

# **Confidential Report**

**Report of an independent investigation into  
concerns raised in October 2013 about the  
Child and Family Assessment Team (CAFAT)  
Wrexham County Borough Council (WCBC)**

**Date of report: February 2014**

## 1 Introduction

### Reason for investigation

- 1.1 In October 2013 Councillor (Cllr) Malcolm King submitted a report to Councillor Neil Rogers, Leader of WCBC entitled 'Concerns Regarding Child and Family Assessment Team at WCBC', in which he outlined 16 specific allegations about CAFAT. This report is attached as Appendix A.
- 1.2 In consultation with Dr Helen Paterson Chief Executive (CE) WCBC, it was decided that she would commission an independent investigation into these allegations on behalf of the Leader. She actioned the commissioning process to the Head of Corporate and Customer Services.
- 1.3 The independent investigator was commissioned in November 2013 and a commissioning brief was drafted and agreed. This is attached as Appendix B and provides the framework for this investigation.

**Commissioning officer (CO)** -Trevor Coxon Head of Corporate and Customer Services (on behalf of Dr Helen Paterson CE WCBC)

**Independent investigating officer (IO)** -Helen Ryan

## 2 Methodology

- 2.1 As part of this investigation the following people have been interviewed and they have agreed and signed the summary notes of their interviews:

- Cllr King was interviewed on 9 December 2013 and 16 January 2014.

- 2.2 Witnesses interviewed:

- Cllr Neil Rogers- Leader of WCBC
- Cllr Michael Williams- Lead Elected Member for Children and Young People's Services
- Clare Field – Strategic Director for Children's Services
- Susan Evans- Head of Children and Young People –Prevention and Social Care
- Francine Salem- Head of Service Safeguarding
- [REDACTED] - Team manager CAFAT
- [REDACTED] - Policy and Projects officer
- [REDACTED] - Assistant Team Manager (ATM) CAFAT
- [REDACTED] - Social Worker CAFAT
- [REDACTED] - Family Support Worker (FSW) CAFAT
- [REDACTED] -Social Worker CAFAT
- [REDACTED] -Social Worker CAFAT
- [REDACTED] - Social Worker CAFAT
- [REDACTED] - Social Worker CAFAT
- [REDACTED] - Social Worker CAFAT

- 2.3 An email briefly outlining her experience as a new member of CAFAT was submitted to the investigation by:

- [REDACTED] -Social Worker CAFAT (At her request)

2.4 In addition to Appendix A, the following documents have been accessed during this investigation and are available to the commissioning officer for reference:

- Letter from Isobel Garner (previous CE WCBC) to Cllr Rogers 28 July 2010-Reference 1
- Letter from Cllr King re Child Protection Services in Wrexham to Gwenda Thomas the Deputy Minister for Social Services Welsh Assembly Government 27 August 2010 -Reference 2
- Letter from Cllr King to Isobel Garner CE entitled Child Protection Services in Wrexham 1 September 2010 -Reference 3
- Letter from CE to Cllr King 6 September 2010 -Reference 4
- Response from children's services senior officers to the allegations made in the letters from Cllr King September 2010 -Reference 5
- Report to the Executive Board entitled 'Safeguarding arrangements in Wrexham' from Clare Field 5 October 2010 -Reference 6
- Report to Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee entitled 'Progress within Child and Family Assessment Team' from Susan Evans 18 January 2012- Reference 7
- CSSIW Inspection of the arrangements for the Assessment and Care Management of Children in Need in WCBC May 2012 -Reference 8
- CSSIW Inspection of the arrangements for the Assessment and Care Management of Children in Need in WCBC March 2013 -Reference 9
- Letter from the Wales Audit Office to Dr Helen Paterson CE WCBC entitled 'Improvement Assessment' 11 September 2013 -Reference 10
- Report to Executive Board entitled 'Summary Quarter Two Performance Report' from Morgan Jones December 2013 -Reference 11
- Report to Education, Safeguarding and Well Being Scrutiny Committee entitled 'Departmental Service Activity and Performance half yearly update' from Susan Evans 12 December 2013 -Reference 12
- A sample of CAFAT team meeting minutes from 2013 -Reference 13
- CAFAT improvement plan June 2013 -Reference 14
- Performance data in respect of the overall performance of CAFAT from 2010- 2014 -Reference 15
- Various case file audit and risk assessment tools -Reference 16
- Chart of agency rates for children's social workers compared to directly employed social workers -Reference 17
- Table providing a comparison of social work salaries WCBC with other local authorities -Reference 18
- Human Resources reports relating to sickness absence, use of agency workers and turnover in CAFAT -Reference 19
- CAFAT induction programme -Reference 20
- Training information accessed by members of the CAFAT (various) -Reference 21
- 6 Social Worker supervision files were reviewed -Reference 22
- Supervision policy -Reference 23
- Recording policy -Reference 24

### **3 Context**

3.1 In interview Cllr King stated that in August 2013, by chance, he met a social worker that he had previously come across but did not know well, who currently works in CAFAT. After a cautious start this social worker made a number of

allegations about the performance of the team. It was arranged for Cllr King to meet with another social worker who was able to add a different but informed perspective about the CAFAT. Cllr King confirmed that he met with 4 social workers (to be referred to in this report as 'the 4 social workers') and they have contributed to the allegations outlined in Appendix A.

- 3.2 Cllr King confirmed that only 1 of these social workers was currently working in the CAFAT and he made it clear that as whistle blowers their confidentiality had to be protected, as they feared for their careers. The IO advised Cllr King that in order to carry out a comprehensive investigation the '4 social workers' should make themselves available to the IO. Cllr King was not optimistic that this could be achieved, as in his view the consequences for whistle blowers are well known and pose too great a risk. In interview Cllr King stated that *'he could think of no whistleblowers who had not suffered as a result of their whistleblowing'*.
- 3.3 In interview Cllr King confirmed that he had collated the information contained in Appendix A over a number of weeks from these workers. Cllr King was particularly concerned about the level of staff turnover in CAFAT. In interview he stated that he had spoken with Clare Field the Strategic Director for Children's Services, in the presence of Cllr Michael Williams Lead member for Children's Services, following a reshaping board meeting in August 2013 when according to Cllr King, Clare Field stated that the CAFAT had *'turned a corner, had done well and had a stable staff team. She said they were still improving.'* Also refer to Appendix A page 1. Cllr King believes that the information he has collated in respect of staff turnover is not consistent with the statements made by Clare Field and is of the view that she misled him and Cllr Williams. The latter does not share the view that Clare Field or any other senior officer in children's services has misled him.
- 3.4 Cllr King explained that he gave his report directly to Cllr Rogers without any discussion with other members or officers, because Cllr Rogers had been involved in the allegations made by Cllr King in August 2010 and therefore had an understanding of the context and wanted to engage him from the outset.

#### **4 Background**

- 4.1 This background information has been taken from the following sources: interviews with Cllr King and some of the witnesses; the formal reports and documents as outlined above in the methodology. The background provides relevant context in respect of the current allegations but is not covered in detail, as it is not central to this investigation. Full background information is covered in other reports that are available to the CO.
- 4.2 Cllr King is a long-standing elected member of WCBC and is the manager of the Venture, which is a community-based facility in a very deprived area of Wrexham. In interview Cllr King reported that over a number of years he had rooted out poor practice and challenged attempted 'cover ups' in a number of different settings, the most significant being the abuse in a children's residential home in Wrexham.
- 4.3 Cllr King stated that over a number of years he has been approached by social workers that disclosed concerns about CAFAT. Cllr King confirmed that in his professional role at the Venture *'he sometimes works with local authority social workers and over time relationships and trust develop with some people'*. Cllr



King believes that he is seen as someone who listens and takes people's concerns seriously and in his view this appears to be the reason why some workers have confided in him.

