

# Children's Services Quality Assurance and Learning Framework



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# 1. The Quality Assurance and Learning Framework

The Quality Assurance and Learning Framework for Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) Children and Families Services covers a wide range of activities undertaken to ensure that work is carried out to the highest possible standard. Enhancing the way we work with children, young people, families and carers is at the heart of our work. The framework underpins and informs our work by providing systematic monitoring and evaluation of practice, policies, and procedures.

The primary aim is to enhance our understanding of whether we support individuals in the right way, at the right time, and whether we have a positive impact on children's lives.

The framework is not intended to prevent or delay any action that is identified as being needed by any member of staff or manager, nor should it prevent dialogue between managers, staff and other professionals regarding necessary actions. The framework does not absolve managers or practitioners of responsibility or accountability for their actions.

The framework enables us to strive for continuous service improvement through ongoing self-assessment and evaluation. The purpose of the framework is to:

- Embed quality into practice to improve outcomes for children.
- Embed quality into the service through adherence to practice standards.
- Ensure that services achieve and maintain consistently high standards.
- Ensure we regularly evaluate the quality and impact of services.
- Support an organisational culture that promotes continual learning and development.
- Support the ongoing professional development of the social care workforce.
- Develop an accountable workforce, which collectively engages in the quality assurance process.

All quality assurance work is underpinned by the following principles:

- The quality assurance process will value the contribution of any child, young person, family member, carer, representative, advocate, staff member, partner agency or significant other to achieve positive outcomes.
- Quality assurance will be based on the features generally agreed as constituting high quality from current best practice guidance and research from relevant bodies including Ofsted, LGA, ADCS, HCPC, BASW, RiP, CC Inform and Skills for Care.
- Everyone who is part of the Children's Services workforce has a vital role in improving service quality.
- Quality assurance is not a single event; it is part of a continuous improvement cycle.
- All members of the Children's Services workforce have access to comprehensive policies, procedures, practice guidance and information about research evidence to inform their practice and development.
- Quality assurance will be an integral part of new service development to ensure that practice and processes can be monitored from the outset.
- Quality assurance will draw together messages from a wide evidence-base to provide an overview of quality and learning and support activities that drive continuous improvement.

## **2. Quality Assurance is Everyone's Business**

It is essential that all levels of staff contribute in driving forward good quality work. Those conducting inspections, audits and other quality assurance approaches share responsibility for ensuring that all levels of staff are actively engaged in the quality assurance process, whether this be through auditing, observations, case discussion, focus groups, bite size workshops or forums.

### **2.1 The Role of Children's Services Staff**

All staff employed within Children's Services are individually responsible for ensuring that their work is of a consistently high quality. Staff will be held accountable for ensuring that the department's practice standards are met at all times (see Section 3 below).

### **2.2 The Role of Operational Managers**

Operational managers need to be very clear about their role in the appraisal process and how practice standards are included within this. They also need to demonstrate the importance of these standards by ensuring that any employee who is unable to meet the required standards receives the appropriate support. Managers should also use the quality assurance process to recognise and praise good performance.

### **2.3 The Role of the Principal Social Worker**

The Principal Social Worker (PSW) supports quality assurance and adherence to practice standards. The PSW takes responsibility for supporting and advising on the quality of practice and provides professional leadership for social work practice. In addition, the PSW champions the voice of frontline practitioners and draws on professional experience and consultation with frontline staff to influence strategic decision making across the organisation, using their knowledge and skills to inform the wider functions of the organisation.

The PSW also promotes and participates in developing the body of social work knowledge and research both within and outside of the organisation, working in partnership to ensure that developments reflect the needs of frontline practice.

### **2.4 The Role of the Partnership and Quality Assurance Unit**

Together with operational managers, Partnership and Quality Assurance (PQA) is responsible for scrutinising and monitoring the work of Cambridgeshire's Children's Services and commissioned services. This is undertaken in accordance with legislation, statutory guidance, performance indicators, practice standards, national and local priorities.

The PQA unit includes a team of Independent Reviewing Officers, Child Protection Chairs Quality Assurance Officers, Customer Service Team and the Local Authority Designated Officer.

