

**25<sup>th</sup> November, 2014**

**Walsall Self Assessment of Services for help and protection looked after children and care leavers: progress since the Improvement Notice was lifted.**

**Ward(s)** All

**Portfolios:** Cllr B. Cassidy

**Executive Summary:**

This report describes and comments on the performance and impact of services to children and their families, especially those delivered by Children's Social Care, which were the subject of negative findings by Ofsted a little over two years ago. It presents data and analysis under the following headings:

- The quality of partnerships and governance;
- Capacity, capability and culture; and
- The quality and effectiveness of frontline practice.

It focuses on the three-month period since July 2014 when the Government lifted the Improvement Notice it had served on the Council in November 2012. That Notice was imposed following Ofsted's "inadequate" judgement in July 2012.

In addition to looking back over recent developments, the report makes reference to work that is planned with the intention of realising further increases in the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of services to children and young people. These include:

- Further changes to our "front door" arrangements for receiving new referrals;
- Strengthening the work of the Council's Corporate Parenting Board;
- Decreasing the reliance of the service on agency staff; and
- Introducing a new system for the electronic storage and presentation of information about children's cases.

**Reason for scrutiny:**

In April 2014 the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel received a report describing the work undertaken to improve the service and the impact of that on children. This report provides an update to that one, recognising that the Panel requires regular assurance that improvement has continued since the lifting of the Notice and the ending of the Improvement Board.

**Recommendation:**

That the report be received.

**Background papers:**

None other than an appendix showing the current management structure for Children's Social Care.

**Resource and legal considerations:**

No additional resources are required at this time and there are no specific legal considerations.

**Citizen impact:**

The services covered by this report play a key role in keeping children and young people safe in Walsall. The impact of improvement in such services ensures that they are supported to live with their families safely, but that timely action is taken when that safety is significantly compromised.

**Environmental impact:**

None

**Performance management:**

This report brings together a range of data and findings that are themselves the products of a variety of internal performance management processes and systems, including those operated by the Children's Services Senior Leadership Team. In addition to oversight by this Scrutiny Panel, the work of the Council and its partners is challenged and held to account by:

- The Walsall Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB);
- The Children and Young People's Partnership (CYPP);
- The Health and Wellbeing Board (HWBB); and
- The Cabinet Member (Children's Services).

This report directly relates to improvements required in response to judgements made by Ofsted, which routinely inspects parts of our provision and periodically looks at the whole service (and the way it is monitored by the WSCB).

**Equality Implications:**

Levels of need for social care intervention correlate with poverty and disadvantage. However, this report has no specific equalities implications.

**Consultation:**

This report describes the impact of a range of services, many of which are delivered through partnership arrangements and are subject to consultative processes. However there has been no need for specific consultation about this report.

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## **1. Report**

### **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1 In April 2014 the then Director of Children's Services presented a report to the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel describing the work undertaken to improve the service and the impact of that on children as suggested by performance information. The compilation of that work and its outcomes anticipated the potential lifting of the Improvement Notice that had been served on the Council in November 2012. That Notice was a consequence of Ofsted's judgement that our safeguarding and child protection arrangements were "inadequate" when inspected in July 2012.
- 1.2 In July 2013 Ofsted's judgement was that services were then "adequate" and required improvement, and in July 2014 the Minister lifted the Improvement Notice. The purpose of this report is to describe and comment on the continued progress of Children's Services since the Notice was lifted. The previous report to Scrutiny covered 16 months of change, while this one deals only with a three-month period. However, it does also look forward to some significant changes which will further assist and embed our continuous improvement.
- 1.3 Developments since the Notice was lifted are considered below under the three Improvement Theme headings that had created a framework for the work done since November 2012. A key change that provides a context for the period is that on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2014 David Haley replaced Rose Collinson as Director of Children's Services. Rose had been effective in leading the recovery of the service over the preceding two years, but it is important and significant that the service now has a DCS directly employed by the Council and committed to building on the work of his predecessor over the long term. At the same time, the Interim Assistant Director of Children's Social Care, Sue Butcher – who had also had a significant role in the achievements made – was replaced by Tony Griffin as an interim appointment. The pending recruitment process to appoint to the permanent Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Safeguarding is underway.

