

Report to PERFORMANCE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Repeat Referrals in Children's Social Care

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Purpose of the report

This is an update to a previous report to the committee on 17 December 2020 titled 'Children's Social Care re-referrals' on the repeat referral performance, key challenges impacting on the performance indicator and the service response for improvement.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny Select Committee notes the report and progress to date.

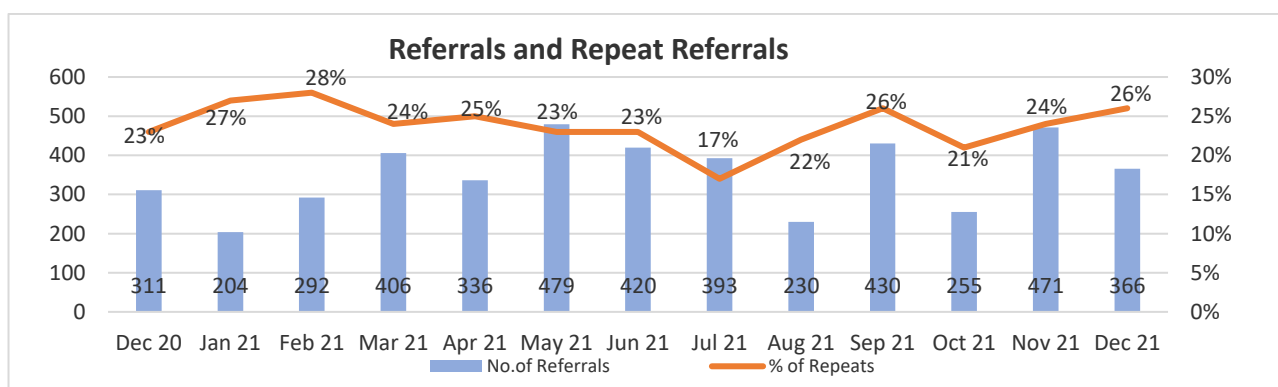
Repeat Referrals in Children's Social Care

1 Background

1.1 This report to the committee considers the current challenges across the Children's Social Work Service, focusing in particular on the variable trajectory of repeat referrals within the last six months. A re-referral relates to a family who has received two or more referrals through to Children's Social Care services within a twelve-month period.

2 Current position

2.1 In recent months, the trajectory of re-referrals into Children Services has been variable. Re-referrals at 26% in December 21 increased by 2% from November and 5% compared to October. We remain higher than both Statistical Neighbours (21%) and England (23%) averages.



2.2 It is important to consider the weekly re-referral rate varies by week and reflects a very fluctuating period of contacts into the MASH. The main sources of re-referrals are education settings and police at 31% and 30% respectively. There were no relatable patterns of sources in the previous referrals.

2.3 A deep dive review completed in 2021 identified:

- The impact of Covid-19 continues to increase the level of demand and re-referrals relating to domestic abuse and mental health
- Children and families in Oldham have experienced significant impact throughout the pandemic, where the re-referral relates to a significant different concern or unexpected event in comparison to the previous assessment or intervention provided by Children's Social Care
- Cases coming into Children's Social Care that should be supported earlier through partnership led early help
- Local context of increased levels of deprivation and poverty, and the increasing pressures this places upon families
- There have been some missed opportunities in Children's Social Care to prevent re-referrals through earliest targeted intervention

2.4 Whilst we have seen an increase in our rate of re-referrals, we take some reassurance from the Regional Information Group 2021/22 quarter 2 data recognises that 9 of the 23 North West local authorities have seen similar increases in re-referrals above Statistical Neighbours and England.

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- 2.5 We have focused on repeat referrals in service performance clinic activity to look in detail at the causes and impact of intervention.

