

Reality Check Visit Family Matters

A report produced by the
Children and Families Overview & Scrutiny Committee

September 2019



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1.0 Background to Visit

Further to the success of the Reality Check Visits held in 2018/19 it was agreed to continue the programme into this municipal year.

A visit to the Family Matters Team, based in Birkenhead was proposed, so members could look at the effects of co-location on the teams there. A Reality Check Visit to Children's Services in Cheshire Lines in July 2019 had given members the opportunity to see the effects that co-location and agile working was having on staff there.

It was evident from this visit that there had been improvements made by all staff being located in one hub, and the fact that agile working and hot desking allowed staff to manage their day, diaries and case files in a more pro-active manner. Members were therefore interested to see how co-location works on a smaller scale.

2.0 Family Matters Overview

Family Matters is part of the Early Help & Prevention Service, within Children's Services.

All teams across the service area work together towards a set of shared outcomes. The Early Help & Prevention Service launched on 01 April 2019 following a full-service review and staff consultation. The consultation, which involved 159 members of staff, commenced 16th November 2018 and was completed on 11th January 2019. With investment of £654,000 into the service budget, an additional 18.7 FTE was introduced, opportunities for professional progression created in new areas and 8.0 FTE Family Support Workers were transferred from Children's Social Care into key roles within Early Help and Prevention.

In advance of the Early Help & Prevention Service restructure officers consulted with 212 children and young people about the type of help they want available for families in Wirral. The consultation was led by 3 Young Consultants, who are care leavers, and was delivered in partnership with the Hive. Findings from the consultation were presented to partners at Wirral Safeguarding Board's Learning Event in September 2018 and contributed to the development of the new Family Matters service. The name of the service was developed by one of the Young Consultants and selected by those participating in the consultation events.

Led by a single Head of Service, Family Matters includes Targeted Family Support, Pre-Birth & Infant Team, Adolescent Response Team and Family Group Conferencing.

3.0 Outcomes so far

As the service launched on 01 April 2019, performance monitoring and reporting are in developmental stages, however there are signs of early impact. Data shows that of the 277 cases closed between 01 April 2019 to 10 June 2019, 136 were Level 3 at the point of referral and 113 were Level 4 at the point of referral (89.9% of referrals at level 3 or 4). This provides assurance that the service is working with the right children and families. Of those 277 closures, 37 escalated into social care (13.4%) and 240 de-escalated to level 3 or below (86.6%), which means that 86.6% have had their needs met without requiring a social care intervention.

Since the launch of the Family Matters service officers have been tracking the progress of closed cases over time to evidence impact of having needs met. Initial data shows:

- For those which have been closed up to 1 month 88.5% remain at level 3 or below
- For those which have been closed 1-2 months 84.5% remain at level 3 or below
- For those which have been closed 2-3 months 89.6% remain at level 3 or below

This indicates that outcomes so far are being sustained and reducing demand on Children's Social Care.

4.0 Member and Officers Discussion

The Family Matters teams are co-located in Rock Ferry. The teams are all based on the same floor which enables them to build relationships and networks. The benefits of co-location mean that officers can share knowledge, skills and build working relationships with other officers, as opposed to more distant interaction with colleagues based in satellite offices.

- The Members in attendance were advised that despite the recent co-locations of the teams, feedback from families and staff across the service has been positive. The individual teams are now settling into the new way of working, and emphasis is shifting to setting robust standards. It was agreed that the way forward would be to ensure that planning work is kept to task and targeted. Robust procedures are now being embedded.
- Several teams within Children's services are already on board, for example families are often referred from the Integrated Front Door (IFD), however others have been slower to take up the offer. The Family Matters teams are meeting with heads of the various service areas to close the gap

4.1 Targeted Family Support (TFS)

TFS seeks to reduce the number of families requiring level 4 Children's Social Care and uses a whole-family approach and works as intensively as is required for each family's identified needs. TFS practitioners aim to secure engagement of families and work flexibly in their approach, covering 7 days a week as required. It is expected that the first 4 weeks will be intensive in order to engage the family meaningfully. TFS work with families for up to 6 months if required. A review takes place at month 5 with the Team Leader and Family Worker. If longer-term involvement is required, it is agreed at this stage. Interventions with families use a combination of evidence-based parenting strategies, domestic abuse programmes and one-to-one support to empower the family to make sustainable changes.

- Members met with the Targeted Family Support teams and discussed their day-to day work and priorities. Officers explained that they can have families who need assistance with many wide-ranging themes. This can include problems such as Domestic Abuse, establishing good morning routines or getting children to school on time. Officers explained that visits are very much tailored to individual needs.