## **2. Progress against the three Improvement Themes**

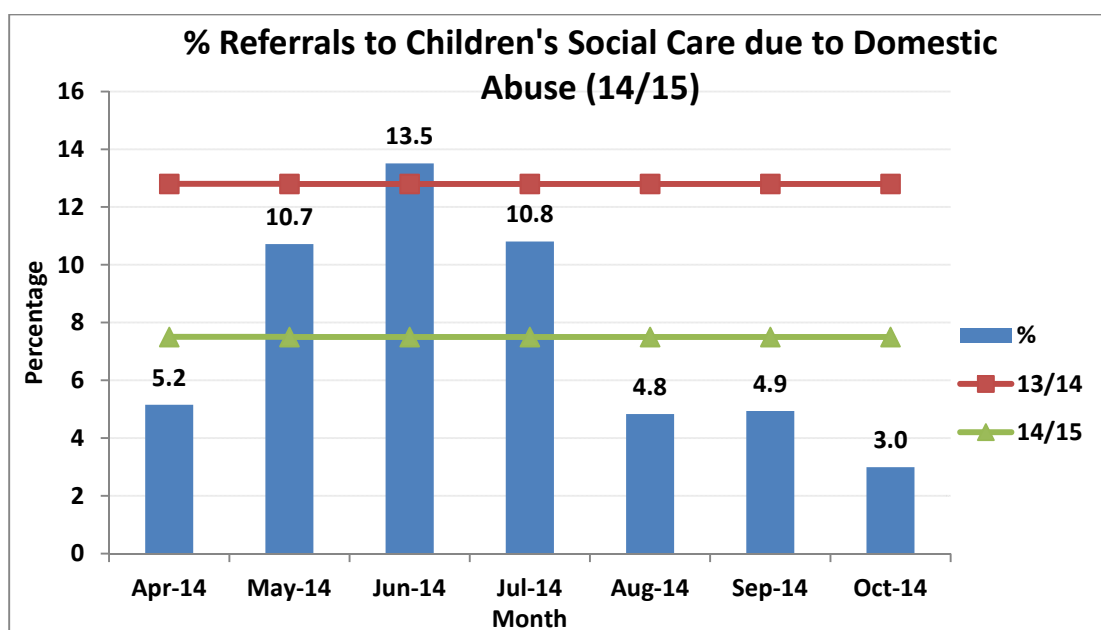
### **2.1 The Quality of Partnerships and Governance**

- 2.2 The lifting of the Improvement Notice led to the ending of the Improvement Board, but not an end to the need for continual strategic oversight and quality assurance of all efforts to keep children safe in the Borough. The body with the responsibility and accountability to continue that is the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB). In recent months the WSCB has demonstrated its ability to perform this function, as exemplified by the lead it has taken in responding to renewed concerns about Child Sexual Exploitation, especially in the light of the

Jay Report about Rotherham. Members will recall that the Independent Chair of the WSCB provided a report to the previous meeting of this Scrutiny Panel about CSE in Walsall.

2.3 In its September 2014 meeting, the WSCB considered some doubts over the effectiveness and efficiency of arrangements for responding to new cases of domestic abuse that affect children. That led directly to the formation of a working group which will appraise the benefits of adopting a MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub) approach, and then planning for its implementation. The MASH model is now in place in a number of Local Authorities and serves to bring together all the key agencies in leading operational responses to all new cases of concern about child protection. Such a model would be expected to improve the process of dealing with domestic abuse cases and to enable more timely decision making. The Board will continue to oversee and monitor this development over the coming months.

2.4 Recent routing of domestic violence notifications and contacts through the MAST has had a marked impact on resultant referrals as a proportion of the total, as shown by the chart below.



2.5 The work will overlap with the need to be assured that thresholds for intervention are understood by all agencies and consistently applied. The timeliness and quality of social work assessments was a concern but around 90% are now being completed in timescale. That shows very good progress, but the very high rate of referral to Children's Social Care remains the biggest single pressure on the service. In the first six months of 2014-15 the service has received 6395 contacts about children. The referral rate per 10,000 population is 944 in Walsall. Although this has decreased (from 1028) over the last six months, the England average rate is 573.

