

Report to the Audit and Governance Committee on 22nd January 2021 on actions taken in relation to key recommendations made in the audit report relating to the Limited Assurance Follow Up audit of Unregulated Placements (Fostering)

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Summary of Audit Area

Local authorities have a duty to investigate the potential for a child to be placed within their family and friend's network (referred to as connected persons) in the first instance, if a decision has been made that they need to enter the care system. The preference should be with a connected person who is approved as a local authority foster carer. However, the child can be placed with friends or family members prior to such approval.

Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 sets out the arrangements for the temporary approval of a connected person as a foster carer and that this should be done before making a placement. In exceptional circumstances, Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) will allow an initial Regulation 24 Viability Assessment to be undertaken within one day of the placement being made although the placement will remain unregulated until such time as the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) grants temporary approval.

In 2019/20 an audit was undertaken to review the operational procedures for placing children in unregulated fostering placements to ensure that the placements were being properly approved, had been quality assured and were not subject to drift. Limited assurance was given and this necessitated a follow-up audit to be undertaken in 2020/21.

Summary Terms of Reference of the Audit

The objective of the Limited Assurance Follow Up audit was to provide assurance that the actions agreed by management to address the original High Priority recommendation had been implemented and were effective.

Risks

- Non-compliance with statutory requirements;
- Non-compliance with GCC policy and procedures;
- Placements not properly approved prior to placing children;
- Placements not formally approved in a timely manner after placing children;
- Placements subject to drift; and
- Children at risk of harm and neglect.

Key Findings

The Internal Audit follow-up review confirmed that corrective action had been taken where appropriate for the previously identified areas of non-compliance in the sample that was tested.

Process improvements had also been introduced, particularly in the area of management oversight. Audit testing of a new sample of cases however, still identified significant areas of non-compliance despite management oversight having been applied and where actions were identified that needed attention. Management oversight has suggested that capacity issues and lack of staff training was contributing to the non-compliance.

A report was obtained from Liquid Logic (the children's electronic case management system) that identified 22 children had been taken into care between 01/01/20 and 31/05/20 with an unregulated placement code of Z1.

The tests that were undertaken on a new sample of five placements (23%) mirrored those from the original audit and the findings were as follows:

- Two 'Request for a Child to become Looked After' forms were authorised after the entry to care start date and one form was not completed at all and therefore not available on Liquid Logic;
- Four Regulation 24 Initial Viability Assessment forms were available on Liquid Logic but had not been authorised by the ADM within one day of the start date of the unregulated placement (GCC's allowable relaxation of the Regulations). The fifth form was on the shared drive, only partially signed but not authorised by the ADM within one day and was not yet available on Liquid Logic;
- Regulation 24 Full Kinship Assessment Forms were applicable for three cases and all three forms were not available on the child's file on Liquid Logic; and
- All five Placement codes had been amended from Z1 when temporary approval was given for the friends and family placement but two codes had not been changed back to Z1 (unregulated) when the temporary approval period had expired but the placements remained open.

No new recommendations were made but due to the Limited assurance on control that was given, a further formal Limited Assurance Follow Up audit will be undertaken during 2021/22. This will seek to confirm that practice improvements are embedded, particularly with the timeliness of completing agreed processes and the storage of data on Liquid Logic.

Management action taken and/or proposed as at the end of December 2020

Significant management investment has been made to address the issues found regarding non-compliance in this area of practice. As a result, oversight is progressed and captured on children's files via a number of mechanisms, including:

1. An Entry to Care Checklist is completed in Liquid Logic by a senior manager within 5 working days of a child entering care. Within this checklist, compliance regarding placements with connected persons is checked. If there are any outstanding actions these are addressed accordingly;
2. The Fostering Improvement Action Plan has identified areas for improvement required in this specific area of practice and has progressed actions accordingly. This includes establishing fostering champions who link with designated social workers in Localities to ensure processes and statutory requirements are fully understood and established across the County;
3. The Strategic Lead for Children in Care carries out spot checks within Liquid Logic regarding compliance in this area, specifically as children enter care. Liaison occurs with The Head of Service (Fostering) and ADM to ensure the Viability Assessment has been submitted and authorised (or otherwise).

Given the above activities, which continue to occur routinely on an ongoing basis, the conclusion is that sufficient management oversight is in place to assess compliance on an ongoing basis. There have been significant improvements in addressing issues around placements with the potential to become unregulated but in the event of any slippage with practice standards, there are mechanisms in place to address this in a timely way.