

# **Children's Services Joint Improvement Project**

**Between**

**West Berkshire Council and  
Bracknell Forest Council**

**Children's Support Pathways  
Development**

**To establish clear support pathways for  
children, young people and families through  
different levels of intervention / need, and  
develop effective step up and step down  
thresholds and processes**



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Bracknell Forest and West Berkshire Councils identified an opportunity to work together to support the development and understanding of clear pathways for children, young people and families to access support and services from the level of early intervention through to more specialist and crisis intervention.
- 1.2 A joint bid was prepared and submitted to the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) to provide some resources to support the project. The bid was successful and the outcomes of the work undertaken as part of the project are contained within this report.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 West Berkshire Council had completed an action plan following an inspection for Safeguarding and Looked after Children in July 2012. One of the areas for development identified was the use of CAF in supporting step up and step down procedures. A peer challenge also provided a focus on the effectiveness of early intervention.
- 2.2 Bracknell Forest Council had recently developed an Early Intervention Hub (in November 2012) to provide a multi-agency forum to enable discussion and action on completed CAF / Family CAF assessments, and the Hub was intended to support the development of step up and step down procedures, and create clarity for practitioners, families and children around the pathways available to support additional needs.
- 2.3 Key to both Councils was demonstrating evidence of "Early Help" as identified in the Eileen Munro Review, and to ensure the CAF process was clear and understood as part of a continuum of need.

### **Project Aim:**

- 2.4 The aim of the project was to develop clear integrated support pathways for children, young people and families through different levels of need / intervention, and establish clear step up and step down protocols.

### **Intended Outcomes:**

- 2.5 At the start of the project the intended outcomes were identified which included:
  - A step change in the effectiveness and efficiency of early help services through significant improvements in targeting, tracking and outcome measures.
  - Families and professionals are clear about how to access early support for families with additional needs.
  - Thresholds between different levels of needs and access to associated services are clear for families and professionals and pathways between these are linked to robust outcome-based processes – identification, assessment, intervention and evaluation.

- A model developed that reflects the systems and structures of each local authority including clarity regarding step up and step down procedures.
- Cross-border working protocols are refreshed to reflect changes in procedures related to 1 and 2.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

3.1 The project consisted of a number of key components which included:

- An identified lead Officer in each authority – this was important to keep the project on track.
- An independent view of the starting point of each authority which was achieved through desk based research and independent review of practitioners views to gain an understanding of their knowledge, practice and commitment to early help.
- A joint event with practitioners from West Berkshire and Bracknell Forest coming together to contribute to the development of new models of working.
- Work in each authority to progress plans supported by independent coaching and support.
- A joint training event with practitioners from West Berkshire and Bracknell Forest on Whole Family Assessment.
- Follow up research with practitioners regarding progress and ongoing commitment.
- Independent research with families regarding their experiences of early help.

3.2. It is important to note that alongside the project there were a number of key initiatives underway in both local authorities which formed part of the evidence base and informed the way that each area developed. The national Troubled Families Initiative was one of these.

### **4 RESEARCH AND CONSULTATION**

4.1 The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned to undertake the initial research. This was to ensure views being sought remained independent of each authority. A wide range of practitioners and managers contributed to the research including colleagues from health (school nursing and health visiting, mental health), children's centres, family support advisers in schools, children's social care, connexions, youth service and services providing information to families. The interviewees consisted of a mix of practitioners and managers to ensure there was a good representation of views from different levels of operational and strategic perspectives.

- 4.2 In addition to seeking views on the current understanding of early help the information gained during this research was to be used to inform the structure of a joint event to take place in July 2013.
- 4.3 A range of questions sought to understand strengths and successes as they are currently perceived, what changes they thought needed to take place to improve the models of early help, what was working well and not so well; and what more could be done to develop systems further.
- 4.4 A full detailed report was produced for each authority, however key findings across both local authorities were:

**Main Strengths and Successes of Children’s Services:**

- Practitioners and managers felt there was a good range of universal and specialist services to support families once they were in the system.
- Despite budget reductions there were strong efforts by teams to improve coordination and delivery of services and to make the CAF and associated processes work for the benefit of the families.
- Working relationships with professional colleagues and voluntary sector partners were felt to be generally positive.

