

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION CABINET BOARD
REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES, HEALTH AND HOUSING – N. JARMAN

24 SEPTEMBER 2015

SECTION B – FOR INFORMATION

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

Serious Concerns Protocol Focused Review

Purpose of Report

To inform Members of the review of the journey and learning by Children and Young People Services during the Serious Concerns Protocol period.

Background

Upon completion of the CSSIW Inspection Report in February 2015 the Chief Inspector (CSSIW) took the decision to remove Neath Port Talbot's Children and Young People Services off the Serious Concerns Protocol. Contained within Appendix 1 is the story of the Service's two year journey out of the CSSIW Serious Concerns Protocol. It sets out the specific lessons that have been learned and the more general learning.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Serious Concerns Protocol Focused Review June 2015

List of Background Papers

None

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Safer, Brighter Futures

better outcomes for children and young people

Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council

Children and Young People Services

Serious Concerns Protocol Focused Review

(June 2015)

Index

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Relationships**
- 3. Managing Change**
- 4. Staffing**
- 5. Early Intervention and Prevention**
- 6. Performance and Accountability**
- 7. Quality Assurance Framework**
- 8. External Stimuli**
- 9. Conclusions**

1. INTRODUCTION

This is the story of our two year journey out of the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) Serious Concerns Protocol. Here we set out the specific lessons we have learned and the more general learning.

Context

When a service 'gets into trouble' it does not happen overnight. For some time, the warning signs are there.

The reality of the situation and its seriousness are hard for those close to it to accept. Often, it is easier for those external to the situation to see it.

It was following a CSSIW Inspection in late 2012, that it became unmistakably clear that our Children's Social Services were seriously underperforming.

Painful as it may have been at the time, the Inspectors' judgements, like the referee's decision, are final.

The Inspectorate plays an invaluable role in confirming this, bringing things to a head and above all, acting as an effective advocate for children, young people and families.

One important piece of learning is not to treat the Inspectorate as adversaries. Harsh though their judgements may have seemed, they also fairly highlighted the areas where we had made progress, even when there was still much left to do.

Similarly, by working with rather than against the CSSIW, their support to us was invaluable in helping us at every stage to focus clearly on what we needed to do next and affirming our own analysis of where we had got to and where we needed to go next. We are all immensely grateful for that.

General Learning

Acceptance of the situation, however painful is a pre-condition of recovery. Denial or partial denial will only delay progress.

Key to this are these things:-

- That Elected Members accept the reality of the situation and support improvement
- That Members are committed to rapid improvement and recovery and understand the scale of what is wrong and what needs to be done

Our Members were totally committed, gave every assistance and resource and made recovery of Children's Social Services the Council's number one priority.

- The whole of the Corporate machine must be equally committed and must pull together to support recovery and improvement. It goes without saying that such a commitment comes from leadership shown by Members, as happened in NPT.
- A completely new Senior Management Team was brought in. We were able to see what needed to be done and we were not held back by association with the past. The latter point does not apply to the vast majority of staff who are still here. You have to assume that most of the staff who are there at the beginning of the journey will see it through with you.
- The support and co-operation of Trades Union Colleagues is vital. Without it, firm action to steer recovery will be delayed by endless disagreements. NPT Council has a Social Partnership with Trades Unions Colleagues. This partnership approach directly contributed to getting out of the Serious Concerns Protocol as soon as we did.
- You have to create the right conditions for recovery. This relies upon strong, resilient leadership from Members, Corporate Directors and Service Management. Potential obstacles to recovery need to be overcome collegially and quickly, like ICT systems, prompt production of clear financial and performance data, management of the HR issues and much more.
- It is important not to become precious and hung up about 'Managerial' versus 'Professional' issues. For instance:-
 - Many of the actions needed to repair our staffing, improve ICT, produce accurate data are managerial.
 - The same can be said of the need to drive pace, resolve conflicts or creating the right conditions for recovery
 - Social work and practice are of course professional issues, which require the knowledge, experience and expertise of professionals who 'Know What Good Looks Like'

