

Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Agenda
Item No.

27 January 2020

7.

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr Wilson, Children's Services

Executive Summary:

This report provides an overview of the findings of the Ofsted focused visit to Walsall Children's Services in respect of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Initial Response Service (IRS) in October 2019 and associated recommendations. It also makes reference to MASH Improvement plan which was implemented in October 2019 following an independent review of the Front Door completed by Sue Williams, Programme Director Strengthening Families/Family Safeguarding Hertfordshire County Council.

Reason for scrutiny:

This report was requested by the Chair of Children's Services Scrutiny Committee to provide an update for Members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel to enable them to fulfil their key responsibility and duties in holding the Council and its Partners to account for its work in preventing and protecting Children and Young People from harm in Walsall.

Recommendations:

Scrutiny Committee are invited to:

- Note the positive progress reported by Ofsted in the MASH
- Note the response to the report by Children's Services, the Health Care Trust and WMP
- Challenge the partnership on the outcomes for children and young people in Walsall in relation to preventing and protecting against harm.

Background papers:

- Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, 2018
- Final report: ILACS Focused Visit of Walsall Children's Services, December 2019
- MASH Improvement plan October 2019
- Right Help, Right Time A Multi-Agency Guidance on the Continuum of Need, (Walsall Safeguarding Partnership)

Resource and legal considerations:

Responding to children at risk of significant harm is a statutory duty placed on local authority Chief Executives, Directors of Children's Services, Strategic Partnership Chairs and senior managers within organisations who commission and provide services for children and families, including social workers and professionals from Health services, adult services, the police, Academy Trusts, education and the voluntary and community sector who have contact with children and families.

The resources required to respond to this statutory requirement come from within the existing resources across the partnership of organisations working in Walsall to protect vulnerable children and those at risk of harm.

Citizen impact:

The effective delivery of high quality services to protect children and young people from significant harm has a direct impact on the welfare and well-being of children and young people in Walsall. It directly links to the corporate priority to Improve Health and Wellbeing and the Children's Services objective that all children in Walsall are safe and supported.

Environmental impact:

There is no direct environmental impact.

Performance management:

The performance of Children's Services and its partners in successfully delivering services which protect and support children affected by abuse and neglect is monitored by the Children's Services Performance Board on a monthly basis and by the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership at meetings of the Performance & Quality Assurance and Performance Subgroup.

Equality Implications:

The co-ordinated provision of services designed to address the protection of children and the disruption and prosecution of activities by adults provides specific support for those children and young people who are at risk of significant harm. This includes those protected characteristics of gender, disability, race and religion.

Consultation:

There is consultation and feedback with partners through the MASH Management Board and the MASH Operation Group. The activity of the MASH Management Board is reported to the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership on a quarterly basis.

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1. Introduction

1.1 A focused visit was completed by Ofsted to Walsall Children's Services on 29th and 30th October 2019. Inspectors looked at the arrangements for contacts and referrals in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), thresholds for children in need and child protection, and arrangements for children and families stepping down to Early Help and on to the Initial Response Service (IRS) for assessment.

1.2 The final report published by Ofsted in December 2019 states:
"The quality of work in responding effectively to contacts has improved since the last inspection in 2017. This is positive for children and families in Walsall, who receive a timely response to initial identified needs and concerns. The local authority response to most children at risk of harm or in need of help is appropriate, although, for some children, consideration of early help support could be given sooner by referring agencies."

"Leaders have a good understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement, with aspirational plans in place to effect positive change." (Ofsted 2019)

1.3 The Ofsted Focused visit evidenced positive improvements and adjustments that had been made in Walsall following an in-depth review of the 'front door' in September 2019 and the launch of our 'Right Help, Right Time' guidance with staff and partners in October 2019.

1.4 The Inspectors highlighted three areas for improvement:

- The timeliness of early help assessments and interventions
- The consistency, timeliness and quality of return home interviews
- The timely availability of health information in the MASH

2. Know

2.1 Prior to the Ofsted focused visit in October 2019, Walsall Children's Services had commissioned an independent review of the 'front door' which took place at the beginning of September and was conducted by Sue Williams (Programme Director Strengthening Families/Family Safeguarding Hertfordshire County Council). A number of workshops were completed with managers, social workers and MASH partners in relation to the application of the threshold for statutory children's social care in addition to some practice uplift work with frontline staff.

