



Committee and Date  
Young Peoples Scrutiny  
Committee  
  
1 February 2017  
  
10.00am

Item  
  
**8A**  
  
Public

## Children's Social Care Assurance Report

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### 1. Summary

This report will provide assurance to Scrutiny Committee in relation to the identification of children in need and children at risk and the delivery of services to children in need and the effectiveness of these arrangements for the safeguarding of our most vulnerable children in Shropshire.

The report will report on the quality of practice being delivered and will highlight any areas of risk and challenge that that may compromise on service delivery.

The report will confirm key areas for improvement that Children's Social Work Services will be implementing.

### 2. Recommendations

To review current arrangements within Children's Social Care and to offer scrutiny and challenge regarding the effectiveness of service delivery.

To establish a task and finish group to consider Corporate Parenting Functions

### 3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

(NB this will include the following: Risk Management, Human Rights, Equalities, Community, Environmental consequences and other Consultation)

If Children's Social Care do not fulfil their statutory responsibilities and do not provide effective service delivery, then there is the potential of poor outcomes for our most vulnerable children in Shropshire. There is the risk of a poor

Ofsted inspection judgement and possible financial, legal and reputational risk for the Council.

### **3. Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications associated with this report. However ineffective children social care service delivery does not lend itself to effective and efficient working and could result in increased costs to the council.

### **4. Background**

The last Ofsted inspection of the effectiveness of arrangements for safeguarding and looked after children was in November 2012. At this point Shropshire Children's Social Care were judged to be adequate. Since this time there has been key service delivery developments to improve the timeliness and quality of interventions. This report will highlight these key developments during 2016/2017.

<b>List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)</b>
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<b>Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)</b>
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David Minnery
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<b>Local Member</b>
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<b>All</b>
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<b>Appendices – Appendix A – Children Social Work Teams</b>
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# **Children's Social Care Assurance Report**

## **1. Key Service Developments 2016/2017**

Key service developments during 2016/2017 to improve the quality and timeliness of safeguarding services to children have been;

1. Ongoing development of Compass as the multi-agency hub improving co-ordination of information sharing and interventions, timeliness in the management of contacts and referrals and joint decision making with consistent application of the SSCB threshold.
2. Development of Early Help and Strengthening Families as a single Early Help approach to supporting and strengthening families.
3. Introduction of 2 Assessment Teams which separates out the assessment process from Child in Need and Child Protection Planning and ensuring that assessments are timely and proportionate.
4. Re-design of case management teams to improve quality and frequency of managerial oversight and supervision to staff.
5. Create a LAC Permanency Team to focus on outcomes for those children in long term care.
6. Improvement plan addressing quality and timeliness of care proceedings.
7. Implementation and review of the LAC strategy specifically preventing unnecessary admissions to care through the edge of care support and improved permanency care planning supporting children to achieve permanence outside of LA care arrangements.
8. Development of opportunities to receive service user feedback from Children and Young People and Parents on the impact and experience of having a social work intervention.
9. Development of a workforce Strategy which sets out our aspirations for our workforce.
10. The development of performance management information to enable managers from front line TM's to DCS to better monitor performance in key social work activities
11. Improvements in the management of and learning from complaints.
12. To conclude cases which had been subject to drift and delay and no longer required the services of Children's Social Care.
13. To increase the challenge and scrutiny provided by the Independent Reviewing officers and Independent Conference Chairs in relation to assessment, planning and improving outcomes for children who are subject to a child protection plan or looked after.
14. SSCB commissioned a review of the multi-agency response to Child Sexual Exploitation. This review gave consideration to the role of the

local authority and recommendations were made and are being implemented to improve service delivery.

15. Appointment of a second Head of Service to provide additional leadership capacity and to drive improved performance in key areas of service delivery.

## 2. External Inspection and Review Outcomes

**Ofsted Inspection November 2012** – Outcome: Adequate. Improvement Plan agreed and completed.

A further Ofsted Inspection will be taking place in 2017.

