Early intervention
Where now for local authorities?
Introduction

There has been an enduring debate over the past two decades about whether services should take a preventive approach or focus on crisis intervention. We are starting to see a broad consensus that acute problems, such as neglect or family breakdown, cost more to address, and can have long-term implications, than intervening early with effective support when problems first arise.

The Children Act 1989 definition of children ‘in need’ theoretically enabled local authorities to work with a broad range of children. In reality, however, traditional political and funding structures have made it almost impossible for local authorities to shift away from the provision of costly acute interventions and towards prevention, even before the current squeeze on public expenditure. This problem has created a mismatch between successive governments’ ambition for early intervention and their ability to deliver it.

At the same time, evidence has mounted to prove how meeting people’s needs as soon as they emerge is both effective for them and makes financial savings for the state.

The Coalition Government and Opposition agree that early intervention is the best way of supporting children and families. Localy the concept continues to feature in children’s social care rhetoric, and practitioners know that without using an early intervention approach they are unable to stem the growing tide of families with acute problems coming through the system.

With this approach endorsed by practitioners on the ground and those in local and national government, it is surprising that we have not made more progress towards embedding early intervention as the standard for children’s social care in the UK. The truth is that making early intervention a practical reality on the ground remains fraught with problems. Fundamentally, our political and funding structures are working against the collective desire to change the way we respond to the needs of vulnerable children and families.

Even with the devolved power brought about by localism, local authorities continue to have their autonomy undermined by central political timescales and the short-term funding arrangements that follow.

Now is the time to overcome barriers preventing us from realising the full potential that a comprehensive early intervention approach could bring. The number of vulnerable children and families is predicted to rise significantly between now and 2015. Using the Government’s own measures of vulnerability, the number of children living in families with five or more vulnerabilities, for example, is set to rise by 54,000 to 365,000, an increase of around 17 per cent.

Action for Children works with over 250,000 children, young people and families in the UK. We see first hand the difference that can be made when you intervene early and transform a family’s life. We want this to be the experience of all families who need support, but to achieve the required shift towards early intervention local authorities themselves need greater political and financial stability.

What is early intervention?

This means intervening as soon as possible to tackle problems emerging for children, young people and their families or working with a population most at risk of developing problems. Effective Early Intervention may occur at any point in a child or young person’s life.

Early Intervention approaches can be delivered through both universal and targeted services. This can mean providing services to all children and families (i.e. universally), or targeted support offered to those more likely to suffer poor outcomes at any stage of childhood or adolescence.
Why does the ambition not match the reality of delivering early intervention?

As a major provider of children’s services Action for Children has seen the impact of instability as the policy pendulum swings back and forth. With a crisis or well publicised tragedy drawing money and services to the acute end of the spectrum, there follows a recognition that the only way to reduce the need for expensive acute services is to shift funding into better preventive services, such as family support. The pendulum then swings back the other way.

This is not about more money. It is about something perhaps more difficult to attain – stability and long-term decision making.

Research published in 2008 found that during the lifetime of a 21-year-old there had been over 400 different major announcements, policy initiatives and funding streams.¹⁸

Often a children’s service has barely enough time to be set up and begin to deliver its service before its staff have to plan for reconfiguration or even closure. For example, the majority of our services do not have contracts in place that span beyond the current Spending Review period (91%)⁹ and 64 per cent of our services are operating on either one or two year contracts.¹⁰

These conditions have a direct effect on the integrity and efficacy of children and families services, not least because it is precisely the stability of interventions and professional relationships¹¹ that often leads to success in achieving positive outcomes.
This way of working can be wasteful and inefficient, but human terms it is: the troubled young person who has just learned to trust his key worker only to find out he has a new person to work with; the mother who has begun to develop her parenting skills and started to volunteer but finds her childcare cut; or the family who has established a relationship with one centre, only to be told they have to attend a new one further from home due to funding changes.

We need a shift from short-term thinking, too often driven by political expediency, to long-term strategies that put children first and short-term politics second.