- Conflict about managerial and professional domains will merely lead to delay and frustration. We were all of us clear about this from the outset.
- Paradoxically, it is as important to know and understand from experience the factors and behaviours which will delay/obstruct recovery; as it is to understand what are the key drivers for improvement.
- Clarity and Manageability are essential. That is to say:-
 - You need to select a handful of the most crucial improvement priorities at the outset, which you know you can deliver
 - Trying to take on everything at the outset will overwhelm you, exhaust and demoralise people and will probably mean that you achieve few if any of your goals; and certainly not at any pace.
 - Your Improvement Plan must be as clear, simple and easy-to-understand as it possibly can be – so that everyone understands what is expected of them. Large ‘Strategic’ documents are not the answer (Let’s face it, no-one logs on in the morning and says to themselves “how is the Strategic Plan going to inform my day?”)
- The clearer and simpler your plan is, the easier it will be to unite everyone including partners around what needs to be done and to get everyone pulling in the same direction. In our own case, we had initially to unite everyone around ‘Back to Basics’
- You must set out clear milestones and targets and clearly communicate when they have been met. When this happens and everyone can see it, as if by magic confidence and self-belief return – “yes we can do it”
- Similarly Members and Service Leadership must as we were; be uncompromising about pace “we are going to do this and we are going to do it quickly.” One of the characteristics of service failure is widespread high tolerance of slow or non-delivery. The moral imperative for pace needs to be accepted (Vulnerable children and families depend upon these services)
- Once clarity and pace become apparent Partner Agencies become more confident and feel safe again in engaging and working with the service
- The improvement journey has to be incremental. This means that once you have secured your original improvement goals in Priority Sequence Order, you can add new improvement objectives; thus expanding the scope of improvement and recovery. Here is a good example:

At the outset the service was fragile on Child Protection. It was also weak on including the 'Voice' of Children and Young People in assessment and planning. Would it have made sense, however desirable, from day one to have made protecting children an equal priority with 'Voice?'

Quote from staff member (detailed within the CYPS Staff Survey 2014):

"I believe the service is operating on a far more stable footing than previous years. Reinstating clear processes has provided a structure whereby staff can operate in a more controlled environment and children and families' welfare is better protected".

2. RELATIONSHIPS

Many of the priorities for Children's Services are cross-cutting in that they affect and are affected by the work of more than one of our partners. Clearly, effective partnerships can help to improve service delivery and contribute towards achieving our priorities by identifying shared goals.

At the start of the Serious Concerns Protocol (SCP) it was clear that Children and Young People Services (CYPS) had disengaged from planning and developing services with its multi-agency partners. We knew that if left unchecked, this would become a barrier to making the necessary improvements. This view was reflected in recommendations from the CSSIW.

The service embarked upon a path that would put partner agencies at the very centre of the improvement journey.

- From a council perspective, the Authority has and continues to provide CYPS with its unequivocal support and fully embraces the need to place CYPS as a corporate priority. Support has taken many forms, including the provision of targeted and sustained financial resources, as well as the formation of an Improvement Programme Board and a Member Panel.
 - The Improvement Programme Board is chaired by the Chief Executive and attended by key individuals from both within the Council as well as partner agencies. The key purpose is to:

- provide senior officer direction, challenge and support
- monitor and identify the financial impact and implications of the improvement work within the context of the Council's Forward Financial Plan
- ensure key improvement priorities are communicated effectively both internally and externally

The Board met regularly throughout our time on the SCP and the commitment of Board members to support and facilitate improvement was key to maintaining the momentum of recovery and progress. In acknowledgement that there is still much work to do, it is the intention that the Improvement Programme Board continues to meet periodically going forward.

- The Member Panel was set up at the instigation of the Leader of the Council, to provide him with reassurance about the morale and experiences of the workforce. Whereas the Improvement Programme Board operates at a strategic level, the Member Panel is far more focussed on dealing with issues directly at the coal face. The Panel comprises of cross party members, who regularly meet with social work teams. Without senior managers being present the Panel have been able to discuss frankly the experiences of social workers, support workers and business support within the teams and provides a very real connection between the issues being experienced on the frontline and the ability of the "corporate centre" to provide meaningful support.
- There has been a concerted effort to increase elected members' knowledge of CYPS. This is particularly evident in Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Committee, where members have fully embraced the learning process and individuals are now confident to participate in constructive challenge and the provision of appropriate support.
- The Corporate Parenting Panel continues to be chaired by the Leader of the Council and has strong representation from the Cabinet and wider Council. The Panel is extremely proactive in undertaking their responsibilities and, for example, played a significant role in ensuring care leavers are provided with suitable accommodation.
- Direct links with children and young people are being developed to better make the connection between strategic direction and

“what matters” to the individuals we support. This programme of greater interaction has already started, with the Corporate Parenting Panel being instrumental in organising a very successful consultation and fun day for all looked after children and their carers.

