

In It Together II: Securing Value in Children's Social Care Roundtable Discussion - 17th September 2010

Introduction:

The Children's Services Development Group, in partnership with the Local Government Association, hosted a roundtable discussion on the 17th September to consider the issue of redefining value in children's services and obtaining best outcomes for children and young people in a challenging public spending climate.

The roundtable was attended by a mixture of Directors of Children's Services, Lead Members and service providers along with government officials and policy experts. Keynote presentations were given by Cllr Baroness Shireen Ritchie on behalf of the LGA; Donald Hirsch, a leading social policy expert; and Steve Page, on behalf of CSDG.

The speeches and the discussion thereafter allowed a range of stakeholders to consider how to ensure best value and optimal outcomes for children and young people are met.

This document provides a summary of the key points and conclusions raised during the roundtable.

The political context:

- Local authorities are facing a period of reduced funding. The Government has already begun the process of making cuts and this is set to continue with the announcement of the Comprehensive Spending Review on 20th October.
- Children's services have not been exempted from the overall financial squeeze and with a substantial proportion of the budget ring-fenced, for example the Dedicated Schools Grant, services directors will face pressures on how best to allocate their funding, which could impact upon the provision of services to vulnerable children and young people, which is not ring-fenced.

- This period of budgetary constraint comes at a time when demand for children's services has been rising. ADCS-commissioned research has shown that between 2007 and 2009 emergency protection orders rose by 32% with the number of interim care orders increasing by 38%. Overall, local authorities were looking after 8% more children by the end of 2009.

Concerns and issues within the sector:

- *Demand Mapping:* One key problem facing local authorities is how they can best project likely demand for services in the years ahead. The 'import' and 'export' of families into local areas will affect the numbers and demographics of those requiring services. With the government looking at making changes

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to housing benefit, this movement of people is likely to be exacerbated. The difficulties local authorities face in mapping future demand naturally creates problems with regards to allocating resources efficiently. Furthermore, with families moving between local authorities, making successful early interventions becomes increasingly difficult and can add additional pressures to the system.

- *Tendering*: The speed with which good commissioning occurs can often be very slow. The process of having to tender is a major factor in the slowing down of this process and often stifles innovation and partnership working. For meaningful and effective partnerships between providers and local authorities to develop it was felt that reform of this process is necessary with, for example, greater use of pilot schemes in local areas.
- *Training social workers*: There is a need to develop the skills base of social workers and carers, as well as a need to reduce the level of bureaucracy they face, to enable them to more readily identify needs early on and make appropriate interventions. It was also felt that involving foster carers at a school level would be beneficial. With regards to the skills of social workers and carers, the Munro Review, currently taking place, offers a chance to engage with government and bring these changes about.

- *The Court System*: There is rising demand within the court system and there are also concerns regarding the courts' treatment of cases and the length of time taken to complete proceedings. The courts are taking an increasingly cautious approach which, coupled with rising demand, has generated a huge backlog of cases. Thus, many vulnerable children and young people are effectively left in limbo and enter the care system later than they otherwise should.

Future ways of working:

- *Innovation*: Whilst the current political environment may appear threatening, it can also be seen as an opportunity. The savings required by children's services departments will create the need for a transformation of local government service delivery. Local government has often been seen as the vanguard of reform - this will need to continue. Local authorities and service providers will need to work in partnership to ensure the best outcomes are achieved for children and young people.
- *New commissioning models*: The discussion highlighted the genuine interest all parties have in looking at different approaches. In particular, a move towards a payment-by-results model, whereby commissioners would provide funding based on a determination of an appropriate timeframe for the provider to deliver specific results. This thinking

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generated interest partly due to its innovative nature.

- *Flexibility in commissioning:* As mentioned above, there are concerns over the length of time the tendering process takes and that this can act as a barrier to innovation. There is the potential for greater flexibility in commissioning with, for example, the adoption of pilot schemes on a small scale. Such schemes present a way to encourage a greater diversity of provision and opportunities to see 'what works' and what does not, allowing local authorities to better determine the services needed in their locality.
- *Understanding the costs of 'poor' care:* Whilst recent think reports from Demos and the New Economics Foundation have started to look at ways of measuring the costs of 'poor' care and inappropriate commissioning, research into this area is seen as being at an 'embryonic' stage. In particular, there was a consensus that costs 'further down the line' are not fully understood. Greater tracking of cases over a period of time is vital and necessary. Further research into the costs of poor commissioning decisions - to both the individual and society will help local authorities and providers to determine what services are required and ensure successful

outcomes for children and young people are achieved.

- *Developing pedagogy:* The need for early intervention remains high on the agenda and there is a consensus that such an approach is crucial to achieving successful outcomes. However, there is currently a lack of pedagogy regarding what specific interventions and policies work. The sector should look to draw together examples of practice which has resulted in the best outcomes for children and young people. This ties in to a wider need for evidence-based practice rather than following what is deemed to be good dogma at the time.
 - *Transparency:* Providers need to be transparent about both the quality and outcomes of their services, using evidence to demonstrate to local authorities what the quality of their care can achieve for vulnerable children and young people. Developing a greater level of transparency will also help to determine what works and will lead to better evidence-based commissioning.
 - *The role of DfE:* There was strong support for ensuring that the Department for Education retained its focus on implementing and delivering the National Minimum Standards.
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Conclusions

- The cuts to local government will impact on the delivery of children's services. This can be seen as much as an opportunity as a threat, with councils able to transform the way they commission services and look at new models of service delivery, such as payment-by-results, to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people.
- Further research into evaluating the individual and societal costs of 'poor' care needs to be conducted to help provide an understanding of both the long term social and financial cost to the child and society when inappropriate services are commissioned.
- Early intervention remains high on the agenda and is broadly accepted to be crucial in determining successful outcomes. More work is needed to bring together examples and case studies detailing exactly which early interventions work, helping to develop a more evidence-based approach to commissioning.
- Developing the skills base of social workers and carers to increase their ability to identify needs early on and to improve their status within the court system is central to ensuring successful early interventions take place.

About CSDG

The CSDG is a policy coalition of eight leading providers of foster care, residential care and specialist education services. Its members: Acorn Care and Education, Cambian Group, Foster Care Associates, Fostering Solutions, Hesley Group, National Fostering Agency, SENAD Group and Young Foundations collectively care for 6833 children and have national coverage, working with the vast majority of local authorities, and together, to campaign for a child-centred and needs focused approach to children's services, placing the wellbeing of each child at the forefront of policymaking and delivering value for money in a challenging public spending climate.