**Peer Review 2015** – Outcome Improvement Plan agreed and completed

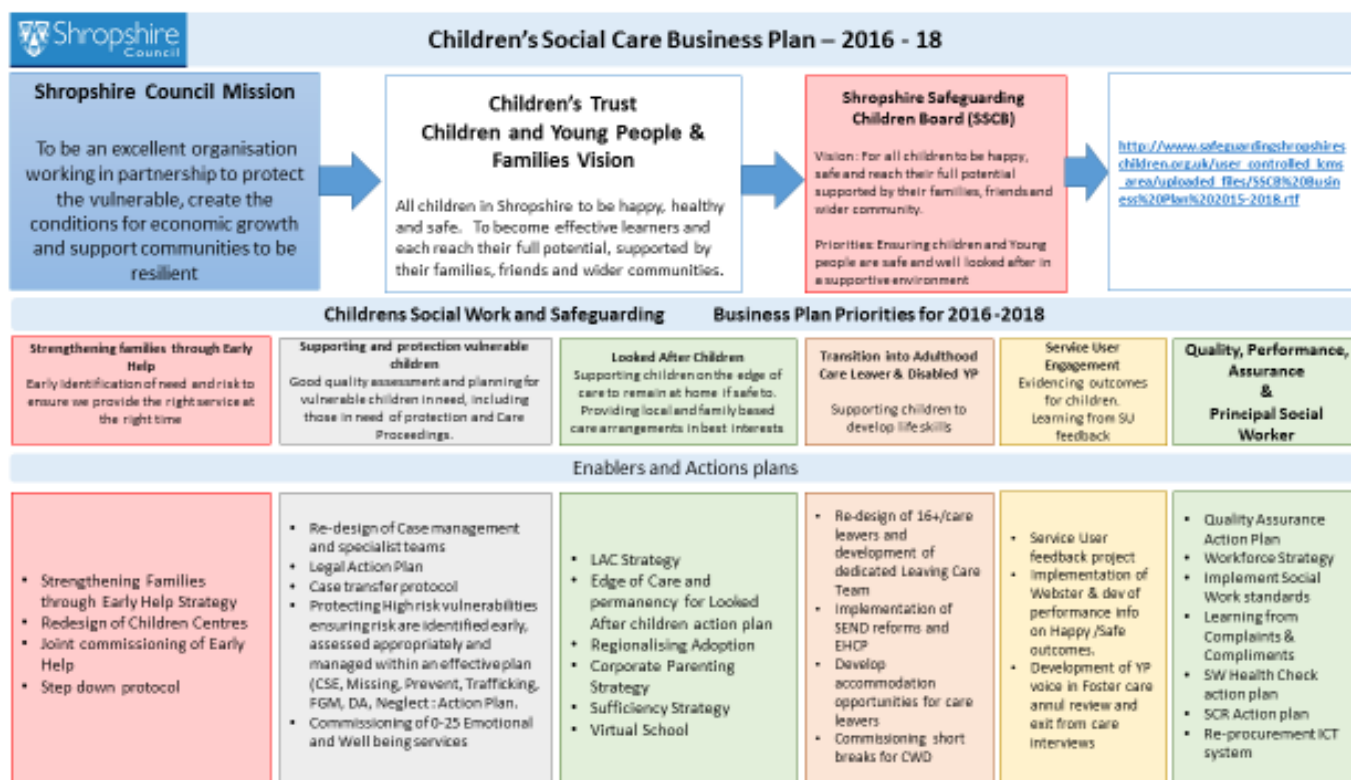
**Ofsted Inspection of Chelmaren Children’s Home** November 2016 – Outcome: Outstanding

**Ofsted Inspection of Havenbrook Short Breaks Provision** – September 2016 – Outcome Good

**Bespoke Peer Review December 2016** – Outcome Step change improvements noted at front door, strong leadership running through veins of the local authority and effective early help services in place.

## 3. Priorities for Children’s Services 2016-2018

Shropshire’s Children’s Services have identified the following strategic priorities. Sitting behind this Business Plan on a page (Under Review) are a variety of Service and Action Plans.



There are six strategic priorities for 2016-2018:

- Strengthening Families through Early Help
- Supporting and Protecting Vulnerable Children
- Looked After Children
- Transition into Adulthood, Care Leavers and Disabled Young People
- Service User Engagement
- Development of a Quality Assurance Framework and Improving Performance

All staff and managers are aware of these strategic priorities and have an understanding of the action plans that sit behind these priorities, and their role in meeting the identified actions within the plans. End to End leadership meetings are held bi-monthly to join the front line and senior managers together to promote joint understanding and working together for continuous improvement to the journey for the child through our services.

With a recent review of the staff appraisal process we are looking to ensure there is an obvious golden thread between our strategic priorities and how it relates to the appraisal process and the identification of staff development needs.

Feedback from staff is that they like the plan on a page and that they have an understanding of the key areas of priority.

#### **4. Improving Outcomes for Children – Key Performance Measure**

Performance indicators are one measure of identifying outcomes for children. The following are outcomes of improvement against key performance indicators:

- **More advice and support being provided through Early Help staff in Compass.** We have seen an increase of 50.8% of Initial Contacts progressing to Early Help from 1059 at Q2 15/16 to 1597 in Q2 in 16/17. This evidences that we are promoting an offer of an Early Help Service where it is appropriate to do so, which provides a more proportionate response to partners and families in the offer of Early Help
- **A related 41% decrease in referrals** being received in Q2 and an increase in the number of referrals moving to SWA from 77.4% in April 15 up to 98.3% in September 2016 is representing a more consistent

application of the threshold document and ensures that we are providing the right service at the right time for families

