

18 January 2016

Agenda Item: 10

## **REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE**

### **REVIEW OF THE EARLY HELP UNIT**

#### **Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to invite the Committee to note the outcome of a recent review of the Early Help Unit and to seek the Committee's approval to establish the post of the Early Help Manager.

#### **Information and Advice**

##### **Background**

2. In August 2015 the Children's Social Care Service Director commissioned a review of the Early Help Unit (EHU) in response to concerns about a backlog of work in the EHU and the desire to clarify how, or if, the EHU should be aligned with the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).
3. The review examined the current position of the EHU and explored a number of options for the future. The review involved a desktop review, meetings and workshops with a number of stakeholders including the staff and management of the EHU and senior managers from Early Help and Children's Social Care.

##### **Key Functions of the Early Help Unit**

4. The EHU has been operational for two years and was established to:
  - act as the central point of contact for children, young people, families and professionals seeking information, advice, guidance and support from Early Help services
  - provide an effective interface with the MASH and wider Children's Social Care services in order to improve the step-across of cases in and out of social care and support referrals
  - advise on the completion of the Early Help Assessment Form (EHAF) and hold a register of completed EHAFs
  - assess if cases meet the criteria for discussion at Complex Case Resolution (CCR) meetings.

5. The EHU also:

- provides information to the MASH to support decision making on cases, identifying where Early Help services or youth justice are already involved with children and young people
- analyses cases that the MASH has assessed as not meeting the Children's Social Care threshold to determine whether an Early Help service can be offered
- informs Children's Centres about domestic abuse incidents involving children under five, as part of the Encompass Nottinghamshire initiative
- tracks the outcomes of children and young people receiving early help
- audits the quality of EHAFs.

### **Service Demand and Performance Data**

6. Data collected by the EHU shows a significant increase in the number of referrals to the EHU, with the volume roughly doubling over an 18 month period, peaking in July 2015 with over 900 referrals in that month. During this period, staffing in the EHU has been reduced by 3 FTE Business Support staff. This increase in referrals and reduction in staffing contributed to the development of a backlog and increasing pressure upon staff, which is likely to have affected the quality of the service provided.
7. At the time of the review the EHU utilised two electronic systems meaning there was no amalgamated, validated data that showed the demand on the service. Data was, however, drawn from separate sources to provide some indication of the service demand on the EHU.

### **Customer Feedback**

8. Recent customer feedback in relation to the EHU is extremely positive. Comments from parents and practitioners highlight the value of the advice provided by the team and their empathy when handling difficult situations. A survey in March 2014 was also positive, with all respondents complementary about the staff in the EHU, particularly for their help, information and advice. 100% of respondents were satisfied overall with the EHU, with 80% reporting 'good to excellent' satisfaction.

### **Quality Assurance**

9. The EHU has been reviewed in a number of different ways since it opened in September 2013. These reviews have provided assurance of the effectiveness of the EHU and the quality of the work undertaken within it.
- a. the EHU received positive comments in the recent Ofsted inspection, published in July 2015
  - b. in June 2014 the Nottinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board (NSCB) commissioned an audit of referrals made through the EHU requesting early help services. The recommendations relating to the EHU were quickly implemented
  - c. in March 2014 a 'Lean+' review of the EHU was undertaken. The review highlighted the effectiveness of the EHU and the strong reputation it had built, while acknowledging that IT systems and processes needed to be improved.

## **Strengths and Challenges for the Service**

10. Managers and staff highlighted the strengths of the EHU in stakeholder meetings and workshops, including:
  - positive reputation amongst practitioners, particularly schools, who appreciate the advice and expertise provided by the EHU
  - high levels of customer satisfaction, evidenced by the survey in 2014 and more recent feedback
  - has coped with a significant increase in workload, while staffing has been reduced, by improving processes
  - strong team identity and proactive support for one another.
11. Managers and staff also identified a number of challenges facing the service:
  - insufficient staff to cope with rising demand
  - duplication of electronic systems
  - temporary management arrangements
  - differing expectations of the EHU.

## **Options for the Future**

12. Wide ranging discussions were held about the options for the future of the EHU. Four broad options were identified:
13. Option A – Do nothing  
This option would involve making no changes to the staffing, processes, technology or location of the EHU. Managers and staff felt the EHU would struggle to cope with the rising demand, with backlogs forming and the quality of advice and decisions being affected. This would have negative implications for the children and families of Nottinghamshire as well as the parents and professionals that contact the EHU, resulting in reputational damage to the County Council. As a result, this option was not recommended.
14. Option B – Co-locate with the MASH  
This option would involve co-locating the EHU with the MASH, keeping both as distinct teams while fostering co-operation, with Early Help Officers linking to each of the four pod teams in the MASH. Referrers would continue to receive the high quality advice they value, with expertise covering the full range of Early Help services. Referrers would also avoid any confusing changes while allowing telephone routing to be improved. Improved understanding and co-operation would ensure more cases are signposted to Early Help services so that children and families get appropriate support. Changes could be made to technology and processes, with staffing levels kept under review in light of the rising demand. This option was recommended.
15. Option C – Integrate into the MASH  
This option would involve co-locating and integrating the EHU into the MASH, breaking the team up and allocating Early Help Officers to each of the four pod teams in the MASH. Early Help Officers would advise their pod on Early Help matters and relevant calls and emails would be passed from MASH Officers to Early Help Officers for advice and responses. Since Early Help Officers would not be sat together, questions about areas they are not expert in

would require calls to be transferred to the appropriate Early Help Officer. Naturally such call transfers would be considered poor customer service. The reputation of the County Council would be damaged as a result of closing a service two years after opening it, and there may be some negative publicity. This option was not recommended.

