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| Subject: | Children's Social Work Model of Practice | | |
| Date of Meeting: | 8 March 2021 | | |
| Report of: | Executive Director Families Children & Learning | | |
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| Ward(s) affected: | All | | |

FOR GENERAL RELEASE.**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the committee on implementation and progress of the changes that were introduced in children's social work services in October 2015.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the committee notes this report and its contents including the next steps.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Why have a model of practice?**

- 3.1 In 2015, Brighton and Hove, like nearly all local authorities, delivered social work via large social work teams based on divisions within our processes. This meant that families had to have a number of changes of social worker and prevented continuity of relationship between a family and a social worker. As a management team, we were aware that we were not performing how we wanted to in terms of children's social work at that time. We knew this due to feedback from families and social workers, as well as from our own quality assurance processes. For example, we had a high number of complaints from families involved in social work services. Social workers told us that they did not have enough support and guidance from managers and did not have time to build relationships with families. And the numbers of children who were open to social work, had a child protection plan, or who were in our care were all significantly higher than the national average and the average for local authorities with similar demographic factors as Brighton and Hove.
- 3.2 This was confirmed by Ofsted in the report of their inspection in May 2015, which concluded that our services required improvement to be rated as good.

The model of practice

- 3.3 In line with evidence from Ofsted and the Department for Education, the Senior Leadership Team in children's social work services believed that the development of a clear and consistent vision of good social work practice would lead to the improvement of services. We, therefore, worked with our practitioners, families, and other local authorities and the University of Sussex to develop a [vision of what good social work practice would look like in Brighton and Hove](#) and to redesign our services to support this. We created a model of relationship-based social work that we call the 'Team Around the Relationship'. We moved to the new model of practice on 26 October 2015. Relationship-based practice is built on the idea that a social worker's relationship with the family is the most powerful tool to facilitate change and that these relationships, when they are trusting, empathic and authoritative, can be reparative.
- 3.4 The model of practice is premised on providing continuity and consistency for families so that they do not have to experience changes of social worker and they know how to access support. We, therefore, created small social work teams that work with families all their way across their journey with us so that a child can have the same social worker from their first assessment until they end their involvement with social workers. Small teams, called pods, also mean that social workers can work together to support each other and get to know the families that they are working with. This allows social workers to collaborate and share skills with each other in order to support families. Small teams, including group supervision and a flatter management structure, also means that social workers experience more support regarding the emotional impact of their work from their managers and peers.
- 3.5 The social work pods that work directly with families are supported by social workers who work in specialist teams such as adoption, fostering, and our adolescent services. A key part of our model is that social workers should not need to make numerous referrals to other practitioners and that support should be offered by the 'team around the relationship'. We have developed a 'Partners in Change Hub' to support the social work pods in providing specialist interventions for families as early as possible in our processes. This reduces the need for intensive social work interventions and expensive independent expert assessments in court proceedings. This specialist support is key to helping social workers to support families to achieve positive changes.
- 3.6 The service redesign was completed within the existing budgetary envelope.
- 3.7 A structure chart for Safeguarding and Care and a flowchart for support from children's social work are included as appendices to this report.

Evaluation of the model of practice

- 3.8 Since we introduced the model of practice we have undertaken a programme of ongoing evaluation. This has included a programme of regular audits, collecting feedback from children and families, and independent evaluations with the University of Sussex and the Centre for Social Work Practice.

- 3.9 The model was formally evaluated in July 2017, in association with the University of Sussex. The evaluation, [Empathy, tenacity & compassion: an evaluation of relationship-based practice in Brighton & Hove](#), found that in general:
- families have a better experience of social work;
 - social workers feel more supported and more able to make a difference for families;
 - relationship-based practice seems to be supporting safe and stable family lives for children, and;
 - the model of practice appears to have decreased demand for social work and high-level interventions during a time of increasing national demand.
- 3.10 As an example of the change in how families experience social work, the number of Stage 1 complaints made by adults and children about children's social work was 101 in 2015-6 and in the last year this was 29. We believe that this is as a result for families knowing, not just their allocated social worker, but other social workers, the manager, and the business support officer in the pod. This enables families to talk to someone who knows them when they have concerns, even if their social worker is not available, and this will often mean that these concerns do not grow and become complaints.
- 3.11 The model of practice has also made a difference in terms of the experience of staff. For example, in our annual 'your voice: social work survey' last year 89% of practitioners responded that they felt safe and supported by the organisation, an increase from 64% in 2016. In addition, at 16 November 2020 the average number of children allocated to each social worker was 14. This has decreased from between 18 and 19 children in October 2015.
- 3.12 At the time of the service redesign almost 20% of social workers were employed on an agency basis costing in excess of £1.6m a year. We no longer employ any agency social workers in children's social work and currently have a full establishment. This is supported by regular ongoing recruitment and an annual recruitment of a cohort of newly-qualified social workers.
- 3.13 The successful implementation of the model of practice also leads to improved outcomes for families and these can be illustrated by tracking indicators of these outcomes such as:
- the number of children open to social work has reduced by 24% since October 2015
 - the number of children with a child protection plan has decreased by 13%
 - and there are 18% fewer children in our care.
- 3.14 These reductions also ensure that the branch can achieve its identified savings.
- 3.15 The impact of the model of practice was also considered as part of [Ofsted's report of their inspection in August 2018](#): "The new model of practice has been embedded and is resulting in greater continuity of social work relationships for children and families. Outcomes for children are largely positive and, frequently, risks are reducing, particularly for hard-to-reach, vulnerable adolescents.... Social workers' morale is high, and workers spoken to as part of the inspection told inspectors that they enjoy working in Brighton and Hove." For the first time, children's social work services in Brighton and Hove were rated as good by Ofsted in 2018. Ofsted returned to complete a ['focused visit' in February 2020](#).