- **Robust decision making and effective step down arrangements** means our repeat referrals have dropped from 20.7% September 15 down to 15.7 % September 16 is lower than the England 24.0%.
- **Improved joint decision making in Compass** to agreed and shared thresholds means we have seen an increase in the number of Joint police/SC S47 enquires following strategy discussion following audit and co-location. Joint investigations increased from 24.5 % in September 15 to 28.3% in September 16.
- **Improved timeliness of assessments** has been achieved in Q3. We have experienced serious delays in Social Work Assessments being completed in the maximum 45 timescale, during the course of this year. This has been an area of poor performance. In March 2016 60.6% of assessments had been completed in time, in comparison to 88.2 in April 2015. By May 2016 our performance had dropped to 33.9%. This has been a key area of focus and at the end of Q3 84% of our open assessments were in timescale.
- **Number of Children Subject to Child Protection.** We have experienced a rise in Child Protection numbers in 15/16. Our CP numbers have been higher than England rates with the highest point in year being December 15 when the figure stood at 46.3 reducing to 44.6 at March 16. England being recorded as at 42.9 in March 16. This is understood by the service as a normal flow of new registrations but lower levels of removal of CP where effective interventions have reduced risk. During the course of 16/17 we have worked hard to progress effective child protection planning for all children. As at 02/12/2016 267 children were subject of a Child Protection Plan, a rate of 45%. This is a reduction from 272 at 01/04/2016. We have further work to do in this area but have seen during the course of this year 181 new Child Protection Plans and 180 ceasing. This has meant that overall our numbers have remained stable during 16/17. We have also seen a significant reduction in the number of red ragged cases awarded at child protection conferences and an increase in the number of green ragged cases which means that the quality of our interventions is improving. We currently only have 4 children who have been subject to a child protection plan for 2 years or more. We are monitoring closely these 4 children to ensure that the cases progress in a timely way.
- **Sustained outcomes for children through effective CP/Targeted Early Help interventions.** We have seen an increase in the number of children subject to a second or subsequent plan, standing at 23.5%. This is a significant increase from 11.2% in 15/16 and is higher than the England average which is at 16.6%. This was an area of focus for a recent SSCB multi agency audit which identified effective decision making at the point of ceasing to be a plan and starting to subject to a further plan. However, this area has been identified as an area for further investigation at a recent performance meeting with consideration being given to the 31 children subject to a further child protection plan at any time and the 14 children subject to a subsequent child protection plan within 2 years.

- **Reduction in the number of children in care.** The number of children in the care of the Local Authority has fallen from 313 in March 2015 to 285 in March 2016 and we currently have 281 looked after children. At a rate of 46.8 per 10,000 at the end of September 2016 this is below the national average (latest available data) of 60, and below the rate of statistical neighbours at 51.4. This is despite an increase in UASC' being placed in Local Authority care.
- **Effective safeguarding and children achieving permanency more quickly.** Timeliness of care proceedings confirm that between Dec – March 16 Shropshire achieved 100% in the first three months and 75% in the fourth month of cases meeting the 26 week PLO timescale.
- **Timely responses to children being placed for adoption.** We continue to score highly on the adoption scorecard. The England average for children adopted entering care and moving in with it's adoptive family is 487 days. In Shropshire the average time was 391 days. The England average between a Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and Local Authority deciding on a match to a adoptive family is 233 days, in Shropshire it was 66 days.
- **Number of Children in Need.** Our number of children in need cases has remained stable throughout the past 12 months with 231 at end of September 2015 and 232 at end of September 2016. In the last 12 months we have seen a significant reduction in the number of CIN cases open for 9 months or more, reducing from 70% in June 2015 to 42% in September 2016. We continue to focus on timely, robust and proportionate responses and expect to see a further reduction through 2017 of children receiving CIN services in excess of 9 months.
- **Improvement in hearing the experience of the child and parent.** Complaints received 15//16 (97) are in line with those received 14/15 (92). Category of reason for complaints in relation to service standards and communication have dropped from 32 to 12 in 15/16. Compliments received by the service 15/16 have been 36 in total compared to 17 compliments received in 14/15 (these are only recorded when received form an external source). We are seeing a reduction in complaints this year with a total of 28 complaints and 10 compliments received in Q1 & Q2.

We are working hard to improve the timeliness of our responses and in ensuring that children and families are receiving the right level of help at the right time. This has resulted in an increase in children and families receiving Early Help interventions and less referrals into Children's Social Care. Where it is appropriate for cases to step down to Early Help from Children's Social Care on a small percentage are returning as a repeat referral. This indicates that children are receiving the right level of intervention. Further work is needed to ensure that we proactively case manage all open cases to ensure there is no drift and delay within the system. Team Managers now have access to a Team Manager Matrix which allows them to proactively track completion of key social work tasks and ensure that they are undertaken in line with statutory requirements.

## 5. Areas of Challenge

This year (2016) has been a difficult and challenging year for Children's Social Care. The previous structure of services, which comprised of large social work teams, where cases were held by the same worker from referral all the way through to adoption or leaving care initially supported consistency of social workers, which was in line with Munro recommendations. However, over time these teams struggled to cope with the volume of work and teams became saturated. This led to drift and delay on cases and we started to lose social workers.

The larger SW teams and instability in the Senior Social Worker/Advanced Practitioner posts supporting Team Manager's has also been a contributing factor in poor/limited oversight and performance management of front line social workers.

The challenges of poor stability within the workforce and a high reliance on agency workers resulted in repeated changes of social workers on many cases. The turnover and quality of some agency workers was extremely challenging to manage. This led to a backlog of work within the system, including out of time assessments, writing up of S47 enquiries and incomplete recordings of visits and meetings.

Compliance with ensuring visit and reports are written up and recorded has been a challenge. High caseloads, a complex IT system and repetitive report formats have contributed to these challenges.

There was a clear impact on our performance data which is evidenced with our dashboards. Social Workers were managing high caseloads and all of these factors impacted on the timeliness and quality of our service delivery.

