

**Manchester City Council
Report for Information**

Report to: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee – 19 July 2016

Subject: Local Government Association (LGA) Care Practice Diagnostic

Report of: Strategic Lead for Children's Social Care

Summary

To provide an overview of the Local Government Association's Care Practice Diagnostic and outline the resultant action plan

Recommendations

Report is for information.

Wards Affected: All

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1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The purpose of this paper is to provide members with information about the Local Government Association Care Practice Diagnostic that was undertaken in March 2016, most specifically in relation to:

- The Care Practice Diagnostic findings
- Actions being implemented in response to those findings

2.0 Introduction and Background

2.1 The previous Interim Director of Children's Services commissioned the Local Government Association to undertake a 'review' of services for looked after children in Manchester. The 'review', or Care Practice Diagnostic, was commissioned as a means to provide an independent assessment and analysis of the quality of service provision received by our looked after children and care leavers. The independent assessment would provide insight into how well leaders and managers know their services and provide direction for service improvement and development work.

2.2 In the commissioning of the Care Practice Diagnostic, it was agreed that the Local Government Association (LGA) team, would seek to answer five key questions, as follows:

- Are we reducing our looked after children population safely and appropriately?
- Are our policies and procedures compliant with up to date legislation and case law and is there evidence of compliance?
- Is the footprint of the manager clearly recorded in a timely manner and is it making a difference?
- How effective is the corporate parenting offer in Manchester?
- Are children sufficiently influential in their own care plans and is there evidence that they are influencing policies and procedures?

2.3 In undertaking their work and seeking the answers to those questions set out above, the LGA team focussed on the following:

- A case records review
- Effective practice and service delivery
- Outcomes for children, birth parents and adopters
- Vision, leadership and strategy

- Managing resources and the workforce

3.0 Care Practice Diagnostic Methodology

- 3.1 The LGA team consisted of nine senior professionals from across the country experienced in working with and managing services for looked after children. The team consisted of a current Director of Children's Services, several Assistant Directors, an ex Director of Education, a senior health professional and a Lead Member from another local authority.
- 3.2 The team reviewed a number of individual children's case files, observed practice, met with all relevant senior leaders and managers in social care, health and education, met with a number of Manchester's Elected Member corporate parents, and held focus groups with social workers, managers, foster carers and looked after children.
- 3.3 The individual children's case files reviewed were of 8 cases held within the Court and Locality Teams, and 19 cases held within our Looked After Children Permanence Teams. Cases within the Court and Locality Teams are children at earlier stages on their journey in care. Cases held within the Permanence Teams are children generally who have been in care for longer and have a plan for permanence agreed.
- 3.4 The Diagnostic was not an inspection. The purpose of the Care Practice Diagnostic was to follow the child's journey from the edge of care through care and permanency planning, adoption and leaving care. It encompassed the needs of specialist groups such as children with disabilities and refugees; safeguarding issues like going missing; health, housing and education outcomes as well as governance matters like commissioning/sufficiency and corporate parenting.

4.0 Findings

- 4.1 The council received feedback from the Local Government Association summarising its findings from the Care Practice Diagnostic. The following is a summary of the LGA team's findings.
- 4.2 The letter opens by noting that *'the team received a really good welcome and excellent cooperation and support throughout the process. It was evident to us all that all those we met were interested in learning and continued development.'*
- 4.3 The LGA team observed positive change in the period since the last Ofsted inspection in July 2014, stating:

'The renewal of your Children's Services leadership team over the past eighteen months has moved the service forward significantly. The past twelve months have seen strategic management grip significantly tightened, and there are plans to extend grip across all management tiers over the coming months. We have confidence in the senior management team; handover

arrangements have been put in place to maintain pace and grip at senior level as the new director and deputy take up their posts. The Improvement Board has provided a focus for discussion, challenge and action to address the areas for improvement identified by Ofsted which included a small number of recommendations in relation to looked after children; there has been significant progress against improvement targets as a result. The Interim DCS has made a significant impact to your improvement journey and under her leadership the pace of improvement has markedly increased; and the same is also true of the impact of the new appointments to the senior management team since October. '