2.6 System improvements have supported the achievement of consistently timely assessments for both Core assessments and initial assessments; information around the latter is provided below.

Initial assessments		Mar-13 England	Mar-14 Walsall	YTD Sep-14 Walsall
	Number of IAs	441,500	5,676	2,577
□	Rate per 10,000	387.4	892.5	810.4
□	% completed in 10 days	75.5	57.9	88.5
□	% where child seen	n/a	94.3	95.2
□	% where child seen alone	n/a	52.6	73.3

2.7 Similar improvements also provide greater intelligence around the decisions made at each stage of the safeguarding journey; the direction of contacts where children's social care involvement was considered not necessary are provided below

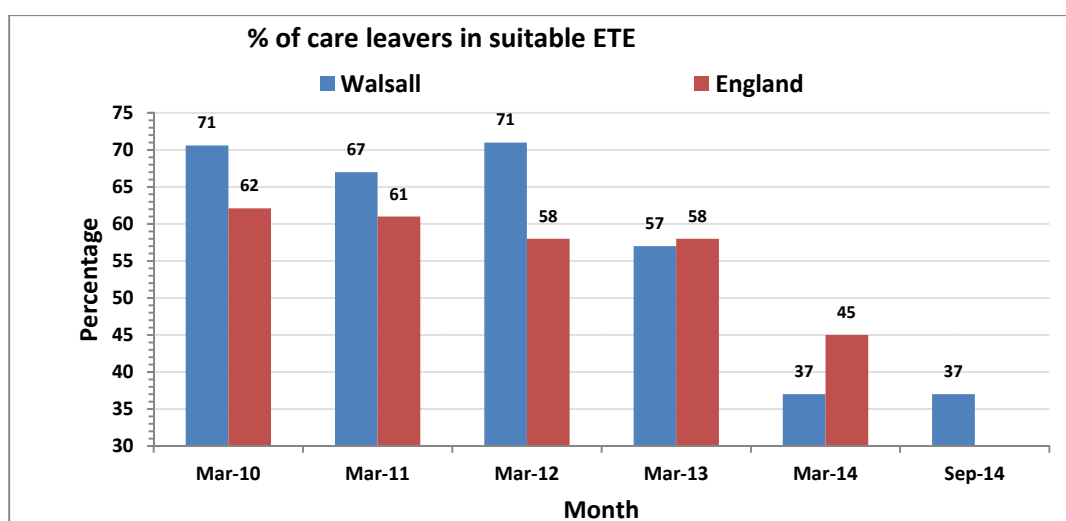
Decision Outcomes of contacts NFA:	Mar-13 England	Mar-14 Walsall	YTD Sep-14 Walsall
Early Help (for screening by MAST)	n/a	n/a	1389
Onwards Single Agency Referral	n/a	n/a	103
Advice and Info Provided	n/a	n/a	3889

2.8 In October the Council's Corporate Parenting Board considered the way it works to achieve the aims of the Corporate Parenting Strategy. That strategy is particularly important in that the improvements it seeks are clearly driven by the views and wishes of Looked After Children themselves. The Board has established a range of Sub-Groups each tasked with leading the work on a section of the strategy (so there are groups for Health, Education etc). Each of these groups is expected to include an Elected Member and a Young Person advocate. The latter is a demonstration of our sincere commitment to listening to children, though the data relating to input by children into meetings about them suggests there is still improvement needed.

2.9 One of the Groups (called Moving into Adulthood) will be greatly assisted by the Scrutiny Panel's recent examination of Care Leaving, which also serves as an example of the very effective analysis and challenge that the Panel has delivered. This group will also be interested in access to welfare benefits and the way that we might implement "Staying Put" (a policy that enables young people to stay with foster carers beyond the age of 18) in Walsall.

2.10 Both the suitable accommodation and Education, Employment and Training (EET) measures for Care Leavers are poor across the West Midlands.