In response to these challenges there has been a re-design of case management teams to:

- Create smaller teams
- Create dedicated Assessment teams to separate the assessment process from the delivery of child protection and CIN planning
- Creation of a LAC Permanency Team, which promotes robust care planning for children in the long term care of the Local Authority up until the age of 18 years of age.
- Increase in TM roles in case management teams to improve clarity of role and accountability

In addition to these actions we have also succeeded in;

- Recruited to all Team Manager posts
- Recruiting to all social work vacancies. We currently only have 1.5 vacant social work posts
- Increased capacity at a senior manager level with the appointment of a second head of service
- Reduced reliance on agency workers



Since the service re-design caseloads are reducing for the majority of staff. The introduction of a Team Manager Matrix provides Team Managers with the ability to manage individual and team performance information. This is enabling front line managers to proactively manage their team's performance. A review of the assessment templates in Care First was undertaken in September 16 and has stream lined recording processes for Social Workers. The council is currently undertaking a re-procurement process of its IT software. Implementation timescale April 2018.

An independent audit in May 2016 reported that there was now evidence of effective interventions with 'evidence that recent changes to delivery had improved outcomes'. Case File Audits and the IRO and Independent Conference Chairs QA and Dispute Resolution Process are all showing evidence of improvements in practice.

We have responded positively to the challenges encountered with the previous structure of Children's Services. As a result, we are seeing improvements in our performance and in the quality of our practice. This is having a positive impact on our work with children and families. Social Workers are happy with the changes that have taken place and morale is good amongst the workforce.

## **6. Workforce**

Over the past 15 months there has been a higher than usual turnover of the social care workforce with a high number of staff on maternity leave, staff successful in career progression moves, both internal and external to Shropshire, and some leavers from the organisation. This has led to the need for higher than usual numbers of agency staff in posts and a large number of newly qualified social workers joining the organisation. This has also led to unavoidable changes in social workers for a number of children.

Maintaining workforce stability and staff retention is key in providing good quality services to children and it remains a priority to reduce high caseloads and ensure regular good quality support and supervision for our social workers and social care staff.

The development of a workforce Strategy that sets out how we will meet the needs of the social work workforce to enable them to provide high quality services to children and families. The vision for this strategy is to improve recruitment and retention through the development of career pathways and to support and develop a skilled permanent social care workforce. We will aim to do this by embedding our revised supervision policy, embedding a model of reflective supervision, developing the way we deliver training and development opportunities, forging links with Higher Education Institutes, Teaching Partnerships and responding positively to

national and regional drivers for the progression of the Social Care profession.

Our aspirations for our workforce are set out in our Workforce Strategy.

These are as follows:

- Safeguard children, young people and their families
- Develop a knowledgeable, dedicated professional workforce
- Recruit and retain a workforce of proud, skilled, competent professionals
- Embed effective partnership working
- Strengthen and empower Leadership and Management
- Link learning & development to Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS) for child and family social work
- Develop a learning culture that respects, challenges and supports
- Use performance and quality assurance data to measure impact, evaluate and shape the plan
- Develop a clear career pathway that offers opportunities for future managers as well as practice consultants.
- Individual feel valued for their contributions and understand the vital role it plays in achieving the best possible outcomes for children, young people and families
- Provide equal access to opportunities for employment, training and development appropriate to each person's role regardless of age, gender, disability, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation or religion.

During the course of 2017 Shropshire will be working in conjunction with Frontline and hosting a participant (student social worker) unit where student social workers will undertake and complete their social work degree whilst working within Children's Services as part of this specialist unit. Their university training will be delivered within the workplace and they will be supported by a consultant social worker who will support the 4 participants in holding cases and delivering services. These workers will remain in Shropshire as qualified social workers at the end of their 2-year training. This is a new way of social workers training for their social work qualifications and is in line with government commitment to the fast tracking of graduates into the social work profession.

During 2016/2017 we have increased the number of student social workers on placement across Children's Social Care. This provides opportunities for our more experienced social workers to provide supervision and support to a student social worker and increases capacity across teams. It also means that should any vacancies arise across social work services that we can look to recruit a social worker who knows Shropshire and is already working within a social work team.

At this current time, we have a stable workforce. All of our Team Manager posts are filled with permanent workers and we currently have 1.5 vacant

social work posts. Our reliance on agency workers is reducing and we currently have 12 agency social workers covering vacant posts, maternity leave and offering additional capacity to support our newly qualified social workers. This will reduce to 10.5 agency workers at the end of January. This is a significant reduction from where we were earlier in 2016. We continue to review the use of agency social workers and we are continually reducing our reliance on agency social workers where it is appropriate to do so.

We have recently recruited to 2 key posts which form part of Children's Services Leadership team. These posts are the Head Of Early Help, Partnerships and Commissioning and Service Manager – Quality Assurance and Performance. Both of the post holders will be in post by March 2017. Both of these posts are pivotal to our ongoing service improvement.

Following on from a successful recruitment campaign for social workers over the summer we currently have 14 newly qualified social workers. The majority of these have recently commenced employment with Shropshire but 3 will shortly be completing their first approved year in practice. Shropshire has delivered a successful Assessed and Supported Year in Employment Programme (ASYE) since 2013. This work has been driven and influenced by National developments and resulted most recently in the development of all ASYE's candidates being assessed against the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Children's Social Work at commencement on to the programme and again at the end, to evidence their proficiency and capabilities. Shropshire is very proud of its internal verification process, involving Team Managers, Principal Social Worker, Universities and Service Users, who form a Standardisation Panel across both Children's and Adults Social Care. Regional work is currently being developed with Skills for Care to develop External Moderation processes for Standardisation and Verification. This area was work was identified within the most recent Peer Review as an area of good practice based on reports received from the Newly qualified social workers.

