

Meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee 20th January 2022

Report of the Director of Children's Services

Social Care Improvement update

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to further update the Scrutiny Committee on the continued Improvement of Children's Social Care including: -
 - Overview of the refreshed Improvement Plan 2022/2023
 - Update on the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) Diagnostic by Worcestershire Children First.
 - Update on the Sector Led Improvement Partnership with South Tyneside
 - Update on the DfE Review December 2021
 - Overview of quality of social work practice.

This will provide members with an opportunity to seek clarity and raise questions whilst providing ongoing assurance that Children's Social Care, along with the wider partnership is making improvements at pace to improve the quality of services being provided to the children and families of Dudley.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that Members: -
 - Note and comment on the progress made to date against the Improvement Plan including the quality of practice
 - Note the refreshed Improvement Plan agreed November 2021, which is designed to achieve positive and sustainable change to the quality of services provided to the children and families of Dudley.
 - That Corporate Leaders have been provided with an understanding of progress made to date.

Background

3. We continue to focus on our value of '*Children first and at the heart of all that we do*', which has been strengthened through the refreshed and updated Improvement Plan 2022/2023.

Members will be aware that between October 2020 and November 2021, our Improvement work focused upon 9 key priority areas:

- Leadership
- Improve the timeliness and quality of decision making in the multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)
- Improve Quality of Assessments and Child Focussed plans
- Timely application of pre proceedings stage of PLO (Public Law Outline)
- Prioritising progression of permanency plans for children
- Improve the Quality and Impact of Education for children in care key stage 4 and post qualification and attainment
- Case transition points across all services
- The pace of progression in the development of non-familial abuse and exploitation
- Improve the effectiveness of supervision, Quality Assurance and Senior Management oversight

Update on the 5-priority areas of the Improvement plan 2022/2023

4. In November 2021 we identified 5 priority areas of focus, namely *Restorative Model of Practice, Whole System, Learning Organisation, Partnership Working, Workforce and Impact* with our recovery from Covid threaded throughout the 5 priority areas and plan.

The new Improvement Plan has been developed jointly with the DfE Advisor, DfE, members of the Improving Service for Children Board (ISCB) and staff.

Restorative model of practice

In developing meaningful relationships with children and families including their wider family network, we will seek to create opportunities to work collaboratively with them and to find solutions to their challenges and difficulties and in doing so, support the building of resilient family networks to support them, focusing on their strengths.

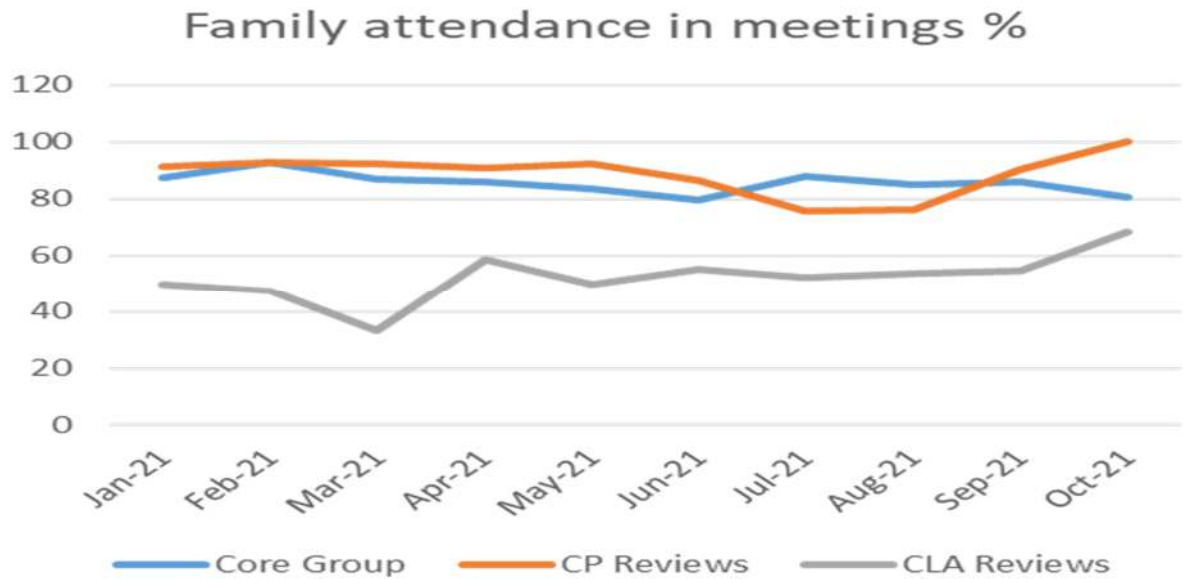
Our plan is to now embed restorative practice in our day-to-day work and work with and alongside families to resolve their difficulties at the earliest opportunity. We know from our current audit activity that we need to strengthen this area further and continue to train and support our staff in this model of work and their practice.

Since September 2021, there has been significant activity around training the workforce in the Restorative Practice Model and to date over 100 front line staff and almost 40 managers have been trained. The remaining Children's Services staff are in the process of being trained and we have included Restorative practice in our core training offer for staff and within our new training programme for 2022. It is anticipated that any new staff joining us will also be trained in this model of work.

We are committed to engaging with children, young people and families and family attendance in child protection conferences and Child in Care Reviews has increased and this is a key area of our focus. We want children and families to feel supported and empowered to make 'Family Led' decisions, which will enable them to have more control



over their lives and to receive professional help for the least amount of time that is necessary in line with their needs.