- 4.4 Over a period of time (approx. 2009/10) Cllr King stated that he tried to raise these concerns in various places for example in the first instance with the Director of Social Services and with the deputy Director but to no avail. Cllr King stated that the Director suggested that he should contact the inspectorate with his concerns, which he thought was an inadequate response. He also met with senior managers from children's social care but he was not confident that they were *'forthcoming with elected members'*. Following a further allegation from a social worker Cllr King decided to contact the Deputy Minister for Social Services in the Welsh Assembly as in his view he had been 'misled' by officers in children's services.
- 4.5 In 2009/10 a number of issues/events came together and resulted in a period of instability in CAFAT, a team that had previously been fairly stable. In late 2009 concerns were reported from within WCBC and from partner agencies about some of the working practices within the CAFAT. It appears that the most serious concern was in respect of the then team manager who had destroyed referrals prior to their entry onto the electronic social care records system known as RAISe.
- 4.6 This led to a comprehensive investigation of CAFAT led by Isobel Garner the then CE WCBC, supported by a range of professionals and an external independent body to enhance the integrity of the process. This investigation reported back in August 2010 and resulted in management intervention including the conduct of the team manager of CAFAT who was subsequently dismissed. In addition a number of changes to the working practices in CAFAT were implemented. WCBC invested in CAFAT to increase social worker and assistant team manager capacity. Following this investigation the CE worked closely with senior managers in children's social care in order to maintain oversight of the service and ensure continuous improvement. Reference1
- 4.7 Cllr King informed the IO that during this period he was in opposition and was therefore limited in what he could do. Cllr King stated in interview that *'there was a change in the financial plans as originally proposed budget cuts of 7% ended up as an increase of 11%'*. Cllr King stated that *'he fought hard to achieve this and led the battle in opposition'*. In interview Cllr King also stated that *'the widely held view was that the Venture often suffered as a result of his whistleblowing activities, including issues related to CAFAT and safeguarding children in Wrexham.'*
- 4.8 As stated earlier on 27 August 2010 Cllr King wrote a letter to the Deputy Minister for Social Services in the Welsh Assembly Government in which he made a number of very serious allegations about child protection services in WCBC. Reference 2 Cllr King also wrote to the CE WCBC on 1 September 2010 reiterating the same concerns. In due course the conduct of the team manager and the allegations made by Cllr King led to adverse media attention in respect of CAFAT and significant damage to the team's reputation. It is unfortunate but understandable that during this period a significant number of social workers left the team and this made the task of improving performance in CAFAT more difficult. This will be addressed in more detail later in this report.

## 5 CAFAT

### 5.1 Team Remit for CAFAT:

*It is the first point of contact for any member of the public or professional who may have a concern regarding the well being of a child or young person.*

*The team works within the Children Acts 1989 and 2004 and complies with national legislation and guidance. CAFAT provide a duty service, which receives information as well as providing information and advice to callers on a regular basis.*

*When required social work staff in CAFAT will complete initial and core assessments with families and work to support families who may be experiencing difficulties. Once an assessment has been completed it may be appropriate for short term services to be provided in order to support any changes made by a family.*

*The team members work proactively to help families remain together however on occasion it is necessary to take legal action to secure both immediate and longer term safety of children. Throughout their work CAFAT are committed to promoting positive outcomes for the young people and families with whom they work.*

## 6 Allegations

- 6.1 The 16 allegations outlined below are reproduced exactly as stated in Cllr King's report and each one will be responded to with the evidence collated during this investigation.

### 6.1.1 Turnover of Staff

*It is alleged that in the last 12 months, 17 staff have left the CAFAT team, 12 stayed less than a year. The normal staff complement I understand is 3 assistant managers and 14 social workers. It is extremely difficult to comprehend how a 100% annual turnover of staff can possibly be described as stable.*

#### **Evidence**

- (i) In Appendix A Cllr King has presented data about the turnover of staff in CAFAT in the period September 2012 to September 2013 (approximately). Cllr King believes that this data is evidence of a high level of staff turnover, which is in turn an indicator that the CAFAT is not a positive working environment. Cllr King believes that this demonstrates that Clare Field misled him in August 2013 when she stated that the CAFAT '*had been turned around..... with low caseloads and a stable staff team*', which was said in the presence of Cllr Williams.
- (ii) In interview Clare Field could not recall this specific conversation with Cllr King, as it was possibly one of many unplanned discussions with elected members about the service areas for which she is responsible. However Clare Field stated that if this conversation took place then she could have said that the CAFAT had made significant progress and that caseloads

had improved and that the team was now more stable because that was and still is, her perception of the team.

- (iii) Cllr Williams remembered an informal conversation in August 2013 following a reshaping board meeting when Cllr King and Clare Field were present. Cllr Williams could not recall the detail of the conversation but he did recall Clare Field saying generally that she was much happier with the direction of travel in children's social care, but could not recall this being specific to CAFAT.
- (iv) It is not possible to be conclusive about the content of a discussion between Clare Field, Cllr King and Cllr Williams in August 2013 as it was informal and there is no record. For this investigation the important issue is whether a positive statement about the stability of CAFAT in August 2013 was a reasonable and fair one based on the team's performance at that time.
- (v) The CAFAT staffing establishment during the period September 2012 – September 2013 (Cllr King's timeframe) consisted of:
  - 1 team manager
  - 3 Assistant Team Managers
  - 3 Family support workers
  - 13 Social workers (an additional permanent social work post was added to the establishment very recently to make 14 social workers)
  - 5.8 Administrative staff
- (vi) As stated by Councillor King the rate of staff turnover is one indicator of the functioning of a team, but needs to be considered alongside other indicators, for example sickness absence levels and staff morale. The rate of turnover as a measure of stability and effectiveness is only relevant when applied to permanent staff because agency staff are employed on a short-term basis and will inevitably increase turnover. Exiting agency staff and replacing them with permanent staff is positive but it can distort the overall picture if turnover is measured without providing context. To make a reasonable judgment about the rate of turnover in CAFAT it has to be seen in the context of the team's evolution over the past few years.
- (vii) In 2010 the reputation of CAFAT was damaged following the adverse media attention and this made it difficult not only to retain existing staff but also to recruit new staff. Therefore in order to maintain a safe service agency staff were contracted to cover vacant posts. It is important to note that this was happening at a time when there was a significant shortage of social workers across the UK following adverse media coverage of some high profile cases in various authorities.
- (viii) Over the next two years a number of measures were put in place to stabilise CAFAT and to improve performance. This is outlined in detail in the report to the Executive Board dated 18 January 2012 and confirmed in the CSSIW inspection report May 2012 in which it states:

*'After a considerable period of instability in staffing the council has taken a number of actions which have resulted in a decrease in numbers of agency staff and increased number of permanent staff'.*

- (ix) The situation continued to improve in the following 12 months, which is the period Cllr King, has made reference to in his report. The number of permanent staff in the team continued to increase whilst agency staff exited the team. It is the movement of agency staff that makes the turnover appear to be high when in reality the loss of permanent staff was minimal. However during this period the team had temporary vacancies due to the maternity leave of 4 permanent team members, which resulted in further use of agency staff to cover these temporary positions. During this period only 3 permanent staff left CAFAT, one moved for career change; one to be nearer to home and the other was a non-returner from maternity leave. (The Human Resources team has provided this information).
- (x) During the year September 2012 – September 2013 the staffing situation was as follows:
- 2 of the 4 managers had been in CAFAT for 6 and 3 years respectively and the other 2 were agency workers
  - 3 family support workers had been in CAFAT for 7, 5 and 2 years respectively
  - 6 Social workers were on permanent contracts and had been in CAFAT varying from 1- 3 years
  - 2 Social workers were on permanent contracts and had been in CAFAT for 6 and 9 months respectively
  - The remaining 6 social work posts were covered by agency workers- 4 of which were maternity leave cover for permanent staff, and 2 vacancies
- (xi) During the 13 months from September 2012- September 2013 there was an average of 5 agency workers in CAFAT at any one time. Reference 19 Whilst every effort is made to maintain continuity with agency workers it is not possible to do so as these workers move on for many reasons, sometimes additional remuneration in other local authorities and sometimes they are asked to leave because they are not competent.
- (xii) The CSSIW inspection report in March 2013 confirmed this situation as follows: *'Staff stability within children's services overall has improved considerably and although 3 members of staff have left CAFAT in the last 12 months the council has had a good response to adverts and is expecting to fill all vacancies. At the time of the inspection however, the CAFAT also had temporary vacancies due to maternity leave and internal promotions resulting in a number of agency staff (5) in a team of 12 being in post. Current sickness rates in CAFAT are relatively low'.*
- (xiii) The turnover referred to in Cllr King's report is primarily the movement of agency staff out of CAFAT either because they chose to go as stated above, or more importantly because permanent social workers were being appointed. To state that there has been a 100% turnover of staff does not reflect the reality as outlined above. However there is no doubt that the high level of reliance on agency staff over an extended period made it difficult to establish a team identity and to improve performance. There is evidence from this investigation that by 2012 the new team was beginning to form and has consolidated in the past 12 months.



- (xiv) It would be of concern if some agency staff were not leaving the team in a planned way to be replaced by permanent staff. Following the March 2013 inspection further permanent appointments have been made and the team has only 1 agency worker at present. As the permanent staff team has been established the performance of the team has improved and in many of the key performance indicators CAFAT is performing above the Wales average.
- (iv) Whilst recruitment has improved overall in CAFAT the management team is aware of the need to focus on retention and in order to do this they have a strategy of staff support and development as well as managing poor performance.

