

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICE

CORPORATE DIRECTOR'S MEETING WITH EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

18 September 2009

CHILDREN'S TRUST BOARD

21 September 2009

INTEGRATED CHILDREN'S SYSTEM (ICS) AND PERFORMANCE RECOVERY PROGRAMME

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

The report has been prepared to take forward the commitments in the Children and Young People's Plan under objectives 2.1 (Safeguarding Children – Arrangements and Accountabilities) and 6.7 (Workforce Development). Specifically it considers

- progress with implementing the Integrated Children's System (ICS, Protocol),
- its links with performance management systems and
- aspects of performance on initial and core assessments.

It sets out the next steps in the ICS recovery programme, which have been designed to ensure that local performance improvement priorities for initial and core assessments are combined with ICS improvement objectives.

2. PERFORMANCE CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

2.1 The relevant performance context began in 2006 with the establishment of Children's Services in North Yorkshire and the findings of the Joint Area Review (JAR) which took place in September 2006. The key performance features from that time which are directly relevant to performance on initial and core assessments were as follows:

- performance management in Children's Social Care was underdeveloped at the point at which it became part of the Children and Young People's Service Directorate
- JAR inspectors judged that the thresholds operating in relation to child protection at that time were too low
- performance on the timeliness of initial and core assessments was below average and the subject of a JAR recommendation

2.2 A number of inter-related developments in 2006/7 and 2007/8 followed and led to significant improvements, as recognised in Annual Performance Assessments in 2007 and 2008. Some of the most significant were:

- Major changes in the performance management arrangements and activity in Children's Social Care. These included improved performance data, more active use of performance measures by frontline managers and staff, differentiated target setting and team level action plans to focus improvement effort appropriately.
- A review and audit of child protection thresholds was undertaken and reported to the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).
- The Local Authority and partners working together in the Children's Strategic Partnership (now Children's Trust) developed an increased range of integrated, preventative services through our Locality Strategy. This included the introduction of early interventions coordinated and managed through Integrated Services, and

using the Common Assessment Framework. This, in turn, was linked directly to an agreed vulnerability checklist to help ensure that thresholds for preventative and high needs interventions were both clear and closely related to one another.

- There were a number of practice developments in Children's Social Care to improve the range of strategies and interventions for work with higher risk families and their children (eg kinship care, restorative practice developments, and outreach interventions from some Children's Residential Centres).
- The Strategic Partnership made it a priority to target improvement work through better support to, and improved performance within, the Youth Justice Service.

2.3 The key impacts of these changes were:

- A reduction in the number of children with Child Protection Plans – they reduced by nearly 100 in 2007/8, followed by a slightly rising trend early in 2008/9 prior to the impact of the Baby Peter case.
- Improved performance on the timeliness of initial and core assessments (though there was still more to do on this as reflected in priorities in the Children and Young People's Plan and the LAA).
- No unallocated cases in Children's Social Care in the summer 2008.
- An approach to preventative interventions (through Integrated Services and Common Assessments) which is recognised locally and externally to be very effective.
- A positive LSCB audit which quality assured the decision taking which had led to the reduced number of Child Protection Plans.
- A timely LSCB review of Child Protection Procedures to underpin practice.

The progress made, and the robustness of the underpinning approaches, were acknowledged in a succession of external evaluations. These included the last CSCI monitoring visit prior to its merger with Ofsted in 2007; both APA judgements in 2007, 2008; monitoring reports by Government Office Children's Service Advisers; and Training and Development Agency (TDA) evaluations of integrated service developments.

3.0 ADVERSE, EXTERNAL PERFORMANCE PRESSURES 2008/09

3.1 Two major external developments coincided in 2008/9 which have had an adverse impact on:

- performance management information for Children's Social Care
- maintaining progress on timeliness in initial and core assessments
- the allocation of cases at some times, in some teams, in Children's Social Care.

3.2 They were:

- implementation of ICS (Protocol)
- the post Baby Peter increase in referrals, and the related increase in numbers coming through to Child Protection Plans.