The aim of the PQA is to provide a proactive approach to quality assurance in order to ensure that the quality of work continues to evolve in line with service improvement plans. PQA contributes to the improvement cycle by embedding this framework and supporting the operational service to drive up standards.

PQA pays careful attention to the boundaries between the quality assurance role and that of operational managers. The role of PQA does not negate the role of operational managers who remain accountable for supervision and oversight of casework including quality assurance.

PQA will:

- Audit casework and provide feedback regarding audit outcomes.
- Identify the need for themed audits in conjunction with Senior Management teams.
- Support multi-agency audits as required by the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).
- Recognise and promote good practice.
- Offer support and challenge, focusing on practice standards.
- Identify the need for additional support for individuals and teams to assist the improvement process including bespoke training, workshops and resources.
- Monitor and track the delivery of action plans following audit completion.
- Contribute to the development of policy and procedures to support improved outcomes for people who use services.
- Undertake wider QA activities including observation of operations and consultation with service users and staff.

The Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Chairs contribute towards the quality assurance process by raising concerns on practice involving looked after children and children who are subject to a child protection plan through an escalation system.

In addition, the PQA refines policies and procedures in response to emerging needs and actively seeks feedback from children, young people, families and carers through consultation and participation work to ensure service users' views inform service delivery.

### **3. Practice Standards**

CCC's practice standards define good practice and provide a clear outline of what is expected when providing services to and safeguarding children and families. These are based on available evidence about the elements of practice, which are most likely to lead to quality services and positive outcomes. These standards will be used in commissioning, auditing, evaluating, monitoring and supervising services and practice.

All staff employed by or providing services on behalf of CCC Children's Services are held accountable for making sure that practice standards are met at all times.

The following practice standards will be applied across all staff working within Children's Services (overleaf).

## 3.1 Children's Services Practice Standards



# Practice Standards

These standards define good practice and make explicit what is expected of staff when providing a service to children, young people and families.

- 1** Risks to children will be identified, responded to and reduced in an effective and timely manner to make a difference to each individual child
- 2** Children's assessments will include all relevant information to illustrate what it is like to be this child, will be up to date and will involve the child, family and carers
- 3** Children's plans will be bespoke, SMART, influenced by the views of the child, family and carers and develop in line with the child's journey
- 4** Visits to children, families and carers will have a clear purpose, and will progress the plan with appropriate use of direct work and tools
- 5** Children's records will detail the child's lived experience and what they would like to be different, with evidence that our intervention is influenced by these views
- 6** All aspects of children's identities and significant people in their lives will be routinely considered throughout their involvement with Children's Services
- 7** All relevant professionals will be involved in the assessment, planning and review process with robust professional challenge in the interests of the child where appropriate
- 8** Children in care will be in stable placements that meet their needs and take account of their wishes, will be supported to achieve their outcomes and prepared for independence
- 9** Children's records will have evidence of effective management oversight and reflective supervision to drive progression of the case and professional development
- 10** Case recording will be timely, clear and reflective of all work undertaken, with evidence that intervention from Children's Services has had a positive impact on the child's future outcomes

## 4. Continuous Improvement Cycle

Cambridgeshire County Council's quality assurance activity is modelled around a continuous improvement cycle (fig.1) to ensure that we:

- support the professional development of staff,
- improve frontline practice, and
- identify areas for service level improvement

whilst always keeping outcomes for children at the heart of what we do.

The continuous improvement model subjects evidence gathered in relation to social work practice to systematic analysis from which themes and patterns will be identified and shared to inform service development and continuous improvement. It is expected that this continuous analysis will drive evidence-based practice and improved outcomes for children and families.