As part of our Workforce Strategy we have a robust Induction Programme in place and we undertake exit interviews for any worker leaving the service. As part of the induction programme The Principal Social Worker meets and greets all new starters and key documents, policies, procedures and training plans are shared.

The programme includes the following information:

- Welcome to Shropshire by the Principal social worker
- Quality assurance framework
- Shropshire quality standards
- The Children's Manual

- SSCB Multi-agency child protection procedures
- Introduction to COMPASS
- Familiarisation with local services and Partner's
- Development of a professional development plan – individual to the needs of the worker
- Care First Training

We have recently undertaken a review of our appraisal process and linked this with the Social Work Knowledge and Skills framework and social work accreditation. By the end of January 2017 all social workers will have an up to date appraisal in place.

We are robustly monitoring case load sizes and can demonstrate a reduction in cases across all teams. The majority of workers now have 23 cases or less and we are striving to achieve this for all workers, with the overall aim of reducing caseloads even further.

We have recently started to monitor the frequency that social workers are receiving supervision, which should as minimum be every 4 weeks for the majority of workers. We have also just commenced a themed audit into the quality of supervision with case file audits being undertaken of supervision files and focus groups taking place with social workers and Team Managers to consider the quality of supervision being provided. The finding of this audit will be available in February 2017.

## **7. Quality Assurance**

In 2015/2016 Shropshire embedded a revised robust Quality Assurance Framework. Analysis is drawn from the quality assurance work undertaken and shared in quarterly reports to Social Workers, Team Managers and Service Managers. The Quality Assurance Framework draws on feedback from case file audits, service user feedback and complaints. Key findings are acted upon to drive a culture of continued improvement.

Case file audits undertaken during the course of the year have included Child Journey Audits, Front Door Audits, and themed audits relating to children subject of a child protection plan and looked after children, strategy meetings, core groups meetings, statutory visits, quality of supervision and Early Help Stakeholder Audits.

In addition to our normal case file audit activity, case file audits were undertaken as part of the Peer Review in July 2015 and through the appointment of 2 independent auditors to audit 50 cases across child in need, child protection, children with disabilities, looked after children and care leavers, in May 2016. We have also contributed to the SSCB multi-agency audits on Thresholds, CSE, Neglect, Domestic Abuse and Core Groups.

Specific feedback has been given to frontline workers on case file audit findings in relation to their cases and on key learning from case file audit activity.

Key learning from our audits relate to the following areas:

- All case files to have an up to date chronology
- Assessments and reports to draw on findings from tools used within the assessment and theory and research as appropriate
- Plans must be drawn from the assessment findings and be SMART
- Files must be up to date with recording to the case file completed in 2 working days of activity
- Management decisions must be recorded at key points and in response to significant events that happen in the child's life
- Increase the offer of advocacy support to children subject of a child protection plan and looked after children
- Ensure that we engage positively with absent fathers

Practice Priorities for 2016/2017 have been identified and shared with staff and managers which sets out the minimal expectations for all aspects of our practice. A case file audit action plan supports the Practice Priorities setting out how we will ensure that workers are managers are supported in meeting these priorities. Quality Standards setting out expectations for all aspects of practice are in place and understood by managers and workers.

We have promoted key areas of practice improvements with a monthly focus on key areas. In September we focused on writing up out of time assessments, in October we focused on updating chronology's and in November we focused on writing up statutory visits. These monthly areas of focus have ensured that everyone is aware of expectations and that there is a specific focus on the identified practice priorities.

We are focusing on closing the loop between identified practice issues through the Quality Assurance Framework and improvements in practice. At present the completed audit tool is uploaded to the child's file and the relevant social worker / team manager is alerted to this.

Any learning from the audit will be discussed in supervision between the Team Manager and the Social Worker. The area that we need to improve on is the re-auditing of case files to ensure that appropriate action is taken in response to case file audit feedback.

General learning and themes are disseminated through a range of forums to ensure learning is shared with teams which will enhance practice. Examples of this are discussion in team meetings, providing learning at development

work shops and breakfast briefings. As we become embedded into our new structure and caseloads are reducing the expectation is that we start to see case file audits highlighting improvements in practice.

In addition to our case file audits we receive monthly reports from the Independent Review Unit in relation to the Rag Rating Process. These reports provide an overview of the rag ratings awarded during that month and any key practice issues identified by the independent chairs for looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan. On average there are 40 child protection conferences held each month and 52 statutory reviews.

The most recent rag rating report relates to November 2016. This report highlights the following;

- A total of 45 child protection conferences were held in November of which 10 were initial child protection conferences
- All child protection conferences were held within timescales
- 30 of the 45 child protection conferences were judged to be green which is consistent with reporting in October which highlights a consistency in practice.
- All initial child protection conferences were judged to be green.
- 12 conferences were judged to be amber and 3 were judged to be red which is the lowest number reported red since the process was introduced in November 2015. Red ragged cases relate to concerns in relation to children not being seen, drift and delay within a Child Protection Plan.
- There were 74 statutory reviews held in November which is the highest number since this process commenced
- 43 reviews were judged to be green indicating robust care planning and no evidence of drift and delay. 18 reviews were judged amber and 13 reviews were judged to be red which related to a variety of concerns including, drift and delay in care planning, outstanding recommendations, lack of transition planning, failure to undertake statutory visits in timescales and lack of core group activity. We continue to see a mixed picture in relation to rag rating for our looked after children. This will be considered further within this report.
- All red ragged cases are reviewed by the Team manager who responds to the concerns raised and clarifies what actions will be undertaken in relation to the red rag.

