

Meeting of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee 14th March 2022

Report of the Director of Children's Services

Social Care Improvement update

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to further update the Scrutiny Committee on the continued Improvement of Children's Social Care including: -
 - Progress on our Improvement Plan 2022/2023 and the 5 key priority areas in line with our Restorative Practice model approach to working with children and families and relationship-based practice
 - Update on the continued work taking place with our Sector Led Improvement Partners from South Tyneside with an emphasis on early and robust permanency planning for children and young people
 - Overview of the quality of social work practice
 - To provide an overview of our workforce and the key challenges impacting on social work practice and work with children and families

This report will provide members with an opportunity to seek clarity and raise questions whilst providing ongoing assurance that Children's Social Care, along with the wider partnership is making improvements at pace to improve the quality of services being provided to the children and families of Dudley.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that Members: -
 - Note and comment on the progress made to date against the Improvement Plan including the quality of practice
 - Note some amendments to the Improvement Plan that will be fully considered for approval at the proposed *Dudley Children Improvement Partnership* Board meeting in February 2022, underpinned by Restorative Practice principles and early help to children and families
 - That Corporate Leaders have been provided with an understanding of progress made to date.

Background

3. There remains a continued focus on our Improvement plan and our 5 key priority areas and all of our improvement work and activity is specifically targeted around these:
 - Restorative Practice
 - Workforce
 - Whole system approach
 - Partnerships
 - Learning organisation

Update on the 5-priority areas of the Improvement plan 2022/2023

4. An update to sections of the current Improvement Plan took place in January 2022 and specifically with an emphasis on Restorative Practice and relationship-based practice throughout the plan and the key areas of focus, and also on working with children and families at the earliest possible time in the least intrusive way, whilst building on family and wider network strengths, and with an increased emphasis on wider partnership contributions to early help.

The amended plan also includes our culture of continued learning, reflection, innovation and using feedback to inform and shape service design and delivery. The updates to the plan have been considered in further detail at the February 2022 meeting along with a refreshed term of reference for the board.

Restorative model of practice

We continue our efforts to embed Restorative Practice in our day-to-day work with children and their families and this work is being taken forward by the Restorative Practice Steering Group that meets on a monthly basis and the development of our Restorative Practice roadmap. This roadmap will be underpinned by *our 3 obsessions and belief statements/promises to the children of Dudley* and each service area across the children's services system are developing their service plan linked to these.

Our obsessions are:

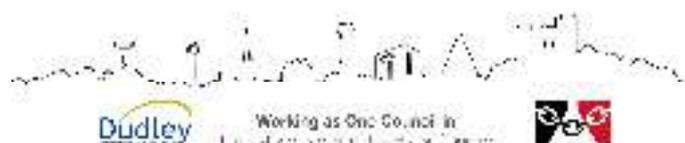
- Focus help earlier where it is needed – right support at the right time.

We believe that we should provide help and support early when there are problems and only intervene in family life only for as long as it is needed.

- All children will benefit from full time education

We believe that all children in Dudley have the right to a good quality education to support them reach their potential and make a positive contribution to their community.

- Support children to remain with their families where it is safe to do so.



We believe that children should be cared for within their families and kinship networks. Children who cannot be safely cared for within their family should be cared for within Dudley and maintain links to their community and the people who are important to them

Our overall aim is to work collaboratively with and alongside children and families, at the earliest opportunity and in doing so, building on family networks and strengths to support them in safely caring for their children whilst providing high support and high challenge within our work.

We are continuing our work on identifying and supporting our Restorative Consultants in each service area, to further assist in taking this work forward across their teams and services. Restorative practice training remains available within our 2022 training programme for all staff across the children's services workforce.

The number of children entering and exiting care is subject of continued work, scrutiny and challenge and the current figure of children in care stands at 589 and this continues to reduce over time and at the end of December 2021 this was 84.9% per 10k of the population which is below our statistical neighbours at 85.45% but slightly above the West Midlands average of 82%.

Whole System

We continue to focus our work across all areas of the system and in doing so ensuring the journey of children and families is as smooth as possible and children and young people receive intervention in the right part of the service in line with their needs. This is a key factor underlining the refreshed Improvement Plan.

On the 24th January 2022, we launched our new Edge of Care service- *Families come First* a multi-disciplinary team working with Children in Need. The service is designed to support more children and young people to safely live with their family.

