

Managing risk



An assessment of the
impact of further cuts to
children's services in
Northamptonshire

7/31/2018

1. Introduction

“Managing Risk” describes the recent sharp deterioration in services provided to children in Northampton and sets out the challenging circumstances experienced by some of our most vulnerable families. It follows on from the earlier document, “Safeguarding our children” which was a response to the cuts in children’s services planned by Northamptonshire County Council in November 2017. That report was produced before the financial collapse of the council, and none of the people or organisations involved in its production could have envisaged the catastrophe that was to engulf the authority. This new document considers the situation as it has developed since November 2017, looks at the implications for the reorganisation now being consulted on and makes recommendations for future action to safeguard the well-being of the most vulnerable children in our community.

2. Staff losses

The most immediate impact of the cuts is in the loss of social workers. The County Council itself reports that of the 172 social workers hired last year, 82 had already left, confirming the experience of community groups of high turnover and lack of retention. Although the figures reported to county councillors were of new recruits, there has also been a serious loss of more experienced social workers. The establishment of 400 social worker posts is currently carrying a vacancy rate of 23 per cent. The vacancy rate, combined with the high level of referrals of children, results in high case loads and extreme pressure on individual social workers, many of whom are inexperienced.

3. Concerns about safeguarding

There is no sign that the pressure on families has reduced in the eight months since the “Safeguarding our Children” report was written. As a crude measure of need, in the year up to May, the Food Bank in Northampton East provided 1,256 food parcels to family units which included 1,009 children. A once a week family feeding programme conducted in a school in Northampton East caters for up to 120 adults and children per session.

The lack of staff poses a risk to safeguarding of children in Northamptonshire. Other risks to safeguarding include:

- A lack of continuity in personnel, input and decision-making from one meeting to the next. This is partly due to the high staff turnover, and also to the lack of staff to take and maintain notes and records of meetings. New staff don’t know the children whose cases they are handling, and may not have ever visited their homes.
- A lack of early intervention. Meetings are called to plan early help for children, but there is no help to offer. The lack of early help for families and children at risk has been a particular concern of Growing Together which is one of the eastern area’s most valuable community based services for children and families. The details of GT’s views are set out below, and their two cases are included under case studies.
- There’s a lack of services to which people can be referred to get help for children. This is the result not just of this round of cuts, but the accumulated impact of successive years of service reductions. So agencies that would normally expect to be able to signpost people onto services are providing signposts to nowhere.

- The high levels of re-referrals and re-assessments – higher in Northamptonshire than in any other of the 27 county areas – is both cause and symptom of the difficulties and results in inflated care costs.

There is much detail in the May assessment of Northamptonshire’s children’s services by Ofsted which concurs with the above, and with which we would agree. Where we disagree with Ofsted is in its statement that no children were found to be at immediate risk of harm. While Ofsted may not have seen children at risk, some of the people who have contributed to this report have seen children exposed to unacceptable and unnecessary risk of harm.

Northamptonshire County Council will be challenged to meet the requirements of the new statutory guidance “Working together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children” published by the Department for Education in July 2018.

4. Early Help

Early Help Assessments (EHA’s) are used to support families and prevent them from getting into crisis or requiring intervention for Children’s Social Care Services. Ideally professionals meet every 6-8 weeks with the family so that family progress or areas of concern can be monitored. Professionals can also draw on services such as Home Start, Sleep Solutions, Wellbeing Team and Citizen’s Advice so that the family’s needs can be met.

Unfortunately this isn’t always straight forward and families can get stuck on EHA’s for a long period of time or end up reaching crisis point and requiring Social Care support. This is in large part due to recent cutbacks and shortage of services. Due to lack of funding and resources many services such as Home Start or Sleep Solutions have long waiting lists or have reduced their services. For example professionals have recently been told that Sleep Solutions will only work with families that have children with additional needs. With cut backs to Children’s Centres families now struggle to attend support programmes such as parenting due to waiting lists or program not being available in their area creating a post code lottery.

Another struggle faced by those on an EHA is the lack of professional support. Many professional’s such as those in health have large caseloads and cannot always attend meetings which impacts the quality and regularity of meetings. Families often get stuck on an EHA as professionals cannot close it due to the family needing support but cannot escalate it for more intensive support due the family not meeting Social Care threshold. Due to the shortage in social workers many families have to reach crisis point before they receive support from Care Services. This results in many families with high level needs sitting on EHAs until something major happens in their lives and a child is put at significant risk or even harmed.

