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Executive Director People Services
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Independent Chair
Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board
Sunderland City Council
Civic Centre
Sunderland
SR2 7DN

5th March 2015

Dear Neil and Colin,

RE: CHILDREN'S SAFEGUARDING PEER REVIEW

Thank you for taking part in the Children's Safeguarding Peer Review. It was evident that all those we met, right across the partnership, were interested in learning and continued development.

We agreed to send you a letter confirming our findings.

As you know the safeguarding review focused on five key themes:

- Effective practice, service delivery and the voice of the child
- Outcomes, impact and performance management
- Working together (including Health and Wellbeing Board)
- Capacity and managing resources
- Vision, strategy and leadership

Within these overall areas, you asked the team to explore the following issues to assist in your on-going partnership improvement plan:

- Early Intervention, Help, Support
- Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board
- Children's Services improvement activity
- The quality and effectiveness of MASH

This letter sets out our findings as positive observations and as areas for consideration. The peer team used their experience to reflect on the evidence you presented on safeguarding vulnerable children and young people. The team triangulated the evidence for their findings from a wide range of documents, and

from interviews and focus groups with staff from across the partnership. It is important to stress that this was not an inspection and the documentary and other evidence provided to us was used in our focus on assisting you in your on-going improvement.

You decided to take up the optional element of a Case Records Review which was completed over two days prior to the main review. A separate case records review report is attached as Appendix One and evaluates the quality of casework, care planning and supervision found in the cases that we reviewed. The evidence obtained from the case records review also contributed to the team's overall findings.

Executive Summary

There has been a thorough ongoing review of frontline safeguarding in Sunderland over the course of the past year, driven directly from the top of the City Council. Partners' concerns are being addressed and outside expertise was commissioned through the Core Assets review to examine the nature of the Council's safeguarding service and identify areas in need of improvement. This Peer Review was seen as the second phase of this drive for improvement with a focus on the wider partnership effectiveness. Although the impetus for this initially came from within the council it is now being driven by the wider partnership as the beginnings of a multi-agency approach to systems improvement are put in place.

In the past, partners have felt that the partnership was 'the council and its partners'. Partners acknowledge their respective roles in allowing this situation to develop without challenge. It is important to avoid any legacy of this "us and them" culture being perpetuated, and to actively promote real partnership across all organisations.

A voluntary Improvement Board, with an Independent Chair, has been established to oversee the improvement journey, and it is commendable that this has the highest possible levels of representation and engagement, due in no small part to the efforts of the council Chief Executive in persuading others of the significant return that will come from investing time now in this Board. The Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) has been given fresh impetus via a new Independent Chair, with challenge, refreshed governance and accountability strengthened on the Board and within partners' own organisations. Proposals for further development of the Board are both ambitious and appropriate. The relationship between the various strategic fora across the partnership is being reviewed and reconfigured, again with the aim of strengthening governance and oversight.

In terms of frontline practice, the Children's Social Care workforce is currently under considerable pressure because of high workloads with some turnover issues in relation to agency staff, which are being addressed. The Core Assets findings revealed the need to improve frontline practice and plans to do this have already been put in place. Implementation is in the initial stages and we saw similar inconsistency of social work practice to that which was highlighted in the Core Assets Report. There is a high proportion of interim managers in senior positions in Sunderland City Council Children's Social Care. We recognise the intention is to take time to decide on the right appointments to key positions but this, when combined with the pressures at the frontline, does need to be carefully monitored as it could be a risk to progress.

Organisations out with the Council also reported that their staff are feeling pressured and anxious because of high workloads in child protection and their staff are increasingly feeling the need to manage risk themselves. There is strong political and executive commitment to bring about rapid improvements within Children's Social Care and in this context additional resources have been allocated to this task; and this commitment is being maintained despite financial pressures.

Early Help and the MASH are both evolving.