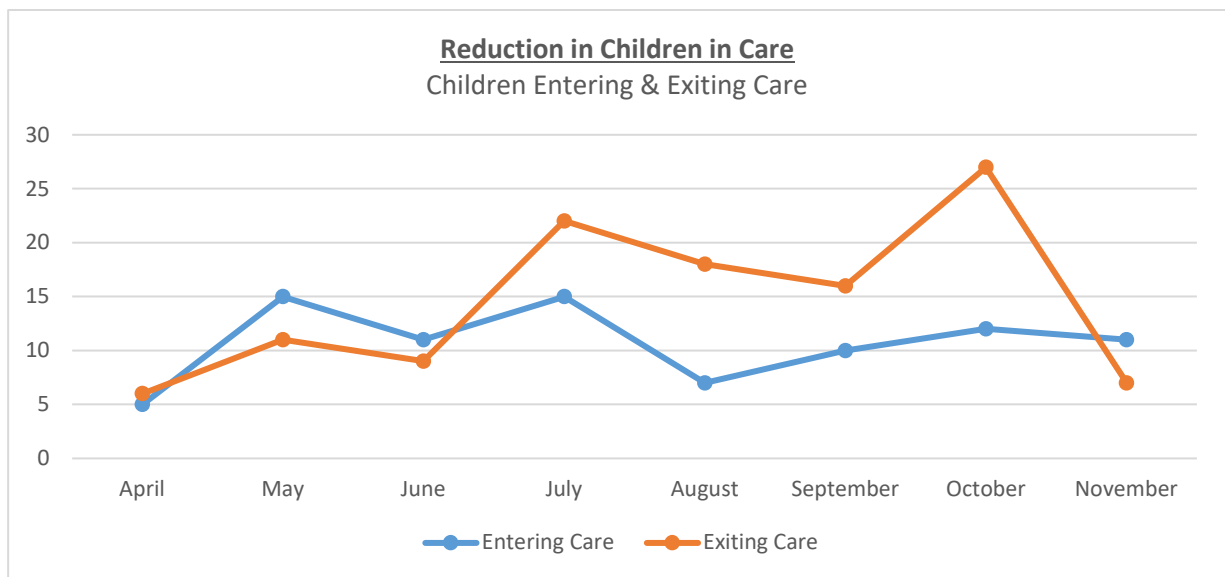


Restorative processes are being embedded across everything we do. Practitioners have received guidance to use Restorative Approaches in everyday work; '4 first steps' guidance was circulated advising how to use high challenge and high support, restorative check ins, solution circles and language that cares. We have a Restorative Practice Steering group in place and champions are being identified across the system and are developing a plan on a page for their service area and this is a key area of our work during 2022 and will form part of our Restorative Practice model plan that will strategically take the work forward.

As part of our Restorative Practice model, we have undertaken work on changes to the forms with our children's case file recording system (Liquid Logic) to promote Restorative Practice principles and ways of working, including how we undertake and record our management decision making relating to children and young people – *What has happened, who has been affected by this and what needs to happen next.*

In line with our work in this area, we need to see further evidence on children's files around how restorative practice is impacting on day-to-day practice and family led decision making including the use of restorative circles in practice.

In line with our work around permanency and valuing families, our data informs us that more children have left care during April-November 2021 than those entering care (116 have left care compared to 86 entering care) and our key aim is to ensure children and families receive the right help at the right time.



Whole system

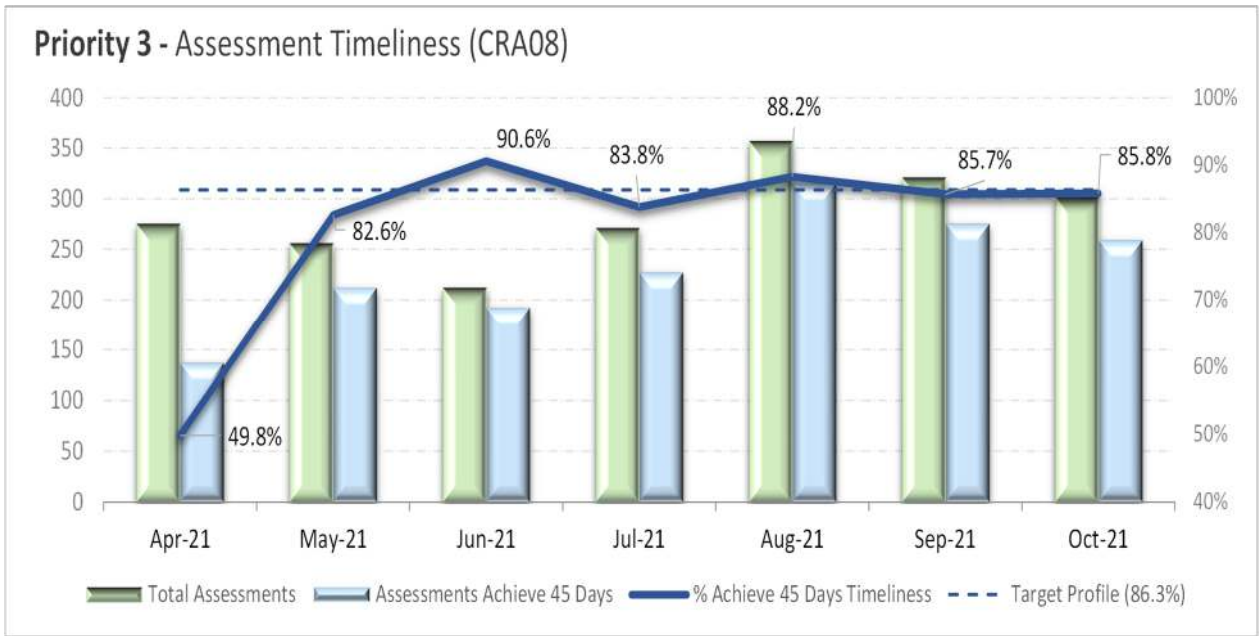
Children and families will benefit from timely and effective interventions in response to their needs and are seen alone as necessary and their lived experience fully understood, and they are safer as a result of the help they receive and secure permanency in a timely way.

We are redesigning our Edge of Care service and strengthening our assessment and planning processes and including exploring opportunities for children and young people to return to their parents where it is assessed as safe to do so.

Since September and building on the strengths of our current CART (Child, Adolescent Response) team, we are launching our Supporting Families First model in January 2022. Service design and scoping of the work has taken place including work and engagement with partner agencies. The service has been designed with the aim of supporting more children and young people to safely remain with their families and in doing so ensuring interventions are delivered to improve outcomes for children and young people.

Additional support has been provided to the Assessment Service to work through an increase in referrals over the September and October period. We have developed improved data reporting to assist with manager oversight and timeliness in the MASH and Assessment Service and started to implement a revised process for manager oversight of assessments.

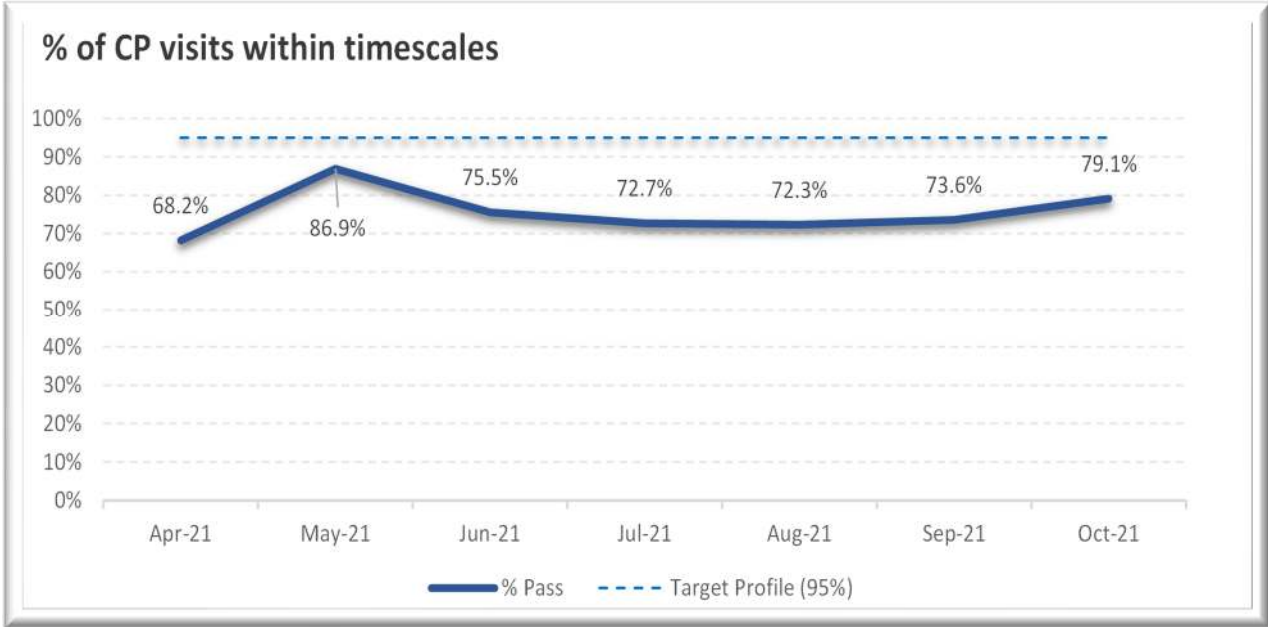
Our Assessment timeliness continues to improve and has remained above 85% since August 2021.



We have reviewed and amended our processes when children step down to Level 4 services to early help ensuring children and families receive a streamline service and receive the right support aligned to their needs.

We have seen a recent increase in our overall percentage of 2 weekly visits to children subject to a child protection plan (79.1%) and core group meetings (76.5%) taking place, although further improvements are required in these priority areas and for these to be sustained.

Dudley’s plan to visit children on a Care Plan every 2 weeks is more frequent than that of neighbouring Local Authorities in the region.



Our child protection numbers are 38.5 per 10k of the population - lower than the regional and national average. We would not want to go lower but were too high previously- currently 287 in total

The number of children in the Public Law Outline (PLO) process has increased and all children subject to PLO are reviewed by a Head of Service and Legal Services every 6 weeks to prevent any drift and delay. At the end of November 2021, there were 7 families in PLO and a total of 20 children which is an increase from the previous reporting period.

Using our qualitative and quantitative data to better understand our whole system story and continue to drive improvements, we have set up DCS (Director Children's Services) Assurance Performance Clinics from January 2022. These meetings will be whole service wide and will give us the opportunity to have a wider system view of performance and quality, how areas connect and what are our shared targets.

Learning Organisation

Our aim is that children and families will benefit from focused social work support, and they know how to provide feedback about the quality of the services they receive. Through our work with them they are encouraged and supported to find their own solutions and their voices influence and shape services. As part of our learning culture, we will now seek to embed reflective one to one and group supervision to support and develop further restorative solution solving circles and share and disseminate learning in team meetings, practice groups and service development

We continue to focus on our quality assurance activity including changes to our supervision policy and will be issuing guidance for facilitating group and peer supervision and supervision with a Restorative focus

We are establishing routine processes for undertaking and analysing outcomes of observations of supervisions and welfare supervision record audits, on a quarterly basis as set out under the Quality Assurance Framework

As part of our work around listening to staff and obtaining feedback from Social Worker's regarding the quality of supervision they are receiving, we will continue to use the method of a Dudley Dialogue focus group to gain feedback from them.

Compliance with audits has reduced over recent months, although increased again in October 2021 after a refocus with managers. The number of monthly audits judged good or requires improvement is increasing indicating some improvements in the overall quality of our practice and this is also evidenced in dip sampling audit activity.

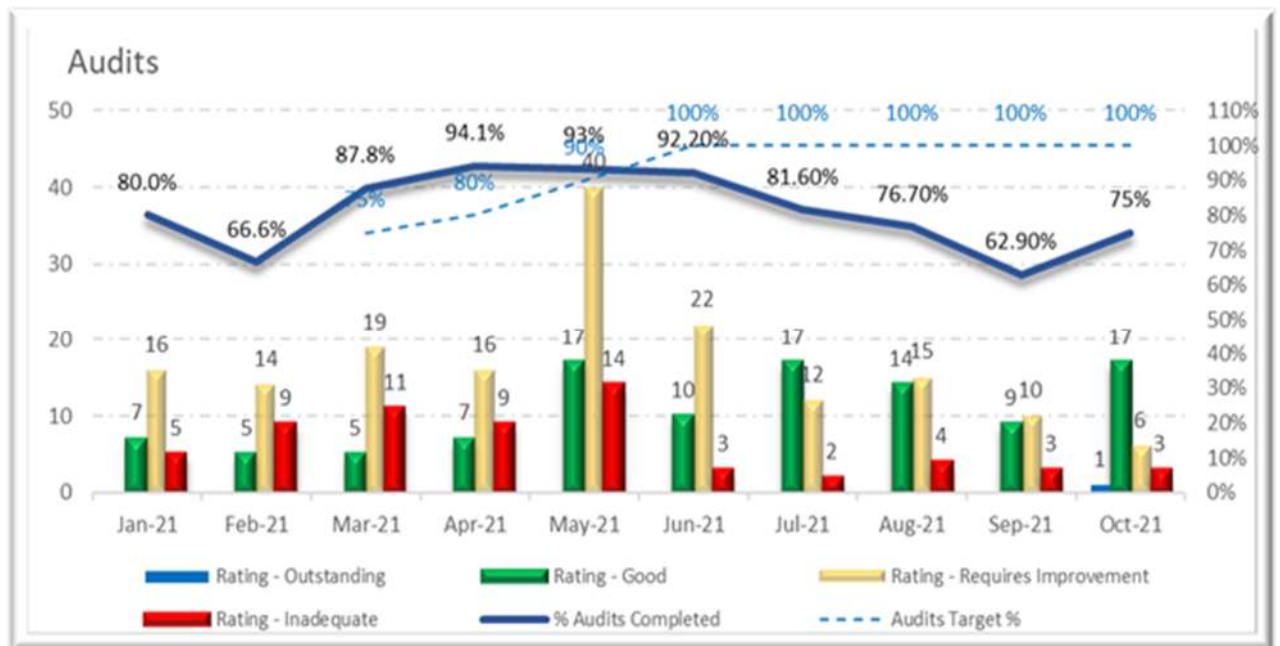
A range of themed audit activity continues to take place, including unborn babies, rates of No Further Action after Assessment, review of care proceedings work and management oversight. Audit outcomes have allowed us to strengthen our processes in these areas.

All managers and leaders have been involved in themed group audit work (permanency in November 2021) – including group learning discussions.



We have embedded reflective audit circles for managers involved in audits to improve their audit skills, practice and decision making for children and to promote a consistent approach to our auditing work

We have also continued with our observations of practice by Senior Managers.



The number of audits judged good continues to improve and we have developed a process to close the loop on audits judged requiring improvement and inadequate

Our recent audit analysis in October 2021 identified that children’s voices were found to be a strength and children were being visited regularly, and there was increased evidence of their participation at review meetings. Stronger examples showed practitioners using a combination of verbal discussions, observations, and direct work to support children to express themselves during visits.

Direct quotes from children were set out in speech marks and highlighted in blue, giving children a sense of identity on their files, and bringing their voices to life. There was also good evidence of Independent Reviewing Officers consulting with children prior to review meetings and writing review meeting records to children rather than about them.

The quality and regularity of supervision and management oversight varied across services. In some cases, there was evidence of regular and reflective supervision supported by clear management oversight and direction. Good examples of supervision records showed use of the Social Discipline Window to support practitioners to reflect upon restorative approaches and their work with children and families.

A key area of our audit activity moving forward is to increase the feedback we receive from children, young people and parents and to also gain feedback at different parts of the child's journey of our work including the Safeguarding and Review Service. We continue to utilise audit circles to reflect, debate, and learn from audit findings and to drive further improvements and we were supported by South Tyneside with this process during November 2021.

A key area of focus is our ongoing learning from complaints and sharing this learning with workers and managers – e.g., focus on communication with families and accessibility of Social Workers

Using DfE funds, we have a dedicated person driving participation across the system.

We are continuing our focus on triangulating the 3 critical areas of Key Performance Indicators, Quality Assurance and family feedback to strengthen our learning culture

Partnerships

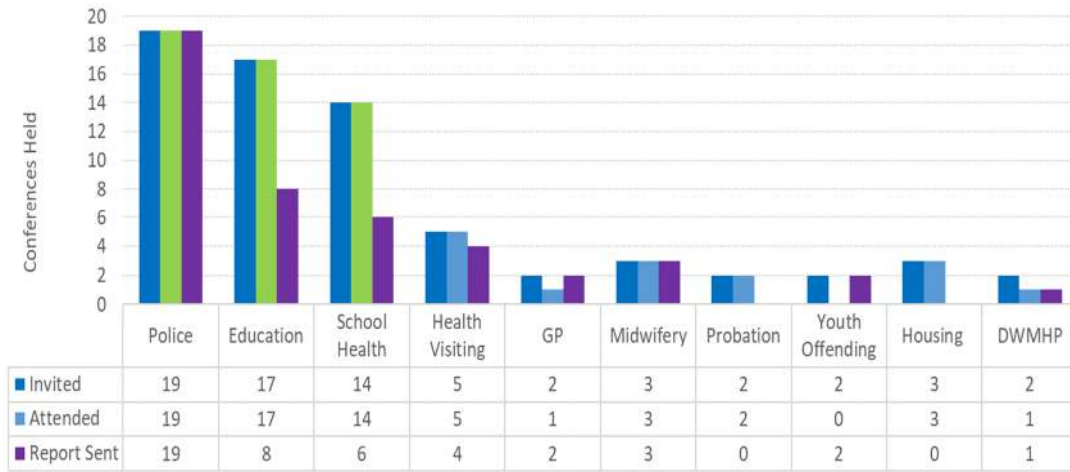
Our aim is that children and families are supported at the right time with the right support and are protected from abuse and neglect and feel safer and are happy and healthy and receive an inclusive education where they learn and enjoy. We want to ensure that children and young people's voices influence the improvement quality of services they receive, and we are working closely with our partners at a strategic level to ensure a joined-up response to the needs of children and families across the Borough

We have further developed Our Dudley Exploitation Hub (DEX) with the addition of 3 Family Support workers. Oversight of children's files indicates these staff have made a significant contribution to partnership working around our most complex children. We are making effective use of the MACE (Multi Agency Child Exploitation) process and work is underway to relocate the Missing Service in DEX by the end of January 2021. Strategies for achieving an increase in Return Home Interviews for children and young people who go missing are being reviewed as part of this work.

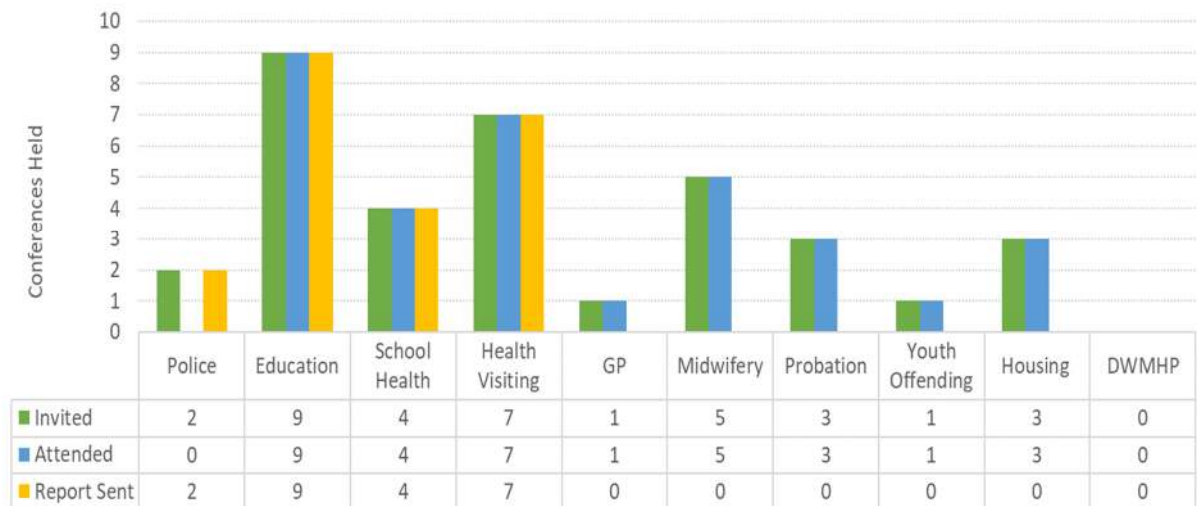
A review is underway of commissioned services for family support and for women at risk of repeated removals of babies from their care and we are working closely with our colleagues from Commissioning and Public Health on this area.

We are seeing good partner agency engagement in meetings including Initial and Review conferences and this supports and promotes multi-agency planning for children and young people

Initial Child Protection Conferences November 2021



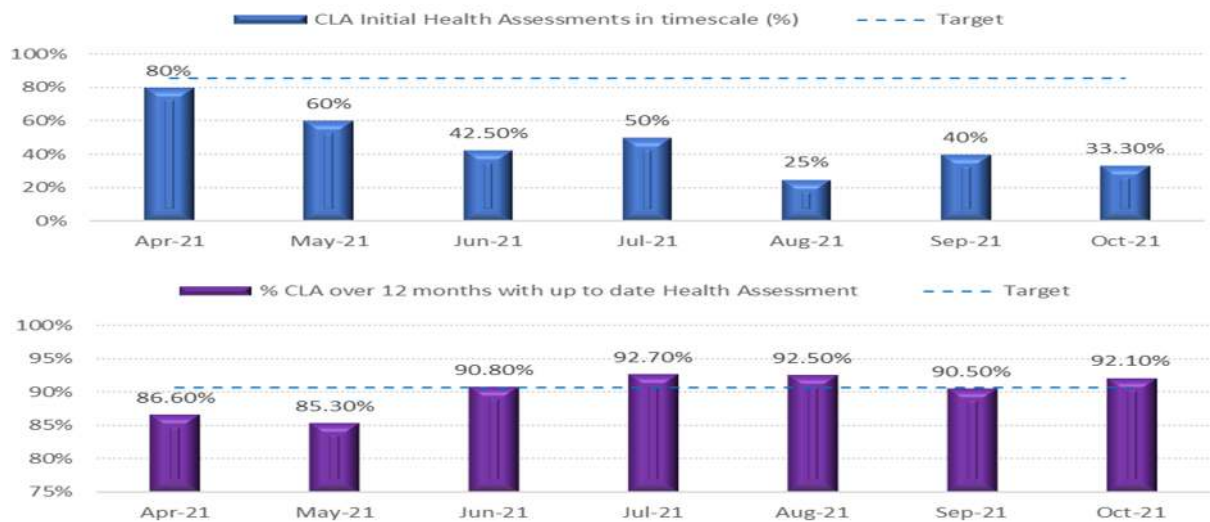
Review Child Protection Conference November 2021



In September 2021, we reviewed and strengthened Terms of Reference to ensure that Health and Education are part of a Complex Cases panel to enable children with complex needs to receive robust jointly funded and planning decisions.

The revised Dudley Lighthouse Links which provides emotional wellbeing support to Children in Care and Care Leavers, is now fully staffed with robust completion of support to children with mental health difficulties. We also have a new permanent Team Manager in the service

Multi-Agency response to improve timeliness of health assessments, dental care and Strength and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs) is now in place with joint monthly performance meetings. We have identified areas impacting on timeliness and have put measures in place to address these. We need to significantly improve timeliness for Initial Health Assessments



Workforce

Our aim is that children and families benefit from consistent and meaningful relationships and tell their story by 'saying it once'. We want children and families to receive the support and intervention that is impactful and timely, and we are recruiting and retaining staff within Dudley.

This remains a key priority area for us and whilst we have seen over 2% in our permanent staff since April 2021, we continue to struggle along with others across the region, to attract both permanent and agency social workers and this impacts on our caseloads and the overall quality of our work with children and families.

Caseloads for social workers, remains too high and at the end of November 2021 the average caseload was 23.4 across our Assessment, Safeguarding and Support and Children in Care teams. This is a reduction from previous months. We know that high caseloads impact upon practice and morale. We continue to work regionally to address recruitment issues.

We continue our relentless to focus on recruitment and retention, taking action on issues raised by staff and their feedback. A Market Supplement for our harder to recruit to posts IS in place and we continue to use and review our work via social media platforms around recruitment.

17 ASYEs (newly qualified social workers) have been appointed to social work roles commencing in November 2021 and 9 permanent social workers have left Dudley since the start of September 2021. 9 permanent social workers are due to start by the end February 2022.

We have now put in place Family Support Workers in Assessment and Safeguarding and Support teams to support with work with children and families and will fully evaluate the impact of their work

We are reviewing our support to social workers and with a focus on the systems we have in place and ways to increase their capacity to spend more time with children and families

We now have very few interim Team Managers in post across teams, promoting consistency in decision making and planning for children and families

It has been agreed that the Improving Services for the Children Board will meet bi-monthly throughout 2022 and the refreshed plan sets out our ambitions throughout 2022-2023. The new Improvement Plan will have a focus on driving forward our practice priorities to ensure that we have a consistent model of Restorative Practice, that the whole system offers the right support at the right time, and with a quality assurance and learning framework that supports our journey to delivering good quality services in Dudley that are sustainable.

Towards the end of November 2021, a meeting was held with Managers across Children's Social Care to discuss and share the contents of our current priorities and the plans for 2022.

5. **Permanency planning and our work with South Tyneside**

We have continued our work with South Tyneside since the last update and they have been involved in our work around permanency planning for children and young people alongside our quality assurance process around audits and Team Manager decision making. This included them providing support with the design of audits around permanence and following managers undertaking audit activity in November 2021, South Tyneside held a reflective circle with our managers to share and discuss key learning. This allowed for an open and reflective discussion to take place and to consider key themes and learning. As part of their work with us, they are also accessing children's case records as part of this wider support work and audit activity.

The Department for Education (DfE) has endorsed a further plan of continued support from South Tyneside currently until March 2022, building on the work undertaken so far in relation to permanency planning and quality assurance.

As part of our wider work and key Ofsted priority action, we have established early permanence planning meetings for children so to avoid any drift and delay in the care planning for them and we will seek to further embed permanency planning and care planning meetings for all children and young people in our care.

We have been successful in increasing the number of children adopted since April 2021 to 12 and also seen an increase in the number of children made the subject of Special Guardianship Orders increasing to 22 since April 2021.

Matching of children to their long-term carers has also been a priority action and we have achieved this for 98% of children and young people in this cohort and will continue with



this process for new children and young people who have been placed with their carers long enough and are eligible for the matching process to take place.

6. Update on the December DfE review

A formal review of our work since May 2021 by the DfE took place on the 13th December 2021. The DfE as part of this Review, met with a range of stakeholders and the Children's Social Care senior leaders. The appointed DfE Advisor, Alastair Gibbons in his role continues to provide support, advice and challenge to Dudley and he is of the view that we have made good progress during 2021 and that the foundation for improvements are in place and we need to continue to build on the progress we have made to date.

The DfE were of the view that our 'One Plan' agreed in November 2021 would be helpful in driving forward further improvements and that having a permanent and stable senior leadership team has had a positive impact. The feedback from partners as part of the review was positive and specifically feedback in relation to communication and the systems in place was really strong.

Staff reported to the DfE as part of the review process that leadership visibility has improved and permanent management has increased, and staff reported that there is stability and support. Also, that the MASH systems have improved, and staff felt engaged in change. Issues with LCS (Liquidlogic Childrens Social Care) were raised and staff reported the need for consistency, support and additional training in this area that we are currently reviewing

Staff reported that supervision had improved, and they were supported in their development and it was considered that overall social workers were cautiously optimistic about the future.

The DfE Advisor reported that there were 4 areas to address including:

- Workforce
- Demand and caseloads
- Quality of practice
- Partnership working

It was reported that our refocussed Improvement plan and work with the ISCB on priorities had been positive with an increasing focus on practice, including embedding the Restorative Practice model, developing a one system approach from Early Help through to Care Leavers with family engagement and feedback threaded throughout.

South Tyneside also contributed to the DfE Review and shared key headings around their work over the last six months, including:

- Visited Dudley in September
- Dip sampling a number of files
- Meeting with a number of staff, managers and foster carers



Colleagues from South Tyneside spoke of specific pieces of work they have supported with around permanency, quality assurance and working with managers on quality assurance activity. They reported that they have enjoyed working with Dudley and have found staff to be open, passionate and that this is a real strength.

The DfE review fully acknowledged all of the progress that has taken place in the last 14 months, including partnership working. It was agreed that the DfE will continue to provide support and supervision to Dudley until the next ILACS Ofsted Inspection takes place.

Whilst we have made progress on most of the targets in May 2021, workforce capacity, high caseloads and our ongoing compliance with audit activity remain key areas of focus alongside embedding Restorative Practice, gaining increased feedback from children, young people and families and further developing our learning culture. We are robustly following this up and we have implemented a number of feedback processes to support this.

7. MASH Diagnostic

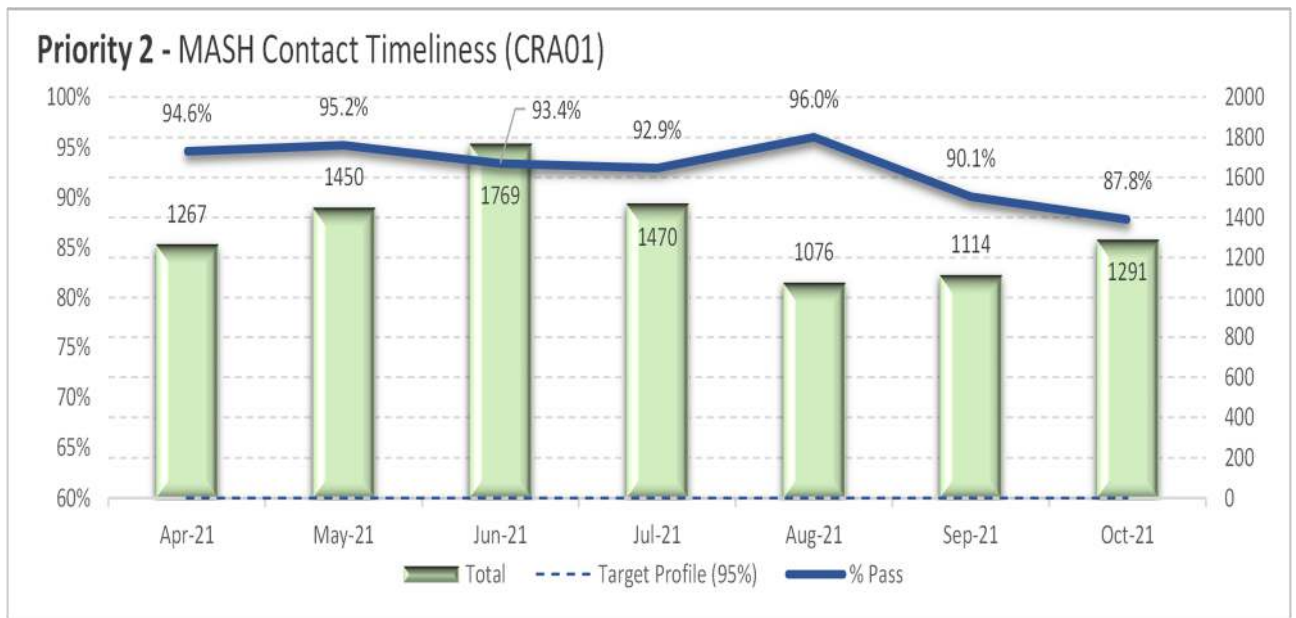
Following the MASH diagnostic by Worcestershire Children First in October 2021, work continues on the key recommendations around processes within the MASH, how work flows through to the Assessment Service, how we avoid duplication of work and also a review of the amount of work taking place in the initial stages of a contact being received. The portals used by partners to submit referrals to social care and early help has been well received, this process is working well and has been received positively by our partners. A benefits analysis of the portals is taking place.

We have in place both operational and strategic meetings within MASH so we can work closely along with partners on the timely decision making for children and young people and ensure the processes in place are as streamlined as possible and agencies continue to fully contribute to information sharing around children and young people in a timely manner.

We have continued to make progress around the timeliness of our decision making for contacts received and this remains over 87% having dropped slightly in October 2021. This has been due to some staff sickness in November, combined with trying to spend more time at the decision-making stage. We have seen an increase in the total number of contacts received since September 2021 of 1255 in total, this increased to 1291 contacts in October and there was a further increase to 1304 in November 2021.

We have developed a robust multi-agency action plan. The plan includes strengthening our 'whole system' working with Early Help, better use of LCS, review of staffing roles and streamlining processes to reduce duplication. The Partnership, via the MASH Strategic Board has endorsed the need to redesign and streamline our Front Door so that children can be signposted more effectively to Level 3 and 4 services. MASH staff have started to frame conversations with parents and partners in line with Restorative Practice questions (*What's happened, who's been affected, what needs to happen next?*).



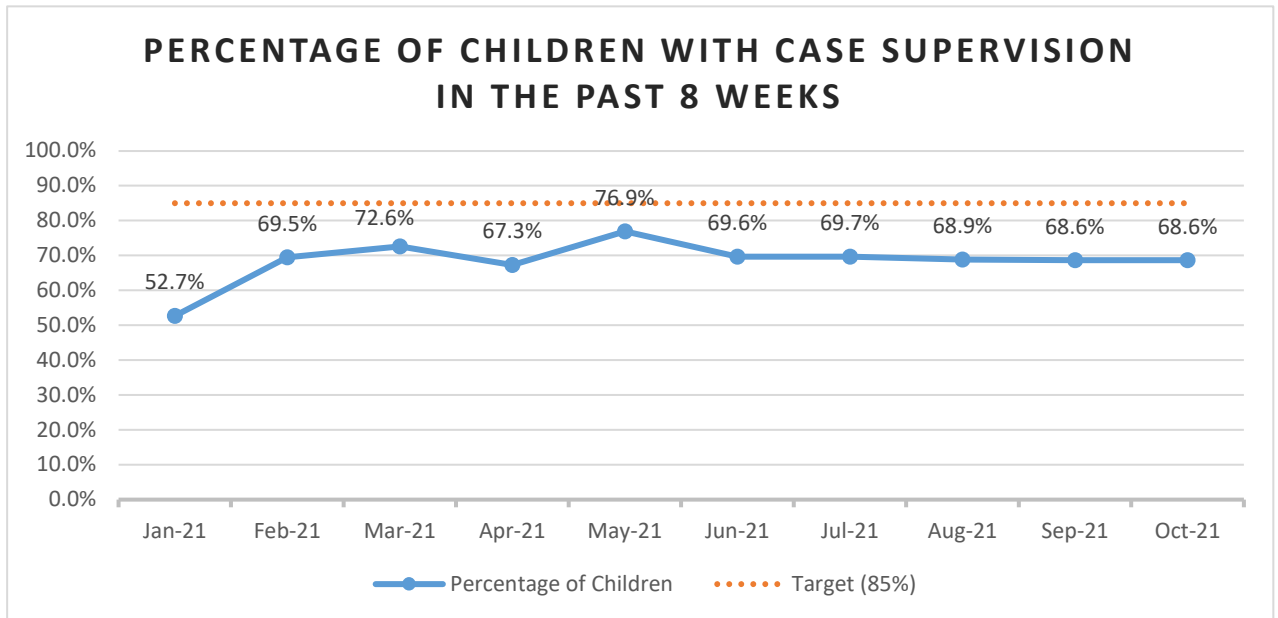


8. Case Supervision and Welfare Supervision

We continue to focus our work on increasing the quality of supervision and this will remain a priority area during 2022. The quality of supervision and management oversight remains inconsistent across services and in October 2021, this stood at 68.6% of children’s records evidencing case supervision in the past eight weeks, in line with our supervision policy.

We have undertaken work to update our supervision policy and streamlining the process around case supervision, to increase the frequency and quality and to simplify this for managers. Whilst there are examples of regular and good quality supervision taking place evidenced via our audits, some children’s records do not always demonstrate and highlight the level of reflection and direction needed to support practitioners to progress children’s plans.

As part of our work with South Tyneside, they will be supporting us in 2022 with Team Manager decision making, early permanence planning and embedding this throughout our teams and services.



Audits

As outlined, we continue to focus on our audit activity, and this has included a range of dip sampling and throughout December we focused on visits to children and young people. We are reviewing our quality assurance framework to ensure this remains flexible and that we are targeting our audit in areas where we have some emerging concerns or where we consider key lessons can be learned/improvements made.

As part of our overall quality assurance framework, we continue to learn and reflect on our activity and the different ways we can improve practice and support the workforce, and this includes learning from compliments and complaints and feedback from children, young people and their families.

A key area of our activity moving forward is to increase the feedback we receive from children, young people and parents and to also gain feedback at different parts of the child's journey about our intervention. We continue to utilise audit circles to reflect, debate, and learn from audit findings and to drive further improvements.

Training

We have continued with our commitment to train and support the workforce with their continued professional development and with a wide range of core offer training opportunities available.

106 staff have attended permanency training up until the end of November 2021 with a further 21 booked on and 64 still to book. 117 staff have attended SMART planning training, 29 are booked to attend and a further 44 are due to book on. 110 staff have attended Assessment and Analysis training and a further 22 are booked on and 38 to book on.

We are increasing the number of overall staff training in Restorative Practice with further dates booked in early 2022

The number of staff attending core training continues to rise each month and we have recently launched our training programme for 2022 across Children's Social Care.

All Team Managers have been offered core skills training through Research in Practice (RiP), which was a five-day programme and in October 2021, managers attended **Reflective Supervision for Supervisors** and **Developing Effective Leadership Skills** aimed at developing critical thinking and reflective supervision.

During November 2021 we held a further Practice Week with a key focus on Restorative Practice, observations of practice and the sharing of learning and including capturing the voice of the child and family.

We continue to listen to the feedback from staff around their professional developmental needs and in doing so, ensure our training plan and delivery is aimed at increasing their skills and knowledge and work with children and families and to inform our training plan moving in to 2022 and beyond.

Our training plan is fundamental to our core offer to staff to support them in their day-to-day work, and to develop their practice, and as part of our overall commitment to improving practice and outcomes for children and young people.

Finance

9. There are no financial implications for the Council.

Law

10. There are currently no legal implications for the Council; however, the Department for Education undertook a formal review of the Improvements made to date on Monday 13th December 2021.

Risk Management

11. The challenges regarding recruitment of social workers continues to impact on our workforce and social worker caseloads, which impacts on service delivery.

Equality Impact

12. The Improvement Plan does not have impact on people with different protected characteristics.

No Equality Impacts have been identified.

The effect of the revised Improvement Plan on children and young people is better outcomes on their lived experience.



Human Resources/Organisational Development

13. There are no Human Resources implications.

Commercial/Procurement

14. There are no direct commercial or procurement implications.

Council Priorities

15. The revised and updated improvement plan is in line with the Council's '**Children First and at the heart of all we do**', the vision of a **Child Friendly Dudley** and the Corporate Parenting Strategy.



Dr Catherine Driscoll, Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer: Andrea Stone (Childrens Social Care)
Telephone: 01384 815858
Email: andrea.stone@dudley.gov.uk