

People's Scrutiny Committee

# Safeguarding Children Task Group

2nd Interim Report

June 2014

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# Preface



**Councillor Sara Randall Johnson  
Chair, Safeguarding Children Task Group  
People's Scrutiny Committee**

This report reflects back on the ground covered since the Task Group's last report in September 2013 and acknowledges the continued work needed to keep children in Devon safe.

The County Council and its partners have risen to address the challenges identified in the Ofsted Report published a year ago. Scrutiny in its wider sense has been a central part of reviewing and evaluating the improvement plan, its progress and implementation.

Since our last interim report the landscape has changed, A Devon Safeguarding Improvement Board (DSIB) has been established which includes all partners, who are held to account for their constituent organisations' joint improvement work and understanding of safeguarding thresholds. We are very fortunate to have the Vice Chair of People's Scrutiny on the DSIB to continue close supervision.

Devon Safeguarding Children's Board (DSCB) has also been strengthened with the appointment of a new Chair. Both these boards have taken the lead monitoring change and driving improvement across Devon. We have deliberately taken a secondary role in scrutinising the County Council's progress; social worker reorganisation, staff retention, and a number of more practical issues including office accommodation, IT and mobile working as well as Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) workloads.

We have witnessed a significant transformation in how the County Council approaches its work and expectations from the partner agencies. Internally there has been recognition that substantial changes in working practices were required across several disciplines including the need corporately to support social workers better in their front line activities. This has been a difficult and challenging time and we wish to acknowledge the hard work and endeavor shown by staff. Whilst there is a balance to be struck between speed of change and a lack of momentum, we must not relax and lose sight of our goal, the safe environment and welfare of all children in Devon.

Sara Randall Johnson  
Chairman

# Introduction

The Task Group — Councillors Sara Randall Johnson (Chair), Frank Biederman, Christine Channon, Alistair Dewhirst, Rob Hannaford and Philip Sanders — would like to place on record its gratitude to the witnesses who have to date contributed to the review. In submitting its recommendations, the Group has sought to ensure that its findings are supported with evidence and its proposals well informed.

At People's Scrutiny Committee on 18 June 2013, it was agreed that a Safeguarding Children Task Group be formed. The terms of reference for the review were:

1. To evaluate the recent Ofsted report on the County Council's arrangements for the protection of children.
2. To examine the implementation of the Ofsted Action Plan.
3. To make detailed recommendations to the People's Scrutiny Committee on the findings of the Task Group.

The Task Group published its first interim report on 26 September 2013, since which time verbal reports have been presented at each Committee meeting on the Group's continued progress. Following a meeting with the Chair of the Devon Safeguarding Improvement Board, on 21 January 2014, the Task Group agreed to undertake a number of visits to children's social care offices across the County to get a perspective from frontline staff. Members visited the following:

- Newton Abbot Children & Families Social Care Offices
- Barnstaple Children & Families Social Care Offices
- Tiverton Children & Families Social Care Offices
- Exeter Children & Families Social Care Offices
- Totnes Children & Families Social Care Offices

This report is based on the findings of those visits, and a follow up session with the Chair of the Devon Safeguarding Improvement Board on 29 April 2014. Time and resources did not allow the Task Group to visit all the children's social care offices in Devon, but the sample set provided a number of similar issues, which members felt are likely to be factors across the County. A further more over-arching report on safeguarding children in Devon will be presented to a forthcoming People's Scrutiny Committee in due course.

A masterclass in June 2014 is also being coordinated through People's Scrutiny for all members to help further their understanding of social care thresholds.

# Recommendations

## Recommendation 1

That the County Council provides all its children's social care staff with an adequate working environment to include a

- car parking space
- desk
- working IT equipment

## Recommendation 2

That the County Council remains focused on the Improvement Plan and continues to drive forward the required changes.

## Recommendation 3

That the County Council reviews the induction process to ensure all new staff and those returning from extended leave receive a comprehensive introduction and the necessary equipment is in place including mobile phone, laptop etc.