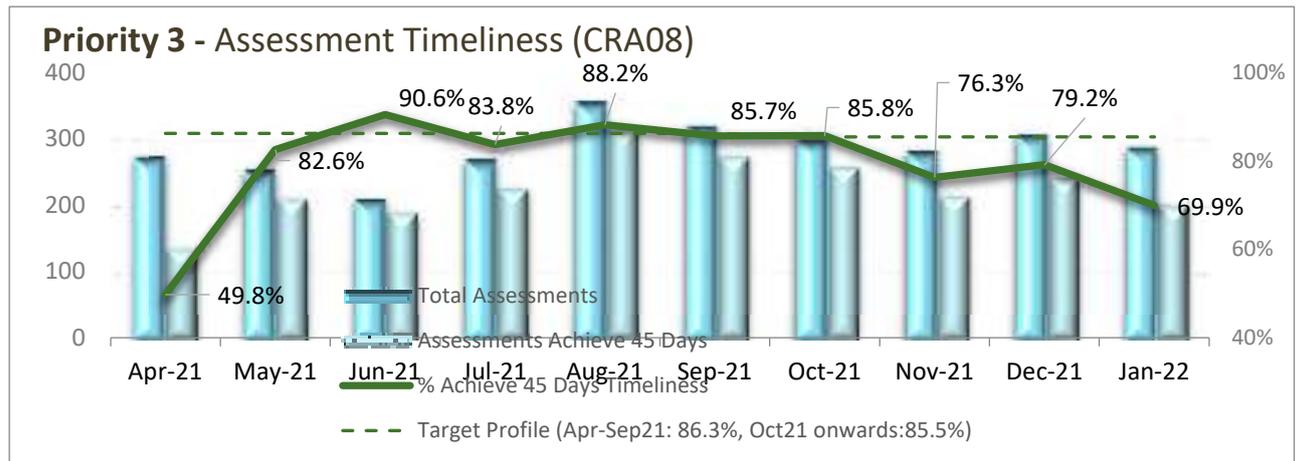
The Families come First team builds on the vision of a Child Friendly Dudley where all children should be happy, healthy and safe, placing them at the heart of everything we do, and valuing families every step of the way. The team has commenced work with children and has capacity for over 120 children.

Our assessment timeliness across our 5 Assessment teams has slightly reduced to 69.9%. This has been due to one of the assessment teams having significant staff absences. This has now been resolved through the appointment of interim staff and performance has improved. We are undertaking focussed work around our 'No further Action' rate after a Child and Young Person Social Work Assessment (CYPA) has been completed, to ensure that we are not over-intervening in family life unnecessarily.

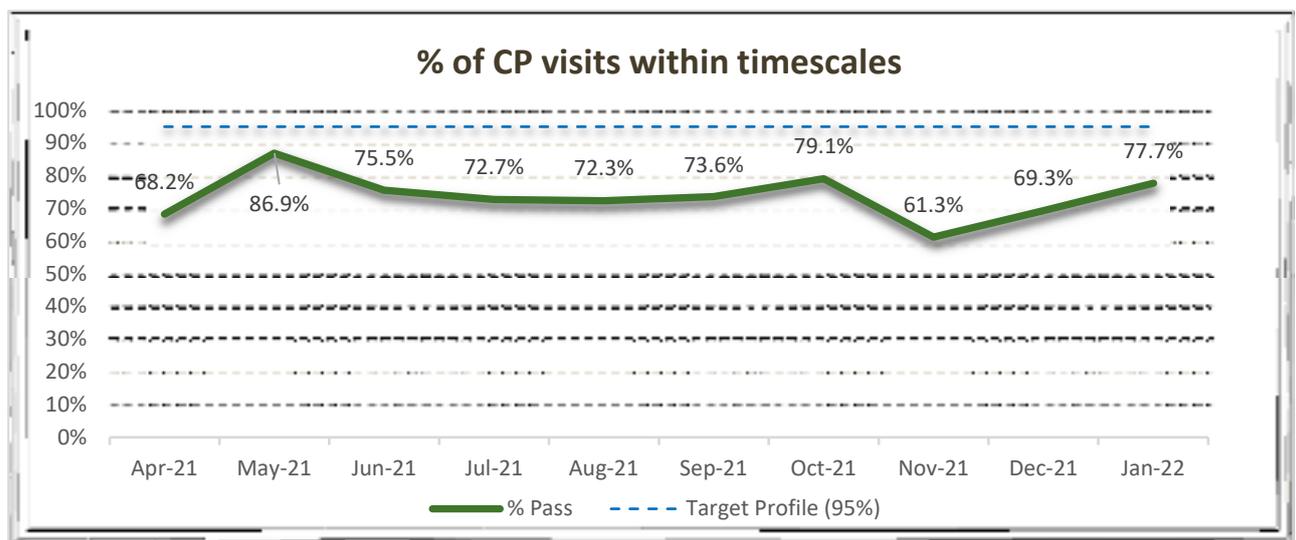
At the end of December 2021 this figure was 60.6% and we are not in line with our regional and statistical neighbours in this area – the average is around 30%. In order to address this, we are undertaking work with our MASH managers and managers for the Assessment teams to identify decision making points in the referral and information gathering process and we are also undertaking audit activity during January around our assessment activity and also those assessments that resulted in No further Action to identify if there is any key