This process provides extra scrutiny to our planning for our most vulnerable children.

## **8. Service User Engagement**

We recognise that this is an area of continued priority. To assist in our understanding of service user feedback a service User feedback project was commissioned January 16. Aims of the project were to:

Gather and analyse direct service user feedback from parents who have received a SW intervention.

The aim of the project was to build service user insights (based on a set of agreed questions) to inform future process.

The service user questions included:

- What was most helpful about the intervention? (What was useful/easy to engage with?)
- What was most unhelpful about intervention? (What wasn't useful/difficult to engage with?)
- What was the impact of having a social worker?
- How did this feel, as a parent?

Feedback from this piece of work highlighted the following areas;

- Changes of social worker could be an issue if there was inadequate hand-over arrangements
- Closure was often unclear and step-down processes are not consistently followed
- Direct contact with social worker (mobile number) was appreciated and very helpful
- Information and clarity at point of referral – why are we getting involved?

We are in the process of disseminating this feedback and making sure that it makes a difference to the way that we manage our cases at key points in the process.

The Quality Assurance Framework has been revised to include a Service User Feedback Strategy and matrix which demonstrates the work streams that are actively seeking service user feedback in relation to services they receive and used to inform practice developments and service improvements.

Other areas of service user feedback have highlighted the following:

Area	Early Help	Social Assessment	Work
Views taken into account	100%	59%	

Knowing what is hoping to be achieved/will happen	85%	83%
Knowing who to speak to	100%	91%

Situation changed through EH	36% fully resolved 50% improved 7% stayed the same 7% Got worse	
SW made a difference		Considerable 28% Moderate 27% Some 9% Minor 18% None 18%

## Looked After Children

We are very keen to understand the views of our looked after children. Consultation forms are provided to all children before every statutory review meeting. We are working hard to increase the number of forms returned but for the ones that are returned they provide a valuable insight into what it means to be a looked after child in Shropshire. The most recent report from the Independent Reviewing Unit highlights the following information:

18 consultation forms were returned by Looked after children between October, November and December.

Children and young people generally indicate they are happy in their placements

Nearly all of the young people indicate they see their social worker on a regular basis and that they get on with their social worker and they consider that their social worker helps them- young people generally recorded they see their social worker around every four to six weeks

A number of young people have indicated there are people within their birth family that they want to see and this is repeated by several of the children and young people

Children and young people report a number of positives around school and education

A number of young people asked to see their social worker more often

Nearly all of the young people indicated they feel listened to where they live and feel helped by their carers



Children and young people indicate they are involved in activities- this as a common theme for younger children

Two young people advised in the forms of getting looked after properly and also feeling safe now they are Looked After

One young person asked for their previous social worker back

Nearly all of the young people indicated they were healthy (3 did not complete this section or indicated not)

One young person indicated he could not talk to his carers

Whilst the number of young people completing the consultation forms is small compared to the number of Looked After reviews taking place- their voices and the key messages from the forms completed are encouraging and also powerful re their experiences of being Looked After

Next steps will be to pick up on the issues raised and look to address these issues with individual workers and collectively across the service.

### **Next Steps**

Although there is a clear commitment to collating service user feedback and using this feedback to improve service delivery we are not quite there yet. We have a service user matrix in place which sets out all the key times that service user feedback is obtained. Now we have a clearer understanding of how we are collating feedback we can now see where the gaps in this process is and how we can best utilise the information that is available.

During the course of 2016 a planned review of service user feedback and how we collate and helpfully maximise the use of this information has taken place. We will now be continuing to access service user feedback during 2017.

A 'Bright Spots' survey for Looked After children and young people in Shropshire is now underway - more detailed information from this survey will be available in February and March 2017 and specifically regarding children and young people's experiences of being Looked After.

The Children in Care Council and Leaving Care Forum meet on a regular basis and provide feedback on a number of key areas that are then reported to Corporate Parenting Panel or to inform service developments.

Coram Voice is the commissioned provider of advocacy in Shropshire. We are just starting to see an increase in the take up of advocacy and we are working with our provider and IRO's and Conference Chairs to continue to raise the profile of this service.

### **What we are going to do next?**

- Review our direct work tools to ensure that we have a range of tools to promote the effective engagement of children and young people.
- Commence reporting on the LAC consultation documents so that we understand the views of our looked after children.
- LAC consultation documents to be completed with children by their allocated social worker to promote completion rather than from the Independent Reviewing Unit.
- Increase participation of children and young people at Child Protection Conferences and Statutory Reviews.
- Introduce a new consultation document for children subject of a child protection plan.
- Seek service user feedback at the point that children cease to be subject of a child protection plan.
- Complete exit interviews for children and young people exiting care so that we can use this information to understand the experience of our looked after children.
- Seek to promote the take up of advocacy as appropriate.
- Review the focus of the Service User Consultation Working Group to implement an action plan to promote a more coordinated and focused consultation and participation process and to produce a Service User Engagement Strategy.

