



The Evidence for Change

By Professor David Thorpe

An innovative new plan to analyse child protection referrals is on course to be a major success in Yorkshire and Humber.

“Referral Pathways” was launched in September 2009 and is already producing a range of benefits that will give councils the ability to operate more efficient systems and give the best possible outcomes for individual families. At the same time a programme to attract and retain high quality social care staff is about to be launched.

The Yorkshire and Humberside region contains 15 very diverse authorities and has seen a significant increase in workload for children’s social care, with a variable picture in terms of performance and findings from inspections.

The area also has a track record of collaboration and a strong group of Directors of Children Services, supported by the regional Chief Executive group, with a history of sharing best practice and supporting each other.

The challenges faced by a number of authorities, coupled with the national spotlight on child protection services and social work practice, quickly inspired an overwhelming desire to ‘do something about it’ and continue driving up standards in this field.

External inspections and authorities themselves had highlighted areas which could be improved. But we needed to be much better at understanding and learning from best practice and, crucially, being able to act before things go wrong.

Directors were especially focused on two key sets of questions.

Firstly, how do we know whether we are dealing effectively with initial child care enquires and the first stages of contact with people needing help? Are systems in place to spot those children at greatest risk? And, when so many agencies are involved, was the focus on where it was most needed?

Secondly, how do we recruit and retain the best possible workers? And how do we counter the lack of understanding about social care work and the damage done by the baby Peter case, which has undermined the confidence of staff and our ability to attract people into this vital area of work?

The baby Peter case heightened concerns that were already under discussion – and strengthened our desire to make sure the social care sector had well developed mechanisms for supporting improvement and innovation.

And so, building on earlier work done in Hull, a two-year project was devised across Yorkshire and Humberside to analyse referral pathways and improve outcomes working with Professor David Thorpe and his team.

The first stage of Referral Pathways is to analyse 300 referrals that have come into each authority over a six-month period, along with their individual outcomes.

This will give a clear perspective on the management of those referrals and provide evidence about the different kinds of outcomes produced by local arrangements and the extent to which they make a difference to children's lives.

Right from the beginning, Referral Pathways generates a range of outcomes:

- it brings clarity to the day-to-day management of the way requests for help are treated
- it allows evidence-based comparisons between different authorities
- it opens up conversations between local agencies about ways of working
- and, ultimately, it gives us the ability to redesign the whole system, along with partners, to make sure it operates most efficiently and gives the best possible outcomes for individual families

The project was specifically referred to in Lord Laming's review of child protection in England (2009 page 26) and is aligned with a number of the recommendations arising from that review, in particular those relating to the need for "a common approach to managing referrals and assessments".

The breadth and reliability of the initial data will make it possible to follow up on any systems changes and to describe the impact on the system as a whole, as well as discover how changed ways of working have made a difference to people's lives.

The Referral Pathways project not only tells us what is happening now, it also facilitates systems redesign and will tell us whether things are leading to better results. And it will improve efficiency.

Like all authorities nationally, Yorkshire and Humber have been facing difficulties in recruiting and retaining high quality frontline social workers and social work managers.

Attracting high-calibre candidates to the social work profession has, as we know, become more challenging and there is always a danger that a vicious circle can develop - problems in recruiting high-quality staff combines with the struggle to maintain standards and then has a knock-on effect in attracting and retaining good staff.

Here again, a collaborative approach is not only sensible but essential. Historically there has been competition between authorities seeking to attract staff from the same pool; we have seen authorities struggling against their pasts; and we have seen reputations spiral downwards in these circumstances.

Throwing money at the problem by offering big salary premiums is a short-term fix, but it quickly limits the ability of neighbouring authorities to recruit and retain staff.

Our “Attract and Support” Programme seeks to promote a positive profile for children’s social work in the region and develop strategies for recruitment of social workers from the UK and other countries.

It aims to attract ‘returners’ – people who have left the profession but may come back - and also to build long-term relationships with training organisations in the longer term so that there is a steady supply of well-trained staff. A collaborative approach to procurement of agency staff is also proposed.

As a backdrop to these recruitment initiatives, it has been recognised that better understanding and awareness of children’s social care work is needed.

While the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) have worked with others to develop a better, more positive profile of social work, it is important to build on this by engagement with local media.

This part of the programme aims to increase understanding of social care work and promote a positive profile generally, but it will also link to recruitment initiatives across the region to increase interest and generate confidence in our work.

Some authorities in the region are already involved in recruiting social workers abroad and an approach to support the recruitment of ‘returners’ has been trialled with some success.

The Yorkshire and Humberside approach will build upon this experience locally and a collaborative approach to recruitment does make better use of recruitment expeditions.

Across the region, many universities and training organisations are involved in the training of social workers.

At the moment there is no strategic approach, but a regional framework would form the basis of securing a long-term sustainable supply of high-quality, locally trained social work staff.

Over the last year there has been a helpful response from authorities who have offered support, advice and the loan of staff to help neighbours through particularly difficult times.

But another part of the Referral Pathways scheme is to develop a skills register, enabling an even more effective response and promoting the sharing of best practice in a more routine way.

Yorkshire and Humberside’s bold strategy is geared towards improving practice, redesigning services and seizing the initiative to recruit and retain good quality staff.

It is also an efficiency initiative, leading to better quality interventions and outcomes whilst making better use of scarce resources – in short, it offers better value for money.

Yorkshire and Humberside has faced a number of challenges, but we have recognised them and we are doing something about them. Out of adversity we are setting a national example.

We are convinced that we can achieve more as a united force than as individual organisations. We have a shared desire to lead the way in making sector-wide improvements.

It is only natural that we will compete for the best staff in a densely populated region where professionals often have a choice of employers within easy reach of home, but this is a strength rather than a problem.

Excellence and good reputation are the strongest drivers for choice when people are thinking about a career in social care and, by raising standards for the whole region, everybody benefits. These are tough times for social work and social care, but we lead the way in doing something about it.

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