learning around this area of our work. The Head of Service and Service Manager have also liaised with their counterparts in other Local Authorities to ensure that we are measuring in the same way.



We remain committed to increasing and improving our timeliness of visits to children subject of a child protection plan. At the end of end of December 2021 this was 69.3% and this figure has increased to 77.7% although this continues an area of focus.



Our child protection numbers currently stand at 43.1% per 10k of the population – the national average is 43.7%. Our current child protection numbers stand at 303 and the number of children and young subject of a child protection plan over 2 years has increased to 2.6% from 0.7% and this is above the national average of 2.1%. This increase constitutes 2 families one of which is already in pre proceedings, the other is being reviewed by the child protection chair and discussed with the team manager.

Following continued focussed work in this area- the number of children in the Public Law Outline (PLO) process has decreased, to 23 but this constitutes 12 families an increase of one. This represents 7.6% of the current child protection population in Dudley and more in line with our regional neighbours. All children subject to this process continued to be reviewed every 6 weeks to avoid drift and delay and timely decision making in line with the presenting needs. Further work will begin in February with Legal Services to strengthen pre-proceedings work in line with new guidance from Mrs Justice Lievan, Family Division Liaison Judge.

We need to better improve our use of the Graded Care Profile 2 (GCP2) assessment tool for children and young people where neglect is a feature of their lives - the solution focussed assessment tool allows for practitioners to understand the scale of the neglect and improvements made and changes required to improve outcomes for children and also supports intervention work with families. We will prioritise GCP2 for children under 5 where there are concerns of neglect.

As part of our improvement, to drive performance upwards and understand our story and current challenges, our first Director of Children's Services (DCS) Assurance Performance Clinic was held on the 27th January 2022. The aim of this 'whole system' performance clinic will be to share performance information from across Children's Services and to create opportunities to understand the quality of our support to families in Dudley, identify further opportunities for improved collaboration and identify themes. The next DCS Assurance Performance Clinic will focus upon vulnerable teenagers.

Within children's social care our focus over forthcoming months is on management oversight, supervision and increasing our visiting timeliness.

The DCS Assurance Performance Clinic will form part of our approach to improve quality of practice and system working, through the triangulation of performance data, audit activity and family feedback.