3.3 On ICS, we were only in the early stages of implementation in 2008/9 because our original chosen software provider failed to deliver a workable product within DCSF timescales. This delayed our local implementation, and meant that we had to make a late switch of provider to meet DCSF deadlines in 2008/9.

3.4 We anticipated difficulty with the implementation of ICS and to reduce risk, selected a replacement product which the provider believed to be compatible with our existing electronic database (Swift). This was important as it would enable us to retain Swift for the first year of implementation to provide us with performance data. We

anticipated that this would allow us to concentrate on introducing the electronic case management functions of ICS. It was also the provider's view that the chosen product was flexible in its operation, a feature which is important particularly in inter-agency work around vulnerable children.

3.5 Neither of these priority features materialised in practice. Other Authorities using the same product, and other products, have been similarly disappointed. The root cause is that the DCSF required the operation of a very heavily prescribed standard procedure which they also insisted was built into the functionality of the software. Taking these two issues together the computer system proved to be very cumbersome to operate particularly as many of the staff had not previously been expected to operate this type of system. In relation to the progress made in the previous two years, the key impacts of ICS in 2008/9 were:

- loss of a system to provide reliable performance data on a regular basis
- major, time-consuming practical complications in progressing casework.

Both were directly attributable to implementation of ICS Protocol.

3.6 As with any operationally critical, IT system, difficulties with the software product have sometimes been exacerbated by vulnerabilities and limitations in the underpinning IT infrastructure.

3.7 We carried out a major reassessment of the ICS project between November 2008 and January 2009. As a result we did the following things:

- allocated significant, non-recurring resources to increase the practical support to frontline workers in Children's Social Care (more administrative, IT and training support to free up social work time, plus use of agency staff to cover social work vacancies and to provide supernumerary help)
- allocated significant non-recurring resources to retrieve performance data, and to maintain an interim, performance data management system during 2009/10 pending stabilisation of ICS
- allocated significant recurring resources to increase parts of Children's Social Care capacity on a permanent basis, because we recognised that the practice implications of ICS (together with the emerging post Baby Peter issues) would be long term.
- strengthened our ICS project management so as to link it directly with Children's Social Care performance management arrangements.

In total this involved a recurring reallocation of funds of £340K for nine extra social workers and in addition extra non-recurring allocations totalling £375K. Over and above that, recurring resources have been allocated for three Deputy Service Managers and two Independent Reviewing Officers for fostering, six Family Support Workers for preventative work, and three additional management posts for Safeguarding, Domestic Violence and Policy Support. The total recurring investment is over £800K.

3.8 While we were carrying out our major ICS review, and establishing the recovery strategy, the Baby Peter case broke nationally. It increased the number of referrals made to Children's Social Care and, because of generally heightened anxieties around risk, has led to a higher proportion of referrals converting into children with Child Protection Plans.

3.9 The combined effect of these two major national pressures has inevitably had an adverse impact on the timeliness of initial and core assessments in 2008/09, and in the first quarter of 2009/10. The next stage of the ICS recovery programme,

therefore, must make improvements in timeliness for these two critical assessments a high priority again, and this must be integral to the ICS improvement plan at County and team level. The issue was highlighted as an area for development by Ofsted inspectors during their unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in the County in June/July 2009.

- 3.10 For completeness, it is worth noting one additional, external pressure which has contributed to the challenges faced in Children's Social Care this year. It is the growing demand by the Family Courts for reports to be prepared for them by Children's Social Care rather than by CAF/CASS. Inevitably requests come with tight timescales related to childcare proceedings. The reports are important, complex and time-consuming to prepare. Courts have acknowledged that the reports produced by Children's Social Care are good quality. They are having to be produced, however, by our frontline, casework staff. Inevitably, therefore, in a year in which there have been other significant pressures too, this level of work for the Family Courts will have contributed to the adverse impact on the timeliness of initial and core assessments.

