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CHILDREN'S SERVICES ROUNDTABLE WRITE-UP

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NLGN hosted a roundtable in partnership with Prospects in March 2015 to discuss changing delivery models for children's and youth services. This was set in the context of increasing local government budget cuts and the need to provide wraparound support for better outcomes for individuals. Delegates included senior officers in children's and youth services within local authorities. This paper outlines the key themes from this discussion and how this fits in the wider context of children's and youth services.

DRIVING REFORM OF SERVICES

NAVIGATING THE CUTS

Children's and youth services can have a profound impact on a child's emotional and physical health, wellbeing, educational attainment and their safety. They are central in shaping the future life trajectories of those who use the services. For these children, the quality of the services they interact with are critical not just in childhood, but in giving them and their families a foundation for their whole life.

Children's services can also have a substantial impact on public services as a whole, both in the short and long term. Through intervening early in the lives of many children who may otherwise develop longer term and more acute needs, children's services can act as a means to manage and

reduce demand by removing the need for downstream services thereby helping to avoid substantial public service costs later on.

Yet for many members of the general public, the work of children's and youth services can be hidden. Unless individuals or their loved ones have a specific need to use them; unless services fail Ofsted inspections or specific cases become high profile in the media, generally children's services are not high on the public's agenda. Rather, the public tends to be more concerned about services such as waste, dog fouling, littering and fly-tipping: in other words, the more visible aspects of local government delivery.

In the face of cuts to local authority budgets which are set to continue well into the next parliament, councils are grappling with how to maintain provision of a broad range of services, including those for children, whilst meeting the ever more complex needs and rising demand found across adult social care. In this context, prioritising children's services budgets becomes an increasing challenge as resources are being pulled towards adult social services and later life care.

In the immediate term, the question for local authorities is how to make the best use of dwindling resources without compromising on service quality. Protecting investments in areas such as safeguarding and emergency cases is paramount. Yet this must be balanced with longer term considerations of

which services constitute the best investment in the life chances of the children involved. Equally worthy of consideration is how these services can mitigate risks and manage public service demand downstream and in later life. But when significant savings are needed now, implementing invest-to-save models is hugely difficult.

Delegates at the roundtable discussed how reform to children's services was fundamentally embedded in the narrative of local authority budget cuts; but that there was much more driving the need to transform. While there was acceptance that services need to change to reflect the financial environment and need for early intervention, many delegates expressed the difficulty in justifying cutting back services which impact so fundamentally on vulnerable children's lives.

While many councils have found innovative ways to navigate the cuts by eliminating waste and duplication from the system, these efficiencies are finite and have largely been delivered. Instead, councils are now pursuing new and innovative ways to transform services – both to deliver better outcomes and strip costs from the system - whilst maintaining provision for emergency cases which cannot go unanswered.

PRIORITISING SERVICE USERS

There is a strong case to be made about transforming services, which can be in part

a response to local authority budget cuts but also as a way of making services work much better for the children they help. In this way, the cuts offer a great opportunity for changing the way services are currently provided. In reforming or redesigning the way children's and youth services operate, the current problems within the system must be addressed. In particular, refocusing resources to frontline staff and overcoming risk aversion are important to create the conditions for greater innovation in children's and youth services. The overarching priority for transforming services should be to guarantee wraparound support for children.

At present, children are passed between too many specialists, removing any sense of personal, tailored pastoral care and introducing a sense of being processed through the system. Delegates noted how wraparound support was vital, but this needs to be balanced with the number of frontline staff involved in one individual case to avoid putting off the young person. Building up a rapport with frontline staff is essential for children to trust their social workers. When children are passed on through different specialists at every turn, there is a risk of losing the engagement of that individual. One delegate mentioned that social workers were all signposting children on to specialists and other services rather than trying to address the problems themselves, which is highly problematic for the individual concerned.

Moving forward, the innovation around children's services should be about reducing the number of professionals involved with every child to streamline the process and remove a layer of bureaucracy - particularly for social workers who are required to make a record of every interaction. Freeing up social workers from endless administration to working much more closely with young people will be vital moving forwards. Social workers are invaluable because of their disposition, people skills and ability to connect with young people on a personal level. Not every worker has these skills, and they need to be utilised much more efficiently. At present, social workers spend a vast majority of their time doing administrative work when their time would be better spent working face-to-face with the families they are helping. Transformation of services should be about a fundamental shift of resources to the frontline to support wraparound services for the individual, as well as a response to the budget cuts.

