

EXTENDED CASE FILE AUDIT

*The purpose of this extended case-file audit was to be able to give a greater degree of assurance on the **reliability** of the findings from the initial work in January 2009 by taking a larger and more representative sample. The findings of this audit are consistent with those of the earlier study.*

Audits of critical areas of public service such as child protection are, by their very nature, stressful for those whose work is under analysis and, in the wider public realm, under an unrelenting public and media gaze.

This report seeks to direct attention towards areas of systems and practice where we think improvements can be made. We do not intend that those comments that can be construed as critical are misconstrued as indications of dangerous or unsafe practice. The audit has uncovered no such evidence. In saying this, we repeat what everyone knows – complacency is perhaps the biggest risk of all.

The message is clear. There appears to be little or no 'slack' in the system. However, social workers and their supervisors, managers and support colleagues are doing good work in challenging circumstances – they occasionally fall short of the highest standards, as described, in this report, to which they aspire, recognise it when they do and aim to do it better next time.

1. Structure of audit

- 1.1 The structure of the audit was agreed by the Children's Champions Board after receiving a report of an initial review of a small number of cases which met criteria previously identified by the Board. The agreed structure for the extended audit was to select a sample of 50 current cases of children with child protection plans. The sample was required to select cases at random with the final selection adjusted to ensure an even spread of cases over Children's Social Services Districts in the county plus cases from specialist teams for children with disabilities. To reflect the particular vulnerability of pre-school aged children, the sample was further adjusted to ensure over half the cases were in this category.

- 1.2 The age ranges of the children in the sample are contained in the following table:

Age range	Number of children
Unborn	2 children
0 – 2 years old	10 children
2 – 5 years old	15 children
5 – 10 years old	9 children
10 – 16 years old	12 children
16 – 18 years old	2 young people

- 1.3 The case files and the ICS records for each child/young person in the sample were examined by four assessors:

Martyn Ayre	(16 cases)
Joan Long	(12 cases)
David Evans	(7 cases)
Peter Thomason	(15 cases)

- 1.4 The case files and ICS records were examined in relevant local offices between 31 March 2009 and 15 April 2009. In order to achieve consistency in the review, each assessor used a common audit tool to guide their review of the case records. The audit tool is attached as an annex to this report.
- 1.5 The audit tool was designed to maintain focus on compliance with the current Kent Safeguarding Children Board’s child protection procedures, to review appropriate and timely interventions, to establish whether social workers are appropriately supervised, to ensure that the child was appropriately protected, and to identify any patterns of child protection activity which may indicate problems.
- 1.6 The results of the assessors’ reviews were collated by Peter Thomason and have been discussed with the Children’s Social Services senior management team.

2. Overall conclusion from the audit

- 2.1 **The overall conclusion is that the children in the cases under review are being adequately protected. Some elements of some case fell short, in the assessors' views, of what could be considered best practice but, overall, practice is NOT unsafe.**
- 2.2 Forming a comprehensive view of individual cases at times proved difficult and time-consuming due to the spread of information between paper files and the computerised ICS system. In some cases this was further complicated by documents and file notes that were waiting to be recorded (i.e. notes kept in manuscript or electronically but not immediately available to others if just reliant on reading the file or accessing ICS).
- 2.3 In their present states, neither the paper file nor the ICS record on its own is currently a useful tool for managing and understanding child protection cases. This is in contrast to the JAR findings in 2007 prior to the introduction of ICS. It is anticipated that the action already taken by Children's Social Services since the completion of this audit to improve ICS and minimise delays and backlogs of inputting will have improved the reliability and is leading to a more efficient and user-friendly information system.
- 2.4 Wherever they were available, chronologies and reports for court proceedings provided a good overview of cases. Similarly, records of supervision discussions and decisions provided a good source of information about the progress of cases. Where these sources of information were absent, assessors sometimes had to spend a considerable amount of time in forming a reliable view of the case. This would also present difficulties for social work staff who had to deal with a case in the absence of the allocated worker (e.g. if the worker was sick or on leave).
- 2.5 In addition to the practical problems of the ICS system that were being encountered in the months prior to this audit, the quality of recording varied considerably between cases. The assessors considered this is a *potential* risk for children, practitioners, and managers. For the protection of the children concerned, it is good practice that records are comprehensive and kept up to date. For the protection of the professionals involved, it is important that their interventions and the reasons for decisions, together with properly completed assessments of risk, are clearly recorded. Much good work is almost certainly being done but is not recorded. In the absence of records, assumptions could be made that appropriate work is not being undertaken.

