

# Children's Services Quality Assurance and Learning Framework

December 2020



Working as One Council in  
the historic capital of the Black Country



## FOREWORD

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to our new Quality Assurance and Learning Framework and Guidance. This document will help us to ensure that the practice and development of the service will help us to achieve our vision;

### **‘Children first at the heart of all we do’**

Working with children and young people and their families is complex, and all of us who work in this world know that their needs are multi-faceted, and that we need to take a whole system approach towards helping them to live safely at home.

When working with families we need to ensure that we constantly explore and build on areas of strength and agree effective plans for improvement where risks are identified. Similarly, we need to constantly explore and build on areas of strength in the quality of services we deliver to children and young people and their families and agree effective plans for improvement where the quality of practice does not meet required standards.

This Quality Assurance and Learning Framework sets out the principles and standards of practice expected of practitioners and managers across Children’s Services. It also sets out the mechanisms we will use to assess the quality of our practice, systems and processes, and use the learning to make improvements in practice and outcomes.

All of us are undertaking important work and come in each day wanting to do the best we can. I hope you will find this guidance both interesting and helpful in ensuring good practice from us and good outcomes for the children and young people we work with.

The Quality Assurance and Learning Framework was approved by the Senior Leadership Team on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

**Helen Ellis – Acting Director Children’s Services**

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## **Section 1 - Introduction**

The Quality Assurance and Learning Framework for Children's Services in Dudley outlines the principles, purpose, and theoretical models that underpin the range of quality assurance and learning activity undertaken by all managers across Children's Services, in collaboration with practitioners, to ensure that work is carried out to the highest quality. This will inform our work by providing the systematic monitoring, evaluation and implementation of practice, policies, and procedures, with the aim of improving our understanding of whether we are supporting the right children, in the right way, at the right time, and whether we are making a difference to improve outcomes for children and their families.

The Quality Assurance and Learning Framework recognises that case file audits and performance data alone will not improve quality of practice and therefore sets out an ambitious vision that through a range of stakeholder feedback, quality assurance, observational and evaluative activity we will see improved and sustained quality of practice. Pivotal to the success of this framework is the ability to consistently share learning widely across services and in a way that is engaging and owned by Practitioners, Team Managers, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), Service Managers, Heads of Service (HoS) and Senior Managers across Children's Services. The implementation of the Framework is supported by the Performance Team who produce performance data and the Centre for Professional Practice (CPP) who coordinate a range of quality assurance, learning and training activity.

### ***Principles***

- Quality assurance is child centred with a focus upon the experiences, progress and outcomes for children as they journey through Children's Services and safeguarding systems – 'children at the heart of all we do'.
- Quality assurance is everybody's business and is based upon building relationships, through conversations and shared understanding with each other and with our partner agencies.
- Quality assurance is enriched by meaningfully gaining the voices of children, families, staff and partners and the influence of those voices in the shaping of the services that we provide.
- Quality assurance as a learning system is carried out in collaboration with practitioners and managers, to engender learning, accountability and change.
- Quality assurance generates an organisational culture that is committed to learning and continual development.