Quote from the Leader of the Council:

“I’m delighted that the Council has now been removed from the Serious Concerns Protocol and want to go on record to express my gratitude to all staff who worked so hard. We are determined to continue the good work that has been achieved”.

Quote from Cllr Lella James, Chair of the Members Panel:

“Providing assistance and support to the social work staff of Neath Port Talbot, has been a real insight and a pleasure.”

Quote from Cllr Peter Richards, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People:

"It is always important for elected members to work with and support staff to deliver the best possible services, but never more so than when driving forward improvements on this scale.

Members now have a better understanding of the service and are kept well informed, which enables us to be more confident in our decision making. Above all we are now clearer on what needs to be in place for us to provide reliable, effective and safe services for children, young people and their families. We are absolutely determined to ensure that we continue to provide these.

With increased pressure on public budgets it is essential that we make the most efficient and effective use of our available resources. The focus on Early Intervention and Prevention is key to this. Getting involved with families at the earliest opportunity enables us to provide the right support to help them achieve better outcomes and prevent the need for intervention from Social Services."

Links with Health have been reinforced, with six weekly management meetings and health attendance at the Complex Needs and LAC Improvement panels.

Quotes from Head of Nursing and Operational Services:

"Children and young people services have demonstrated strong leadership within the partnership, to address poor performance and delivery and to challenge traditional models of service delivery. There's been a Focus on the preventative agenda; enabling teams at grass roots level to feel supported in implementing this new approach.

Lastly, the can do approach and partnership values demonstrated by Nick Jarman, have been essential; there now exists an honesty under Nick's leadership, where you feel able to challenge and any views expressed are always considered and health contributions to new service models encouraged".

- There has been a concerted effort to target support services within Children's Services, in recognition that it will assist in developing children's plans, thereby ensuring that risk is minimised by giving children and young people the right support in a timely way. The formulation of a Family Support Strategy (FSS) is a key step forward to achieving this aim.

The FSS has been developed following consultation with staff, partners and focused Task and Finish Group reporting to our Practice Improvement Group. It highlights Children's Services joint working with the Think Family Partnership to ensure a joined up approach through the Tiers of need from early intervention through to Tier 4 specialist support.

- Following consultation there has been a remodelling of some of our support services to assist with delivering targeted support to the families most in need, these include:
 - Action for Children
 - Dewis housing support
- The Youth Offending Team has actively participated with Children's Services utilising their Prevention Team and this support will become formalised within social work practice.

Quotes from Caroline Dyer, Regional Manager, Western Bay Youth Justice and Early Intervention Service:

"The plan to amalgamate the three youth offending services from Bridgend, Neath Port Talbot and Swansea Local Authorities has taken some time to come to fruition. However, the Western Bay Youth Justice and Early Intervention Service Management Board was formed in May 2014 and Neath Port Talbot has had strong representation and good relationships with partners on this Board, where working together to achieve positive outcomes for children and young people is at the heart of delivery".

- CALAN DVS Project is now in place, offering a range of immediate and long term support options for individuals and families experiencing domestic violence and abuse.

Quotes from Rhian-Bowen Davies, Chief Executive, Calan Domestic Violence Service:

“There’s now recognition of what specialist services can achieve when they work with and alongside children and young people services to provide statutory services”.

From a business perspective, children and young people services have had to make difficult funding decisions, but we understand there is a need for change to ensure resources are targeted where their most needed’

There are visibly more opportunities to bring a wider range of partners together”.

Building upon what has been achieved to date; we plan on a further re-commissioning of targeted procured services throughout this summer, in order to ensure the right support is in place to meet the need.

3. **MANAGING CHANGE**

Any level of change will impact on both staff and processes. When faced with the task of transforming the service in such a short space of time, it was essential to manage the change process carefully.

