
5. At the meeting on 20 May, Members were also given an initial analysis of the self-assessment questionnaire results. In terms of providing further assurance, it is intended that this analysis will be presented again, for the benefit of all those attending the special meeting on 21 July. These findings have been discussed with and 'reality checked' with a staff focus group and with the Senior Management Team for Children's Social Services. The key findings of that analysis are set out in Appendices 1 and 1a to this report. The findings from the self-assessment questionnaire-based survey are consistent with the preliminary findings reported in February and also bear a strong correlation with the review team's findings from the extended case audit.
6. It was envisaged that this second phase of the review would focus on the extended case-file audit, recommended and agreed in February 2009, together with working jointly with the Kent Safeguarding Children Board, on an examination of the effectiveness of interagency safeguarding arrangements. The first strand of that work, namely the extended case audit, comprises the key outcome of this second phase and is the main focus of the meeting on 21 July. Appendix 2 sets out in detail the findings and conclusions of the extended case-file audit and will be the subject of a presentation at the meeting on 21 July.
7. **The overall conclusion of the extended case-file audit is that children in the cases under review are being adequately protected.** Taken together with the earlier audit work and the analysis of the self-assessment questionnaire, a strong assurance can be given that Children Social Services is 'on top' of its child protection responsibilities, notwithstanding the pressures identified

in the earlier report indicating little or no 'slack' in the system and the areas for improvement identified through the audit.

8. However, whilst information has now been collected from all agencies represented on the Safeguarding Board, insufficient progress has been made thus far on the analysis of inter-agency effectiveness work to be able to report on it substantively at this point. A third stage to this review has always been intended and consideration of the inter-agency work will now have to be incorporated into that third phase.
9. In terms of the actions already being taken by the Children, Families & Education Senior Management Team and Children Social Services since the February report on additional posts, managing vacancies and workload pressures, the actions are noted and welcomed but it is too early to report on their impact. These too will be reported in the third phase.

The national policy context

10. Much has happened on the national stage since the special meeting of the Children's Champions Board in February 2009. Members will of course be aware of the continuing developments in the Baby Peter case in Haringey – the prosecution, conviction and sentencing of the mother, her partner and their lodger, and the partner's further conviction for a serious sexual assault on a 2 year old girl.
11. The most recent Ofsted-led progress report on Haringey, at the beginning of July, indicates limited progress in correcting the systemic and practice failings identified in the 2008 Joint Area Review. These very specific events have ensured that child protection remains very much in the public eye.
12. Lord Laming was invited in November 2008 to undertake a national review of progress on implementation of the recommendations of the Climbié Inquiry that he had chaired in 2003. His report was published on 12 March, accompanied on the same date by a Statement to the House of Commons by the Secretary of State giving in principle agreement to the reports findings and the 58 recommendations it set out for action.
13. The formal Government response to Lord Laming's report was subsequently published on 6 May, setting out a detailed action plan and timetable for implementation. The Government response and action plan wholly endorses Lord Laming's recommendations, with the singular exception of the recommendation for Government to ring-fence budgets to ensure that the needs of all children in need can be met. Instead, whilst the narrative of the response is silent

on the specifics of the recommendation, the Government has committed itself in the Action Plan to “further discussion”.

14. Many of the actions relate to the Department of Children, Schools & Families issuing revised *Working Together* guidance, following consultation, on important matters to do with the accountability and governance arrangements of Local Children Safeguarding Boards and Children’s Trusts; the conduct of Serious Case Reviews; the focus of local Children & Young People’s Plans. Some of the draft guidance is now coming out for consultation but it is too soon to usefully comment until it is possible to have an overview of the entire package of proposed changes. Further information on Lord Laming’s report and the Government response can be found in the agenda papers for the Children’s Champions Board on 20 May.
15. The Review Team, from the outset, has worked on the basis that whilst systems and processes play an important role, the best safeguards for the protection of vulnerable children rely on having skilled, qualified and confident social workers and others, equipped with sound professional skills in direct intervention with families, risk-assessment and risk-management, supported by their supervisors and managers, and able to make inherently difficult judgements in sometimes stressful situations, each of which is unique.
16. So, whilst there is little with which one can take exception in the recommendations and the action plans to deliver them, opinion remains divided as to whether they, as a package, strike the right balance of measures, appropriately calibrated to the different stakeholders, and that they will strengthen capacity and capability at the point where professional staff are intervening directly in the families and lives of vulnerable children.
17. Also on 6 May, the Social Work Task Force published an initial report which gives a clear set of messages about the pivotal role played by social work professionals in protecting vulnerable children, calling for greater political and public support for the profession and for urgent steps to be taken to free up practitioners from what it refers to as “bureaucracy”, a reference to the unintentional but adverse impacts of rolling out nationally a fundamentally flawed Integrated Childrens System.
18. It is a credit to staff in Children Social Services and the Children, Families & Education Directorate that, even before this call from the Task Force was made public, they had already taken significant steps locally to mitigate the worst defects of ICS in a measured and managed way. It is also a credit to the Secretary of State that the Government has accepted the underlying messages about the system’s manifest flaws and substantially varied its earlier policy position on rolling-out ICS.

Recommendation to Children, Families and Schools

19. *One very specific finding in respect of Children's Social Services has emerged from the work of the Review Team since the earlier special meeting of the Children's Champions Board in February – the strong correlation between the quality of supervision and the quality of social work practice. This is not specific to Kent and is a key message in research published by the Department for Children, Schools & Families in June 2009 into the findings of 350 SCRs conducted in the period 2005-07.*
20. *The two key recommendations the Review Team makes are:*
- *CSS undertakes work to review its supervision policy and where necessary strengthen it;*
 - *the additional investment in staffing takes account of the need to make high-quality task-focussed and reflective supervision consistently available to front-line staff.*

Recommendations to Children's Champions Board

21. Members are asked to:-
- (a) NOTE the contents of this report and in particular the findings of the staff survey and extended case-file audit;
 - (b) ENDORSE the recommendation set out in paragraph 20 above;
 - (c) NOTE that a further special meeting of the Board will be arranged for the Autumn to report back on further national developments and their possible impacts on local safeguarding arrangements and on the findings of the work to assess the effectiveness of local interagency safeguarding arrangements.

Martyn Ayre
Senior Policy Manager/Lead Reviewer
Email: martyn.ayre@kent.gov.uk
Telephone: 01622 694355