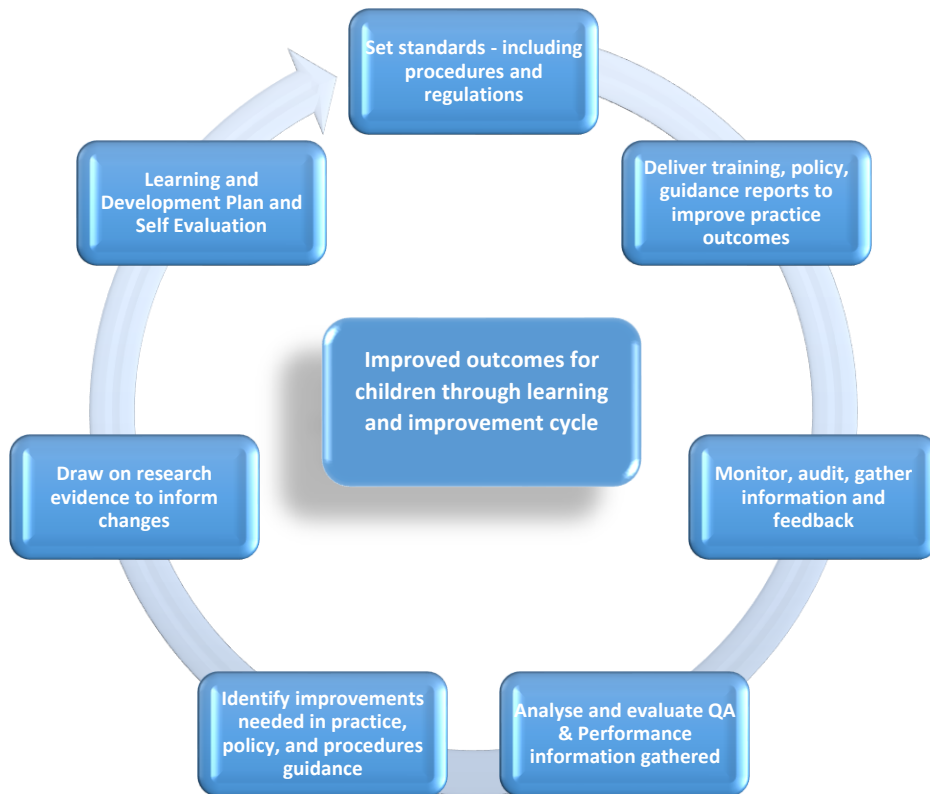
## ***Purpose***

- To develop a more confident and effective workforce who understand 'what good looks like' and able to use this to deliver positive outcomes for Children and Families.
- To continuously improve and sustain good quality of practice through reviewed and updated Practice Standards, Practice Guidance, Procedures and Policies.
- To know ourselves well, through triangulation of quality assurance findings, evaluation and analysis alongside staff supervision and annual appraisal, which leads to a consistent approach and 'baseline' established across the whole of Children's Services.
- To develop wider workforce involvement in the reviewing/evaluation process, thus ensuring that our self-evaluation is well understood and owned by all of our workforce.
- To highlight that senior managers' role in promoting and monitoring quality assurance activity is undertaken consistently and ensuring that learning and improvement is achieved.
- To continually develop a mechanism to regularly evaluate services and identify what difference we are making to children, young people and their families
- To ensure that good practice and learning from quality assurance activity is effectively shared and that we monitor impact on practice.