## Summary

In the Task Group's first interim report in September 2013, members urged the County Council to use the Ofsted inspection positively as an opportunity to create an improved system for child protection in Devon. There was an initial delay in responding to the challenges Ofsted set out with some denial as to the position the County Council found itself in. However in the intervening 12 months the Task Group has seen momentum gathering pace with the introduction of the Early Help Strategy, the children's social care staffing restructure and the strengthening of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) among myriad other developments. The Chair of the Devon Safeguarding Improvement Board advised the Task Group that crucially Devon's children are safer than they were, in large part due to the County Council having removed the backlog in terms of initial assessments.

While staff acknowledge that practice is now safer and they are receiving clearer messages from management, the Task Group is also aware of comments made directly to it and others, that social workers may feel undervalued and are not always being provided with the necessary tools to do their job. The Task Group is of the view that it is imperative the County Council addresses these issues to achieve a stable workforce. Devon has busy social workers, undertaking difficult, often highly pressurized and demanding roles, who have had to contend with the not inconsiderable barriers relating to their office accommodation, IT and parking. It will continue to be a deterrent to staff recruitment and retention if these issues are not resolved. Creating and maintaining a stable workforce is the bedrock of improving child protection services.

The Task Group also acknowledged the County Council has embarked on a period of cultural change in the way in which it operated over the last 12 months and this will take time to embed. There are significant developments underway being led corporately through Business Strategy and Support to improve the IT and mobile working infrastructure for children's social care staff. Certain changes to ways of working such as hot desking, have met with some resistance, which members are extremely sympathetic to but the fact remains that with reduced finances moving forward the County Council has to take a different approach to the way in which it operates. The Task Group recognises there have to be changes in the way in which employees work as resources available to the authority are reduced.

# Key Findings

## Quality of Practice

Following the Ofsted inspection in April 2013, in line with the experience of other authorities in a similar position, Devon's children's social care faced significant increases in activity caused by a general loss of confidence in the child protection system. The precursor to improvement is stability and activity levels have now fallen to levels in line with comparator authorities. Social worker caseloads have reduced from 38 in the autumn 2013 to 20 now.

Children's social care has been restructured to better align the capacity and capabilities of the workforce to the journey of the child and enable social workers to form ongoing relationships with the children they are involved with. External auditors have assessed the voice of the child as now more present in social work practice and in children's records. Thresholds have been re-described and re-communicated across agencies with focus on the assessment and management of risk using best practice tools in doing so.

There has been constant focus on the assessment and management of risk using best practice tools. A new single assessment framework has been implemented to replace the previous two-tier framework in line with *Working Together 2013* statutory guidance.

There has been investment in frontline practitioner and management capacity, with managers now more focussed on their core responsibilities of managing workload, making decisions, assuring the quality of practice, and listening to children and families. There has also been investment in the training and development of managers and staff, focussing on those areas of weakness identified by Ofsted. A revision of approaches to workforce recruitment and retention has been undertaken, enabling the County Council to stabilise and grow its permanent workforce.

The new children's social care staffing structure is not yet fully populated in terms of workforce. There has been difficulty appointing to all the Assistant Team Manager posts, which means at present some managers are responsible for up to 240 cases and therefore lack the appropriate supervisory capacity when there may be insufficient experienced workers within each team.

## Early Help

Following the Ofsted inspection of child protection arrangements in April 2013 that identified weaknesses in the County Council's 'whole system' front-door and Early Help arrangements, a new Early Help Strategy has been agreed. An Early Help coordination service is now co-located within the MASH to ensure that children who do not meet the threshold for social work intervention can be assessed and where appropriate receive support from professionals involved in their care supported by four area-based Early Help Advisers. Professionals across agencies are supported in this by a suite of Devon Assessment Framework tools. A multi-agency workforce development programme has been agreed to ensure staff in all agencies are working to common standards and are effective in that practice.