5. Case studies

This section has been deleted from the public version to protect identities.

5. Factors affecting children’s services moving forward:

6.1 Wider cuts in the community

The result of the cutbacks in statutory services means that more work is being undertaken in the voluntary sector. It is not safe for unqualified and untrained volunteers to take on risky childcare cases with no ability to refer them on to more appropriate services. There are also fewer

agencies that undertake assessments of risk. For example Cafcass no longer does this work, which means that volunteers in contact centres do not know the level of risk associated with their clients. The “Safeguarding our Children” report warned of the impact of wider cuts on children, and these remain a risk to children.

6.2.. Data sharing

Legislative changes in data sharing has implications for voluntary organisations that have to meet the costs of registering under the new arrangements. The changes may also have an impact on the ability to share data between organisations working with particular children or families.

6.3 Children not in schools

There is anecdotal evidence locally that the impact of academisation is resulting in children either being excluded from or refusing to go to school and being unable to access the support they need to get back into education. This has been noted nationally in the recent Education Select Committee report. In addition, it appears there is less central support for or monitoring of children who are being home-schooled.

Children not in school are exposed to a range of risks, and, as set out below, there are virtually no youth services in place which they might be able to access.

6.4. Lack of youth services

Services for young people have been decimated in Northamptonshire at a pace faster and a scale larger than the national picture. Our Youth Service was deleted in 2006; four teams in Northampton and four teams in Wellingborough / East Northants; Corby; Kettering; Daventry and South Northants alongside a specialist counselling and emotional behaviourist team. The services lost to young people were universal open access community-based information education and community citizenship; detached and outreach education on the streets with a team specialised in tackling hot spot areas. Outdoor education and residential experiences were woven into each area's offer, and young people's voices were heard in providing an understanding of community dynamics.

The impact of the loss of the youth service on young people has been profound. Voluntary organisations have seen outcomes for young people deteriorate greatly. Previously, we saw young people with dysfunctional families and there were services and support which enabled them to complete education, find work and move forward with their relationships. Now these young people are out of education, getting criminal records, showing dependency on substances and with high levels of unprotected promiscuity.

Young people report feeling increasingly unsafe outside of home and school and feel that the level of violence is increasing. The majority of young people accessing our youth groups report having carried a knife or know someone who has, and have been involved in an incident involving a knife / or know someone who has.

We are experiencing increasing numbers of young people excluded from mainstream schools, on part-time timetables, in-between education placements with no school work provided, and home schooled without monitoring on education provided.

The shift of youth services to the voluntary sector has implications for safeguarding. In Northampton, we have well meaning volunteers attempting to support young people through opening community centres without a strong understanding of safeguarding or safe procedures to deal with the issues the young people face. There are some organisations delivering good support but this is in isolation, without a clear strategy or curriculum. Young people's voices are not strategically heard from the voluntary sector; there is not a central accountable service to identify needs and understand outcomes for young people. There is a professional loss also. We no longer have a career progression route for people to work in Youth and Community Development. This means that if statutory funding is redirected to Youth and Community Work there will be a challenge to find the skills required for this. A generation of organisational knowledge has been lost and the structures for these services will need to be rebuilt.

A recent community meeting in St Davids highlighted the lack of provision for young people at a time when County Lines are getting young people who are out of school involved in the drug trade and also falling victim to knife crime.

6.4 Children with disabilities

Earlier this year Northamptonshire County Council proposed major changes to the respite care service for children with disabilities. A series of new contracts were due to start in August 2018. However, it is not clear what has happened to the contracts, and the group would welcome an update.

7. Service reorganisation

The group is concerned about the impact of continuing and further change and reorganisation of the services:

- 7.1 Current restructuring. There are concerns about the current changes to provide three locality-based services in Northampton and four more across the county. The service for Northampton East is to be based in Moulton Park, which is not accessible. The group is concerned that there are no assurances that the funding for these seven new localised hubs will be provided over the longer term, or that the staffing will be in place to make them all viable.
- 7.2 Local government reorganisation in Northamptonshire. The group is unaware of how children's services in the county will be organised in the reconfiguration of local government. There have been reports that the service might be outsourced on a single-county wide basis. The group is also concerned that there are particularly acute problems of re-referrals and repeat assessments in Northampton, and that the new organisational structure must be able to deal with the town's complex child care needs. The assessment of the cost/savings possible through the reorganisation do not take into account the cost and organisational pressures on associated services such as health and police. Early clarification of the proposals for children's services and consultation on those proposals is essential.

