

# scrutiny

## focus on performance

### **Children's Portfolio Task & Finish Group Children's and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

#### **1. Introduction**

Each Committee asked their respective Executive Members to attend the first meeting to explain the current status of their portfolio / departmental reviews, giving the Committee an explanation of how confident they were of meeting the budget challenges agreed at Finance Council. Each of the Executive Members were supported by a Strategic / Director. It was anticipated that Scrutiny Committee members would focus their attentions between June and September 2011 on the delivery and outcomes of those reviews; in that the implications of not meeting the required targets would have significant impact on delivering the Performance Agreement from September onwards. It is anticipated that Scrutiny of these reviews will be completed by September. At the Committee's first meeting it was decided that the best way to proceed with Scrutiny in this area was to divide the Committee into three Task and Finish Groups looking at the three individual Portfolios.

At the first Task and Finish Group of the Children's Portfolio, Members had the opportunity to scrutinise Senior Officers, around key and relevant parts of the Transformational Agenda 'RAG' Report. During this meeting the Committee examined and asked Senior Officers questions on a number of issues, including, the Social Care Practice Pilot, Children's Centres and the effects of the financial efficiencies on Pre School Children. Following this meeting the Committee agreed that their initial focus and work plan until September 2011 should be to review caseloads of Social Worker in Children's Services.

#### **Draft Recommendations Subject to Committee Agreement**

The Task and Finish Group undertook a number of pieces of work during this review and as a result of their investigations the following recommendations have been made:

### **Caseload:**

- 1) That the Committee commend the commitment and dedication of Social Work staff to continue to deliver similar levels of professional service despite significantly diminished resources, and
- 2) That the Portfolio produce and share their strategy for dealing with numbers should capacity be reached and
- 3) That the Portfolio develops and produces a strategy which will enhance and further improve Early Intervention Services in order to keep more families out of Social Care and
- 4) That the Committee be advised how the Portfolio will meet the requirements set out in both the Laming Report and the Munro Review with diminished resources.

### **Social Worker Cuts:**

- 1) That frontline services continue to be a priority focus of the authority's diminished resources.
- 2) That the Portfolio consider further innovative yet safe ways of highlighting other staff to support and deliver a consistent, quality priority service.

### **Enablers:**

That the Information Technology Department engage early with Children's Services to provide enablers that will facilitate mobile working, Peripatetic Advanced Professionals and a paperless system which has been funded through the Social Work Improvement Fund.

## **2. Work Plan: Review of Caseloads of Social Workers in Children's Services**

By the end of the first two meetings of the Children's and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the first Task and Finish group of the Children's Portfolio it was agreed that due to Member's concerns around the numbers of caseloads that Social Workers were holding that the Task and Finish Group would further explore this area. The intention of this piece of work was to see how the cuts were impacting on Social Workers caseloads and to see how these high case loads were impacting on the quality of service being received by children and their families. This review also intended to do a benchmarking exercise in which Social Workers caseloads were compared against other nearest neighbour authorities.

### **Did we do what we said we would do?**

The Committee agreed that the scope of the review would include:

- Review of the cuts to Children's Services and the impact on the numbers that Social Workers are carrying. ✓
- An understanding of the number of high level cases each worker is carrying, that utilise a considerable amount of the workers' time ✓
- Explore current caseload levels and the systems that are in place to help with reduction and how effective they are ✓
- Explore the impact on the quality of service that is being provided to children and their parents ✓
- Investigate the impact of high caseload levels on Social Workers. ✓
- Compare caseload numbers against comparable neighbouring authorities ✗
- Benchmark caseloads against national recommendations. ✓

### **Scope of the Review**

The focus of this review was to look at the current caseload levels of Children's Social Workers in Blackburn with Darwen and benchmark them against other nearest neighbour comparator authorities and against recommended guidelines for caseload numbers. The Task and Finish Group agreed to this review due to concerns over the high number of cases coming through the front door of Children's Services and the number of caseloads that Social Workers were carrying. The review also looked at how caseloads could become more manageable so that children and their families are receiving a consistent and quality service. In order to see if a quality service was being delivered by staff, Members felt it necessary to also look at the current systems that are in place around case load management.

In order to undertake this review Committee Members have:

- Conducted research around acceptable case load levels.
- Reviewed reports and recommendations from Lord Laming.
- Reviewed Professor Eileen Munro's Report on child protection and the Government's response to this.
- Examined alternative ways of reducing caseload numbers
- Scrutinised current procedures for supporting Social Workers

- Received a presentation on the current situation with regards to Social Workers Caseloads from the Head of the Social Work Service.