## Findings

1. The contextual information in respect of CAFAT over the past 4 years demonstrates a team that has worked very hard to achieve its current performance and a new sense of identity. Its starting point in 2010 was from a fairly low level and improvements have been achieved year on year. It is fair to say that CAFAT has made gradual and sustained progress over the past 4 years and more so in 2012/2013. This progress is evidenced in the performance data, which is presented to elected members every 6 months and demonstrates sustained improvements in many key performance areas. It should also be noted that sickness absence in CAFAT is below the average for the rest of children and young people's services and below the national SS APTC average. Reference 19
2. The managers of this service are aware of the need to make further improvements over the next 12 months and this is outlined in their improvement plan. However in August 2013 it is my view that it would have been reasonable and accurate for Clare Field to make a number of positive comments about CAFAT (if indeed she did) including its stability and reduction in caseloads, as this was the reality, one that was articulated in the CSSIW report in March 2013. There was and continues to be good reason for Clare Field to be optimistic about the current and future performance of the CAFAT.
3. I found no evidence to support the allegation that Clare Field misled Cllrs King and Williams.

### 6.1.2 Size of Caseloads

*A sizeable number/a majority of social workers appear to have high caseloads above 40 or 50 cases. Whilst this is much lower than the 60 - 70 cases which many social workers had a few years ago, they are still far too high, especially considering the apparently extremely high staff turnover and relative inexperience of the team members (see later)*

## Evidence

- (i) The number of cases held by a social worker at any point in time can be a useful but crude measure of their workload. The social care electronic system RAISe provides daily information about the number and type of cases held by individual workers which in turn enables managers to

maintain oversight of the team's overall workload as well as individual workloads.

- (ii) The CSSIW inspection report March 2013 stated: *'Caseload numbers appeared to inspectors to be high within the CAFAT team. Both managers and social workers acknowledged that the numbers were partly inflated by cases, which were awaiting formal closure. Managers also pointed to the fact that each child in a family is counted separately'..... the report goes on to say: ' Although measures are being taken to reduce caseload size the rate of through put of cases dealt with by CAFAT as the department responds to the higher than average number of referrals it receives, will continue to cause work pressures and require the council to consider whether there is sufficient capacity to achieve the required improvements'.*
- (iii) Since this inspection a further social work post has been established and other measures taken to reduce caseloads and work pressures, these will be outlined in later sections of this report.
- (iv) There is no national standard recommended for the size of social work caseloads, it is expected that managers match case complexity with a worker's level of experience and competence. There is evidence from interviews and supervision records that this happens in CAFAT. The social workers that were interviewed consistently stated that although they are a very busy team, they have manageable workloads and the main problem was finding time to close cases when the work was completed. The closure of cases will be addressed in more detail later but it is worth noting at this stage that workers have to make up a paper file at the point of closure as well as completing all of the electronic pro formas. This is time consuming and a duplication of effort, however the Head of Service and the project and performance officer are addressing this.
- (v) A number of workers acknowledged in interview that they struggle to prioritise closures and therefore inactive cases inflate their caseloads. One worker stated: *'there is always a discussion about when cases will close/transfer. I still have to work at closing cases in a timely way and I know that it is not good practice to keep cases open when CAFAT intervention is completed.'* Social workers also consistently stated that when they have a build up of inactive cases their supervision is usually increased to help plan and prioritise their work appropriately. In addition they may not be given any new work until they have closed their inactive cases and this is done with a high level of management oversight.
- (vi) Caseloads are recorded on RAISe as follows:
  - a) Individual children counted as 1 case (this in effect means in a family where there are 4 children will count as 4 cases)
  - b) Family group caseloads in which one family counts as a case
  - c) Inactive and awaiting closure
- (vii) In November 2013 the average caseload for category a) was 29.8 and for category b) was 15.1, and c) was 12.6. The same data was accessed from RAISe during this investigation on a date selected randomly by the



IO, which was 14 January 2014. In respect of a) it was 28.4 and in respect of b) it was 16.1 and c) it was 7.31.

- (viii) There are significant differences between workers caseloads depending on experience and competence and ability to close cases. In November the highest caseload was 46 children; 24 families and 19 inactive cases and therefore a net active caseload of 27; another caseload of 42 children and 19 families with 21 inactive cases thus a net caseload of 21. There is a clear correlation between high caseloads and the corresponding number of inactive cases awaiting closure with that worker.
- (ix) There is evidence from the review of supervision files as well as interviews with staff, that managers are involved at the time of allocation and that they take into account the worker's capacity to take more cases. Caseloads are printed from RAISe for each supervision session and individual cases are reviewed and clear plans are put in place to progress each case. This appears to be done in a supportive and enabling way. However there is evidence that with a small number of workers it has been necessary for managers to adopt a more formal and directive approach where progress has not been made despite a number of revised timeframes.
- (x) The volume of work in CAFAT is high and there is no doubt that staff and managers would welcome lower caseloads, but with the current level of staff and the volume of referrals it is not realistic to reduce workloads in the short term. WCBC has increased capacity in CAFAT from 1 ATM to 3 ATM's and from 10 – 14 social workers over the past 4 years. This investment in front line child protection services has enabled the team to process incoming work and to provide a safe level of service.
- (xi) During this investigation senior managers acknowledged the pressures on social workers arising from the volume of referrals. However they are aware that in the current financial climate it is unlikely that any further resources will be available. Work is ongoing to 'change some working practices' in order to free capacity in the team and thus reduce time spent on tasks that are not direct work with children and families. The introduction of the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) in February 2014 is likely to reduce the incoming volume of referrals in CAFAT and the impact of other preventative services should continue to make a positive difference.
- (xii) In the short term the performance officer is working with CAFAT to make changes to RAISe in order to streamline some of the processes and release social work time. An example of this is the combined assessment, which reduces duplication of effort when completing the separate initial and core assessments. Other initiatives have also been implemented and others are in the pipeline for example removing the need for the duplication of records at the point of closure.

## **Findings**

1. I have found evidence that some workers have an overall caseload of 40 as stated by Cllr King but this figure includes inactive cases and is not therefore an accurate picture of workload.

2. Referrals rates in CAFAT are high and the team has no control over this on a day-to-day basis. However the further development of preventive services, which is ongoing in Wrexham, should ensure that support services are put in place at the point of need, thus preventing escalation to a higher level of need for some children. Also the internal measures as outlined above to streamline work processes will also free up social work time and reduce work pressures, in particular the volume of paperwork required at the point of closure. This will be kept under constant review by managers and reported to elected members on a six monthly basis.
3. Social workers in the team generally recognise that there is no silver bullet and that managers are working with them to improve their working arrangements and in particular workloads. When considered in the context as outlined above my judgment as the investigating officer is that caseloads are at an acceptable level within the team but managers need to continue to monitor this situation and keep the lead member appraised as well the Executive Board who receive 6 monthly reports.

### **6.1.3 Agency Staff**

*It appears that the practice of employing a large proportion of agency staff has become a permanent feature of the CAFAT team. During the last 12 months almost 50% of the team have apparently been agency staff. Whilst a few stay for years most stay just a few weeks or months. All are paid at a much higher rate than the Council employed staff creating tensions and resentment.*

#### **Evidence**

- (i) The role of agency staff in the CAFAT has been covered in 'Turnover of staff', above and will not therefore be repeated in detail in this section. It is clear from the background information that for an extended period in 2010/11 CAFAT was heavily reliant on agency staff but gradually shifted the balance from agency to permanent staff during 2012/13.
- (ii) Agency staff played a key role in stabilising the team following the events of 2009/2010. The recruitment of a permanent workforce has taken time due to the many factors outlined above, but this has now been achieved. It is very likely that it will be necessary to use agency staff again in the future to cover vacancies as there will always be some turnover, as some staff move on for career progression; take maternity leave; are on long term sick. The use of agency staff to fill temporary gaps ensures that the service can be maintained.
- (iii) It was explained earlier that as permanent recruitment was taking place in CAFAT and some of the existing agency workers moved on, four members of staff went on maternity leave and hence a period in 2013 when the number of agency staff increased, this was noted by CSSIW and quoted above. There is now only 1 agency worker in the team and it is not therefore accurate to describe the practice of employing agency staff as a '*permanent feature of the CAFAT*'.
- (iv) Over the past 2 years senior managers in children's services have worked with the human resources team to negotiate a reduction in

agency workers' pay to bring it in line with permanent staff salaries and therefore it is not accurate to state: *'All are paid at a much higher rate than council employed staff creating tensions and resentment'*. This is evidenced in Reference 17.

## Findings

1. The use of agency staff in CAFAT has been necessary and appropriate in order to maintain a safe service. As social workers' salaries in WCBS were increased in 2011 and agency staff pay scales reduced there is no evidence that the more recent use of, or future use of agency staff would cause tension. There was ample evidence available that Cllr King could have accessed prior to submitting his report that would have made it clear to him that agency salaries and WCBC social work salaries are in line.

### 6.1.4 Inexperienced staff

*Many social workers are apparently very inexperienced, with many taking up post with less than 1-year post qualifying experience of social work. In the last year, 13 I understand out of a complement of 13 had no post qualifying experience before coming to work for the CAFAT team!! In addition newly qualified social workers are apparently supposed to have a protected caseload (i.e. less than 25) and additional support given to them. This does not apparently happen. In the last 12 months I understand 9 social workers had less than 3 years experience between them. There appear to be very few experienced social workers at any one time.*

## Evidence

- (i) The recruitment of permanent staff into CAFAT has inevitably resulted in a significant number of inexperienced staff joining the team; this is replicated in many parts of the UK. Cllr King's allegation that: *'In the last year 13, I understand out of a complement of 13 had no post qualifying experience before coming to work in the CAFAT team'* This statement implies that all of the team (as it refers to 13 workers) had no experience when they joined CAFAT and is misleading. This figure has been taken from a list of 23 workers and it includes agency staff. Out of the 13 on the list with no post qualifying experience when they came into CAFAT, 5 are agency workers and the other 8 are permanent employees. There is no evidence that 13 workers with no post qualifying experience were employed in the team at the same time. The remaining 10 workers on the list had 43 years experience between them. Some of these were agency workers and some were permanent staff. This allegation has distorted the reality of CAFAT during the period in question.
- (ii) It is accurate to say that there are newly qualified staff in CAFAT. This is inevitable given the availability and willingness of experienced workers to work in front line assessment teams. For the purpose of this investigation what is important is how this situation is being managed. The CSSIW report March 2013 also commented on the limited experience within CAFAT. In interview Cllr King acknowledged that this was a much wider problem than CAFAT and in his view should be addressed at a national

level but was clear that his primary responsibility was for what happened in Wrexham.

- (iii) There is evidence from interviews and from the review of supervision files that in CAFAT there is a clear set of standards and expectations in place in respect of newly qualified social workers. The increase of ATM's from 1 to 3 is a key part of the additional capacity to support and develop all social workers but in particular the newly qualified and inexperienced staff. There are now 3 experienced ATM's in the team, 2 are permanent and 1 is an agency worker, there is also a very experienced and competent team manager. Together these 4 managers provide a high level of support and oversight to ensure the induction, supervision, training and development of newly qualified staff is compliant with the local and national standards and expectations.
- (iv) There are now 8 social workers in CAFAT with more than 12 months experience and within the 8 there are 3 social workers with over 10, 6 and 4 years experience respectively, the remainder have 12, 18 months and 2 years experience. These social workers are engaged in the mentoring and support of the newly qualified staff, and in interview they consistently agreed that this was positive for the newly qualified staff and good for their own development. The staff were realistic about this situation and did not minimise the heavy workload of CAFAT. It was clear that they share these responsibilities across the team as they are all very busy and their capacity is limited. I found there to be a strong team ethos for the support of newly qualified staff.
- (v) In respect of caseloads for newly qualified staff, Cllr King is correct to say that they should have protected caseloads; they should be protected from holding child protection work until they have received the appropriate training and reached an appropriate level of professional confidence and competence. In CAFAT all child protection work is allocated to the more experienced social workers who are supported by managers in this area of work. There is no local or national standard that requires newly qualified staff to have fewer than 25 cases, it is not clear from what source Cllr King has obtained this figure and in interview he did not provide any further clarity.
- (vi) In interviews with social workers it was clear that they take the mentoring role seriously and in turn newly qualified staff feel supported by their own mentor as well as other members of the team. This is not to suggest that this process functions without difficulties at times. All of the staff in this team are very busy and there is no doubt that this sometimes makes workers tired and feeling under pressure, some staff acknowledged this in interview. A [REDACTED] assistant team manager stated: *'...staff are very supportive of each other, they get tired because it is so busy but they all pull together'*.
- (vii) The overwhelming message from social workers and managers was a strong commitment to working together and supporting each other and many examples of this were provided. The experienced staff understand the importance of supporting and developing newly qualified staff. For some of them their own experience of being newly qualified is not very long ago.



- (viii) It is important that newly qualified staff have opportunities to develop and that they are not over protected. The managers appear to be aware of this important balance and ensure that newly qualified staff start with low-level children in need cases and gradually move onto more complex children in need. Newly qualified staff have opportunities to shadow their more experienced colleagues on child protection cases to gain relevant experience. This approach appears to be working effectively across the team. A newly qualified worker [REDACTED] stated: *'from the beginning I have had a mentor which continues and I was secondary allocated to cases to effectively learn the processes and to be supported in my learning and development. It has been a positive experience in the team'.*

## **Findings**

1. I have found that inexperienced staff are appropriately inducted, supervised and supported in CAFAT. There are clear protocols and procedures in place to ensure newly qualified staff are given work that is commensurate with their experience and competence. All newly qualified staff have a mentor as well as a line manager. The supervision policy Reference 23 states that *'supervision will take place at least once a month. This frequency may be increased if the staff member is new in post or newly qualified'*, this policy is adhered to in CAFAT.
2. It is equally important that in addition to there being appropriate protocols and procedures in place, there is also evidence of a team culture in which newly qualified staff are welcomed, nurtured and professionally developed. This appears to have been embraced by the team as a whole according to the feedback from staff during this investigation.
3. This allegation is not supported by evidence and lacks credibility as it has used data to present a distorted picture of the reality in the team.

### **6.1.5 Quality of Work/Pressure to close cases too early**

*The lack of supervision and support for newly qualified and inexperienced staff, often temporarily employed, as Agency staff leads inevitably to poorer quality work. However, most of all it appears that the constant pressure to close cases as early as possible leads to what several social workers have described as dangerous practice, with inadequate work being done to help children and families, and as a result re-referrals occurring with unjustified frequency. Although more difficult to measure, this is the danger area.*

## **Evidence**

- (i) The evidence collated in this investigation does not support this allegation. There is evidence that all social workers receive formal monthly supervision and for some workers it happens 2 weekly. In addition there is a high level of informal supervision, this was consistently reported by social workers in interview. Many said that there was always a manager available to consult about a case matter. The supervision files provide evidence that supervision covers: personal issues (where relevant); professional development and training and case discussions using the caseload print out from RAISE. It is clearly recorded on files

and on RAISe case notes that once the worker and manager have agreed that the necessary work has been completed, a decision is made about whether the case will be transferred to TAC; the 'long term team' or closed, and an action plan with timescales is agreed for each case.

- (ii) It is appropriate for managers to set clear expectations about the timeframe for the closure and/or transfer of cases. CAFAT like many other 'front line duty and assessment teams' has a high case turnover and it is essential that they maintain throughput in order to have the capacity to respond to new referrals. There was no evidence in interviews or from supervision files that cases were being closed prematurely.
- (iii) The statement in this allegation that: '*several social workers have described this as dangerous practice*' has been discussed with Cllr King in interview. It is not clear who the several social workers are as they wish to remain anonymous and Cllr King stated that only 1 of the 4 workers involved actually works in CAFAT. Cllr King has been made aware that there is a professional responsibility on these workers to provide evidence if they believe the safety of children has been or is being compromised because of the working practices in CAFAT. The needs of the children should take precedence over the workers' wish to remain anonymous. The '4 social workers' have chosen not to make themselves available for this investigation and the suggestion that they fear for their future careers is not credible.
- (iv) The level of re referrals is a key indicator of whether the initial referral was responded to appropriately. The level of re referrals was identified as a priority practice issue in the 2011 CSSIW inspection and the data at that time indicated that there was a problem in CAFAT. Over the past 2/3 years management has addressed this practice issue and it has been reported in detail to elected members in the reports to the Executive Board, Education Safeguarding and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee in December 2013. In the March 2013 CSSIW inspection some cases were found to have been the subject of a previous referral some within the past 12 months. CSSIW's case analysis concluded that an earlier assessment should have taken place. Managers continue to monitor this area of practice to ensure that assessments are carried out at the appropriate time. Consistent management of the duty desk and the routine case file audits has strengthened the management oversight of this area of practice.
- (v) It should be noted that the Summary Quarter 2 Performance Report December 2013 also highlighted the improvement in re referrals and Cllr King presented this report to the Executive Board, he was therefore aware of this improvement in performance. In interview he said he was uncomfortable with this report but had to take advice from the performance officers. Cllr King went on to say that as this investigation was underway in December he decided not to raise his concerns in Executive Board as it may have undermined this investigation.
- (vi) The level of re referrals has decreased: from 44% in 2010/11 of referrals that were re referrals within 1 year; to 22% in 2012/13 and 21% in the second quarter of 2013/14. This demonstrates a stable performance and



brings the CAFAT's performance below the Welsh average of 27% which is a significant improvement and invalidates the allegation in Cllr Kings report that: '*as a result re-referrals occurring with unjustified frequency*'.

