

CYP Scrutiny Commission - 18th December

Additional questions for CFS

The following questions could not be addressed during the Scrutiny Commission meeting on 18th December 2023, due to time restrictions.

The responses below have been provided by the Children and Families Service and will be discussed at the next Scrutiny Commission meeting in February 2024.

Follow up Questions from CYP Scrutiny Commission:

Edge of Care

12. The Edge of Care service is in operation to support children (and families) who are at risk of becoming looked after (and entering care).
- a. How successful has this service been in helping children live within existing family networks rather than being placed in care?

Response from CFS:

To date, 7 children and their families are open to the Edge of Care team. One of these children is looked after, although is living with a family member through a connected care arrangement. The other 6 children remain living at home. Since April 2023, 16 other children have been offered a service. For 7, the team were unable to successfully engage them in the offer. Nine were offered a service, with the following outcomes:

- 6 family relationships were stabilised;
- 1 came into care due to being remanded in custody, however, family relationships were stabilised;
- 2 remain living at home but strains in family relationships persist.

The team have experienced some staffing challenges over time, which has meant periods of reduced capacity, however, a core team which includes social care staff, clinicians and an educational psychologist have been delivering intensive multi-agency support focused on partnership with families in a way that is systemic, trauma-informed and anti-racist.

Youth Justice

13. The Youth Justice service notes that whilst the number of young people who are first time entrants to the youth justice system has decreased over the past few years, that it has become increasingly difficult to support some young people who are facing acute, multiple and complex needs and challenges.
- a. What does the service plan to do differently to support this cohort of young people, who may be at risk of entering the Youth Justice system, who have really acute needs?

Response from CFS:

The key principles of youth justice practice within Hackney, are that it is expected to be systemic, trauma informed, anti-racist and anti oppressive, restorative and congruent with a child first approach. These principles are reflected within the Youth Justice Partnership Plan.

Through academic research and the HMiP Inspection our Prevention and Diversion Team has been recognised for its collaborative assessments and strong delivery of out of court interventions. The findings of the Middlesex University Research have been discussed at a learning event in January 2024 and there is a shared recognition that too many children are still propelled to Court. Our Police partners are committed to reviewing decision making and as a Partnership Board we will continue to press at a London-wide and central MPS level for agreement to allow our local 4 borough project "Postponed Prosecution (Outcome 22)" as an option for 'no comment' interviews. In 2023, we have also been able to enhance our Prevention and Diversion Offer through two new grant funded programmes (Engage and Turnaround) which provides opportunity to engage with young people arrested and brought into Police Custody (Engage), as well as to offer very early support (Turnaround) to young people who have come to the attention of the police for minor misdemeanours without resulting in a statutory outcome.

As partner agencies we are also committed to improving data collection across the partnership to provide an in-depth understanding of children's education attendance, engagement, and attainment. With the support of Health colleagues we have undertaken a health needs assessment for the cohort to ensure their needs are met and to identify opportunities to intervene earlier. We have developed a multidisciplinary health team to address the identified needs of young people within the cohort and to provide support for parents. This has led to the inclusion of Speech and Language Therapists (SaLT) within the Court setting to ensure additional learning needs are understood. SaLT Training has also been provided. An additional education resource for the Virtual School to extend its offer to young people supported through Prevention and diversion has been identified, with recruitment to begin February 2024.

The London Accommodation Pathfinder service (LAP) is a pan-London project, backed by Ministry of Justice/Youth Justice Board funding to commission new pathways that can accommodate 16 and 17-year-old children as an alternative to custody (either those on remand or as an alternative to custodial sentence), and with provision for resettlement. The new facility for North and Central boroughs is located in Barnet and opened in August 2023. It provides community-based accommodation and intensive support to meet the shortfall of provision in London with supportive pathways on exit for a stable transition and resettlement - this includes outreach support for a period of time following the placement. Since opening Hackney has successfully placed two children.

Clinical Service

14. The report suggests that 291 local families were allocated to the Clinical Service in 2022/23 - a 32% increase on previous years. Can officers confirm:
 - a. If there is a waiting list for the clinical service, if so how long?
 - b. Are all these children and families receiving support through the clinical service?
 - c. What pressures this service is currently experiencing, and future plans to support provision?

Response from CFS:

291 children were allocated to the Clinical Service throughout the year - on average we usually work with around 150 children at any one time. The average wait time for allocation to the CFS Clinical Service is currently 15 weeks. Over the past year we have experienced challenges in recruitment and retention, but are now fully staffed. We are embarking upon a review of our Clinical Services as we have shifted from a service designed to support Social Work Practice to a service that is almost entirely focused upon direct work with children and families. In line with our ambition to develop a Practice Academy to support frontline practice (including the embedding of our Systemic, Trauma-Informed and Anti-Racist 'STAR' practice model and improving recruitment and retention through the development of clear career pathways) we will be in dialogue with our CAMHS Alliance partners about any potential impact for our children and families and how their needs can best be addressed.

Children's Rights

15. How effective is the Children's Rights service in engaging and supporting children in care and or care leavers? How is this assessed?