Following the first Task and Finish Group the Committee raised a number of issues with the Head of the Social Work Service that they wished to explore further. These issues were discussed in a meeting with the Head of the Social Work Service and the Strategic Manager Statutory and Regulatory for Families, Health and Wellbeing. The issues the Committee wished to examine further were:

- How Social Worker caseload numbers compare against other similar Authorities.
- How the cuts are starting to impact on the caseload numbers that Social Workers are carrying.
- The numbers of high level cases each worker is carrying that take up a considerable amount of the workers' time.
- Where caseloads are at currently and what systems are in place to reduce them? How effective are these systems?
- How do case load numbers in Blackburn with Darwen compare with national recommendations?
- What the impact is on the quality of the service that is being provided and what the impact is on the social workers.

At a fact finding meeting with the Head of the Social Work Service and the Strategic Manager Statutory and Regulatory for Families, Health and Wellbeing the above issues were addressed.

### **Social work caseloads**

The Head of the Social Work Service explained that she felt that looking at Social Work caseload numbers would be difficult to do, because:

- Figures around caseloads can often be historic, inaccurate and misinterpreted.
- That caseloads are difficult to look at because of the nature of the work.
- That the department has a fixed resource that often experiences unpredictable rises in demand.
- External factors can impact on these figures
- Early intervention and prevention has an unintended consequence of highlighting problems which subsequently impacts on numbers.

However clarification was given around what is nationally recognised as an acceptable figure for Social Workers caseloads.

- Ofsted's numerical value for "standard" caseloads is no more than 22 but with a preference to them being less than 20.
- Newly qualified Social Workers should carry a reduced workload. In Blackburn with Darwen Newly qualified Social Workers carry an 80% caseload.

- It was suggested by the Head of Service that in order for the Department to meet Ofsted's ideal figures with cases at their current levels, then the department would need a further 5 members of staff.

### **Benchmarking Against Neighbouring Authorities**

The Head of the Social Work Service advised the Committee that it was not recommended for them to try and undertake a cross comparative benchmarking exercise with other nearest neighbour authorities as:

- Each authority is very different.
- Some Authorities have big case loads, but have plenty of administrative support which therefore makes caseloads more manageable.
- Some other Authorities may have smaller caseloads with less/no administrative support and this may make their caseloads unmanageable.
- The background and the demographics of authorities can also make things look different from authority to authority.

Due to the above factors and the recommendation of the Head of the Social Work Service the Task and Finish Group agreed not to undertake the piece of work around benchmarking caseloads against comparable neighbouring authorities.

### **Workload Management System and Social Worker Support**

The Workload management system was also explained -

- The system used, rates cases on complexity, therefore a worker can have more cases than a colleague but due to the complexity the one holding more cases may have a smaller case load.

The Head of the Social Work Service felt that her teams are well supported with their caseloads. She explained that support is given to staff through:

- Good management
- Case supervisions, which helps them to manage their caseloads
- A case tracking panel.

### **Possible Options for Reducing Caseloads**

During the meeting options for reducing caseloads were explored these included:

- Potential to raise thresholds –
  - Whilst this would reduce caseload numbers it is seen as a very risky / dangerous option.
  - Due to the cuts in services, there are now fewer teams and agencies who are able to work with families who fall below the threshold.

- Families who are in need of services may not receive any support due to falling below the threshold and this may have serious consequences.
  
- Early exit strategies –
  - This option involves working with families for shorter periods of time.
  - If safe to do so workers would look to try to finish working with families at about 9 months rather than two years. This strategy had worked well until last July.
  - There are issues as to where families can move on to once they are closed to Social Care.
  - Other agencies who would have previously worked with families who had been closed to Social Care are either now no longer around or are unwilling to work with these families due to capacity issues.

### **Munro & Social Work Reform Board Standards:**

The Munro Report and its possible impact on social care were discussed. It was explained that Munro is trying to provide a shift in thinking with regards to the direction in which Social Work is moving; i.e. Munro is wanting to take Social Care back to the 'old fashioned' care principles.

There was also a discussion on the Social Work Reform Boards Capabilities Framework and the Employee Standards, which are due to come into effect in September 2011. It is felt that these new standards may place a cap on the number of cases that Social Workers are able to carry out.

Amongst the many reasons for introducing a uniform standard for Social Workers and a Supervision Framework, is that it ensures that Social Workers have the tools to do their jobs, whilst at the same time being supported appropriately to ensure they are doing their jobs safely and effectively.

### **Future direction**

During the meeting the Head of Service Suggested that Members may want to alter the focus of their review and look at how the service is managing the issues and the pressures around Social Workers Caseloads, recognising that different exit strategies may be needed in order to reduce numbers.

### **Further information**

At the end of the meeting the Head of Service offered to do a presentation for the Task and Finish Group meeting on 10th August which would look at the

caseload figures and also give the background and the warnings behind them in order to avoid misinterpretation.

