

PROVIDING LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN CARDIFF

CONTEXT

This short Paper has been produced by the Independent Support Team (IST) and considers the difficulty that has been encountered by the Authority in seeking to make a permanent appointment to the post of Assistant Director for Children's Social Services.

The IST has considerable experience of assisting individual local authorities in Wales in their efforts to strengthen the performance of their Social Services for Children. As a result, the Welsh Local Government Association suggested to Cardiff that the Team could assist the Authority in its initiative to develop and implement a Children's Services Improvement Programme.

The Team commenced working with the Authority in the Summer of 2014 and spent 3 or 4 days a month working with managers and operational staff over the following 15 month period. More recently, Team members have pursued specific tasks as requested by the Authority, but, during the initial period, its focus was upon providing regular reports which gave a systematic and objective assessment of:

- The extent to which the services met required performance targets and reflected appropriate standards of good practice;
- The robustness of Improvement Plans;
- Progress made in strengthening Services for Children and Families;
- The extent to which organisational arrangements within the Department and across the Authority are sufficiently robust to support and promote improvements in services.

Additionally, advice has throughout been provided on ways of tackling identified weaknesses and recommendations made which have been aimed at strengthening arrangements further, both within and across the Authority.

In view of its experience across a number of Authorities, its familiarity with the services and with the workings of the Authority, the Team is uniquely placed to offer a view on how best to provide leadership for Social Services for Children and Families now and for the future.

PROGRESS ON THE IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY

The IST's Reports have provided a consistent impetus for progress to which the Services have responded positively. Practice has shown steady improvement and operational managers have in the main responded well to the challenges that have been put to them. There has been a small amount of staff turnover at this level and this has provided opportunities to increase the skills available in the operational management team and improved team solidarity in ways which the IST considers to be positive. The leadership provided by the Director of Children's Services was seen by the IST to be crucially important in driving forward the Improvement agenda and this has continued following the creation of an integrated Social Services Department in 2015 and his appointment as Director of Social Services with responsibility for both Adult and Children's Social Services. He has been supported throughout by the Chief Executive and other Corporate Directors who have recognised the need to prioritise Children's Social Services within a context of budget pressures and of an increasing level of need. Elected Members have also shown their support for the services and for the sense of strategic direction provided by the Director.

The Authority has made 4 attempts during the last 3 years to appoint an Assistant Director to lead Children's Social Services but has not been able to do so. Those showing an interest in the post have been few in number and have not generally had the level of experience or proven competence which the Authority requires. Throughout this period, the post has been filled on an interim basis by an officer who has evidenced that he has all of the necessary skills but who has, for a range of reasons, not felt able to commit himself to the Authority on an ongoing and permanent basis. This is regrettable as the IST and also the Care and Social Services Inspectorate in an Inspection Report earlier this year have both recognised the importance of the interim post holder and the Director's contributions in bringing about significant improvement in the performance of the services.

While recognising the importance of the progress made, there is more to be done to:

- Build upon the more robust service foundations and improved operational management strengths that have been achieved;
- Develop and implement an effective Quality Assurance Framework to ensure that performance targets and good practice standards are met;
- Significantly strengthen leadership and accountability within the Directorate's Safeguarding assurance function;
- Implement a major restructuring of the Department;
- Put in place a Workforce Strategy able to ensure that Cardiff can recruit and retain a sufficient number of qualified and experienced social workers able to meet needs in the present and for the future;
- Develop and implement a Service model better able to meet social services needs focusing on family support and prevention and providing viable alternatives to placing children in the looked after system;
- Secure better partnership working with other agencies:

- to deliver particular service initiatives such as the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub currently under development and of stronger services for children with a disability;
- to plan and implement broader models of service aimed at meeting the needs of children in Cardiff.

Arrangements for leadership of Children's Social Services for the future must reflect the need to progress on 3 key fronts:

- Giving day to day Senior Management attention to the delivery of social services, to sustaining the progress that has been made, to continuing to implement the Improvement Programme and to ensuring that Strategic and professional leadership can be provided;
- Ensuring that the Department is able to meet the requirements of the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act of 2014;
- Enabling Social Services to fulfil a lead role in promoting and stimulating work with partners, both within the Authority itself and with partner agencies active across the geographical area, to promote and implement models of services to meet the social services and wider needs of children in Cardiff.