Given the scale of the issue, the matter is to be raised directly with CAF/CASS. A request will also be made to the LSCB to monitor the position and to pursue the matter as need be.

4.0 ICS AND TIMELINESS RECOVERY PROGRAMME – NEXT PHASE

- 4.1 Detailed reports on ICS have been made to the Directorate Leadership Team and Elected Members as the basis for the recovery programme which has been in place since the end of 2008. Regular monitoring reports are provided to the Director and to the strengthened Project Management Group. (Copies of reports are available as background documents.)
- 4.2 The first phases of the programme have concentrated on stabilising the system, releasing social work time back into frontline practice, and re-establishing data capture for performance management. Data is being captured at Team and County level on spreadsheets for quarterly performance monitoring which has enabled us to get back to informing team level action plans with comparative data.
- 4.3 Simultaneously, we have been recruiting staff to the 15 additional posts established in Children's Social Care this year and the additional Family Support Workers in the Integrated Service Teams. Nine assessment and safeguarding social workers have been appointed, three are in post now and six will be by the end of October. We are continuing with our recruitment processes for the remainder of the unfilled posts.
- 4.4 In the interim, agency staff have been used to cover vacancies (for previously established and newly established posts). This has, inevitably, put pressure on budgets this year, which we are addressing firmly. However, the extreme, combined pressures in the system this year could not have been predicted when the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2008/9 and 2009/10, and the related annual budgets, were agreed. Some significant variation in original expenditure plans, therefore, has been essential under the externally driven pressures we have faced (see para 3.7). It is a high priority in the next phase of the recovery programme to complete recruitment and so to stabilise expenditure.
- 4.5 The first phase of the recovery programme included an evaluation of key issues, learning and progress. This helped to identify the key points to work through in the next phase to ensure that we get to a final position in which ICS is working as an efficient tool to support effective practice in a sustainable way. The principal issues for the next phase are:

- resolving some aspects of the programme design which are excessively time-consuming and do not lead to a high quality product. These are particularly the exemplars used for assessments, especially core assessments, and the assessment planning tools.
 - reviewing the roles of frontline staff and administrative support to get the best balance to optimise frontline worker time with clients, and to inform staffing standards and training for the future.
 - improving the reliability of performance data generated automatically by the system.
 - maintaining a personalised training programme for frontline staff to achieve relevant IT skills and confidence for the system and, crucially
 - restoring a focus on key performance improvement priorities in our practice, especially the timeliness and quality of assessments.
- 4.6 We have also identified the features in the Council's IT infrastructure which need to be addressed to improve the system's resilience. There is Corporate commitment to address them as a priority. Further details are provided in the next section of the report (see para 5.5).
- 4.7 Whilst we have been doing our local evaluation of ICS, three major national reports identified concerns about ICS. All have drawn attention to the scale of the problems which have been caused for many Local Authority services by the current configuration of the various ICS products, and the implementation timescales set by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The three key publications have been:
- Lord Laming's second report – "The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report" (March 2009)
 - the Protection of Children in England: Action Plan (DCSF May 2009)
 - First Report of the Social Work Task Force (May 2009).
- These have led very recently to major changes in the approach taken by the DCSF. This is set out in the Department's letter of 22 June which withdraws its previous timescales for ICS implementation, introduces potential flexibilities in the way systems are configured, and restores local discretion about the use of ICS (albeit with some national requirements still in place).
- 4.8 We do now have the option in principle, therefore, to withdraw from ICS if we wished to do so and had local systems which met national requirements. Our pre-ICS systems do not, however, and it would be an immensely complex task to develop from scratch a local system which met national requirements. It remains appropriate, therefore, to press ahead with making a success of ICS, and most staff and managers wish to do so.
- 4.9 The policy approach in our next phase, however, needs to use all the relevant flexibilities now on offer nationally so that we can make faster progress to having an efficient tool which is being used consistently well and which operates at sustainable cost.
- 4.10 Some of the new flexibilities can be exploited quickly, for example substituting local templates for assessment for the unsatisfactory exemplars provided in the system. Other flexibilities will take longer to put into operation, possibly several months, as they require the software provider to make changes to the program. These include the key issue of the assessment planning tools. It must be our priority now to work with the provider, applying pressure as need be, to resolve this matter during the autumn. Changes in these two key areas would provide significant simplification of the program, which must be our objective in the interests of service users and

