

Children's Improvement Board Case Study – Trafford Council

August 2012

1.1 Summary

- **What they are doing:** Trafford Council's Area Family Support (AFS) Service draws on a number of professional disciplines, all co-located in one of three AFS teams across the locality. These teams hold a number of different professionals, each with their own caseload, as well as multi-agency work where appropriate.
- **How they are doing it:** The innovative way in which the service benefits from cross-professional expertise is through the use of an informal monthly Panel Meeting which brings together professionals from across the team to hold a case discussion where a practitioner has some barrier to making progress with a child/family. The meetings are completely non-hierarchical and there is no administrative burden to bringing a case to Panel.
- **Main benefits and outcomes:** These discussions facilitate *problem-solving* between professionals, as well as *boosting confidence* and *generating peer support*, providing insight into progressing a case that may otherwise be 'stuck'. Its biggest benefit is the informal and democratic way in which this takes place, ensuring that all professionals are equally valued, both through their professional challenges and contributions.

1.2 How it works

Three geographically configured AFS teams operate across Trafford local authority (North, West and South), offering a range of children's services and multi-disciplinary work. Each AFS Team is made up of approximately 60—70 professionals, all of whom retain their professional identity and remit. These include:

- Social Care Professionals
- Health Visitors
- School health (previously school nurses)
- Education Welfare Officers
- Youth Work Professionals
- Connexions.

By September 2012, Children's Centres and the Early Years Service will also become integrated into the AFS service.

AFS professionals each carry their own profession-related caseload, and recording and referral systems for each continue to exist as per arrangements before the establishment of the service rather than be integrated across the AFS. In this way, a significant part of their day-to-day work remains within their professional discipline and is not necessarily integrated across the team.

Across the AFS service in its totality, there are three identified disciplines:

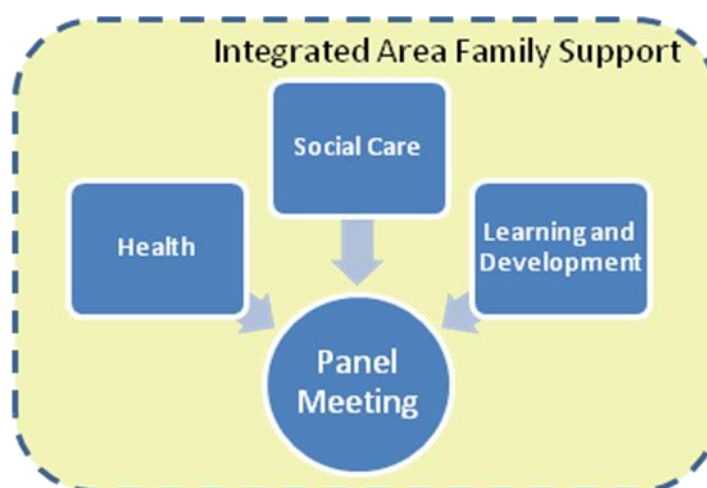
- Health
- Social Care
- Learning and Development (including Education and Youth Work).

AFS professionals sit within one of 3 multi-disciplinary teams per locality, each managed by an Operations Manager (who is the Lead within that locality for one of these three disciplines).

In addition, each Locality Team Manager also has responsibility for one of these disciplines within the AFS service across the Local Authority as a whole. Per locality, there is therefore 1 Locality Manager and 3 Operations Managers.

Once a month, each AFS team holds a Panel Meeting where professionals can come together to discuss any case they are holding where:

- They are facing some barrier in progressing with the case and/or;
- They are unable meet the child/family's needs
- They are having difficulties in identifying next steps for intervention.



The Panel lasts for approximately 1.5 hours. Professionals are invited to present their case, which often takes place informally with a verbal presentation from the practitioner bringing the case to Panel (although they can also produce written supporting evidence if they wish). As well as Team Leaders and Operations Managers, other professionals working on cases being brought to Panel are expected to attend. All staff members attending each Panel Meeting are required to sign a data-protection protocol enabling

them to share all relevant information about the case (on the premise that it would be in the best interests of the client) so that Data Protection legislation is not breached. Each Panel hears about 1-2 cases and over the past 12 months, 20 cases have been brought to Panel. Attendance varies but is typically between 12-40 professionals.