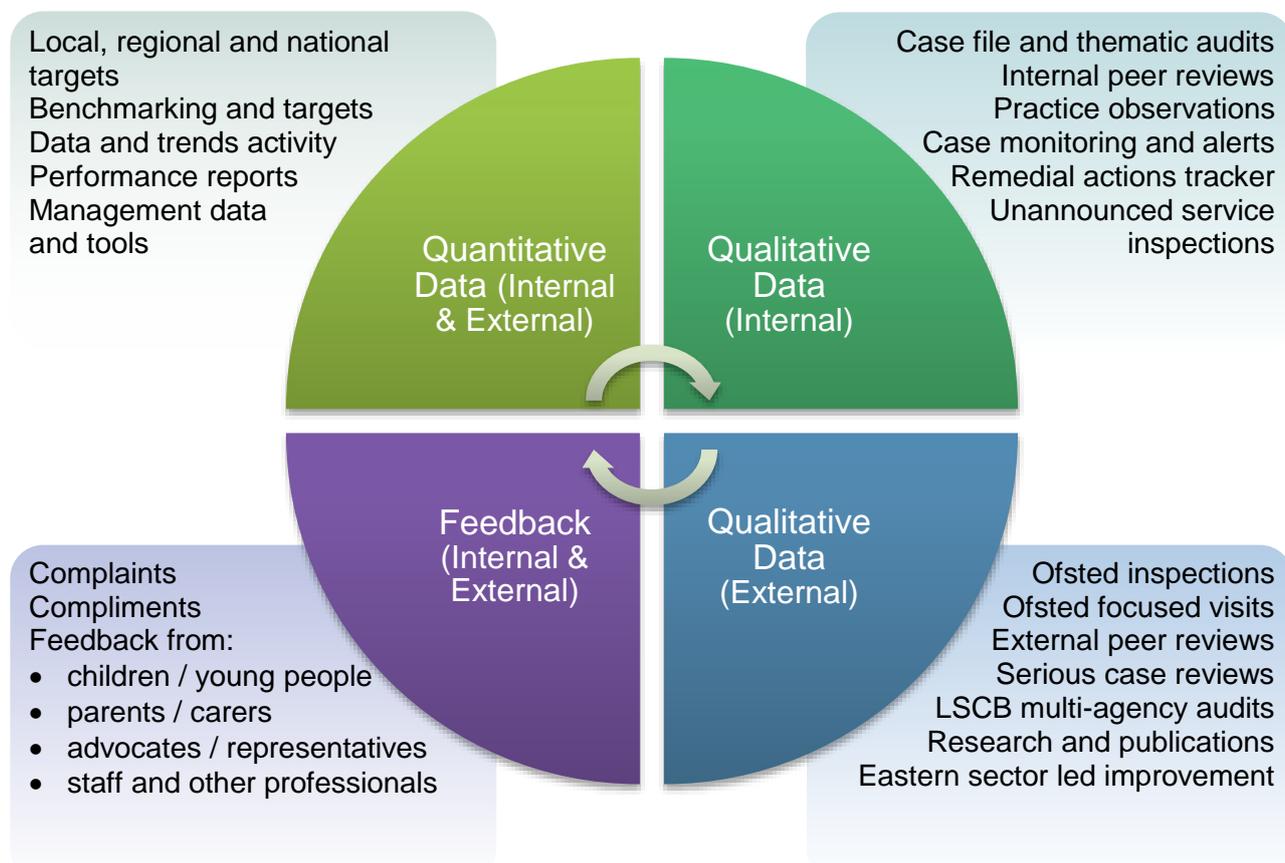
*Fig.1: Continuous Improvement Cycle*





Evidence about practice is found from quantitative and qualitative data (both internal and external) and feedback in accordance with the quality assurance activity model (fig. 2).

Figure 2: Quality Assurance Activity Model



#### 4.1 Quantitative Data

CCC Children’s Services delivers services in accordance with local, regional and national standards and overall performance is measured against externally reportable performance measures. Performance indicators provide an internal and external reporting mechanism with which to measure performance, identifying practice strengths and areas requiring improvement.