- 4.4 The team noted 'a concerted effort' had been made to ensure compliance with policies and procedures, although indicating more work is needed to embed the improvements.
- 4.5 It was noted positively that the number of looked after children had reduced and that there was now a wider range of timely and more appropriate placements options achieved. For example the team notes strengths such as improvements in adoption timeliness, more children achieving permanence through Special Guardianship, low placement breakdown numbers, and more planned rather than emergency admissions to residential care.
- 4.6 The team were particularly positive about education and health provision, saying,
- 'There was good practice and good provision within Health and Schools. The relationship between the Council and schools in the city is positive, regardless of whether they are maintained schools or academies. In terms of looked after children (LAC) placed outside the city there are also increasingly effective relationships with the schools and colleges where LAC are educated, as is evident from the number of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) completed by out of city schools. Community health services for looked after children were well resourced, with an effective skill mix, and working relations between the council and health were positive'*
- 4.7 The team noted that while the management and independent reviewing officer (IRO) footprint was not well evidenced, they had seen that new management panels established had had a positive impact on reducing the number of looked after children, increasing timeliness and ensuring appropriate placements and interventions. It was noted that social worker supervision was regular, although rarely reflective, and that the IRO challenge and case oversight was improving.
- 4.8 Staff morale was said to be high, and foster carers spoke positively about improvements in the fostering service and feeling communicated with more.
- 4.9 The LGA team reported that child sexual exploitation systems and practice were effective.
- 4.10 The LGA team were positive about our plans to improve commissioning and

our understanding that good commissioning underpins the improvement agenda for looked after children services, and support our plans to take responsibility for placement commissioning functions currently sitting within adults services.

- 4.11 The team felt that the Improvement Board has provided good rigour on performance monitoring and consistent oversight. And the team felt there is clear and strong corporate and political support and commitment to oversee fund improvement in children's services.
- 4.12 It was noted that *'membership and debate on the Corporate Parenting Panel was effective, with good representation and engagement by young people.'* The team felt that *'Scrutiny Committee requires some development as does the clarification of the corporate parenting role of the wider membership'* and that we should prioritise raising awareness amongst councillors of their Corporate Parenting responsibilities.
- 4.13 Whilst it was observed that there was insufficient evidence of the child's voice in case files and children's plans, the team noted that there had been some improvement more recently, and the Corporate Parenting Panel was an exception to this with good engagement with young people.
- 4.14 The team acknowledged that we were well aware that further work is needed to improve services for care leavers and to develop a clear CAMHS service for looked after children.
- 4.15 The 27 case files reviewed indicated *'variable and inconsistent quality of practice'*. However the team noted evidence of improving practice in the batch of 19 case files of children held in our Permanence Teams.
- 4.16 The team felt there was not a clear enough shared narrative across our governance arrangements. They found our governance arrangements too complex, in terms of *'the number and interrelationships of our partnerships and council fora'*.
- 4.17 Other areas for improvement identified include, increasing the sufficiency of care placements, embedding new quality assurance frameworks, and continuing to reduce the number of children looked after.
- 4.18 Despite seeing significant evidence of improvement in services, the LGA team were very clear that social work caseloads remain too high and this impacts on quality of practice and supervision. They did comment positively however on recent investment in the service, saying,

'your 'invest to succeed' initiatives (in frontline social work capacity and additional in-house foster care) should help to deliver further significant reductions in overall numbers and achieve improved practice and outcomes'

5.0 Our Response to the Findings

- 5.1 The findings of the LGA team confirmed 'we know ourselves well' and will be used to inform future strategic and operational planning.
- 5.2 Work is being taken forward on all the development areas the LGA highlighted. Progress will be monitored by the Children's Management Team and the Improvement Board. In addition, we will be using the new monthly Performance Clinics to probe service-specific issues raised by the LGA and review progress against these.