

London Borough of Bromley

PART 1 - PUBLIC

Briefing for Care Services Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee Thursday 26 June 2014

OUTCOME OF THE COURT PILOT (CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE)

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1. Summary

The London Borough of Bromley led a joint Court Pilot initiative with the London Borough of Bexley from 4 February 2013 – 31 March 2014. The final Project Board meeting took place on 25th April 2014. The aim of the Pilot was to improve the quality and timescales of care proceedings for children in need of care and protection in preparation for the new judicial requirements for care proceedings to be completed within a maximum period of 26 weeks in preparation for the new legal requirements as set in the Children and Families Act which became law on 22 April 2014. Progress reports on the work undertaken by the joint Court Pilot were presented to the Safeguarding and Corporate Executive Working Party on 5 February 2013 and 10 September 2013. The initiative was reviewed at the final Project Board meeting which took place on the 25th April 2014 and concluded it had been extremely successful.

2 The Briefing

1.1 Progress and conclusion of the joint Court Pilot:

The Bromley and Bexley Court Pilot concluded on 31 March 2014. The Pilot ran for 14 months with a Case Manager tracking and monitoring all court work and outcomes for cases in care proceedings across both boroughs and reported to Terry Parkin, Chairman of the Court Pilot Project Board. During the Pilot Bromley issued **53** sets of proceedings which concerned **91** Children. The pilot achieved the original goals identified and Bromley and Bexley were both successful in significantly reducing the duration of care proceedings. Bromley's average number of weeks for concluding care proceedings at the start of the pilot was 52 weeks against a national average of 45 weeks and by the end of the Pilot Bromley's average for concluding care proceedings was **24** weeks. In September 2013 CAFCAS in its Second Quarter Heat Map reported Bromley as being ahead of the curve for London and was scored as Green alongside only two other London Boroughs, which was an excellent achievement.

3. Positive Outcomes:

- The Court Pilot was a partnership initiative that involved working closely with the Family Court, CAFCASS, the Bromley and Bexley Legal Teams and Children's Social Care. It could not have been successful without the cooperation and support from all stakeholders. All stakeholders report improved and more effective working arrangements and outcomes following the conclusion of the pilot.
- The reputation of the London Borough of Bromley has been enhanced by the initiative. Bromley took the lead role in setting it up and progressing it to conclusion. Judges' Atkinson and Redgrave reported they are pleased with the progress made.
- The Court Pilot has brought about specific and measurable improvements in procedures and quality of practice within Bromley's social care.
- During the court pilot period Bromley concluded **28** Pilot cases concerning **50** children. **23** cases concluded on or within 26 weeks. As of the end of April 2014, Bromley had **25** cases still in proceedings of which only **5** will exceed the 26 weeks deadline due to the complex and exceptional circumstances of the cases concerned.
- Bexley concluded 21 Pilot cases concerning 36 children and 13 cases concluded on or within 26 weeks. Bexley were recently inspected 11 March 2014 – 2 April 2014 and inspectors found that the Pilot: "...has proven to be instrumental in reducing timescales and improving the quality and timeliness of reports to the court. During the inspection the local authority legal advisors reported that the pilot project has recently reduced the length of care proceedings to 23 weeks for those cases within the pilot".
- Children can be placed sooner in safe and secure permanent placements as lengthy delays in Care Proceedings are now being avoided.
- Concluding cases within shorter time frames achieves best value in how services and resources are delivered and deployed over time and supports a small reduction in placement costs.
- A reduction in the use of Experts. The Family Justice Review highlighted that delay in care proceedings was often linked to the instruction of experts and late serving of their reports. The focus has been a move to limit the number of experts. However, care cases are rarely heard without one or two external experts, usually an adult psychiatrist or psychologist and a greater tendency for requests for residential parenting assessments and domestic violence risk assessments. Tests for substance misuse are routinely used in cases where alcohol and drugs feature. Other than for parenting assessments however, the Court will now order shared costs for expert assessments which previously fell to the Local Authority and will sometimes order that the expert is paid by the legal aid certificate of the parent. Due to the complexity of some care cases and assessments the Court can specify that to resolve the proceeding justly the case may fall outside of the 26 timescale.
- Improved timescales for the assessments of family and friends. One key work stream identified by the Pilot was for Bromley to respond with timely assessments for connected persons (family and friends assessments). The Fostering Team now has a small dedicated team of fostering social workers able to undertake connected persons assessments in a timely way within 6 to 8 weeks.

- Family Group Conferencing Service (FGCS) has been embedded in practice. This is a fundamental service in pre-court work and is a requirement by the Courts to ensure that Local Authorities are actively identifying extended family networks to support or look after children where care proceedings are being considered. The FGCS has been effectively used by social workers to identify extended family members and in many cases children have been successfully permanently placed within their extended families. During the Pilot February to March there have been 156 FGCs concerning 238 children.

4. Challenges

Professional continuity has been a major challenge during the pilot and remains a difficulty. Recruitment and retention of child protection social work staff is a risk area for most London Boroughs and Bromley is revisiting its Recruitment and Retention strategy to ensure that the present strategy is robust in the recruitment of child protection social workers.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion the Court Pilot has achieved its objective and made measurable improvements to timescales, procedures, practice and outcomes for children. The positive outcomes from the Court Pilot will become increasingly evident with children achieving stability and the right type of care placement early thereby reducing the need for Local Authority care placements overtime.