

8 February 2022		ITEM: 10
Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Children's Social Care Operating Model		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key	
Report of: Janet Simon, Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director Children's Services		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report in October 2021 setting out proposals to deliver budget savings of £1.2m in Children's Social Care and Early Help. The proposal included the introduction of a revised operating model, Think Family. This report will provide an update following consultation with staff and partner agencies and an overview of the Think Family approach.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive this report.**
- 1.2 That Members comment on the contents of this report.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1** In October 2021 Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report setting out a number of proposed changes to the structure of Children's Social Care and its operating model. These proposals enabled children's social care to contribute budget savings of £1.2m for the financial year 2022/23. The proposals were in line with the requirement to focus on prioritising statutory duties, whilst continuing to protect prevention services to minimise pressure on statutory teams. The report referred to an operating model known as the Think Family approach. There are a number of merits to this approach in terms of improved outcomes for children.
- 2.2** Over the past three months consultation has taken place with the Directorate's workforce and local partners and a scoping exercise has been undertaken to assess the suitability of the model to meet local need. Whilst

Thurrock Council is facing a significant budget shortfall, the ongoing demand for specialist, high cost statutory interventions for local children has continued to increase. The proposed operating model will help to address this demand and enable children's social care to continue building on the good progress made by the department since the Ofsted judgments in 2019 and Ofsted Focussed visit in 2021.

- 2.3 The Assistant Director and Strategic Lead, Prevention and Youth Offending Service are leading the development of the Think Family approach in Thurrock, with an implementation date of 1 April 2022.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 Current Children's Services Structure

Children's social care is currently divided into four key areas of practice each overseen by a Strategic Lead reporting to the Assistant Director, namely:

- Children in Need (CIN) and Child Protection (CP)
- Children Looked After (CLA)
- Safeguarding & Quality Assurance (including Business Administration)
- Early Help & Prevention and Youth Offending Service

This structure manages demand for prevention and statutory services effectively and the revised operating model does not make significant structural changes which could undermine this.

3.2 The Think Family Approach

Clear parallels can be drawn between the Think Family operating model and the 'whole family' approach which has been used effectively in Thurrock's early help services in recent years. The Think Family approach is used widely by both health and social care services to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and adults, including those with complex needs. It enables practitioners to build strong and effective relationships with parents and children as they assess the needs of each family member, and then co-ordinate appropriate multi-agency interventions and support to ensure needs are met. A key feature of our local model will be to hold Family Network Meetings at an early stage to explore support that can be provided by an extended family and friends and other people within the network to enable a child to remain living safely at home when it is in their best interests, or to quickly identify alternative carers from within the extended network when this is not possible.

- 3.3 Thurrock's Think Family model has been developed following consultation with the Children's Service workforce including from those most directly

affected by the proposals. This has been used to help finalise the structure of our new Think Family Service.

3.4 Consultation processes with service users are embedded in practice across Children's Services, and a comprehensive needs analysis focused on commissioned parenting support was undertaken in 2021. Learning from these processes (and feedback from parents nationally) has also informed the shape of the local model so that it can address some of the key practice issues that have been identified, namely:

- Taking a whole family approach with each family member having their individual needs met
- Parents not having to retell their story to a range of professionals and Feeling that services and interventions lack co-ordination
- Increasing levels of 1:1 tailored support for vulnerable families
- Support for families in their homes during and following attendance on parenting programmes to help them put learning into practice
- Tailored assessments and support for parents with learning disabilities / needs
- Increasing engagement with fathers

3.5 Whilst the Think Family approach will be embedded in social work practice across the department, there will be a dedicated Think Family Team incorporating the following teams:

- Families Together Team – currently working with children on the edge of care or to support children looked after to return home
- Family Group Conferencing Team
- Contact Service - delivered at Oaktree Centre for children looked after

Managers and practitioners from these teams are very experienced and have an extensive and varied skill base. They will not be case holding but will work collaboratively with children and their families for an agreed period of time. They will undertake some complex parenting assessments including for the Court, and will work intensively with parents and children both in group settings and in their own homes. Interventions will be augmented by existing resources from across the department e.g. tailored support for families where domestic abuse is/has been a feature, and from partner agencies.