For the former, there has been a local increase from 77% to 82% in the last 6 months; currently better than the last England average of 78%. For the latter, there has been a significant reduction from March 2012 to March 2014 as shown below. Although the national trend has also been a downward one, Walsall's figure has shown a steeper decline. It is likely that the reasons for this relate to the particular cohort of young people that the data relate to. They have been unusually difficult to engage, some were in custody, and some had become parents. Many of the young people in the cohort had become looked after well into teenage years and were already entrenched in non-engagement with school/education and this proved difficult to reverse. This is an explanation but it must not be allowed to affect our ambition. We will continue to closely monitor the data to ensure that there are improvements once the impact of this particular cohort has passed.



2.11 The Children and Young People's Partnership has recognised that more needs to be done to better align the work of the various partnership Boards, and has received a report about how this may be achieved. There is some evidence of the same issues being dealt with by more than one Board, which is at least inefficient. It is heartening that the Health and Wellbeing Board recently decided that a Children's Services issue (childhood obesity) should be its first priority, but we need to ensure that this complements – rather than duplicates – the work of other partnerships.

2.12 Unprecedented financial pressures upon the Council are leading to significant budget reductions. Child protection services are relatively unaffected by such savings. However, we are consulting on proposals to reduce the cost of providing short breaks to disabled children. In working to achieve this, the service intends to work with the parents of those children as partners. This extends the notion of "partnership" and is important as we believe that it can help us to realise savings while minimising the impact on the support and assistance that families need and deserve.

## 2.13 Capacity, Capability and Culture

2.14 1<sup>st</sup> September 2014 saw the implementation of a new management structure in Children's Social Care. Six Group Managers are now in place, each of whom takes a lead on a specific area of service delivery. The structure also contains a Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance and a dedicated Principal Social Worker. A structure chart for the service is attached as an appendix to this report. The incoming Director and Assistant Director have been impressed by the commitment and purposefulness of the work of this management team. A more significant impact is expected from the next phase of the restructure. High volumes of work and a high proportion of inexperienced staff have led team managers to have to concentrate on individual case work rather than leading and quality assuring the work of their teams. Changes about to be implemented will see the ending of some job roles, including Senior Practitioners, and the introduction of new ones (Practice Manager and Practice Development Coordinator) which will directly address this.

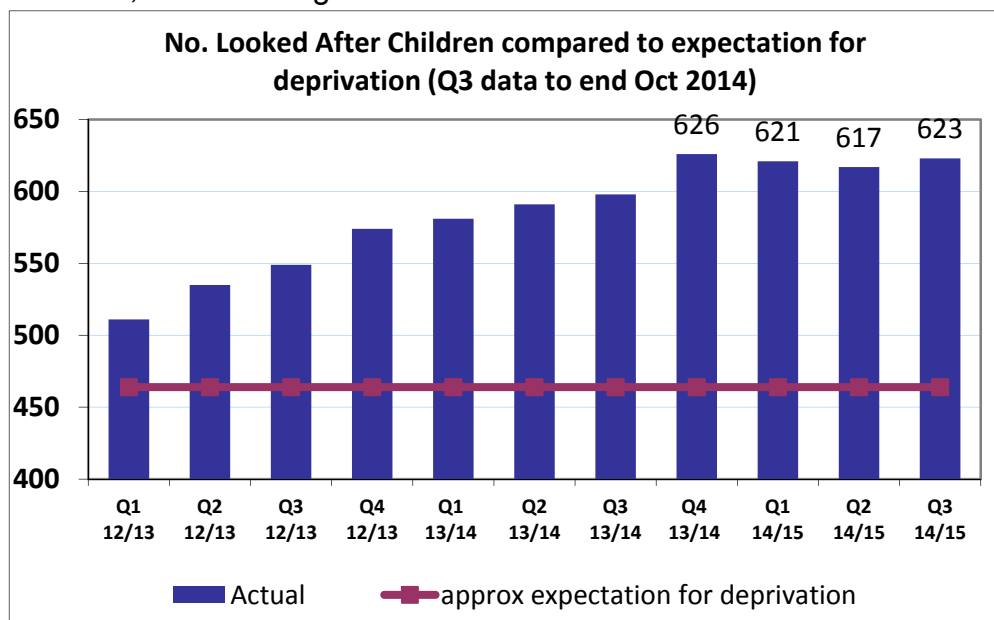
2.15 We continue to be able to attract social work staff to want to come and work in Walsall. However, almost all of our recruits are newly qualified workers, who rightly have protected and reduced caseloads. This is balanced by a number of more experienced social work staff, many of which are agency workers, our dependence on whom is not necessarily problematic in terms of quality but is contributing to budget overspends. At the time of writing, almost 35% of posts within the service are filled by agency workers. A project group has been established to improve the "recruitment, retention and development of social work staff". We look forward to the success of this group's work in the face of what are difficult market conditions. The need for the service to work within allocated staffing budgets will have to lead to changes in the way we use agency staff. However, there are other improvements that will enable this, such as the 22% reduction in sickness absence in the service over the last year. This is shown in the chart below.





