

**Responding to the Recommendations of the SSI Inspection of
Child Protection Services in Hertfordshire
Progress Report January – June 2004**

1. Introduction

- 1.1 It is now six months since the SSI inspection of Child Protection Services and five months since a project managed response to the SSI report's recommendations was put in place. This report summarises action and progress in response to the SSI recommendations over the period January – June 2004. It provides information about key developmental issues and outlines the key priorities for Phase 2 of the Action Plan.
- 1.2 The report shows that the first phase of the Action Plan has laid the groundwork for system-wide change. A full revision of the casework framework has been completed. The self – evaluation and audit of all child protection cases have confirmed that variability in the quality of casework practice is the key issue for the service. This will be the main focus of Phase 2 of the Action Plan through a learning and development programme for all staff, with work-based coaching to support an intervention in practice.
- 1.3 There has been a very positive commitment from staff at all levels, and from partner agencies, to improve the quality of the service. CSF staff have worked extremely hard to support the developments in the Action Plan at a time when the high level of vacancies has meant that they have carried a heavy workload to maintain the core service. (See Appendix 2) It has been a difficult balance to spearhead development at the same time as maintaining service provision which, because of the backlog in assessment and unallocated cases, continues to be at the margins of capacity.

2. Actions and Progress in Response to SSI Recommendations

Self Evaluation Audit

- 2.1 In the light of the findings in the SSI report that some 5 children of the 28 cases examined were inadequately protected, it was decided to undertake a self-evaluation audit of all 539 children on the register in January 2004. The approach taken for this audit was to use the existing CSF quality standards for social work casework.

QUALITY STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL WORK CASEWORK

1. Providing users with accurate and up to date information
2. Effective, sensitive responses giving priority to those in urgent need
3. Safeguarding children on an assessment of need
4. Active participation of users
5. Confidentiality and respect
6. Accurate recording
7. Working in partnership with other organisations and agencies
8. Protection of children at risk of significant harm
9. Protection of children where Section 47 agreed
10. Use of legal system
11. Competent, knowledgeable staff (especially around supervision)
12. Monitoring and auditing of work

Social workers were asked to indicate on the self-evaluation form whether or not each case for which they were responsible met the standards. Furthermore, they were asked to indicate whether or not they believed that the child was adequately safeguarded.

- 2.3 The self-evaluation exercise was analysed fully by the Assistant Director, Local Services and Quadrant Managers. It confirmed that there is variable performance in child protection services, with consistently evident good or excellent performance in only three of the twelve quality standards. There are, of course, many examples of cases that exhibit excellent performance across all the quality standards, but the percentage of those cases is not at a high enough level. Problems in practice are not confined to either a few teams or one or two quadrants. The analysis is helpful in identifying the key areas for improvement in practice, to be included in the learning and development programme in the next phase of the Action Plan (see paragraph 4.1 below) In addition to this programme, a cultural shift and improvement in management oversight is needed.
- 2.4 The self-evaluation exercise also revealed some 41 children where improvements to safeguarding arrangements were required. Quadrant Managers were instructed to review these cases, to take corrective action and to assure the Director of CSF that these children were now adequately safeguarded. These assurances were received prior to 1st April 2004.
- 2.5 As a follow on from the self evaluation audit, team managers were asked to discuss the results of the audit with social workers in supervision using a practice note to indicate what action should be taken if a quality standard was not being met.
- 2.6 The self evaluation audit has been independently validated by examining a random sample of the self audited cases. This has shown a number of anomalies between the original findings and those of the external verifier, and further questions about social work practice. These have all been notified to Quadrant managers who have been asked to identify any further action being taken.
- 2.7 The activities described above have been designed to intervene in practice. The self evaluation audit was required to be undertaken to reinforce the fact that all child protection social work is underpinned by a substantive set of quality standards, and to enable social workers and their managers to reflect on whether in practice those

standards are being met. In effect the meeting of standards is the “day job” and reinforces the notion that quality is everybody’s business. Clearly practice across Hertfordshire is inconsistent. Improving performance will be a critical element of the learning and development inputs which commenced in June 2004.

Review of Emotional Abuse Cases

- 2.8 The SSI Report suggested that Hertfordshire had too high a percentage of children on the register categorised as being emotionally abused. All of these cases have been reviewed. As a result there are now 109 children registered under this category representing 22.2% of the register. This compares with 151 and 24.7% at the time of the inspection
- 2.9 At the same time there has been a 24.75% reduction in the numbers of children on the register. While there is no prescribed “correct” number of children within a population who should be on the child protection register, it would be expected that the number would be generally similar to Hertfordshire’s statistical neighbours. Hertfordshire’s child protection register would expect therefore to fluctuate between 500 and 550 children.
- 2.10 The current number of the register (459) is probably lower than would be expected. This may be partly explained by a backlog of referrals in R & A Teams and a slowing down of the numbers of initial child protection conferences held. This in turn, is reflective of the high number of vacancies in Quadrant teams (highlighted in Appendix 2, paragraph 1.8).

Supervision

- 2.11 The SSI report suggested that some staff had said that they were not receiving regular supervision. This was despite a robust supervision policy for social work staff in CSF. In order to establish whether this was a widespread issue a sample of all supervision records were checked for content, frequency and quality. The Assistant Director (Local Services) checked the Quadrant Managers, Quadrant Managers checked the Group Managers and Group Managers checked Team Managers.
- 2.12 The sampling and checking showed that in the majority of circumstances supervision was happening at the prescribed intervals to an appropriate supervision quality standard. In those instances where supervision was lacking support has been provided to improve it. The findings outlined in paragraph 2.3 however would suggest that while supervision is occurring, it is sometimes not sufficiently intervening in practice to ensure that the quality standards associated with child protection are being consistently met.

