

Children’s Social Care Quality Assurance Framework

Introduction

“Children and families deserve good quality services.”

In Blackpool, we seek to work restoratively with families to establish positive relationships that build on their existing strengths.

The purpose of Quality Assurance is to explore practice through the routine and robust oversight of case work, in order to develop an accurate understanding of the quality of practice.

We know that historically Quality Assurance has been heavily compliance focused, placing too much emphasis on what can be measured and graded through audit. Our QA activity will be clearly focused on understanding the impact of our work, and how we are making a difference to the lives of our children and families. We want to know what works well, and what we need to do better.

QA activity forms part of a continuous cycle of learning and improvement. This continuous evaluation will ensure that learning can be understood on a system wide level, and we will ensure themes feed into the Workforce Development Plan and Social Work Practice Improvement Plan to influence improvement activity.

Quality Assurance is broader than audit, although audits clearly play a key role. Good quality, robust performance management information provides quantitative information that can provide proxies for quality and timeliness of work, in addition to giving valuable insights into the flow of work, demand levels and compliance. Analysing trends over time, layering datasets and looking at performance system-wide can enable a greater understanding of the service demands. The diagram below illustrates the different sources of information that we will consider:



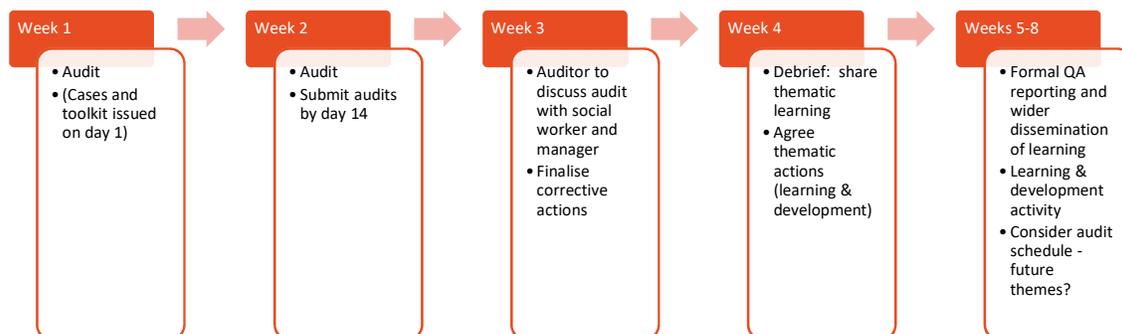
Source: Research in Practice: Building a quality culture in child and family services (2018)

Audit

Case file audits provide managers and other auditors with the opportunity to assure themselves regarding the quality of our work with families and children. It also promotes professional curiosity and debate and is an opportunity to triangulate information from other sources, for example supervision and decision making and oversight panels. Auditing is a core function of a manager’s role and it is expected that managers at all levels across the service take part in the audit programme.

As the audit framework is relaunched in 2020, the initial focus will be to continue the development of team managers following the Restorative Leadership Programme delivered by our Partners in Practice from Stockport MBC. Over the course of 12 months, the audits will be expanded to include Service Managers and Heads of Service; audits by the DCS and Assistant Director will also be developed to complement other QA activity and also to ensure line of sight from the DCS and Assistant Director to front-line practice.

Audit fortnights will take place bi-monthly, with audits being in the first two weeks of the period. The subsequent weeks will allow for discussion between the auditor, social worker and manager; agreement of any improvement actions required; audit de-briefs with the wider auditor group to discuss themes and agree any additional learning and development activity needed; formal reporting to senior management; and wider dissemination of learning.



Audit toolkits will be centrally collated for analysis, and to ensure agreed actions are completed. As part of the 3-way discussion between auditor, manager and social worker, corrective actions will be agreed. These actions will be recorded on the child's electronic case record and monitored to ensure completion, with the Practice & Development Service playing a critical role alongside the service working with social workers to address learning and actions.

Themes for audit will be agreed based on what we know from performance, QA and other sources of information and insight identified in the diagram on page 1 of this framework. A detailed audit schedule is set out in the Auditor Handbook, which will be regularly reviewed and agreed with the Assistant Director for Children's Social Care.

The methodology for audit fortnights will depend on the particular issue to be explored, but may include some or all of the following:

- Practice observations
- Feedback from staff and/or service users
- Case file audits (internal, independent or multi-agency)
- Structured enquiry
 - Systems - identifying factors that support good practice, and factors that make failure more likely
 - Appreciative Inquiry – looking at what has gone well and sharing good practice, developing case studies and creating opportunities for positive feedback.
- Reflective group supervision
- Audit clinics

Observations of practice

Observing practice gives the opportunity to see and evaluate reviews, conferences, direct work and other meetings. This enables the observer to identify if wider improvement strategies are understood by practitioners and having an impact on practice.

Observations of practice are part of our supervision framework, ensuring that this approach is embedded and that themes for learning are identified and shared.