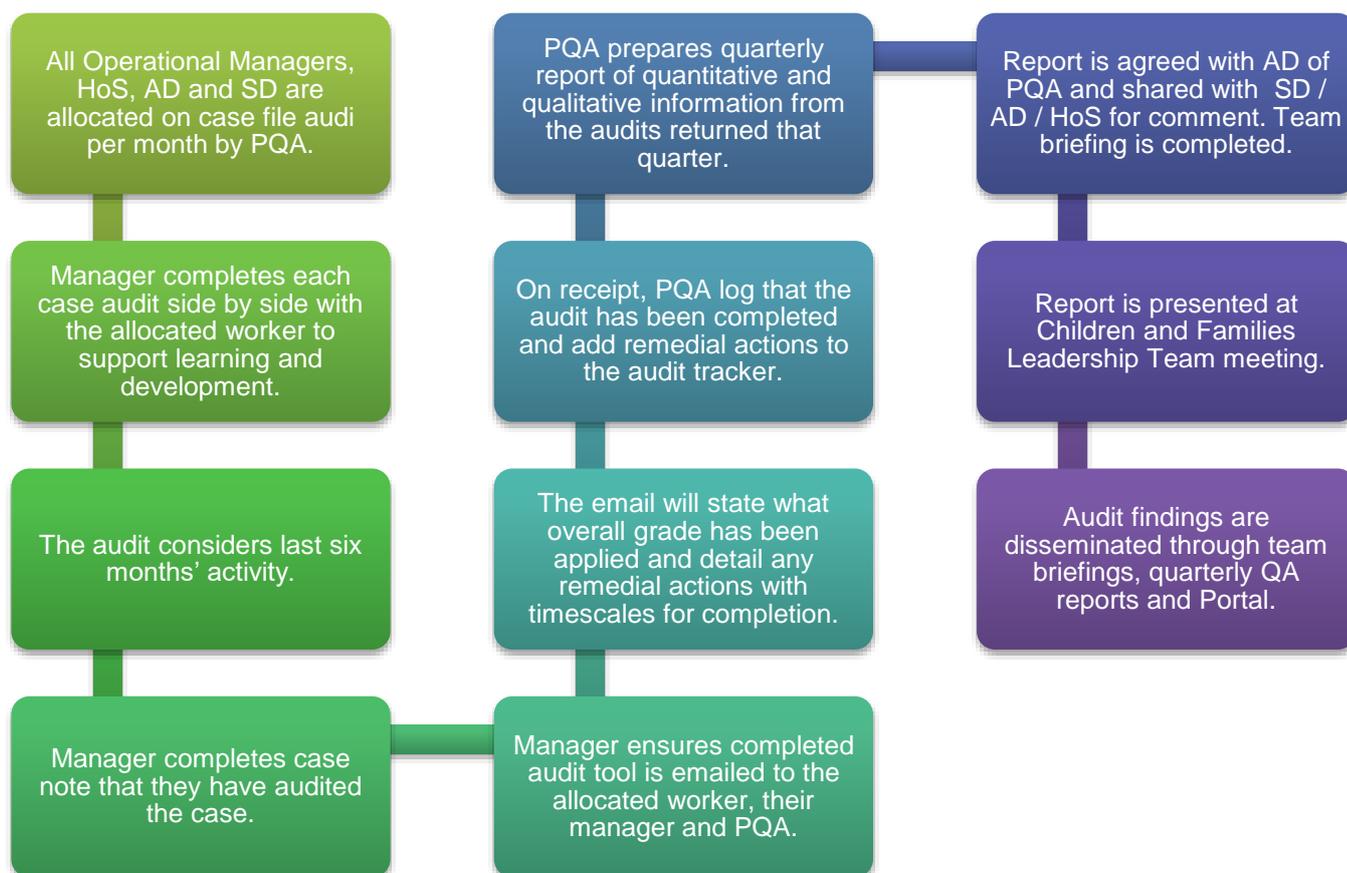
The Performance Team produce monthly performance reports for Children’s Services which cover operational reporting against key local, regional and national standards performance indicators, and includes benchmarks against regional and national comparators. Performance data can be used by managers as one strand in monitoring and evaluating the performance of teams and team members. Performance data is analysed by the service to identify volumes and timeliness of practice activity, strengths and areas for improvement and areas for further QA activity to gain a more in-depth understanding of practice and the service user experience.

## 4.2 Qualitative Data - Internal

**Case file audits** (fig. 3) are completed on a monthly basis by all Operational Managers, Heads of Service (HoS), Assistant Directors (AD) and Service Directors (SD). This rigorous commitment to systematic audit is fundamental to inform learning about the quality of practice and the impact on service users.