Early Help provision appeared widespread and good, with the locality teams providing a strong community base. Staff applied lessons learned from other projects to their own practice, though this is individually rather than strategically driven. At the present time, in the absence of a fully defined Early Help Strategy, Early Help is not linked strategically to child protection, and the role of Early Help in reducing demand on child protection services is not yet clearly set out. Early Help has enormous potential which is not yet being fully realised. To realize this potential will require the delivery of your plans around the strategic and operational positioning of Early Help in relation to other aspects of children's services across the whole partnership.

Following on from a recent Kaizen event, the MASH is being reconfigured and we believe the new operating model offers a good base upon which to move forward.

Staff across the partnership reported positively on CAF and Strengthening Families

Data on measures such as reach and throughput is not readily available and data on impact and outcomes even less so. Performance management is largely under developed across the whole of the Children's Services Partnership. Performance monitoring is hampered by poor quality data and we found little evidence of a performance driven culture. Efforts are being made to address this deficit with specialist expertise being brought in, both in the Children's Social Care management team and via secondments from the corporate centre and from health.

The necessary governance structures are being put in place to drive forward improvement. However this is not solely a question of strategic relationships and process. The will to drive improvement is certainly there at the very top, and the desire for things to get better is certainly there at the frontline. However senior managers are not visible enough with staff, and we did not see the performance focused analysis and priority setting that will be needed to bring about the required impact. Senior leaders and managers need to communicate better and explain, in terms that staff will feel addresses their concerns, how the journey to an improved safeguarding system will be taken forward and what it will look like in the future. The management plan needs to be driven to be successful.

We saw some very good front-line practice, and significant engagement everywhere to getting it right now and in the future. There is a real sense that the 'we're all in it together' culture to which everyone aspires can be realised. Across the workforce there is tremendous commitment to local communities and to the children and families of Sunderland. There is also a willingness to go the extra miles it will require in order to bring about the significant changes that are both needed and desired.

The Review Team highlighted key messages from their overall findings in a presentation at the end of the onsite week.

Summary Strengths

You are working in partnership to provide effective safeguarding services to children and families.

You are putting in place improvement plans at both an operational and strategic level to drive improvement forward

Everyone knows that things have to be done differently; as a partnership you recognise the scale of the challenge that you face and there is widespread support to bring about system wide change

We met committed, competent, passionate and inspiring people across the partnership, at all levels; this energy and loyalty to Sunderland is a good base upon which to build improvement

There is strong political and corporate commitment to resource change and improvement. The Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board has appointed a strong and well regarded Independent Chair; there is renewed energy and commitment from partners, and the Board is rapidly taking appropriate steps in the guise of a Delivery Plan to fully meet its statutory responsibilities, address gaps and develop stronger and more systematic oversight of safeguarding.

Early Help is currently an untapped strength, but clearly has the potential to play a significant role in reducing demand in child protection

Summary Areas for Consideration

Frontline services are under severe pressure and workloads mean that practitioners across the partnership are anxious about managing risk.

There are a high number of interim managers within Children's Social Care; staff experience this as a rolling programme of new initiatives that are not embedded before another change of personnel and direction.

Improvements to frontline social work practice are being put in place but there remain instances of inconsistent practice, poor quality case recording and reports. The level of posts filled by agency staff may be a contributory factor.

The partnership is hampered in its understanding of how effective services are by a lack of good quality performance data, we saw very little evidence of a performance driven approach. There is a perception amongst some partners that the partnership has not been an equal one – this is being addressed and the impetus needs to be maintained going forward, with a more equitable basis for the partnership established.

Moving forward, a more visible leadership style is needed and a culture needs to be developed that acknowledges and rewards staff for their hard work and contribution, - and builds upon and learns from their awareness of pressure points and what could be done differently/better. This applies across the children's services partnership.

The review team highlighted the following key messages in relation to your additional lines of enquiry (see above for details of these)

Evidence collected during the peer review endorses the Core Assets findings and the Core Assets recommendations remain very relevant.

We found good evidence of Early Help provision and activity, and were impressed by the range of what was on offer across the city. However Early Help provision is not yet part of a strategic plan for the child's journey.

