

Your money or your front line – the challenge for children's services

By **Paul Diamond**, director, iMPower Consulting

As a parent, grandparent, uncle or aunt, we all know how challenging children can be. The same is true for chief executives and directors of children's services up and down the country who are facing the huge challenge of delivering improved outcomes for children and their families whilst balancing three core objectives: ensuring their safety and wellbeing, maintaining quality of services and meeting the efficiency demands of unprecedented budget pressures.

This is nothing new. The balance between safety, quality and efficiency has been present in public services for as long as there have been public services. Now there are two major additional complications.

Firstly Britain is facing the biggest financial challenge it has seen for a generation. We have a new government to steer the country through this but at the time of writing it is not clear how they plan to tackle public services. In their manifestos the Conservatives saw children's services as open to cuts whilst the Liberal Democrats were committed to protection of front line services. Time will tell how this apparent conflict resolves itself through coalition government.

Secondly there is a trend across the whole country of increasing numbers of children who are being looked after and funded either by the NHS or children's services. Let's take for example Jo, a looked after sixteen year old single mother of twins, who has a complex set of needs in relation to housing, training, educational opportunities and social care. How would you, as a chief executive or children's director even begin to identify what the best outcomes were for her and her family?

How do local authorities address this highly complex set of circumstances whilst still balancing the trinity of safety, quality and efficiency?

One area that appears ripe for exploration is prevention. Our experience suggests this is much talked about but in reality is often a set of

disjointed local initiatives, the effectiveness and associated benefits of which are not being measured.

There are good things happening, not least around the use of Family Group Conferences and the Family Intervention Programme. If run successfully not only do these initiatives potentially address the immediate challenges being faced by individuals, they also prevent other members of the same family becoming involved with children's services and other agencies.

A second area that we believe

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can make a real difference both to local authorities and to outcomes for children is a reduced case load and more effective case handling. This means identifying the financial, operational and behavioural benefits of a well run service and relentlessly managing front line performance to get the best outcomes for children.

Examples include meeting budgets (financial), streamlined processes (operational) and reducing the behaviours which lead to social care intervention (behavioural).

There are many other areas that can be considered including better placement, commissioning and use of the third sector but what is clear is that there is no panacea. As a children's director said to me recently: 'What works for a unitary authority in Yorkshire may not work for a rural county and this in turn may not work for a London borough like Hackney for example'.

However the one thing that is common across all councils is that change needs to take place if safety, quality and efficiency demands are to be balanced, and it cannot come any quicker.

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