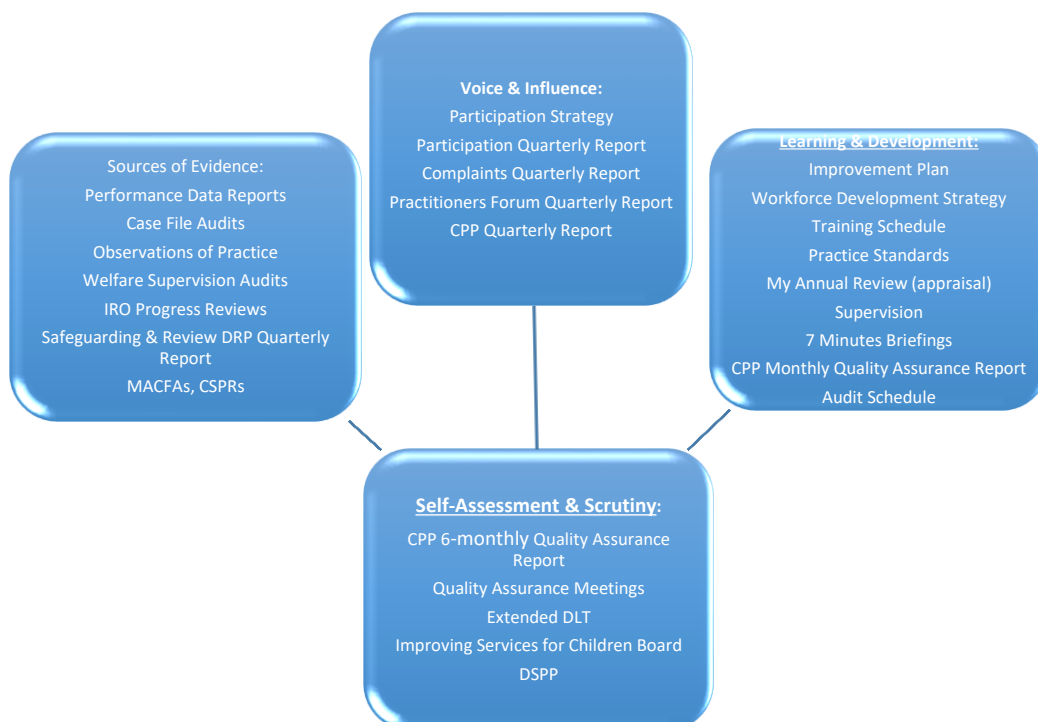
## ***Theoretical Model***

The Continuous Improvement & Learning System (figure 1) subjects the performance information to systematic analysis, from which knowledge may be gained to inform service development and ensures an evidence-based approach to drive practice improvement. This learning will inform direct work, the integration of training into practice, the provision and revision of practice guidance documents, and the allocation of resources to ensure improved outcomes for children and young people. The Quality Assurance and Learning Framework will inform the Workforce Development Strategy and ensure the recruitment, retention, and development of highly skilled practitioners within a continuous learning cycle.