‘The service lacks direction and staff need clear guidance and support to promote consistent levels of good practice’; this was one of the key conclusions emanating from the CSSIW’s Nov 2012 Inspection.

Unsurprisingly, implementing the necessary changes to practice and culture was a fundamental necessity, if real meaningful improvements were to be made.

- It was recognised from the outset that staff needed a collective purpose to “get behind” - one that was clear, straight-forward and concise. It was agreed that we adopt the ethos of “**back to basics**”; three words that encapsulated what needed to be done.
- Although the message appeared simplistic, implementing “back to basics” was anything but. Following an objective review of

existing arrangements; some key changes were instigated, most notably reinforcement that practice is consistent with:

- The All Wales Child Protection Procedures
 - The Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families
-
- To facilitate the required changes, huge strides were being made at this point in time to solidify our workforce (these efforts are recorded in more detail, later in this Review). However, it was imperative that system and process changes were made post haste, to expedite compliant practice. To this end, significant changes were made to the templates being used by workers, with the I.T. system effectively having to be “re-written”. The pace of change at this stage was frenetic and it was commonplace for workers to switch on their terminals in the morning and be faced with screens that looked totally different from the previous day.
 - At this stage of recovery, there was a need to strike a balance between complying with the fundamentals of social work (via the transformations to processes and systems), whilst ensuring that we continue to take staff “with us”. On reflection, there were occasions when the speed with which change was occurring was too quick, causing some staff to feel that changes were being made to them and not with them. To address some of these concerns, a temporary I.T. Trainer was appointed, who worked on a one to one basis with frontline staff.
 - After the initial developments, the process of change became more ordered. The Practice Improvement Group was established and continues to be the primary conduit by which developments to practice and systems are considered, tested and implemented. The group is chaired by the Head of CYPS, but its core membership is made-up of representatives of frontline workers. Developments “to” the service are now “owned” by the service.
 - The Senior Management Team have operated an open-door policy throughout the period of the SCP and have gone to great lengths to eradicate any perceived suggestions of bullying and harassment. In addition, suggestions of a blame-culture have been quashed over time, with staff being encouraged to take responsibility for their actions, safe in the knowledge that they won’t be subject to inappropriate retributions.

Extract from the CSSIW Inspection Report – February 2015:

'The senior management team enjoyed a high level of respect and credibility from the workforce, who in turn believed they were listened to and valued for the enormous amount of effort being made to improve timeliness and quality of services.'

4.

STAFFING

Children's Social Care is a service to people from people. It stands to reason then, that people and staffing are the most important element of what we do.

24 months ago our staffing pattern was in a very poor state:-

- Over 40% of staff had left and more were leaving weekly
- There was a succession of agency workers covering vacancies
- Staff morale was at its nadir.
- Casual sickness absence, often owing to stress was rife
- There was a series of outstanding Disciplinary, Capabilities and Grievances
- It was proving nigh on impossible to recruit.

It follows from this that you will get two major problems:-

- a) There will be serious discontinuity in the work of social workers with children and families, making it very difficult to complete safe, good quality work with them
- b) There will be massive disruption of multi agency working, where for example you never see the same manager or worker from one contact to another.

Dealing with this malaise was our number one priority. There are nine lessons that we learnt:-

- 1) We appointed two dedicated HR Officers to deal specifically, full time with the HR problems facing us. This has worked so well, we have continued to fund this.
- 2) We immediately reviewed caseloads and were adamant that caseloads for frontline teams remain no higher than 1 to 15 (unmanageable caseloads are the biggest deterrent to staff remaining with you or being able to recruit new staff. If you have high, unmanageable caseloads you may as well place an

advertisement hoarding by the M4 at Port Talbot saying “Don’t come and work here”). Getting caseloads manageable was one of the major factors in improving the Council’s reputation and marketability to potential recruits. Obviously we also monitored caseload mix (e.g. out of 15 cases, no-one had 12 difficult CP cases.)

3) Sickness

Much of the sickness originated from a climate of insecurity, excessive workloads and demoralisation. Firstly it was essential to convince our workforce that there was a clear plan which was deliverable over a short period of time to turn the service round. We were absolutely consistent in getting this message across to staff and gaining their buy-in and this made a material difference to attendance levels.