Overall, the group is concerned more with the quality of the services than the structure of their delivery, and would especially want reassurances that:

- Reorganisation will not mean reduction of services available on the ground for children and families.

- Reorganisation will not mean a retreat from public access and accountability for children and families.

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8 Future actions

- 8.1 Protection against further cuts. At the time the group met to prepare this paper, there were informal reports of further cuts in children's services due to the continuing financial crisis at Northamptonshire County Council, including the difficulties in achieving some of the previously proposed savings. We were especially concerned about the profound impact of mid-year spending reductions. In the few weeks it has taken to produce this report, these fears have been borne out, with the issue of a second section 114 notice and warnings that children's services will bear the brunt of £60- £70 million cuts. Voluntary organisations need detailed information and consultation to be able to work out how to manage an increasingly difficult situation.
- 8.2 Reorganisation Children's services potentially face two reorganisations in a short space of time. It's not clear that the funding is there for existing services, let alone for repeated reorganisations.
- 8.3 Risk management. There is a particular need for tracking of children at risk. The level of re-referrals and re-assessments is a sign of the lack of tracking of children.
- 8.4 Approach to government over funding. Ultimately the funding for children's services is insufficient to provide a safe service, and Northamptonshire County Council needs to make this clear, along with the risks to children of the continuing shortage of funds.

July 2018

November 24th 2017

Managing risk



A response to the proposed cuts in children's services in Northamptonshire.

7/31/2018

Proposed cuts in Northamptonshire's Children's Services

Northamptonshire children are experiencing more hardship than children in almost any other county area in the country.

A county council study last month of the children in social services care in Northamptonshire found that :

- Rates of referrals and re-referrals (within 12 months) to Children's Social Care Services are the highest of all 27 county areas.
- The rate of Children in Need is the fifth highest.
- Rate of Children subject to a Child Protection Plan is the second highest.
- The rate of Children Looked After is the seventh highest.

This is the context in which Northamptonshire County Council is proposing to make cuts of £2.879 million in children's services, and of £4.167 million in wider services that also affect children. These come against previous cuts totalling up to 30 per cent in spending on children's services in Northamptonshire.

This paper looks at those cuts and how they will affect children. It draws on the experience of people working in or with statutory and voluntary services, and those active in the community.

We appreciate that Northamptonshire County Council has been placed in an extremely difficult position by central Government policy and now faces impossible decisions that will have disastrous effects on local people and especially on children. However, the county council was elected by local people, and we would like our council to have the courage to spell out to central government exactly what these cuts will mean for the community. They will have consequences for children, for families, for the well-being of children and their success in school, their safety at home, and their life chances as they grow into adulthood. They will be felt most profoundly by the most vulnerable children in our community who are the most dependent on the Council, and all of our organisations for support.

If we do not provide for our children and young people now, our failure will come back to haunt us in years to come, indeed we are already seeing some consequences now. So we say to the County Council, we understand your position, but we are not prepared to stand up and say it is alright to make these cuts.

Of the proposals set out in the Cabinet papers, we make the following points:

1. Need for complete transparency on the scale of the cuts affecting children

There was a lack of information and no clarity about the cuts affecting children's services. These were included under a number of different headings, and have been extracted and collated in the tables below. They show that of the £9.6 million cuts now being considered by Northamptonshire County Council, nearly a third are to be made in services directly affecting children, and a half are in services that also have consequences for children. The cabinet papers make clear that some of these cuts are aspirations, as they are unlikely to be capable of being implemented which raises serious questions for a council already near to bankruptcy.

