

Improving Children's Services in Essex strengthening service delivery through multi agency commissioning

Summary

In 2008, a Joint Area Review of Children's Services recommended improvements in the delivery of services to vulnerable and underachieving young people. The subsequent improvement programme demonstrates how effective auditing, widespread consultation and evidence-based planning can achieve a step change in service delivery and achieve a very broad consensus on service redesign.

Authority/partner organisation(s):	ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL
Improvement East theme:	PERFORMANCE
Improvement East initiative (workstream):	CHILDREN'S SERVICES
Author:	Wendi OGLE-WELBOURN, DIRECTOR OF COMMISSIONING, SCHOOLS, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Date:	MARCH 2010

Main messages

Improving Children's Services is a key priority for Essex County Council, the Children's Trust and local strategic partnerships. Significant improvements in service delivery are required if vulnerable young people, their families and communities are to get the support needed to progress on to successful adult and working life.

The improvement programme was designed to:

- identify the strengths and weaknesses of the existing systems for multi-agency service delivery
- identify models of practice which have potential to lead to improvements in service delivery
- consult with all stakeholders on the options, debate alternative approaches and build consensus on preferred solutions
- implement programmes which would deliver improved services, invest in preventative work and realise savings which can be re-invested in front line service delivery.

Case study

Essex has announced recently a strategic partnership with IBM to deliver a Transformation Programme designed to improve the effectiveness of all of the Council's services. The programme will ensure that investment in front line services is maximised and that services are accessible, timely and effective. Rethinking the delivery of 'back-office' services, information and communications systems will ensure that scarce resources are channelled where they are needed most. This process adopts a Total Place approach to service commissioning and delivery. The Transformation Programme builds on intensive work, currently underway, to deliver a Children's Services improvement programme.

Throughout 2009, Essex has undertaken a thorough and detailed audit of the work of 29 teams around Schools, Children and Communities (TASCCS) to identify the strengths and weaknesses in this form of service delivery. What emerged were inconsistent levels of impact across the County and across services; an unaffordable management overhead; inflexibility in service delivery; fragmentation of professional practice; and, conflicting leadership demands. The net result was the likelihood that some vulnerable and underachieving children and young people would not get the support they needed in a timely and effective way.

Alongside this audit, a comprehensive consultation programme engaged all stakeholders, partners and service providers in considering the strengths and weaknesses of the current service delivery model and possible alternatives to that model. The four models confirmed as options were: continued development of TASCC teams; delegation of resources to partnerships of schools; integrated management across districts; and the development of locality based commissioning arrangements.

The consultation programme also took evidence from headteacher groups; community and voluntary sector partners; young people, parents and carers; and, all strategic partners involved in service delivery and in the Children's Trust in Essex. The overriding risk identified throughout the consultation was the cost of doing nothing, which would be failure to meet the needs of the most vulnerable young people and not tackling the growing affordability problem with the current delivery structure. These factors supported the case for a further system-wide change management programme.

Drawing on successful practice developed across the region, systems and processes were redesigned to ensure that needs assessment and commissioning of services was accurate, timely and effective; and that service delivery is efficient and effective. Essex has developed a three tier model for commissioning service delivery. The separation of the commissioning process from the management of delivery teams is key to making sure that there is local coordination of support for children and young people. The commissioning process now takes place through three groups: Multi Agency Allocation Groups (MAAGs); Essex Access to Resources Panel (EARP); and, a Joint Agency Panel (JAP).

Multi-agency allocation groups (MAAGs) meet in each of the 12 districts on a weekly programme. These groups are school and community facing and involve a broad spectrum of agencies including the private, voluntary and independent sector, social workers, education professionals, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, children's centres, housing, Primary Health Care workers, Connexions, Youth Service, Youth Offending Service and the Police.

These groups will determine who is best placed to act as lead professional and agree a package of support and intervention in each case. These panels will ensure that there are common thresholds and, through the involvement of social care staff, will implement robust safeguarding arrangements. MAAGs are central to the delivery of services meeting local needs. Whilst professional staff are led and managed through quadrant teams, the MAAGs commission a local team around the child to achieve an integrated package of support. Quadrant based professional teams have greater flexibility to respond to local

needs as they are identified through the panels. The engagement with the Private, Voluntary and Independent sector adds much needed capacity to support the work of the panels. Support packages are monitored closely, their impact evaluated by the panels regularly and support the recommissioning and decommissioning decisions taken by the panels. The system is efficient, effective and responsive to local needs.