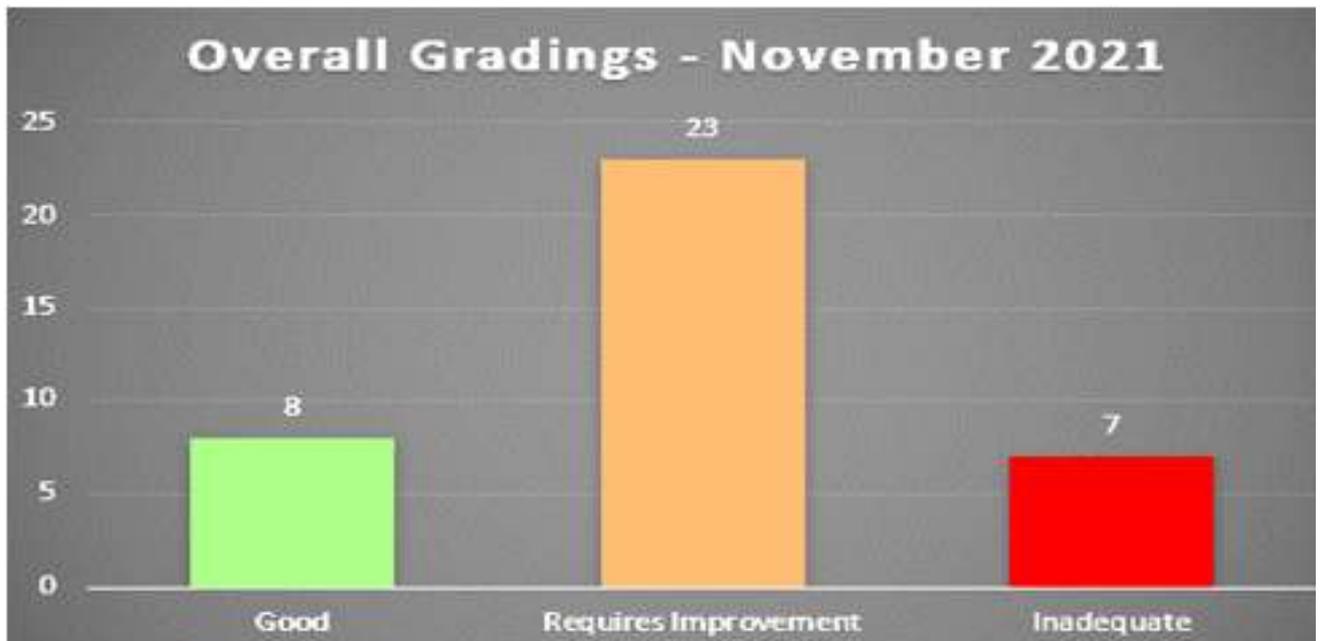
Learning Organisation

A key feature of our refreshed Improvement Plan is our commitment to being a learning organisation that is underpinned by reflection, challenge and our quality assurance activity including feedback and innovation.

In January, we launched our updated quality assurance framework, and this was shared at an audit circle meeting with an emphasis on a new schedule for auditing including deep dive audits, dip sampling, observations of practice and embedding group supervision alongside 1:1 supervision.

Throughout November 2021 we focussed our audit activity on permanence planning, and we observed an increase in the overall number of audits completed. 82.6% of audits were completed in comparison to the last cycle, where deep dive audits were undertaken, and the percentage of audits completed was 58.97%. S.Tyneside, who are our Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP), reviewed half of our audits and agreed with 80% of our gradings.





Our audit findings in November 2021 informed us that whilst there were some good examples of practice where children had received effective support and permanence had been timely, there were also a number of examples where children had experienced drift and delay. This was due to a range of factors, including Social Worker or Team Manager absence or changes; a lack of early assessment and contingency planning; limited or ineffective use of Family Group Conferencing and Early Help support; and irregular supervision and management oversight.

It was found that while quality assurance arrangements were in place, they were not always effective in resolving delays. For example, the service was not always responsive to disputes raised by Independent Reviewing Officers; and there were situations where children had repeat presentations to Achieving Early Permanence Panel, but their plans remained the same. Permanency Planning Meetings were not consistently taking place.

A further theme identified has been the issue of recording. In some cases, in conversations with Team Managers, permanence plans were progressing, but the child's file did not necessarily reflect this. Auditors recommended updated case summaries to centralise information and provide a clearer understanding of the child's plan and journey.

A positive finding from the November audit activity has been the quality of support given to young people in the Care Leavers Team. These young people were found to have strong relationships with their Young Person's Advisors, and a team of multi-agency professionals who worked together to ensure they were being supported through their adult years.

The representation of children's voices was found to be variable in our November audits. There were some good examples of recording where practitioners had used direct quotes from children and highlighted them in blue. This gave children a sense of identity and bought their voices to life, evidencing engagement and participation. There were also

examples of effective use of direct work, focussed to understanding children's lived experiences.

In contrast to this were examples where children had not been visited, or visits had not been recorded. The representation of children's voices was at times limited due to generalised or brief recording. The quality of supervision and management oversight was found to be an area for development. In some cases, supervision had not taken place, and management oversight was found to be limited, including during times of crises. In relation to permanence, auditors identified that insufficient focus was placed upon supporting practitioners to drive permanence plans for children, contributing to drift and delay.

During December 2021 we undertook a wide range of dip sampling audit activity including visits to children and young people, strategy discussion, S. 47 Enquiries, Private Fostering, children entering and exiting care and also the quality of intervention and support for children and families known to the Dudley Exploitation Hub. Our audit findings are consistently informing us that we need to do more around evidencing our decision making on children's files, continue to evidence the voice of children and young people and highlight planning for children and young people alongside strengthening our analysis in assessments and continuing to improve the quality of our plans.

Our participation work remains central to our day-to-day practice and ensuring our services are being designed and delivered with the voice of children and families at the centre and this includes gathering feedback at different stages in the child's journey including at the point that we close our assessments, during the child protection planning and Children in Care review process. Feedback will support our continued improvement journey.