frontline staff. In addition, during this period, we will work with the software supplier to implement any available "tried and tested" upgrades to the existing system which we think will be of assistance in increasing the overall efficiency of the operation of ICS.

When these changes have been made it may then be opportune to "take stock" of our future strategy for further development of ICS, bearing in mind that, also during this period, we will be progressing developments following the significant "changing approach" by the DCSF. It is also necessary to consider how best the systems for ICS within Social Care can be linked with other systems, particularly our main Children's Service database, IMPULSE, especially as we are working towards having, from a user's perspective, a single electronic record for every child covering all aspects of the services provided to them.

5.0 PRIORITY NEXT STEPS

5.1 Exemplars for Initial and Core Assessments – Links with Timeliness of Assessments

It is our intention to reintroduce the templates for initial and core assessments which were used locally prior to ICS. They provide better reports for service users than those in ICS, which is a high priority, and are simpler for practitioners to use, especially for core assessments.

5.2 To keep the assessment reports an integral part of the electronic record, they will be entered by frontline workers electronically as a Word document. Any workers who do not currently have appropriate IT skills or confidence to enter assessments in this way will receive personalised training as a priority.

5.3 It will be possible to make this change during September and October 2009. It will be linked directly with the following performance and quality assurance objectives:

- i) targets in Team Action Plans to improve the timeliness of initial and core assessments will be reviewed and emphasised;
- ii) the Standards for Core Assessments which were developed previously by the service as part of its improvement strategy for core assessments will be reissued and supported by examples of local good practice based on the guidance;
- iii) performance data on the timeliness of assessments will be collected via spreadsheets on a monthly basis (in addition to the full dataset which is gathered quarterly at present). This will enable faster feedback to managers and frontline workers to actively manage performance;
- iv) data about referral numbers, numbers of children placed under or removed from Child Protection Plans will also be produced on a monthly basis. This will help to monitor trends and to assess performance on timeliness.

5.4 Assessment and Planning Tools

Whilst the assessment templates can be changed locally, the planning and work sequencing tools cannot. The software supplier will be making national revisions given the scope for flexibilities now allowed by the DCSF. We will be pressing for that as a priority and will link with other Authorities in doing so.

5.5 IT Infrastructure – Improvements to Resilience

Since ICS is so fundamental to the services we provide to our most vulnerable children it is essential that the risk of the service being unavailable is kept to an absolute minimum. This is very challenging, and potentially expensive, in providing back-up and alternative facilities especially in a large rural County where Social Care Services are provided at a relatively large number of locations. The actions required range from having the installation of sophisticated computer back-up systems to measures in Local Offices taken in the event of electricity supply or telephone failure, etc. It should be noted that the additional investment required may be needed in any event as other Council services, and indeed schools, become similarly increasingly dependent on computer systems and infrastructure.

The need to ensure the resilience of ICS is recognised as a corporate priority.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 That Executive Members/Children's Trust agree the priority actions outlined in

4.4 – re completing recruitment to Children's Social Care and stabilising expenditure

4.9 – re policy commitment to utilise national flexibilities to simplify ICS

5.1-5.3 – re replacing exemplars for assessments and renewing focus on targets to improve timeliness in initial and core assessments

5.4 – re working with Liquid Logic to free up assessment planning tools

5.5 – re improving resilience in relevant parts of the Corporate IT infrastructure.

6.2 That a further monitoring report on progress with ICS and performance recovery be considered in December 2009.

**CYNTHIA WELBOURN
CORPORATE DIRECTOR – CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICE**