

Central Bedfordshire Council

Corporate Parenting Panel

11 February 2019

Ofsted Action Plan Update

Report of: Cllr Steven Dixon, Executive Member for Families, Education and Children and Lead Members for Children's Services (steven.dixon@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Responsible Director: Sue Harrison Director of Children's Services, (Sue.Harrison@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to update elected members on the Ofsted Action Plan 2017-18 and to propose next steps.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Panel is asked to:

1. To note the contents of the report
2. To agree that the Ofsted Action Plan is now completed

Issues

The purpose of the Ofsted Action Plan

1. The Post Ofsted Action Plan (Action Plan) was developed in response to the Ofsted Inspection that took place between 12 June and 6 July 2017. The Ofsted Inspection concluded that Children's Services in Central Bedfordshire are good and nine recommendations were made.
2. The Action Plan is informed by the nine recommendations in the Ofsted Inspection report published on 25 August 2017. The Action Plan is attached as an appendix to this report. The Action Plan was co-produced with managers and practitioners in Central Bedfordshire Children's Services, led by the Director of Children's Services.

3. The Action Plan was agreed as appropriate by Ofsted in December 2017. From January until September 2017, the Action Plan has been subject to frequent progress monitoring by the Director of Children's Services and other senior leaders. This has meant that progress on actions and impact measures have been subject to close and continuous scrutiny.

4. The nine recommendations of the Ofsted Inspection report are, in summary:
 - I. Improve the effectiveness of frontline managers
 - II. Ensure that pre-proceedings work is initiated promptly when children's circumstances do not improve
 - III. Provide rigorous oversight and tracking of children's plans when children become looked after so that permanence is formally approved in a timely manner
 - IV. Strengthen performance management and the quality assurance framework to provide managers with a clear line of sight to practice quality
 - V. Ensure that Corporate Parenting Panel is routinely informed about issues and areas for improvement, so that it is able to act as a critical friend, challenging and holding to account senior managers and driving improvements in outcomes for children in care and care leavers
 - VI. Improve the quality of Personal Education Plans (PEPs)
 - VII. Ensure that the physical and emotional needs of looked after children are considered earlier when plans being made for them to be placed at a distance, so that they can access any services they need in a timely manner
 - VIII. Ensure that 16 and 17 year old homeless children are provided with clear information about their entitlements to accommodation
 - IX. Ensure that the agency decision maker provides a coherent rationale for all adoption decisions and that this is recorded on children's files

5. The recommendations primarily relate to looked after children although some are broader, specifically the recommendations on improving the effectiveness of frontline managers (Rec 1) and strengthening performance management and the quality assurance framework (Rec 4). Recommendation Two in respect of pre-proceedings is not directly in relation to looked after children but relates to the statutory requirement for timely intervention and planning for children at all stages in their journey.

6. Each of the nine recommendations has a series of actions and outcomes in the Action Plan. The recommendations and related actions vary in terms of complexity. For example, the recommendation that the agency decision maker provides a coherent rationale for all adoption decisions and this is recorded on the child's file (Rec 9) is relatively straightforward to complete and evaluate. The other eight recommendations are more complex and have required multiple action points and evaluation measures. Auditing has been built into the action points to check progress. All the agreed actions have been completed as planned. Impact measures are ongoing, with further audit work and regular but less frequent oversight of the Action Plan progress. The Eastern

Region Peer Review of Looked After Children and Permanence in November 2018 provided further independent evaluation of the progress and impact of the Action Plan.

A summary of progress against the Post Ofsted Action Plan

7. Recommendation One, is in respect of improving the effectiveness of front line managers and review managers, to ensure that children's assessments are updated in response to change. Training has been provided to frontline managers (team managers and review managers) and practitioners as agreed and is ongoing. Revised supervision and assessment procedures have been put in place, through a process of consultation and collaboration and integration of research findings on best practice. Monthly case file audits indicate that overall practice is sound and further improvement opportunities are clearly identified, actions agreed and progress and impact of actions evaluated. The number of children who are subject of a Child Protection Plan for over two years has reduced significantly as a result of considered, child safety and welfare focused action.
8. Recommendation Two addresses the need to ensure and evidence that pre-proceedings work is initiated promptly when children's circumstances do not improve. The agreed training has been provided and well received on pre-proceedings work. Monthly data and the audit of pre-proceedings practice shows that timely action is being taken for children entering and in the pre-proceedings process. Clear and impactful data is also available about the timeliness and outcomes of legal care proceedings.
9. Care proceedings for Central Bedfordshire are mainly completed within the national target of 26 weeks. In a small number of unusually complex cases a longer timescale is required, bringing the average to completion within 28 weeks. This is significantly below the national and regional average and is indicative of prompt decision making for children so that their legal status is secured in a timely way. In most (88%) cases the application requested to the Court by the Local Authority is granted and close scrutiny of the outcomes in all cases ensures that appropriate action is taken to safeguard children if an alternative outcome arises. Learning is secured through reflection on the most complex and challenging situations for children in care proceedings. The Eastern Region Peer Review concluded that practice in respect of PLO was exemplary.
10. Recommendation Three is in respect of rigorous oversight and tracking of children's plans when they are looked after. Whilst we know that looked after children in Central Bedfordshire continue to have stable placements, the issue of formal matching and agreement of permanence continues to be a particularly high profile area of our recent and current work. Permanency tracking and formal matching processes have been revised as agreed in the plan.