During Panel meetings, professionals access peer support in a non-hierarchical and informal way to access expertise and insight that they may not have otherwise considered. The atmosphere of the Panel Meeting is one that is very supportive and relaxed, ensuring that practitioners are at ease and fully encouraged both to bring up issues in their cases, but also to suggest alternative ways forward.

1.2.1 Main benefits

The main benefits of the Panel meetings in relation to integrated working has been the informal support and problem-solving they allow individual practitioners to access, without the need for lengthy bureaucratic systems and delay. Over time, professionals have become more confident in accessing support in a non-judgemental way to overcome any obstacles they are facing in their cases and can benefit from the professional expertise of a number of disciplines, offering solutions that may not necessarily have previously been considered. Cases brought to Panel need no particular criteria except that the practitioner working on it is facing a significant barrier/hurdle to progressing with the child/family. Most cases however tend to involve children/families facing complex and inter-related problems, such that the inter-disciplinary insight offered at Panel can be very helpful in thinking holistically about families' needs.

1.2.2 Has the project improved outcomes? Any evidence from user feedback/staff?

It is difficult to evidence improved outcomes in families whose cases are brought to Panel meetings in a comparable way, since their needs are so varied, reflected in the subsequent diversity in intervention strategy. However, case auditing of the cases that have been presented at Panel have shown that there has been marked progress by practitioners working on them to improve families' situations and that by bringing the cases to Panel, these families/children are able to access and benefit from a wider range of professional expertise and support, and at times alternative referral pathways for additional services.

1.2.3 Has the project led to cost-savings?

At this stage in service development, there are no demonstrable cost-savings which are attributable to the AFS service. However, strategic-level managers stress that the rationale to integrate services and bring together professionals from different disciplines was not one that was rooted in cost, but instead a commitment to improving outcomes for children and families through joint working. Whilst it is recognised that this new model of working *may* have some cost-saving implications in the future, this will need much more time to evidence in a robust way with a strong level of attribution to the service itself.

1.3 How it was achieved

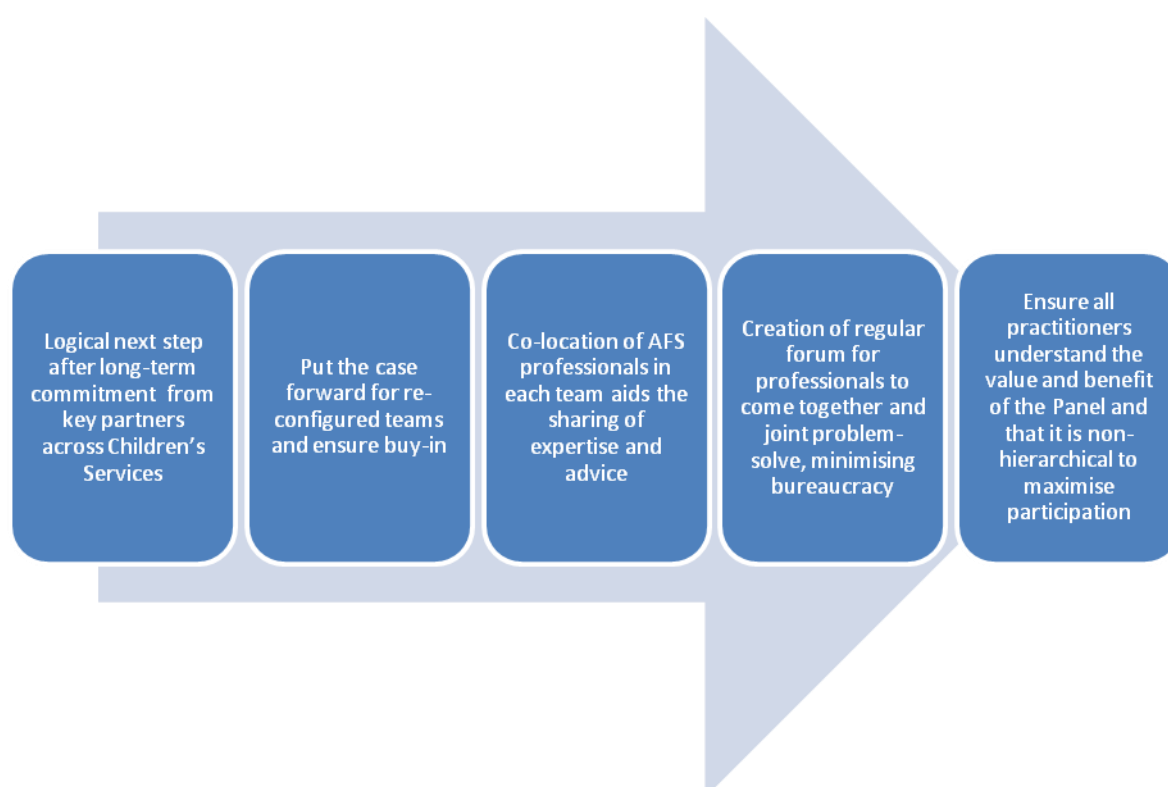
1.3.1 What was the rationale for service development?