Table A. Cuts directly affecting children's services

Item	Saving
Management of Tiffield site – return to its owner – note that there is a warning in the council papers that this may not be possible due to legal challenge	£235,000
Children's services provision and location review and contractual reductions including cuts to children's centres in Corby	£692,000
Increase in targeted in-house foster carer recruitment. Increasing take-up locally instead of using agencies	£150,000
Review of non-statutory children's services	£500,000
Cut international social worker recruitment – an agency has been recruiting social workers in South Africa to reduce reliance on agency staff	£310,000
Converting agency staff to permanent staff – in the past year this was offered to 70 staff and 40 accepted	£992,000
Total direct cuts in children's services	£2,879,000

B Cuts indirectly affecting children's services

Item	Saving
Cuts in phone access	£75,000
Reduction in office opening	£66,000
First point of contact remodelling to cut front line staffing	£500,000
Streamlining of commissioning work to reduce staffing	£250,000
Negotiations with health colleagues to reduce NCC funding for health elements of jointly provided care packages	£250,000
Library closures: Will potentially affect up to 19 out of the 21 Libraries designated as children's centres. Option 1 - would affect up to 13 children's centres Option 2 - would affect up to 13 children's centres Option 3 - would affect up to 19 children's centres	£290,000 £619,000 £1,226 million
Cuts to Northamptonshire Community Foundation – funds eg supplementary schools	£1.8 million
Total indirect cuts	£4.167 million

C. Cuts in services that will have knock on impact on children

Removal of subsidies for bus services. It is acknowledged this would affect school transport, although it is not clear how	£1.054 million
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In addition there is also a review taking place of the short break service which is feared could lead to the closure of one of the three centres in the county. It is not clear whether savings resulting from this are included in the above figures, or whether there are extra, hidden savings being considered by the Council.

We feel it is important that the cuts to children's services are fully and clearly set out, with impact assessments, and are fully consulted on with parents, carers and those working with children. In addition the Council needs to have some means of measuring the impact of these cuts on children, should they press ahead with the proposals.

2. Cuts in spending on social workers

The County Council has the legal responsibility for child protection. The Council cannot pass this off to local voluntary organisations who are then placed in a very difficult position in deciding whether to accept referrals of people whose needs they are not equipped to deal with.

We are greatly concerned about the position of social workers. Many of us work with families who are supposed to have the support of social workers. However, these families usually do not have enough contact with their social worker, or their designated social worker is frequently changed. The impact on the families' and children's well-being is profound. We lack confidence in the ability of the council to recruit extra social workers, especially when it is making cuts which leave social workers over-stretched and both children and social workers at risk. There is a need for more training for social workers, and any strategy for recruiting social workers should ensure they have the environmental and locality knowledge required. The shortage of social workers will also have an impact on the county council's ability to recruit more foster parents in-county – one of its proposed savings measures. Foster carers need to have support from social worker and, without that, retention may be even more difficult than recruitment.

With cuts in statutory social services, the responsibility for supporting at risk families is already being shifted in an unplanned way to the voluntary sector, not just to the large national voluntary organisations that often contract with local authorities and employ qualified and supervised staff, but also to the small local groups that often rely on unpaid volunteers. Some of this is being done informally, some appears to involve more formal planning: one of our organisations was visited by social services to scope out its services for referral purposes. Some of our smaller, local voluntary organisations provide substantial training for volunteers, some of whom are professionally qualified people, but many rely on the goodwill of local people. Whatever the skills of volunteers, it is not fair or reasonable to expect them to take on complex problems that require the appropriate resource, skills and accountability structures. It is just not fair or safe to leave life and death assessments on the shoulders of people or small organisations who should not be expected to carry that anxiety or risk, however willing they feel they should be. It is also not appropriate for people with profound and complex needs, who may be a risk to themselves or their children, to be reliant on untrained, inexperienced and unsupervised volunteers, however compassionate. It feels increasingly that we cannot be certain that the appropriate, skilled support will be there for children from families with the most serious problems.

3. Cuts to children's centres

We are strongly opposed to cuts to libraries forcing the closure of children's centres, and from past experience fear that it hides an overall strategy to close down children's centres. The aim of having a universal service for children and families was important in providing an environment in which all families, including those at risk, could get support and learn from each other. It was an important preventive measure. It was not ideal when the children's centres were closed and services moved into libraries. The loss of them completely would be a retrograde step, with long-term consequences

for the upbringing of children and in all probability short-term consequences of increase in serious family problems resulting in more referrals to hard-pressed social workers.