**Areas for Improvement:**

- Provision can be variable and there are gaps and overlaps in the overall picture of good practice.
- Engagement by schools is variable.
- Interviewees felt that a clearer sense of where strategic responsibility sat was needed.
- More clarity and understanding of the term early intervention was needed – practitioners felt that it should cover early in the stage of a problem, or at an early age.
- Interviewees felt there needed to be more balance between reactive crisis work and pro-active preventative work, and noted the ongoing challenge of quantifying the value of early intervention in financial terms.

**5 JOINT EVENT**

- 5.1 The research report completed by NFER was used to help to plan a joint event for practitioners from Bracknell Forest and West Berkshire. Interface Associates were engaged to facilitate the joint event which was called a “Solutions Workshop”. The purpose of the workshop was to “engage and enable key stakeholders to develop the prototype referral, assessment and support pathway models for Bracknell Forest and West Berkshire”.
- 5.2 The starting point for each authority was different in that Bracknell Forest was looking to fine tune and strengthen the existing model of

early help which centred on the CAF and the Early Intervention Hub as the mechanisms to facilitate joint working. West Berkshire was developing a new model of working and seeking to engage staff in development and implementation.

- 5.3 Attendance on the day included a range of multi-agency practitioners again representing both strategic and operational levels of responsibility. The fact that the models were at different points meant that for a large part of the day joint working was not possible and this was meant that the opportunity for sharing experiences and learning was limited, which was a disappointment to the organisers and to the participants.
- 5.4 Each authority group focused on the proposed model and worked to identify what needed to happen to further develop and implement it. Despite the different models and the fact that much of the day was spent in two groups the issues identified from both groups were very similar in terms of progressing the new models / ways of working.
- 5.5 Some of the issues identified reflected the earlier research and included for both local authorities:
  - Develop a strong strategic vision which will enable management, practitioners and families to understand and engage in the change process. Shared vision at team and individual level is essential.
  - Ensure the assessment process is holistic and focuses on the child / families journey rather than being intervention led.
  - Foster a culture of collaboration to reduce bureaucracy and increase the time spent with families.
  - Increase accountability through robust monitoring and review.
  - Increase the opportunity for peer support and challenge multi-disciplinary training and action learning sets.
  - Encourage family ownership and participation, building on strength based models of intervention, to reduce risk and increase resilience.
  - Ensure the pathway has an identity that can be recognised and communicated effectively.
  - Be proactive and circulate regular communication to ensure that practitioners and families understand the change and recognise what success looks like.
  - Clearly state what success looks like in terms of measurable outcomes.
- 5.6 Following the event the aim was for the lead officer for each authority to take away the information and progress the development of the models within each authority. During this period it was agreed that Interface Associates would provide support to the Officers in the shape of regular coaching and challenge regarding the project progress and development.

- 5.7 The coaching activity was undertaken by regular phone calls with the lead Officers to track progress made on the project. Discussion was centred on the use of the McKenzie 7 S framework (strategy, structure, systems, shared values, skills, staff, and support). These interviews enabled both lead Officers to consider progress, share issues or concerns and seek solutions to any problems or issues. This was very helpful and supportive to both lead Officers.
- 5.8 Interface also carried out a series of reflective interviews with colleagues across both authorities to seek any indicator of change in systems or practice. The general feedback was that people had understood and bought in to the proposed ways of working but there remained more work to do.

