

Impact on children of living in family circumstances of domestic violence and abuse

Outcomes of the Children's Services OSC meeting on 25 February 2014

Background

The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) is the Council's committee with responsibility for scrutinising issues relating to children in Central Bedfordshire. The OSC agreed to arrange a detailed discussion regarding the impact of living in circumstances of domestic abuse/domestic on children.

The purpose of the meeting was:-

1. To increase the understanding of Members in relation to the prevalence of incidents
2. To consider how best to support a multi-agency partnership approach to deal with the issue.
3. To agree some outcome focused recommendations on how to enhance the offer to children in this situation.

Visit to Hawthorn Park Community Lower School

To support this meeting Members visited Hawthorn Park Community Lower School to meet the Headteacher and officers responsible for delivering the Freedom Programme (a programme of support for female victims of domestic abuse/domestic violence) in order to discuss the prevalence of issues in Central Bedfordshire and the manner in which support was currently being provided.

Members were advised that 33% of the population (nationally) were at some point the subject of DA/DV. It was accepted that the Freedom Programme offered valuable support to victims and that there were clear the objectives and outcomes of the programme but Members were not fully aware of the extent of the problem of DA/DV in Central Bedfordshire.

Members were also advised of the benefits of enabling groups of victims to talk to another about issues in order to empower victims to seek further support. It was important that authorities encouraged a move away from stereotypes about DA/DV or that excuses were acceptable. There was also a perception that there were significant numbers of women who did not receive support because they refused to accept they were the subject of DA/DV. This was a significant issue as to how those women who did not want to or were unable to attend the programme could be empowered to reach the conclusion that they needed to seek support.

Members were made aware of the concerns of the head teacher regarding the waiting lists for some support services that were commissioned by the Council (for example by Sorted and Action for Children). Although one school was in receipt of these services due to the waiting times it had been necessary to commission additional services so that support could be provided in a timely way. Although schools were allocated funding to commission services themselves, in this particular school the level of funding was not always enough to commission those additional services in a timely way.

Members were also made aware of the concerns of one head teacher that the level of counselling support to the education profession was felt to be insufficient, particularly when dealing with DA/DV. Staff were sometimes unsure of the action they had taken in relation to individuals and whilst schools could pay out of their own budget for additional training or support this could be to the

Background

detriment of other services. Sufficient training and advice was crucial to give staff the confidence to provide support to children and to encourage teachers to feel empowered to take appropriate action. It was also felt that whilst Child Protection Officers provided time 'on-site' in schools this was not always sufficient, particularly in high-risk schools.

Members discussed the value of community hubs as a means of delivering schemes such as the Freedom Programme. Community hubs provided a safe environment in which women could interact socially and seek support without feeling judged. There were however concerns that the refuges that currently operated in Central Bedfordshire were not fit for purpose and as a result it might discourage some victims from seeking support.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee Meeting

Following the visit the Committee invited a range of representatives to attend the Committee meeting on 25 February 2014 as follows:-

- CBC Community Safety Team
- CBC Relay Officers
- Domestic Abuse Co-ordinator
- Freedom Programme
- Healthy Relationships Programme
- Home Group – Refuge and IDVA service provider
- Hawthorn Park Community Lower School
- Sorted

In setting the context for this item the Committee watched a DVD demonstrating the experiences of victims of domestic abuse and

domestic violence. A presentation was also provided by the Client Service Manager for Central Bedfordshire's Refuges with regards to the "Children's Worker Pilot". The presentation demonstrated the benefits of the Pilot that commenced in April 2013 and the impact of these posts on meeting the needs of women and children. The presentation highlighted the numbers of children that had been supported and detailed some of the other supported outcomes that had been achieved as a result of the pilot.

The Committee also received a presentation of the Deputy Executive Member that provided an overview of the prevalence of domestic abuse, the impact of abuse on children and the current support that was available in Central Bedfordshire. The presentation also set out some of the challenges and pressures in relation to providing support for children and responding to incidents of domestic abuse.

A service user also informed the Committee of their personal experience of domestic abuse and use of Women's Aid. The service users experience of domestic abuse highlighted some personal concerns regards the services that had been delivered, which would be discussed with relevant officers. Although there had been a negative experience of several services the benefit of the CHUMS service and the impact this had on the person's children had been positive, although it had taken a considerable period of time for the service to be provided. The importance of ongoing support and the benefit of sharing experiences with other service users were highlighted.