- Officers reflected on the co-location and agreed it is working better. If they need advice there are teams on hand to assist and are aware of lead professionals as a point of contact. The officers had been recently trained to use Liquid Logic; they had been using paper files until earlier this year. Officers reported feeling an increased confidence using the new systems and felt reassured that managers have easier oversight of their case notes. Most partner agencies have access to Liquid Logic as do most schools and officers felt this provided constancy of service across the board.
- Members questioned caseloads and capacity. Officers advised that they all had similar numbers of cases and felt that their managers understood the impact overloaded caseloads would have. One officer advised that they felt management had good oversight of the skill set of individual staff.
- Questions were raised about time scales and meeting review dates. Officers confirmed they were quite methodical about this. Prevention assessments can take less than 40 days to complete, but this can also depend on family engagement. Understandably problems do pop up which can make it harder to keep on track, such as safeguarding issues.

4.2 Pre-Birth & Infant Team

This team works with women and families who are at risk of having their new-born or infant taken into the care of the Local Authority. It seeks to support families to overcome barriers to parenthood, develop the skill and capacity to care for their baby and give new parents every chance of retaining the care of their child. Parents may have had previous new-born or infants removed and therefore be known to Wirral Children's Services, may be mothers or fathers who themselves have been a looked after child or may have a recognised learning difficulty. One-to-one support is provided, and evidence-based programmes are used for sustainable behaviour change.

- Members were informed that the Pre-Birth & Infant Teams worked with expectant mothers and mothers and babies up to one year of age.
- A lot of referrals are through the Integrated Front Door, and members were advised the expectant mother were often victims of Domestic Abuse, had drug or alcohol issues or had severe mental health issues.
- Mothers are offered support with bonding and attachment as well as parenting classes. This is vital to help mother form a relationship with the unborn baby.
- Officers explained that they work with the mother to identify risks at an early stage, this is a window of opportunity to work together and target areas of vulnerability early on.
- Members queried how receptive mothers were to the team. Officers advised that they could often be detached or difficult to work with in the beginning. This may be due to fear, mental health issues or a distrust of Children's services.
- Some expectant mothers have been known to refuse help before the baby is born. For example, they may refuse intervention, support or refuse to take mental health Medication. On some occasions this may change when the Baby is born, after which stage the Mothers will engage.

- One case was highlighted where the mother relapsed, and the child removed. Because a lot of work had been done on bonding and attachment, the shock of this removal meant that the Mother has changed to the extent that officers are now able to work on longer term support and planning.
- Contact with Mothers is based on the level of need. This can be 1-3 times a day or a week. Officers offer sessions to discuss life history which helps create a base to help mother explore and understand their past, and how this feeds into the present and future. Officers advised they felt this work was essential as they could reflect on it when planning and is assisted with work on parenting skills.
- Again, officer echoed the benefits of co-location and sharing skills. Members questioned whether agile working ate into the evenings and effected work-life balance. The officer questioned advised that they felt Agile Working assisted work life balance and it meant they could organise and structure their day better. If on occasion they worked late, they can take the time as TOIL.
- Members queried what happens after the infant turns one. Officers advised that they then go to the Children's Centres. Officers say that they encourage mothers to start visiting the Children's Centres early on, so they start to feel comfortable. Members were also advised that there is also the option of a referral to Family Support Teams.

4.3 Adolescent Response Team (ART)

This team aims to reduce the number of young people (aged 11-18) who become looked after and to increase the number of children re-integrated to their family home. Adolescents are far more difficult to reunify with their families than any other age group. Reunification for adolescents can be a difficult process with lots of planning and preparation required and ongoing support needed to remain at home and avoid further breakdown. ART provides an out-of-hours service and supports young people at risk of homelessness.

- Cases come through the Integrated Front Door with an identified risk of family breakdown and officers advised that the overarching theme is to get young people back in the family home, and commented that home should not just where you live, but where you go to feel safe.
- Officers told Members that they often work alongside other Social Care practitioners, and undertake joint visits, if appropriate.
- Regarding the co-location, staff echoed previous comments about improved communication and better understanding of different teams' remit's as well as utilising the experiences of colleagues more effectively. Officers also felt that it has also the way they approached other staff members as they are less reliant on communication such as email or telephone.
- Officers confirmed that they do plan their work with input from social workers. The ART now have access to Liquid Logic, so the plans are now held in a central system so everyone can access and view it.
- Officers advised they work with Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS), and there is lots of training and planning available. Things have improved significantly now they are

not working from written notes, whereas previously they had struggled juggling plans, visit and paper notes.

- Those in attendance queried the range of work ART officers may do with an adolescent. Officers advised they may meet with parents, taking young people to counselling sessions or meeting them locally for catch up sessions. Officers also advised that there is often a different relationship between early help teams such as ART and social workers as it can seem less formal.
- Members asked whether the ART had received Mediation training. Officers advised that this had been requested but they had not yet received it.
- Officers also advised that there are a great deal of interventions in place for young people, including places such as Pilgrim Street.

4.4 Family Group Conferencing (FGC)

FGC uses a national practice model devised by The Family Rights Group and aims to put children and young people at the centre of decision making about their family. FGC does this by empowering the family, supporting them to come together and have open, honest conversations about the level of support that is required and can be offered within that family without the need for professional involvement. The strengths of the family are recognised, and the main aim is to keep children within their family unit and reduce the number of children becoming looked after by the Local Authority.