The second thing which improved attendance was that we were unashamedly aggressive in visiting people who were off sick at home and getting them back into work.

Nowadays it is understood within the service that if people are having a bad time, we talk about it we don’t go off sick.

- 4) Communication is everything. All Senior Managers from the Director down were constantly accessible to staff, were visible and “walked the floor.” It is hard to underestimate how significant this was in restoring staff confidence, allaying fears and boosting a good sense of team spirit.
- 5) We dealt promptly with performance issues. For over 18 months we have had no outstanding Disciplinary, Capabilities or Grievances and we are down to two people only who are off on sickness with long term conditions.

Quote from staff member (detailed within the CYPS Staff Survey 2014):
“Having worked for the Social Services Department in another Authority for approximately 32 years, I feel that Neath Port Talbot Council offer more support to their employees and are more willing to listen to staff concerns and provide advice and flexibility.”

We believe by reference to benchmarking data that we currently have the best HR Profile in Children's Social Care in the United Kingdom.

- 6) Training and Development are also vital. In addition to Standard Training e.g. on the basics of Child Protection which was mandatory, we insisted that each individual member of staff had an Individualised Learning Plan of high quality CPD. This ILP was designed specifically around each individual's developmental needs, at the place they were in at that time and to enable them to develop at their own speed, but to ensure that all staff raised their performance to a standardised high level.
- 7) We had an on-going monthly Recruitment Programme. We made this much simpler by 'shortening the line' over recruitment process, thus dramatically shortening the time between the Job Offer being made and the candidate starting work.
- 8) We retained a number of Senior Agency Staff to provide capacity, expertise and role modelling. This was a worthwhile investment.
- 9) Above all, we focussed down relentlessly on staffing as our number one objective and refused to be distracted from it.

Quote from a looked after child:

"I like it that I've had the same social worker for a long time".

Quote from a mother being supported through the adoption process:

"You have been amazing to me and my son; we couldn't have a better social worker"

5. **EARLY INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION**

For families that are showing signs of distress getting appropriate support at the earliest opportunity is critical. It can prevent them reaching a point where it is necessary for children's social services to intervene, less still for them to break down to the stage where their children are taken into care. This is why we made our Early Intervention and Prevention (EiP) agenda a priority.

We looked at other local authorities where the EiP approach has really made an impact to see what we could learn from them. Consequently we decided to adopt a Think Family Partnership approach. This meant turning our EiP arrangements upside down two years ago. At that time the challenge was to achieve in 12 months what other local authority areas had taken four to five years to accomplish.

A number of factors were key to the success of this:

- 1) We reformed our previous Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership onto more modern, effective lines to create The Think Family Partnership. The key emphasis being on prevention.
- 2) We established a dedicated Team Around the Family, with 15 staff.
- 3) To promote 'buy in' to our Think Family Partnership and TAF approach it was essential to raise awareness across Children's Social Services, but also across all of our partners including Health, the Police, Schools the voluntary sector and the other partners. We put out consistent messages about what benefits this approach offers, the part that people can play in it and what they themselves can expect from it.
- 4) TAF is a small team and we recognised that in order for them to make a difference it is crucial that colleagues across the Think Family Partnership agencies work together in a continuum. All of these professionals working together with a specific programme, designed to meet those families' needs can make a huge difference.
- 5) Training is essential, especially when introducing a new way of working. We rolled out a series of high quality training sessions for professionals working in the partner agencies. The aim was to achieve a high coverage rate (i.e. the number of people who undertake the training, understand it and buy into it).

Good progress is being made. The NPT Think Family Partnership is now fully operational and there is a steady rate of appropriate referrals into the team.

Shortly we should begin to see:

- Fewer children coming into care and
- Families that didn't meet the children's social care threshold criteria in the past but who still need support, receiving a service so that they become more resilient.

Quote from a parents of children-in-need, requiring a more appropriate home, better suited to accommodate the family:

"I'd like to thank our social worker for working with Housing, to get us a better home".

6. PERFORMANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Effective recording and reporting of our performance management information is essential in helping us to know whether or not we are making a positive difference to the lives of the children, young people and families that we support.