Background

The remainder of this report is structured in relation to the key issues that were discussed at the meeting in order to supplement the Minutes of the meeting, available at the following link:-

<http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/modgov/documents/g4457/Printed%20minutes%20Tuesday%2025-Feb-2014%2010.00%20CHILDRENS%20SERVICES%20OVERVIEW%20SCRUTINY%20COMMITTEE.pdf?T=1>

Early intervention

The Committee discussed the benefits of early intervention and the extent to which additional funding could be made available to provide additional resources that would enhance the services that were available. There was a need to recognise that funding in early intervention could reduce spend in the long-term although it was accepted that spending more on intervention and prevention could result in reduced funding being available to fund more reactive programmes of support.

There was also a genuine need for effective co-ordination of training and support for children across Central Bedfordshire in order to maximise outcomes of the support that was provided.

At the OSC meeting the professionals in attendance highlighted the difficulty of providing support to victims as there was a need for people to accept that they were a victim of domestic abuse before support could be provided. In Houghton Regis a group of schools provided £8k each into a joint pot to fund two parent support advisers to work in those schools or with children who lived in Houghton Regis but attended school out of the area. Schools already worked with identified vulnerable families so that support could be directed in the most appropriate way. These advisers provided real benefits but their work-load was such that they were over-run. Early intervention provided real benefit but it was sticking a plaster over the cracks, organisations needed to get at the root cause of domestic abuse at a much earlier stage to prevent a cycle of abuse in the future. Although work was underway locally there was a need for a co-ordinator to work specifically with children to maximise outcomes and to encourage training and support for children at a much younger age to help them identify inappropriate

behaviours. A key role for this co-ordinator would be to address the cycle of abuse that can develop where children 'learn' behaviours.

It was noted that much of the work that was currently underway focused on MARAC and IDVA, which focused on high-risk victims only. If Members felt that work with medium/low-risk victims or early intervention should be prioritised this may be to the detriment of the funding that was presently available for programmes. It was however noted that the Freedom Programme itself delivered support for early intervention so funding would need to come from elsewhere.

Healthy relationships & identifying the impact of domestic abuse

The Committee discussed the importance of schemes such as the Healthy Relationships Programmes (which raises awareness and understanding for young people about what makes a healthy, non abusive relationship) and stressed the importance of encouraging schools to take part in these. There was however a need to understand what constituted a 'healthy relationship' to inform the training that is provided.

Attendees at the OSC felt that schools were the ideal place to run the Healthy Relationships Programme and this should be integrated more effectively into the school curriculum. There was a reluctance in some schools to become involved with this Programme but it was vital that they were carried out early in children's development and that the Police were involved in these conversations as well. There were a range of schemes currently in operation and getting schools to buy in to these was crucial. There was potential for relationship training to be delivered via Project Relay in the future.

Where possible the Committee felt there were real benefits to training being delivered by those who understand domestic abuse that more targeted and continued training should be provided for professionals.

The Committee specifically discussed the difficulty of distinguishing between learning difficulties and the impact of domestic abuse. Professionals referred to the Smile project, which had provided real benefits in terms of training professionals. It was felt that a similar approach could help them identify the impact of domestic abuse on children and this should be considered along side the recommendations regarding support and training.

Providing support

The Committee discussed the importance of understanding the prevalence of women as perpetrators of domestic abuse and the levels of support provided to male victims. In light of the number of incidents and the manner in which support was currently provided the Committee discussed whether money could be saved by training a number of dedicated professionals to go to schools to deliver support, rather than schools arranging their own support.

Presently the Project Relay Support Officers notified schools's safeguarding leads of referrals for specific children so that appropriate support could be provided. An additional Project relay Support Officer was being appointed to extend the level of support that was available. Programmes that were delivered in schools (such as theatre and drama) by specialist advisers had provided real benefits but there was not enough funding to deliver these schemes widely enough in all schools or to younger children.

The Committee also discussed the 22 units provided by refuges in Central Bedfordshire, which were felt to be a really valuable asset and the self-contained nature of these was quite unique. There were however issues relating to the number of referrals to the refuges and there was always a need for more capacity. Whilst the Committee queried why there were no refuges in the area for men it was noted that provision across the UK was very limited. Statistically there were not the high number of male victims within Central Bedfordshire to justify the delivery of an additional refuge although there were specific support programmes provided within Central Bedfordshire for male victims. Providing support for victims could be complicated as some victims (particularly men) could also be

perpetrators of domestic abuse so an assessment process in these cases was particularly important.

