



Changing Children's Services in Bournemouth Borough Council

Summary

Bournemouth's decision to apply a whole system approach to reviewing Children in Care services has led to a reduction in the number of children in care from 204 in 2003 to 150 in 2007. There has also been marked improvement in the outcomes for children in care. This has been achieved by adopting an approach which shifts resources from acute to family/preventative services - as promoted by the Audit Commission's: 'Making Ends Meet'.

Project Background

In 2003 Bournemouth Borough Council faced a number of challenges, including criticism from the Joint Review regarding the high number of young people in care, and growing concern regarding increasing costs. There was a lack of planned commissioning, eligibility levels were low and there were too many young people placed in residential care. This was against a background of changing government policy, with much more focus on the child, particularly improving outcomes, reducing exclusion and a move away from residential care.

The introduction of a new Director of Social Services led to a full review of services provided to children in care and the recognition of the need to develop a planned commissioning approach. The Audit Commission's: 'Making It Happen' approach to commissioning services for children's social services was useful in supporting this work. It included profiling children in care and aggregating that information. Applying the same approach to foster carers also gave a profile of our foster carers. Activity and performance data as well as demographic data was used to assess business support; mapping services and expenditure; analysing that information to inform priorities for action.

The authority started with an extensive audit of looked after children, examining whether each placement addressed their needs, particularly reviewing whether those in residential care needed to be there.

Based on this work the Children's Services Commissioning Strategy was prepared for the whole service.



The strategy was very broad and comprehensive and covered safeguarding children and children in care issues. It recognised the need to view children holistically, and acknowledges the need for effective partnerships with education and health services. It looked at the evidence of need and of service quality and costs and concluded with the Services priorities, actions and forecasted commissioning intentions.

The outcome was wide ranging, including a decision to close a residential home. In addition, a dedicated children's review team, which ensures that reviews of child protection and children in care are carried out robustly and to time and that care plans are progressed. Redeploying resources to preventative services was considered essential. Other key changes were the development of a Patch approach to working as well as the introduction of a Brokerage service and a Family Solution Team (FAST). The team works with children, young people, parents and carers applying Family Solution Therapy. Whilst the approach entails a range of interventions dependant on the issues arising in a family, at a simple level the aim is to create a stable home where boundaries are set and carers and teenagers appreciate each others rights and their own responsibilities. The team has been very successful, leading to fewer children in crisis and care, and is well regarded by colleagues.

In addition, the authority engaged dedicated contract officers in the procurement and commissioning process, including providing them with the authority to negotiate with providers. This has led to improved monitoring of contracts and gained better value for money on placements.

Objectives

The following key objectives were defined:

- To reduce the number of looked after children
- To focus on preventative activity
- To focus on the needs of individual children
- To bring the budget under control

Benefits achieved

To date Bournemouth has achieved the following:

- A greatly improved Joint Agency Review report in 2006
- A reduction in the numbers of children in care, from 204 in 2003 to 150 in 2007. In a population of 30,000 young people, this performance is above the national average
- Now scoring in the top 25% for some of the most important 'Children in care looked after outcomes' i.e. stability of placements and educational outcomes
- An improvement in the financial position, which is closely monitored and reviewed.

Critical Success factors and lessons learned

- A new Director and Head of Children's Social Services with a vision was able to lead from the top and this was very important in implementing changes and keeping momentum throughout the process. Clearly this was not about writing a strategy it was about changing culture and good change management.
- In its planning Bournemouth identified the need to take a whole system approach to change, but equally identified that it wasn't possible to change everything at once. It was very important to prioritise changes over the short and medium term.
- Good training and support helped to build confidence in the new way of working and to give momentum for staff to deliver the new approach.

Risks

Bournemouth managed risks through valuing staff, good supervision and good training.

Further Information

If your authority is interested in making significant changes to children's services, the South West Centre of Excellence can help - contact details below.

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