## Quality Assurance

Quality assurance arrangements have been revised to ensure that the County Council has a rounded view of its children's social care performance, and that leaders and managers use those insights to drive improvement and address performance concerns. Comparisons with other authorities revealed Devon was under-resourced in this area, and that has been corrected.

A wide range of quantitative and qualitative information is now collected as a means of overseeing practice and its impact including performance, activity and outcome data; information on the quality of placements; the assessments of Independent Reviewing Officers; complaints, surveys and other feedback from children, young people and their families; surveys of staff; and case audits undertaken internally and externally. This is summarised and presented in a common format to all interested parties with more detailed reports available to operational managers and staff. Further developments are planned over the next 12 months in Early Help, Multi-Agency and Integrated Children's Service reporting.

Case auditing is now aligned to practice standards and incorporates individual feedback to enable learning and improvement. Managers are committed to formal audits of at least two cases monthly alongside regular direct observation of practice, and to having their supervision practice observed and their auditing moderated. The latest set of external case audits is evidencing improvements in practice and the management oversight of it.

## **Leadership and Guidance**

Following the Ofsted inspection, in line with the restructure of social work operations, significant changes have been made to leadership and management, making both interim and permanent appointments in key positions. A number of immediate changes to multi-agency governance arrangements were also made to ensure they were fit-for-purpose to lead Devon's improvement journey. A Children's Safeguarding Improvement Board was established with an independent chair, the participation of politicians, the senior responsible officers in the authority, and partner agencies. The Board oversees the Improvement Plan and makes a monthly assessment of progress against it and of its impact on outcomes for children. While the Task Group welcomed the independent chair's appointment to this role, the County Council's improvement journey lost some time as the appointment was only made in September 2013 and not in April/May 2013.

A new independent chair of the Devon Safeguarding Children Board was also appointed who has overhauled its membership, formed an Executive, and revised its sub-groups to focus on a clearer set of priorities aligned to its core functions of challenge and support to multi-agency child protection arrangements.

## **Pace of Change**

There is now a strong direction from the centre that was not there previously. There is considerable instruction coming down from senior management at the present time this is necessary to ensure safeguarding practice improves rapidly, but this has to be carefully balanced as where there are too many demands staff can get overloaded and do not then know what to prioritise. Some staff welcome the degree of oversight now, while for others it is a challenge to have that level of support from the centre.

## **Social Worker Recruitment and Retention**

At the present time social workers feel they could have a better working experience in Devon. The Task Group's visits to children's social care offices across the County uncovered many issues relating to the inadequacy of office accommodation, mostly focused on the availability of parking, desks, computers and meeting rooms along with a number of IT problems. It is however recognised by the Task Group that their visits to children's social care offices took place at the very start of the restructuring exercise in February/March 2014, and work has been ongoing in the intervening period to address many of these issues.

It is vital if the County Council is to replace some of its 20% agency staff with permanent social workers that Devon is seen as an a good place to work. At the present time other local authorities like Somerset and Torbay are felt to provide a more attractive working environment. It is not only difficult attracting permanent staff but it is also a competitive market for agency workers who can pick and choose where they work, and the County

Council has to ensure it is at the forefront in terms of being able to recruit and retain the best staff.

It was highlighted to the Task Group the importance and need to improve the induction process for staff. A piece of work has been undertaken with Human Resources, Business Strategy and Support and children's social care managers to rapidly improve the induction process. Staff have been somewhat let down in terms of induction over recent years and this needs to change.

The role that that social care managers have as appointing officers and line managers is also essential in guaranteeing that Business Strategy and Support have relevant and timely information regarding staff to ensure that appropriate tools are available as quickly and efficiently as possible.

## **Office Accommodation**

### **Newton Abbot Children & Families Social Care Offices, Estuary House**

There are significant difficulties for staff working at Estuary House in relation to the suitability of the office accommodation to the extent it has a major impact on their ability to do their job. Parking is particularly problematic, with only 5 spaces available for frontline social workers and extremely limited on street provision, staff are often forced into parking up to 20 minutes' walk away from the offices. The Cabinet Member for Performance and Engagement recognised that the car parking situation at Estuary House needs to be addressed with some urgency and reported that a solution to the parking issues on this site is currently being considered, while costs to provide additional meeting room space have been obtained.