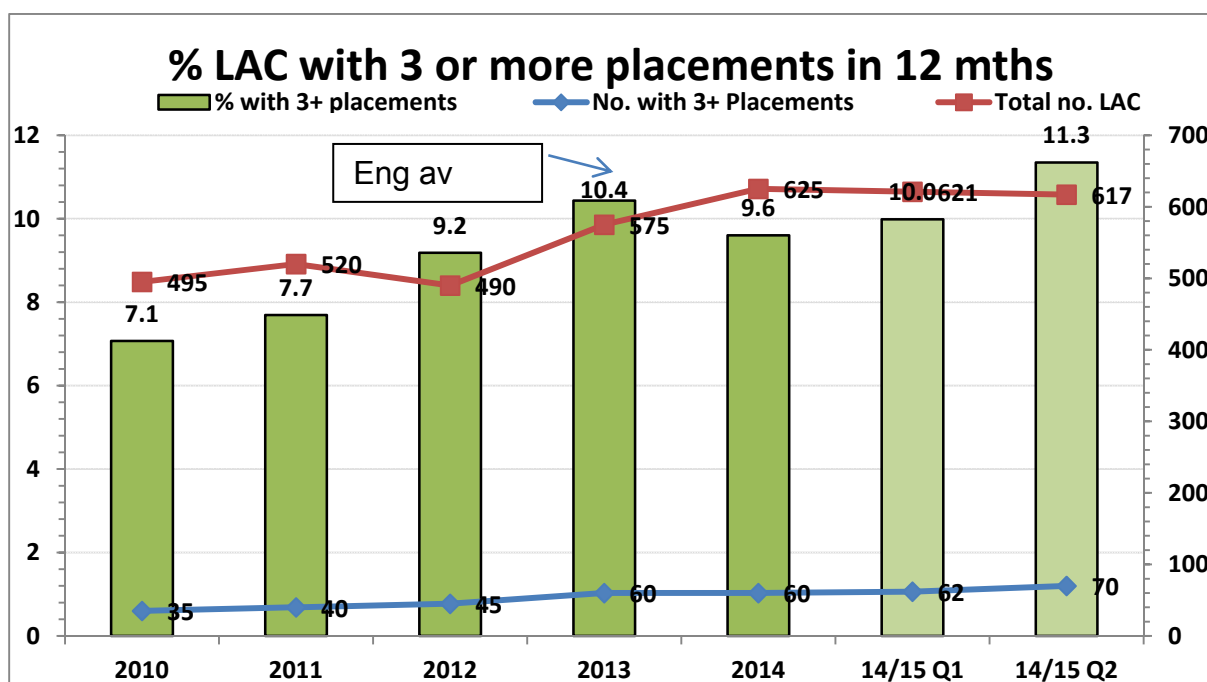
2.16 Budget pressures are also caused by the cost of looking after a increasing number of children in care. Some of our service improvements have been predicated on reducing the cost of Looked After Children's (LAC) placements allowing attention and other resources to be focused on prevention and early intervention. That end has not been realised yet, but the importance of Early Help in preventing children becoming Looked After is undoubted. A range of services are in place and a project entitled "Preventing step-up; Promoting step-down" is working on improving our use of these services and their resources. We are also in the process of strengthening our processes to ensure there is robust challenge when a child may become "Looked After". This will see our current panel (which considers only those cases where court action is likely) expanded to deal with all cases, and it will include representatives from services with a part to play in finding suitable and safe alternatives to care. The panel will not simply be about agreeing or refusing an admission to care, but about a process that can allocate the resources that are needed to prevent such an admission. Having said that, there is no evidence of children entering care when such alternatives were available and our greatest impact on the number of LAC is likely to derive from speeding the exit of children already in care. The Principal Social Worker is providing an important role in this. Some decision-making has become centralised to senior managers and we now need to begin to support and enable operational managers to play a greater role in managing budgets and resources =on behalf of children and families..