This view is shared by the Early Action Task Force which recently criticised successive governments’ short-term planning as well as the prevalent attitude that meeting the current year’s budget target is the only target, regardless of impact on future Government spending plans.
The local authority perspective:
New research

We recently commissioned the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) to undertake a study exploring local authority decision making in regards to early intervention.13

This research set out to answer two questions:

- To what extent the provision of children’s social care is subject to short-term policy and budgetary decisions?
- Why does this happen and what can be done to address the problem in order to provide the security and stability required to make a difference to children’s lives?

SCIE’s work comprised analysis of relevant literature and a set of 30 in-depth semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews with senior representatives from English local authorities. SCIE then summarised the findings in an interim report which was shared with, and presented to, a total of 49 local authority experts who attended five events held across England in late 2012. These facilitated events provided an opportunity to test the findings and gather further perspectives to inform recommendations for central and local government.

Key findings from the research include:

- It is difficult to work towards long-term visions while meeting immediate need. While some local authorities set an overall vision for the long term, strategic plans for children’s services typically cover 3-5 year periods, and delivery contracts have to be managed on a much shorter-term basis.
- There is tension between long-term outcomes and the day-to-day operating context. The stability of services overall, and the potential to deliver long-term benefits, are limited by short-term funding cycles and national initiatives that feel hard to ‘join-up’ at service level.
- External factors include:
  - The need for stability, as well as long-term planning and funding, at the national policy level.
  - Engagement of the wider workforce, in particular the voluntary and community sector.
- Internal factors include:
  - The level of engagement of elected members in this work.
  - Having both the organisational culture and capacity to commission skillfully and manage the risk of working in different ways.
  - Building the professional skill and confidence to work across service boundaries, in a culture of intervention rather than onward referral.

The findings also indicated a number of factors that effect local ability to develop and sustain an early intervention approach as a way of delivering long-term outcomes.
How do we achieve change?

Stability derived from strong leadership, having a locally appropriate response, investing in the most effective programmes, and longer-term financial settlements will all play a part in making the early intervention rhetoric a reality.

We know instability is created by the inherent short-termism in the system that is passed down the chain from Government to local authorities and service providers and, ultimately, this has a detrimental impact on vulnerable children. Change is required nationally and locally.

This thinking has not been applied to the conundrum of how to enable local authorities to shift services towards early intervention. One crucial step forward would be to reform the timescales of budgetary and spending review arrangements that control local decisions. As David Robinson, OBE, at Community Links points out, “it is the budget process that casts the darkest shadow over the preventative approach obliterating vision and curtailing delivery.”

The current three or four year spending review cycle, translates into shorter contract periods for local services, which simply are not long enough to embed change. Worst still is the planned ‘mini’ spending review which is scheduled for 2015/16 and will only cover one year.

Participants in the study undertaken by SCIE also highlighted how in the medium-to-short term shifting to early intervention approaches can actually increase costs as the previously hidden or unmet needs of children and families become evident. This reinforces the need for a change to spending arrangements in order to plan for any increase in demand which occurs before savings are realised. This is a point backed up by the National Audit Office who recently said that the budget process:

“does not currently have enough focus on the long term. Current budgetary processes are medium term, with the Treasury led spending review covering 3–4 years. But the Government’s fiscal framework has as one of its key aims the need for sustainable public finances...promoting intergenerational fairness...The UK budgetary process does not include the sort of longer-term vision seen in other countries which could help inform strategic decision making. This would be more conducive to the development of spend-to-save initiatives, which require a willingness to accept short-term costs in return for later benefits.”

Nationally

Action for Children has consistently called for Governments to take a longer-term approach when thinking about improving outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. This is a view shared by the Early Action Task Force, the National Audit Office, and Graham Allen MP in a report commissioned by the Government.

The Government has rightly recognised through the promotion of social impact bonds that it takes time to achieve results in children’s social care, with the new private finance models of investment in evidence-based programmes spanning over five year periods. Action for Children is working on one such five year programme to deliver Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) on two sites from spring 2013. These services will reduce the number of young people on the edge of entry to local authority care from doing so and instead provide positive alternatives by way of improved relationships within birth families and improved educational attendance and achievement.

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We would like to see ten year spending plans22 that set out the funding to be made available for children’s services. This needs to be produced in line with the Government’s long-term vision of realising early intervention and ideally would be done on a cross party basis to prevent a reversal of policies at each election. The stability that would be passed down to local authorities by working in this way would enable them to plan and implement the early intervention approaches that would best suit their populations. Of course, this does not mean that services would go unchallenged if they did not achieve the desired outcomes. There must still also be scope to de-commission services where they fail as well as regular reporting and oversight mechanisms in place.

