

Strengthening Children Services Quarterly Report: April 23 to June 23

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Further to a comprehensive review and additional investment in Children's Services during 2022-23, this report provides an update to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the development work to strengthen Children's Services. The committee are invited to review the contents of this report and provide questioning and challenge to the officers and Cabinet Member in attendance regarding this work.

2.0 Background and Context

2.1 In September 2022, a comprehensive review was carried out across Children's Services to provide a clear picture of the level and quality of support and protection that was provided to children and young people across the borough and to assure the leadership team that children under our care were safe.

2.2 Evidence was gathered from a range of sources, which included: -

- Feedback from our workforce.
- A review of data not currently included within the Children's social care performance framework.
- External case sampling has been completed using the Ofsted methodology by a former Ofsted HMI Inspector.
- Findings from Spring Lane children's home inspection.
- Findings from the recent Joint targeted area inspection.

2.3 Summary findings from the review confirmed that: -

- Staff are committed and loyal to Barnsley and work hard to make sure that children, young people, and families receive the support and help they need.
- There are significant recruitment and retention challenges in Barnsley, (a national issue), which is making it difficult to meet demand across the service.
- Caseloads were high, leading to fewer opportunities to build relationships with families and undertake direct work with children and young people.
- Staff sickness and turnover was higher than the norm and morale was low.
- Practice was variable with children not always receiving timely support.
- Timely and effective multi-agency decision making was not always evident.
- Gathering and recording information and acting on the voice of the child was inconsistent across individuals, single agencies, and the multi-agency partnership workforce.
- Thresholds of need were not understood by partners and not consistently applied within the Local Authority or across the partnership.
- We needed to strengthen our performance framework and quality assurance mechanisms.
- There are not enough local placements to support local children and young people.

2.4 In November 2022 Cabinet approved a range of investments to strengthen children's services in the borough in response to an internal review of the quality of practice in children's social care. Investments were made at a time when children's services were impacted by rising demand, a significant workforce crisis, and its impact upon caseloads and staff morale, a slow recovery from a global pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis meaning many more people parenting in adverse circumstances.

2.5 The investments focussed on improving services through the following activities: -

- The introduction of a Development Board. Comprising of key decision makers across the council and partner agencies, providing strategic leadership and governance to the Development Programme.
- The establishment of a Children's Services Development Hub, a strengthened quality assurance and

performance function with responsibility for leading a workforce strategy that ensures practice improvement and effective recruitment and retention.

- The appointment of additional permanent and temporary roles, including social workers and managers, family support workers and managers to increase capacity, reduce caseloads and reduce spans of control.
- The procurement and implementation of a 'practice model' to provide a consistent framework for staff and partners to use with children and families, impacting on the quality of direct work and outcomes for vulnerable children in need of help or protection.
- An expansion of current commissioning capacity through the recruitment of a permanent Head of Service and additional commissioning roles to focus on increasing local placement provision for children in care.

2.6 In April 2023 Cabinet approved a further £3.4M to cover increased costs from the initial proposals in November, and to provide additional required investment identified through the continued review of services, demand, and from the Ofsted focused visit in January 2023 on the Care Leavers service.

2.7 The investments in April 2023 focussed on: -

- Covering the increased cost of Signs of Safety, the extension of the programme and project support roles and additional management resource to support capacity.
- The establishment of a re-modelled Emergency Duty Team specifically to support children's services with additional resourcing to manage increasing demand and through put.
- To respond to the findings of the Ofsted focused visit in January by improving the offer to Care leavers and increasing management and Personal Advisor resource.
- Expanding the corporate resource that supports children's services through increasing capacity in business intelligence, business support and HR.

3.0 Current Position

Development Programme

Date Period	New Activities	Total Activities	RAG Ratings					
			Not Started	Completed	In progress / on target	Minor concern	Major concern	Ceased / Closed
Oct 22 – 28 Feb 23	N/A	145	12	35	69	24	5	0
01 Mar – 31 Mar 23	6	151	13	45	71	19	3	0
01 April - 31 May 23	35	186	9	59	75	28	5	10
01 June – 30 June 23	4	190	8	65	67	31	7	12

3.1 Since the commencement of the programme, 65 activities within the development plan have been completed and 67 are on target. 31 activities are being tracked as they are either outside of timescale, or they are continually monitored until we can see evidence of impact. 12 activities have been closed due to duplication or transfer to service improvement plans.