Case file audits focus on the impact for the child by looking at the effectiveness of frontline practice and outcomes for children and families based on the practice evidenced for the preceding six months. Standard audit tools are used based on the practice standards, which include a judgment about the quality of work based on the grades used by Ofsted.

Figure 3: Case File Audit Process



A range of **themed audits** (fig. 4) are set out in the annual audit programme and linked to themes identified by QA activity, performance data, and feedback from the Local Safeguarding Children Board, inspections of the services we provide by Ofsted, peer reviews and senior management in line with prevailing needs. These audits are generally undertaken by PQA. Additional dip samples are undertaken to explore themes, trends and areas of concern that arise from performance data, service user feedback and / or audits completed, in order to identify the root cause of problems and make recommendations for improvement.

Approved audit tools are used for all audits undertaken and are developed to cover Cambridgeshire's practice standards. These are subject to ongoing review based on best practice guidance and changes in legislation and regulatory framework.

Figure 4: Themed Audit Process



Remedial actions or safeguarding concerns identified during audit activity are communicated directly to the case responsible worker and their team manager at the time they are identified. Any case audit identified as being 'inadequate' will form a case escalation, which will also be sent to the Head of Service. These processes ensure that any safety concerns that come to light in audits will be addressed immediately.

Remedial actions and case alerts are recorded on a tracker by PQA. Themes of remedial actions and escalations are analysed to inform professional development.

**Observation of staff** in their everyday work is an important element of quality assuring professional practice and identifying areas of professional development. Frontline staff will be observed to assess the quality and impact of their practice with children and families. Direct observation will be conducted by Operational Managers, Heads of Service and the Principal Social Worker. Key measures will be the extent to which practice reflects the CCC practice standards and the impact on outcomes for children and families.

During each observations of practice, the observer will be sensitive to the potential pressures on, and the apprehension of, children, young people, families and staff.

Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Conference Chairs, complete a CCC monitoring form after each statutory review or conference for looked after children and children who are subject to a child protection plan. Significant areas of concern are raised through an escalation and / or dispute resolution process to the appropriate case accountable manager. These processes are an important contributor to the Quality Assurance and Learning Framework.

### 4.3 Qualitative Evidence - External

Learning from external quality assurance processes will be essential components of this framework to inform continuous learning and development. External evidence will come from a range of external partner agencies, statutory bodies, providers and stakeholders:

- Ofsted inspection and focused visit findings and service action plans, including learning from inspections of comparable authorities.
- LGA and Eastern Region peer reviews including learning from reviews of comparable authorities.
- Audits and data including section 11 audit, external agency performance data, external single agency audits.
- Learning from multi-agency audits.
- Children's Services Sector Led Improvement networks in the Eastern Region which provides a platform to share learning to inform best practice including arrangements for planned and structured inter authority peer reviews.
- Learning from multi-agency partnership reviews including Serious Case Reviews, Domestic Homicide Reviews, Child Death Reviews, Serious Incident Reports and Independent Management Reviews.

### 4.4 Feedback

**Compliments and complaints** about Children's Services are integral to our learning. PQA provides a quarterly report that includes data on compliments and complaints received and identifies relevant learning from complaints.

CCC practice standards and the associated supporting guidance clearly set out the expected standards for ensuring service users' views, wishes, feelings and aspirations are explored through assessments and reflected in the services provided through a comprehensive **service user consultation programme**. Adherence to these standards will be rigorously measured through case file audit, service user surveys, feedback from advocacy, focus groups and other consultation activities.

Case file audits include seeking the views of the child / young person and family / carer where appropriate in order to identify immediate learning at both individual and strategic

level. The means by which service users are involved in the development of services are detailed within the department's participation strategy. This includes provision for individual participation through use of the Mind of My Own (MOMO) app, the Voices Matters and Care Leavers forums alongside a suite of surveys and feedback questionnaires and interviews.