11. The number of children who are matched with long term foster carers is clear. Currently 59% of our looked after children who have been living with foster carers for 12+ months are formally matched with their carers. This is an increase from 39% in February 2018. We anticipate that this number will continue to increase as a result of the robust processes that have been put in place as a result of the Action Plan. A process also is in place to ensure that children with other types of permanence have this formally agreed. This continues to be a high profile and particularly active area of work. Further actions include refining the Permanency Planning Meeting process to ensure consistency, and re-introducing the regular Permanency Tracking Meetings that were temporarily suspended in the autumn 2018 to allow managers to focus on ensuring formal matching activity (the 13+ Matching Panels).

12. Recommendation Four addresses performance management and the quality assurance framework. The quality assurance (audit) process has been subject to extensive change as agreed in the Action Plan. The second quarter of the revised case file audit process was completed in October 2018. Audit completion rates are high and the collated findings provide clear service strengths and development areas. Development activity from audits results in agreed actions and these are closely monitored by the senior leadership team. Emerging indicators of practice improvement as a result of learning and actions from audit is apparent in the most recent quarterly audit report.

13. Practitioners and managers report that the revised audit process is clear and helpful, supporting them to reflect on practice quality effectively. A themed audit programme is running in parallel to the monthly case file audit process. This includes planned progress and impact update audits going through 2019.

14. Recommendation Four also addresses actions in respect of return home interview practice. This was promptly streamlined to ensure that the Return Home Interview Service (RHI) secures all missing notifications within 24 hours so that all children are offered a return home interview so that an understanding of their needs can be secured and help offered as promptly and as required. An audit is nearing completion to check compliance and impact in respect of practice and reporting in the consistently effective use of child sexual exploitation screening and risk assessment tools.

15. Recommendation Five addresses the need to ensure and evidence that the Corporate Parenting Panel is routinely informed about issues and areas from improvement, so that it is able to act as a critical friend, challenging and holding to account senior managers and driving improvements in outcomes for children in care and care leavers. Agreed actions and deep dives have been agreed and followed up on as planned. Elected members attended open sessions with Corporate Parenting colleagues in January 2018 to further enhance their understanding of their role, the journey of the child and the role of the Corporate Parenting Service in a child's life. The session involved members exploring how they can further utilise their role as Corporate Parents to drive change and seek the views of children to inform committees and communities.

16. Since July 2018, a Children in Care Council member has co-chaired as well as attended the bi-monthly Corporate Parenting Panel and all Corporate Parenting Panels now take place in school holidays to make attendance by children easy.

17. Recommendation Six is in respect of the quality of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) for looked after children. Improvement activity was based on challenging and comprehensive quality assurance processes for the completion of PEPs by the Virtual School Team Leader and Head Teacher as well as additional guidance to education and social work colleagues who complete PEPs. PEP quality has shown a marked improvement following this improvement activity.

18. Recommendation Seven is about ensuring that the physical and emotional needs of looked after children are considered early when plans are made for them to be placed at a distance. A tracking process has been established with health colleagues to ensure good oversight and prompt action to support the needs of children. An audit of practice in May 2018 showed that overall the physical and emotional needs of children are being met. Practice in respect of this area of work was judged to be sound by the Eastern Region Peer Review team in November 2018.

19. Recommendation Eight is in respect of making sure that 16 and 17 homeless children had clear information about their entitlements to accommodation and support. Training has been provided to practitioners, homeless interviews are put on the child's electronic case record and practitioner compliance is checked through file audits. Children's Services managers ensure that it is exceptional for children to remain in emergency homeless accommodation for more than the agreed maximum of 28 days.

20. Recommendation Nine requires that the agency decision maker for adoption decisions provides a coherent rationale for the decision. This is evident on all case files, evidenced in routine audit activity.

Legal Implications

This report does not have specific legal implications. However, the Council has a statutory obligation towards children and this report provides information as to how some of those obligations are being met in terms of the Ofsted regulatory framework.

Financial and Risk Implications

This report does not have specific financial implications. However timely, considered and effective service delivery for children and their families is an efficient use of resources and for this reason contributes to good budget management.

Equalities Implications

Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. Ensuring that children are provided with timely, considered and effective services enables Central Bedfordshire Council to achieve better outcomes for children and young people who are additionally vulnerable.

Conclusion

At our request, The Eastern Region Peer Review in November 2018 provided a timely independent review of the quality of service provided to our children who are looked after or on the edge of care, central issues in the Ofsted Action Plan. The successful Peer Review confirms that the Action Plan has been completed and that it has been impactful in terms of practice development and service quality.

It is imperative that we continue to retain focus on the practice development areas steered in the nine Ofsted Inspection recommendations that informed the Action Plan. This because many of the recommendations are challenging and complex, requiring both process and cultural shifts. This focus needs to go alongside a keen attention to continuing to the basics right - timeliness, collaboration, statutory requirements, - whilst attending to emerging priorities also.

Recommendations

- That the Ofsted Action Plan is formally signed off as completed by the Director of Children's Services
- A progress review is undertaken as part of the annual Eastern Region Self Assessment in May-June 2019
- Continued rigour in audit practice, informed by the ILACS framework, as well as emerging national priorities (for examples, intrafamilial child sexual abuse, (a current Joint Targeted Area Inspection theme) and criminal exploitation of children) and Central Bedfordshire Children's Service priorities such as reunification of children from care and children at home and subject of Care Orders.

Appendices

The following Appendix 1 is attached - Post Ofsted Action Plan September 2018

Background Papers

None

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