

## **Council – 24 September 2012**

### **Notice of motion – Ofsted Inspection of Walsall Council's Safeguarding Children Service**

The following notice of motion has been submitted by Councillors Cassidy, James, Nazir, Creaney, Oliver and Westley:

"This Council notes that the recent Ofsted inspection of Walsall Council's Safeguarding Children Service has given both the service and its prospects for improvement the lowest rating of "inadequate".

This Council therefore resolves:

- To call upon the political leadership and the portfolio holder for Children's Services to apologise to vulnerable young people and their families and to the wider community in our borough for presiding over this unacceptable state of affairs.
- To fully support the work of the new Children's Improvement Board, to find out why the service has failed so badly and to initiate the necessary improvements, and to directly intervene and affect change in all areas including funding, staff recruitment, retention and training and partnership working with other agencies.
- To build partnerships with other local authorities where child care is rated excellent or good – such as Liverpool, Oldham and Newcastle-on-Tyne which face similar economic and social problems as our borough."

#### **Background information**

As part of a national programme, OFSTED undertook an inspection of safeguarding and looked after children's services in Walsall between 11 and 22 June 2012. The inspection looked at how the council and partners safeguard and support vulnerable and looked after children. Inspectors visited front line offices, reviewed case files, spoke to children, and young people, staff members of the council and partner agencies. The report was published on 31 July 2012. The report can be found online at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/local-authorities/walsall>.

The main findings are very concerning and disappointing. Out of a total of 22 judgements 8 areas of practice in safeguarding were found to be inadequate. While services to looked after children were found to be adequate overall with good features, the capacity to improve safeguarding was found to be inadequate. The Department for Education has indicated that the council will now receive an Improvement Notice which will outline key actions and timescales, as well as the expectation that an Improvement Board will be established with an independent chair. Immediate steps have been taken to put this in place together with improvements in front line practice and management decision making. The improvements to services will contribute towards the Marmot objectives of giving every child the best start in life, by building resilience and well-being of young children across the social gradient, and enabling all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives.

## Report detail

OFSTED inspectors identified serious issues which they concluded may leave vulnerable children at risk of harm. In particular, they highlighted a number of areas of serious concern including:

- Leadership and oversight by the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board
- Social work practice too variable and sometimes poor
- Risk assessment, care planning, partnership working particularly with the police not sufficiently effective
- Assessments not informed by chronologies
- Core groups of professionals not meeting regularly enough
- Child protection plans do not consistently identify risk
- Police are not consistently contributing to joint protection enquiries
- Management oversight and decision making inadequate in some cases
- Sometimes cases are closed too early or children left too long in risky situations
- Performance management and quality assurance is inadequate as senior managers did not have adequate information to inform judgments about practice and take the appropriate action
- Disabled children's needs are not always met or sufficiently prioritised
- Workforce planning ineffective as council had not been able to recruit sufficient experienced social workers
- Capacity to improve deemed inadequate as the depth of the problems had not been known therefore not acted upon

Nonetheless Inspectors also noted areas of satisfactory, good and excellent practice particularly within looked after children's services

- Most children and young people seen by inspectors reported feeling safe and 94% responding to OFSTED survey said they felt safe
- Most children seen by inspectors reported the care they receive was good.
- Children's homes, fostering adoption and children's centres inspected are all judged good or outstanding for safeguarding
- A good range of multi agency services to support victims of domestic violence are in place and preventive services are improving
- In the main parents and carers were positive about the support they receive
- Social workers report that Walsall council is a good employer which offers high standards of training and support
- Social workers have manageable caseloads
- Good examples of the involvement of children and young people are evident
- There has been significant service improvement in looked after children's services
- Children have good opportunities to make a positive contribution in their communities
- Looked after children's health is well supported

The Leader of the council and the Lead Member have both made a public apology for the failings of the service.

A letter has been received from Secretary of State for Children and Families setting out his intention to issue the Council with an Improvement Notice. The Secretary of State recognised in his correspondence that the council has swiftly begun to address urgent issues such as securing an interim Director of Children's Services.

As required an Improvement Board has been established, with an initial meeting on 17 September. An experienced independent chair has been appointed. This Board will monitor and direct the Improvement Plan and hold partners to account for impact and outcomes. There has and continues to be close working with the national Children Improvement Board and ongoing discussions with the Department for Education who have given every indication that they are satisfied with the action taken to date and direction we are heading in.

The Chair of the Improvement Board is a former Director of Children's Services with a strong performance record and a government adviser on children's safety. The Board will meet monthly, while the Chair of the Improvement Board will report on a quarterly basis to the Secretary of State, who will confirm reports received with the Board itself. The independent Chair will undertake meetings with managers and a range of officers and check the impact of improvement on outcomes for children and young people.

Changes have taken place in leadership with appointment of Interim Director of Children's Services, Rose Collinson and recruitment has commenced for an assistant director for children's social care.

In terms of immediate actions responding to the outcomes of the inspection all priority cases from the initial response service are being audited independently. A thorough case file audit has been undertaken by a reputable independent agency to audit a number of priority cases. The final report of these findings has identified a number of areas for concern. Issues had been identified within the disability service post-transfer to council management from Serco. However, there had not been sufficient time prior to the inspection to make all the necessary improvements.

Immediate steps have been taken to improve areas of concern identified in Ofsted Report, which include initial focus on the following key issues:

- Improvement in decision making and management oversight at the point of contact with children's social care (Initial Response Service).
- Action to improve and monitor the involvement of police officers and all other relevant professionals in strategy discussions and meetings and securing appropriate police involvement in Section 47 investigations.
- Setting monitoring arrangements in place to ensure that assessments are of a satisfactory quality before being signed off by managers. A new format and training has been put in place to ensure that child protection plans are focused on risk and identify clearly what needs to change, and how this change will be supported.
- Arrangements to ensure that core groups meet regularly and that children are visited with a frequency linked to the level of their need

- Arrangements to add capacity through additional support and experienced practitioners into the domestic abuse referral team (DART) to ensure it is appropriately staffed and resourced and to provide a consistent and good quality response to assessing the risk to children of domestic abuse.
- A comprehensive case file audit by highly reputable independent agency to audit a number of priority cases to identify necessary actions, gaps and risks.

It is essential that we grow a culture and practice of robust multi-agency challenge and accountability across the partnership. Practitioners, across children's social care and children's services more widely, need to be secure in delivering planned and purposeful direct work with families that is of quality and can evidence impact and change and, importantly, demonstrate that children's voices and feelings are listened to and taken into account. Improved management oversight, including supervision, should enable and help effective analysis and challenge of practice decision making and the identification of management of the risk of harm to children.

The inspection framework has changed and will change again over the next year but the important essentials: effectiveness of help and protection for children, young people and families; the quality of practice and the impact of leadership, governance and partnership will remain.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rose Collinson". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Rose Collinson  
Interim Director for Children's Services

14 September 2012