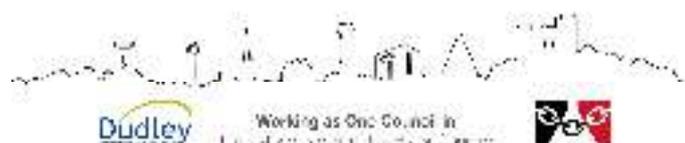
Work is also currently taking place around updating our Children in Care website, involving young people in the recruitment process across children's services and targeted auditing activity planned around the Education, Health Care Plans (EHCPs) and EHCP reviews in February 2022 with a focus on the voice of the child.

Our learning from complaints centre around communication and some workers not always following processes and we have identified an Advanced Practitioner from our Centre for Professional Practice (CPP) to work closely with our complaints team so we can share key learning from complaints with staff across our teams and services.

Solutions Circles are a fundamental part of our Restorative Practice model and these continue to develop and are being used within the Families come First, MASH and Duty and Assessment teams and form part of our reflective cycle of problem solving and shared learning. As part of our ongoing work we want to fully embed these across all of our teams and services and for them to assist and support in planning for children and young people.

Partnerships

Providing joined up multi-agency support to children and young people is a central feature of our refreshed Improvement Plan and this includes our joint working arrangements with all of our partners.



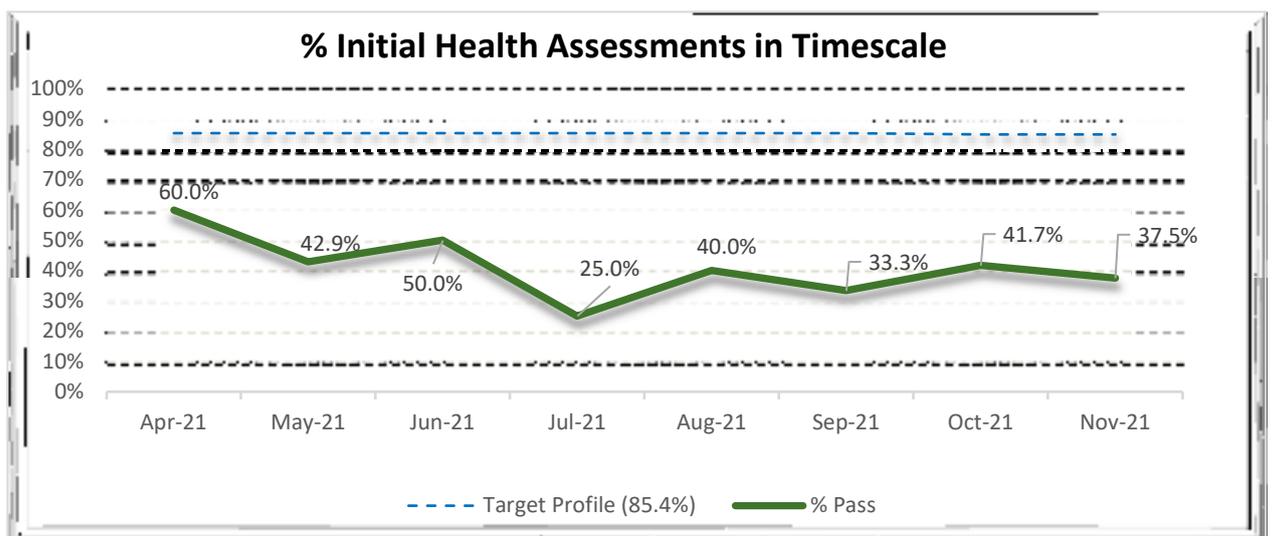
A key piece of work moving forwards is our joint working arrangements with housing colleagues and specifically around young people presenting as homeless and meeting the needs and outcomes of this particular vulnerable group of young people. We know that there is more to do in this area to strengthen the arrangements of joint working and ensure a timely response in line with national guidance in this area and local practice.

As part of our wider work around meeting the needs of children and young people who go missing and are exploited or vulnerable to exploitation, we have aligned our services for children and young people going missing with key staff moving across to the Dudley Exploitation Hub on 24th January 2022. This will allow for a more joined up and holistic approach to our work with children and young people and allow us to understand in greater detail the needs of children and young people who go missing and also ensure a more wider focus of our work linked to vulnerabilities and exploitation.