The inspectors concluded that we “have built on what was working well and have taken steady steps to improve ... Small social work teams, called pods in Brighton and Hove, are embedded, are valued by social workers, and are working well.”

Current challenges

- 3.16 COVID has had a significant impact on social work and the families that social workers are supporting. The vulnerabilities of individuals, children and families are often heightened by the impact of COVID.
- 3.17 Social workers and other practitioners within Safeguarding & Care provide essential services to children and families in the city and have continued to support families. When we initially moved into the lockdown in March, this support was offered virtually except for the children identified as at most risk. However, this has moved to most children and families having support provided on a face to face basis by social workers and we have been able to maintain this position since the first lockdown was eased.
- 3.18 While virtual working provides a challenge to relationship-based practice, it is important to emphasize that the model of practice has made a difference to social workers and families during the impact of COVID. For example, practitioners have talked about how the pod structure, and relationships within pods, helped when we quickly moved to working virtually in March and that continuity of relationships with families allowed social workers to offer support even when this needed to be virtually. This was reflected in the feedback from ‘your voice: social work survey’ this year. For instance, despite being completed during the first lockdown, 88% of respondents said they felt safe and supported and 91% said they were comfortable talking to their manager and that their manager was supportive.
- 3.19 The model of practice was implemented within the context of a reduction in funding for local authorities and implementation of the model has facilitated a significant reduction in costs associated with agency staff, legal fees and placements for children in care based on the outcomes described above.

Next steps

- 3.20 Some of the key priorities for children’s social work services currently include:
- Taking forward the work of the anti-racist project in Safeguarding & Care, which will include an action plan based on 3 working groups: staff support; how we work with families; and the voice of children, families and carers. This will also be supported by providing bespoke learning opportunities for social workers and other practitioners on anti-racist practice, making sure that a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic member of staff is included on all recruitment panels, and by embedding the new Lead Practitioner for Anti-Racist Practice post. The new post-holder started in November 2020. We have also been chosen, along with adult social care, to be one of the pilot sites for the [Workforce Race Equality Standards for Social Care](#) from April 2021

- Increasing the involvement of families in the evaluation of the service and the development of parental advocacy or peer mentoring
- Embedding robust multi-agency support for children in need through the new child in need processes
- Moving to a new recording system, Eclipse, in Spring 2021. The new system is easier to use, saving social workers time, and will allow creative work with families to be captured, creating more child focused records

4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

4.1 Not applicable

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

5.1 Please see references in Section 3 above.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 The committee is asked to note the contents of this report including the next steps.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

7.1 There are no Financial Implications as a result of the recommendations of this report.

Finance Officer Consulted: David Ellis

Date: 26/11/20

Legal Implications:

7.2 The report sets out the model of social work practice being used in the City with families and their children who need help and protection. The relationship with a social worker has been widely recognised as a key factor in preventing children from requiring care, and in ensuring that children are protected in a timely way when required. This is essential to the successful delivery of social work to ensure the council meets a range of statutory duties, including duties to look after children to whom all councillors have a particular duty of care.

Lawyer Consulted: Natasha Watson

Date: 30.11.2020

Equalities Implications:

7.3 Equalities impact assessments for staff and for children and families were completed in 2015 as part of the service redesign and the assessment for children and families is in the process of being reviewed.

Sustainability Implications:

7.4

Brexit Implications:

7.5

Any Other Significant Implications:

Crime & Disorder Implications:

7.5

Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

7.6

Public Health Implications:

7.7

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

7.8

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

1. Structure Chart for Children's Safeguarding
2. Flow Chart for Safeguarding and Social Work

Background Documents