## 9. Looked After Children

Over the course of 2016 going into 2017 our looked after children numbers have remained relatively stable with 280 looked after children at 01/04/16 and 281 looked after children at 06/01/2017. This is despite an increase in unaccompanied asylum seeking children being located/dispersed to Shropshire.

Our Looked after Children has been reviewed and confirms our commitment to only looking after those children that need to be looked after.

Other priorities within our LAC Strategy relate to the following;

The LAC strategy set out some overarching principles and targets:

	Targeted Outcome	Result
1	That we prevent children needing to come into the care system where it is possible and we support them to remain in their family care where it is safe to do so.	New accommodations reduced to 83 during 15/16 compared to 125 in 13/14 and 138 in 14/15.

2	Reduce the number of children received into local authority care via Section 20 i.e. family breakdown / voluntary request, where timely and effective early help could have prevented the need for LA care.	Section 20 legal status have reduced for LAC from 41% in 2014 to 34% in March 16 to 31% in September 2016.
3	Increase the number of children who achieve permanency outside of local authority care in order to ensure these children can move forward leading 'normal' family lives without long term intervention of the local authority.	The number of children achieving permanency outside the LA continues to increase, with improvements seen in the rate of children leaving the care system exceeding the new entrants. SGO's up from 5% in 14/15 to 20% in 15/16 and Adoptions up from 15 each year 13/14 and 14/15 up to 19 children Adopted 15/16.
4	To increase the number of children who are placed locally in Shropshire maximising potential to achieve stability in their school and health provision and connections with community and family where this is appropriate.	Overall numbers of LAC placed outside Shropshire is decreasing, from 80 in March 2015 to 73 in March 2016.
5	That where children come into the care of the Local Authority to protect them from harm we progress assessments and care planning without undue delay achieving permanent and stable outcomes as soon as possible.	Whilst we recognise that the joint six LA's within the Black Country LFJB have significant improvements to make in the timeliness of care proceedings, recent breakdown of performance by each LA identified Shropshire to have 100% in 3/4 months Dec – March 16. We continue to work on this through our internal action plan and the regional improvement board.

In addition to this 69% of our looked after children in September 2016 were placed in foster placements. 78% of our looked after children have been in the same placement for 2 years plus. This exceeds the West Midlands and England averages.

We continue to closely monitor our performance in relation to our looked after children. Despite stable looked after children numbers and strong areas of performance we continue to have some concern about the robustness of our planning for some of our looked after children. These areas of challenge are being identified through the rag rating process. Although we are seeing a reduction overall in the number of red ragged cases, where red ragged judgements are being awarded they relate to issues regarding delays in seeing children, completing paperwork, progressing care plans and core group meetings not taking place. Despite our best intentions to establish a team that is focused on improving outcomes for all children remaining in the care system on a permanent basis up until the age of 18 years, capacity within the LAC Permanency Team is of growing concern. The LAC

Permanency Team has the highest number of open cases and the highest number of social workers. Capacity within the team is a key issue and meeting the complex needs of all of our Looked after Children up until the age of 18 is a challenge. This is despite the best efforts of all concerned. It is recognised that this situation cannot continue and we are currently considering options to address this issue so that we can be confident in the robustness of care planning for all of our looked after children.

In conjunction with the work that we are undertaking in respect of the LAC Permanency Team we are also considering our effectiveness at supporting care leavers and whether our interventions and services are as robust as they need to be to ensure that our Care Leavers are reaching their full potential.

### **Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children**

In Shropshire for each Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child that presents in the county, there is an immediate need to identify a social worker (and an interpreter if required) who can meet the child and conduct an initial safeguarding and wellbeing assessment. This initial assessment includes making a considered judgement on signs which may indicate for instance that a young person is a different age to that claimed and/or signs that a child may have been trafficked, exploited or harmed. A bed must also be identified in an age-appropriate setting; however temporary, it must be available immediately. In Shropshire the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children has historically been low. Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016 Shropshire accommodated 3 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children who were assessed and provided with Looked After Children services under section 20 of the Children Act 1989.

Since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016 a further 10 UASC's have been accommodated by the Local Authority. In November 2016 Shropshire had a total of 14 UASC's (3 are now care leavers).

The nationalities of our UASC's are;

Eritrean – 6

Vietnamese – 3

Iranian – 2

Ethiopian – 1

Sudan – 1

Afghanistan - 1

Shropshire Children's Services currently have 2 representatives on the Refugee Operational Group and Refugee cross party working group to advise and contribute to the Syrian Refugee dispersal scheme. Our role within the group is to liaise with appropriate agencies who may be able to offer universal support to refugee families with children, to provide updates on our

contribution to placing UASC's and contribute with appropriate safeguarding and legislative advice. However, at the present time none of our Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children are from Syria.

We will be participating in the national dispersal scheme and will likely receive more UASC through the coming months at the proposed rate of 0.07% (42 total). This does present a challenge for us as a large rural county in terms of access to local resources to meet religious and or culturally diverse needs. It will also be a challenge in terms of placement availability and type. We are reviewing our provision, recruitment of carers and seeking knowledge and expertise from other authorities who have greater experience with demand created by UASC.