**Figure 1. Modified - Research in Practice - Continuous Improvement & Learning System (2018)**



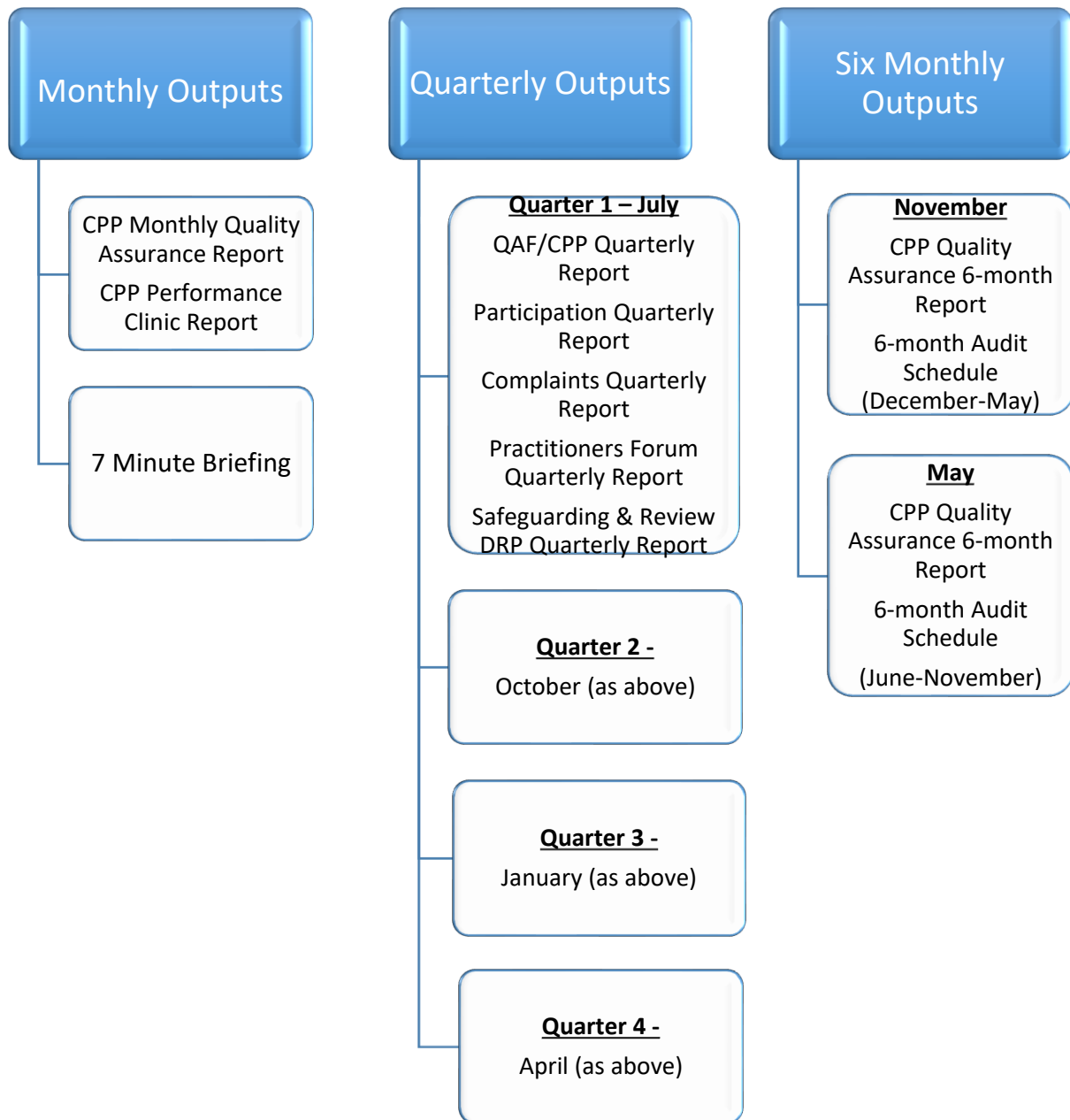
**Figure 2. Dudley Systems Map**



The Dudley Systems Map demonstrates how children, their families, and practitioners' "voice and influence" alongside "our sources of evidence" are gathered, reported, and brought together in a range of "self-assessment and scrutiny" activity. This in turn informs the "learning and development" offer all of which strive to provide a framework for continuous learning and improvement. This model will ensure services and practice are responsive to users' needs and wishes. Staff feedback, involvement and supervision, at all levels across Children's Services, is also highlighted as a key opportunity for reflection and self-assessment, enabling learning from experience, which is an essential process in the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984).

The Service Manager for the CPP will produce a monthly quality assurance report, summarising the findings from audit and moderation – specific to themes and service areas - and discussed at Manager and IRO Forums and shared with practitioners through 7 minute briefings. This will be complimented with quarterly reports presented to DLT and monthly Performance reports presented within Performance Clinic. The Participation, Complaints, Practitioners Forum, and DRP Quarterly Reports (outlined within the Framework) will feed into the CPP 6 monthly Quality Assurance Report, drawing together all of the sources of evidence within the Quality Assurance and Learning Framework compiled by the Service Manager for the CPP. The CPP 6 monthly Quality Assurance Report will be presented to Extended DLT to ensure middle and senior managers are informed of good practice, key themes, and areas that need further exploration. This will also be shared with the Improving Services for Children Board and DSPP to determine the Multi Agency audit and training schedules.

## Reporting Mechanism



## Section 2 - Sources of Evidence Providing Assurance

Our 'sources of evidence providing assurance' is wide ranging, which enables us to seek assurance about practice and organizational effectiveness, across the whole of Children's Services. Our aim is to move beyond auditing alone to a strategy that encompasses the voices of children, young people, parents or carers, our practitioners and the development of our workforce.



## ***Voice and Influence***

Participation and Advocacy work completed with children and their families is also a vital component in the Quality Assurance and Learning Framework. We expect our workforce to have a commitment to meaningfully and robustly gaining the views of children, young people and their families and ensuring that they are involved in key decision making on a day to day basis. We are building on existing systems to evidence participation right across



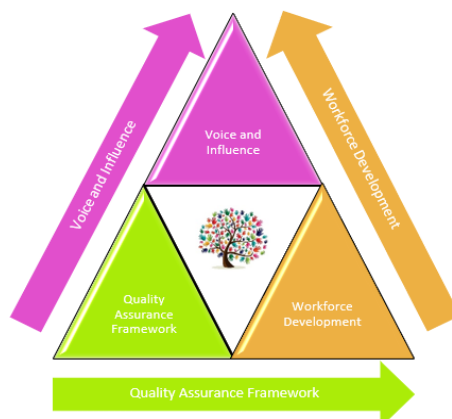
Children's Services and the important influence that feedback from families has upon the services that we offer; this will be outlined in the Participation Strategy. A continuous feedback loop, throughout our intervention, including during audits, is essential for understanding the impact upon families of interventions and their experiences of being assessed and supported by us.

The Children's Participation Worker will complete a quarterly report of all participation and advocacy, internal and externally commissioned, provided to young people. The report will contain a brief analysis which will identify key themes, trends, and any difficulties young people are experiencing with service provision and engagement. The report will be shared with Extended DLT and analysed in the CPP Quarterly Quality Assurance Report.

