

Interface Issue - Thresholds

In March 2015 Ofsted produced their thematic inspection report evaluating the effectiveness of the early help services for children and families provided by local authorities and their partners. (“Early Help – whose responsibility?”)

One of the major themes in this report is the issue of clarity about thresholds and their application. This is a regular feature of the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework. Here are some of the findings from the report:

Referrals to the Local Authority

Themes from referrals that did not progress beyond the referral and those that progressed to a formal assessment followed by statutory intervention then ceasing:

- A quarter of the professionals and social work staff spoken to said they struggled to understand and apply local thresholds.
- In just over three quarters of cases closed at the point of referral, this decision was appropriate – but though statutory intervention was not required, children and families would have benefited from an early help offer and this opportunity was missed for some.
- Almost a quarter of cases were closed inappropriately at the point of referral. In these:
 - a) Risk was not well considered and action not taken when it should
 - b) A re-referral for the same issue was made in the subsequent 3 months that could have been addressed with the information known originally
 - c) The referral quality was poor and the referral was closed without children’s social care speaking to the referrer to establish the reason for their decision
 - d) The case was closed without completion of identified tasks
- Almost half of the referring professionals took no further action when children’s social care closed the case, and did not seek to secure early help for the child; in too many cases children’s social care also failed to secure appropriate support.
- Despite Working Together requiring children’s social care to give feedback to the referrer on the decisions taken, this was not done in a third of the cases examined – and many referrers had no expectation of feedback and did not seek it.
- Ofsted’s evidence from this inspection indicates that in 30% of cases examined not all children and families with additional needs were given help when they did not meet the threshold for a statutory intervention.

Communication, feedback and clarification of roles and responsibilities are crucial.

A Cautionary Tale:

In a recent Ofsted Inspection a Local Authority was judged to be inadequate. The Inspection reported that this Local Authority failed to keep children safe. Inspectors identified a significant number of cases where a decision to take no further action was inappropriate, being based on too little information. In a few cases, this left children at risk of further harm. As a result of inspector's findings, the local authority immediately reviewed decision making in over 2,500 closed cases from the previous 2 months through which they found over 200 cases which they needed to re-open. The Inspectors also did not find this process robust enough.

Other agencies expressed concern about the thresholds and the challenges in getting children's services to accept referrals.

(NB this example is not in the Ofsted Early Help report)

Good Quality Referrals:

Good quality referrals are timely and contain the following features:

- Concerns about the child and a rationale for referral
- Reference to the local threshold document
- Clarity about how the concerns affected each child in the family
- Evidence that concerns had been discussed with parents and consent sought and obtained
- Context and historical information
- A balance between positive factors and risk
- A summary of views of other professionals
- Identification of any language barriers or the need for an Interpreter.

A Good Practice Example:

In a recent Local Authority Ofsted Inspection where the judgement was Good the Inspectors were impressed by the Local Authorities approach to inter-agency and service thresholds with all agencies welcoming the offer by Children's Social Work Services to engage in 'professional conversation' with any agency that is concerned about a child. Experienced social work practitioners and managers provide this capacity. This openness and assured professional response supports their current work and next steps with other early or targeted help services. It enhances the confidence of these agencies in working with families, significantly reducing barriers between professional boundaries. Families also welcome the often seamless provision of services as levels of need change.

(NB This example is not in the Ofsted Early Help report)

Effective Leadership in Children's Services

Ofsted's good practice report "Joining the Dots – Effective leadership in Children's Services" (March 2015) emphasises the crucial importance of good strong leadership from the top down to ensure that services for children, young people and families are ambitious, innovative, effective and keep children safe. Here are some themes from that report:

What Makes a Good Leader?

- They have an open, honest and collaborative approach
- They are driven by a strong moral base informed by solid professional knowledge
- They model expected behaviour and set clear expectations for staff
- They are credible and highly visible and inspire staff to perform well
- They set high standards for workers and develop a culture which is supportive and challenging while acknowledging risk and the need for clear accountabilities

What do Good Leaders Do?

- Senior Leadership investment in the professional environment enables social work to flourish
- Senior leaders monitor casework, and management oversight focuses on quality of work as well as volume
- Leaders keep staffing vacancies under review and use local knowledge and effective strategies to help retain and develop staff
- Supervision and training are effective in retaining and developing staff
- Managers understand and manage caseloads; they know children and care plans well
- Principal Social Workers positively influence practice and provide the professional voice in senior management teams.

What Do Good Local Authorities Do?

Some features:

- There is a shared vision and strategy for services across the whole range of Children's Services from early help to care leavers
- There is a clarity of role, accountability and responsibility
- Chief Executives, Elected members and all senior leaders play a role in creating a supportive and challenging role in which social work can thrive. They all kept a firm 'grip' on the quality of practice.
- Developed creative approaches to systematically gather the views of children and families. The senior leadership team (including elected members and the Chief Executive) invested time visiting children and young people, getting to know the cases and are passionate about doing the best for families.
- Social workers trust their managers to take decisive action when necessary and trust their ability to do what was right for children.

A Good Practice Example:

The report of the recent Ofsted Inspection of Leeds County Council was published on 27/03/2015; The overall judgement was good whilst the judgement of Leadership, management and governance was outstanding. Here are some of the comments:

- Children's Services in Leeds benefit from outstanding, inspirational and confident operational and political leadership. The 'Child Friendly' Leeds ambition has cross-party political support reflected in Children's Services despite the challenging financial context.
- The LA has taken a thoughtful and methodical approach to improvement and has followed the child's journey.
- Children and young people are at the heart of the city's 'growth strategy'. This is articulated in the Council's ambition to be recognised as one of the World's first Child Friendly Cities. Safe guarding children and young people is a key priority within this strategy and it is underpinned by strong governance arrangements and committed city-wide partnerships.

(NB this report is not in the Ofsted Leadership report – this report is well worth reading.)

Good Practice in Bath and North East Somerset:

Celebrating Good Practice in B&NES:

A recurring theme throughout the newsletters has been to identify good practice in respect of Ofsted preparation and to emphasise key themes:

- That we are making a difference to the lives of children and young people ensuring they are safe and improving their lives at every stage of their 'journey' within our services.
- That we are a Local Authority who cares about continuous learning and improvement so we can make a difference to improve the lives of children and young people

In Bath and North East Somerset we work really hard to ensure that we provide good services for children, young people and families and we have lots of examples of good practice. I would like the theme of June's newsletter to focus on Good Practice in Bath and North East Somerset.

A Request: Please email me with the areas of good practice that you think should be included.

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