

Raising the Standard – Reducing the Cohort

Summary

This study describes a whole systems approach to reducing the numbers of children in care in Peterborough. This Local Authority had traditionally been outliers when compared to other Local Authorities in England and statistical neighbours. No real signs of reducing the cohort of children in care had been seen for several years.

This had resulted in many children being placed in independent fostering places and external residential services. The study shows that the numbers in care have dropped by 24%, the number placed in independent provision by 45% with resultant savings of £2.248m. This project was delivered against a backcloth of an approach called “sustaining the improvement” which is also described.

Authority/partner organisation(s):	PETERBOROUGH CITY COUNCIL
Improvement East theme:	PERFORMANCE
Improvement East initiative (workstream):	CHILDREN'S SERVICES
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Main messages

- Projects such as the one described needs to be led by a tier 2 manager at the very least and driven by senior managers so that it's momentum can be assured
- Regular reporting must be built into the project so that rigour is maintained
- The interdependencies of different teams/functions and responsibilities need to be established early in the life of a project so that all aspects of the project are adding value to the whole

Case study

The number of children in care in Peterborough reached a peak of 386 in September 2007. This represented 100 per 10,000 children under 18. At the time, the national average for England was 55 and the average for the statistical neighbours was 72 per 10,000 population. Peterborough was therefore a huge outlier.

Children's social care services had overspent their budget in the previous two years by about 10%. This whole issue was causing concern to the Children's Services Advisor at Government Office and it was agreed that serious and robust action needed to be taken.

A plan was put in place called Reducing the Cohort. The task of this action plan was to reduce the numbers of children in care from 386 to 334 by 31 March 2008 and to reduce the number of agency placements from 106 to 85.

The Plan

The Reducing the Cohort proposals were four-fold:

1. Gate-keeping: to keep entries to the care system to an absolute maximum of 8 per month
 - There should be no emergency placements unless there is unforeseen clear and present danger for younger children
 - All core assessments being undertaken must contain targets and proposals in the care plan which aim to keep children out of care, ensuring that they remain in the community if safe to do so
 - Improved communication should be maintained with specialist provision who can provide services to maintain children in the community e.g. CAMHS, Educational Psychology etc
 - If children are thought to be on the edge of care, a threshold of care meeting will be held, chaired by a Service Manager which will ensure that a team around the child is put in place to avoid accommodation unless it is not safe to do so
2. Throughput/exit plans: to ensure that children left the care system as quickly and safely as possible at a rate of 10 per month
 - An exercise will be undertaken to consider those children who have been accommodated recently to see if the exit plans could be advanced if safe to do so
 - All professionals attending the 4 week review for children in care will consider carefully the risks to achieving outcomes in care versus those of staying at home and whether the child should go home
 - By second review a permanence plan must be in place which has addressed whether or not the child can go home if safe to do so
 - Realistic end dates must be set for all children being accommodated which reflects the work required to implement the care plan
 - End dates should be communicated to external providers and contracts signed for that period and be subject to review
 - There are 373 reviews happening over the next six months. At every one of these, the possibility of a return home must be considered along with the support which would be needed to achieve such an outcome. Safety must be ensured

- Each of the 28 children currently placed at home will be considered for coming out of the care system. It is thought that this would be suitable for 10 children
- Those children for whom a revocation of the care order has been requested action will be chased up and speeded up

3. Stability of Placements: to reduce the numbers of agency placements and associated costs and to stabilise placements in the longer term.

- All agency placements should be considered carefully with a view to establishing if:
 - Children can move from agency residential care to foster care (cost reduction)
 - Children can move from agency residential care to in-house foster care (cost reduction)
 - Children can move to family and friends (cost reduction)
 - Children can be rehabilitated home (cohort reduction)
 - Children could be adopted (cohort reduction)
 - Children could be made subject to an SGO (cohort reduction)
- To review the list of those children for whom permanence is deemed to be with agency foster carers and negotiate with providers for reduced fees
- Potential placement breakdowns should be identified by foster carers and social workers. “A Team around the Child” meeting should be convened, which includes all relevant staff and plans made to support the placement. The possibility of buying in any necessary support should not be overlooked
- Ensure that all children in agency placements (who are not in permanence plans) have end dates

4. A list of all children who have already had one placement move or more should be identified. Each team should create an early warning system so that the team manager can be vigilant and ensure that appropriate support is provided

- Recruitment of foster carers/adopters: to ensure that by the end of March 2008 there were 10 extra foster care households offering 15 extra places and there were 5 more children placed for adoption
- There are 10 foster families going through the approval process. Ensure that they are fast tracked as far as possible so that they become active in last quarter of the year

- Assess whether those foster carers currently inactive should remain on the approval list. If so, predict the number of placements which will be offered and when
- De-register those for whom there is no likelihood of taking more placements
- Ensure that by the end of the year there are 25 potential foster carers waiting to start the approval process
- Ensure that there are 5 extra children placed for adoption by the end March 2008
- Ensure that the target of 26 adoptions for 2008/09 are well planned for by year end

Monitoring the Plan

The indicators associated with the plan were monitored closely and robustly on a weekly basis, at least. If there was increased activity it was subject to daily scrutiny. The plan was a feature on the agenda of all relevant team meetings as well as all management meetings. Updates were provided on a monthly basis to directors and senior politicians.