Complaints and compliments about Children's Services are another important element of the Quality Assurance and Learning Framework. The Children's Services Complaints Team will provide a quarterly report, identifying the nature of all reports received and provide an analysis which identifies trends about the nature of complaints. The report will be shared with Extended DLT and analysed in the CPP Quarterly Quality Assurance Report.

The Principal Social Worker (PSW) facilitates a Practitioner Forum with a range of staff from across Children's Services. Practitioners represent and share views from their Service areas into the Forum and also take information back. Practitioner views are also sought on leadership plans and members understand that their views from the frontline are essential to the development of the wider service. The Practitioner Forum will report on their work quarterly and this will be shared with Extended DLT and analysed in the CPP Quarterly Quality Assurance Report.

## Performance Framework



In Dudley, our performance data includes an agreed set of performance indicators and targets that are set nationally based on statutory guidance (Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2018; the Care Planning, Placement, and Case Review Regulations 2010) and locally. Nationally determined performance indicators allow us to benchmark local practice against national, regional and statistical neighbours to determine performance; identifying areas of strength and areas requiring improvement. Our focus is that all managers and practitioners have an understanding of their role to improve performance and that managers recognise that they are accountable for effectively managing the performance of their teams/services.

**Table 1 – The Performance Reporting Framework**

2nd full week of each month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Performance team to run reports and complete scorecard for circulation to Extended DLT.</li> </ul>
3rd / 4th full week of each month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•HoS and service managers to review performance, with support from analysts through existing meetings and follow up to drill-down on figures.</li> <li>•HoS complete performance report.</li> </ul>
Performance Clinic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Performance session based on HoS performance reports.</li> </ul>

Performance data is generated from recordings on children’s electronic files and is available in a range of formats. Daily regenerated reports are available meaning consistently accessible data are available to all levels of management and designed to assist Team Managers to monitor individual workers caseloads and drill down into how individual children’s needs are being met in several areas. This data can be used in staff supervision or team meetings as required. There are two monthly reports, the Safety Scorecard and Drift and Delay Scorecard, designed to assist Team and Service Managers. These reports provide an overview of practice but also enable managers to drill down to individual workers or children as required. This data can be used in

Team Managers' supervision and performance clinics (Service Manager chaired meetings with Team Managers and HoS chaired meetings with Service Managers). There is a monthly Directorate Scorecard designed for service, HoS and Senior Managers and provides an overview of practice alongside agreed targets and enables comparison with national, regional and statistical neighbours. This data is used by managers as outlined in Table 1. The range of formats are designed to provide data in a way that is accessible and meaningful for different levels of management and is one strand for monitoring and evaluating the performance of service areas, teams and staff members.

HoS review performance, with Service Managers and the support from analysts, through existing performance meetings and the HoS complete a performance report to reflect areas of strengths and weakness and priority actions required.

### ***Safeguarding & Review Service***

The role of the IROs in quality assurance is pivotal as the critical friends of the local authority. IROs have an important part to play in identify good practice, the timely progression of children's plans, and initiating effective challenge when practice falls short of practice standards. Furthermore, the IRO Handbook states: 'the individual IRO is personally responsible for activating the dispute resolution process, even if this step may not be in accordance with the child's wishes and feelings, but may, in the IRO's view, be in accordance with the best interest and welfare of the child, as well as his/her human rights' (Section 6.4, IRO Handbook, 2010).

Our IROs are part of the monthly thematic audit programme. The IRO Service Managers will undertake themed manager audits bi monthly and IRO specific audits in the alternate month as part of their role to continually review the progress of children subject to child protection planning and children looked after. For example, in Dudley, IROs undertake a Progress Review for all children subject to CP/LAC plan. The practice standard for a Progress Review can be found in the [IRO Practice Standards Guidance](#). The Progress Review is recorded as a "Progress Review" case note on the child's electronic file. The Progress Review is a key monitoring activity and is an opportunity for IROs to ensure children's plans are being progressed. If there is insufficient progress the [Dispute Resolution Process](#) (DRP) is initiated.