## **TIMELINE** **CHILDREN'S SERVICES TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

### **4<sup>th</sup> July 11**

Agenda setting meeting for Children's and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

- Membership of the three Task & Finish Groups decided

### **13<sup>th</sup> July 11**

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting.

- Members informed of which Task & Finish Group they are involved with.

### **19<sup>th</sup> July 11**

First Task & Finish Group

- Social Workers caseloads
- Children's Centres
- Pre School Children
- Social Care Practice Pilot

### **3<sup>rd</sup> August 11**

Meeting with Head of Social Work Service and the Strategic Manager – Statutory & Regulatory Families, Health and Wellbeing

### **8<sup>th</sup> August 11**

Meeting with Chair to devise questions to put to the Head of Social Work Service

### **10<sup>th</sup> August 11**

Second Task & Finish Group Meeting

- Presentation given by Head of Social Work Service and the Strategic Manager – Statutory & Regulatory Families, Health and Wellbeing

### **Presentation by Children's Social Care**

As part of the Task and Finish Group of August 10<sup>th</sup> Members received a presentation (See Appendix 1) from The Head of the Social Work Service and the Strategic Manager Statutory and Regulatory for Families, Health and Wellbeing. Questions were submitted to the Head of Service prior to the meeting (See Appendix 2). The purpose of the presentation was to give Members an overview and understanding about Caseloads in Blackburn with Darwen and how the Social Workers are supported.

## 1. Welcome

Meeting Commenced 6 pm

The Chair welcomed those present and gave an overview of the previous meeting where Members had had the opportunity to question Senior Officers from Children's Services on the Transformational Agenda 'RAG' Report. The Chair outlined the key issues that they had scrutinised Officers on and explained that this was the key issue that was going to be further scrutinised.

The Chair then welcomed the Head of Social Work Service and the Strategic Manager – Statutory & Regulatory Families, Health and Wellbeing and asked them to give their presentation.

## 2. Case and Workload Management Presentation

The Head of Social Work Service opened her presentation by informing the group that she was happy that they had chosen to look at the issue of caseloads further, as this is something that was recognised as an issue within her Service.

Some historical background was provided to Members about Caseloads, it was explained that the Social Worker on the Baby P case was holding 18 on her caseload and this was deemed to be excessive. She went on to further explain that when Local Authorities are deemed to be failing following an Ofsted inspection one of the key criticisms is that caseloads are too high.

She then went on to explain that in May 2010 she conducted a Time and Motion Study with a number of her staff. These staff were expected to record their activity every 10 minutes for a ten day period. Within this, as well as everyday expected working activity, things such as travel time and trying to find car parking spaces were included in their recordings. From the information that was collated Social Workers were working around 43 hours per week.

Members were also provided with information as to the current situation with caseloads:

- Since May 2010 caseload numbers in all teams have increased,
- The average caseload in First Response Early Intervention Support Team (FREIST) and Safeguarding & Child Protection has increased by 8%.
- Caseloads for Leaving Care Personal Advisors (P.As) have risen by 20%. This would have been greater had a duty system for 19 year olds not been created.
- Since May 2010 administrative support for Social Workers has been reduced and this has impacted on Social Workers.



The Head of Social Work Service informed members of two surveys that have taken place around caseloads, the first one was a National Survey conducted in 2009 by the Social Work Reform Board and the second survey was undertaken by Community Care in September 2010. Whilst she explained the difficulties of comparing caseloads across authorities, Members were informed that the situation in Blackburn with Darwen is similar to that in other authorities across the country.

Blackburn with Darwen's Caseload Management System was then explained to Members. This is a system the Head of Service believes to work and she stated that Social Workers believe this model works. She explained that cases have different weighting, a case that involves court proceedings carries greater weighting and if there is a case where a worker has to go to another part of the country then this will also have a higher weighting. It was also explained that newly qualified workers get five points to start with and can therefore only then receive a further twenty points before they reach capacity. Each team is also supported by a child support officer.

The Head of Service informed members that currently they have the highest number of Child Protection Plans that she has known and also the highest number of court proceedings.

The Head of Service also spoke about an annual health check that needs to be undertaken and published each year, two have been done so far and both of these have been very positive.

The Head of Service then spoke about measures that are currently in place in order to ensure that some pressures are taken off Social Workers so that their caseloads are safe. She explained that there is now a contact team who support Social Workers doing contact and the team is doing a total of 250 hours per week. She also spoke about the re-model of the Service; however she anticipated that it would be 9-12 months before the benefits of the re-model would be seen.