We remain committed to keeping children in the care of their parents where it is considered safe to do so, and along with Public Health colleagues we are reviewing the current service provision for women at risk of repeated removals of babies from their care so that we can carefully consider future service provision within Dudley with the aim of more children safely remaining with their parent/s underpinned by evidence based assessment and interventions.

In line with the planning for unborn children, we are also working with our health colleagues including midwifery, to ensure a timely response to mothers who may have had previous children removed or there are concerns emerging around their capacity to care for their unborn child. This work includes reviewing the multi-agency procedure in place and the early help pathway so that there are joined up responses that are timely and effective.

Our work with health colleagues continues to take place around our timeliness of the completion of Initial Health Assessments for children and young people who come in to care and this is an area for improvement. At the end of November this stood at 37.5% and we have strengthened our internal processes to improve in this area and in conjunction with health colleagues and will continue to review them as part of our improvement work in this area



Workforce

Our Workforce Board chaired by the DCS continues to meet on a monthly basis with a specific focus on our Workforce Development plan underpinned by our 3 key areas around capacity, capability and culture.

The recruitment and retention of experienced social workers in Dudley remains a significant and critical area and one of ongoing challenge impacting directly on our improvement journey and also on our progress and work with children and families.

Our work continues to focus on creating the right culture for social workers to flourish and providing them with the skills, knowledge and tools to do their work including reviewing the systems we have in place.

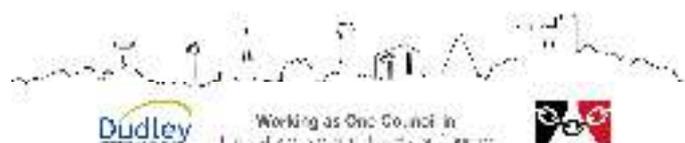
We have put in place systems around listening to the views of the workforce including sessions with the DCS and Service Directors, so that we remain responsive and attuned to the needs of staff and can respond swiftly to the challenges reported.

Our aim is that children and families benefit from consistent and meaningful relationships and that tell their story by 'saying it once'. Our caseloads in parts of the service remain too high across our Assessment, Safeguarding and Support and Children in Care teams although has decreased in December 2021 to 22 per worker from an average of 23.4 the previous month.

We have recently recruited a further 9 permanent social workers of which 2 of these started in January 2022, 3 are due to start in February 2022 and we are following up start dates for the other 4 who have been offered social work posts. Whilst this is positive within the context of national and regional challenges around recruitment and retention, we also have social workers leaving and during the last quarter period September- December 2021 period a total of 12 permanent social workers left Dudley and this impacts on the care planning for children and young people, changes in social workers and frustrations from children and young people and families and also directly impacts on the morale for workers who remain.

Changes in social workers also impacts on Team Manager capacity with them having to spend time inducting new staff including agency staff and reallocating children to new workers. We are committed to learning from our exit interviews for staff who leave Dudley to work in other Local Authorities.

There also remains a key challenge in recruiting and retaining suitable and experienced agency social workers and in turn this directly impacts on our overall caseload figures, and we also see the impact and evidence of changes of social workers in the quality of our social work practice and planning for children and young people. This is also evident in our audit activity and from feedback from young people and families who have experienced multiple workers. There is a specific challenge around the recruitment of social workers within our Safeguarding and Support teams and this is the area where we are seeing the most evidence of drift and delay in the planning process for children and young people.



Our caseload average has very recently improved due to the Innovate Teams that are supporting us and some work to step down families out of social care where appropriate. The innovate teams are working with 240 children.

Our training offer to social workers remains robust and we have launched our 2022 training programme, which includes a range of additional training including Life Story work and Adverse Childhood experiences training. We have further updated our induction processes and will launch this in February 2022.

We have established a Team Manager forum and are strengthening our practitioner forum allowing for the sharing of good practice across teams, learning and key reflections.

5. Permanency planning and our work with South Tyneside

Our work with our Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP) South Tyneside remains in place and they have recently undertaken audit activity during December 2021 and early January 2022 linked to our permanency planning arrangements and in line with their ongoing support and work with us.

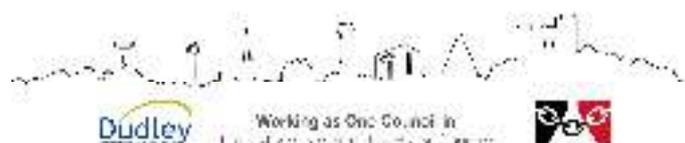
A whole service meeting is planned for Friday 28th January 2022 involving all Managers and Independent Reviewing Officers across children's social care and our colleagues from South Tyneside are also involved and contributing to this service meeting. As part of this South Tyneside will be providing an overview of their work with Dudley to date and including providing feedback on recent audit activity undertaken of around 30 children and young people.