16. Option D – Disband the Early Help Unit

This option would involve disbanding the EHU and transferring Early Help Officers into the Family Service locality teams. Staff and managers felt strongly that this would be the worst option, reducing the quality and consistency of advice to parents and professionals. The differing backgrounds and specialisms of Early Help Officers means the best advice is provided when they are able to confer easily and impartially identify the most appropriate service, which would not be possible if they were dispersed across three localities and linked solely to one service. As with option C, managers have highlighted the damage to the credibility of the County Council if the EHU was to be disbanded, given how well regarded it is by practitioners and families. As a result, this option was not recommended.

17. The review made a number of recommendations that were agreed by the Children's Social Care Service Director, following consultation with the Group Manager, Targeted Support & Youth Justice Service and Group Manager, Social Work Services:

- a. option B – to co-locate with the MASH, is pursued
- b. the role of the Early Help Manager is made permanent
- c. additional staffing is arranged in the short term to cope with demand and maintain the service. In the medium term, staffing should be considered again once electronic systems have been streamlined
- d. electronic systems in the EHU are streamlined
- e. service demand and performance data is improved
- f. the potential overlap between the roles of the Early Help Officer and the Family Service Level 2 Development Worker is considered and clarified
- g. expectations of the EHU are clarified with Early Help services to ensure the EHU is providing what the services downstream require.

### **Early Help Manager Post**

18. The Early Help Manager role is temporary until May 2016. Arrangements need to be made to ensure the 7 FTE Early Help Officers and the EHU continues to be managed effectively. Consideration has been given to different management arrangements and it is felt that the most appropriate and effective arrangements are to make the Early Help Manager post permanent.
19. It is proposed that the post of 0.8 FTE Early Help Manager (Hay band D, £36,571 - £41,140) be established.

### **Other Options Considered**

20. Consideration has been given to a number of other options. Prior to this review the 'Lean+' review and the NSCB audit made recommendations to improve processes and systems, which were implemented. This review explored ideas for improvements with staff and managers which are reflected in the recommendations, along with the four options for the

future of the EHU. Consideration has been given to different management arrangements.

### **Reasons for Recommendations**

21. The recommendations invite the Committee to note the review of the EHU, in order to assure the Committee that consideration has been given to the current position of the EHU and its options for the future. The Committee is also asked to approve the establishment of the Early Help Manager post, in order to ensure the Early Help Officers and the EHU continues to be managed effectively.

### **Statutory and Policy Implications**

22. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, sustainability and the environment and ways of working and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

### **Financial Implications**

23. The financial implications are set out in paragraph 19 above in relation to the establishment of the post of 0.8 FTE Early Help Manager (Hay band D, £36,571 - £41,140). The cost of the post can be met from within the Children's Social Care budget.

### **Human Resources Implications**

24. The human resource implications are set out in paragraphs 18 and 19 above in relation to the establishment of the post of 0.8 FTE Early Help Manager (Hay band D, £36,571 - £41,140). The advice of the Human Resources team has been followed in relation to the establishment of this post.

### **Safeguarding of Children and Adults at Risk Implications**

25. Retaining the EHU and co-locating with the MASH will help to ensure that interventions can be provided to children, young people and families before situations escalate to a safeguarding level.

### **Implications for Service Users**

26. Service users will continue to benefit from the advice provided by the EHU, as well as the EHU's role in brokering the most appropriate support for the service user.

### **Ways of Working Implications**

27. The EHU will be co-located with the MASH in the Piazza, Sherwood Business Park, Annesley, Nottinghamshire. The Ways of Working team is involved in the project to co-locate these teams, providing advice and support.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

That:

- 1) the outcome of a recent review of the Early Help Unit be noted.
- 2) approval is given to establish the post of the Early Help Manager.

**Steve Edwards**  
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**For any enquiries about this report please contact:**

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### **Constitutional Comments (SMG 16/12/15)**

28. The Committee has the responsibility for approval of departmental staffing structures as required. The proposals in this report fall within the remit of this Committee.
29. The Employment Procedure Rules provide that the report to Committee include the required advice and HR comments and that the recognised trade unions be consulted on all proposed changes to staffing structures (and any views given should be fully considered prior to a decision being made).

### **Financial Comments (SS 22/12/15)**

30. The financial implications of the report are contained within paragraph 23 above.

### **Background Papers and Published Documents**

None.

### **Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

All.

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