Progress

	Position by 31 st March 2008	Position by 31 st December 2009
Children in care	344	293
Agency Fostering	88	60
Agency Residential	12	14
Numbers of children adopted	27 (plus 10 subject to SGO)	60 (since March 2008)
Numbers of new foster carers	24	34 (since March 2008)

The downward trend of children in care is illustrated by the graph reproduced in Appendix 1

The net reduction of Agency placements to date has resulted in savings of **£2.248m full year effect.**

The Interdependency of Performance

The importance of the interdependency of the performance of different teams in order to achieve the plan has been noted and developed as part of this project. This is best illustrated by considering children awaiting adoption placements. At one stage early in the project, there were 25 children waiting for adoptive parents to be identified. It had been expected that 14 of these would have been adopted before 31st March 2008. Eleven of these children were in agency fostering places. The adoption team were not able to

identify places for these children and thus some children remained in expensive placements and without permanence.

Social care as a system

All children's services are attempting to intervene earlier and to offer preventative services so that tier 4 solutions can be avoided wherever possible. During the life of this project, we have been monitoring what has been happening in the rest of social care delivery. Below is a summary:

1. Following a capacity analysis exercise the number of qualified workers was increased from a baseline of 55 to 77.5 and a restructure and a relocation of services has resulted in better workload management, easier access for service users and improved timeliness of response to referrals. Appropriate thresholds have been set with a vulnerability matrix operating at all levels of need.
2. The number of initial assessments undertaken has risen steadily with end of March 2009 performance at 55.6% of referrals and is currently above target for 2010. Alongside this the timeliness of initial assessments has improved to 63% in time at end of March 2009 and currently at 83%, above the LAA target of 80%. Similarly, core assessments had increased to 94 per 10,000 at end of March 2009 and 61% on time. Currently 75% are on time, in line with the target set.
3. The Ofsted unannounced inspection in July 2009 commented that the response to referrals was "timely, consistent with thresholds and helped keep children safe."
4. There is improvement in the allocation of Children In Need (CIN) cases from 59.3% in March 2008 to the current position of 87.4%.
5. All children who are subject of a child protection plan are allocated to a Qualified Social Worker (QSW) and 100% are reviewed on time. There are fewer children subject of a child protection plan – falling from a baseline of 176 to 101 currently. There are no children who have been subject to a plan for more than two years and re-registration is 10.6% against a target of 16%. The unannounced inspection commented that "child protection plans are distributed within one day of the conference ensuring all professionals who need to know are informed".
6. The department has a robust management information system to collect and monitor performance which includes daily, weekly and monthly scrutiny of key indicators and performance across those indicators continue on an upward trajectory.
7. The quality of work is now being audited against a systematic modular audit programme and issues of quality are addressed through practitioner practice surgeries. The unannounced inspection found that staff were regularly supervised. Capacity analysis shows that currently caseloads for children in care average 16 per worker, in leaving care it is 17 per worker. For assessment and care planning it

is 22 and referral and assessment is 23. The highest caseloads are in CIN averaging 30.

8. Vacancy levels of QSW's are running at 10% but are concentrated in referral and assessment. All other service areas are fully staffed. 65% of staff are engaged on Post Qualifying [PQ] training and there is now an established career progression framework that has been recognised nationally by Childrens Workforce Development Council (CWDC).
9. Succession planning is in place with a strategy for five bursary payments and three secondments and traineeships year on year.

Sustaining the improvements

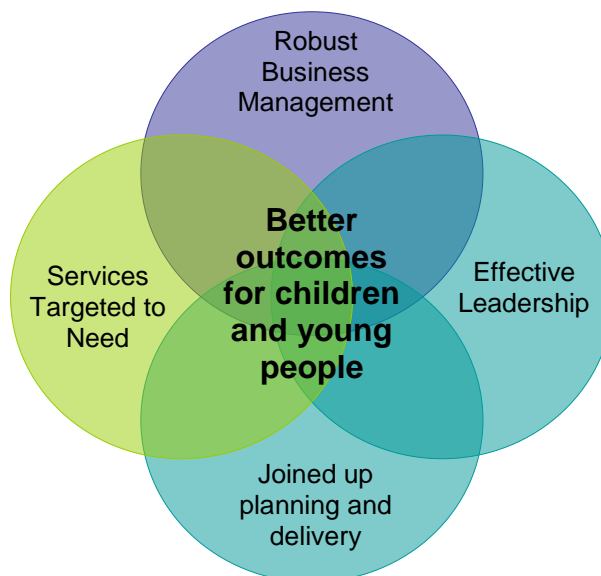
It is clear that a project such as “reducing the cohort” cannot function independently from a wider and more far reaching improvement plan. The improvements made in children’s social care/safeguarding, which are demonstrated in Appendix 2, will be sustained through continuing to deliver the following:

- Robust business management processes:
 - Real-time performance management and interrogation through the Performance Dashboard – extended beyond Children’s Services and into the Children’s Trust; Solution Clinics, targeting ‘wicked’ and hard-to-shift performance; early intervention in areas of declining or ‘sticky’ performance
 - Effective resource alignment through integrated business and financial planning, with resources targeted at agreed areas of priority / challenging performance; clear accountabilities and responsibilities within departmental and divisional delivery contracts.
- Effective leadership
 - Strengthened Assistant Director accountabilities, introducing a matrix management approach combining both strategic leads and locality management.
 - Extended Leadership Team – raising the standard and accountability of Tier 3 management and strengthening the strategic role of Tier 2 management.
- Services that meet the specific needs of children and families in local areas
 - Delivering through Localities – integrated multidisciplinary front line delivery in localities responding to local needs more effectively.
 - Continued development of “Team around the child” approach supported by effective integrated processes.
 - Effective risk profiling and customer segmentation allowing for targeted interventions (and commissioning).

- Joined up planning and delivery
 - Children’s Trust – shared and agreed vision, strategy and planning leading to the ‘multiplication effect’ of a range of agencies jointly contributing to improving priority outcomes
 - Joint Commissioning procedures and processes developing across Natural Alliances – bringing services together in a holistic, joined up approach to key priority areas (integrated children in care services, integrated children with disability services etc)

This is shown in diagrammatic form below:

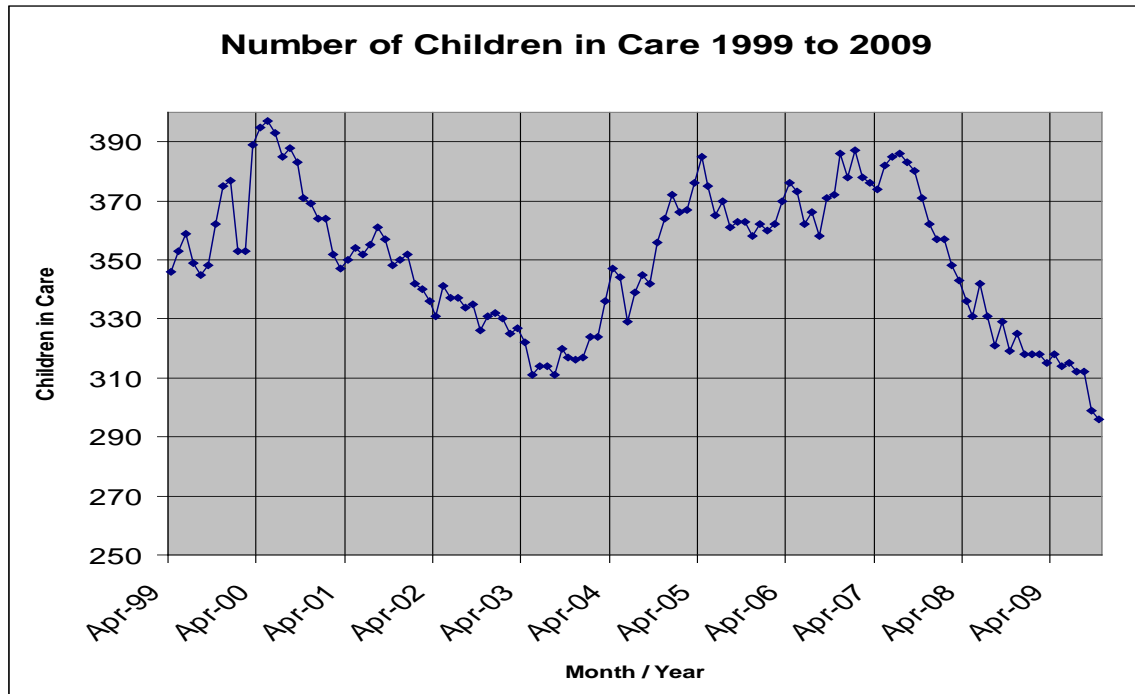
Peterborough Children’s Services Sustainability Matrix



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Appendix 1: Changes in Children in Care 1999 – 2009



Appendix 2: Key Performance Data - Safeguarding