South Tyneside reported that during their audit activity they observed examples of good practice, with evidence of good relationships with children and young people and workers and also of direct work taking place that could be improved with a clearer purpose for intervention and being clearer about how children's voices impact on their plans

South Tyneside echoed our observations that children and young people experience multiple changes of social worker. For some children and young people the quality of the case records was variable with analysis and reflection being areas for improvement. There was evidence of drift for some children and young people with a need for increase contingency planning at the early stages of our work and a variation in our management oversight that could be improved. These are key areas of our improvement work and along with our support and challenge from South Tyneside, during the next stages of their work with us.

A key factor in our work around permanency is ensuring our work from the very early stages of our involvement is robust, includes fathers and wider family members and also focusses on the individual needs of children who are part of a sibling group and that we can evidence and demonstrate our rationale and decision making in planning for children and young people

Despite our challenges around fully embedding permanency planning throughout the system, we have seen an increase in the number of children adopted since April 2021, currently 14 and we have also continued our work on Special Guardianship Orders and



since April 2021 this has increased to 26 to date and this is an improvement on previous reporting years demonstrating our journey of travel around permanency.

Matching of children to their long-term carers has also been a priority action and we have a clear process in place for this to happen.

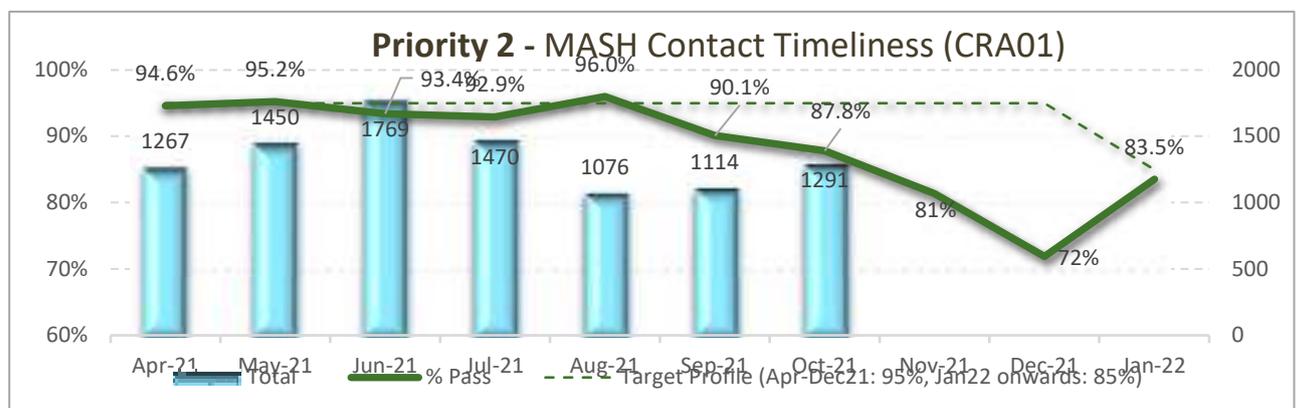
6. MASH

We have continued our work around MASH including the setting up and development of MASH improvement meetings taking place to further progress the recommendations of the diagnostic undertaken in October 2021. In order to progress this work, we have developed a detailed project plan to take the work forward and this is significant around key milestones as part of the planning process in this area.

Our refreshed Improvement Plan focusses upon more children and families receiving timely early help and fewer children requiring non-consensual social work intervention and with a redesign of our MASH service that offers families and partners timely information, advice and guidance and signposting to access local support within the community.

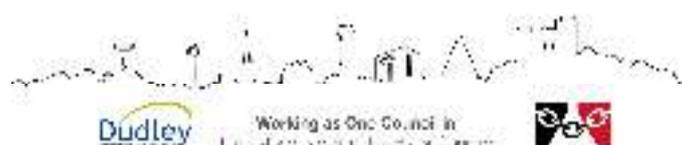
This ethos around earliest and early help will also require us to work closely with our partners to help them understand and manage risks at a lower level of intervention and in a less intrusive manner to children and families and including signposting to other services available within the local community

Our contact decision and timeliness has increased by over 10% to 83.5% and continues to be an area of attention through the operational and strategic groups meeting on a regular basis. The groups focus on partnership working, performance and quality assurance as these areas are fundamental to any future changes that take place.