Locally

“It’s taken a lot of banging away at it...you need to win hearts and minds. You keep having to bring it all back to what works for families...changing the culture is the hard bit.”23

A stable and long-term funding regime would provide local authorities with the chance to unlock the potential of localism, to take necessary risks and to thereby transform their approach to working with vulnerable children and young people. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight how local authorities can themselves begin, or in many cases continue, the process of shifting the emphasis of their services towards early intervention.

Practical steps that can be taken by local authorities include:

- Strategic and cross-party plans for children’s services that span a 5-10 year period
- One-off needs assessment to understand the increase in demand that a shift to early intervention and prevention may involve
- Social impact bond arrangements to help fund the transition to early intervention and reduce acute need
- Comprehensive and independent scrutiny panel arrangements to assess local barriers to early intervention approaches and suggestions for progress
- Investment in key professional skills, including financial modelling and responsible decommissioning which are necessary to shift to early intervention
- Long-term contracts and commissioning arrangements for children’s services and interventions
- Seek opportunities to pool finances with local partners, taking the learning from the community budget programme

As the SCIE research has shown24 much of this exists in terms of local good practice and against the odds of austerity and national policy churn, many local government leaders have made great strides in recent years towards early intervention.

It is now time for central government to empower a generational shift across all areas, by changing financial arrangements and allowing local leaders to make much better use of their resources.
Local Authorities have greater autonomy than in recent times, but the localism agenda remains unfinished. While authorities continue to be hampered by short-term funding and conflicting policy initiatives they are unable to implement their own long-term plans. They must be able to work with their local partners to re-design services based on their local needs, to intervene early and achieve sustained and positive outcomes for their communities.

The centrally driven policies on troubled families and adoption are a case in point. However welcome these policies may be, the contradiction between central prescription and local freedoms has sent conflicting messages to local areas on where their priorities must lie and which services can accrue additional funding – important in times of stretched resources.

The introduction of the Early Intervention Grant sent a powerful message that while no longer ring-fencing money, the Government wanted to enable local authorities to shift towards early intervention.

The abolition of the grant appears to undermine the Government’s own commitment to this agenda. Nevertheless, the new Early Intervention Foundation, which is funded by Government and enjoys cross party support, is a welcome sign that the agenda remains alive.

A ten year national vision and spending plan would give Local Authorities the confidence they need to reconfigure their services to focus on early intervention. Importantly, they would then be free to work more effectively with their local partners, to share the initial financial burden but also reap the benefits that early intervention brings.

Endnotes

1 Action for Children (2009) As long as it takes: a new politics for children
3 New economics foundation (nef) and Action for Children (2009) Backing the Future: Why investing in children is good for us all
9 Action for Children (2012) The Red Book 2012: The annual review of the impact of spending decision on vulnerable children and families (NB: we recognised that the start date on these contracts has an impact, but does not fully account for this large figure)
10 Action for Children (2012) The Red Book 2012: The annual review of the impact of spending decision on vulnerable children and families (NB: Figure based in all Action for Children services, excluding fostering and adoption and schools)
11 K Crowther and G Cowen, York Consulting (2011) Effective Relationships with Vulnerable Parents to Improve Outcomes for Children and Young People
13 SCIE (2013) Early intervention: decision-making in local authority Children’s Services
14 Early Action Task Force (2012) The Deciding Time
15 National Audit Office (2013) Early Action: Landscape Review
17 https://www.gov.uk/social-impact-bonds
20 SCIE (2013) Early intervention: decision-making in local authority Children’s Services
22 The Early Action Taskforce also advocates this type of approach – see The Deciding Time
23 Quote from Local Authority Executive Officer: SCIE, (2013) Early intervention: decision-making in local authority Children’s Services
24 SCIE (2013) Early intervention: decision-making in local authority Children’s Services
About Action for Children

Action for Children is a UK-wide charity that speaks out for the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people, and supports them to break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential. We help over 250,000 children, young people and their families through more than 600 projects across the UK.

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