The potential of Early Help to become a major part of the solution to the high levels of demand for intensive interventions (CP/CiN/ LAC) is not yet fully understood nor is it effectively articulated in a partnership-wide Early Help Strategy. This means that you have yet to see the full benefits that Early Help could bring.

Partner agencies are committed to working together in a reconfigured MASH. Recent quality assurance of the MASH has identified shortcomings which are actively being addressed. We have not seen the new operating model for MASH but there has been considerable learning from the past year and there is now a good base upon which to build.

Recent developments indicate that the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board is going in the right direction and has the potential to be an effective forum to safeguard children in Sunderland. Partners recognise that they have significant responsibilities to engage far more strategically and proactively, and contribute to the development of a challenging culture of learning and accountability.

You are keen to develop the Improvement Plan as a partnership plan; the current iteration captures most of - and focuses upon – the key findings from Core Assets report relating to Sunderland City Council Children's Social Care. We understand the early focus on getting frontline social work practice right in the light of the recent Core Assets findings. However in order to develop the systemic and partnership approach to which you aspire, in our view, the Improvement Plan needs to have a broader scope and move beyond its current and predominant focus upon frontline social work practice.

The cross cutting enabling themes in the Improvement Plan are appropriate; these now need to be delivered.

Outcomes need to be more SMART and priority needs to be given to how the right kind of leadership and partnership culture is developed to enable improvement to happen.

Our evidence suggests that the pace of delivery on your improvement targets needs to increase. We acknowledge the amount of improvement activity taking place; a refocus on a smaller number of key priorities would better focus your activity on 'doing the right things at the right time'.

You are working hard to address the challenges revealed in the Core Assets report but at the time of the Review Team visit the improvements you are seeking were not consistently identified.

In order for you to gain the level of assurance that services are effectively delivered to children we suggest that your immediate priorities should include the following; a safe front door, good quality performance information, supported and valued staff, enabling leadership and a learning culture

Detailed Findings

The table below highlights good practice noted by the peer review team and areas for consideration by the partnership:

Effective practice, service delivery and the voice of the child	Positive observations: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We saw a tremendous commitment to Sunderland at all levels across the partnership• You have put in place positive developments in relation to CSE• The Sunderland Safeguarding Children's Board's safeguarding resources, and the training provided and accessed by the partnership, are highly valued• We saw many innovative ways of working with and engaging children and young people• There was good communication and feedback from the Customer Service Network, within CAF and in the Strengthening Families Panel• There is evident commitment to continue to develop the MASH across the partnership. You have learned much from the first twelve months of operation. On the back of your recent Kaizen event you are developing a new operating model and there is a good base upon which to build• Early Help is developing positively, there is a wide range of locality based Early Help services and proactive multi-agency working is being encouraged. Projects are learning from each other and are continuously refining how they deliver services• There are some early indications that partners are becoming more willing to manage risk themselves without recourse to putting in place Child Protection Plans• Multi- agency meetings (core groups, CAF, TAF) work
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well and staff report that they are extremely helpful in coordinating holistic support to families

Areas for consideration:

- We did not see consistent improvement in social work practice.
- Have the needs of the child been maintained as you focus on getting process right? There seemed to be an understandable focus on process as you drive forward improvement.
- The loyalty of staff has been drawn on heavily and staff concerns need to be heard and acknowledged; test how far what you have put in place already has had an impact on frontline staff - and explore with them what further support they need to do their jobs well
- Referrers spoke of their anxiety that they may need to escalate concerns to child protection levels in order to secure a service; this perception needs to be fully investigated and any blockages and/or miscommunication addressed by the partnership
- We found a widespread perception amongst Health Visitors and Midwives that they are inappropriately carrying risk because of the workload pressure on frontline social work teams. This perception warrants investigation and if necessary remedial action taken as a matter of priority
- Some partners feel they could contribute more to work with children and families but anxieties about data sharing stand in the way. The SSCB might want to consider what action it could take to further clarify or emphasise the responsibility on all partners to share information about children who may be at risk
- The threshold document is disseminated but needs to be consistently applied by all partners
- Early Help is not a strategic offer. The intended impact on outcomes and the interface with safeguarding is not defined
- We saw examples of poor quality case recording and reports, as well as inconsistent social work practice
- MASH is improving but it is still in development and the new operating model has not been fully tested
- More effective engagement with schools is needed in respect to referrals and case work activity