- Officers explained how Family Group Conferences originated in New Zealand due to concerns around the number of young people in the Maori Community entering the justice system and allowed Social Work Practitioner's to work with the Maori and their values and Culture. This allowed the family to make decisions to support the family and take care of the child. They have been deemed so successful they have been described as the 'lynchpin' of the New Zealand justice system.
- Families are often referred when they are at level 3 in the continuum of need, with the aim of reducing the need for interventions at level 4 – the overarching aim is to reduce the number of Children Looked After.
- Families often disengage from Social Workers and other intervention methods. Family Group Conferencing aims to reduce this by offering families more ownership over decisions.
- Family Group Conferences in Wirral follow a very similar process to the New Zealand model. In Wirral officers from FGC will visit families beforehand so they can prepare families for the conference. Often there are two-part sessions planned for especially volatile families. The conferences are held in a neutral venue in Birkenhead. This has been designed to look as much like an informal living space as possible.

- Session are split into clearly defined parts. Members were advised that there are FGC officers in attendance, as well as a social worker if required. It was agreed that there should be the minimum of officers in attendance to keep focus centred around the family.
- Members were shown an agenda for the Family Group Conferences. It was explained that they follow the same basic principles as the original New Zealand model.
 1. Introductions and information
 2. Private Family discussion
 3. Resolution and way forward.
- Officers are there to ensure the conferences stay child focused. They often put the thoughts and wishes of the child on sheets of paper around the room, to ensure this stays the focus of the sessions and stays on track. This method can also be used if the Children do not feel comfortable attending.
- Additionally, the conferences enable families to discuss what they need to support them as a family unit. There can often be two tier recommendations from the sessions, such as contact or mediations resolutions. The family's strengths are always included within the agenda.
- Members were interested in the success of FGC, and the referrals. Officers advised that the success and expansion of FGC teams in Wirral meant that referrals were now being made from early help teams, whereas previously the referrals were already at Level 4. There is a good success rate, and re-referrals are often for different issues.
- Officers commented on the Ofsted inspection in Leeds in October 2018, where all but one area were found to be outstanding. The report confirms that this was in part due to excellent early help services and a corporate aim to help and support families at the lowest level of intervention. GCC's can also be used as a rehabilitation method to get children out of care.

4.5 Practice Development Officers (PDOs)

PDOs work across the service to ensure consistency of practice, raise standards and support/mentor individual workers. PDOs deliver service-wide training and oversee the development of systems and processes. They are a key resource for ensuring continual practice improvement.

- Officers advised members that they are ensuring standardised services, with focus on priority areas. The officers advised that they have all worked in different service areas and have previous practitioner training; they can bring a wealth of skills and expertise to the role.
- The PDO post was created after the restructure, and officers confirmed they felt that with the focus on early help they can go back to basics. They meet with team leaders to discuss baseline

audits, reviews and monitor practice. Members were pleased to hear this and commented that it had not always been the case.

- Members queried staff development. Officers confirmed that there is a training package in place and 3 mandatory courses. This is enhanced by a staff questionnaire every six months.
- Officers confirmed that the Early help service is now very targeted and very clear as to its objectives. Officers advised that they are now finding their feet and getting more out a co-located service. This is enhanced by the fact that staff are now less transient.

4.6 Discussion with team managers

- Members commented that the co-location appears to be successful, as previously there were 23 teams located over 14 buildings. It was noted by one member that the conversation around co-location had been going on for years with little action taken. They were pleased to see that this was now moving forward.
- Members asked about travel for officers, and whether this had increased. The managers advised that officers now plan their diaries better, and this has been better for workflow. There has been monitoring of travel expense claims and it has made very little impact.
- Workflow is better but there have been challenges when it is not appropriate for meetings to be held in homes. officers will be looking at utilising the HIVE and Devon Gardens as meeting space, as well as linking in with Pilgrim Street. It was agreed that there is a balance to be struck and a change to the collective mindset – which can be challenging.

5.0 Suggested recommendations

- Several teams advised they had requested mediation training to enhance their ability to help families. Members would like reassurance that this can be delivered.
- Members were interested by the outstanding Ofsted inspection in Leeds and their use of family group conferencing and early help. Members would support the growth of early help schemes in Wirral to improve outcomes for Children and Families and will look forward to seeing this service helping to reduce the number of children in care.

Attendance:

Councillors

Cllr Wendy Clements

Cllr Chris Cooke

Cllr Chris Carubia

Cllr Yvonne Nolan

Officers

Elizabeth Hartley (Assistant Director: Early Help and Prevention)

Kerry Mehta (Head of Children's safeguarding unit)

Kerry Lockhart-Thompson (Manager – Family Matters)

Emma Meaney (Manager – Family Matters)

Anna Perrett (Scrutiny Officer)