

**25 February 2014**

**Thematic Inspection of Early Help Arrangements in Walsall**

**Ward(s)** All

**Portfolios:** Cllr R Andrew – Children's Services

**Executive Summary:**

The purpose of this report is to provide Scrutiny with a summary of the provisional findings of the Ofsted Thematic Inspection of Early Help in Walsall undertaken on 21 and 22 January 2014, and proposed next steps.

**Recommendations:**

1. To note the contents of the report and identify any further action for officers and partners arising from this report.

**Background papers:** None

## **Resource and legal considerations**

This report relates to the strategic and operational improvement plans which are underpinned by resources, with the expectation that the Council and partner agencies will continue to contribute to ensure that resources across the partnership are prioritised to improvement needs.

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families has exercised his power to issue an Improvement Notice that contains a concise range of outcome driven targets to address the issues raised in the previous Ofsted inspection. If the Council and partners fail to comply with the Improvement Notice by the assessment dates, then the Secretary of State for Education can use statutory powers of intervention (s497A Education Act 1996) to direct the Council to enter into appropriate arrangements to secure the necessary and rapid improvements required in children's services. Part of ensuring that these improvements are on track is via external reviews and inspections.

## **Citizen impact**

Sustainable improvements to Children's Services are designed to ensure the partnership works "*better together for children and young people*" in Walsall so that children and young people are safe, happy and healthy with a better today and a brighter future.

## **Performance and risk management issues**

Failure to adequately deliver sustained improvements to services and therefore meet the requirements of the Improvement Notice risks the safety and protection of children and young people. Delivery of the objectives in the Improvement Plan will be risk assessed and mitigated as appropriate.

The Improvement Board monitors progress and impact on a 6 weekly basis. This is in addition to developing service and partnership wide performance management and quality assurance arrangements. The Department for Education (DfE) also assess and evaluate progress and impact on a 6 monthly basis. The (delayed) 6 month review took place in August 2013 and the 12 month review took place in December 2013. The reviews include written reports from the independent chair of the Improvement Board, fieldwork by the DfE as well as other supporting evidence, including self evaluation, external review and inspection.

The framework and evaluation schedule for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and reviews of Local Safeguarding Children Boards has now been published. This sets a higher bar for all regulated services:

- Framework and evaluation schedule for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers (single inspection framework) and reviews of Local Safeguarding Children Boards:  
<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/results/130216>
- Inspection handbook: inspections of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and reviews of Local Safeguarding Children Boards:

### **Equality Implications:**

Has an Equality Impact Assessment been carried out? No

### **Consultation**

There is on-going engagement with partners at a strategic level at the Improvement Board. One aspect of improvement is to ensure that other key partnership boards e.g. the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB), the Children and Young People's Partnership Board (C&YPPB), the Corporate Parenting Group and the Health and Wellbeing Board are productive, mutually challenging and impact positively on better outcomes for children. At an operational level, a multi-agency group, chaired by the Assistant Director Specialist Services, representing all key partners, is championing the implementation of the delivery plans which underpin ongoing improvements.

Staff and partner briefings are now in place on a 6 weekly basis to ensure key messages are communicated and to provide regular opportunities to capture feedback and learning from those delivering the services. Key messages go out monthly to social care teams. Regular visits to teams and services provide additional opportunities for feedback and feed-forward as do email updates.

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## 1. Background

- 1.1 Ofsted is undertaking a national programme of thematic inspections of Early Help arrangements across a mix of 12 authorities. Ofsted will produce a single national report in the summer of 2014 identifying common themes, highlighting areas of good practice and thematic areas for development.
- 1.2 Within this framework, Ofsted do not provide judgements regarding the quality of work in individual authorities, although any significant risks would result in a formal raising of concern. Informal feedback was provided verbally to partners at the conclusion of the inspection and this forms the basis of the headline findings outlined in this report.
- 1.3 The inspection team comprised two inspectors and an observer who spent two days in Walsall working to a tightly programmed schedule of interviews with operational staff from across the partnership, senior leaders and commissioners and children and families in receipt of Early Help services.
- 1.4 The primary focus was on a prescribed sample of Early Help cases for the month of September 2013. It should be noted that this was during a period of significant remodelling of Early Help provision and that notable improvements have been achieved in the post-October 2013 period. This development curve was noted by inspectors.