2.17 The chart below shows how after 6 months of gentle decrease in LAC numbers, there was again an increase as at the end of October 2014.



2.18 While the number of children in care remains high, the proportion with three or more placements in the last 12 months remains in line with the latest national average available; an achievement given the increase in numbers. The linkage between an increased % having 3+ placements and higher numbers of

LAC is apparent in the chart below; when there are more LAC it is harder to quickly find just the right placement to meet their needs. The proportion of children looked after for 2.5 years and in the same placement for 2 years is better than the national average.



2.19 For some while it has been clear that our IT system (“Paris”) does not provide social work staff with an environment that reinforces best practice. For example, the service has not yet been able to introduce the Single Assessment Framework (which became standard across England from April 2013) because Paris simply does not support it. We have procured Mosaic as a market-leading alternative system and work is under way to implement it this calendar year. Aside from the technical and training issues that this gives rise to, it provides an opportunity to refocus social work effort on what is important and effective. The system will allow the wishes and feelings of children to be properly presented; assessments to be more dynamic and updatable (rather than just reflecting the situation at a point in time); and a better balance between description and analysis, all of which should lead to better planning to address the identified needs.

2.20 The new system will support the improved collection, presentation and interpretation of performance information. Children’s Services has a strong track record of understanding and assessing itself effectively. The Senior Leadership Team receives and acts on regular performance monitoring reports, as measured through a range of “scorecards”. In October 2014 a regional event was held in which Local Authorities provided each other with “Peer Challenge” of their self-assessments that each had produced. This demonstrated to us (and others) that we do know ourselves well and that we do use that knowledge to plan and target our efforts on areas requiring the most attention. We believe that this puts us in a

good state of continual readiness for our next Ofsted inspection, whenever that comes. The removal of the Improvement Notice has – to some extent – allowed us to take some local control of what “good” means. We are now ensuring that this is consistent with the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework.

## **2.21 The Quality and Effectiveness of Frontline Practice**

2.22 While the developments described above are all important, their real value lies in the effect they have on children’s lives and the ability of our workers to protect children, preferably within their families. Staff at all levels demonstrate a real willingness, enthusiasm and ambition, which is having a positive impact on the quality of work with children and their families.

2.23 A key way of judging that impact is through the regular auditing of casework, both within the service and through the multi-agency audits conducted on behalf of the Safeguarding Children Board. We maintain a programme of such audits from which we can learn important lessons. The thorough file auditing programme shows that there has been a significant improvement in the number of children found to have current, appropriate plans that were regularly reviewed within the required timescale. We need to ensure that auditing has impact, in that remedial action is implemented in a timely fashion. While the number of children with a child protection plan has increased, effective practice is suggested through the proportion having a second or subsequent plan within two years of a previous one remaining appropriately between 10 and 15% (10.1%) and the percentage having had a plan for in excess of two years is positively low (4.4%).

