

TITLE OF REPORT: Review of Local Test of Assurance

REPORT OF: Mike Barker, Strategic Director Corporate Services and Governance

Summary

This report sets out details of a review of the operational and strategic effectiveness of assurance arrangements put in place when the statutory roles of the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and the Director of Adult Social Services (DASS) were allocated to a single chief officer, the Strategic Director, Care, Wellbeing and Learning. The roles were merged as part of the organisational review and restructure which was implemented on 1 October 2014.

Background

1. On 16 September 2014 Cabinet agreed proposals which brought the functions within the former Children and Learning directorate and the adult care and safeguarding functions within the former Community Based Service directorate within a single group which also included the Council's public health functions. As part of the proposals the statutory posts of the DCS and DASS were allocated to a single chief officer, the Strategic Director, Care, Wellbeing and Learning.
2. In accordance with the statutory guidance relating to the role of the DCS, to be applied when considering the allocation of additional responsibilities to the holder of the statutory role, a 'local test of assurance' was undertaken. The test took the form of a risk matrix and showed how the risks commonly associated with broadening the responsibilities of the DCS were mitigated.
3. Although not specifically referred to in the statutory guidance relating to the role of the DASS, a similar approach was undertaken and a 'local test' applied to the proposals as they related to that statutory role as well.
4. Cabinet agreed that a joint meeting of the Care, Health and Wellbeing and Families OSCs would be asked to undertake a review of the operation of the new service group twelve months after the new arrangements had been in place to ensure that the arrangements are robust and that the

Council continues to meet its statutory obligations in relation to children and vulnerable adults.

The Review Process

5. The review has included renewed scrutiny of the structures and organisational arrangements within Care, Wellbeing and Learning to ensure the group is able to:
 - fulfil its statutory duties effectively (including ensuring that children, young people and their families receive effective help and benefit from high educational standards locally),
 - be transparent about responsibilities and accountabilities; and
 - support effective integrating and partnership working.
6. Consultation has been undertaken with partners including the police and the CCG. Views have also been sought from the independent chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

The Ofsted Inspection 2015

7. The Ofsted inspection of Children's Services undertaken in November 2015, judged the service as 'good'. 'Children's services in Gateshead are good because leaders, managers and workers are highly effective' and there is a 'strong corporate commitment to safeguarding and improving outcomes for all children and young people in the borough'. Governance was found to be strong with solid foundations in place for taking services forward.
8. The Test of Assurance was described as 'coherent' and as demonstrating 'a clear understanding of statutory responsibilities to ensure the effective oversight and delivery of services for children'.

Proposals

9. The review has found that the Test of Assurance continues to be relevant and appropriate. The revised test is attached as Appendix 1. Amendments have been made to reflect changes in senior management and improvements to practice over the last 18 months.
10. These changes include:
 - The former Strategic Director, Care, Wellbeing and Learning has retired. He has been replaced on a temporary basis by an interim Strategic Director who is a social care professional with considerable experience as both a DCS and DASS. It will be a requirement when recruiting a new Strategic Director that he or she is a social care professional with relevant experience. This should further strengthen the Council's ability to discharge its statutory duties in an integrated and coherent way.

- A Quality Assurance Unit has been established and will focus on quality, policy and performance across Care, Wellbeing and Learning. The Unit will provide comprehensive and robust performance management information and analysis with monthly reporting to senior managers and partnership boards to provide further assurance of the effectiveness of services regarding the wellbeing and safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults within Gateshead.
- Moving forward children, adults and public health commissioning will be brought together, enabling the Council to consider needs and strategic commissioning across the life course. The approach will be outcome focused commissioning which will provide more needs led, evidence based service provision and will include a focus on streamlining transitions between children and adults.

Recommendations

11. The views of the OSCs are sought on whether the assurance arrangements set out in the revised Test of Assurance are sufficiently robust and that the Council continues to meet its statutory obligations in relation to children and vulnerable adults.