

Children, Young People and Learning Scrutiny Committee

Early Intervention Policy Review

Department for Education Notes

Present: Cllrs Stewart, Bell, Morrissey, MacKnight, Williams, Rose Elliott (Co-opted Member) and Pat Smith (Portfolio Holder – Children and Learning City).

Also Present: Ciaran Hayes (Sure Start and Early Intervention – Department for Education), Nigel Cummings (Scrutiny Officer), Sandra Mitchell (Head of Early Intervention and Locality Services) and Liz Craig (Scrutiny and Area Support Assistant).

Notes

The discussions began around the definition of early intervention and reference was made to the various independent reviews conducted by Allen, Tickell, Field and Munro. All the reviews acknowledged that it was not just about the early years but also about early detection of abuse, neglect or family circumstances. In essence early intervention requires a broad definition for it is a broad issue.

It was also acknowledged that there were various differing definitions of early intervention and ways of operating and there needed to be greater coherence and consistency of approach.

The Importance in Early Intervention

1. There is no single service for early help and intervention.
2. Under the age of 5 universal services are the domain of children's centres, maternity services and health visitors. After the age of 5 this is provided by schools.
3. Good identification mechanisms and high quality frontline practice are vital within universal services.
4. There needs to be a shared local understanding of what early intervention means in practice in the local area.
5. What works locally, national research and evaluation of approaches will all help front line staff and commissioners to make effective decisions for help and intervention.

Measuring the Success of Early Intervention

It was noted that robust measures were essential to a whole system approach to early intervention. CH explained that success measures should as far as possible:

- Avoid the risk of perverse incentives – those incentives which have an unintended and undesirable result which is contrary to the interests of the incentive makers;
- Be simple, meaningful and under the control of those who are held accountable for them - have measures that are common across all services which will simplify the data collection;
- Incentivise partnership working and data sharing;
- Contribute to benchmarking;
- Be meaningful to users of services;
- Be outcome measures, or linked as closely as possible to outcomes.

Financing Early Intervention

Social investment and social impact bonds were discussed as potential ways of funding early intervention. A Social Impact Bond was defined as a contract with a public sector organisation in which a commitment is made to pay for improved social outcomes that result in public sector savings. The expected public sector savings are then used as a basis for raising investment for prevention and early intervention services that improve social outcomes.

The broad benefits of such financing are that:

- More funds are available for prevention and early intervention services;
- The public sector only has to pay for effective services; the third party investor bears all the risk of services being potentially ineffective;
- There is an incentive to be as effective as possible, because the larger impact on the outcome, the larger the repayment investors will receive;
- The Social Impact Bond approach imbeds vigorous ongoing evaluation of program impacts into program operations, accelerating the rate of learning about which approaches work and which do not.

It was also reported that the Early Intervention Fund was to go ahead with various Whitehall departments contributing to this fund.

Discussion Points

Members raised the issue of the funding challenge and that this was perhaps the most difficult issue in light of the huge public spending cuts announced in recent budget statements. While commissioning services and partnership working are ways to overcome this there still is the need for a lead organisation.

The term Early Intervention was also discussed and how the term 'Early Help' was now beginning to creep into the terminology and language when discussing intervention. It was highlighted as important to have a clear definition and a clear term to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.

Members queried how saving could be measured and it was felt that local authorities would struggle to identify cashable savings from work undertaken. CH noted that the Social Impact Bond would only fit in a very specific and controlled environment and would not suit all services.

It was also acknowledged that all local authorities faced difficult decisions in prioritising in light of spending reductions. It was also noted that some of the funding mechanisms were perverse incentives in that LA's were penalised for doing well.

Members enquired as to a national perspective on the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and it was noted that there appeared to be a huge variety across the country. There is currently no major national work being undertaken in relation to the CAF process.

Summing Up

In summing up Members were asked if there were any particular points they would wish to be reported back to the Department of Education. Members outlined the following issues:

Important to look at what Local Authorities do well and ensure that they are not penalised for good performance in financial terms.

A need for clarity in the use of the terms Early Intervention and Early Help was seen as important to avoid confusion.

If early intervention is to succeed on a multi-agency level then all organisations need to work to the same goal. This could be problematic in relation to the voluntary sector, charities and other agencies as there is an issue with fragmentation and coordination of a number of groups etc.

The focus on the voluntary sector, to engage with a vast agenda, is often unreasonable as many of these organisations are in reality small groups with limited numbers and limited capacity.

Members thanked CH for his attendance and found the presentation and discussion very useful to the policy review.