### **Findings**

1. The evidence I found on supervision files confirmed that supervision is compliant with the supervision policy for children's social care including newly qualified staff -Reference 23 and this was confirmed in the inspection report CSSIW March 2013. I did not find any evidence to support the allegation that there is pressure to close cases. There is an appropriate expectation that cases are closed when workers have completed their planned work. This is essential in a short-term team with high levels of incoming work it would otherwise become silted up with unallocated referrals.
2. The allegation that *re referrals occur with unjustified frequency and is a danger area* is unfounded and is an ill judged statement to make without any supporting evidence, indeed there is evidence available to refute this allegation, evidence that Cllr King was aware of at the time he made this allegation

#### **6.1.6 Poor allocation method for new cases**

*The normal method of allocating cases to individual social workers appears to be that all new cases are allocated to whichever social worker happens to be on the duty desk that day, which may result in up to 10 new cases being added to a social worker's caseload in a single session. For social workers already feeling overwhelmed with work, this often results in social workers feeling swamped by new cases. (new cases need to be responded to within 7 days)*

### **Evidence**

- (i) The CAFAT has a duty desk, which has a static team consisting of: an ATM, a qualified social worker and a family support worker plus administrative support. As they are dedicated to the duty role these workers build up expertise and important relationships with partner agencies who may seek advice and support about a case matter. The duty desk receives all referrals, and the static workers do not have allocated cases.
- (ii) In addition there is a duty rota for the rest of the team and this generally works out that each social worker is on duty every three weeks.
- (iii) The system works as follows: the duty desk ATM reviews all new referrals and identifies those that need to be allocated. The team manager then reviews these referrals and meets with the social worker that is on duty that day. The cases are discussed and it is agreed what action is required. This provides the worker with the opportunity to clarify their understanding of the case priorities.
- (iv) This social worker will not usually be allocated further cases until their next duty day in three weeks, which gives them time to complete their assessments. This process was understood by those social workers that

were interviewed and there was general consensus that the allocation process was fair. However staff were realistic and understood that there are times when exceptional circumstances mean that they have to respond to cases when it is not their duty day. This is always done in consultation with a manager and was seen to be part of the job. It was confirmed by some of the workers that if on their duty day they had particular pressures within their own workload, for example care proceedings, then they would only deal with section 47 enquiries for that day and the manager would seek to allocate other referrals to other team members.

- (v) The team manager and head of service meet weekly to review caseloads and take into account anyone who is experiencing particular pressures in their caseload. This level of managerial oversight ensures compliance with statutory duties whilst carefully managing a high volume of cases taking into account the experience, competence, workload and any other relevant issues for individual social workers. Interviews with staff and review of supervision files indicate that by and large this system works effectively.

### **Findings**

1. I found no evidence to support this allegation.

#### **6.1.7 Financial management**

*It appears that one of the negative factors in attracting and retaining staff in Wrexham is that neighbouring Authorities pay higher salaries than we do. Whilst paying our social workers at a lower rate may, on the face of it, save Wrexham County Borough Council money, the fact that agency rates are spending far more than if we raised our normal rates of pay to match or even better our neighbouring Authorities, thereby attracting and retaining more Council employed staff and spending less as a result.*

### **Evidence**

- (i) It is unclear why this allegation has been made as it is inaccurate and it is inexplicable that '4 social workers' would not be aware that they had a significant pay award in 2011.
- (ii) Part of rebuilding the CAFAT after the difficulties in 2010, the head of children and young people worked closely with the human resources manager to improve pay and career opportunities for social workers. This was achieved in September 2011 when a new pay and career structure was implemented and brought WCBC social workers, team managers and assistant team managers in line with, and in some cases exceeding the pay scales of neighbouring authorities. This is outlined in a report to Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee Agenda item 7, 18 January 2012. At the same time WCBC created a level 4 social worker post that provides social workers a further opportunity in their career progression, there is no evidence that this is available in any of the neighbouring authorities. This is outlined in Reference 18.
- (iii) As stated earlier in this report following the poor conduct of a team manager and the previous allegations made about the CAFAT in 2010,

there was adverse media coverage and a significant exit of permanent staff from the CAFAT. There was a competitive market at that time for agency workers in all areas of the UK and as a result salaries for agency workers who were in short supply increased considerably in a short space of time. In order to maintain the service WCBC had to offer enhanced rates in order to cover vacancies. As stated in an earlier part of this report senior managers have since negotiated reduced rates for agency staff who when they are contracted by WCBC, are now paid in line with permanent staff salaries.

## Findings

1. This allegation is inaccurate and could have been clarified with reference to any senior manager in children's social care or human resources. Social work pay scales were increased in 2011 and this went through a formal council process involving elected members. It was Cllr King's responsibility to check this for accuracy before submitting it as an allegation.

### 6.1.8 Misleading CSSIW

*Prior to the last CSSIW inspection, it has been alleged that the [REDACTED] was employed temporarily through the social worker agency to tidy up working arrangements and ensure the best image was presented to the inspection team. Despite this, the CSSIW inspection raised a number of serious concerns.*

## Evidence

- (i) It is accurate that [REDACTED] was employed on a temporary basis in CAFAT between [REDACTED], and is the [REDACTED]. He was employed through Matrix which is an independent service contracted to recruit temporary staff on behalf of WCBC. [REDACTED] was appointed as an [REDACTED] to cover the [REDACTED] when the [REDACTED]. This is a critical role in terms of the safety of the service and could not have been left vacant. Once a new permanent [REDACTED] was appointed [REDACTED] was expected to induct and support this person into their role. His experience and competence matched the person specification and although he is the [REDACTED] there is no evidence that this compromised his position as an [REDACTED]. During his tenure he was supervised by the [REDACTED] with an agreement that any issues in respect of [REDACTED] performance would be passed to the [REDACTED] and go straight to the head of children and young people's service Susan Evans.
- (ii) The main issue in this allegation is that [REDACTED] was appointed to 'tidy up working arrangements' for the March CSSIW inspection, in order to mislead the inspectors. This is a very serious allegation and one, which the inspectors would be very concerned about as it potentially undermines their competence and integrity. I found no evidence to support this allegation; indeed the evidence refutes this as [REDACTED] was appointed prior to the notification of the inspection and could not therefore have been appointed for this purpose.

- (iii) Very little notice is provided about an inspection in children's social care and indeed some are unannounced. However it is usual for a team/service area on receipt of a notification of inspection, to carry out some preparatory work. Inspectors generally provide a list of what they want to read prior to their arrival on site. Also documents they may want to review whilst on site. It is incumbent on the managers of the service to prepare any policy or other documents requested by the inspectors; possibly set up an interview timetable; arrange visits to partner agencies and interviews with staff, parents and some children and young people. There can be a lot of work involved in the preparation for an inspection and all managers and some staff would help with this process, which takes place in a very limited timeframe.
- (iv) Preparation for an inspection is very different to the allegation as stated by Cllr King that there was a deliberate attempt to mislead CSSIW inspectors. In my view this indicates a lack of trust and confidence in the staff and managers working in CAFAT and more widely in children's social care. The inspectors are very experienced and competent individuals who can quickly see behind "window dressing". They have a robust methodology, which triangulates evidence through interviews with staff, partners and elected members; also scrutiny of relevant documents and files. Case records are at the heart of the inspection because they tell the child's story and provide the evidence of the service they have received. Case records are held electronically and cannot be changed/amended/deleted without leaving an audit trail detailing the time, date and person who has made the entry. Inspectors are aware of and check this as part of the inspection process.
- (v) In March 2013 the inspection report provides a balanced assessment of CAFAT performance as illustrated in the performance data that is presented 6 monthly to elected members. The CSSIW report acknowledged the progress made since the last inspection and highlighted areas for further improvement. It is 10 months since that inspection and there is evidence from current performance data that the improvements already made have been sustained and further improvements achieved. There is ongoing work to build on progress in 2014.