Outcomes, impact and performance management

Positive observations

- There have been a number of attempts to improve governance and performance monitoring across the health and social care economy
- The Independent Reviewing Officer function has moved service areas and additional capacity is now in place.
- The Children’s Services Scrutiny Panel is now scrutinising safeguarding.
- You have made progress in terms of QA within the MASH.
- MARAC receive quarterly benchmarking information
- Early Help has a de-escalation system, albeit this is currently a manual system
- The use of the Outcomes Wheel in Early Help services is a positive development that could help to incorporate an outcomes focus into your performance management processes.

Areas for consideration

- Performance reporting is hampered by poor quality data
- The team saw some evidence that you have begun to address the absence of performance data. The role of the QA manager will be vital in developing robust systems and driving activity; as yet this is at an early stage of development.
- Urgent and consistent progress is needed to develop an adequate data set and performance scorecard for the partnership.
- Two areas of underdeveloped data (monitoring and tracking children in need cases & recording activity and impact in Early Help) mean you are unable to assure yourselves of, first, effectiveness at these levels of intervention and, second, the way that early help and children in need services can impact on demand for child protection services - reach and throughput data is missing in some cases
- Your system of collecting information on contacts makes it difficult for you to track your rates of conversion from contact to referral – an important performance indicator
- A useful next stage of development would be to design and implement a detailed multi-agency performance management information system that reflects the child’s journey