## 6 JOINT TRAINING EVENT

- 6.1 A joint training event on Whole Family Assessment was delivered to practitioners from West Berkshire and Bracknell Forest and provided an opportunity to bring people together to train on the theoretical principles of whole family working which included assessment, support planning and review. This enabled practitioners the opportunity to mix and share knowledge, information and good practice.
- 6.2 The summary of the training event by Interface Associates demonstrates some of the impact of the day:
- There was agreement across the authorities regarding key definitions and use of language. Some **common understanding was reached for some of the main features of the pathway** but this will be strengthened through on-going joint relationships. There was **a renewed understanding of different perspectives** and how a word can mean different things to different practitioners.
  - There was a **clear recognition of the child being at the centre of any process** and the importance of maintaining this within a whole family pathway.
  - Participants had valuable discussions about their roles and responsibilities with regard to the varying level of needs within families, however there needs to be broader understanding of the range of interventions within and across services to assist the development of an early intervention model.
  - There was an interest from both authorities in understanding tools such as the family star. This demonstrates an **increasing the desire to evidence impact since the initial workshop**.
  - The training was not only a helpful refresher but also **helped strengthen bonds between the two authorities and provoked a request for further joined up training events**.
  - There was **clear enthusiasm for peer support between the two authorities** as people with the same roles were able to spend time discussing the challenges they face.

- There was renewed understanding that some families will transition between authorities and consequently **there may be scope to join up the pathways in future.**
- Discussion about information sharing reinforced the need for better ways of achieving this. There **was a clearer understanding through case studies about the importance of knowing as much relevant and current information as possible** when trying to make decisions and assess support.

## **7 RESEARCH WITH PARENT / CARERS**

- 7.1 As the project in each area progressed it was important to seek the views of parents / carers to gain a better understanding of their experiences of early help and look at how their ideas and experiences could be built into the ongoing development of the project in each area.
- 7.2 NFER was commissioned to undertake this qualitative research as it again provided an independent approach and analysis to the views of parents. A total of 22 parent/carer telephone interviews were completed, 11 in each authority.
- 7.3 Given that each authority was implementing a different model and working at different stages of implementation the questions were designed to ask questions about the experiences of accessing support, experience of assessment, support offered or received.
- 7.4 There was a range of responses for each area which will inform ongoing local development, however a summary of some key points include:
- For the majority of parents schools are the gateway to accessing support but a number of parents had experienced frustration in accessing support through this route and it would appear that there is more work to do to improve this.
  - Despite reductions in resources the strength of universal services was noted by parent / carers. On the whole they were positive about the support they receive.

## **8 PROGRESS AND CURRENT POSITION – BRACKNELL FOREST**

- 8.1 The starting point in Bracknell Forest was a strong CAF / Family CAF process and the introduction of an Early Intervention Hub which served as a mechanism to coordinate a multi-agency response to identified needs.
- 8.2 The strategic commitment was clear in the Children and Young People's Plan and the Early Intervention Strategy; however it is clear further work needs to be undertaken to broaden knowledge and awareness of these.

- 8.3 Bracknell Forest had committed to participating in the LARC 5 Research project, and this work fed into and will continue to feed into ongoing developments around early help.
- 8.4 Bracknell Forest has also been undertaking a review of Family and Parenting Services and participating in analysis of cases using Vanguard methodology. All of this work and outcomes will contribute to the ongoing development of the early help model.
- 8.5 During the same time period as this project an evaluation of the Early Intervention hub was also taking place. The findings from the evaluation will help to shape the Hub processes in particular the step up and step down procedures.
- 8.6 The Children and Young People's Partnership supported the project and received regular reports and updates on progress.

**Outcomes – what has changed?**

- 8.7 A new model has been developed which clearly identifies the different levels of need and has introduced at basic tier 2 and a tier 2 complex level which clarifies the threshold for different levels of intervention (the Early Intervention Hub support will sit at tier 2 Complex level)
- 8.8 A new threshold document has been written which includes a clear description of the levels of need and the threshold for each level of support. This has been agreed by the Local Safeguarding Children Board and will be published on the Pan Berkshire Policies and Procedures website.
- 8.9 The review of family and parenting support has been concluded and a restructure is currently taking place which will streamline some services and reduce the potential for duplication. The CAF / Early Intervention function will become part of this service and will provide a clear pathway into the most appropriate level of support.
- 8.10 A new three year Children and Young People's Plan has been published which maintains a strong commitment to early help and to the child's journey when additional help or support is needed.
- 8.10 The evaluation of the Early Intervention Hub has concluded and the findings are now being used to further develop the process. Further clarity has been gained regarding step up and step down from Children's Social Care, in the past year out of 327 only 4 referrals have stepped up to Children's Social Care, and xx have stepped down. There is a greater understanding of the process and increased communication between the Hub and Children's Social Care.