## 2. Inspection Findings – Key Strengths

- 2.1 The following areas were identified as strengths by the inspection team:
  - (i) An **honest and candid tone and culture** from senior leaders and partners was reflected at all levels of the partnership through to dialogue with operational staff, including agency staff, which clearly reflected the vision, values, practice ethos and priorities communicated by the leadership group. There is a **high level of self-awareness** with clarity about what needs to be done to introduce and improve an effective Early Help Offer to the community.
  - (ii) A strong **culture of partnership and collaboration** across agencies and departments at both a strategic and operational level.
  - (iii) Clear evidence of **progressive and continuing improvement** in the development of the Early Help Offer, supported by hard-won changes in attitude, trust and culture across the partnership.

- (iv) **Strong engagement of operational staff** in the shaping and delivery of the Early Help Offer, and evidence of an energetic and visible presence of leaders within teams at a local level to provide support and drive change and improvement.
- (v) The Walsall Safeguarding Children Board (**WSCB**) **speaks with a single voice**, is 'healthy' and conducts effective business both during and between meetings with a clear understanding of the relationship between early help and safeguarding. It was noted that it is too soon to evidence wider impact of WSCB effectiveness in this area.
- (vi) **Commissioning partners articulate clear shared priorities** and are working to develop early help commissioning with clear reference to the Joint Strategic Needs Analysis, the Children and Young People's Partnership Board and Health and Well-Being Board. Two specific areas of good commissioning practice were identified in housing support and the development of links between social inclusion and substance misuse, and where specific commissioning of support to engage the Polish community resulted in improved reach and outcomes for local people.
- (vii) **Quality assurance arrangements are good**, with synergy between partners and good emerging models of multi-agency auditing, links to training needs and workforce development strategy.
- (viii) Strong evidence of **partnerships with children and families** and their voice influencing and informing service design, development and review.
- (ix) Good evidence of workforce development being actively informed by **learning from serious case reviews** ('better than average').

### 3. Inspection Findings- Areas for Development

3.1 The following issues were identified as areas for development by the inspection team:

- (i) Case recording, individual plans and written records are not on the whole reflecting the quality of practice and evidence of outcomes and impact of their direct work with children and families, and of the child's voice. There needs to be a clear drive to **improve recording and the evidencing of good practice**.
- (ii) **Management oversight, including supervision, is highly variable** across the partnership. Common standards should be introduced as a priority to secure a step-change in this critical area.
- (iii) There is a **clear strategic vision from partners (ie: Health) but this is not consistently translated to operational staffing arrangements**. Work is required as a priority to clarify and strengthen Lead Professional roles and accountabilities across the partnership.

- (iv) Consistent concerns were identified relating to **CAMHS support for 13 and 14 year-olds**. Waiting times and the quality of the CAMHS offer is a particular concern around early help cases – CAMHS is more robust around Child Protection and LAC cases but this is not sufficient. It is noted that commissioners have identified this as a priority but change should be secured without delay.
- (v) The Area Family Support Team model of 'whole-family' case working should be strengthened to ensure **clear and unambiguous Lead Professional roles and accountabilities**, with related strengthening of management oversight and supervision reflecting the complexity of some of the casework involved.
- (vi) The **PARIS system is not fit for purpose** and has been previously identified by Ofsted as a priority issue. It is recognised that this is in the process of being addressed.

#### **4. Next Steps**

- 4.1 The Children's Services Leadership Group, in dialogue with partners, is moving swiftly to complete a development plan for Early Help which is driven by the Early Help Strategy and is critically informed by the areas for development helpfully highlighted by the thematic inspection.
- 4.2 A summary of learning from the thematic inspection is being shared with partners and staff through a range of partnership and Children's Services fora. This will ensure that local children and families benefit from rapid improvements in our Early Help Offer where areas for development have been identified.
- 4.3 Walsall has been invited by Ofsted to provide a brief summary of three identified areas of good practice:

Housing Support and Early Help  
Early Help 'Meet the Teams' fortnight for staff and partners  
Early Help engagement sessions for staff and partners

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