Although time-consuming, recording is a valuable social work tool that aids objectivity in complex cases.

3. Supervision

- 3.1 The importance of supervision in child protection cases has been emphasised in Lord Laming's recent report and recommendations to the Government following the Baby Peter case in Haringey.¹ The assessors in this review agreed with his statement that "Regular, high-quality, organised supervision is critical". In the cases where records were well ordered and where practice could be considered to be exemplary, good quality supervision records were generally evident. It was concerning to note a number of cases where there were no or limited recorded evidence of supervision. Certainly, in those few cases where episodes of "drift" had occurred or where improvements were needed in other areas of practice, supervision records were often lacking and it is reasonable to assume this indicated a lack of regular and focussed supervision.
- 3.2 Children's Social Services' supervision policy – or at minimum, the recording of supervision – might benefit from being revised and it is anticipated that the requirement for regular supervision will be strengthened as a consequence of the revision to *Working Together* guidance. It is clearly essential that supervision notes are properly and consistently recorded by the supervisor on either the paper file or the ICS system and that they include a regular review of the progress of the child protection plan.
- 3.3 In order to be able to achieve these standards consistently and without undue difficulty, it is essential that social workers and their supervisors have sufficient time for the process. It is important that when the planned additional social work posts are filled, managers and senior social workers are given adequate time to meet the demands of supervising both the existing and the new social workers.

4. Assessments

- 4.1 A significant analysis of risk in child protection cases is dependent on completion of a Core Assessment. This is a requirement in cases where a

¹ The Lord Laming, *The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report* (HMSO, March 2009)

Strategy Discussion has agreed to pursue enquiries under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 and the assessment should be completed within 42 working days of the referral which led to the S.47 enquiries.² The Core Assessment is intended to follow the very detailed and comprehensive model of the Common Assessment Framework and "should include an analysis of the child's developmental needs and the parents' capacity to ensure that the child is safe from harm. Occasionally, it may be necessary to commission specialist assessments (e.g. from child and adolescent mental health services) that create difficulties in meeting this deadline. Wherever possible, this should not delay the drawing together of the core assessment findings at this point"³ (i.e. within the 42 working day time limit).

- 4.2 In a number of cases under review, Core Assessments had been noted to have commenced but there was no evident record that they had been completed. Delays in completing Core Assessments can represent a deficit in child protection practice as risk assessment and child protection planning may overlook significant information that could have been revealed in the assessment process. There was evidence in the audit that even where core assessments were not completed, care was being taken to order the available assessment information in a preliminary version. Whilst not best practice, it does demonstrate a risk-assessed approach to safeguarding against potentially unsafe practice. The reasons for the delay are not usually recorded on files and can be due to a number of causes (e.g. social workers with limited time, delays in responses to requests to other agencies for relevant information, delays in provision of specialist assessments). Delays from other agencies are obviously beyond the direct control of Children's Social Services and should be the subject of further investigation and discussion in the inter-agency element of the Kent Safeguarding Review.
- 4.3 Based on their direct experience of the system in the course of the audit, the review team are of the view that current ICS Core Assessment "exemplar" should be reviewed with the aim of simplifying inputting and retrieving information. As a national system, this may be beyond the control of Kent Children's Social Services but the review team are aware that significant "work around" solutions are being developed locally to mitigate the defects of the exemplar and that representations are being made via the Social Work Task Force and other avenues to the Government.

² Kent & Medway Safeguarding Children Procedures: 6.5.3

³ *Working Together to Safeguard Children* : Paragraph 5.114

5. Repeated periods of intervention

- 5.1 A number of the reviewed cases had a history of previous referrals, sometimes over many years. These are cases which have been previously opened, allocated and worked with for periods and then closed, only for more referrals leading to the case being re-opened. This pattern is in no way unique to Kent and is very well known throughout children's social care in the UK, to the extent it is now generally given the epithet of "start again syndrome". This pattern can suggest the possibility of lack of progress in previous interventions, premature closure, or incomplete assessment; all of which may – or may not - be associated with inadequate or poorly focussed supervision or lack of resources leading to priority being given to the most risky cases at the expense of lower risk but still needy cases. As patterns of re-referral can only emerge through time, the causes are obviously based in the past and may not apply in the current situation in Children's Social Services. However, minimisation of this pattern and the associated "drift" in cases will depend in large measure on regular and focussed supervision to ensure progress in child protection plans and revision of plans when they are not succeeding.