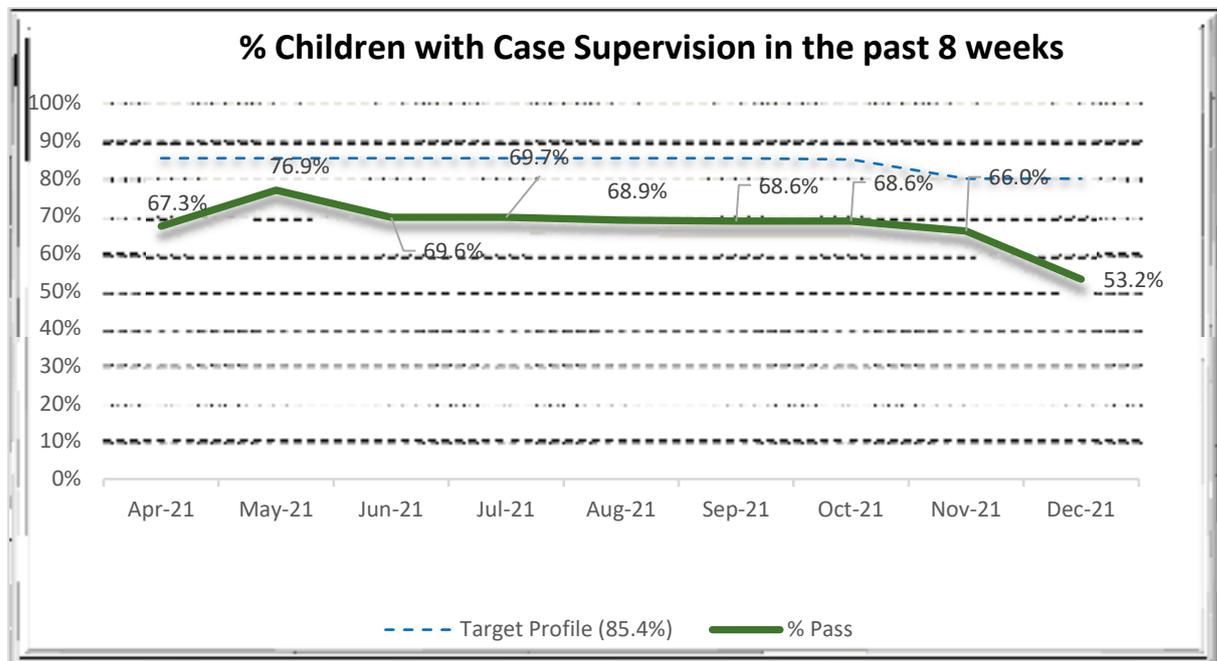


7.

Case Supervision and Welfare Supervision



As part of our improvement work, we are focussing on case supervision which includes management oversight on children’s files and also the recording of welfare supervision for our staff. We have observed a decline in management oversight on children’s files in November and further reduction in December 2021 and this is an area of renewed focus within our teams moving forward and including the quality of management oversight to support effective planning for children and young people. This is also an observation of our audits and in part is linked to changes in staffing and management capacity as their time is spent discussing children and young people with new workers and not evidencing all of their work and decisions on files.



A further area of focus is the recording of welfare supervision for staff within the HR system. Whilst welfare supervision is taking place this is not always recorded in a timely manner demonstrating and evidencing supervision is taking place and we are providing further support and guidance to all of our managers during the service meeting on the 28th January 2022 to improve our data reporting in this area.

Financial Implications

- 7. There are no financial implications for the Council.

Law

- 8. There are currently no legal implications for the Council; however, the Department for Education continues to provide support, advice and challenge around our improvement work.



Risk Management

9. The challenges regarding recruitment and retention of experienced social workers are impacting upon workforce morale, capacity and the volume of social worker caseloads, which impacts directly on service delivery.

Equality Impact

10. The Improvement Plan does not have impact on people with different protected characteristics.

No Equality Impacts have been identified.

The effect of the revised improvement plan on children and young people is better outcomes on their lived experience.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

11. There are no Human Resources implications.

Commercial/Procurement

12. There are no direct commercial or procurement implications.

Council Priorities

13. The revised improvement plan is in line with the Council's '**Children First and at the heart of all we do**', the vision of a **Child Friendly Dudley** and the Corporate Parenting Strategy.



Dr Catherine Driscoll, Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer: Andrea Stone (Childrens Social Care)
Telephone: 01384 815858
Email: andrea.stone@dudley.gov.uk