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<p>Working Together (including Health and Wellbeing Board)</p>	<p>Positive observations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elsewhere we reference a number of good examples of partnership working. We found a real sense of ‘we are all in this together’ and a positive attitude to developing a partnership approach to improvement • The Sunderland City Council Chief Executive, and the Independent Chair of the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board, are both highly visible with partners. • The appointment of a new and well regarded Independent Chair has brought a redefined positive direction of travel for the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board, which brings the promise of the effective future development of the Board’s oversight of safeguarding • Planned revisions to the structure and governance arrangements for the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board are underway • Steps have already been taken by the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board to address areas of non-compliance against Working Together 2013 statutory requirements (e.g. drafts of the Business Plan, Annual Report and CSE strategy are in place) • There was positive engagement of partners in the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board development day which identified and endorsed a clear improvement schedule • Dealing with multiple Serious Case Reviews is a testing process and there has been generally high partner engagement, including at learning events • The five themes of the Improvement Board are defined - each has a theme lead and an executive sponsor from different agencies • There are joint case focussed meetings between Health and Children’s Social Care managers • The Clinical Commissioning Group has seconded a senior manager to Sunderland City Council to drive specific improvements <p>Areas for Consideration</p> <p>A robust look at connectivity between strategic Boards is needed to align multi- agency accountability and governance across Sunderland Safeguarding Adults Board, the Improvement Board, the Health and Wellbeing Board, Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board and the Safer Sunderland Partnership - new arrangements are at the design stage. The continuing role of the Children’s Trust is unclear.</p>
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	<p>There is a legacy of 'the council and their partners' which needs to be addressed – the language and thinking about partnership working needs to change so you can move on from an 'us and them' partnership to an equitable partnership.</p> <p>There has been good partnership working on the frontline between different agencies that has developed as a result of good working relationships within localities - how can you now use effective strategic leadership to maximise the gain, and focus this activity around key strategic outcomes and targets?</p> <p>Despite a recent increase in capacity for the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board business unit you have not yet clarified how as a partnership you will ensure that the Board is sufficiently resourced to function effectively, including covering the costs of the many ongoing SCR's</p> <p>You are continuing to develop the Board; key areas for consideration include, the size of Board, how to maximise scrutiny and challenge, how to develop effective information provided for performance management</p> <p>You need to address the fact that there is no multi agency Early Help Strategy, including oversight of its effectiveness by the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board</p> <p>Health representation in MARAC needs to be broadened beyond the Mental Health Trust who are currently the only health representative</p> <p>To maximise pace and keep a regular eye on progress the Improvement Board needs to consider meeting more frequently</p> <p>Progress the planned implementation of a combined performance management framework across both the Improvement Board and the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board.</p> <p>Ownership of the delivery of the CSE strategy appears to lie with the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board. This should be reviewed, to ensure appropriate operational leadership and accountability, including how the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board will hold partners to account.</p> <p>Ensure that data sharing protocols do not unnecessarily hinder the ability of partner agencies to offer support to families</p>
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<p>Capacity and managing resources</p>	<p>Positive observations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is strong political commitment to maintaining the increased investment in Children’s Services by Sunderland City Council, enabling extra capacity to drive improvement. • Specific secondments from the corporate centre are used to provide specialist expertise • Management development has been prioritised with a development programme within the council and the Leadership for Change programme funded by the Leadership Academy and Public Health • You have a two phase plan to improve your Integrated Children’s System; phase one is remedial action to improve the current ICS system; in phase two (intended to be delivered within the next two years) you will go out to tender for an improved ICS system • The locality teams promote good operational level partnership working and are being extended to include Child Protection • The West Locality pilot points to positive future ways of working but is as yet at a very early stage • CAF is reported to be working effectively and feedback loops are used • A Social Work Academy is to be launched in the near future to help in recruitment and retention of staff • We were impressed by the Customer Service Network manager and staff, there is a commitment to make it work and to deal with problems as they arise • Partners recognise the stress that exists in Child Protection, are sympathetic to the workload pressures experienced by social workers and are working hard in to try to mitigate it as much as possible by ‘managing the risk’ whenever possible <p>Areas for consideration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frontline social work staff were very stretched. High case loads and high levels of demand mean some staff feel vulnerable • Multiple IT systems prevent effective reporting • There is an absence of data to evidence work flows and outcomes • Business support arrangements do not effectively support frontline practice, there was a widespread perception that ‘the wrong savings’ had been made in respect to business support • There remains a reliance on interim appointments in
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	<p>the management tiers of Children’s Social Care and many agency staff in the social work teams</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your Workforce Strategy remains in draft and is generic; a corporate approach to workforce development does not appear to be meeting the needs of the social work workforce nor providing for effective social worker induction. • We were told that there was a poor record of attendance by Children’s Social Care, both managers and social workers, at multi- agency Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board training and at Core Groups
<p>Vision, Strategy & Leadership</p>	<p>Positive observations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The incoming Executive Director for People was keen to investigate fully how effective frontline safeguarding actually was when he assumed managerial responsibility. Since then he has driven forward a programme of improvement. He sought the help and support of his corporate and political colleagues in the council, and from partners, as well as bringing in new staff and outside expertise to secure the future effectiveness of his own service and the wider safeguarding partnership • Across the partnership there is a recognition of the need for major improvement - and that this will need to continue to develop for some time to fully embed all the improvements to practice that have been highlighted by external and internal review and audit • Management teams across the partnership are open and honest in terms of what they have to do to improve • The Improvement Board and the Improvement Plan were instigated voluntarily in response to the findings of the Core Assets report; the Improvement Board is attended by Chief Executives of appropriate partner agencies and the Council Chief Executive has worked hard to fully engage all partners at this level • The Council Chief Executive’s office is committed to improvement and is actively facilitating additional support to Children’s Social Care via specialist secondments • The new Independent Chair is showing strong leadership and vision to the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board. • The Strengthening Families Framework promotes resilience in families, communities and individuals • There is positive leadership in localities, which promotes staff empowerment and innovation; this is