6. Complexity factors

- 6.1 It is often difficult to convey to non-specialist audiences, the complexity of the circumstances with which social workers have to contend in their day-to-day child protection work. In all of the cases reviewed, risk and the complexity of the case was associated with a multiplicity of factors. In some, as many as six or more factors could be identified. Amongst the commonest were drug and/or alcohol misuse, domestic violence, parental mental health problems, and frequent changes of address. These were further complicated when there was an aggressive attitude to social workers and other professionals and open non-compliance with child protection strategies. Even when aggression or open non-compliance was not apparent, some cases showed evidence of covert non-compliance where parents or carers were seemingly co-operative but made little or no progress in set tasks or the general care and protection of their children. Some cases involved fathers with serious mental health problems and histories of violence necessitating MAPPA

assessment and plans. **It is notable that many of the cases have made good progress despite the presence of many of these factors. Once again, regular supervision is an important element of maintaining the welfare and protection of the child as the paramount focus of the case.**

7. Changes of social worker

- 7.1 Despite a high referral rate of children deemed in need of a child protection plan, the evidence from the review sample clearly indicates that social workers are allocated promptly to child protection cases. This is indicative of sound risk-assessment in social work teams. In one case, the change was prompted by the request of the family. In another, there was, exceptionally, a delay of two months from initial case conference to the allocation of a named long-term worker, which also delayed the commencement of the core assessment but the norm, judging from this audit, is that good practice prevails.

8. Use of legal process

- 8.1 The review sample gave evidence of prompt and appropriate use of legal processes where there was immediate and irresolvable risk to a child or where interventions had been tried and failed to bring adequate improvements to the welfare and safety of the child. The use of a formal letter advising parents or carers of the intention to institute legal proceedings had a positive effect; prompting engagement of parents and measurable improvements in their care of children. Where cases were assessed as posing high immediate or long-term risk, there was evidence that legal proceedings to protect the children were taken at an appropriately early date.
- 8.2 Although complex and time-consuming, the process of instituting care proceedings and its associated Public Law Outline process have had the effect of imposing greater structure on cases and improving the standard of information contained on files. Although this approach is not necessarily appropriate for all child protection cases, a similar rigour in assessments, evidence, and recording would benefit most cases.

9. Other elements of the child protection process

- 9.1 The review sample provided positive evidence that the following elements of the child protection process were conducted appropriately:

- Strategy discussions: in most instances, are held according to current child protection procedures and are recorded.
- Child protection conferences: are generally held within stipulated time-scales and are properly recorded although there are frequent delays in completing and circulating minutes. Where available, the minutes provide a good summary of the case.
- Independent chairpersons of child protection conferences: the chairpersons maintain focus on the needs of the child and the progress of agreed child protection plans; holding agencies to account where necessary.
- Core Group meetings: are normally held within stipulated time-scales and are well-attended and recorded. The Core Group follows the agreed child protection plan and will take action when the plan does not achieve identified goals.
- Children are seen: there is evidence that children are seen and spoken to (where age and understanding allow) and are visited regularly when subject to a child protection plan.
- Child protection plans: are in place and monitored. Most show evidence of progress. Where there is no progress and continued risk of significant harm, legal action is instituted.

10. Conclusions

10.1 Based on this sample of 50 current child protection cases, the assessors concluded that the general standard of child protection work with these cases was satisfactory but some elements of practice could be improved. These were:

- Ensuring regular and focussed supervision which is then clearly and concisely recorded.
- Ensuring Core Assessments are completed within 42 working days of initial referrals. Where this is not possible due to reliance on other

agencies' assessments or information, an interim Core Assessment should be completed within the 42 days.

- Improving the standard of recording on paper files and ICS, ensuring it is comprehensive, accurate, and concise.
- Ensuring regular review of the progress of child protection plans and taking legal action to safeguard children where progress is not evident or where parents are non-compliant.

10.2 The standards are deemed to be adequate in the cases under review. This can be said with a greater degree of assurance than it was possible to give on the strength of the initial case-file audit reported in February. However, there can be no guarantee that a single case within Children's Social Services may not be in a state of risk. Standards of child protection work overall can only be assured by regular supervision and self-monitoring. This requires adequate staff and supervisory resources. Action has been taken to improve the number of practitioner posts: it will be critically important to match the supervisory capacity to the increased numbers of practitioners.

10.3 Many elements of the child protection process are dependent on the resources and relationships with other agencies. These will be the subject of further discussion and review within the Kent Safeguarding Children Board.

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The four assessors engaged in this review would like to thank all the managers and staff of Children's Social Services for their ready assistance and co-operation in making files available for the review and for providing office and support facilities.