DRP is an important element of the Quality Assurance and Learning Framework. The Service Managers for the Safeguarding and Review Service collate a DRP quarterly report of all alerts raised, identifying key themes about practice issues relating to frontline work, management response or organisational/systemic culture. The report will be shared with Extended DLT and analysed in the CPP Quarterly Quality Assurance Report.

## ***Dudley Safeguarding People Partnership***

DSPP undertake a programme of multi-agency quality assurance and audit activity each year, which is supported across the Partnership. Children's Services will participate in and learn from relevant multi-agency audits commissioned by the DSPP. Findings from such multi-agency case file audits (MACFA) and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs) will be included in the CPP Quarterly Quality Assurance Reports. A member of CPP will complete MACFA audits in conjunction with the service, where appropriate and attend MACFA meetings. CPP will provide a summary of learning from the MACFA audits and share these findings via 7 minute briefings to disseminate learning and training identified.



We will also engage in learning events and any improvement activity in relation to findings from Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews. The CPP Quarterly Quality Assurance Report will be shared with the DSPP via the Children's Safeguarding Partnership Group representative, which will help the DSPP to determine the Multi Agency audit schedule.

### **Section 3 - Quality Assurance Activity**

Case file audits, welfare supervision audits, observations and service visits provide insight into the journey of the child and the impact of our actions and decision making and whether this has led to change. All managers across Children's Services, as well as the Cabinet Members for Children's Services and the Chief Executive, will undertake case file audits to assess the quality of recording, practice and the outcomes and experiences of children and young people.

#### ***Auditing schedule***

There is a schedule of auditing themes identified 6 months in advance based on the CPP 6-monthly Quality Assurance Report. Each month, the cases to be audited are selected randomly from the identified theme and cohort of all relevant children by the CPP. A range of audit activity is undertaken by all managers within Children's Services as follows:

#### ***Audits:***

Team Managers	1 case a month
Family Solutions Managers	1 case a month

Residential Managers	1 case a quarter (3 managers so 1 case per month)
IROs	IRO Service Managers will allocate peer audits within the service.
IRO Service Managers	Alternate between monthly deep dive audits, and monthly IRO specific audits
Service Managers	1 case every month

The Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Service and the Early Help Service will be carrying out audits in their areas.

Team Managers will audit cases from teams they are not directly responsible for.

***Moderation;***

- CPP practitioners will audit 20% of all audits undertaken within Social Care, and 10% of audits undertaken with Early Help. All audits identified as Inadequate are subject to moderation and follow up. The remaining capacity of CPP practitioners audit time per month will be used to moderate a selection of audits, chosen at random, to monitor the quality of auditing and ensure the provision of developmental feedback to auditors on an ongoing basis.
- Moderation panels will take place once every 2 months – where a group of managers and social workers review the quality of the audit, not the case. This enhances consistency across the auditing process. This involves each panel member independently moderating then a discussion on the individual positions to come to a consensus or moderation as a group.

***Re-audit of Inadequate cases:***

- **5 Heads of Service** – will re-audit Inadequate cases within their service areas. This will ensure that the audit action plan has been completed and that the case is no longer Inadequate. The re-audit will be shared with the operationally responsible Service Managers to ensure any remaining actions will be monitored and evaluated.
- **The Assistant Director** – 1 inadequate case every 3 months.
- **The DCS** - 1 Inadequate case every 3 months.

### ***Re-audit of cases:***

- **The Cabinet Member for Children's Services** - re-audit 1 randomly selected previously audited case side by side with a member of CPP every three months.

### ***Bespoke and Themed Audits:***

- Completed throughout the year by the CPP to understand more fully particular areas of practice, including issues identified through performance data, or to respond to requests in relation to particular cases or cohorts of children. These may include a request by the DCS/AD, based upon concerns recognised in performance data or may be relating to individual worker or team's performance.
- Audits of case files are also undertaken by the CPP in readiness for career progression panel.

### ***Audit Process and Feedback Loop***

The audit tool has been developed by the CPP and includes specific targeted questions in relation to Children in Need, children subject to a Child Protection Plan, Children with Disabilities and Children in Care. The audit tool includes a judgment about the quality of work based on Ofsted grades, underpinned by Ofsted's evaluation criteria and grade descriptors. This is embedded into the Child's electronic record.