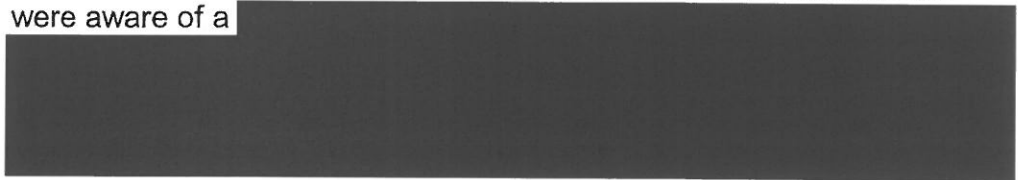
## Findings

1. I found no evidence to support this allegation.

### 6.1.9 Nepotism

*The practice of employing close relatives of senior staff within Children's Services has apparently developed over time. Whilst one would hope that appropriate methods are used for appointments, it is difficult to answer staff within Children's departments who regularly comment to me on the apparently increasing number of staff that this practice applies to. However much people may have been appointed on merit, it remains my view that we should do all we can to avoid giving anyone the opportunity for pejorative comment and raising suspicion. This issue can and does have a caustic and debilitating effect on staff morale and respect for the organisation.*

## Evidence

- (i) Cllr King has not provided any further evidence to support this allegation and as his report states: *'it is difficult to answer staff within children's department who regularly comment to me on the apparently increasing number of staff that this practice applies to'*. As the staff who have made these allegations have chosen not to contribute to this investigation and as Cllr King has only provided one example which is CB, then it is difficult to make a judgment.
- (ii) In interview Clare Field stated: *'as Wrexham is a small authority, there are occasions when members of staff are related and this cannot be completely eliminated but where this happens consideration is given to line management arrangements to avoid any obvious difficulties that can arise'*. Neither Clare Field nor Susan Evans could identify a significant number of situations in children's services where staff is related. Both were aware of a 

## Findings

1. I found no evidence that employing close relatives is an established pattern of practice in children's services. Susan Evans confirmed that it would not be acceptable for a manager to supervise or manage a close relative. This is the standard that is applied in such situations. As stated earlier Wrexham is a small authority and a major employer and it is likely that members of the same family will be employed in the authority but the potential for this applies across all areas of service and not just to children's services.
2. The important issue is that WCBC have robust and transparent recruitment processes in place to ensure all appointments are based on merit and not relationships, such procedures are in place. Also there are clear expectations in children's services about how family relationships are managed in the workplace.
3. I did not find any evidence to support this allegation.

### **6.1.10 Lack of training in child protection investigation procedures**

*Only 3 social workers (one until recently) have been trained in child protection investigation procedures (called Achieving Best Practice). This still leaves a very low proportion of the team with what appears to be an important qualification lacking for so many team members and leaves a very worrying gap in knowledge within the team.*

## Evidence

- (i) There is evidence from the training manual; supervision records and interviews that there is a comprehensive package of training available in child protection and other related areas of practice. Some courses are mandatory and others are agreed between the worker and manager in



accordance with the individual worker's development needs. All social workers have a personal development plan in their supervision file and their training and development needs are recorded for the following 12 months and reviewed in between times when training courses and other development opportunities are identified.

- (ii) A high proportion of the supervision files reviewed in this investigation evidenced a discussion at each supervision session about training opportunities. Also social workers reported consistently in their interviews that the team manager regularly sends emails with information about training courses and encourages people to attend despite the busy workload of the team. There is evidence in team meeting minutes that training opportunities are discussed and that social workers provide feedback to their colleagues when they have attended a course. All of this evidence indicates a team where staff development and training is very much a part of the ethos.
- (iii) The specific course referred to by Cllr King in his report, relates to Achieving Best Evidence, (not Practice as stated in Cllr King's report). This is a national protocol for interviewing vulnerable children and the specific training, which is provided jointly with the police and aims to equip social workers and the police with the skills to effectively interview vulnerable child witnesses and ensure this is carried out in a format that is acceptable within the criminal justice system. The professional who takes the lead role in an interview must have completed the training. This can either be the social worker or the police officer, more commonly it is the police officer. This training is carried out throughout the UK as all authorities must have a number of workers who are able to undertake these interviews, it would not necessarily be expected that all social workers receive this training.
- (iv) The training is usually delivered in 2 parts over a year and the course is usually provided on an annual basis. The reason for this is that it is a high cost and a very intensive course that can only accommodate a small number of equal participants from social care and the police. It is not logistically possible for all social workers to complete this training nor is it cost effective for them to do so as the demand for such interviews is limited. In CAFAT there are 3 social workers and 2 managers who have received this training and about 9 other staff across children's social care who could be called upon to carry out the lead role in an interview if necessary. In 2012/13 children's social care was awarded 6 places on the Achieving Best Evidence' course. For 2013/14 they have been awarded 8 places.
- (v) The training required to carry out child protection investigations under section 47 is different training, which is readily available and accessible to all staff in the team.

## Findings

1. It would appear that in making this allegation, neither the '4 social workers' nor Cllr King understand the distinction between these different types of training courses. Had they spoken to a manager in children's social care it could have been explained to them.



2. The evidence collated from this investigation demonstrates that there is comprehensive training available for all social workers. Training needs are formally agreed in the personal development plan in accordance with the supervision policy. There is evidence that staff attend mandatory training and also additional training to enhance their professional skills and competence. Access to the Achieving Best Evidence course is adequate within the context outlined above.
3. There is no evidence to support this allegation.

#### **6.1.11 Poor supervision**

*Social workers complain that supervision concentrates overwhelmingly on the need to close cases as soon as possible. This constant pressure to close cases inevitably creates pressure on social workers to cut corners and close cases too soon. Social workers also complain of a lack of mentoring, particularly those with no social work experience before starting with CAFAT and being plunged in at the deep end. There appears to be little or no mention of the All Wales Child Protection Procedures, which it is felt should be CAFAT's Bible.*

#### **Evidence**

- (i) Supervision has been addressed earlier in the report in various sections and will not therefore be duplicated here. In summary there is evidence from a number of sources including: staff interviews; review of supervision files; performance report from RAISe as well as the March 2013 CSSIW inspection report, that formal supervision is being carried out on at least a monthly basis in line with the supervision policy and more often when social workers have specific issues to be addressed. Informal supervision is readily accessible to social workers as and when it is required.
- (ii) The CSSIW report stated: '*the council has demonstrated improvement in the recoding of supervision. This was identified as an area for improvement in the 2012 inspection report. Supervision files and supervision notes on case files read by inspectors, as well as interviews with staff and managers, indicated that supervision takes place on a regular basis and is felt to be effective. Annual performance development reviews are also taking place. The council provided evidence of capability issues being taken up with staff members.*'
- (iii) CAFAT is a very busy team and it is credit to the staff and managers that they prioritise supervision and recognise its value when working with vulnerable children and families. The review of supervision files in this investigation found them to be well organised and that the supervision was of a high standard.
- (iv) I did not find any evidence in supervision records of pressure to close cases prematurely. In those cases where closure was appropriate the managers set a date with a plan for closure. If this did not happen it was followed up at the next supervision with revised timescales for closure. As stated earlier it is essential that these cases are closed and as long as there is a full discussion between manager and worker then the decision rests with the manager who is accountable for the overall

performance of the team. All social workers interviewed seemed quite puzzled by this question and responded consistently that there was no pressure to close cases.

- (v) The process for closing cases was described by staff and managers as outlined above. It was reported that once the social worker has completed all of the actions and paperwork the assistant team managers will quality assure the paper and electronic file, but ultimately the closure is signed off by the team manager. Social workers consistently stated that the team manager will return cases if there are any flaws in the practice and/or paperwork. Also she will not close a case unless a child has been seen within 2 weeks of the closure. This is not consistent with the allegation that *'social workers cut corners and close cases too soon'*.
- (vi) The mentoring scheme has been outlined previously and will not be repeated here. Also there is no evidence that new experienced or inexperienced staff are *'plunged in at the deep end'*. To quote from a couple of staff interviews: *'I was gradually allocated cases but was not given CP cases, just CIN .....I was not dropped in at the deep end'* This was a social worker who started in [REDACTED] and had some related experience but no statutory child care experience. Another worker who started in [REDACTED] and qualified as a social worker in 1996, stated: *'I appreciated the 'gentle way into the work', which lasted a few months until about [REDACTED] when I became a case holder'*. The views of these two individuals were replicated in the staff interviews.
- (vii) All staff attend the introductory child protection courses which are mandatory. These courses focus on child protection procedures and Working Together. All staff are familiarised with the All Wales Procedures as part of their induction and there is a hard copy held in the team as well as access to them on the intranet. The child protection procedures are an integral part of the team's work on all of the cases they work with: for example: section 47, section 17, child protection conferences and core groups, this is their everyday work and it is therefore difficult to contemplate how 'the 4 workers' have made this allegation to Cllr King unless they as individuals do not understand child protection matters.

