

Shropshire Children's Social Care and Safeguarding – Principal Social Worker Annual Report 2024-25

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A year in review...

Shropshire Children's Social Care, Safeguarding and Early Help has faced some significant challenges over the last financial year however these have been well balanced with success, growth and development. This PSW's Annual Report focuses upon the work of the Quality Assurance Service (Independent Reviewing Unit, Quality Assurance, Local Area Designated Officers), Workforce Development and the Practice Learning Hub (responsible for the oversight and co-ordination of Social Work students, Apprentices, newly qualified social workers, the Assessed Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) and Practice Educators).

Following on from the significant staffing challenges in 2023/24, where there were vacancies of the Principal Independent Reviewing Officer (PIRO) who went on maternity leave in August 2023, the Performance, Improvement and Practice (PIP) Officer who was seconded to a new position in the Office of the Chief Exec in May 2023 and the Workforce Manager who was promoted to Operational Manager for the Joint Training Team in September 2023 – none of these vacancies began to be appointed to until January 2024, requiring the PSW to cover all of these roles in the interim – with varying degrees of success.

The impact of the absence of a PIP Officer/Quality Assurance Lead was noted within the Ofsted Focused Visit in November 2023, as was the absence of a PIRO and the understaffing (in terms of demand management) in the Independent Reviewing Unit. Renewed and proactive recruitment drives to fill these vacancies plus newly created extra capacity Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) posts were successful and, by the start of the new financial year 2024/25, we had secured a PIP Officer/QA Lead, a PIRO (interim – maternity cover), a Workforce Manager (role extended to cater for Social Care and Early Help) in place, plus 3 of the 5 additional IRO posts.

Through the hard work and commitment of these additional staff members and the initiatives driven by the service, 2024/25 has been a year where successes have outweighed and overcome the challenges and we are ending the year with some clear priorities and goals for the to strengthen our service and contribute positively towards better outcomes for children and families.

Additionally, the establishment of the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) in the latter quarters of 2023/24 has had a positive impact on our services, requiring enhanced focus on specific areas of practice – PSW provided regular reports on dip sampling activities to CIB and experienced high levels of support and engagement from senior leaders and Members.

Key strengths and successes in 2024/25:

- Our annual **Practice Week** was held from Monday 30th September – Friday 4th October 2024. The week began with an Opening Staff Conference, which was well attended and well received. The theme for the Conference was “Participation” and we secured keynote speakers who were able to powerfully impress upon our staff the importance of meaningful participation and engagement of families, children and young people in our work. Practice Week continued with around 30 workshops and masterclasses delivered to staff across Early Help, Social Care, Residential services and the Virtual School – on a wide range of topics including Exploitation, impact of trauma on attachment, effective genograms, learning from case reviews, Later Life Letters and more. Total attendance number for all of the events of the week was 625 and the feedback we received was overwhelmingly positive, with staff identifying the difference their learning would have on their practice. Practice Week 2025 is already in (advanced) planning stages and we are delighted that once again a large number of our events throughout the week will be delivered by our own staff – we are keen to recognise expertise within our workforce, rather than seeking to solely engage external speakers.
- This year we were successful in securing DfE funding for a **Leadership Development Programme**, delivered by Research in Practice (RiP). This programme was developed alongside ourselves in order to make it bespoke for Shropshire, addressing the key issue of how to ensure that supervision is regular, reflective and effective, with the associated pressures of personnel management, ensuring good oversight of children’s plans and seeking to practice in an Anti-Racist manner. Team Managers (and some aspiring managers) undertook a 5 day training programme throughout Q3 and Q4, with the Senior Leadership Team undertaking a condensed and focused 2 day programme in Q4. Feedback from attendees was uniformly positive, with many managers highlighting the benefits of having the physical and emotional space away from the work environment to reflect on their practice and areas for development. Supplementary and complimentary mentoring, Action Learning Sets and development sessions have been planned with RiP to be delivered in Q1 and Q2 of 2025/26.
- The **Social Work Health Check** was undertaken and completed in the summer (Q2) 2024, garnering 113 responses. 77% of respondents confirmed that they experienced job satisfaction working for Shropshire, the vast majority of respondents shared that they enjoyed working with their team and benefitted from regular, reflective supervision. The majority of respondents reported that, despite the challenges of working in a profession that is widely understood to be stressful, they felt supported to undertake meaningful work with families and support change.
- This year 5 Social Work **Apprentices** completed their Social Work Degree course, with excellent results (Firsts and 2.1s), and moved into their Assessed Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) with focused support from the Advanced Practitioner for ASYEs. These Apprentices have benefited from 3 years of experience within social work teams whilst completing their academic studies and are entering the social work workforce with confidence and a commitment to working for Shropshire Council.

