

**Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board (OSCB) Response to**  
**Oxfordshire Children's Services Consultation**

## **1. Introduction**

Oxfordshire County Council is proposing adopting a new model of children's services in Oxfordshire for children aged 0-19 to save £8 million from the budget by 2016-17. The proposal is to create a brand new service by opening up to eight new Children and Family Centres across Oxfordshire. These centres will support children and their families who need help and will integrate the work of the current Children's Centres, the Early Intervention Hubs and Children's Social Care.

Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board (OSCB) recognises the current pressures on public sector funding nationally and understands the context leading to the three options put forward by Oxfordshire County Council to deliver Children's Services in the future. The overriding question the consultation raises for the OSCB is whether Children's Services will still have the capacity to keep children safe within the proposed new integrated model of service delivery and prevent children most at risk from being harmed. The OSCB has been informed that the county council's preferred option is to provide no universal services in order to maximise the number of Children and Family Centres and maximise the capacity of the new Family Support Service to provide support to the most vulnerable families through casework, group programmes and outreach. The families supported in this option are children in need, those on child protection plans and families identified through Oxfordshire's Thriving Families programme.

In the 2014/15 OSCB Annual Report the Independent Chair of the OSCB concluded that partnership improvements have continued to be made in protecting all children from harm in Oxfordshire and that the standard of child protection services was considered high in the most recent Ofsted inspection of 2014. In her introduction she indicated however, that the increase in the numbers of child protection plans and complexity of cases were putting undue pressure on the child protection system.

OSCB is already concerned that the upward trajectory of cases coming into the child protection system will result in an even greater risk to children and as a statutory body tasked with assessing the effectiveness of the system it will require close analysis of how services are responding to the most vulnerable families.

## **2. The Model – new Family Support Service**

The OSCB recognises that the reconfiguration of services to establish an integrated 0-19 service across early intervention and statutory social care for 0-19 year olds is in itself a good model. It considers there to be three key risks – partnership working, capacity, and workforce.

There is a risk that in reducing services in early help, as proposed by the Oxfordshire County Council consultation, that this could have a further negative impact on the child protection system, if there is not sufficient capacity within the new

arrangements to deliver the ambition to focus on the most risky children and reduce caseloads.

There is also recognition that all partners, including the voluntary sector are operating within similar constraints. In this context the OSCB has requested that agencies complete a Report Card relating to activity and demand across child protection on a six-monthly basis using an Impact Assessment completed by all organisations across the partnership. An analysis of this will be reported into the Board.

### **3. Key Issues**

#### **3.1 Partnership Working**

OSCB requires assurance that the importance of prevention and early help is maintained in the new model and this will be dependent on strong partnership working. OSCB will be keenly monitoring that plans are in place that are effective in picking up early help services that are closing or no longer funded by the county council, so that there are no gaps in service provision.

OSCB requires assurance that the development of the new service delivery model will be led by partnerships that can deliver at a local level and it will require Oxfordshire County Council to lead in monitoring and reporting on progress, particularly in relation to risk and safeguarding.

This oversight and monitoring are particularly relevant in terms of the role of schools and health partners and their engagement in locality working to ensure a whole system approach. Joining up the front line to develop local teams in each area requires health visitors, schools, community policing and the community and voluntary sector to establish a network of preventative support linking closely with city, district and parish councils. Schools have already indicated to the OSCB that they will be dealing with higher risks than they have the capacity to meet.

At the November 2015 OSCB Annual Conference on adolescence, Jenny Pearce, Professor of Young People and Public Policy, from Bedfordshire University, outlined the concept of contextualised safeguarding, meaning that organisations need to ensure there is a sustainable whole community focus on responsibilities in relation to safeguarding and statutory organisations need to rely on everyone in the community to deliver this. In this context it is vital that there is clarity about how to raise concerns, how information is shared, how local communities will be supported in this function and clear roles and responsibilities.

The importance of the Locality and Community Support arm cannot be stressed highly enough in delivering the success of the model and ensuring that there is a clear pathway in each area of Oxfordshire to support professionals, identify concerns, understand local needs and signpost to other services that are available.

OSCB welcomes the focus on prioritising resources on people to deliver services rather than buildings and to use other existing buildings wherever possible e.g. health centres and community centres.

Information sharing and partnership working are key issues that come up frequently in Serious Case Reviews. Trusted relationships between agencies are vital to ensuring good information sharing and joint planning and there is a risk if the reduction is too significant that relationships will be eroded.