3 Key challenges and service response

- 3.1 The implementation of the refreshed Continuum of Need (interagency agreement for levels of intervention from early help to social care intervention) went live in March 2021. The integration of Early Help and Children's Social Care at the front door (MASH) and recent data analysis has identified the need to strengthen the focus and understanding of partnership led earliest possible early help to be able to effectively step down to lower-level services.
- 3.2 We continue to face challenges in ensuring that our frontline workers both within Children's Social Care and across the partnership have a clear understanding of threshold and quality of intervention. Partnership commitment to this offer is key and remains under review given the continued high proportion of contacts (over 60%) that lead to information, advice and guidance each month. This continues to be a re-occurring theme and wider discussions continue to take place with key partner agency leads to ensure they are committed to providing children, young people and families with the earliest possible early help. This will be supported by a demand management strategy which is in development, linking to the wider rollout of place-based working during 2022.
- 3.3 We currently have a limited and inconsistent offer for children subject to child in need plans, this can lead to ineffective intervention meaning change is not sustained. In response, we are developing an Assessment and Intervention service to create opportunities to consider how we can work differently with children, young people and families to improve both the quality of practice and positive outcomes. We are confident that in delivering our services differently, this will improve current inconsistent practice within child in need planning and reduce the number of children subject to a re-referral. We acknowledge that the level of intervention provided alongside single assessments is insufficient in working with families to see effective change. To implement the proposed service redesign, further consideration is required to consider how this can be implemented safely, in the face of current demand across Assessment and Fieldwork Services (child in need, child protection and court work).
- 3.4 The recruitment and retention of suitably skilled and experienced social workers continues to be a significant challenge. We are working hard to strengthen our recruitment and retention offer to encourage experienced frontline workers to join Oldham. Working closely with our colleagues in communications, we have recently launched a recruitment microsite and a social care blog, with key messages delivered by the Managing Director of Children and Young People and Director of Children's Social Care, showcasing Oldham's strengths as a great place to work. It is a national issue that Local Authorities are facing challenges in permanent recruitment and are therefore over relying on agency staff. The North West Local Authorities are currently paying significantly inflated rates to practitioners – including up to £40phr. This creates further challenges in Oldham to ensure we have suitably skilled practitioners available to work with our children, young people and families.
- 3.5 There has been sustained improvements to the timeliness of assessments over the last twelve months with over 90% completed within expected timescales. We recognise that poor quality, but timely assessments are likely to lead to increased re-referrals as we have not identified or addressed elements of root cause. We are currently implementing a new model of practice in Children's Social Care and Early Help; the systemic approach, supported by the Centre of Systemic Practice and Warrington Council. Training and development is underway, and practitioners have demonstrated a keen appetite to develop
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their assessment skills through systemic practice, as evidenced during the Ofsted recent focused visit. We anticipate this programme of training and development will support practitioners to strengthen their assessment skills to deliver good quality assessment, intervention and planning. In doing so, we anticipate the key themes identified within the deep dive report around the quality of assessment, analysis and missed opportunity to intervene, will be addressed.

- 3.6 The ongoing development of the MASH Strategic Governance task group led by the Assistant Director Social Work Services and supported by the partnership, will ensure improved information sharing and shared partnership responsibility for support/intervention and decision making. This forum will provide opportunity for review of quality and proportionality of contacts made into the MASH and robust partnership challenge.
- 3.7 By strengthening our Child in Need and Edge of Care offer to deliver earliest possible help and protection across the wider partnership, we anticipate this will create opportunities for meaningful relationships between frontline workers and children, young people and families in Oldham. This will positively impact on reducing the need for repeat help and intervention from our services.

4 Links to corporate outcomes

- 4.1 Meeting our statutory duties as corporate parents of children looked after and care leavers and providing timely and appropriate access to services and support to meet the needs of children, young people and families in Oldham is central to the co-operative values of the Council:
- **Thriving Communities** where people have the power to be healthy and happy and can make positive choices about their lives.
 - **Co-operative Services** underpinned by collaboration, integration and innovation that improve outcomes for residents and create effective and seamless services.
 - **An Inclusive Economy** where everyone has a fair chance to improve their living standards, wages and skills.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 We recognise as a service that the rate of repeat referrals requires on-going scrutiny. The increase in rate must be considered within the broader context of the increase in referrals. The implementation of an Assessment and Intervention Service in the coming months will provide greater opportunity to work with children, young people and families differently. Through a relational approach, the quality of assessment and intervention will improve. The investment from the Council into the systemic approach to practice for all practitioners and multi-agency partners, will enable the focus to remain on delivering good quality services to our children, young people and families in Oldham.
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