

Select Committee on Children's Services – 26 January 2011

Report of the Acting Director of Children's Services

Directorate of Children's Services – Contextual Information regarding Performance in the Following Areas:-

1. Percentage of initial assessments for children's social care carried out in less than 7 working days
2. Percentage of core assessments for children's social care that were carried out within 35 days of their commencement
3. Percentage of private fostering assessments completed within 42 days
4. Looked After Children (LAC) cases which were reviewed within the required timescales
5. Percentage of young offenders engaged in suitable education, employment or training (EET)

Purpose of Report

1. To inform members of the committee about specific performance measures, and factors affecting performance measures, in a small number of specific areas highlighted in the quarterly reporting process. To inform members of actions being taken and which are planned, to improve performance. To provide contextual and performance information to members about the experiences of, and outcomes achieved by, young people in different localities within Dudley.

Background

2. The Directorate of Children's Services reports regularly to Select Committee on issues where we are performing below target in order to help members understand why this is the case, and what the Directorate of Children's Services and the Children's Trust is doing to improve. This report is based upon the performance measures within our Directorate Strategic Plan. In some cases performance measures have not changed since last time as they are based upon data that is only reported annually e.g. examination results.

3. It should be remembered that these matters are reported in the overall context of Children's Services having been judged as good in the 2009 Comprehensive Area Assessment.
4. In addition members of the Select Committee have requested that in future more contextual data is provided by ward or other form of localised analysis, rather than relying on borough wide data only. In order to commence this process we have included as an appendix to this report data about child poverty from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs web site broken down by electoral ward in Dudley.

Percentage of assessments of social care referrals carried out within 7 days of referral

Actual performance has improved from 55.9% in quarter 1 to 61.2% in quarter 2 but remains below target. Our recent OfSTED inspection of safeguarding has indicated that where children are at risk of significant harm action is taken promptly to safeguard them and this was identified as a strength. The Safeguarding Board continues to work effectively with all partner agencies. However there has been a rising trend of referral to children's social care which has affected our ability to respond to initial assessments and therefore there remains the potential for some children to not receive services in a timely way to meet their needs. This is particularly affected by the police notifications for domestic abuse. A new process has been put in place to deal with these referrals more effectively and this should lead to improved performance against this indicator in quarter 3.

Key elements of our Improvement Plan are:

- Implementation of guidance on the role of Children's Social Care in relation to the common assessment process in order to safely reduce the numbers of children being referred for social care assessment
- Taking steps to ensure that domestic abuse notifications can be dealt with as "contacts" rather than referrals – this should reduce the conversion rate to initial assessments by 20% and reduce the amount of admin work
- Re designation of roles and responsibilities to establish a Domestic Abuse Response Team
- Development of regional and local protocols in relation to class A drugs and substance misuse in order to ensure appropriate referral practice
- Extending the Team Around the Child school pilot which is proving successful in meeting early need without referral to Children's Social Care (CSC)
- Working with senior managers in other agencies to improve referral practice
- Developing multi-agency teams to work with young people and families at an early stage to help prevent the need for referral to Children's Social Care, and to increase capacity by workers in these teams remaining engaged should referral become necessary

- Appointing additional agency workers to the Assessment Teams to provide capacity to deal with the volume of work

Percentage of core assessments for children's social care that were carried out within 35 days of their commencement

Actual performance has improved from 66.5% to 74.6% but remains below target. The numbers of young people being referred to social care has stabilised and is not increasing at the same rate as in previous months. However completing core assessments with current staffing levels remains a challenge. We are working with colleagues to make greater and more effective use of the common assessment process. This should help to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals, and to provide a safer and more managed "step down" from our care teams when this is appropriate. This in turn will make the completion of core assessments more manageable.

Percentage of private fostering assessments completed within 42 days

No assessments have been initiated in this quarter, because we have not received any notifications of private fostering arrangements. This is a cause for concern and we continue to ask partners to ensure that all relevant cases are communicated to the local authority. We will escalate this as a priority issue in quarter 3.

Looked after Children cases which were reviewed within the required timescales

Performance has declined due to high numbers of Looked After Children and the impact of this on operational and review arrangements. In addition there are high levels of sick leave among our Independent Review Officer team. Our Independent Review Officers have an average of between 150-160 cases to review, which compares to a recommended position of 50-70 cases nationally. As a service we have been operating above our establishment of 5.1 Independent Reviewing Officers with two Independent Reviewing Officers undertaking an additional ten hours between them, and through the engagement of a sessional Independent Reviewing Officers averaging two days per week. We have recently invited a consultancy review from the Council's Audit Services team to explore other steps that might help and we are awaiting our initial feedback from this. The findings will be incorporated into an overarching improvement plan for the Independent Reviewing Officer service. We have recently changed the management arrangements for the Reviewing Officer service to provide more frequent supervision and support for the team than the previous system allowed.

Percentage of young offenders in education, employment or training

All cases of young people not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) have been analysed on an individual basis from which no general cause has been identified for this current rate of performance. In addition the July to September quarter is always difficult because some college courses do not start until orders have ended.

The Youth Offending Service has continued to support young people, to engage and remain in employment, education or training.

Young Offenders are a priority group within our Targeted Youth Support Plan. Our Youth Offending Service (YOS) treat young offenders who are in danger of becoming not in education, employment or training as a priority. There are monthly meetings attended by Youth Offending Service staff, Connexions Personal Advisers and others to analyse data and to discuss action plans for individual “hard to engage” cases. Systems are in place with Connexions to support any young person who has completed their order and is still not in education, employment or training. Advice and Guidance is offered to all not in education, employment or training young people. A weekly job club has been developed specifically for young offenders. This has enabled some of the obstacles, which prevent engagement to be addressed. Post 16 providers meet young people face to face in order to support them into provision.

Finance

5. There are no direct financial consequences arising from the information contained within the report. The work in relation to monitoring performance information for the Directorate is met from existing budgets.

Law

6. The main pieces of legislation governing these aspects of our work are the Children Act 2004 and the Education and Inspections Act of 2006.

Equality Impact

7. OfSTED judges that Dudley’s Services for all children and young people are good but agrees with our self assessment that the progress of children in care and those with learning difficulties/disabilities should continue to be seen as priorities for improvement.

Recommendation

8. That the report be noted by the committee.



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Jane Porter
Acting Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer: Ian McGuff (Assistant Director Children's Services)
Telephone: 01384 814387
Email: ian.mcguff@dudley.gov.uk

List of Background Papers; Percentage of Children in Poverty from NI 116 (2007) by Ward; HMRC September 2010.