It is important to recognise the scale of these tasks and to ensure that adequate arrangements are in place to deliver them in practice.

THE RECRUITMENT CHALLENGE FACING THE AUTHORITY

Children's Social Services in Cardiff are now in a stronger position than they have been for a significant number of years. The appointment of an Assistant Director with the necessary experience, professional credibility and leadership skills must now be a priority if the improvements achieved are to be sustained and services continue to be strengthened better to meet future needs.

The significant reputational damage which Cardiff Social Services suffered during those earlier years has inevitably had a bearing upon the failure thus far to recruit to the Assistant Director post. This was not considered to be a safe place in which to work, leadership of the service was seen as weak and lacked credibility, there was ongoing criticism of practice and decision making from the judiciary, relationships with partner agencies were poor, the political priority was seen as focusing on developing Cardiff's City status and was not supportive of Social Services. The IST has seen for itself that things have improved significantly on each of these fronts due to the efforts of the Director and the interim Head of Service, but reputational damage takes time to remedy and will need continuing and proactive attention if this is to be achieved.

Against this background, steps taken to fill the Assistant Director post will need careful handling as this will provide evidence that the Authority has tackled some of the credibility issues that flow from the Service's history. Options that might be considered are set out below and are accompanied by the IST's view of their practicality:

- Asking the Director of Social Services to assume direct responsibility for managing and leading Children's Social Services. This would in effect return to the position that existed 12 months ago and that the Authority moved away from by creating an integrated Social Services Department with the Director being responsible for Adult and Children's Social Services. This would be a retrograde step, effectively turning the clock back to a set of arrangements which the Authority had only recently recognised the need to move away from. It would make it very difficult for progress to be made on the Social Services wide agenda which the Director would then have little capacity to deal with.
- Asking the Assistant Director for Adult Services to assume responsibility for Children Social Services in addition to her

Adult Services duties. She is considered to be a highly competent officer who has experience of working in Children's Social Service. This was however not at senior management level and the learning curve for moving into these services would be considerable. This would also have a detrimental effect on her ability to continue the progress she has made in improving the performance and credibility of Adult Services. The agenda facing these services is as equally challenging as that facing Children's Services – need for stronger professional leadership at all management levels, for performance management, for a more systematic approach to improvement, for more active partnership working, for a clear service model to be defined, for effective management of scarce resources. The achievement of both the agendas would be put at risk by overburdening a single Assistant Director.

- It is clearly not desirable, or possibly even feasible, to continue in the long term with the current arrangement of covering the post using an interim Head of Service. The service needs to achieve the stability which will come from the appointment of a permanent Assistant Director. However it must also be able to continue building upon the strengths that are inherent in the current arrangement. The IST would therefore propose that consideration be given to pursuing the following course of action:
 - Advertise the post of Assistant Director for Children's Services at an overall remuneration package that would place the Authority as a market leader and would be consistent with its status as the Capital City and largest local authority in Wales. The package should be informed by the approach of other similar authorities outside Wales and recognise the fact that the different legislative arrangements between the two countries might make moving from

England to work in Wales less attractive. It should put forward its ambitions for high quality services and to make Cardiff a “child friendly City” in as substantive and credible form as possible, stress its commitment to being a good employer and set out the career development opportunities inherent in the post ;

- Retain the current arrangement involving the Interim Head of Service until the new Assistant Director takes up the post and specify a period of overlap to enable comprehensive hand over and briefing regarding the service’s history, progress made and challenges to be addressed;
- Recognise the immediate need to drive forward through partnership working the development and implementation of new models of services to meet the social services and wider support needs of children and families in Cardiff. Effective partnership arrangements have already been established by the Interim Head of Service and these are built upon mutual respect and trust across agencies. It would be unrealistic to expect a new Assistant Director to pick up the lead on these and to form the necessary relationships upon arrival and important to ensure that the momentum already generated for partnership working is maintained. In view of the importance of this work, the IST suggests that the possibility that the role of the current interim Head be redefined to involve progressing this work following the AD’s arrival should be explored. This should be on the basis of a defined project plan with a specified end point.

The IST hopes that the analysis provided in this paper will be helpful to the Authority and would be happy to discuss the course of action set out in the preceding paragraphs if that would be helpful.

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On behalf of the Independent Support Team: July 2016