- Additionally, regional DfE funding secured allowed the creation of a post of **Advanced Practitioner for Apprentices** – the position has been filled by an extremely experienced Senior Social Worker who is utilising her skills, knowledge and expertise to support and develop our current and future Apprentices.
- This year Shropshire Council have **partnered with Opus People Solutions** to centralise and more effectively regulate our use of agency/locum staff. Opus provide a ‘front door’ for all agency providers to sign up to which controls the contracts and pay rates that can be sought, meaning that we are better able to remain compliant with our regional Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). We have developed strong links between the PSW, Workforce Manager and Opus in order to ensure this partnership is fruitful.
- The **recruitment of 5 permanent (extra capacity) IROs**, has significantly strengthened the IRU service, reducing caseloads, enabling IROs to have more oversight of the progression of children’s plans and more capacity to check and challenge as befits their statutory function. The increased IRO “footprint” evidenced on children’s records and the more efficient and effective progression of RAGs through the Dispute Resolution Process is supporting improved outcomes for children by reducing the risk of drift and delay. Morale within the IRU is significantly improved, with IROs now contributing to QA work and, most importantly, visiting their allocated children more often.
- Additionally, the IRU has been supported by the creation of the **PowerBi IRU performance dashboard** specifically for IROs (and PIRO and PSW) oversight. IROs have been enabled to move away from manual record keeping and instead utilise accurate data to ‘self serve’ and identify priority areas for action, increasing overall compliance with statutory timescales.
- Our partnership with the DfE funded **Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP)** from Wiltshire has been a critical area of development and progress. SLIP supported us with our Public Law Outline pathway and process, began work supporting us with updating our (currently out of date) Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) and helped us to understand ‘the art of the possible’ in respect of audit management tools. We also benefitted from SLIP colleagues providing Action Learning Sets and visiting our staff in person to deliver a range of workshops to Team Managers, Social Workers, Early Help and Residential staff. A bid has been presented to the DfE to request a further period of SLIP support to complete the work begun on the QAF and to overhaul our current auditing processes and, ideally, implement a new, more comprehensive audit management system. We are awaiting the DfE decision on this bid.
- In advance of and in conjunction with the Wiltshire SLIP support we have **strengthened our quality assurance activities** throughout the year – with a focus on Child Journey Audits (CJA). The previous Word document format for CJAs was poorly used, with auditors tending to skip questions they felt were not relevant, or just giving yes/no responses, which did not amount to good quality assurance or assist strategic oversight of frontline practice. By transferring the CJA format onto MS Forms, whilst streamlining the audit questions and areas and making the completion of all sections mandatory, including citing evidence to support gradings, we are now able to collect and collate

good qualitative and quantitative data from CJAs. This work was begun in the previous financial year however completed and refined within this year – further work to improve the tool will continue into the next financial year, ideally assisted by Wiltshire SLIP colleagues.

- **CJA compliance** has been an area of success – with submissions at only 70 for Q1 but increasing to 118 in Q4. This improvement has been due in part to the persistence of the PSW and PIP Officer/QA Lead but also reflects the developments in auditors' practice and 'buy in' to the importance of monthly CJAs. Auditors who previously rarely submitted CJAs have, upon completing these more regularly, fed back that they have found the process useful and supportive in terms of applying a QA lens to the work within their own teams. 'Lunch & Learn' sessions led by the PSW on "High Quality Auditing" have been extremely well attended by auditors who are keen to improve their practice and confidence. **Group auditing work** in End to End Leadership meetings and Performance Management Group meetings have further embedded the value of effective and focused dip sampling to identify themes and issues. It should also be noted that the consistent inclusion of the Director and Assistant Directors in auditing activities supports the emphasis on the importance of QA work.
- This year the process of audit moderation has been fully embedded by way of monthly **Moderation Panels**, which are attended by auditors on a rotating basis. Most of our auditors have now attended 1 or more Moderation Panels and we consistently receive feedback as to how helpful it is to read CJAs completed by others and consider how they form their judgements. Auditors report they have grown in confidence when completing their own CJAs and when moderating – this is borne out by the clear reduction in CJA gradings being moderated up or down at Moderation Panel.
- In Q3 of 2024/25, Shropshire Children's Social Care invested in a **pilot of Magic Notes**, an AI powered meeting summary tool. This was a considerable investment and initially rolled out to only 20 social care staff (5 Team Managers, 1 Service Manager and 14 Social Workers) with the view to those staff utilising the technology to its full potential and reporting back regularly to assist with measuring impact against KPIs. It became clear early into the pilot that the efficiency of Magic Notes technology would allow the pilot to be extended to more workers. PSW and Workforce Manager have worked together to extend the pilot group gradually, providing training and support to users. At year end there are in excess of 220 regular/consistent users of Magic Notes. Feedback from users can be encapsulated in one term; "game changer!" and our performance data evidences improvements in compliance with timescales for visits and reviews, as the administrative burden for workers using Magic Notes is significantly reduced.