### **Corporate Parenting Board**

During the course of 2016/2017 there has been a review of Corporate Parenting board. The agenda for the meeting has been reviewed with a key theme relating to looked after children being considered. We are also giving consideration as to how we can engage looked after children and care leavers with the board in a meaningful way. Going forward representatives of the Corporate Parenting Board will be supporting the Leaving Care Ambassadors in taking forward some key actions from the New Belongings project.

A key challenge from the most recent Peer Review was how we can ensure all members of the council are sufficiently engaged with their Corporate Parenting responsibilities.

## **10. Trend of Improvements**

Overall we are satisfied with the trend of improvements. The latest Peer Review in December 2016 has confirmed that we are starting to see evidence of improved service delivery which is being driven by effective leadership.

The past 12 months have been a challenge and resulted in a big backlog of work within the system, high caseloads and a high reliance on agency workers. Much of the focus of the 12 past months has been on implementing a new social work structure, recruiting to permanent posts and addressing the drift and delay on open cases and ceasing involvement with those children and families who no longer require our services. Despite these challenges we have been able to maintain stability within our looked after children numbers, reduced referrals into children's social care, reduced re referral rates and we

have started to see a reduction in the number of children subject to a child protection plan.

We are now in a structure that reflects the timely assessment and progression of work, caseloads are reducing, we have a stable workforce, we have sought to address overly bureaucratic processes and we have clear priorities for practice which are informed by a robust quality assurance framework and service user feedback.

We will continue to address our strategic priorities as set out within our Business Plan (Plan on a page) and in our supporting action plans.

However, in respect of enhancing our service delivery and providing consistently good social work practice our key priorities are:

1. Ensuring our working systems and processes are promoting timely and effective social work interventions which in turn are reducing caseloads and preventing drift and delay
2. Ensuring that our service user interventions are inclusive, involving the child, both parents, carers, significant others and resistant families
3. Ensuring that regular core group meetings take place in between key CIN, Child Protection and Care Planning meetings
4. Ensure that all files have an up to date chronology on the case file
5. Ensuring that management oversight and direction is evident on the case file
6. Ensuring there is involvement of the child in child protection conferences and statutory reviews and that we make good use of our advocacy service
7. Ensure that the number of children subject to a child protection plan reflects the level of need and risk in Shropshire.
8. Review of the LAC Permanence Team to ensure it has the capacity of offer outstanding services to our looked after children
9. Review cases in light of changing case law regarding deprivation of liberty
10. Review of Permanency Strategy and our processes for securing permanency for our looked after children at the earliest opportunity
11. Review of our Career Pathways to make Shropshire an employer of choice for social workers throughout their social work career.

As senior managers we will have key oversight of these practice issues and will ensure that improvements are made within these areas and that workers and managers are equipped to meet these expectations. We have a self-evaluation in place and believe that we understand ourselves well and have all the necessary arrangements and processes in place to continue on our improvement journey.

Our priorities have been formulated in conjunction with managers and staff at a development morning held in December 2016. All staff are committed to addressing these key areas of improvement.

**DISABLED CHILDRENS TEAM**

The disabled children's team is a county wide specialist service for children with disabilities and will hold case responsibility for children 0-18 yrs who are CIN/CP and LAC where the primary child in need or at risk is the child with the disability. The DCT team will work alongside Compass, Case Management and LAC permanency teams to offer advice and guidance where these teams are holding a family case and there is a child with a disability within that family.

**COMPASS**

Compass are responsible for the management of all new initial concerns contacts and referrals. Compass SSW are decision makers for new S17 assessments and S47 enquiries.

**ASSESSMENT NORTH**

**ASSESSMENT SOUTH**

Where a decision in Compass is made that a child might be a child in need and or a Section 47 enquiry is required the case will be transferred to an assessment team. The assessment team are responsible for completion of the social work assessment s17 and any s47 enquiry required on cases coming from Compass including any emergency legal action and or placement of a child in care.

**CASE MANAGEMENT NORTH**

**CASE MANAGEMENT CENTRAL**

**CASE MANAGEMENT SOUTH**

Case management teams are responsible for the delivery of the social work intervention against the identified child's plan. This can be a child in need plan, a child protection plan or a care plan. Case management teams are responsible for all applications and statements within the care proceedings process including pre proceedings.

**Looked After Children - PERMANENCY**

LAC permanency teams is responsible for:

- Looked after child and has a care plan for permanency with a LAC status from the point of permanency being the single plan and placement / order made. This will include LTF / PWP/Remand
- UASC from the point of assessment to full care planning.
- Any child subject to a supervision order for the duration of that order.

**Placements (Fostering and Residential)**

This is a countywide service providing the identification and management of children placed in LA care and the assessment / recruitment / management of carers and providers

**Adoption.**

This is a joint Adoption service with Telford LA providing assessment, matching of children placed for Adoption and recruitment/assessment and post adoption support to children and adopters

**APPENDIX A**

**LEAVING CARE TEAM**

Leaving care is a county wide specialist service for children leaving the care system.

The leaving care team are responsible for all relevant, eligible and former relevant children aged 18 – 25 yrs and will ensure each has an allocated personal advisor who will be responsible for the pathway plan, education, training, health and accommodation for children within the leaving care statutory framework