## **9 PROGRESS AND CURRENT POSITION – WEST BERKSHIRE**

- 9.1 The starting point in West Berkshire was a CAF process requiring improvement and a commitment to develop a new early help offer which would support better integration of Council early help services and a streamlined route to support for families with different levels of need
- 9.2 The inter-agency strategic commitment was weakened by a Children and Young People's Partnership that lacked a clear focus and plan going forward, so operational change was focused on children and young people's services within the Council.
- 9.3 West Berkshire has been reviewing a number of children's and educational services and the management structures to support these. Not all this work was well integrated with the Pathways project.
- 9.4 However its inclusion, part way into the life of the project, as one of a number within a Children's Services Improvement Programme linked to the Munro Board helped to raise the profile and accountability of the work
- 9.5 During the project work continued on developing improved outcomes focus and reporting of early help work. This was managed through an Early Help Development Group, which later became a Help and Health Commissioning Group with a broader commissioning focus and involving Public Health.
- 9.6 Staff recruitment issues hampered the implementation timescales and indeed the delivery model has had to move forward using agency staff in management roles.

### **Outcomes – what has changed?**

- 9.6 Help for Families is West Berkshire's transformed early help offer, now in operation. At the heart is a multi-professional team from a range of Council services dealing with Level 2, Lower Level 3 cases. As with Bracknell Forest the priority area on the thresholds continuum is the group on the cusp of statutory intervention.
- 9.7 A new threshold document has been tested and a new version launched, which includes a clear description of the levels of need and the threshold for each level of support. The post-test version will be agreed by the Local Safeguarding Children Board
- 9.8 The production of a new Council website closely aligned with the timing of the Help for Families launch has ensured that all new processes and documents went live with the new site. The existing CAF processes and forms end in July – a few weeks overlap should enable professionals to manage the transition comfortably.
- 9.9 A strong commitment to workforce development and communication has and will continue to support effective inter-agency management and enable partners to hold early help cases with confidence. A suite of training has already been offered and further training is planned. Short

video information products will help promote the service and provide information to families.

- 9.10 Evaluation of the first go-live phase of Help for Families is underway involving staff interviews, referrer interviews and family/young people interviews
- 9.11 The new approach has been developed on the basis of very close working with the Referral and Assessment Team in Children's Social Care. Transfer and step up and step down processes are now being refined on the basis of test cases and supported by a new single enquiry form for both early help and child protection enquiry. Work with SEN colleagues has resulted in the promotion of a single support and achievement plan for use with children with SEN and what might have previously been a single agency CAF scenario.

## 10 NEXT STEPS

- 10.1 A significant amount of progress has been made in both authorities on the development of this project despite the ongoing challenges of managing change in a busy environment. The following will require ongoing focus from the strategic managers in each authority in order to continue to drive forward the change programme and succeed in delivering effective early help services using clear pathways for support.

### **Strategic commitment and drive**

- In order to harness enthusiasm, maintain momentum and ensure that partners are not disillusioned or confused as a result of the speed of progress there is a continuing need for high level strategic commitment for operational change. **This need to be tangible and effectively communicated.**
- There is an ongoing need for **strategic partners to address referral and assessment processes which are better aligned** and encourage collaboration.
- Both authorities need to **be alert to opportunities to foster strategic collaboration and be flexible in their approach to development** in order access to resources. The offer of specialist skills and knowledge should be valued as highly as commitment to additional staffing resource and should be exploited where possible.
- There needs to be a **clear strategic identification of families needs** at a step down stage in order to support better future commissioning of early intervention services.

### **Delivery**

- There is a need to **increase accountability of the Lead Professional role** and embed robust review procedures through the assessment process. The review process is essential in order to measure impact, keep the work on track and hold the other agencies to account.
- It is essential that **assessments are comprehensive enough to inform a planned and coordinated support package.** There need to

be an increased focus on the appropriateness of the intervention rather than the capacity available within a service.