## Findings

1. I did not find any evidence to support this allegation.

### 6.1.12 No induction

*Social workers also complain of the lack of adequate or in some cases, any induction training. Poor planning has resulted at times with new social workers left with little to do until their RAISE training has been completed sometime over a week for the training event to start.*

## Evidence

- (i) There is a CAFAT induction booklet in each social worker's supervision file and it is signed and dated when each part of induction is completed. New staff also have a Children and Young People; Prevention and Social Care booklet and they also access the Corporate induction. It is a comprehensive process and happens for all staff when they join the

team. There was evidence in the review of supervision files that the quality and thoroughness of induction has improved over the past 12- 18 months.

- (ii) One social worker that joined the team in [REDACTED] stated: *'my induction could have been better with more structure and organisation .....but I completed the corporate induction at a later stage. I spent time on the duty desk and was able to read the All Wales Procedures'*. This worker went on to say that the induction of staff in the past 12 months has improved, as there has been more management capacity in the team. Another worker who joined the team in [REDACTED] stated: *'I had a thorough induction period which was supported throughout. I was encouraged to meet as many professionals and agencies throughout my induction and shadow experienced workers. I have had excellent support from my managers'*. Other interviews and the evidence on supervision files support this.
- (iii) The induction includes RAISE training but this generally takes place once workers have had a chance to meet other teams and agencies. The understanding and use of RAISE is important once workers are allocated cases and they need to record on the electronic file. As social workers are not allocated cases in the short term it is not clear why they would expect/need to access RAISE. It is not clear why the '4 social workers' have raised this issue with Cllr King, stating that not being on RAISE in their first week *'left them with nothing to do'*. This is inconsistent with the earlier allegation that people are *'thrown in at the deep end'*.

## Findings

1. The induction process is a comprehensive and well thought out process, which provides new staff with the opportunity to get to know the team; other teams in children's services and other departments in WCBC. It enables them to meet with partner agencies and some of the voluntary/independent sector.
2. During induction it is expected that staff read a wide range of policy documents including supervision and recording practices as well as the All Wales Procedures amongst other documents. RAISE training is part of induction and is planned into the schedule in line with plans for case allocation. There is a managers' checklist that has to be completed for all new staff. The head of service audits supervision files to ensure compliance with these expectations.
3. There is no evidence to support this allegation.

### 6.1.13 Support workers are case holders

*It appears that a number of support workers are case holders, which appears to be unsatisfactory. Much of the work involving closing cases is allocated to support workers, which is often highly inappropriate and with considerable risk attached to it.*

## Evidence

- (i) All cases in CAFAT are allocated to and managed by qualified social workers. There are 3 support workers in CAFAT. One is static on the duty desk and therefore is not a case holder. The other 2 workers undertake a range of work which includes: organising and supervising contact between children and parents; doing some direct work with children and young people for example 'how to keep safe'; and other general tasks carried out on social workers' cases. These workers are not case holders. This can be evidenced from RAISE.
- (ii) Support workers are sometimes secondary allocated to a case for example if they are supervising contact then they are named as secondary worker on RAISE so they can make case recording entries onto the child's file. This is usual practice in children's social care with electronic social care records. If a case is audited then it is clear who is the responsible case holder and any other relevant workers. Workers from other parts of children's or adult services will also be noted on RAISE as 'involved workers,' for example a youth justice or adult mental health worker. This is not case holding.
- (iii) If a qualified social worker needs a support worker to work directly with a child or supervise contact, a referral is made and the assistant team managers will decide whether a support worker has the capacity and/or competence to carry out the requested work. These support workers sometimes assist social workers with the paperwork when closing cases. All workers interviewed as part of this investigation were clear about the role and responsibilities of support workers and the RAISE system was examined to confirm that they are not case holders.

## Findings

1. I found no evidence to support this allegation.

### 6.1.14 Changing case holders as social workers leave

*Many children's families will experience the effects of chronic staff instability by changing over between social workers. This introduces an entirely unwelcome and harmful lack of continuity for vulnerable clients who have already frequently experienced high levels of instability in their lives.*

## Evidence

- (i) Firstly it is important to state that based on the findings of this investigation there is no evidence to support the statement: '*the effects of chronic instability by changing over between social workers*'. The issue of staff turnover has been fully addressed earlier in this report and whilst there have been difficulties historically there is now stability in the team and it would be expected that changes of worker would be the exception rather than the rule.
- (ii) At risk of repeating earlier comments it has been acknowledged earlier in this report that there will always be some turnover in the team as and when staff move on for personal or professional reasons and when there

are gaps due to maternity or sick leave. Current practice in CAFAT is to cover all vacant social work posts regardless. The posts are covered either by agency or sessional workers. This ensures the service can be maintained at a safe level and that all work is allocated in a timely manner and social workers caseloads remain manageable.

- (iii) The use of temporary staff will inevitably result in some changes of worker for some families but this has to be weighed against unallocated work that would leave the service unsafe. This is an aspect of service delivery that cannot be avoided. It is clear that social workers and the managers strive to keep this to a minimum but some change is inevitable and is not peculiar to CAFAT. At present there is no performance data available in respect of this matter.

## Findings

1. Most staff and managers in CAFAT and in many other areas of service strive to minimise a change of worker, as they understand the impact this can have on some children and families. However it cannot be eliminated for the reasons outlined above and is an operational challenge. However, as the CAFAT has had a reasonable level of stability for the past 12-18 months it is unlikely that changes of worker have occurred at an unacceptable level. This was not raised by CSSIW in the March inspection as an area of concern. It is possible that changes of worker was a more frequent event when there was less stability in the team but this will inevitably have improved with the growing stability of the team.

### 6.1.15 Oppressive culture

*Social workers complain of an oppressive working environment that lacks support and emphasises criticism. It does nothing to nurture inexperienced social workers who are thrown into the deep end of constant child protection investigations.*

#### Evidence

- (i) Much of what has been outlined in evidence in the above sections does not support this allegation. The supervision files demonstrate a supportive culture in CAFAT and staff interviews confirmed this. In addition the team meeting minutes provide evidence of an open culture in which a wide range of issues are discussed in team meetings, which are held 2 weekly. Staff confirmed that they could put items on the agenda for team meetings and can have their say.
- (ii) Staff also confirmed that managers have an 'open door policy' and are very accessible. It may be useful to provide quotes from social worker interviews that illustrate how people experience the team:

*'the staff group is definitely more settled .....there is always a manager available and the team rally around .....I had a lot of support from the team and in my view there is a strong culture of support'.*

(This worker has been in the team since [REDACTED])



*'I am concerned that this complaint has come at a time when the team has come together and that the working atmosphere is open and supportive.....managers listen to what staff have to say, they are very open and are available for staff to seek advice and guidance.....the team has worked very hard and at last is a permanent team which is stable and working together*  
(This worker has been in the team for over ■ years)

*'I am of the view that the team is stable as it is at present you feel supported even when you have a heavy workload.....I feel there is a good atmosphere in the team and that it is not an oppressive culture, management provide feedback about performance individually and as a team and let staff know when there have been improvements'.*  
(This worker has been in the team for ■ years)

*'I feel it is now a team and not just a group of people and there is good will and support'*  
This worker has been in the team since ■

*'The team feels like a unit with nice relationships and support. Although people are busy and at times when people clearly feel under pressure and feel stressed there is a positive attitude and lots of team discussions mainly about cases'.*  
This worker joined the team in ■

- (iii) During interviews staff made it clear that they value the support they receive from managers and appreciate the increase in ATM capacity. Various other supports have been put in place, which include: additional capacity to assist social workers with paperwork, the gradual move to a paperless system, which will reduce duplication; access to various technical devices/systems to enable flexible working arrangements.
- (iv) Social workers also stated that they would feel confident about approaching a senior manager if they had concerns that were not listened to or addressed by the assistant managers or team manager. Staff have access to the Lead Member for Children's services who visits the team as well as Clare Field and Susan Evans. There is also a Whistle Blowing policy if social workers feel there are issues of concern they need to address. There are staff in the human resources department who can assist if a member of staff wishes to raise concerns outside of their line management.
- (v) The statement in this allegation that: *'It does nothing to nurture inexperienced social workers who are thrown in at the deep end of constant child protection investigations'*. The evidence outlined above invalidates this statement in its entirety. All social workers who were interviewed both experienced and inexperienced confirmed that child protection work is not allocated to inexperienced staff. Supervision files and RAISe reports confirm this. This is reliable evidence set against no evidence provided by Cllr King and the '4 social workers'.