It comes as no surprise that children's services are a highly sensitive area and therefore risk aversion is rife. Subject to rigorous Ofsted inspections, the pressures on services are onerous, particularly where inspection systems are designed to 'fail by default'. This is due, in part, to recent scandals reported in the media of failing services coupled with an Ofsted system which failed to detect key indicators of abuse and its scale - for example in the case of child

sexual exploitation in children's care homes in Rotherham. There has been a recent backlash from children's service directors against a 'deeply flawed' Ofsted inspection regime, which unfairly paints the picture of the 'inadequate authority'.¹ Professional anxiety from both children's service workers and Ofsted inspectors has led to a culture of risk aversion, indecision on the frontline and unnecessary referring up to specialists within the system.

In the context of increasing scrutiny, councils are reluctant to innovate. Demand for quality is at a premium at a time when resources are depleting dramatically. One delegate noted: "Ofsted are looking for platinum services where we have brass resources". Such high demands on children's services can be counter-productive, particularly in terms of recruitment and retention of high quality frontline staff. While the kinds of failures we have seen must be avoided, risk aversion does mean that councils are reluctant to stray too far from tradition, making innovation much more difficult to initiate.

Although delegates did not advocate lowering risk tolerance as a solution to the current problems of professional anxiety, integrating children's and youth services to initiate substantial, wraparound support can only be achieved through redesigning and rethinking the way in which the current system operates.

¹ http://www.lgcplus.com/5083843.article?WT.tsrc=email&WT.mc_id=Newsletter31

TRANSFORMING SERVICES

The next wave of service transformation, and a high priority for many councils, is to look at new forms of collaboration with local partners; seeking efficiencies by outsourcing, cutting duplication in the system and ensuring single pathways of support which are designed around the individual to meet their complex needs. There is a growing recognition amongst service providers that the problems young people face are interdependent and often mutually reinforcing, not linked to one issue or service, but requiring a joint response in order to be adequately addressed.

Many locally based public services frequently interact with the same cohort of children and young people, and in this context, it makes sense to collaborate and integrate services by joining-up staff, merging services, streamlining management and providing single pathways of service provision. Indeed, for many delegates at the roundtable, their councils are already in the process of redesigning services and focusing on wraparound support for the individual; for example, fostering formal and informal connections between the police, youth offending services, social workers, schools and family support services. By developing wraparound support, services are better able to meet the individual needs of the child, whilst cutting duplication from the system and reallocating resources to the frontline.

Some local authorities have merged services, some have integrated back-office locality teams, and some have focused more on community and voluntary provision. Overwhelmingly, the priority has been to keep the child as the focal point of service delivery, whilst addressing issues early to avoid escalation and the need for further referrals. Much work has already been done around this agenda, for example the Troubled Families programme; whole-scale service transformation has much to learn from this work and could benefit from applying the threads of its success.

Delegates at the roundtable discussed three emerging models for service transformation in response to the cuts and need to focus on early intervention:

- Outsourcing services
- Integrating services
- Combined approach

The section below gives an overview of these models, alongside issues delegates raised regarding their perceived opportunities and the barriers to implementing them.

MODEL ONE: OUTSOURCING SERVICES

For some councils, outsourcing provides a means to cut management overheads, streamline services and lever the expertise of external organisations to deliver services. In some areas of children's services, for example

education and employment services, this is highly effective.

However, there is also a lot of political sensitivity around outsourcing children's services. For example, some deem it highly inappropriate for services like child protection and children in care to be the responsibility of external organisations and not directly democratically accountable. Furthermore, there are high levels of professional anxiety around sharing sensitive data about a councils' most vulnerable children which would be essential in outsourcing services.

In the wider context of high profile media cases, this anxiety is completely understandable. Cases such as Baby P and Victoria Climbié not only sparked huge reforms nationally and within councils, but they have also fostered a culture of extreme risk aversion in such important areas like children's services. For some councils, keeping children's services in-house brings a perceived, if not actual, degree of oversight and accountability. When balancing risks, many local authorities deem outsourcing too much of a risk.

It is not possible to outsource risk completely, as ultimately the local authority will remain accountable for the performance of outsourced services, despite not having direct control over them. Crucially, children's lives as well as the reputations of councils hinge on this.

However, some models of outsourcing have been very successful, such as the Hackney Learning Trust taking over educational services in the London Borough of Hackney. However, success may not be immediate and may take time to be delivered. Building trust and aligning business and political priorities are crucial elements to successful partnership working, particularly where councils give up day-to-day control over services. Furthermore, strong governance structures with strategic oversight from the council can mitigate risk and ensure solid contract delivery. Flexible contracts can be useful tools to facilitating partnerships, preferably with an element of risk management and share.