3.6 Children currently managed across children's social care teams will benefit from the Think Family approach including:

- Children who are at risk of, or have suffered significant harm
- Children looked after or on the edge of care
- Children subject to court proceedings or pre-proceedings arrangements
- Children in need

Practitioners and managers will identify those children most vulnerable to becoming looked after and there will be a focus on assessing and working with families before, or at the pre-proceedings Public Law Outline (PLO) stage to divert as many families away from Court proceedings as possible.

3.7 In addition to the realignment of teams set out in para 3.5 some previously commissioned services will be delivered under the Think Family umbrella:

(i) Parenting assessments have been commissioned from Independent Social Workers (ISW) mostly during care proceedings. This has included assessments for parents with learning difficulties as Courts can require local authorities to use the specialist Parenting Assessment Manual Software (PAMS) specifically designed to assess adults with learning needs. Assessments commissioned from ISWs are expensive and mean that vulnerable adults have to quickly form a new relationship with another professional during what is an anxious and stressful time. To address this practitioners will be trained to use the PAMS application and, as a guiding principle, all parenting assessments will be undertaken in-house unless there are exceptional circumstances. This is recognised as best practice as social workers know their families well.

(ii) A range of evidence based parenting programmes have been commissioned but some parents were referred for programmes as their child's case was closing limiting levels of engagement and impact. Parents and professionals both confirmed parents need support in their homes to help them put learning into practice so this will be addressed using the Think Family approach. Some practitioners are trained or are currently delivering parenting programmes in Thurrock which means we can utilise our existing skill base and tailor parenting programmes to meet local need. Some parents will attend programmes as part of an assessment process and how they use this learning will provide a rich source of information for practitioners in both decision making and care planning.

3.8 Parenting support will be delivered in a variety of ways by the Think Family Service, early help and social care teams and will also have a focus on engaging fathers / male figures in line with recent research (Myths of Invisible Men March 2021). The number of fathers attending commissioned parenting programmes was below 30% so the Think Family approach will ensure more fathers / males are involved in both parenting assessments and interventions. Practitioners will assess and work with families in their home (or community hubs if children are looked after) to ensure they are given the best opportunity to develop and sustain appropriate parenting skills.

3.9 The existing Family Group Conferencing (FGC) model encourages families to develop their own family plan to support vulnerable children and parents. However, it can be time consuming to set up these meetings and there can be delay in allocation. A relatively high number of parents do not engage until

they are required to do so by Court and often that is too late for FGCs to be effective in terms of planning for children. In 2020 over a quarter of families referred for a FGC in Thurrock did not engage.

- 3.10 The revised operating model uses Family Network Meetings instead of FGCs. These will be arranged by either Family Network Meeting facilitators from the Think Family Service or the allocated social worker. These meetings bring together family members and other people identified by the parents and children as significant to them, with a view to the family network agreeing a plan of support that will enable children to either live safely at home or within their extended network. Family Network Meetings are strengths-based and will be held earlier so they can inform care planning for children. They are in line with Signs of Safety (Thurrock's chosen social work practice framework). The model will be rolled out across the Department, with facilitators co-ordinating meetings for families open to the Think Family Service but also supporting practitioners in other teams to set up meetings so they feel confident in their role. Family Network Meeting training will also be provided.
- 3.11 Whilst it is already a requirement for practitioners to create genograms with each family to better understand their extended support networks, there will be a focus on developing three generational genograms and pictorial genograms with children so they are able to identify the people who are important to them. This information will ensure Family Network Meetings include the right people and can play an integral role in care planning.
- 3.12 The Think Family approach has been adopted by other partner agencies particularly Health, and is underpinned by multi-agency partnership working. Existing integrated pathways will therefore continue to support referral and planning processes to ensure the needs of individual family members are met including pre-birth planning and perinatal care. In addition to support for parents, support for extended families is also vital if it enables children to remain living safely within their family networks. Key partners have expressed their support for the new operating model and a willingness to join with the local authority to look at new opportunities for partnership working. A Think Families Partnership Board is planned which will enable new ways of working to develop and evolve, building on the excellent relationships already forged through the Brighter Futures Partnership.
- 3.13 The Think Family approach is in keeping with recent Best Practice Guidance from the President's Public Law Working Group (March 2021) specifically:
- Having an emphasis on using assessment and Family Network Meetings at an early stage to inform planning without the need to enter pre-proceedings Public Law Outline (PLO) arrangements
 - Initiating pre-proceedings PLO arrangements at an early enough stage to be effective in addressing the local authority's concerns and promoting timely permanence planning for children