2.24 We have at least maintained the improvements noted in the April report to Scrutiny, including the following:

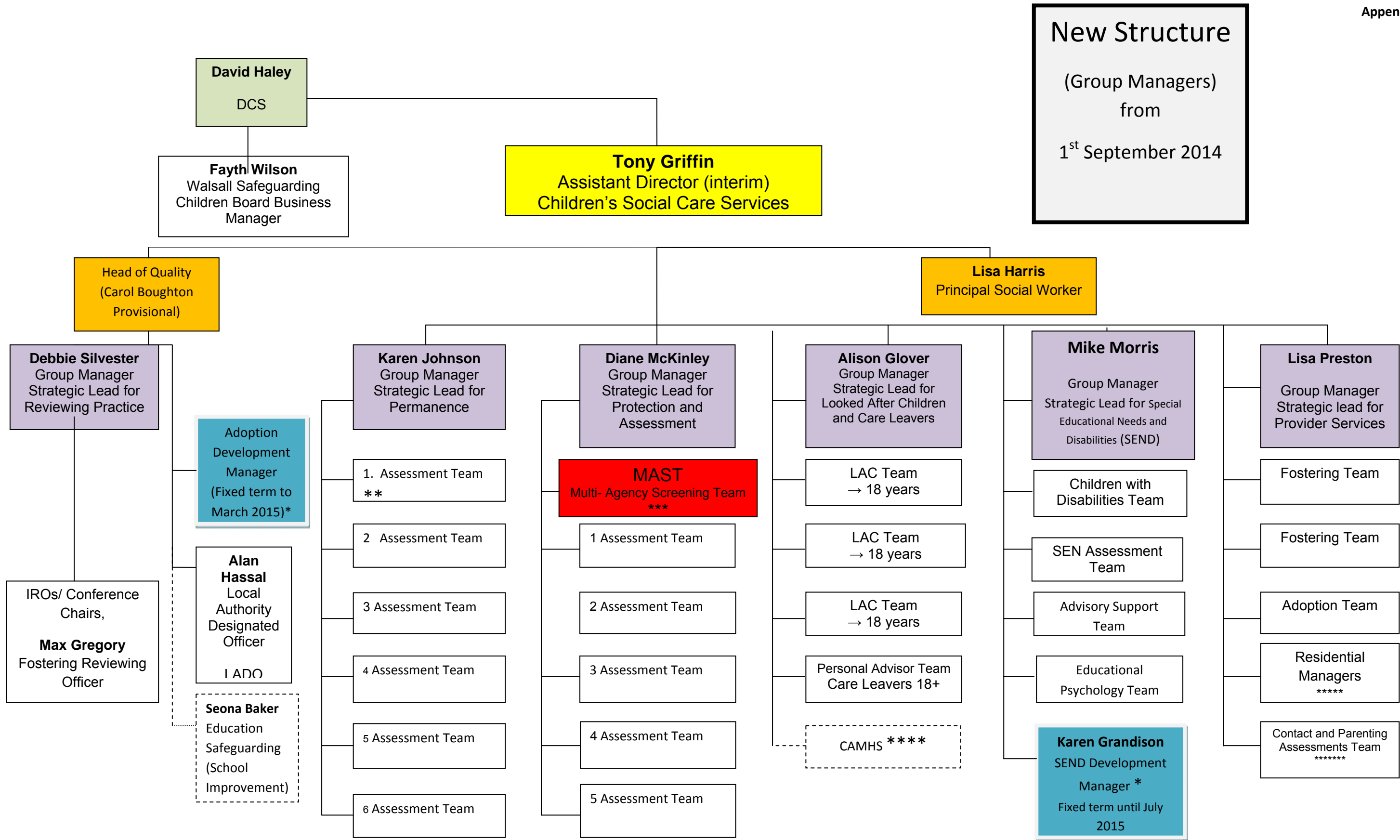
- The Multi Agency Screening Team (MAST) operating new threshold arrangements and step-up / down guidance
- The completion of assessments that are much more often produced within timescales and to higher standards, which supports ...
- ... an improvement in the quality of child protection plans
- Higher standards and frequency of supervision by managers, staff development and quality assurance

2.25 For each of these bullet points above we have plans for further improvement, some of which (such as the potential Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) development, the introduction of Mosaic, and the restructure of management) already described elsewhere in this report.

## **3. Summary and Conclusions**

3.1 Although this is essentially a report covering the last three months’ of continued improvement in Children’s Services, its intention was also to present a synopsis of current and anticipated development work. The purpose was to provide the

Scrutiny Panel with the information it needs to determine whether it is assured that our improvement journey continues apace with the lifting of the Improvement Notice and disbanding of the Improvement Board. It may be that it leads members of the Panel to raise further questions, which senior officers will respond to.



\* Grant Funded      \*\* Single Assessment work, Children in Need, Child Protection, Court work including Adoption      \*\*\* Colleagues from Partner agencies retain their own terms and condition and clinical line management

\*\*\*\* Matrix Management Arrangement      \*\*\*\*\* To stay with AG for max 6 months,      \*\*\*\*\* To stay with AG max 3 months