HACKNEY LEARNING TRUST

In 2002, London Borough of Hackney put out a ten year contract to tender for their education services with a successful bid from the not-for-profit organisation, the Hackney Learning Trust (HLT). HLT had three broad goals: to raise standards within schools through quality recruitment of staff; to invest £108 million over ten years to rebuild or refurbish all schools under the Building For Schools programme (which ended in 2011); and to create more school places in anticipation of increasing demand. Over ten years, HLT had transformed the reputations of Hackney schools: in terms of Ofsted grading, they were amongst the most improved schools in the country; and

in terms of academic achievement, pupils surpassed the national average of GCSE results, rising from 32% passing with five A* - C grades in 2000 to 50% in 2012, even though deprivation levels within the borough remained the same. Education services were transferred back in-house in 2012 after the ten year contract ended and the Learning Trust now operates as a department within the Children's and Young People's Service.

While some delegates were sceptical about the ability of outsourced children's services to deliver better outcomes, outsourcing has proven to be effective in some areas providing that the organisation providing the services is suitable, which may require a trial and error approach. Outsourcing contracts and services is not a panacea for budget cuts to children's services, and must be considered on a case-by-case basis, but it does have some practical uses to help councils navigate the difficult financial climate.

MODEL TWO: INTEGRATING SERVICES

There was a sense that many councils are moving towards a broad, universal model, integrating their children's and youth services into a single pathway to reduce the bureaucracy of the system, eliminate duplication of work and to allow the young person to have a single point of contact for multiple and complex needs. This was the

preferred approach for many of the councils represented at the roundtable because of its potential to streamline services at the same time as providing wraparound support focused on the individual.

There are many practical barriers to integrating services between local authorities and partner organisations. Cultural differences between organisations, financial structures which do not incentivise integration, fear of potential loss of autonomy and insufficient upfront investment for integration all make integration harder. Financial structures are particularly tricky, as local authorities invest in children's services but the rewards are reaped elsewhere, for example the Treasury who will benefit from increased taxes for young people who are no longer NEET or the NHS will benefit from young people whose substance or alcohol misuse has been tackled upstream. A previous NLGN report, *Break on Through*, identified cultural differences between partner organisations as the top barrier to integrating public services with local partners.²

Interestingly, this sentiment was echoed by delegates at the roundtable, who noted that the most difficult part of integrating services is to instigate a cultural change and to turn automatic silo working into a more collaborative approach, despite the fact

² <http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/wp-content/uploads/BREAK-ON-THROUGH2.pdf>

that they were talking about integrating two council services. Cultural differences exist not only between organisations, but also between departments. Delegates reported that there is a tendency amongst council services to adopt a ‘we know it all’ mentality, which is counter-productive to joined-up working. Learning to use the expertise of other services or organisations to provide each child with efficient, effective services is much more important than individual services meeting their own specific targets. This should be recognised within departments and by those who set the targets in the first place.

One recommendation from delegates was to use co-location to foster ‘water fountain networks’ between staff, which is already commonplace in areas like community safety. It was noted that working together becomes easier when informal relationships and networks are created between - for example - police and probation officers with social workers within district and borough offices. Such an approach was adopted by Suffolk County Council.

SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL

In 2011, Suffolk County Council restructured their children’s and youth services into one service to make better use of resources and to invest in early intervention and prevention. Providing more effective assessment was intended to reduce the need for costly

specialist intervention downstream. The Children and Young People’s Service Office is responsible for education, youth, community, health, early years and specialist services for children. Estimates suggest that savings of £7 million were made to the Children’s and Young People’s Directorate between 2010-11 and 2011-12 as a result of integrating services.

The integration of services are based on key elements including improved public access to data to allow families and practitioners to make full use of universal, community and self-support services; improved information sharing facilitated by the co-location of the integrated team with the police and other public bodies; and a “Team Around the Child” approach for early intervention for children with additional needs, who may not be identified as needing immediate specialist support.

Integrating children’s and youth services makes sense when dealing with the same cohort of people who are likely to be in regular contact with police, youth offending, family support and other children’s services. Lessons can be learned from the Troubled Families programme, the threads of which could be applied to the integration of children and youth services. This programme aimed to turn around the lives of 120,000 families and, as of March 2015, the programme had achieved 90% of this target. Previously, these families cost the public purse approximately £9 billion per year.

In Greater Manchester, a new model was created of a single virtual team consisting of the council, health, schools and work programme provider representatives to give families a single point of contact with rigorous support regarding a wide range of support services. This was an investment in early intervention as well as wraparound support for these families which required a new investment model to streamline support services and decommission those which were no longer necessary. Future returns on investment are expected by saving money downstream.

Focus on the child involved must be the first priority when integrating services around the individual. There is a tendency within social work to provide one-to-one support as standard; however, this is not always the most appropriate nor most welcomed method of connecting with a young person. Instead, detached work, active outreach and education programmes in a group support setting may be more suitable for the needs of some individuals. Tailoring support on a case-by-case basis will be more efficient in the long-term, and can save the council money rather than providing a blanket response.