Response from CFS:

Across 2022/23, 513 children were offered support by the service, which is very similar to the previous year. 386 of these young people were referred during that calendar year, with the remaining 127 children already being open to the service prior to 01/04/2022.

In respect of Looked After Children and Care Leavers, 78 children were referred for Advocacy, 6 to be supported to make a complaint and 5 in respect of housing and accommodation needs. Our Children's Rights officers have excellent child focused and creative approaches to engaging children according to their age and abilities and receive consistently positive feedback from the children they are supporting and the wider professional network. Good practice by the Children's Rights services has also been identified through our wider Audit programme.

Care Leavers

16. The Commission notes that a Care Leaver Hub (a previous recommendation of this Commission) has been agreed, and that capital funding (£300k) has been set aside for its development in this month's (December) Cabinet decisions. Can officers update the Commission:

- a. What services are planned for the Care Leaver Hub?
- b. How Care Leavers have been involved to date?
- c. How will it work with existing services?

Response from CFS:

A potential Hackney Council site has been identified for a new Care Leavers Hub by Property Services and, as noted, capital funding agreed. The Property Services team are in the process of carrying out a full specification of the work required, including enlisting the support of architects. The hope is that work will be undertaken across the spring and summer and it will be ready to launch in autumn 2024. Hackney of Tomorrow have been made aware of the plans and will be consulted in the design of the building e.g. colours, choice of kitchen / furniture, garden design, etc, as the project develops.

Once up and running, the plan is to base existing services from the hub, to include Leaving Care staff being there every day and regular attendance from other services including the care leavers leads from Housing Needs and Benefits, the CFS Clinical Service, the Virtual School and the Looked After Health Team. These services would then be available for planned and unplanned sessions with care leavers, who will have an open invite to 'drop in' to the hub during working hours. The space will also be available for group events e.g. summer BBQs or Hackney of Tomorrow meetings.

Additional questions from Care Leavers:

The following questions arose during a focus group with 9 Care Leavers and were not able to be addressed during the Scrutiny meeting on 18th December 2023 due to time constraints:

- 1) Placement/accommodation stability is equally as important for care leavers as it is for looked after children - but do we monitor how many times care leavers may be moving accommodation? Could standards be developed?

Response from CFS:

We are aware of the potentially negative impact of moves for all care experienced children and young people and work hard to minimise these wherever possible. Whilst it is not a statutory requirement to report on stability of accommodation for care leavers, we do track the number of moves each month.

The Young People's Accommodation Pathway, our commissioning framework for supported accommodation, which was launched in 2023 was designed so that support could be flexible, in order to wrap around a care leaver and provide the level of support needed at any given time. This avoids a young person having to move, for example, to access a higher support provision. The primary reasons for a care leaver moving between the ages of 18 to 21 are because they have breached their tenancy; because they are stepping down the level of support; or because they want or need to move to a different area.

We work closely with all our providers to try and avoid our care leavers being evicted, for example, due to non payment of rent or service charges or breaching the rules of the accommodation. However, sadly it is not always possible to avoid this outcome. Where care leavers tenancies have come to an end, we will always work to find them alternative suitable accommodation. Some care leavers continue to need to live in 24 hour staffed homes when they turn 18, due to the complexity of their needs. We are always mindful of our responsibility to prepare them for independent living by the time they turn 21. We therefore meet regularly to

review those in high support accommodation and consider step down plans. We always endeavour to be clear to young people if and when they may need to move before or after they turn 21. These conversations should be reflected in their Pathway Plans. We work hard to source supported accommodation in or around Hackney, so that any necessary moves will have minimal impact on other areas of their lives e.g. access to education and other support services, as well as informal support networks. Some young people request a move to a different location, at times for safety reasons, but at other times for new opportunities e.g. in education, training or employment, or to move closer to Hackney, following a period living elsewhere.

- 2) What assurances can officers provide to the Commission that all of our care leavers, especially those aged 21 years and above and required to seek accommodation in the private rented sector, are allocated quality accommodation suitable to their needs?

Response from CFS:

All the supported accommodation that we commission for care leavers age 18 to 21 is subject to a quality assurance framework, led by our Placement Management Unit. This includes quality assurance visits and gathering feedback from practitioners and young people on their experiences of the provider. We also work closely with commissioning teams in neighbouring East and North London boroughs to share information, particularly where we may have any concerns about a specific provider. The 3 providers who are part of our Young People's Pathway - Outward, One Housing and Irish Causeway - are subject to regular commissioning contract reviews, including regular quality assurance visits. We are planning to enlist the support of our Care Leavers Advisors, Elena and China, in the quality assurance activities going forward.

We have small numbers of care leavers opting to access accommodation in the private rental sector prior to the age of 21, primarily due to affordability. Post 21, the duty to support care leavers to access suitable accommodation passes to our housing colleagues. Housing colleagues may help a care leaver explore options in the private rental sector and have developed partnerships with landlords over time in this regard.