The EARP is a County wide panel of service heads and commissioners from children's services that meets weekly. The panel's task is to develop support packages as alternatives to children becoming Looked After or needing to access independent schools, which means young people remain at home or in their local community and continue to attend their school.

The JAP agrees joint resource allocation for children with complex and challenging needs. Bringing together the Primary Care Trust, Adult Transition Service and commissioners from across the Council's services, the panel seeks to ensure that more young people get the support they need within Essex.

Proposals have now been agreed and an implementation programme is in place:

- Quadrant based teams will be relocated from Spring 2010;
- JAP, EARP, and MAAG Panels have been constituted and will meet to commission services from January 2010;
- Embedding the CAF as a key tool in integrated assessment and service delivery through the work of the panels.
- Action to reduce the numbers of children placed outside Essex includes more robust commissioning of Essex residential care facilities; improving the recruitment of foster carers; and, extending the use of Special Guardianship and Residents Orders. The provision of high level family support services.
- Action to reduce reliance on out-of-county boarding schools which includes investment in Essex for additional places for children with autism and those with behaviour, emotional and social difficulties.
- Investing in parenting programmes and family support, delivered through the MAAG panels, to ensure that parents develop the skills needed to enable children to continue living at home safely.
- Developing integrated youth support working alongside the accommodation teams to ensure that young people do not become homeless.

This is a radical, system wide remodelling of service design and delivery. It has already delivered considerable savings that can be reinvested in front line services. Based on sound evidence of effective practice in other local authorities, these solutions have the support of all stakeholders in providing a sound basis for partnership working. The commissioning and delivery of services will continue to realise cost savings as the Council implements a deliverable preventative strategy.

Key outcomes

This work is now at the detailed implementation stage. To date, the consultation programme has ensured a broad consensus on the proposals and support across agencies and partners for their implementation. Early outcomes include:

- Savings of up to £650,000 annually will be achieved through the establishment of quadrant based teams
- Establishment of five local Children's Trust Boards, coterminous with PCT districts, with the capacity to deliver services in an efficient and effective manner.
- MAAG panels in districts/boroughs ensuring that there is a responsive, local assessment, commissioning, monitoring and evaluation of services required.
- Potential for considerable additional cost saving through investment in local provision.
- Commitment to strengthening multi-agency working.
- Projected savings of over £3.1m over five years through service redesign.

Learning

Essex has risen to the challenge in taking radical and wide-ranging action to improve service delivery for vulnerable children, young people and their families. Faced with evidence that recently implemented systems were not working as planned the Authority invested significant resources in an audit of current practice, an options appraisal and then detailed consultation on the possible future models for service delivery.

The quality and range of the consultation was critical to developing a consensus on the solutions to be implemented. Through 19 workshops, a voluntary sector conference, interviews, consultations with stakeholder groups and written responses, all partners had an opportunity to engage with the debate and participate in decision making on preferred solutions.

Learning from elsewhere informed the development of solutions and the success of the consultation programme. Evidence of best practice in commissioning nationally and across the region informed the options analysis, enabling exploration of solutions with proven impact. The implementation of locally based, streamlined commissioning panels is central to the delivery of the model.

The improved professional leadership of specialist teams, whilst retaining multi-agency delivery, presented a particular challenge. Increased flexibility, improved communications and common information systems will ensure that commissioning panels have access to the resources they need to support vulnerable young people.

Overall, service users need confidence that these new systems and processes will deliver more consistent, multi-agency support at the time and place where it is needed. The work of MAAGs, supported by quadrant teams will be central to the delivery of this improvement programme. MAAGs will have an immediate impact. The work of quadrant teams will evolve over time and will increasingly invest in preventative work, reducing the requirement for high cost, long term intervention.

Contact details

Improvement East contact:	Lynsay Cook, Programme Manager Lynsay.cook@improvementeast.gov.uk
Authority contact:	Roger Bullen, Head of Partnership and Business Support Essex County Council, Schools, Children & Families Directorate roger.bullen@essex.gov.uk Wendi Ogle-Welbourn, Director of Commissioning Schools, Children & Families, Essex County Council wendi.ogle-welbourn@essex.gov.uk
Other partner organisations:	