2.2 Following the completion of this review, the MASH Operational Group compiled a MASH Improvement Plan to capture the improvements needed and track progress; progress against these agreed actions is reported to the Safeguarding Partnership MASH Management Group. Actions currently being worked on include:

- Continued implementation of the ‘Right Help, Right Time Continuum of need’ criteria via the delivery of training and ongoing conversations with those partners who make contact with the MASH to further develop the explicit understanding by practitioners across the partnership
- Continued work with practitioners across the partnership to ensure that parental consent is obtained by the referring agency before contacting MASH unless there is a concern for the immediate safety of a child
- Continued work with MASH to ensure that strategy meetings are purposeful, timely and proportionate to Section 47 requirements.

2.3 The independent review resulted in changes being made to the MASH processes which are starting to have an impact with reductions in the number of referrals, assessments that lead to ‘no further action’ and Section 47 enquiries that do not result in an ICPC.

2.4 The implementation of ‘Right Help, Right Time’ guidance was launched the beginning of October 2019 and early signs indicate some improvement and this is beginning to embed within the ‘front door’, however there is still some work to do with partners to embed understanding and adherence to the guidance. ‘Right Help, Right Time’ training is delivered to a range of partners on a monthly basis and MASH and the Early Help Hub operate an advice line for partners wishing to seek advice and support in relation application of the guidance.

2.5 The number of MASH contacts continues to fluctuate, but is not yet reducing to any substantial degree; however the number of referrals has reduced significantly since August 2019.

Month 2019	Number of contacts	Progression to Referral
July	1,801	960
August	1,271	535
September	1,505	507
October	1,632	530
November	1,440	502

This indicates some progress arising from the work done with MASH staff in the summer in respect of ensuring the necessary clarity about the legal threshold for statutory intervention resulting in the MASH team being much clearer with partners who are referring about the appropriateness of some of the contacts being made.

However, the number of contacts made that result in no further action for Children's Social Care remains too high and there is still further work to do across the partnership to embed the understanding and consistent application of 'Right Help, Right Time'

- 2.6** The number of assessments that lead to no further action for Children's Services has also reduced from 66% in the period April –July 2019 to 50% in the period August to November which is positive.
- 2.7** There has been a significant reduction in the number of strategy discussions at the front door. Strategy discussion have reduced by 51% and section 47 enquiries have reduced by 60% in the last four months compared with the previous four months. The proportion of section 47 investigations that result in ICPC has also started to increase.

The Ofsted focused visit report highlighted that:

“Children at risk of significant harm are appropriately identified within the MASH, and timely strategy discussions are held and well attended by partner agencies. The effective multi-agency response means that children's needs are addressed and children are safeguarded” (Ofsted 2019).

- 2.8** The October 2019 focused visit report also stated that:
“Information sharing between most partners within the MASH is timely and thorough, and clear analysis is undertaken by workers. However, the recording of consent by partners when contacting the MASH is inconsistent. The Local Authority had recognised this issue in advance of the visit, and is taking steps with partners to ensure that this improves” (Ofsted, 2019).

The 'Right Help, Right Time' guidance is clear in relation to parental consent, as is Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018. This requirement is comprehensively covered in the Right Help Right Time training delivered to partners as is the importance of being open and transparent with our children and families. Where parental consent has not been obtained by the referrer, MASH staff speak with the referring agency to explain that their concern cannot progress without this unless this can be justifiably overridden to protect the child's immediate safety. Referrers are asked to obtain that consent.

- 2.9** The Early Help Pathway has been revised to improve the interface with the MASH arrangements. A daily meeting is now held with Team Managers from MASH, IRS and the Senior Family Support Advisor from the Early Help Hub, to explore and agree appropriate intervention for children and families where threshold is not clear, in line with the Right Help, Right Time guidance. This ensures that children and families are receiving the right intervention at the right time.