It was widely acknowledged that our infrastructure for recording and reporting performance management information was broken:

- case files read by inspectors were difficult to follow;
- it was not possible to tell whether statutory checks had been completed.
- Recording was minimal on some case files even when the child was subject to statutory requirements.
- When speaking to staff and service users however, it was evident that direct work had been undertaken, but there was little recording on files of what action had been taken and even more so, little or no performance management information available to back this up.

The support provided by CSSIW in addressing this deficit was instrumental in helping us to identify a relatively small number of key areas in which to channel our initial focus to putting things right. A "don't run before you can walk" approach was adopted, and the following steps were taken:

- 1) As previously referenced, our IT systems and processes needed to be completely overhauled to ensure practice and reporting arrangements were compliant. This meant that the pace of change was often hectic, but essential to achieving the significant developments needed given the starting point we had come from.
- 2) With the children's services performance monitoring system established and providing a valuable context of the service and its

business, a decision on how best to use the available performance information.

- 3) Only by challenging and understanding the data, could the service make a step change in terms of service delivery and it was clear that managers needed to take accountability for performance in their respective areas.
- 4) To facilitate this, regular performance meetings were set-up with managers to discuss performance across a range of key areas, including access to the service. This process undoubtedly helped embed the shift in responsibility and accountability for performance, to the point that performance is now 'owned' by the teams. It is common practice for managers and staff to challenge and query performance data in a constructive way. Whilst we've actively promoted performance management, we have been very mindful that this message doesn't tip-over into inappropriate competitiveness between teams and individuals. This has certainly not been the case and the forums that have been established have definitely had a positive impact on the service. Although this process took time fully to establish itself as part of the day-to-day culture, the fact that CSSIW allowed time for it to evolve has without doubt been one of the positive aspects of their intervention.

Quote from a parent of a child-in-need:

"My social worker is non-judgemental and always listens to me"

Quote from a child-in-need:

"I find my social worker really easy to talk to"

Quote from the Mother of a child on the Child Protection Register:

"I wouldn't be where I am today, without the support and help of my Social Worker"

7. QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

The need to be confident that our services are of the type and quality that our service users and other stakeholders expect and require cannot be underestimated. For that reason we set out clear parameters for how things should be done and to do them to a very high and consistent quality.

At the time of entering the SCR, there was little evidence of any planned and systematic actions in place. Additionally, despite some managers carrying out elements of quality assurance within their own teams, this was not being collated or used to shape the improvement agenda.

Whilst improvements were being almost instantaneously in our quantitative performance indicators, there was a lag in both measuring and reporting upon the quality of our work.

In 2013 a Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) was launched to address this shortcoming.

- The purpose of the QAF was to define “what good looks like”, by setting high quality standards to be delivered across the service, as well as establishing methods for measuring and evaluating the quality of our interventions with families and using findings from audits and complaints to identify priorities for improvement and further develop services.
- Initially, the responsibility for auditing of case files was placed firmly on Team Managers’ shoulders. Despite their best efforts, it was becoming evident this arrangement was proving problematic, with audits either not being completed or, completed to a sub-standard level.

In hindsight, it is now clear that asking Team Managers, most of whom were relatively new in post, to undertake a bespoke task with little or no training was doomed to fail. Particularly when these same individuals had to juggle so many balls, given the changes to workforce, processes and systems that they were being asked to implement at this stage of our recovery. Consequently, 2014 saw a more pragmatic approach to quality assurance, with the assistance of commissioned external assistance, whose remit was to audit case files and meet workers on a

one-to-one basis to provide constructive feedback/make suggestions to potential improvements in practice. On a more strategic level, thematic reports were produced by auditors, identifying strengths and potential areas for improvement within the service.

We recognised that the reliance on outside assistance to take forward the QAF was an unsustainable position that needed to be addressed:

- 1) Approval was sought and agreed to create a dedicated resource in order to undertake a further step change and equip the service to embed quality assurance throughout its everyday activity.
- 2) We have subsequently established a Performance, Quality and Practice Development Team, comprising of a Performance, Quality and Practice Manager, Complaints Officer and Engagement and Participation Officer. All three staff are now in post.

8. EXTERNAL STIMULI

Maintaining a sense of objectivity is essential to any improvement programme. It enables rigorous assessment of situations and leads to sound conclusions. To this end, the support of the CSSIW and others was invaluable throughout our journey out of the SCP.

