

Report of the Cabinet Member: Children, Schools and Skills

I have been asked to report, by Councillor Hannaford, as follows;

..... a report on the REACH review, and raise the issue of the high number of missing children each month in Devon, and how we are approaching this area of work with other key agencies (this was following discussions at a recent Community Safety Partnership meeting)

Context

The REACH (Reducing Exploitation and Absence from Home and Care) review has been completed and the consultation process with the REACH team is well underway. Following the consultation process during September and October 2016, the plan is for implementation to the new structure in November 2016.

The consultation document sets out the following context for change:

“The REACH Team has struggled to attract a stable work force across all levels since in December 2014. Although the six Youth Worker posts (referred to as REACH Practitioners) and that of one Social Worker and an Assistant Team Manager have generally been consistent, the posts of Team Manager and Social Workers x 3 have not proven to attract and retain employment of experienced workers despite repeated recruitment activity, and has impacted on the effectiveness and development of the team

Since the setting up of the REACH team, workers have achieved positive impact in respect of carrying out Return Home Interviews (RHIs) and follow up work for children who have been missing and who are not known to social work services. The team has also offered and supported direct work to young people at risk of CSE, and many of those young people have described the positive effects of this. However, due to management gaps and changes of social work staff, there have been ongoing challenges to and pressures on the team.

One area of planned delivery, namely improving the understanding of the wider social work workforce regarding CSE, has been cut back almost from the inception of the team due to the need to prioritise Return Home Interviews and follow up work for young people not known to social work services. The impact of the team has therefore been compromised in terms of being able to evidence general improvement in knowledge and skills in the social work teams countywide, although individual social workers have reported positively regarding the support they have received.”

The core business of the REACH team will remain as:

- Return Home Interviews for children who are not open to Children's Social Work teams, with opportunities for diversion activities for missing children to reduce their missing episodes;
- Support and therapeutic input to children who are at risk of child sexual exploitation
- Lead responsibility for facilitating large scale CSE enquiries; and
- Educative and mentoring role for wider social work workforce to increase awareness of and practice knowledge regarding CSE

This will be supported by longer term work by colleagues from Checkpoint, Children's Society for children and young people who have been known to have experienced Child Sexual Abuse.

Proposed changes

There are a range of proposed structural changes currently under consultation which aim to increase the efficacy of the team and its impact across the wider social work service. These changes include:

- Broadening of REACH Youth Worker role to that of REACH Practitioner – to enable earlier involvement of parents and families to provide protective factors for young people who are going missing and/or who are at risk of child sexual exploitation
- Deletion of the social work posts in the team and creation instead of two CSE REACH Practice Lead posts to oversee the practice in the team, lead on large scale enquiries and provide the educative role to upskill the wider social work workforce
- The team will be led by a Team Manager who will provide the day to day management for the team and form the link to strategic management of the county's CSE development plan.

Financial Implications

The proposed changes will be achieved from within existing budget provision and will also allow capacity (again within current funding) to support the social work element of large CSE scale enquiries as and when these are required.

Staffing implications

No redundancies are required under this process. Trade Union colleagues are involved in supporting their members through the consultation process. The move to REACH practitioner posts for current youth workers will be a 'slotting in' process, with agreed adjustments made for the different terms and conditions of service. Expressions of interest for the ring fenced REACH Practice Lead posts will be submitted by the existing during October 2016 to be followed up by the necessary recruitment process.

Missing Children

Return home interviews are carried out as stated by the REACH team for children not open to children's social work teams. There is an expectation that these will be carried out within 72 hours of the child's return. In July 2016, 40 of 48 visits (83%) carried out by REACH team members met that 72 hour target and in August 2016, 27 of 35 (77%) did so,

with full explanations given where these timescales were not met (e.g. difficulties in making contact with the child).

For the children who are known to social work teams it is the responsibility of the child's social worker to arrange for the visit to be undertaken. Project work was undertaken in Spring 2016 (including a seconded member of the REACH team) which generated a significant improvement in numbers of RHIs to children open to social care teams. This is being monitored by the REACH team and follow up work is in place to tackle instances where RHIs are delayed or not undertaken and to confirm that CSE risk assessments are in place where required.

Further initiatives are in place to support the reduction of missing children episodes:

- Work with police, commissioning team and independent providers to focus on children's residential homes (which have a high incidence of missing episodes);
- Awareness raising with partner agencies through DSCB training inputs;
- Work with district housing colleagues in respect of young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness (for whom missing episodes is a known risk indicator of potential homelessness);
- Collaborative work with MASH, REACH and police colleagues to monitor missing episodes and target interventions; and
- DSCB CSE Sub group regularly receives monitoring data regarding missing children to enable multi-agency focus.

Following implementation of the REACH review plans, an improvement plan is in preparation to embed the changes, and improve outcomes for children and young people.

**Councillor James McInnes
Cabinet Member for
Children, Schools and Skills**