Trafford Council has benefited from a longstanding strategic-level commitment to integrate services, bringing together Children's Services, the Primary Care Trust, and other

partners within the Children's Trust to deliver better outcomes for children and young people. As such, the current Area Family Support Service works alongside a number of other multi-agency teams (e.g. Multi-Agency Referral and Assessment Team, Children in Care, CAMHS, YOS, etc).

1.3.2 Key steps towards integration

The key steps to getting the service and in particular the Panel operational and working effectively are set out below:



1.3.3 What were the key challenges, and how were they overcome?

One of the main challenges in relation to the successful establishment of the monthly Panel has been the way it was viewed by practitioners in the early stages of service development. There were some initial issues of practitioners being hesitant in bringing cases to the Panel as they felt it reflected negatively on their own practice and that in some way, to bring a case forward implied that there were issues inherent in the professional's own practice, rather than external issues/circumstances which impeded progress. In addition, a fear of additional work by bringing a case to Panel discouraged some members of staff from doing so.

Implicit professional hierarchies between the different disciplines represented across the AFS service also initially impacted on the power dynamics in early Panel Meetings, such that some professionals' voices were somewhat muted in comparison to others'. Managers have addressed these teething issues by aggressively reinforcing the purpose of the Panel to all staff as well as reassuring them that all contributions are critical to its

success and to bring a case to Panel will only strengthen and facilitate practice, rather than impede it. As such, the Panel process is now much more fully and democratically participated in by AFS staff, as well as those who sit outside it – for example, there has been a recent increase in Head Teachers bringing cases to Panel, highlighting the increasing number of stakeholders who see it as beneficial to practice.

1.4 Learning points

The main learning points in relation to the establishment of the AFS service, and in particular the setting up of the Panel have been:

- The key role of **addressing cultural resistance, challenging orthodox working practices, and professional hierarchies to ensure the service becomes truly democratic and participative, and has a shared sense of ownership.**
- **The significance for practitioners to adopt an open and honest approach to their work to fully benefit from the potential support of the panel, drawing on elements of critical self-reflection and peer-support.**
- The intrinsic **benefit of valuing the full range of professional intervention** cannot be underestimated.
- **Importance of shared Business Support provision for the whole service** rather than separate administrative teams for different professional disciplines – is a critical lever and facilitator of practice.
- **Pooled budgets are not necessary** to successfully integrate services.
- **Staff members need to have a genuine commitment** to improving outcomes for children, young people and families.

1.5 Key contact

For further information, contact Will Owen, AFS Team Manager (South Team) and Lead for Learning and Development on 0161 7486 3812 or will.owen@trafford.gov.uk.