- 1) The CSSIW clearly pinpointed our shortcomings; shortcomings that up to then were under the surface and frustratingly intangible.
- 2) The CSSIW's November 2012 report, focussed the attention of not just CYPS, but also the authority on what needed to be done to ensure the children and young people of Neath Port Talbot were properly supported.

We found that the CSSIW were not just focussed on solely measuring our success in meeting their recommendations; in addition, they proactively offered up regular advice, such as suggesting that the senior management team would benefit from a visit to Leeds City Council. This visit subsequently took place and proved extremely informative. Leeds CC showed us that despite having naturally high levels of demand; they were still able to provide quality social services support to children, young people and their families, particularly in the areas of:

- Managing high levels of complex cases

- Strong multi-agency safeguarding processes
- Innovative Intake arrangements
- Open and informed Leadership

Whether it was a conscious approach or not, we feel that several of the positive traits exhibited by Leeds CC, are now embedded within our service. To this end, we are extremely grateful to both the CSSIW for “pointing us in their direction” and to Leeds CC themselves, who were extremely generous in the advice and guidance they afforded us.

Another CSSIW suggestion adopted by the service was to enlist the help of someone independent of the service, to assist the development and implementation of our improvement plan.

We subsequently “appointed” Graham Williams and Rhonwyn Dobbing. After previously working for Welsh Government, both individuals had vast experience of supporting Local Authority Children and Young People Services’, particularly those in crisis.

- They were referred to as our ‘Independent Support Team’ and during our time on the SCP, they played the vital role of “critical friends”, constructively challenging not only CYPS, but also the authority.
- Being so closely linked to the CSSIW in their previous careers, the Independent Support Team were able to provide us with a unique perspective on how best to approach the necessary transformation of services. Their objective insight, knowledge and experience proved invaluable in focussing CYPS on what needed to be done and by when.

Late in 2014, it was evident that progress had been made, but with no formal Inspection due, we felt that it was important to explore other options to measure how far we had come, whilst at the same time establishing which priorities would likely be most effective in retaining or improving upon the momentum generated over the preceding 18 months or so.

We decided to Commission a Peer Review from the Social Services Improvement Agency (SSIA).

The Review Team were made up of professionals who each brought a wealth of expertise and knowledge:

- Cathie Williams – SSIA Associate

- Phil Hodgson – SSIA Associate
- Jake Morgan - Director for Education and Children, Pembrokeshire County Council
- Mike Nicolson - Strategic Director – People, Newport City Council
- Angie Allen – Supervising Social Worker – Fostering Team, City of Cardiff Council

The review started on 24th September 2014 and focussed on four key themes to help understand current arrangements and identify the best way forward. The themes covered were:

- Outcomes for, and the experiences of, children and young people and their families who use services
- Leadership, strategy and working together
- Service delivery, effective practice and commissioning
- Performance, quality and resource management

Not only did the Peer Review exercise confirm what we anecdotally suspected, in terms of progress made; it also gave us the confidence to move beyond the *'back to basics'* ethos and strive to become an exceptional service, adopting the new strapline:

'Achieving quality, supporting families, managing risk'.

Extract from the Peer Review Report – December 2014:

'It is evident that the council has completed a lot of work to improve services for children, young people and their families since the CSSIW inspections.'

9. CONCLUSIONS

- It is as important to understand and avoid the factors which can delay or complicate improvement; as it is to understand what brings about recovery and improvement.
- 100% commitment from Members, partnership with Trade Unions and concerted Corporate Support are pre-requisites.
- This is a service *'to people by people.'* Most of the issues and their solutions will be about managing and developing people.
- Clarity of focus, prioritisation, pace and manageability of objectives are vital.
- It is essential to work with CSSIW to involve others from the sector (no one Council has all the answers or all the expertise).
- You have to be uncompromising about expectations and standards of performance.

- Staff must feel secure and have faith in what is promised. They must be able to see “Improvement Growth” for themselves.
- Always keep things simple (not simplistic). Always “shorten the line” in processes wherever possible.
- Make sure everyone understands what is wrong and what good looks like.
- Leadership is vital. Leaders need to be visible.