3.2 Performance data continues to be a significant challenge, although the performance framework is developing, with a current 68 indicators now in place. To address the risks, Business Intelligence continue to balance the data requirements for children's services. Performance is monitored across the service by fortnightly performance meeting with Heads of Service and a monthly Directors Performance Meeting. All areas of practice against the available key performance indicators are interrogated.

3.3 Recruitment is still challenging in some areas of the service, and focused efforts are in place to support this including the appointment of a dedicated recruitment officer and a partnership with Sanctuary which is an organisation specialising in the recruitment of social workers. However, due to the number of social worker vacancies, we continue to require agency staff which is placing an additional pressure on the budget.

Development Board / Governance

- 3.4 The Development Board continues to meet monthly with good support and attendance from key representatives and partners. Updates across the plan are provided to Board members along with a specific update on the performance and data developments. The Board has maintained an oversight of all the workstreams, alongside more focussed scrutiny into specific areas including contextual safeguarding, the Integrated Front Door (IFD), workforce and performance.

Communication and Engagement with Staff

- 3.5 Work has continued to shift the culture in children's services and improve the operating environment for our staff, including increased communication and engagement. A Practitioner Forum commenced in December 2022 and meets monthly. The forum has informed a number of key strategies.
- 3.6 The workforce has collaborated to develop a vision for Children's Services.

Our Vision

- 3.7 Barnsley a place of possibilities: We are one service with one goal, working together to build a brighter Barnsley for every child.

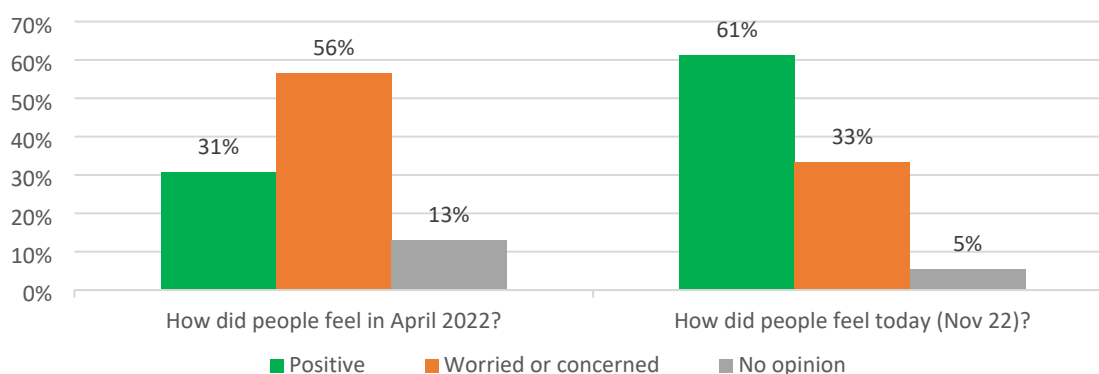
We will achieve this by: -

- Putting children & families first
- Working together in partnership to deliver joined up care.
- Delivered by a strong & valued workforce.

- 3.8 We have conducted regular information sharing and engagement activities through regular team meetings, extended leadership meetings, whole service events, social care forum and early help conference. Over the course of the year, we distributed staff engagement questionnaires and can see from the results that we are having a positive impact:

Short Survey Nov 22:

- 3.9 In April 2022, 56% of respondents felt worried or concerned about the future of Children's Services, 31% of respondents felt positive and 13% had no opinion. By November 2022, this has shifted significantly with 61% of respondents feeling positive about the future, 33% feeling worried or concerned.



Signs of Safety (SOS) Survey May 23:

- 3.10 A new senior leadership team is in place that appears committed and passionate about bringing about change in Barnsley. There has been a significant shift of late, more members of staff and much-improved communication. As a result, people are more supported and happier within their roles.

SOS survey May 23: I feel valued and know my work contributes to success and improvements for families.

Social Work Health Check June 23:

- 3.11 89% of respondents said they had access to a manager to discuss issues outside of supervision with the remaining 11% saying they had access most of the time.

