

Report to OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PERFORMANCE AND VALUE FOR MONEY SELECT COMMITTEE

Repeat Referrals in Children's Social Care

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Eddie Moores, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

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Purpose of the report

This is an update to a previous report to the committee on 10th February 22 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.

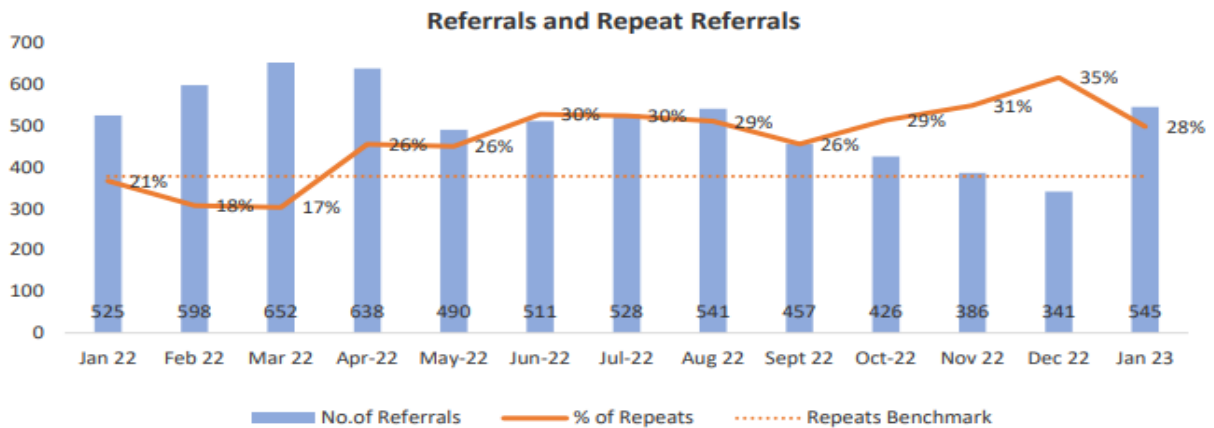
Repeat Referrals in Children’s Social Care

1 Background

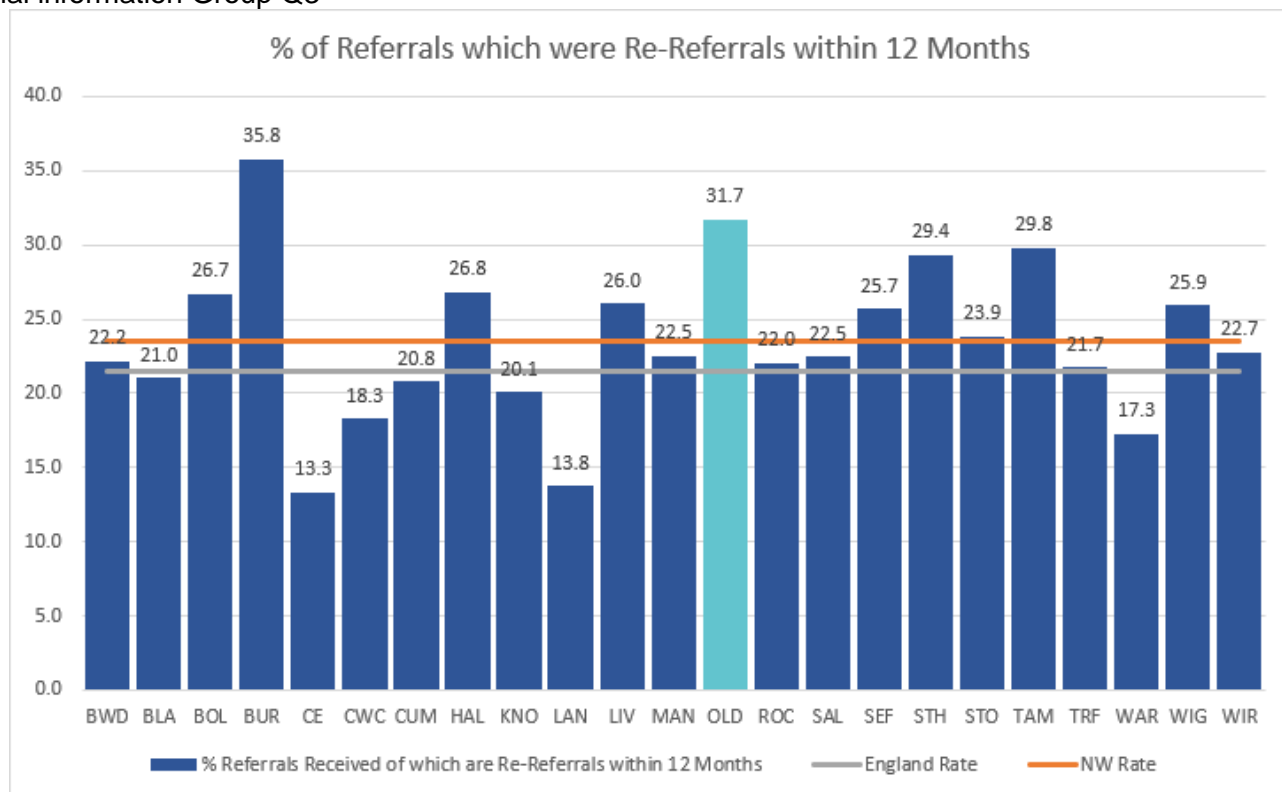
1.1 This report to the committee considers the current challenges across the Children’s Social Work Service, focusing in particular on the variable trajectory of repeat referrals within the last six months. A re-referral relates to a family who has received two or more referrals through to Children’s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