Staff also reported to the Task Group that the hot desking policy has caused another barrier to staff being able to fulfil their role. Business Strategy and Support advised that the average desk utilisation at Estuary House is 49%. Meeting room space is limited, as the few rooms available are shared with health colleagues who are also based in the building, with staff supervision sometimes having to take place in cars. Desks are however available across the building. Managers need to be aware of other areas of the office accommodation where staff can sit if it is fully occupied where their team has tended to be zoned.

### **Exeter Children's Social Work Offices, County Hall**

The office move from George Street in January 2014 appears to have been relatively smooth with the accommodation working well. The Task Group however received a number of reports from staff relating to the 3 day access rule to the County Hall car park referencing difficulties for staff in dealing with crises when they occur if they do not have a car on site. The Task Group recognised the imperative for social workers to be able to park in close proximity to their office, as they need quick access to their cars. Officers advised that children's social care staff that are on duty are provided with the duty worker car park pass which allows them unlimited access to the car park whilst on duty in addition to their own car park pass and allowance. In a scenario where all duty workers were off site and a rapid response was needed, managers can use their discretion to find alternative transport – i.e. other members of staff to drive, hiring a taxi – as with carers and car sharing. A pool car can also be booked (based at County Hall).

Officers advised that since the Task Group met staff in February 2014 there have been a number of concessions made to the County Hall car parking policy for social workers including:

- Social workers have also been put on a 5 week, 3 day schedule to allow those staff to park any 15 days over a 5 week period in line with the car sharing policy
- 1 hour drop off access, rather than 30 minutes

There have also been IT issues, where there has not been enough computers for staff. Officers in Business Strategy and Support reported that this matter was isolated, managed and resolved within 3 months and mitigated within that period by the use of other facilities at County Hall.

### **Barnstaple Children & Families Social Care Offices, Civic Centre**

There are a number of issues relating to the office accommodation at Barnstaple being of a sub-standard nature. Given the decision by North Devon Council to vacate Barnstaple Civic Centre, the County Council is looking to refurbish existing alternative accommodation and affect a joint exit of the Civic Centre. In light of the uncertainty around the future of the building the capital budget allocated to reconfigure the office space has not been used (only urgent compliance work is being commissioned).

### **Hot Desking**

The County Council's policy for staff hot desking has been a challenge for some social workers as they adapt to this more flexible way of using Council assets. The transition from the traditional cluster working to hot desking has led to frustration for staff in such a pressurized role to not be able to automatically sit down to do their work next to a social worker colleague. It is in no way helpful where staff have to wait for a desk to become available and then in some instances there not be a computer on that desk. Where staff have to hot desk this can also be at detriment to team dynamics, as individuals become isolated and lose the ability to share work concerns etc. It is also vital that each office has adequate break out areas / meeting room space. While it is advantageous for staff to have a laptop so that they can work on the road, there is still a need for their having desks to be able to do their paperwork. It is inappropriate to have social workers sat outside offices working in their cars.

In March 2014 a utilisation survey was conducted in children's social care offices, monitoring desk usage over a week on four occasions each day. The survey showed that at no point was there an office without an available desk. Desk utilisation for children's social work staff averaged between 39% to 49%, with the highest percentage of occupancy being 62%.

Social workers are being encouraged to build links with children's centres and schools, using these spaces to work rather than at home on those days when they are not working in the office. The Task Group agreed that it is vital that this approach is further encouraged and supported.

### **IT and Mobile Working**

Concerns were however raised to the Task Group about a lack of pace to address issues relating to the basic infrastructure in Devon with a lack of coherence to Devon's strategy on IT and office accommodation for its social workers. The process for social workers getting new IT equipment has been overly bureaucratic. The system needed to be smartened up where for instance a replacement Blackberry has to be signed off by the Head of Service. The Head of Children's Social Work Service and Child Protection (Interim) is now meeting the Head of Business Strategy & Support on a monthly basis as a way of trying to bring a swift resolution to any ongoing issues.