Caseload Levels

- 3.12 One of our concerns and prior to the investment into Children's Services was the high caseloads of Social Workers. High caseloads meant fewer opportunities to build relationship with families and undertake effective direct work with children and young people. To address this, we set a clear expectation of maximum caseloads: -

- 20 children for Experienced Social Workers
- 14 children for Newly Qualified Social Workers

- 3.13 We know that there is still more work to do in this area, as our social care teams still struggle with recruitment and demand has increase which impacts on caseload levels. However, since June 22 caseloads have continued to reduce. There are still some services where caseloads are not at the desired level which include, Children and Young People Teams (CYPTs), Assessment but recruitment continues to be a key priority for the service.

Average Caseload	June 22	May 23
Average FTE caseload for Assessment Team	37.3	18.9
Average FTE SW case loads	25.6	18.9
Average FTE NQSW	23.4	13.9

Staff Recruitment

- 3.14 Whilst recruitment remains a challenge for the service, as for many other local authorities, we have made some progress. The Leadership of Children's Services is stabilised, with a new Service Director for Children's Social Care in post from 10th July. All Heads of Service and Service Managers have been recruited to permanently.

- 3.15 We now have a Workforce Development Strategy in place with a clear delivery plan. Recruitment approaches have been reviewed and improvements to processes are underway. There is a rolling advert for social workers, alongside, targeted recruitment adverts. The dedicated recruitment officer is supporting all recruitment activities across the service since May with positive feedback from managers. Performance in this area is being monitored.

- 3.16 We know that currently our agency numbers are still high due to the challenges of recruitment. From March 22 to June 22, we have seen an increase in worker agency numbers and a reduction in agency managers.

- 3.17 To address the recruitment challenges, we have several additional initiatives underway including: -
- Work with LinkedIn, another social media channel to attract more people to Barnsley. Additional features extend the reach of our job opportunities, showcase our opportunities more prominently and target the right candidates for our roles, using analytics to help tailor our recruitment campaigns.
 - Work has commenced to bolster our current recruitment marketing capacity and ensure that we are attracting the right candidates, The provision of a specialist recruitment service will support the appointment of social workers required for Children's services provision, helping to fill vacancies and replace agency staff with permanent employees.
 - June saw the launch of our Children's Service's Academy with Barnsley College, a collaboration with Barnsley College and a shared aspiration to support local people into careers in children's services. The aim is to grow our own employees by linking in early with the college, promoting us as an employer of choice.
 - Working with the South Yorkshire Teaching Partnership to maximise our opportunities for student placements at all intakes, a longer-term vision to 'grow our own' social workers. New apprenticeships start in September 2023.

- 3.18 Our retention rates of case holding social workers has improved and absence levels have reduced or been maintained across the service.

Performance and Quality Assurance

- 3.19 The Practice Development Hub has been created to support workforce development, improve the quality of practice and support the development of a robust performance framework.
- 3.20 The Hub has developed and launched Practice Standards across the service, providing clear expectations of practice. Alongside this they have reviewed and updated the Quality Assurance Framework, managing the audit process and ensuring all areas of identified practice improvement are addressed. We are supporting staff to make these improvements with a comprehensive continued professional development offer including 'back to basics' training alongside more specialist training.
- 3.21 Performance and practice quality remain challenging and managers across the service continue to audit cases to drive improvement in the quality and compliance of practice. The new audit scorecard has identified a slight positive shift in practice, but we are not yet where we want to be.
- 3.22 To further support this, reviews of practice have been carried out by a former HMI inspector and we have developed service by service specific improvement plans, which are routinely monitored through challenge sessions.
- 3.23 A dedicated team manager training programme commenced in June 2023; offering a bespoke offer to front line managers who are central to our improvement journey. Feedback from the annual training programme is collected regularly and confirms that the training is having a positive impact.
- *"It was food for thought. This was really beneficial to my role and helped me to understand how to make my recording more purposeful and it helped me know what I need to do. (Recording Expectations)"*
 - *"Really good at making me focus on the language in plans and make me focus on goals (Pathway Planning and Needs Assessment training June 2023)"*
 - *"Excellent course all children's practitioners and managers need to do this course to ensure consistency in decision making and better outcomes for children (Good Practice in Section 47 Training)"*
- 3.24 The service is currently preparing for the roll out of Signs of Safety the practice model that will be used across the service and with partners to ensure a consistent, strength-based approach when working with children, young people, and their families.