MODEL THREE: A COMBINED APPROACH

The roundtable identified the merits of a combined approach of both outsourcing and integrating services, as delegates heard from representatives from Prospects, who manage the integration of Gloucestershire County

Council's children's and youth services. There are many benefits to a combined approach, including maintaining an element of control over services whilst simultaneously allowing an external organisation to provide objectivity and fresh approaches to entrenched ways of working. Focusing on outcomes, not processes, is essential to keep the needs of the user at the forefront of service delivery, and thus an outsider perspective with solid project management skills can be highly beneficial.

PROSPECTS AND GLOUCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

In 2008, Gloucestershire County Council put out a contract to tender for the integration of children's services, Connexions and other youth services. Prospects secured the bid for the management contract to provide leadership and connection across the services. In 2010, the large-scale budget cuts led to Prospects being tasked with taking out £5 million within a year. This forced a complete redesign of services, including remodelling of NEET work (for those not in education, employment or training) and creating flexible, community-based teams at the same time as expanding care services.

Following their initiative in the face of austerity, and ready to face another round of cuts, Gloucestershire were awarded £1.5 million from the Department for Education Innovation Fund to include health and social care, child

protection, mental health and others into one service. Prospects will build on their outcomes-focused integrated service to develop a single assessment and formulation that all service staff can understand and all young people can benefit from.

Gloucestershire ensured they had a central point for all referrals to pass through and to ensure the most appropriate response. Strong partnerships were forged between mental health nurses, speech and language specialists, police and probation officers, firemen and many other community service workers. Using a strength-based model - which involves focusing on the positives of an individual's skills, capacity, knowledge and connections - they used a short outcomes framework for young people in order to tailor support and, with fewer cooks spoiling the broth, these programmes will be used to help to see the distance travelled by young people and their families. In this way, outcomes and development can be seen by both frontline staff, the young person involved and their family.

CONCLUSIONS

Children's and youth services are operating in testing times, with increasing budget cuts and simultaneous pressure for ever higher standards and quality. Reform to services will sit within this broader narrative of cost-savings. There are fundamental tensions between investing upfront and investing to save: local authorities need to meet need now

but also invest in the future. At the same time councils must navigate immediate budget cuts whilst keeping children as the focal point of services.

However, this paper has demonstrated that there is a great culture of risk aversion in children's and young people's services due to high profile media cases and the sensitivities around this service area. Councils are therefore reluctant to initiate wholesale system change. A great challenge to transforming services is this need to overcome risk. Moving forwards, it is important to create the conditions and political will for innovation in children's and youth services while making sure vulnerable children remain protected.

Delegates at the roundtable floated three possible approaches to reform: outsource services, integrate services, or follow a combined approach. Many councils seem to be moving towards integrated services, to reduce duplication within the system and remove layers of bureaucracy. Integration can also help to delineate the system which is plagued by high professional anxiety leading to the passing up of responsibility, nervousness around the scrutiny of Ofsted, and reluctance to innovate. Regardless, the ultimate priority should be to provide high quality, wraparound support for the children and young people involved, and therefore any compromise on cut-backs should not come at their expense.

THE VIEW FROM PROSPECTS

Austerity has been the driving force in public service innovation for some time now; Children and young people's services have not been immune to significant budget cuts. Despite the reduction in finances the same – or ideally better – services are required to ensure that vulnerable children are protected and given the support they and their families need.

Unfortunately, often, quality and affordability do not make happy bedfellows. It was encouraging to hear the variety of innovation that local authorities around the table were leading and their new ways of overcoming budget reductions while ensuring the quality of the service remains.

Partnership working was one of the ideas discussed. Partnerships are about more than cost. Adding value through providing experts or experience is often at the heart of partnerships. This style of service delivery is one Prospects excels at, as our work with Gloucestershire County Council demonstrates. We work with many other local authorities in this way.

Prospects has delivered careers information advice and guidance (IAG) for young people aged 16-19 on behalf of Leicestershire County Council since October 2012. Since then we have exceeded tough targets set by the council, working with them to reduce

numbers of young people who are classified as NEET. Indeed the figure has fallen to a record low of 2.8%.

In Calderdale we work in partnership with the council to provide their Leaving Care Service. Currently we support 154 young people, 19 of whom are studying at higher education and we are achieving some of the best NEET rates in the country for Looked After Children. Currently 18.6% are not in education, employment or training against a national average of 37%.

We work with more than 21 local authorities and our focus is always on innovation; discovering new ways of delivering services without sacrificing quality. Making a difference to people's lives is at the heart of what we do at Prospects. For those most at risk of disengaging with society the difference we can make is life changing.

Find out more about the difference we make at www.prospects.co.uk

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