The importance of communication and sustainable networks is therefore crucial to enable partnership working and locality based work at a local and strategic level and this takes time to develop. It is recognised that services need support to remain engaged particularly when there are fewer frontline workers. Currently there are strong networks of professionals coming together in places like Children's Centres, which then make it easier to pick up the phone when necessary. OSCB will require assurance that partners maintain networks in the new model as a priority.

Current pressures on the MASH (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) can help inform the service redesign. At the December 2015 MASH Operational Meeting it was identified that 70% of enquiries were closed with no further action by Children's Social Care, but might be signposted on. There is a concern that the signposting arrangements are not effective enough currently. The proposed service redesign offers an opportunity to review arrangements given successful signposting will be a crucial aspect of the new model. This is partly about effective communication with the receiving partner e.g. talking to health managers about capacity for health visitors to take on additional work or similarly with schools about the role of Home School Link Workers if statutory services are withdrawing earlier or signposting on.

### **3.2 Capacity**

OSCB commissioned a Report Card on Activity across the safeguarding system in September 2015 which identified a significant increase in child protection cases and children in care and noted that:

*'There is a significant impact on resources across the system (e.g. police, health visitors, social care, GPs, education etc.). Failure to address this may mean we stop protecting children well. The greater the number of children subject to statutory oversight, the lower the capacity to work preventatively with children in need. This in turn fuels the growth in child protection numbers....there is a risk that the combination of reduced budgets and increased activity could adversely affect the ability of local services to keep vulnerable children safe and prevent harm at an early point.'*

OSCB seeks assurance that the new design model can achieve the outcome to reduce caseloads, whilst also continuing to support those in highest need, who are not requiring a statutory service. If not, OSCB maintains there is a risk that Children's Services will no longer be protecting children, but will only be able to intervene once abuse has occurred and become a reactive rather than a proactive service.

This is a particular risk because early intervention services currently provide help to children at the edge of neglect and abuse or for example, with mental health concerns. If there is no early help offer at all the model could result in increased costs to the council and other partners. Later identification could lead to a higher

number of urgent referrals and a greater level of need at point of entry to specialist services and lack of options for signposting on stepping down from specialist support. The risk of delays in intervention is that unaddressed needs will develop and fester leading to more ingrained need requiring more input and resources over a longer period of time.

OSCB believes that preventative services are vital in reducing the demand on future services for example as victims or offenders, or users of mental health or social care services and the detrimental effect of losing these services is that risk and harm to children could escalate. Losing services for younger children could result in early concerns not being addressed at the time and the risks they face could increase as they grow older and they could become victims and offenders or long term users of specialist services in adulthood.

### **3.3 Workforce Issues**

OSCB requires assurance that the children's workforce has the right skill set for the new service. If organisations are to learn from Serious Case Reviews, staff must be supported by good supervision and have sufficient reflection time to ensure professional curiosity, with line managers having low numbers of staff to supervise in order to maintain close oversight. There is a real risk that if the overall children's workforce is reduced and spread more thinly then it may be less effective. Intensive training and ongoing learning and development opportunities are essential to reduce this risk.

OSCB also require confirmation that specialist portfolios and expertise will be maintained within the workforce and that workers are not expected to have the breadth of skills to work across the whole 0-19 age group.

It is also critical that the workforce is local and mobile and that professional standards are maintained in accordance with regulatory requirements.

### **3.4 Transition Planning**

In summary, OSCB requires clearer understanding of any unmet needs or gaps in services identified through the Oxfordshire County Council consultation. For example, the consultation specifically identifies Stay and Play and Youth Open Access as areas that would no longer be funded by the Council.

The OSCB also recommends that there is high quality communication in relation to change management so partners understand any new model and how it will work as it develops, pre-launch, post-launch with ongoing regular updates.

### **3.5 Charging for services**

OSCB does not recommend charging for services on the following grounds: if the services are targeted at the most vulnerable then there is a high risk the families who most need support would be lost; it is not a fair or proportionate option; there are potential conflicts in meeting statutory responsibilities; and it would be complex and resource intensive to administer.

#### **4. Conclusion**

OSCB requires a formal response to its concerns and regular reporting on the progress of the new model. The OSCB will incorporate ongoing issues into the six monthly Report Card and Impact Assessment on activity across Children's Services and will publish any findings in its 2015/2016 Annual Report on the effectiveness of the child protection system.