Looked After Children Commissioning / Sufficiency

- 3.25 Our Sufficiency Strategy is agreed, and our implementation group is underway. The purpose of the group is to ensure there are sufficient, safe, secure, and appropriate placements for children in care and young people over the next 3 years and support children and young people to stay with their families where it is safe to do so. This is also a key element of our financial strategy.
- 3.26 The implementation group has 8 specific priorities to deliver against including: -
- Review of high-cost placements,
 - Planning for permanency
 - Review health funding contributions
 - Developing the local market
 - Fostering Service Review
 - Development of Edge of Care services
 - Improving Contract Management
- 3.27 Properties are already being identified to expand Barnsley's own provision including sixteen plus accommodation, specialist residential care and investigation options to 'block book' suitable provision. The Edge of care service is developing with the introduction of a Family Group Conferencing team in July which will support families in PLO (pre proceedings) to keep families together where possible and it is safe to do so.

- 3.28 Our children in care and care leavers have recently responded to the Bright Spots online survey sharing their experience of living in care. Results will be share in September and will help to shape services in the future.

Practice Improvement/Partnership Working

- 3.29 Partnership working is integral to safeguarding children and young people and is central to our development programme.
- 3.30 Capacity in the Integrated Front Door (IFD) has increased and there has been a focus on improving relationships with partners - the aspiration is to become a truly Integrated Front Door. Weekly partnership audit meetings are showing improvement in the quality of the screening, with a more collaborative approach so that all professional opinions are shared. A short-term accommodation review is underway so that partners can be co-located better with a longer-term plan to move the IFD. The new Thresholds of Need document is launched and work is underway to embed a consistent understanding and application of thresholds.
- 3.31 We are in the early stages of implementing our Vulnerability Hub for adolescents experiencing extra familial harm The service has started work with young people and we will be increasing this offer as staff are appointed. There will be an official launch of this service in October.

4.0 Financial and Risk

- 4.1 The Director of Finance (and S151 officer) and his representative have been consulted in drafting this report.
- 4.2 The 2023/24 budget included recurrent investment (£7.0M) aimed at strengthening and improving Barnsley's Children Services. This investment supports the ongoing implementation of the Development Plan with specific focus on the following priority areas: capacity / caseloads; governance / leadership; service quality & improvement, early help and the LAC sufficiency plan.
- 4.3 In addition, the Phase 2 Development Plan report (April 2023) sought approval for further spend commitments (£9.2M) that relates to continuing rise in caseloads, quality of service, rising LAC sufficiency / placement costs and increased corporate capacity (e.g. business support, BI/Performance, etc). It was agreed that these should be recognised as cost pressures in 2023/24 and funded through reserves.

The following provide further explanation on the forecast spend on the key development plan priorities and LAC sufficiency: -

Caseloads / Staff Capacity

- 4.4 The forecast variance of £2.1M mainly relates to the additional staffing capacity agreed under the phase 2 development plan for addressing rising caseloads, service demand and spans of control issues in the following teams: Integrated Front Door, Assessment, Children & Young People Teams, Emergency Duty Team, Children Disability Team, etc.
- 4.5 The cost variance mainly consists of agency costs and reflects the increasing use of agency staff to manage caseloads and vacancies / absences – a consequence of the ongoing challenges in recruitment. Work is progressing to address the recruitment issues and reduce reliance on agency staff. However, it should be noted that there is increased risk of further deterioration in the forecast position due to the following: -
- agency staff are retained beyond their end date due to delay in staff recruitment;
 - extension to the duration of existing agency project teams;
 - recruitment of additional project teams to manage rising caseloads in case holding teams;

Service Quality & Improvements

- 4.6 The forecast variance of £0.6M covers additional requirements under the phase 2 development plan for the following: additional care leavers' personal advisers; enhancement of the care leavers financial offer;

advocacy support; strengthening quality assurance & audit capacity and LAC commissioning activity. In addition, it includes investment in practice hub / signs of safety – which is responsible for the development and launch of Practice Standards across the service, which provide clear expectations of practice.

Early Help

- 4.7 An underspend of £0.1M is anticipated against the investment in the Early Help team due to slippage and delay in recruitment to established family support worker posts.

Corporate Capacity

- 4.8 The £0.6M variance forecast mainly covers identified spend commitments (highlighted in the phase 2 development plan report) across the following: Business Support; Business Intelligence; and Human Resources.