Workload Management

- 2.13 Some social workers had reported to SSI that they thought that their caseloads were excessive. A workload measurement exercise has been carried out to establish patterns of caseloads between teams and quadrants. A new measurement tool is currently being piloted in North Quadrant which, if successful, will be implemented for all long term case work. This will help to ensure that social workers have manageable caseloads and ensure consistency across Hertfordshire.

3. Developmental Issues

Recruitment and Retention Package

- 3.1 At its meeting on 10th May 2004 Cabinet approved a recruitment and retention package for CSF staff which included:
- Career progression to senior practitioner grade
 - Workforce remodelling of administrative support
 - Market supplements for staff with statutory responsibility for child protection work
 - Improved training and development opportunities.

Generally the initiative has been welcomed, however some qualified social workers who work in posts that do not carry statutory responsibility for child protection have expressed concern that their work is not being valued. An extensive communications programme has been undertaken to explain the reasons for this package of measures and to emphasise the positive opportunities for all staff.

Child Protection Delivery and Management Framework

- 3.2 A pre-requisite for improving the effectiveness of casework practice is the revision of the child protection delivery and management framework. The current process and methods of working are not compliant with the Department of Health Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families (2000). A new set of documentation and guidance has been agreed for dealing with initial referrals, undertaking initial and core assessments, care planning, managing core groups, writing social work reports for conferences, and recording conferences. This documentation is designed to underpin best practice. It provides a step by step guide for social workers and their managers for delivering and managing child protection services. There will be some IT implications for CSF and Oracle/IRIS arising from these changes. The extent of these is currently being established.

Area Child Protection Committee (ACPC)

- 3.3 The SSI report included a number of recommendations for the ACPC. In the light of these, ACP held a special meeting on 3rd March 2004 to draw up an action plan. This is currently being worked on by the members of ACPC. In order to boost capacity, an experienced consultant has been recruited to assist the Head of Child Protection in this work. Arrangements are in hand to increase the number of staff available to work on ACPC issues.

4 Intervention in Practice : Improving Performance

Learning & Development Strategy

- 4.1 Developing and maintaining best practice has to be underpinned by a robust learning and development strategy which directly relates to social workers and managers in the work setting. An approach has been agreed which is both team and quadrant based which will address all the learning needs identified as a result

of the actions and activities which have been detailed in this report. The aim is to intervene to improve day-to-day practice through training inputs and, equally importantly, through coaching and mentoring support. The programme has begun with quadrant social work management staff in June 2004 and is to be followed by a series of sessions with practitioners. The programme will initially last for 12 months, after which it will be reviewed. Some improvements in practice are expected to happen quickly as agreement has been reached to tackle priority poor performance issues first.

Phase 2 Implementation Team

- 4.2 The next phase of the Action Plan has its focus on implementation. The PAT and Triangle Groups have now completed their respective tasks and their work has concluded. An implementation team has been formed which consists of:-

Deputy Director (Social Care & Prevention)
Head (Child Care Practice)
Head (Child Protection)
Learning & Development Manager
Quadrant Managers
Group Managers
Team Managers

This team will lead from the middle and be champions for promoting best practice and the changes which will be required. This team will develop and deliver an action plan which will be overseen by the Director. Regular progress reports will be made to the CSF Board, Cabinet and Scrutiny Committee.

Consultant Practitioners

- 4.3 In the light of the findings of the self evaluation audit, and in acknowledgement of the capacity of managers to not only manage the substantial day to day work, but also to improve practice, it has been decided to appoint one consultant practitioner per quadrant who will not only boost the management team, but will provide help, guidance and support to team leaders and social workers, intervening in practice in real time. To date only one consultant practitioner has been appointed. It is hoped that the other three will be in post in the next 2-3 weeks. These are time limited posts for six months.

Short Term Intervention Team

- 4.4 Appendix 2 documents the continuing pressures arising from high volumes of referrals and the significant number of vacant posts. As a result, there is currently a backlog of referrals awaiting assessment and action. These amount to approximately 1,000 across Hertfordshire. This backlog has a direct relationship with the high number of staff vacancies (outlined in paragraph 1.8).
- 4.5 In order to alleviate these pressures it is proposed that for an initial period of 3 months, a 7-person team be established under a temporary manager to assess from an examination of the outstanding referrals what actions are required and to ensure

that relevant action is taken. As a result of this team being in place, staff in the quadrants can concentrate on current workloads and improving the quality of their interventions. Expressions of interest from social workers, who currently do not hold child protection case loads, will be sought for during the next 2 weeks. It is expected that staff will be seconded to quadrant work for the three month period.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 The first phase of the Action Plan has laid the groundwork for system-wide change. A full revision of the casework framework has been completed. The self – evaluation and audit of all child protection cases have confirmed that variability in the quality of casework practice is the key issue for the service. This will be the main focus of Phase 2 of the Action Plan through a learning and development programme for all staff, with work-based coaching to support an intervention in practice.
- 5.2 There has been a very positive commitment from staff at all levels, and from partner agencies, to improve the quality of the service. CSF staff have worked extremely hard to support the developments in the Action Plan at a time when the high level of vacancies has meant that they have carried a heavy workload to maintain the core service. It has been a difficult balance to spearhead development at the same time as maintaining service provision which, because of the backlog in assessment and unallocated cases, continues to be at the margins of capacity.
- 5.3 Overall, a robust and systematic response to the inspection has been made. It is expected that the effectiveness of our response will be reflected in the annual performance assessment of Social Services made by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) in July.