2 Current position

2.1 Since April 22 the trajectory of re-referrals into Children Services has steadily increased with a peak of 35% in December. There was a reduction in January 23 to 28% however it is noteworthy that we remain higher than both Statistical Neighbours and England averages as demonstrated in the below tables.



Regional information Group Q3



- 2.2 Recent deep dive review completed in February 23 identified some missed opportunities to prevent re-referrals through earliest targeted intervention. There was a clear correlation between the increase in referrals in April, May 22, and the increase in re-referrals in December.
- 2.4 Whilst we have seen an increase in our rate of re-referrals, we take some reassurance from the Regional Information Group 2022 quarter 3 data recognises that 8 of the 23 North West local authorities have seen similar increases in re-referrals above Statistical Neighbours and England.
- 2.5 The deep dive review identified that there were several families where new concerns were identified. In those cases where the decision to close to Children Services, there were missed opportunities to step down to Early Help for further targeted support and intervention. It is therefore reasonable to hypothesise that a repeat referral may have been prevented.

3 Key challenges and service response

- 3.1 The review findings have been shared with all team managers across the children assessment and intervention service. All managers are aware of the expectations and minimum standards, as defined within the practice standards, in regard to how parents contribute to assessment. In order to strengthen this, we have embedded weekly head of service case reviews that have been re-referred into the service within a 12-month period, where the decision to close following assessment has been made by the team manager.

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- 3.2 The head of service will review the proposed decision within the wider context of assessment and evidence of intervention, prior to the case closing. These case reviews will be reflected on the child's file.
- 3.3 The introduction of a management review has been implemented in recent weeks to review all children who are re-referred into the service by the previous team manager. Findings in regard to common themes will be shared as part of fortnightly learning circles, in collaboration with the consultant social worker. The findings will be collected on a monthly basis and shared within the Children Assurance Board.
- 3.4 A recent review of the step-down case transfer policy from Children Services into Early Help will strengthen the transition of families across both services, thus: improving the co-production of the step down child's plan.
- 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 the implementation of a new model of practice within the multi-agency safeguarding hub.
- 3.3 A new model of practice is about to be launched in the multi-agency safeguarding hub. The council have commissioned Professor David Thorpe to support a relational model of practice, encouraging partners to contact the hub by telephone, and not email. This will provide greater opportunities to discuss a professional's concern for a child and/or family to encourage a conversation about who is best placed to provide support and intervention. The model has been implemented across other Northwest Authorities and is reported to have reduced demand through to Children Services by up to 30%. We are hopeful that by implementing this approach, this will reduce unnecessary statutory intervention for those families who often go on to receive no further action following assessment.
- 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 campaign. It is a national issue that Local Authorities are facing challenges in permanent recruitment and are therefore over relying on agency staff. The Northwest Local Authorities are currently paying significantly inflated rates to practitioners – including up to £45phr. 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 Whilst demand remained high, 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.
- 3.6 Following recent investment from the council, the service has increased the assessment and intervention establishment by 55%. The transformation from assessment to assessment and intervention, coupled with the growth in establishment,

has enabled a critical eye on the quality and implementation of providing earliest possible support and intervention to those children and families in need. These changes are still in the implementation stage, and further review of success and barriers continues to be identified. It is noteworthy that since the investment, caseloads have significantly reduced from approx. 55 children per social worker, to around 22. This provides practitioners with the time to reflect and undertake meaningful intervention with families.

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 earlier in the year of 2022. The investment from the Council has provided an increase of 125% in the establishment, reducing caseloads significantly. This will provide practitioners with the time to reflect and undertake meaningful intervention.