increasing the effectiveness of service delivery

Areas for consideration

- The pace of improvement needs to increase
- The extensive use of interims across the partnership can carry risk and give out the wrong message.
- Promote a stronger 'Team Sunderland' voice to ensure frontline staff are confident in the direction of travel
- Senior leaders across the partnership need to take responsibility for developing a culture of openness, accountability without blame, learning and trust
- Increased visibility of Children's Social Care senior managers at the frontline is required
- The partnership should set out the outcomes expected for children in Sunderland and how these could be measured and monitored
- We found that there was no clear expression of a joined up vision across the partnership that tells the story of where you want to be
- You need to assure yourselves on performance through effective reporting systems
- Collective leadership is needed, the willingness to do that is there, but it needs to be one partnership with equal responsibility and accountability.
- There is not as yet a fully-fledged 'we're all in it together' culture – the willingness and intent is there but the reality lags behind the intent; mainly as a result of the 'council and its partners' culture that is said to have prevailed in the past.
- You need to ensure the right skill sets and the necessary expertise exists across all management positions to drive improvement
- Nurture frontline children's services staff; recognise how they feel and reward their commitment and hard work.
- Strategic leaders need to be more visible, listen to concerns and inform frontline staff of how they intend to address those concerns and agendas.
- Opportunities seem to be missed to learn from and share good practice across the City. Celebrate the achievements that are happening.
- We didn't see any evidence of a reward culture, acknowledging the hard work and contribution of staff. In times of transition this is a vital means to keep staff engaged and working in the right direction. This is equally true on a partnership as well as a single service basis.

We wish you well with taking forward the issues identified by the peer review and we understand that the feedback from our review presentation has been discussed by key stakeholders.

You and your colleagues will want to consider how you incorporate the team's findings into your improvement plans, including taking the opportunity for sector support through your regional arrangements - the LGA's Principal Advisor, Mark Edgell, can be contacted by either email: Mark.Edgell@local.gov.uk or by phone on 0774 763 6910. In addition, you can contact Ann Baxter, LGA Children's Improvement Adviser covering the North East Region for specialist support. Ann can be contacted via baxter.ann@googlemail.com or on 0757 749 5153.

Once again, thank you for agreeing to receive a review and to everyone involved for their participation. In particular, please pass on our thanks to Agnes Rowntree and her team who provided sterling support to the review team during the onsite week.

Peter Rentell
Programme Manager (Children's Safeguarding)
Local Government Association

Appendix One

Case Records Review - summary of key findings

NB findings are aggregated due to the extreme difficulty experienced by the review team in accessing information held within individual electronic case records

- Social workers were not adjusting the date on the system when they input case notes. As a consequence the case records that we reviewed did not have the actual date of the activity correctly assigned.
- ESCR files are dated but often the date doesn't correspond with the document contained within.
- Plans, assessments etc. stored on ESCR appeared to be the dated for the time that the entry was uploaded onto the system rather than the date that the activity took place.
- There is an overuse of the 'terminated' assessment function; this is often seen within Initial Assessments.
- Initial and Core Assessments are not populated on the electronic system, the form is downloaded, completed and then stored on a social worker's personal drive or will be found on ESCR, some assessments could not be found at all.
- Child's status was not inputted on the system so when first accessing the system it was not possible to ascertain whether a child was e.g. CP/CLA etc.
- There is a general over use of, and over reliance on, written agreements with families. This was seen in a number of cases where risk was very obvious and a written agreement was not viewed by the peer reviewer as an appropriate way to manage the case
- Supervision did not appear to be taking place monthly in the cases reviewed, despite the update given on the Improvement Plan suggesting that it was. On those instances where supervision was recorded it often lacked focus and/or direction and in some cases failed to address risk and drift.
- Where there was case direction about fundamental activity, i.e. progress to PLO, significant delay in implementation was noted
- Assessments, including parenting assessments, lacked structure and analysis, some assessments were written on the basis of self-reporting by parents. Revised Parenting/Risk Assessment guidance was written in January 2013 but this was not seen to be used in the cases that were reviewed

- There was barely any reference to be found in the cases reviewed to the utilisation of Early Help services
- Significant drift and delay was found in many of the cases that were reviewed
- Many of the cases appeared to be 'stuck', with workers unable to identify when a case needed to progress further i.e. to Child Protection or removal.
- Child Protection minutes, and subsequent plans, lacked focus and gave little direction to the multi-agency team in terms of what was expected