We have a statutory duty to keep in contact with all care leavers who are open to us for support at least every 8 weeks. Wherever possible, we endeavour to meet with them face-to-face, as well as keeping in touch with them by phone, email, etc. Whilst most often care leavers may prefer to meet with us in the community, we also understand it is important to see where they are living, as this can offer important insight into how they are managing. If and when we have any concerns about the suitability of their accommodation, for example, repairs, safety, etc, we will always endeavour to support our care leavers to escalate these concerns and get them resolved.

- 3) Are the roles of the Independent Reviewer and Children's Rights officers sufficiently promoted to young people in care and among care leavers? What is being done to make sure that such young people have access to independent advice and support and guidance to support their care, especially when things might go wrong?

Response from CFS:

All looked after children have an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). Their IROs will see them every 6 months for their Looked After Children Reviews and will always endeavour to speak to them alone as part of the reviewing process. Many of our IROs have long-standing relationships with the children they work with and will maintain contact with them outside of reviews. All children, their parents and their networks are made aware of the role of the IRO to independently oversee plans for them and that they are therefore a potential point of escalation if they are unhappy about any aspect of their plans.

In addition, Children's Rights Officers are able to offer independent advocacy to all Hackney's looked after children and care leavers. We try to ensure that all care experienced children and young people are aware of the support on offer from Children's Rights Officers. As outlined above, 89 accessed this support in 2022/3. However, we are aware that we need to continue to promote this service, to ensure all those that may benefit from it are encouraged to access it as needed.

- 4) Young people were also unsure about their rights in respect of their allocated social worker. Could their SW be changed if the relationship between them was not working or poor? A care leaver noted that due to their previous experience, they only felt safe with female workers and expressed a clear preference to work with female SW or PA, yet had been allocated male practitioners? Is this a system failure? Is this trauma informed?

The social worker relationship is critical for young people to help them build trust and a positive working relationship. What are the rights of young people if they wish to change their social worker?

Response from CFS:

Whilst it does not happen very often, sometimes children and young people make requests for specific characteristics in their practitioners and/or make a request to change their practitioner. We should always do our best to seriously consider any requests made by children and young people about who they feel most comfortable being supported by. Sometimes, it may not be possible to meet a specific request, for example, for a male practitioner, due to the makeup of the team. There may also be occasions where someone may request a change of worker, for example, because they are unhappy with a message they have been given, where we may feel it would be in the child or young person's best interests to try and repair their relationship with their practitioner. As outlined above, if children and young people are unhappy with the response to their requests, or feel their voices are not being heard by their units, they are all entitled to independent advocacy support from the Children's Rights Service, who are very skilled at helping to explore and resolve any differences of opinions.

- 5) Care leavers noted that they had experienced periods of high turnover of social workers that supported them, and aside from having to update and develop new relationships with different social workers, young people noted that the approach of social workers was not

always consistent? What was the overarching approach of social workers - was this practice holistic, trauma informed and anti-racist? Are all social workers trauma informed - are all practitioners being trained in this approach?

Response from CFS:

Locally and nationally children and families consistently feedback that changes in practitioners is something they find most difficult about the Children's Social Care system. We know that strong relationships are key to achieving positive outcomes in our profession. Sadly, there are significant national challenges in recruitment and retention of social care staff. Across the senior leadership team, we are thinking about the structures of training, support and remuneration we need in order to attract and retain high quality staff, at all levels. The development of our Systemic, Trauma-Informed and Anti-Racist (STAR) practice model is a key component of this. As we embed this way of working / being, we hope to attract people to Hackney whose values align to our own. We have plans in 2024/5 to develop a Practice Academy that will support all practitioners to develop their STAR skills in order to achieve greater consistency of approach.

6) What is the average caseload for social workers? Is there an agreed standard that the service has? Does this differ for different aspects of the service - e.g. LAC, care leavers FIZ?

Response from CFS:

Within the Child in Need Service, newly qualified social workers usually begin working with around 6-8 children, rising to 12-14 children by the end of their first year.

Within the Access and Assessment Service, newly qualified social workers usually begin working with around 7-9 children, rising to 16-18 children by the end of their first year.

Most Child in Need and Access and Assessment social workers support around 16-18 children.

Within the Looked After Children Service, newly qualified social workers usually begin by working with around 12 children, rising to 16 or so by the end of their first year. Most looked after children social workers support 17 or 18 children. Practitioners in Leaving Care tend to work with between 20 and 25 young people.

7) What are waiting times like for LAC/ Care leavers for clinical support, CAMHS and SLT? Is there a joined up approach between CAMHS and CSC in ensuring that the needs of care leavers and looked after children are met locally?

Response from CFS:

The average wait time for allocation to the CFS Clinical Service is currently 15 weeks.

The average wait time for allocation to CAMHS Services in Hackney ranges from 15 to 35 weeks depending upon the service required.

Our CFS Clinical Service will link with CAMHS services local to a looked after child or care leavers home to support the identification of local support in respect of mental health and emotional wellbeing as well as providing direct support to children who are within an hours distance from Hackney.

As at December 2023, the average wait time for Speech and Language Therapy was 6.6 weeks. This is the time from referral received to assessment completed across the service from age 0-19 years (and up to 25 years for SEND).