## Findings

1. There is very clear evidence that all social workers and other staff are supported and professionally developed in CAFAT. There is evidence in supervision files and from interviews that when a social worker has personal difficulties this is taken into account by their manager and they are supported throughout.
2. However there is also evidence that poor performance in CAFAT is appropriately managed, as some workers either need additional support within a formal capability framework to benchmark and measure their capacity to improve, this generally works. When it does not the workers may be exited from the service. This is appropriate management of staff but can be viewed negatively by some workers who find it difficult to deal with their practice shortfalls. CSSIW commented positively on the management of individual workers performance.
3. I have not found any evidence to support this allegation.

### 6.1.16 Feedback to referrers

*Feedback to referrers appears to remain at a very low, if not non-existent level.*

#### Evidence

- (i) As with previous allegations, this allegation does not provide context or evidence. If this allegation has been made by '4 social workers' it is confusing as it is within their role and responsibility to provide feedback to referrers, therefore the allegation is about their own practice.
- (ii) However based on this investigation it is my view as the IO that this is a subjective view expressed by Cllr King. The latter made reference in his interview to the lack of feedback received from social workers to staff in the Venture, which includes himself in another role. This was not backed by any substantial evidence/examples.
- (iii) However managers acknowledged that this is an area of practice that needs to improve, as feedback to referrers is not consistently provided at present. The team manager picks this up at the point of closure when appropriate with the expectation that a letter or telephone call will be made to inform the referrer of the outcome. Until recently there was no performance report on RAISe to monitor this area of practice and therefore no baseline from which to measure current or future performance and progress. The project and performance officer has recently put this in place and it will enable managers to work from the current baseline and set clear targets for improvement.

#### Finding

1. This is a practice issue, of which managers of the service were aware and are addressing as part of their overall improvement. Cllr King's allegation that feedback is low is probably correct but the statement that it is non-existent is not accurate and is not supported by evidence.

## 7 Conclusions

- 7.1 Cllr King submitted a report to the Leader of WCBC, which contained 16 serious allegations about CAFAT. These allegations are based on information provided by 'the 4 social workers' and there is little or no credible evidence to support them. The '4 social workers' have not engaged in this investigation and Cllr King's suggestion that to do so would put their future careers at risk is not convincing. The unwillingness of these workers to engage with the investigation calls into question their integrity and motivation for making what must be seen as unsubstantiated allegations.
- 7.2 It is entirely appropriate for elected members to ask questions and challenge performance in any service area, as they are ultimately accountable. However Cllr King could and should have approached Cllr Williams, the Lead member for children's services, and/or any of the managers with responsibility for CAFAT. This would have provided an opportunity for all parties to share information that could have clarified the allegations outlined in Cllr King's report. The latter chose not to make any initial enquiries and went straight to the Leader with his report. In doing so he bypassed his colleague Cllr Williams and the managers of the service and in the process undermined their positions. This mirrors the approach used by Cllr King in 2010 when he bypassed WCBC and went straight to a minister in the Welsh Assembly Government and only later informed the then Chief Executive.
- 7.3 In interview Cllr King stated that on this occasion he had gone straight to the Leader as the latter had been involved in CAFAT issues in 2010 and was therefore familiar with the background. It is true that the Leader was aware of the issues in 2010 but that does not provide a sound rationale for bypassing other colleagues in respect of *these* allegations. In interview Cllr King stated that as Clare Field was the subject of part of his complaint it would not be appropriate to meet with her. He also stated that *he had a conversation with Cllr Williams about these allegations after the '4 social workers' had spoken to him*. Cllr Williams did not recall having this conversation. *Cllr King stated that Cllr Williams has a good understanding of Education but less so of children's social care and that he relies on Clare Field to keep him informed*. Cllr King went on to say *'that the significant areas for improvement in CAFAT are covered up and that they were covered up when the inspectors came in last time'*. This attitude towards other colleagues whether it is officers or elected members is disrespectful.
- 7.4 Based on the findings of this investigation, it is my conclusion that the 16 allegations in Cllr King's report are either wholly inaccurate or contain some relevance that is taken out of context and does not contribute to the overall understanding of CAFAT performance. This team has made gradual and sustained progress over the past 2/3 years. I found strong leadership from the management team at every level and a clearly articulated vision to achieve an outstanding service. The managers are under no illusions that the improvements they have made so far must be sustained and that as far as possible with limited resources they must continue to achieve further improvements. There is no evidence in recent or past reports presented to elected members of an attempt by officers to mislead elected members or of any attempt to mislead CSSIW. Weaknesses in CAFAT and other parts of children's social care are outlined in the six monthly reports presented to elected members and confirmed by CSSIW. This is an open and transparent process.

- 7.5 These 16 allegations are very serious matters and are presented in a report without any credible evidence to support them. The content is not only inaccurate in many of the statements but also provocative. Many of these statements are very similar in content and presentation to those put forward by Cllr King in 2010 for example: staff turnover; case loads; inexperienced staff. Cllr King also had anonymous 'sources' when he made allegations in 2010. During his two interviews for this investigation Cllr King made many references to 2010 and found it difficult to remain with the current allegations. He appeared to be pre occupied with the background and possibly unable and/or unwilling to accept the current performance data and other evidence of stability and improved performance in CAFAT over a significant period.
- 7.6 During the staff interviews different emotions were expressed to me about Cllr King's allegations. Some workers were distressed and felt their hard work and commitment was not valued; some were angry that their team had been criticised and undermined unfairly. One [REDACTED] assistant team manager stated: *'When I heard about Cllr King's complaint I was shocked as the content of the complaint is nothing like the CAFAT I have experienced'*.
- 7.7 Another worker who has been in the team for more than 5 years stated: *'I am concerned that this complaint has come at a time when the team has come together and the working atmosphere is open and supportive.....I am concerned that this complaint could destabilise the team and cause people to leave'*.
- 7.8 It is not clear to me how much thought Cllr King has given to the impact of his allegations on individual workers and the team as a whole. I cannot believe that Cllr King set out to destabilise CAFAT but that is a potential outcome if this situation is not carefully managed and action taken to avoid this happening again in the future. It is important to reiterate that challenging the performance of a service based on evidence is appropriate. All elected members can do this in a number of situations for example: the Executive Board when children's services reports are presented by the Lead Member and officers are also present who could respond to any concerns an elected member had, Cllr King has not chosen this option. There are Labour Group meetings when Cllr King could raise his concerns with Cllr Williams direct and agree how to follow it through; Cllr King has not chosen this option.
- 7.9 Cllr King's allegations are not based on evidence. They are broad unsubstantiated statements about CAFAT most of which appear to have little basis in reality. If Cllr King had reviewed the performance data, read the CSSIW report March 2013 and talked to the appropriate people this situation could and should have been avoided. Following this investigation if Cllr King continues to pursue these allegations then I believe his motivation for making them should be challenged, as it is difficult to understand how and why an experienced councilor would proceed to make judgments about a service based on the views of 4 workers and without testing out what they said against the available evidence.
- 7.10 In interview Cllr King made reference to the *fact that there is a widely held view that the Venture often suffered as a result of his whistleblowing activities including issues relating to CAFAT and safeguarding children in Wrexham.*

- 7.11 A number of witnesses posed the question whether Cllr King had made these allegations at this time in response to the proposal not to renew the Venture's contract as he had made his 2010 allegations in similar circumstances. This investigation has found no evidence to support or refute that theory but it cannot be dismissed, as it is otherwise very difficult to understand Cllr King's motivation for making unsubstantiated allegations.
- 7.2 It is clear from this investigation that Cllr King appears to be determined to focus on negatives without first testing their accuracy. He has made reference to the CSSIW inspection March 2013 and has focused on the negatives without acknowledging the many positives also identified by the inspectors. He seems unable to give the managers and staff of CAFAT either the credit they deserve for the progress they have made or his confidence, trust and support.

### **Recommendations**

1. That team members and managers of CAFAT are formally thanked for their engagement in this investigation and are given feedback on the main findings.
2. That the findings of this investigation are shared with Cllr King and his responses are recorded as a formal record.
3. That Cllr King is given the opportunity reconsider the allegations in his report (Appendix A) in light of these findings and to provide a written statement of support and confidence in the staff and managers of CAFAT.
4. That the council ensures there is clear guidance in place outlining the specific steps for councilors to follow if they have concerns about any service area in the future.



Helen Ryan  
Independent investigator  
27 February 2014