2.10 All members of the MASH Team, including partners, have attended practice development sessions with the Children's Services Restorative Practice lead to support the continued embedding of this way of working with children, families and our partner agencies.

3 Respond

3.1 Following receipt of the Ofsted focused visit report work has begun on delivering the improvements identified and the MASH improvement plan has been updated to reflect their recommendations

3.2 Recommendation 1: The timeliness of Early Help assessments and interventions

3.2.1 The report stated that:

“Children and families in Walsall are able to benefit from a broad early help offer from across the wider partnership to respond to their identified needs. Skills and experienced family support workers offer a range of interventions. However, some children and families have to wait too long for early help assessments to start due to lengthy screening processes in the Early Help Hub and capacity issues in the Early Help Locality Teams. The outcomes and progress of early help assessments are not consistently tracked to ensure that children's needs are being fully understood and responded to promptly and effectively” (Ofsted 2019).

3.2.2 Following the Ofsted visit the on-line Early Help partnership tool, in development with partners prior to the focused visit has been launched. This will strengthen the identification of children and families needing Early Help and the support they require, enabling faster and more effective screening.

3.2.3 Screening and assessment processes in operation in Early Help Hub have been reviewed to ensure arrangements are proportionate, add value and lead to timely interventions for children and families

3.2.4 Early Help Locality Team capacity has been strengthened with the addition of 2 dedicated Early Help police support officers co-located in two of our localities but increasing capacity more broadly across the Early Help Locality teams to improve the timeliness of our responses to requests for help remains an area for improvement.

3.2.5 The delivery of a comprehensive training programme to a range of statutory and voluntary partners on how to intervene and reduce parental conflict and a strengthened offer to parents should release some capacity, although it is too early to assess the impact of these new initiatives.

3.2.6 Key Early Help performance measures are being reviewed, to ensure the progress of early help assessments are tracked and reported and outcomes for children and families are improving.

3.3 Recommendation 2: The consistency, timeliness and quality of return home interviews

3.3.1 The focused visited report stated that:

“too many children in Walsall who has been missing from home or care do not receive a return home interview (RHI). When they do, they frequently do not take place within timescales. This is due to the lack of timely police notification when children return, current capacity issues linked to the recent changes in police reporting arrangements, and the consequent increase in demand” (Ofsted, 2019).

3.3.2 In the spring of 2019, West Midlands Police adopted the Police College Guidance in respect of dealing with reports of missing persons. This resulted in a change from previous practice where some children were classified as absent rather than missing to a position where all children whose whereabouts is unknown will be considered as missing. This change was welcomed as it was recognised that on occasion vulnerable children were being classed as absent even when there were indicators of exploitation and the opportunity for early engagement was lost without this trigger for intervention. All children who are reported to WMP as missing are now classified by WMP as being at High, Medium, Low or No risk.

3.3.3 It is expected that this would result in an increase in reports of missing children. Walsall Children’s Services, in common with other Children’s Services across the West Midlands, are experiencing some significant delays in receiving some of the notifications from West Midlands Police that children have gone missing or that they have been found and this impacts on the timeliness of the completion of the return home interviews.

3.3.4 In September 98 missing notifications were received in respect of 62 Walsall children.

49 return home interviews that were completed; of these 22 were in timescales (45%) and 27 were out of timescales. This was due to:

- 8 delays in notification from West Midlands Police.
- 12 interviews carried out at child and parent earliest convenience.
- 7 non-engagement.

11 return interviews were not offered because:

- 8 of the notification were missing again within 72 hours.
- 3 of the notifications were triaged with police and deemed to be missing no apparent risk and therefore an interview was not required.

33 return interviews were declined by children and their families.

3.3.5 In October 79 missing notifications were received in relation to 56 Walsall children.

50 return home interviews were completed, 24 were in timescales (48%) and 26 were out of timescale. This was due to:

- 12 delays in notification from West Midlands Police.
- 13 interviews carried out at child and parent earliest convenience.
- 1 child was missing again within 72 hours

21 return interviews were declined by children and their families.

1 child was still missing at the end of October; their interview was completed in November.