### **Mobile/Peripatetic Working**

The Head of Service for Social Work also informed Members that she has just had approval for three mobile working/peripatetic workers to be employed. This will be of massive help for the workers as they will have the appropriate equipment to work away from the office.

### **Staff Recruitment**

A discussion was then had around the recruitment of staff and whether experienced staff are being replaced with inexperienced staff. The Head of Service explained that when they have advertised posts they are getting more newly qualified Social Workers applying

for positions than experienced staff, this in itself has implications for the Service, as Newly Qualified Workers carry smaller caseloads and need more support in terms of supervision than experienced workers.

### **Paperless System**

A discussion was also had around paperwork and systems, it was explained that they were looking at moving towards a paperless system in the next 12 months and this should free up some admin time. There was also a discussion around the current system, Social Workers do their own write ups and these need to be done in a specific order, if phases are incomplete then workers are unable to move on. There has also recently been an increase in paperwork due to a change in Central Government policy, this has meant extra paperwork has been added to the process; however this can not be added to the electronic system and as a result is being completed separately.

### **Members Questions & Answers**

**Q.** What is your internal target for Social Worker caseloads and how does this compare to the recommendations of Ofsted and Lord Laming?

**A.** No internal targets were given. It was explained that it was not possible to reach Lord Laming's ideal target as there is just not the resource to get caseloads to such a low level. Members were referred to the slide 'ensuring safe caseloads, Social Work Capacity and Optimal Outcomes' of the presentation, where the measures to support Social Workers and strategies for reducing caseloads were discussed. The Head of Service for Social Work explained that they are working to close cases quicker and Invest to Save was helping this to be done quicker. She also informed Members that they have cases where they have been working with some children and families for as long as five years.

**Q.** What are the warning signs when things are starting to go wrong?

**A.** It was explained that both the monthly monitoring and quality assurance of cases would help to flag up warning signs.

It was also mentioned that there are definite strains on the service currently and timescales are now starting to drift.

**Q.** What would happen when numbers reach the 400 mark? (Current number is 383).

**A.** The Head of Service informed Members that if it does get to this level then they may need to approach Council to look at raising thresholds, The Head of Service explained that this is something they don't want to do as she feels levels are right and inspectors

feel they are right, she also felt that this would be unpopular with staff. Other options to look at are:

- Waiting lists
- Unallocated cases

The Members were also informed that a Strategic Group had been set up to look at Early Help and that she hoped to have a first class strategy in place within 12 weeks.

Meeting concluded 7:45pm

### **Helping to Reduce Caseloads**

A key theme that came out of the meetings with the Head of Social Work Service and from the research that Members had undertaken was around the importance of administrative assistance for Social Workers. It was stated that in authorities where Social workers have administrative support they often have more manageable caseloads than in authorities where little or no administrative support is given

An area that has been affected by the efficiency saving measures in Blackburn with Darwen is administrative support for Social Workers. Since May 2010 this particular area has been reduced. Starting in August 2011, the Borough in conjunction with Gateshead College has provided a course which will look at the administrative functions of Social Workers. When Members looked at the literature for the course, stated benefits included:

- Improved performance
- A motivated workforce
- More efficient working practices
- Reduced costs and waste

When Members started to explore this course further to establish the impact it would have on Social Workers they were informed by those administering the course that they were unsure as to the depth and detail the course would go into and were unsure as to the direction the course would take, as this would only be decided once the cohort had met for the first time. Whilst this course may have long term benefits for Social Workers, in terms of making administrative practices within Children's Social Care more efficient, Social Workers would have benefitted if such a course were set up at a time when efficiencies had first started to be made in this area.

**Councillor Ron O'Keeffe**  
**Chair Children's Services Task and Finish Group**

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## APPENDIX 2

### Questions from Members Children's Task & Finish Group Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> August 2011

- 1) What is being done to get caseloads down towards Ofsted's preferred numbers of 22 but ideally 20?
- 2) Newly qualified Social Workers are supposed to carry reduced caseloads with this being 80%. Are newly qualified Social workers having a reduced case load and what percentage are they carrying? What extra measures do you have in place to support Newly Qualified Social Workers with their caseloads?
- 3) What current support systems are in place for Social Workers around caseloads and can you explain how they help to take the pressure off social workers with regards to their caseloads?
- 4) What are the department's plans and strategies for reducing caseload levels in the near future?
- 5) Are Social Workers spending appropriate amounts of time on each case and therefore providing a quality service to the children and families they are working with? Are there any barriers that are preventing them from delivering a quality service?
- 6) What is your internal target for Social Worker caseloads and how does this compare to the recommendations of Ofsted and Lord Laming's recommendations?
- 7) How are current caseload levels impacting on Safeguarding?
- 8) How are you working towards moving towards Professor Munro's child centred approach?