### **Working smarter**

- There is a continuing need to **assess the availability of resources to ensure that structures can enable a more cohesive approach to early intervention** recognising that traditional or historic way of working will need to be challenged and potentially changed.
- The **extensive experience, research and tools that are already in existence need to be collated and made accessible to the wider workforce**, and any new developments should not duplicate or diminish the value of existing resources.
- **Information technology continues to be a barrier** to success and source of frustration. More work needs to be undertaken to improve this for joint working to be successful.

### **Impact**

- Practitioners need to have a **better understanding of tools that evidence impact** both for the benefit of the families being able to see the distance travelled and justify the development of an early intervention model.

### **Cross border partnership**

- There is an opportunity to build on the learning of the project to date. Practitioners are keen to engage in joint ventures in order to share ideas and good practice. This would not only inspire and motivate practitioners but would reinvigorate teams and develop skills

### **Effective communication**

- The progress to date, and any proposed future developments need to be communicated not only to the practitioners actively involved in the change process but also to the wider workforce, partners and families.

## **11 BENEFITS FROM THE JOINT PROJECT**

11.1 The benefits of undertaking this project have been significant, and whilst the models were very different the value of peer support for the lead Officers and opportunities to share knowledge and practice have been positive. A summary of the benefits are listed below for the consideration of the Children's Improvement Board:

- The CIB project has given structure to the development of the pathways and ensured that the focus remained when developments could otherwise have been side-lined or other priorities taken precedence. This gave a sense of 'reality' about the work that was required and enabled the work to be aligned to distinct phases with action plans and SMART targets.
- Although the pathways are different, the challenges were similar and both local authorities have benefited from peer support. This was

evident through the joint event and training for both the lead officers as well as front line practitioners.

- Both authorities identified the benefit of having independent partnership with Interface Enterprises and NFER. The external support brought clarity through questioning, challenge and evaluation from both organisations enabling the local understanding of the pathway and design to be developed through conversation with the external partnerships.
- The project mapped out specific activities that enabled time to be ring fenced to ensure the outcomes were met. This time is precious and the protection of it was a crucial element to ensuring that progress was made. Furthermore, the project with Interface ensured time was allocated for reflection and coaching which helped maintain motivation and momentum. This helped the Lead Officers to identify and appreciate the positive progressive progress rather than being weighed down by the challenges and blockages.
- The opportunity to bring people together was appreciated. Critically, the sharing of ideas and information exchange improved workers' understanding of best practice and ensured a baseline understanding of terminology.
- The CIB project gave leverage and authority to the work because it was part of a framed project. Both Bracknell Forest and West Berkshire agreed that there would have been significantly more slippage without the necessity of meeting the project timelines.
- Despite all the positives that emerged from the project supporting there was also a significant time commitment required in management of the project and maintaining the contracts with Interface and NFER. These additional pressures need to be balanced against the benefits and an analysis of this should be undertaken before agreeing additional projects in future.
- On reflection both authorities would have ensured a better strategic steer was given from the start from the senior management teams. The level of achievement was recognised despite rather than because of senior leadership.

### **Work differently and working together.**

11.2 Having completed the joint project, there is a desire to maintain some of the positive effects of the project. Going forward, West Berkshire and Bracknell Forest have agreed that:

- More joined events should be commissioned. The peer exchange and challenge was agreed to be the most positive element of the work completed.
- Early help action learning sets should be established based on common themes such as inspections.
- Support and guidance would be welcomed on how to maintain a responsive, creative management approach within the ever changing and challenging landscapes.

For further information please contact:

Bracknell Forest:

Sandra Davies, Head of Performance Management and Governance. Tel: 01344 354017. Email: [sandra.davies@bracknell-forest.gov.uk](mailto:sandra.davies@bracknell-forest.gov.uk)

West Berkshire:

Julia Waldman, Commissioning, Strategy and Partnerships Manager (Children and Young People), including Turnaround Families Programme Co-ordinator. Tel: 01635 519810. Email: [jwaldman@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:jwaldman@westberks.gov.uk)

South East Sector Led Improvement Programme:

Richard Tyndall, Programme Manager. Tel: 07880 787007 Email: [richard.tyndall@richardtyndall.co.uk](mailto:richard.tyndall@richardtyndall.co.uk)

Web: [www.seslip.co.uk](http://www.seslip.co.uk)