3.3.6 In November 106 missing notifications were received in relation to 58 Walsall children.

50 return home interviews were completed; 42 were in timescales (84%) and 8 were out of timescale. This was due to:

- 4 delays in notification from West Midlands Police
- 4 interviews carried out at child and parent earliest convenience

56 were not completed. This was due to:

- 25 of the children were missing again within 72 hours
- 1 child's whereabouts were unknown at time of interview
- 1 child was in police custody.
- 1 notification was triaged with police and deemed to be missing no apparent risk and therefore an interview was not required
- 3 were carried over to December. This child was missing on a daily basis and a strategy meeting was convened with a range of professionals in the household on a daily basis.

24 return interviews were declined by children and their families

3.3.7 Due to the increase in the number of children reported as missing due to changes in Police systems and procedures and delays in receiving notifications, we have focussed on improving the timeline of the Return Home Interviews by working with the Police to understand the delays in their systems and by putting additional Children's Services capacity into the team to manage the backlog and demand. This backlog is now addressed and going forward the focus is on how we can work more effectively with the Police to manage demand.

3.3.8 The delays and their impact on the offer of an intervention for children within the statutory timescale of 72 hours has been raised with West Midlands Police who advise that the reasons for these delays are due to the time available to staff to upload the notifications onto the system. These delays are being escalated at a local and regional level and have also been raised with Ofsted.

3.3.9 The Missing and Exploitation Team have daily contact with police LOCATE officers through a daily triage in MASH of those children who have been reported as missing. This has supported a joined up approach to information sharing and decision making in respect of the children who have been reported to WMP as missing from home or care. This has improved working once the notifications have been received. It has also assisted in enabling police and missing return home officers to gain a deeper insight into those children that are actively missing or repeatedly missing and to share information about links between children who are potentially missing together and who may be at risk of exploitation. It improves joint working and understanding and actions are set and agreed to reduce and manage risk for children who continue to be missing.

3.3.10 As part of our commitment to tackling exploitation, a review of the Missing Service to ensure that it has sufficient capacity and the right processes to be able to offer Return Home Interviews to the appropriate children is being undertaken. This review will consider our capacity to respond to missing incidence in a timely way and within the statutory timescale of 72 hours and how we engage more positively young people in this process by reducing the numbers of young people refusing Return Home Interviews.

3.4 Recommendation 3: The timely availability of health information in the MASH

3.4.1 Although inspectors found evidence of sustained and improved partnership working between children's services and our partners, they noted that:
"Health resources in the MASH are very stretched, and this leads to delays for some children in ensuring that important information is shared quickly enough" (Ofsted, 2019).

3.4.2 Following the focused visit, the health presence in MASH has increased and now includes two nurses and an administrator. This has increased capacity within health resources to respond to information requests in MASH in a more timely way, ensuring that information is available to support informed decision making.

3.4.3 Further work is continuing to ensure that the capacity and expertise of those health partners in MASH includes a practitioner with a Mental Health background. Work is also still required to ensure GP records, held by Primary Care, are routinely accessed and considered as this will further strengthen informed decision making.

4. Next Steps

4.1 The Ofsted focused visit resulted in positive feedback and recognised the progress made in MASH; it also identified actions for further improvement which Children's Services and its partners are engaged in addressing.

4.2 The MASH Development plan has been updated to reflect the findings of the focused Visit and progress in implementing these actions will continue to be monitored by the Safeguarding Partnership MASH Management Group.

- 4.3** The delivery of the Right Help, Right Time training remains a key priority for the partnership and planning for delivery dates for 2020/21 is well underway as embedding an understanding of the threshold for referring to Children's Services remains a key priority to ensuring that children and their families get the right support early on to avoid escalation of their difficulties which might result in a referral to statutory services.
- 4.4** Work will continue to strengthen the early help offer from across the partnership and to streamline the screening and assessment process.
- 4.5** As part of the partnership work in tackling exploitation in Walsall, work will continue with West Midlands Police on a regional basis to seek an improvement in the timeliness of notifications in respect of children who are missing and have returned. This will include a review of the existing service.
- 4.6** Walsall Healthcare Trust have already increased their staffing compliment in the MASH and work continues to ensure that access to mental health and GP records occurs routinely.