LAC Sufficiency Plan

- 4.9 A financial pressure of £7.2M is forecast against the LAC placement budget for the year - this compares unfavourably to the £5.8M previously highlighted. This pressure reflects an increased number of placements in foster and residential care as well as the continued competitive pressures in the children's care home provider market. The Council continues to face challenges (increasing numbers and costs) in placing young children, especially those with complex / multiple needs.
- 4.10 Implementing the commissioning actions set out in the refreshed LAC Placement / Sufficiency Plan continues to be the focus for managing demand pressures over the medium term. The Sufficiency Plan will ensure that the right children are placed in care and in the right placements to meet their needs (in family type placements where possible).

Managing the Financial Risk

- 4.11 The above cost pressure needs to be considered within the context of the overall financial risk / pressures currently forecast for Children Services for Q1 of £10.9M – which mostly relates to LAC placement costs. This is in excess (£2.3M) of the reserves level previously agreed by the Council in support of the budget pressures for 2023/24.
- 4.12 In the short term the Executive Director of Children's Services is working closely with the Director of Finance to formulate an immediate Financial Recovery Action Plan to address the increased LAC placement pressure in 23/24 including: (1) review of recent 16/17 year old placements in supported accommodation; (2) review of the process for residential care searches (3) managing the local residential care market; to help address the current cost pressures experienced. To coincide with this, the Director of Finance is also undertaking a full review of the Council's reserves should this plan not address the full cost pressures currently being experienced.
- 4.13 Furthermore the following are the key actions and outcomes within the LAC sufficiency plans over the medium term (2023 - 2026): -
- Reduction in LAC numbers over the medium term through the planning for permanency initiative, stabilising services and development of Edge of Care and / Family Group Conferencing services (which is envisaged would prevent escalation to children social care)
 - Increase in the number of in-house foster carers;
 - Reduction in numbers of children placed with IFA carers;
 - Accelerate the procurement or development of new Council owned children's homes;
 - Bring back into use a children's home;
 - Reduction in the number of residential care placements – through frequent reviews, step downs and planned moves;
 - Improve the level of continuing care funding for high cost looked after children placements (and those with disabilities);
 - Improved commissioning / contract management / procurement approaches of high-cost placements e.g., block booking of beds.

5.0 Next Steps

5.1 The Council and Partners are committed to the development Programme, which is continually reviewed through the Development Board and reported quarterly to the BSCP and Cabinet. Whilst progress has been made and progress is evident, more time is needed for us to see this translate into consistently good outcomes for children.

5.2 The next stage of our improvement journey is to focus on evidencing positive impact on outcomes for children. We will: -

- Continue to prioritise the recruitment, retention, and development of the workforce.
- Continue to monitor and challenge performance across the services.
- Continue to focus on improving compliance and quality of practice.
- Develop a financial strategy to manage the change sustainably
- Thoroughly embed the QA framework and use findings from audit to continually improve practice.
- Develop the Performance Framework further.
- Utilise modern technologies to reduce duplication and streamline practice.
- Continue to develop a collaborative culture with effective support and challenge at its core.
- Continue to collaborate with partners to effectively help and protect children and young people.
- Review the current governance reporting framework to ensure a sustainable focus on continuous improvement through existing structures.

6.0 Invited Witnesses

6.1 The following witnesses have been invited to today's meeting to answer questions from the OSC regarding the performance of and additional investment in Children's Services:

- Carly Speechley, Executive Director, Children's Services, BMBC
- Matthew Boud, Service Director, Children's Social Care, Children's Services, BMBC
- Cllr Trevor Cave, Cabinet Spokesperson, Children's Services, BMBC

7.0 Possible Areas for Investigation

7.1 Members may wish to ask questions around the following areas:

- What area of investment has had the greatest positive impact on service improvement and why?
- What are the major concerns within the development programme and what solutions have been identified? What are the implications for children, young people and their families?
- What do you need to stop doing, start doing, do differently, and do more of?
- When do you expect to see consistently good outcomes for children?
- How confident are you that the additional investment will achieve the desired improvements in children's services? How will you know?
- What does quality look like and how will you know if it is being achieved?
- How have the voices of our children and young people been incorporated in the improvement work?
- When do you expect caseloads to be at the desired levels?
- What actions could be taken by Members to assist in the improvement work?

8.0 Officer Contact

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04 September 2023