Key challenges experienced in 2024/25:

- This year a full **Business Support Review** has been completed – with many positive results, particularly in terms of aligning Job Descriptions and allowing administrative support to be more flexible to meet demands across services. Unfortunately, this coincided with the Business Support element of the IRU service being significantly impacted by several workers leaving the service or being off work due to ill health,

further exacerbated by the Business Support Lead moving into a new role in Q1 and not being replaced until the latter end of Q4. With gaps in service provision and a subject matter expert no longer being in a lead role, the covering Business Support managers were unable to ensure that statutory duties – including and especially the timeliness of convening ICPCs – were met. For a period of several months, our ICPC timeliness fell far short of the statutory expectation. Focused work by the PIRO was required – including daily meetings with Business Support to co-ordinate ICPC requests with Independent Chair’s calendars – in order to rectify this issue and embed a clear understanding of our statutory responsibilities. At year end our ChAT data reported that 61% of ICPCs had been held within timescales – an improvement but the trajectory must continue to climb into next year.

- In line with the **spending controls** imposed, as appropriate, in response to the Council’s financial position, we have experienced challenges in securing external meeting rooms for ICPCs and RCPCs, which led to Business Support arranging the majority of Child Protection Conferences as online/MS Teams meetings. The PSW and PIRO were initially unaware of how many meetings were being held online, in contravention of our clear stated aim to hold all/the vast majority of ICPCs and, where possible, RCPCs as face to face meetings. The breakdown in communication with the PIRO and PSW (from Business Support and our own IROs) meant that a resolution to this issue was not secured immediately and raised questions as to the understanding of the need to escalate issues of concern.
- In Q3 SLT examined PowerBi performance data in respect of **CLA Review meetings**, due to the fact that a high proportion were reported to be out of date or having never been held. More in depth scrutiny highlighted that, in the majority of cases, CLA Reviews had been held and the content and outcomes of these meetings had been uploaded to LCS as a Word document owing to the fact that the LCS workflow/pathway had become “stuck” when the Pre-Meeting Report had not been completed by the Social Worker. It became clear that a culture of tacit acceptance of this practice had developed, where IROs had not challenged (beyond a RAG) or escalated this issue instead allowing this “stuck workflow” position to remain. Focused work was required by the PIRO and Ofsted Improvement Lead with IROs, SWs and TMs ensured that the appropriate actions were completed in order to ensure that all children’s care plans and reviews are accurately represented within LCS. IROs have been challenged by the PIRO and PSW around the need to ensure that this or a similar situation does not arise again.

Priorities for 2025/26

It is essential that we learn from the challenges we have faced this last year and build upon the strengths and successes, setting ourselves ambitious goals and priorities for the year ahead. The services sitting under the PSW are staffed with talented people who are committed to ensuring that all developments or initiatives undertaken are done so with a focus on how they will positively impact outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Our key priorities for the coming year are:

- **Learning from Quality Assurance in 2024/25** - Learning Brief to be produced based on the findings in the Quality Assurance Annual Report – to be shared within AD Updates, End to End Leadership meeting and at Staff Conference (within Practice Week).
 - **Deliver a high quality, impactful Practice Week** (29th September – 3rd October 2025), with sessions clearly linked to learning from quality assurance activities and challenges experienced this year. Virtual sessions to be recorded and uploaded to Practice Development Hub for access after the event.
 - **Deliver Staff Awards event in Q3** – a popular event held in 2022/23 and 2023/24, put on hold in 2024/25 due to sensitivity to the wider context of redundancies across the Local Authority. We are keen to hold this important event again next year to show our staff how valued they are and to celebrate outstanding practice across the service areas.
 - **Establish a Social Work Academy/Centre of Excellence** – to centralise oversight of all students, Apprentices, ASYE SWs, social workers wishing to progress to Senior via Linked Scale Progression and Practice Educators; and to lead on embedding post qualification requirements in line with national reforms.
 - *(DfE bid success pending)* **Update QAF – continuation of work with Wiltshire SLIP** on updating and launching a fit for purpose and future proof Quality Assurance Framework.
 - *(DfE bid success pending)* **Update Audit Management system** - implement a Shropshire version of Wiltshire’s audit management tool (ARMA). Establish a Task and Finish/Working Group with representatives from QA, Business Analysts and IT Support to devise Project Plan.
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