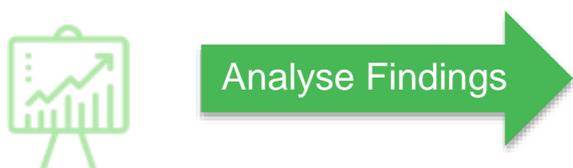
Service users along with other stakeholders are represented on a variety of partnership boards and working groups to ensure service users have the opportunity to influence and inform policy and practice development, organisational learning and continuous improvement.

CCC commissions advocacy services for Children's Services. For example, NYAS are commissioned to represent the voice of children at Child Protection Conferences.

**Advocacy services** produce quarterly reports to the commissioning service with information on type, levels and details of activity, outcomes, feedback, complaints and compliments received. Advocacy services also report on challenges faced and reports include learning for Children's Services.

Gaining **feedback from staff** is critical to informed judgements about good practice, barriers to progress and next steps. Staff surveys are regularly conducted by PQA and side by side case file audits include reflections from the child's social worker about the work and impact on the child. This is part of a reflective conversation to bring about immediate impact and change to address identified practice issues and supports a strong culture of learning.

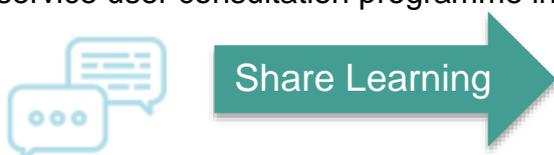
**Feedback from key partners** is essential to the triangulation of data to identify service improvement to improve outcomes for children. Feedback is provided by partner agencies, through the LSCB and its sub-committees and other multi-agency meetings.



Findings of thematic and case file audits are analysed to identify areas of good practice and development. Remedial actions and recommendations for professional development and service level improvement are identified including review of policies, guidance, training, templates and systems.

The **quarterly QA report** pulls together an analysis of the learning from all relevant QA activity. The report includes analysis of strengths and areas for development in relation to quantitative and qualitative data and feedback received. It also contains information about practice workshops and events, research, learning from compliments and complaints and policies and procedures updates.

The **quarterly participation report** pulls together all feedback received through the service user consultation programme in line with the participation strategy.



CCC wants to ensure that the difference that feedback from PQA has made to frontline practice is clearly identifiable. This framework will ensure that all QA activity is regularly analysed for themes, trends, learning about strengths to build on and identifying areas for improvement and that this information is disseminated accordingly. It also details activities designed to measure and evidence the impact of PQA on improving service user outcomes and ensures a clear focus is maintained on continuous improvement.

**Audit reports and team briefings** are produced and disseminated following audits and are also available on the Portal.

A PQA Manager presents findings from quality assurance and participation activity in **quarterly reports** to the Children & Families Leadership Team. The PQA Service Managers provide a quarterly report of escalations raised including key themes and analysis identifying recurring and unresolved issues. These reports are used to inform service improvement plans, supervision, PDR and personal development plans, policy, practice guidance, training needs analysis, workforce development plans and activity and CCC's overall business strategy as appropriate.

The **Workforce Development Plan** is informed by QA activity. CCC Children's Services invests in a comprehensive training programme for all social care staff and managers in Cambridgeshire. This commissioned learning and development programme centres on the service user journey and experience.

Managers will use audit outcomes alongside appraisals and supervision to monitor and review staff learning needs. The Workforce Development Team coordinates training and development for social care staff and ensures that all staff are trained in line with new legislative requirements, policies and changing practice guidance. The CCC Workforce Development Strategy Meeting is held regularly to discuss recruitment data, workforce development, marketing, alternatively qualified workforce and induction in relation to Children's Services.

Bite size workshops are run by clinicians. These practice sessions are based on themes identified by the service and following QA activity including audit, dip samples, inspection and surveys.

To ensure robust governance and service improvement, findings from QA activity also feed reports to the Directorate Management Team (DMT) meetings, extended CFLT meetings, Performance Meetings, the LSCB and its Quality & Effectiveness Group, Cambridgeshire Corporate Parenting Committee and Scrutiny Committees.