At the point of allocation, the auditor will make contact with the practitioner and Team Manager to inform them that an audit is being completed and arrange a time, at least one week after allocation, to meet with the practitioner to undertake the audit together. This is an important part of the process and allows the auditor to focus on the right issues for the worker or child in real time and reach conclusions that are jointly understood by the auditor and worker so that recommendations are agreed together, owned by the worker, and actions are the most important for improving outcomes for the child. The worker should prepare for the meeting by ensuring that the child's electronic case record is up to date. The auditor should prepare for the meeting by familiarising themselves with the audit tool and supplementary reading, including practice or statutory guidance, provided by CPP when the audit was allocated. The completion of the audit tool on LCS, following the meeting is the responsibility of the auditor.

The auditor, following consultation with the allocated worker, will if appropriate contact the child's main carer to inquire and determine how the child and/or parent/carers can be consulted as part of the audit.

If during the audit process the auditor becomes concerned about the safety and welfare of the child. In these circumstances the auditor will immediately alert the relevant HoS and any safety concerns will be addressed immediately.

If any practitioner involved with the audit disagrees with the findings of the audit, they should first discuss this with the auditor. If the practitioner and auditor cannot find a resolution, the auditor will alert the CPP to the dispute. The CPP team will allocate a worker to hold a Restorative Conversation with the practitioner and auditor. If the dispute remains, the HoS for Safeguarding, Practice and Quality Assurance will be alerted.

The auditor is responsible for completing the audit on the child's record. It is critical that auditors ensure that what is recorded on the child's case record is appropriate information. This information may be used in future to support legal proceedings and/or accessed by the child should they request access to their records at a later stage. The auditor will also check the case file two weeks after the completion of the audit to ensure recommended actions have been completed by the practitioner and manager and put a case note on file to reflect this has taken place. Where recommendations have not been completed or evidenced on the child's file the auditor will contact the practitioner and manager.

It is essential that case file audits result in improved practice with children and families, therefore, even those audits rated as good or outstanding, must include a **stretch target** for both the practitioner and manager involved. This learning includes feeding back any learning for partner agencies to the DSPP via the CPP Quarterly Quality Assurance Report.

To ensure this learning is acted upon within Children's Services, the manager will meet with the case holding practitioner and explore with them the core elements from the audit, hold a reflective 'support & challenge' conversation, including the setting of a stretch target, and ensure recommended actions are undertaken. This will be recorded on the child's case file as Supervision/response to audit as well as being recorded on the workers Welfare Supervision record on PIMs.

In addition, and to ensure the feedback loop is concluded, the Service Manager will meet with the team manager and hold a reflective 'support & challenge' conversation, including the setting of a stretch target. This will be recorded on the managers Welfare Supervision record on PIMs.

The CPP will identify good practice as well as cases which do not meet the required practice standards and ensure all audits identified as inadequate are subject to moderation and follow up. Specific examples of good practice identified within audits will be recognised as part of this process and fed back to practitioner via individual recognition emails and to management as outlined in the Systems Map (Section 1).

### ***Auditors Learning and Development***

We have recognised that for good quality auditing to take place all managers need the time to undertake audit activity alongside effective training and support. Furthermore, that our staff in the CPP also need ongoing development to produce consistent moderations. Therefore, all staff undertaking audits will attend briefings around this Framework and training to use the new audit tool. Managers are also provided with Audit Guidance documents produced by CPP. Guidance is also provided to practitioners to guide them through their role in the quality assurance process.

Auditors are encouraged to book the equivalent of one day per month in their diary to undertake audit activity.

### ***Observation, Visits and Welfare Supervision Audits***

Observation of staff in their everyday work is an important element of quality assuring front line practice. Alongside supervision and case file audits, observations are very useful for understanding the quality of practice and identifying strengths and areas of development of our workforce when working directly with families.

Key decision-making meetings will be observed in order to consider key factors such as leadership by Children's Services staff, multi-agency working and the involvement of children and families. Any observation of planned meetings with children, young people and their families, will be with their explicit and informed consent. Observers will explain that the purpose of this is to assess the effectiveness of help, care and protection for children, young people, their families and carers; it is not to make judgements about individuals.