The County Council needs to get to a position where everything is set up and programmed including phone numbers and email contacts for staff ready for their first day in post. It is key that the right IT equipment is available for staff, so that they are able to work effectively both off site and on site. Mobile working arrangements need to be robust and it is vital that social care is supported corporately to ensure that this is the case. Training through Business Strategy & Support Services is available on any new IT equipment staff are provided with.

There were a number of reports to members relating to the performance and functionality of CareFirst, TRIM and the County Council's network in more general terms. Officers within

Business Strategy & Support reported that the target for the availability of the CareFirst application is 99.5% during office hours. Between December 2013 and March 2014 availability during these times was 100% and for March and April 2014 it was 99.6%. The CareFirst application has seen a series of upgrades to both improve performance and functionality most recently in April 2014 when the CareFirst application was upgraded. CareFirst has a dependency on the network, and with the removal of the old network in June 2013 the issues which caused service interruption were resolved (the network has been fully stable since this time).

The Blackberry roll out although a positive initiative, was poorly handled it is felt, as while social workers received Blackberry's, advanced practitioners and agency staff did not which was an unhelpful differential for staff in many case doing the same job, the impact of which had been a demoralizing effect on staff across the office. Officers reported that they have now stopped any difference in the provision of equipment between agency staff and social workers to ensure all staff are equipped for the job.

An independent review of child care business processes focusing on the journey of the child and the productivity of the social worker has been completed. This report made a series of service specific recommendations including some IT system related recommendations. To that end, the first phase of the business process review was implemented in May 2014 focusing on the interface between the MASH and the Customer Service Centre. Within that were a number of technology enhancements which when joined up with business process change, should hopefully bring significant benefit.

### **Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)**

The Task Group's first interim report in September 2013 expressed significant concern about the MASH. There was a lack of governance arrangements around the MASH model; inappropriate enquiries were being accepted; issues around multi-agency engagement and too much information was being held on children and families, which was not proportionate to the level of risk. In the period following the inspection, there was a dramatic increase in enquiries into the MASH from professionals in other agencies and members of the public, peaking in July 2013. This loss of confidence in the profession meant a far greater proportion of enquiries were referred on for assessment by a social worker. This lowering of thresholds meant that demands on the system were greater than the capacity to meet it with a rising backlog of work.

An independent review of MASH was commissioned focussing on decision-making and the County Council has implemented its recommendations to ensure enquiries are responded to appropriately, auditing outcomes accordingly. Concerted efforts to re-establish thresholds externally and internally, stabilise the workforce in a more effective structure, and improve standards of practice have enabled the County Council to reduce the number of children waiting for an assessment by 1,000 in the last 6 months.

Councillors Sara Randall Johnson (Chair)  
Frank Biederman  
Christine Channon  
Alistair Dewhirst  
Rob Hannaford  
Philip Sanders

*Copies of this report may be obtained from the Democratic Services & Scrutiny Secretariat at County Hall, Topsham Road, Exeter, Devon, EX2 4QD or by ringing 01392 382232. It will be available also on the County Council's website at:*

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*If you have any questions or wish to talk to anyone about this report then please contact:*

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### Task Group Activities

Since the Task Group published its first interim report on [26 September 2013](#) members have held a number of evidence gathering sessions and undertaken site visits across the County. Brief details of which are included below:

- A1.1 On **28 October 2013** members received evidence from the Detective Superintendent, Public Protection Unit, Devon & Cornwall Constabulary; Head of Business Strategy and Support; Strategic Director People and Lead Designated Nurse Safeguarding Children, NEW Devon Clinical Commissioning Group.
- A1.2 On **4 December 2013** the Task Group met the Head of King's School / Devon Association of Secondary Headteachers (DASH) / Devon Safeguarding Improvement Board (SIB); Head of Hatherleigh Primary School / Devon Association of Primary Headteachers (DAPH) / Devon Safeguarding Children's Board (DSCB) and Director NIB Consulting / MASH Co-creator.
- A1.3 At its meeting on **21 January 2014** members received evidence from the Chair, Safeguarding Improvement Board (Devon) and the Independent Chair, Devon Safeguarding Children Board.
- A1.4 On **10 February 2014** the Task Group received evidence from the former County Council Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's Services; Head of Children's Social Work Service and Child Protection (Interim); Team Manager, Initial Response Service, Children's Social Work. Members then undertook a walk-through of the new Exeter Children's Social Work Offices in County Hall and met frontline staff.
- A1.5 On **25 February 2014** members undertook a site visit to Barnstaple Children & Families Social Care Offices, Barnstaple Civic Centre and Tiverton Children & Families Social Care Offices.
- A1.6 On **6 March 2014** the Task Group visited Newton Abbot Children & Families Social Care Offices, Estuary House, Newton Abbot and Totnes Children & Families Social Care Offices, Follaton House, Totnes.
- A1.7 At its meeting on **10 March 2014** members interviewed the Cabinet Member for Improving Health & Wellbeing.
- A1.8 On **26 March 2014** the Task Group undertook a site visit to the MASH, Pynes Hill, Exeter.
- A1.9 On **29 April 2014** members received further evidence from the Chair of the Safeguarding Improvement Board (Devon), following which the Task Group discussed its next interim report.
- A1.10 On **27 May 2014** the Task Group discussed its draft interim report with the Cabinet Member for Children, Schools and Skills; Cabinet Member for Performance and Engagement; Strategic Director People and Head of Business Infrastructure.

## Contributors / Representations to the Review

Witnesses to the review (in the order that they appeared before the Task Group / provided written evidence):

<b>Witness</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Paul Northcott	Detective Superintendent, Public Protection Unit	Devon & Cornwall Constabulary
Rob Parkhouse	Head of Business Strategy and Support	DCC
Jennie Stephens	Strategic Director People	DCC
Sue Baldwin	Lead Designated Nurse Safeguarding Children	NEW Devon Clinical Commissioning Group
Faith Jarrett	Headteacher	The King's School / Devon Association of Secondary Headteachers (DASH) / Devon Safeguarding Improvement Board
Caroline Boother	Headteacher	Hatherleigh Primary School / Devon Association of Primary Headteachers (DAPH) / Devon Safeguarding Children Board
Nigel Boulton	Director	NIB Consulting / MASH Co-creator
Professor Ray Jones	Chair	Safeguarding Improvement Board (Devon)
David Taylor	Independent Chair	Devon Safeguarding Children Board
John Smith	Former County Council Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's Services	DCC
Fiona Fitzpatrick	Head of Children's Social Work Service and Child Protection (Interim)	DCC
Corrina Bryant	Team Manager, Initial Response Service, Children's Social Work	DCC
Social care staff	Exeter Children's Social Work Offices, County Hall	DCC
Social care staff	Barnstaple Children & Families Social Care Offices, Barnstaple Civic Centre	DCC
Social care staff	Tiverton Children & Families Social Care Offices	DCC
Social care staff	Newton Abbot Children & Families Social Care Offices, Estuary House	DCC
Social care staff	Totnes Children & Families Social Care Offices, Follaton House	DCC
Councillor Andrea Davis	Cabinet Member for Improving Health & Wellbeing	DCC
Felicity Baldwin	MASH Operation Manager	DCC
Councillor James McInnes	Cabinet Member for Children, Schools and Skills	DCC
Councillor Barry Parsons	Cabinet Member for Performance and Engagement	DCC
Colin Mackenzie	Head of Business Infrastructure	DCC

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- Safeguarding Peer Review (LGA, 2012)
- Stabilising the Social Work Workforce HR Report (Devon County Council, 2013)