Developing needs-led, outcome-focused services

Introduction

This leaflet describes a programme underway in Cumbria which is developing children’s services that are more focused on children’s needs and so achieve better outcomes for them.

The programme is relevant to staff at all levels:

For front line workers...

it aims to promote a focus on good practice and judgement, so that – in Lord Laming’s words – ‘good practice becomes standard practice’,

and for managers...

it aims to ensure that the services they commission are based on clear evidence about local need and robust information about which services are making a real difference to children’s lives.

Central to the programme is a simple needs-based approach to analysis which can be used by any practitioner, from any agency, to assess needs and formulate desirable outcomes in any child care situation, ranging from CAF assessments to planning for children looked after.

The approach is easy for children and families to understand and so enables them to participate fully in plans being made with them.

Using the same needs-based approach, service planners, commissioners and evaluators can draw on the assessments produced by local practitioners to plan for larger groups of children.

Needs-based analysis uses four linked concepts in sequence:

Need > Seriousness > Outcome > Plan

Progress so far

June 2009:

The programme has made good progress, and much more remains to be done.

A Community Care Excellence Award – for innovative practice - has acknowledged the Organisational Learning and Development Team’s role in initiating and supporting the programme.

Needs audits

We have been using needs-based analysis to audit the needs of children and families in touch with children’s services so that we can better understand those needs.

We hope that this will help us develop services that focus directly on what children really need rather than slotting them into the services that we have at the moment.

Auditing that uses needs-based analysis differs from the auditing methods we are more familiar with because, rather than focusing on process - the number of assessments completed; time-scales for completion; professionals attending reviews, and so on - the primary focus is on an assessment of the needs of each child in the sample.

These individual assessments are then added up (or aggregated) into need groups, which represent the pattern of need running through the sample, and can form the basis of future commissioning. This ability to use assessments of individual children as a basis for future planning is a distinctive feature of the approach.

The audit method relies on:

• the knowledge and skill of local staff to assess, using needs-based analysis and their professional judgement
  ‣ the needs of children they are working with
  ‣ the severity of those needs and
  ‣ the success of their services in addressing those needs

• moving from an individual to an aggregate level by asking auditors to reach consensus about the most pressing need of each child in the sample. Children with a similar pressing need are allocated to the same group and from this process a number of need groups emerge.

Five audits have been completed: one countywide and one in each of the four local areas. The audits have included 439 children and between 10 and 14 need groups have emerged from each audit. These need groups can now form a basis for commissioning and shaping new services, at a local and countywide level.

Full reports for all five audits are available on request.
ECM agenda.

This is an exciting and ambitious programme of work. Cumbria has the necessary structures in place. The next stage is to achieve the culture change needed for full implementation of the Every Child Matters agenda:

**Focus on outcomes**
Ensuring that the primary focus of all work undertaken is to make a difference to the lives of vulnerable children and families.

**Focus on child not agency process**
Ensuring that processes are not seen as an end in themselves but rather as a means of supporting good practice – and improved outcomes for children.

**Supporting parents/carer**s
Ensuring that work is undertaken with parents – acknowledging that they are the experts about their children, that the best way of responding to children’s needs is often to address their parents’ needs, and that evidence suggests that working in partnership with parents delivers the best outcomes for children.

**Graduated response**
Ensuring that the right service is available at the right time in order to reduce or overcome family problems.

**Earlier intervention**
Ensuring that families do not have to wait until their problem is serious before being seen as eligible for a service.

**Service integration**
Ensuring that agencies and professionals pool their resources so that they can respond to the whole range of need of local children and families in ways that evidence suggests are likely to be effective.

**Workforce reform**
Ensuring that professional judgement and skill are seen as the most valuable resources that children’s services have to offer to children and families.

**The overall aspiration** is that all agencies use the practical tools and approaches provided by needs-based analysis and action learning, together with other initiatives being undertaken in the county, to ensure that children’s services achieve – over time – the ambitions of the new ECM agenda.

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### Action learning sets

**A series of area-based, action learning sets are addressing some of the changes needed to move towards more needs-led services.**

Locality managers have completed their first cycle of six sets and are now involved in their second cycle, whilst senior managers are involved in their first cycle.

There are two strands to this learning:

**Needs-based analysis**

This is the same approach to analysis that underpins the audit work described above. It enables practitioners to analyse children and family circumstances through identifying:

1. needs
2. seriousness of need
3. desired outcomes, and
4. services/responses.

The benefits are that everyone - including family members - can be clear about the needs identified, the outcomes to be achieved, the action plan to achieve them, and the way of reviewing progress to see if needs are addressed.

The approach is useful in supervision and it can be used on an on-going basis by teams, agencies or whole services, to aggregate data for planning and commissioning purposes.

**Action learning**

Action learning asks individual group members to identify a barrier in their work situation, which they see as preventing them from delivering the outcomes they would want for the children they are working with.

The individual then looks at ways of overcoming the barrier on three levels: what they themselves will do to overcome the problem, what they need their team to do, and what they need the wider organisation to do to support the solutions they have identified. This work is discussed in the group as a means of providing peer support and learning.

At the end of the first cycle, the team managers (now locality managers) shared the work they had been doing in their individual groups and drew up an overall list of outcomes they wished to work towards. Some of these are listed below to give a flavour of the work in progress.

They are about:

- workers being able to easily identify a child’s most pressing need
- workers knowing how to develop needs-led plans with children/families
- workers seeing electronic recording systems as a tool to support their practice and make a clear record of their needs-led analysis and outcome-focused plans
- colleagues from other agencies using the same approach to develop integrated outcome-focused plans
- embedding a culture of practice development across children’s services
- collecting aggregated needs data to inform planning, commissioning and evaluation.

The outcomes were agreed by DMT, and strategies for implementing them are being developed by senior managers in their learning sets, alongside work to develop evidence-based commissioning.

### Practical ways of supporting the programme

As the work progresses we are trying to offer practical help to address the issues that staff have identified as impeding progress. This practical support includes:

- trying out ways of using electronic recording systems that are more in tune with needs-based analysis
- providing coaching for individual teams and practitioners to promote widespread use of our needs-led, outcome focused approach
- developing processes to collect information at reviews about outcomes being achieved for individual children, to feed into outcome-based commissioning, and
- offering case study workshops for practitioners who might want to ‘champion’ the approach.

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**The direct interaction and engagement with children and their families, which is at the core of social work, is said to be at risk as the needs of a work management tool overtake those of evidence-based assessment, sound analysis and professional judgement …**

Lord Laming 2009