There was a particular difficulty in providing support to address incidents where children were domestically abusing their parents. The Committee were advised of the work that was undertaken to educate and break the barriers between parents and their children in these circumstances. The Council delivered a Family Adolescent Support Team but work in this area had only just started to emerge. Engagement in these cases was important in order to prevent a cycle of abuse in the future.

There was also a real need to provide support in order to address the 75% of incidents that were perpetrated by repeat offenders. The Committee were informed that multi-agency working in this area was effective but changes in the way that Probation Services are delivered will have an impact later in the year. There was a significant amount of work still to do in relation to perpetrators and to join up work between agencies in this area but this was underway to ensure that resources were used effectively.

In order to provide support effectively the Council's directorates needed to work collaboratively in relation to domestic abuse and to focus effort on both children and adults in order to achieve successful outcomes. This included the Council's OSCs to ensure that appropriate Members and officers were engaged in conversations.

The HMIC had recently undertaken an Inspection of Bedfordshire Police in relation to their approach to domestic abuse/domestic

Providing support

violence and as a result they were already undertaking work in this area to develop their approach and develop more effective means of supporting victims.

Finally the Committee discussed the following issues in relation to providing support that they felt needed to be taken into consideration:-

- The need to ensure that rural areas of Central Bedfordshire had the same level of access to programmes as those in urban areas.
- The value of Central Bedfordshire refuges and the service that they provided for women.
- The negative impact of the national media and television programming in the manner in which it displays domestic abuse.
- The importance of a multi-agency approach in order to effectively address the prevalence of domestic abuse.
- The critical importance of HomeStart as a way of engaging with families.

Where possible the Committee felt there were real benefits to training and support being delivered by those who understood domestic abuse and that more targeted and continued training should be provided for professionals.

Signposting & communication

The OSC discussed the need to enhance signposting in schools to those services that were available in Central Bedfordshire. There was a real need to ensure that Members contacted the Intake and Assessment Team (during the day) or the Emergency Duty Team(out of hours) if they were made aware of an incident of domestic abuse of a child and the Police who should also be contacted.

Members discussed the value of raising awareness of the issue of domestic abuse and ensuring that schools were aware of the support that was on offer within the area. Raising awareness was an important mechanism for trying to identify the level of 'unknown' victims within the area who required support. It was widely accepted that schools and others could do more in this area but as there were always competing pressures there was a need to balance the level of resource that was provided in this area. A designated lead with the school for coordinating this work however could be beneficial as a means of giving people a voice.

The Committee felt it was critically important to raise awareness in relation to domestic abuse, which the Committee felt needed to be prioritised above the other recommendations agreed. Of particular importance was need to ensure that Councillors were aware of the services that were available in light of their roles as corporate parents.

Recommendations

In light of their discussions the Committee discussed and agreed several recommendations that they agreed should be submitted to the Executive and reviewed in 6-months to ascertain progress.

These recommendations were as follows

RECOMMENDED as a priority that organisations develop more effective means of signposting to the support that is available for the victims of domestic abuse. The issue of domestic abuse should also be highlighted:-

- (i) through 'Central Essentials' (the school newsletter), the Governors and Headteachers Forums in order to encourage attendance at Local Safeguarding Children Board training; and
- (ii) at the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, especially in relation to mental health and substance misuse services.

RECOMMENDED that following detailed work on the above priorities the following also be considered:-

1. That the co-ordination of preventative and early intervention work to support children at risk be further enhanced.
2. That the Executive continue working with the Community Safety Partnership to identify sources of funding to preserve and enhance the current services that are available to support the victims of domestic abuse.
3. That the benefit of support and training for professionals to help identify victims, preferably delivered by those who understand the issues, be recognised and that targeted

training be provided for frontline professionals, particularly those in universal services e.g. health visitors, Children's Centres and GPs, with the aim of earlier identification of incidents of domestic abuse.

4. That the accessibility of services for victims in same sex relationships and disadvantaged groups, such as unemployed persons, Gypsies and Travellers and other BME groups be further enhanced.
5. That schools be encouraged to recognise the value of the "Healthy Relationships" programme and as well as developing similar programmes for younger age groups schools ensure that vulnerable teenagers are engaged in such programmes.
6. That all schools be encouraged to develop a system of staff mentors, particularly in areas of high incidence of domestic abuse, to provide support and a focal point for training.
7. That all schools be encouraged to designate a member of staff responsible for raising awareness and attending training in relation to domestic abuse and domestic violence.
8. That the level of future need for support services be identified and commissioned appropriately.
9. That an understanding be developed of the extent to which victims enter into a cycle of abusive relationships so organisations can determine the extent of support that is required.

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