

## **Children's Services Scrutiny**

### **Early Intervention Hubs Review**

#### **September 2012**

At the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2012 meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee, members discussed the progress of the implementation of the Early Intervention Hubs in Oxfordshire now that the service has been running for a year

Prior to the meeting a majority of the committee members visited the hubs, with at least two committee members at each of the 7 hubs, which informed the discussion. Feedback from committee members on the visits was very positive; all agreed that the staff they met with were dedicated and that interviews with service users found many successes in positive outcomes for families and individuals. The launch of the hubs last year was followed by a period of significant change and it was seen that whilst this scale of change always presents challenges, things were progressing in a constructive way. The committee was impressed by the level of motivation they saw in the staff and volunteers as well as the high quality of services provided.

The committee divided its discussion into 4 themes which were 'Vision and Aims', 'Partners and Communication', 'Duplication/Overlap', and 'Resources'. The following reflects the committee's views on those themes and outcomes for policymakers to consider in leading the Early Intervention Hubs into their second year.

#### **Vision and Aims**

The committee viewed that there needed to be a level of consistency around the 'core offer' across all Hubs in the county. Better clarity around what this core offer entails can also be useful in communicating what services are not available in hubs.

It is acknowledged, however, that hubs need to maintain their local focus and that the full complement of each individual hub would reflect that area's service needs in addition to the core offer.

#### **Committee Recommendation**

- Development of a better articulation of the core offer across all hubs.

#### **Partners and Communication**

Partnership working is instrumental in ensuring that the hubs work effectively by providing sources of referrals and resources and knowledge that can be shared. Whilst there was evidence that in many cases this is working effectively, there is a lack of consistency in success across some hubs with some partners. It is essential that there be regular and on-going communication with all partners and expectations need to be clear and consistent from all parties.

The partnership working with schools is especially important as the conduit for the majority of referrals. There is further work to be done bridging hubs to schools and communicating the hub offer to key members of school staff. There was also

discussion about the early focus targeting secondary schools; for the next stage of implementation, members suggested a deliberate approach to primary school outreach.

Partnership with the voluntary sector is also crucial as there are many voluntary organisations with skills/volunteers/information to offer the hubs. The hub message needs to continue to go out to the voluntary organisations so that the dialogue about what they can offer is ongoing. In particular, there are many small groups, particularly in rural areas, which could help with hub outreach.

### **Committee Recommendation**

- Continued commitment to widening connections with all schools and projecting the hub's core offer to them.
- Continued development of strong links with the voluntary sector.

### **Duplication/Overlap**

The committee discussed that there need to be clear links and liaison with partners to ensure the hubs are not duplicating work but are recognising each other's strengths and combining to provide a cohesive service.

The committee questioned whether there is joint working with the district/parish/town councils, particularly surrounding housing allocations as this is seen as an important issue that needs to be addressed effectively.

It was also noted that the Thriving Families initiative should be fully integrated with the work of the hubs.

### **Committee Recommendation**

- Invite officers from the district councils to a future scrutiny meeting to explore contributing issues around housing provision.
- Consider investigating options such as pooled budgets with stakeholders or grant payments for some services

### **Resources**

Over the first year of operation, hubs have developed and expanded their service provision. While it was apparent during the visits that they were well utilised and busy, anecdotal evidence from staff indicated that capacity is stretched.

Staff have been increasingly under strain to respond to the levels of demand for services. While there is currently an utilisation of volunteers across all hubs, questions were asked as to whether there is scope to develop further volunteer support. There were also suggestions about the potential to share more 'back office' support functions with other services such as Children's Centres. In addition, given the diversity of service users and provision, the intensity in some areas and the stretch in others, there was concern about the accepted approach to fund all hubs on the same basis.

While the committee recognised the benefit to the 'one front door' approach to services, there was concern surrounding the reach of services for those that do not live near to the hub location. There was best practice evidence at some hub

locations around flexibly providing services 'off site'. Many of the service users value meeting in neutral locations and it needs to be explored how these can be best provided.

There was also concern that not all of the hubs have adequate facilities. The Littlemore hub was highlighted particularly as it does not currently have its own premises and relies on sharing with the library.

### **Committee Recommendation**

- A re-evaluation of the funding distribution between hubs.
- The committee also requested an explanation for the current year's underspending projection. The committee would seek to ensure that any current year underspend were re-invested in other aspects of the service.
- A continued emphasis on recruitment, retainment, and utilisation of volunteers.
- Enhancing the geographical reach of hubs – particularly with partners or developing other 'neutral territories'.

### **Exemplar practice**

Intervention projects bid for/led by partners eg. schools, utilising Hub grants.

Art Room/Play Therapy sponsorship.

Regular Partners Forum to share 'thinking' and expectations.

Development of 'neutral territory' for family meetings, particularly in the more rural areas.

Working with particular groups eg. young carers, disability, men.

Strong links with the police eg. operation stay safe, restorative justice.

Partnership with Children's Centres – joint meetings at different levels, representatives on advisory boards, joint strategic planning, recognition of each other's skills and 'pointing' families appropriately.

Appointment of staff with school experience as this helps to meet local need.