4. Cuts in phones and point of contact to services

Children and families at risk can be hard to engage with and can have real difficulty in making contact with services. For most of them, the first point of contact will be the only point of contact, and if they are rebuffed, or cannot gain access, they are likely to turn away. They are unlikely, especially very young children, to be able to make contact online. The libraries provide computer access for some excluded people, but these are facing cutbacks. So although cuts to phone services and points of contact may seem minor, they have major consequences for some sections of the community. They make essential council services even more remote and increase the likelihood of escalating problems requiring more expensive follow up further down the line.

5. The Community Foundation and councillor empowerment funds

These provide financial support for some of the small-scale interventions that support the most vulnerable families, especially during out of school hours and holidays. Many small, local voluntary organisations rely heavily on small grants from the Community Foundation, and these can mean the difference between survival and closure. Reductions are a false economy.

6. Consequences for food poverty

One of our organisations runs a food bank, now under increased pressure due to the closure of the Trussell Trust food bank in Northampton. In the past week the food bank run jointly by Emmanuel Church, Storehouse Church, St Peters. St Albans and Broadmead Baptist Church provided support to 150 people from 35 families, some of whom walked across town to get there. Of the cuts proposed by the County Council, five will have a serious, albeit indirect, impact on food poverty in the community:

- Phone access for people needing referrals
- Reduction in office opening hours for people needing referrals
- Proposed changes to working with partners in health services
- Cuts to bus services as people have to travel further to get to the food bank. In addition any reductions in bus services could leave children unable to get to school where some get their only substantial meal of the day.
- Community foundation cuts

Food is a big issue in the community. Up to half the children in the 15 schools in the Emmanuel parish receive free school meals. For some, school will be the only place where they are properly fed. There is evidence of parents going without food so that their children can be fed from the food bank. There is real concern about lack of food during school holidays.

7. Other service cuts

The cuts to health service spending are well-documented. Some of the County Council proposals will place extra pressure on the NHS to pick up budget shortfalls to keep services going. Less well documented is the impact of cuts in police services to provide early intervention in communities, prevent crime and deal with domestic abuse which is a very significant problem in Northampton. There are already signs that the social security changes, including universal credit, are causing serious financial hardship and evictions around the country and there is no reason to suppose that Northamptonshire is exempt from these pressures. These changes are piling pressures on the

children in already struggling families. This can only increase the probability of a continued rise in child protection referrals and a growth in the number of children needing to be looked after by the council.

Urgent steps are needed to disrupt this downward spiral and to strengthen family support, which in the long run reduces demand for more costly council services.

Moving forward

This paper represents the views of the individuals and organisations set out below, and draws from our knowledge of the local community and our experience of working in the community, especially with children. Based on that, our judgement is that the spending cuts proposed would have a damaging impact on the most vulnerable children in Northamptonshire and could put some at real risk of harm. This especially true in the context of several years of cuts in funding and increase in demand. If county councillors feel they have no alternative but to make the cuts, then we call on you to publish an honest risk assessment and let the community know how serious that this will be, and that in your view it is not the right way forward for the county or its people. If central government policy is preventing local councils from protecting their communities, then local councillors, elected by the people and accountable to them, should not cover up. We ask that the County Council does not proceed with these cuts but, if it must, then at the very least it should make clear to the people of this county and the government of this country that it cannot manage within its budget without putting children at risk.

Contributors to this paper:

Growing Together - Kathryn White, Danielle Reeves, Lewis Bevan

Emmanuel Church - Haydon Spenceley, Paul Foster

Emmanuel Foodbank - Lorraine Bewley-Tippler

Homestart Northampton - Bernie Barnes

Northamptonshire Association of Youth Clubs - Zoe Robinson

People Need People - David Jones (retired social worker and former independent chair of a local safeguarding children board outside Northamptonshire)

Springs Family Centre – Clive Ireson

Tracy Barford - local resident involved in children's and youth work

Brian Burnett - former chair of a children's centre, trustee of Spring Charity and volunteer with Healthwatch

Genna Whitlock – Free2Talk

Cllr Janice Duffy – Northampton Borough Councillor for Talavera

Sally Keeble – former MP for Northampton North

Dawn Wright - Former director of Lowdown youth club, now working in mental healthcare

Jo Spenceley, Healthwatch Northamptonshire staff member, also attended the meeting