The approach to staff observation will be closely linked to the workers My Annual Review (Appraisal). Specific themes identified during practice observations will inform My Annual Review objectives. Learning from practice observations will be used to support individual staff members and importantly, the wider continuous improvement agenda.

#### ***Audit activity:***

- Team Managers will complete at least 1 practice observation per team member in a year;
- Service Managers will complete 1 welfare supervision audit per Team Manager per year;
- Service Managers will observe 1 supervision of each direct report each year;
- IROs will be observed at least once per year – preferably twice, chairing one Child In Care Review and one Child Protection Conference
- HoS will complete the welfare supervision audit of Team Manager - 1 per year for each direct report;



- The Assistant Director will shadow 1 practitioner from their service area for half a day every 6 months for observation of practice;
- All Senior Managers will undertake visits to staff teams, residential homes and other settings during the year.

#### **Section 4 - Quality Assurance Impact on Learning and Development**

The Framework has the expectation that quality assurance activity leads to learning for individuals, teams and the organization as a whole. The Quality Assurance and Learning Framework will ensure that we share what we have learnt about our quality of practice with the workforce in a way that develops and sustains good practice. Thus workforce development plans, service plans and My Annual Review plans will evidence that they are shaped by the learning from the quality assurance process.

Registration of social work staff with Social Work England is reliant upon evidence of minimum learning requirements over a two year period; requiring managers to provide oversight to, and sign off, the evidence of learning for each qualified Social Worker for whom they are responsible.

The Quality Assurance and Learning Framework feedback loop includes the expectation that the impact of training will itself be quality assured. As a result, Dudley CPP will be assessing the impact of training; this will be reviewed quarterly by the CPP and inform the training schedule.

#### ***Practice Standards***

Practitioners and managers employed by Dudley Children's Services are held accountable for making sure that practice standards are met. [The Supervision Policy](#) and Annual Appraisal process ensures that staff are supported, challenged and have identified developmental targets to ensure practice is continually improved.

Those providing services on behalf of the Council are held accountable for making sure that practice standards are met through Dudley's commissioning arrangements which outline these expectations at the onset. Partner agencies working with children and their families are held accountable, and can hold Dudley's Children's Service staff accountable, through the Dudley Safeguarding People Partnership (DSPP) and the [DSPP Multi-Agency Resolution and Escalation Protocol](#).

Practice with children and their families is underpinned by the Children Act 1989 and Dudley's Practice Standards for [Social Workers](#), [Managers](#) and [IROs](#) are informed by statutory guidance and regulation (Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2018; the Care Planning, Placement, and Case Review Regulations 2010; IRO Handbook, 2010). They are based on evidence from the elements of practice which are most likely

to lead to good quality services and positive outcomes for children, young people and their families.

The College of Social Work set out standards of conduct for all social work staff, which is set in their Professional Capabilities Framework (British Association of Social Workers, revised 2018).

### ***Supervision and My Annual Review***

Dudley has a Supervision Policy that requires practitioners, with their managers, to reflect critically on their cases and foster an inquisitive approach to practice with children and their families; it clearly dictates that supervision records are used to demonstrate practitioners' and managers' reflections on the progress of cases and the quality of decision making. The policy also clearly requires the managers to use this process to support the practitioner to identify training needs and to then reflect on whether the training has impacted upon the quality of their practice.

All Dudley MBC staff have a My Annual Review. The appraisal takes the aims and priorities set out in the Council Strategy and Service Plans and translates them into objectives and targets for individual staff members. It provides the opportunity to identify strengths and areas for development in staff performance, including findings and recommendations from audits, and provides a vehicle to develop good practice.

Our stable and developed workforce is essential to us on our continued improvement journey. Here in Dudley we are working towards developing a supportive, yet challenging culture for our staff to grow. The Quality Assurance and Learning Framework feedback loop will inform the Workforce Development Strategy.

<b><u>Approved by:</u></b>	<b><u>Date</u></b>
Helen Ellis, Acting DCS	28 <sup>th</sup> January 2021
<b><u>Shared with:</u></b>	
Elected member	
DSPP	
<b><u>Review:</u></b>	
To be undertaken by the Head of Service, Safeguarding, Practice and Quality Assurance	September 2021