Once learning is identified and shared, it is essential that it be implemented upon at all levels to allow it to embed:

- Staff learn from and complete remedial actions

- Staff reflect upon learning with their team managers and peers
- Team managers help staff implement professional development through supervision and appraisal process
- Senior managers review service plans and facilitate service wide improvement in line with recommendations
- Workforce development review training offer in line with emerging needs
- Clinicians facilitate practice and reflective workshops targeting specific areas of practice development
- PQA supports practice development by creating and sharing resources including quick guides.



Evidencing the impact of learning from audit and other QA activity is central to improving outcomes for children and families.

Figure 5: Monitoring Impact

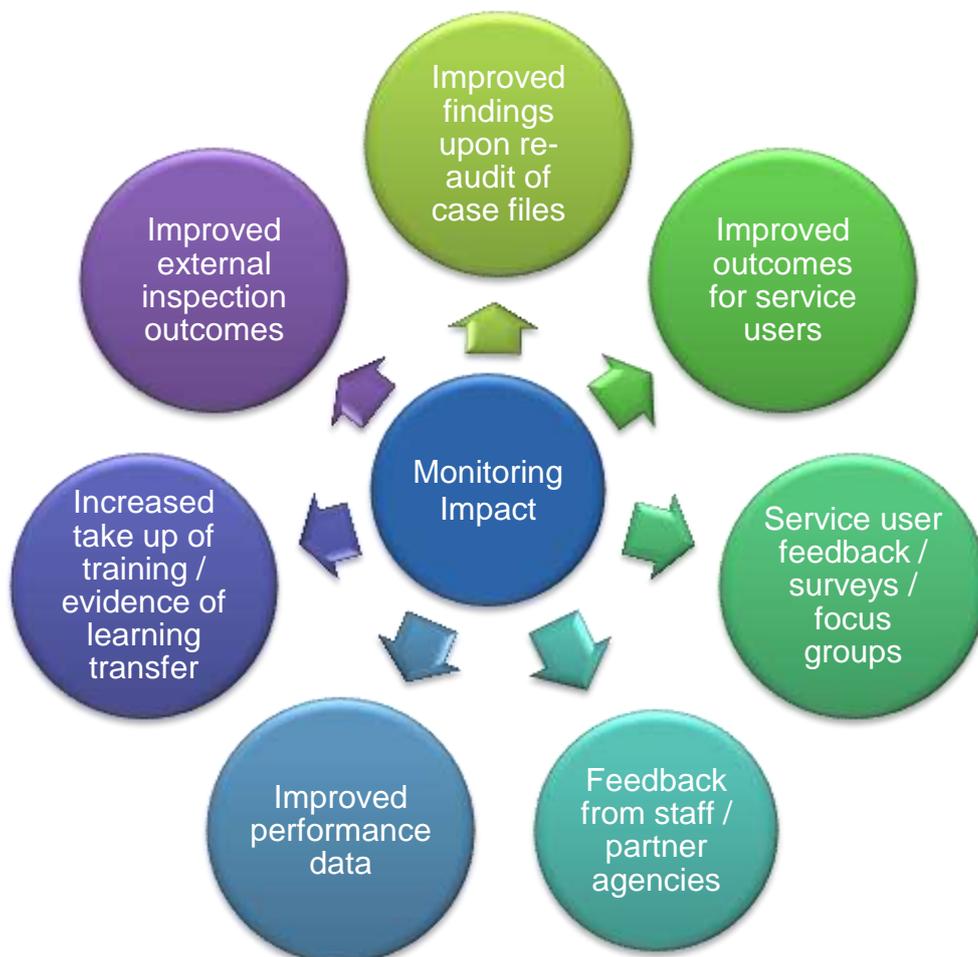


Figure 5 illustrates the activities designed to measure and evidence the impact of PQA on children and families and their outcomes. The feedback loop includes the expectation that the impact of training will itself be quality assured by managers and PQA. PQA will seek evidence of service improvement and positive impact of QA activity through:

- Re-audits and observations showing evidence of practice improvements including adherence to practice standards
- Improved service user feedback through surveys, focus groups as well as analysis of compliments / complaints
- Improved staff feedback through discussion and surveys
- Improved feedback from other professionals / partner agencies
- Improved performance data
- Increased take up of staff training and evidence of learning transfer to practice
- Continuous improvement in findings from external inspections.