- A focus on identifying family members and friends quickly (including more effective use of three-generation genograms) and involving them in planning for the child using a strengths-based approach through Family Network Meetings
- The model is child focused and support will be given to their wider network if this enables children to remain living within their family network
- Work is underway to ensure Health and Education partners are part of this new approach to ensure that assessments and family interventions are multi-agency, including pre-birth and for new-born babies
- Social work assessments will be undertaken in-house, either by the Think Family Team or social workers, thereby improving how families experience the assessment process and timeliness of reports

Our local Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) manager has expressed their support of this approach and there will be ongoing liaison with the Judiciary and CAFCASS as the model develops.

- 3.14 The impact of this revised operating model on outcomes for children will be closely scrutinised by senior managers and informed by a Think Family performance dataset. This will include monitoring the effectiveness of the approach in diverting cases from entering the Court system and enabling children to remain living safely within their family networks.

4. Risks

The Council has statutory duties under the Children Act 1989 to safeguard children and young people within its area and Ofsted uses its national inspection framework to assess how the local authority is discharging these duties and outcomes for children. The revised operating model will enable senior managers to maintain and enhance existing good quality children's services for Thurrock's most vulnerable children whilst delivering agreed budget efficiencies. This will include maintaining appropriate case levels and spans of control that allow managers to have clear management oversight of the quality of practice.

5. Reasons for Recommendation

- 5.1 The implementation of the Think Family approach will have a positive impact on vulnerable families receiving a service from Children's Services. Thurrock developed an edge of care service (Families Together) in 2019 to enable more children and young people aged 10 years and over to remain living safely with their birth families. Since April 2019, c30 children have been supported to return home and for children on the edge of care, improved outcomes were seen in 90% of interventions. This included improved family relationships, which enabled children to remain living at home. Practitioners

from Families Together will move to the Think Family Service which means they can work with a much wider cohort of children of any age. Children in care are disproportionately from more deprived areas of the community, so this new approach will continue to challenge the inequalities in outcomes for this vulnerable group.

6. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

A consultation process has been followed to minimise the impact on staff affected by the structural changes.

7. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

7.1 The revised operating model should not have a negative impact as it does not reduce the duties, performance, policies or priorities and services that will be provided to the community.

8. Implications

8.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

The medium term financial position was set out to Cabinet on 7 July 2021. The proposals for Children's Services to make savings of £1.2 million over the next two years were set out in the report to Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 12 October 2021. This report does not impact on this savings figure.

8.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal

The Children Act 1989 s17-20 gives local authorities the power to intervene in private matters in order to protect and promote the welfare of children within their governed area. Every local authority is bound by a moral and legal obligation to provide support and assistance to children within their local areas the emphasis on children who are in need of outside protection.

S17 (1) It shall be the general duty of every local authority:

- To safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need; and

- So far as is consistent with that duty, to promote the upbringing of such children by their families by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs.

The revised operating model takes into account the local authority's statutory duties and ensures that social work practice remains at the highest possible standard.

8.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
**Community Engagement and Project
Monitoring Officer**

A community equality impact assessment has been completed setting out how the new operating model will mitigate the risk of disproportionate negative impact for protected groups including the workforce. For example, local resources will be used wherever possible to deliver either 1 to 1 or group based interventions to minimise travel for residents and allow them to receive services in their homes and communities.

8.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children

A full support programme and consultation process has been followed to minimise the impact on staff affected by the structural changes.

9. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

10. Appendices to the report

- None

Report Author:

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