Management oversight

A number of panels provide senior management oversight and line of sight to front line practice. These include:

- Permanence Planning (weekly), chaired by AD Children's Social Care
- Care planning (weekly), chaired by AD Children's Social Care

Terms of reference clearly set out the purpose and process for each panel, and where cases are presented at panel, evidence of the discussion will be recorded on the child's electronic record. Delivering management oversight in this way enables senior managers to understand quality of practice through the review of relatively large numbers of cases. In addition, it also promotes increased consistency of practice and provides a learning opportunity for managers.

The need for panels reflects the current position in our improvement journey, and enables an ongoing line of sight to front line practice for children at critical points in their journey through children's services. In future we will seek to achieve this through a model of case audit and reflective discussion between practitioners and senior managers.

Stocktakes form another key aspect of the wider management oversight and challenge. They also seek to encourage managers to become more reflective and analytical in their thinking about the services that they manage. Stocktakes are scheduled every six months. Service managers prepare a concise report in advance of the stocktake meeting, to summarise their view on what is working well and areas for further development. The meeting provides an opportunity for service managers to share and discuss issues across the different service areas, as well as enabling priorities to be continuously reviewed and aligned to ensure good progress on our ongoing improvement journey.

Impact on outcomes – voice of the child/young person

There is a strong ethos of co-production in Blackpool, with children, young people and families most recently helping to develop the Blackpool Families Rock Model of Practice.

As part of the ongoing development of this framework, we will consult with our young people to understand what matters most in terms of the focus of QA activity. We will also ask for ways in which they might want to be involved in QA – for example, through practice weeks, audit and use of the participation app.

We will also use feedback from families, gathered through our child protection and looked after review processes, to cross reference against individual audits (where possible) as well as analysing themes as part of the wider performance and QA.

Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) & Child Protection (CP) Chairs

As part of the oversight and advocacy function fulfilled by IRO's and CP Chairs, for each child or young person they engage with, they will form a view about the quality of the work being undertaken with the child and family and the effectiveness of the support/intervention being provided. It is therefore important that their views are captured and systematically fed into the QA process. One of the ways that we will seek to achieve this is through the use of short, focused case feedback forms which will be completed by the IRO or CP chair after each conference or review.

The form will have a small number of key questions focusing on impact of the support and services being provided on the child and family's lived experience. We will also seek to include direct feedback from the child, young person or family so that we understand any themes emerging from our children and families about the strengths and weaknesses of our practice at different stages of the child's journey.

Complaints and compliments

Analysis of complaints and compliments received by the service will be considered as part of the analysis of performance and QA. Themes identified in the analysis of complaints will be taken into account when reviewing QA and performance data.

Multi-agency Audits

The Children's Safeguarding Assurance Partnership (CSAP) will lead on thematic multi-agency audits, which will include the three statutory partners as a minimum (Children's Social Care, Health and Police). Other partners will be invited to ensure as wide a representation as possible and to maximise learning.

Multi-agency audits will be held on an as needed basis in 2020/21 and will focus on key multi-agency areas of work, such as core group meetings and child protection planning, with these audits becoming more routinely scheduled as the Pan-Lancashire Safeguarding Partnership arrangements develop further and as the QAF embeds.

Sector Led Improvement (SLI)

Support from the other local authorities is playing a key role in Blackpool's improvement journey, and we are currently working with the following three Partners in Practice:

- Essex – using a solutions focused approach to deliver edge of care services
- Leeds – child friendly work and restorative practice
- Stockport – introducing managers to restorative approaches, safe uncertainty, social work supervision theory and an asset based model of social work

The North West region has a strong, well established sector led improvement network, which includes an annual peer challenge and self-evaluation process. Regional peer reviews are co-ordinated within the region in response to demand, and Blackpool are also part of the regional QA group.

The national sector led improvement offer delivered by the Local Government Association (LGA) will also be considered at appropriate stages of the improvement journey.

Independent Auditing

External, independent auditing will be carried out regularly on a small number of cases; this will either have a thematic focus or will moderate the work of internal auditors. While external, independent auditing will not be the long-term mainstay of the audit programme, it performs a critical counter-balancing function by ensuring that audits undertaken by our own managers are an accurate reflection of the quality of our work. This moderation of our auditors will be supported by the PSW, who will carry out other additional audit moderation.

Learning and understanding the impact of QA

It is important that practitioners understand the key issues identified through QA activity, so that they readily see the relevance of audit and other QA work.

Themes identified from audit and other QA activity will be analysed as part of a wider consideration of performance. This will be shared with staff at all levels: reported to senior leadership and disseminated via the Practice Development & Learning service.

Where themes are identified, this will inform other plans, such as workforce development and also the Social Work Practice Improvement Plan. Individual action plans will be kept to a minimum to reduce complexity in improving performance to a necessary minimum.