Report on budget pressures: Barking & Dagenham

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Terms of reference

Barking and Dagenham like most authorities across England is having to make considerable savings across the council after substantial cuts following the spending review. The challenge continues to be - do more with less. Following an assignment at a partner authority, Thurrock Borough Council, who have undergone a similar exercise, I was asked to provide some consultancy in B&D to look at areas of over spend and savings proposals. Specific savings of £2M were identified in Thurrock, with a challenge to achieve a further million across the service as well as addressing overspends on agency costs and legal spends. The areas that savings were achieved were £400K in staffing by deleting a number of management posts and reducing other posts across the service but not front line social work posts. Fortuitously, accommodation moves were in hand and savings were made across the running costs of £300K, further savings were identified by decommissioning some services as well as better commissioning of placements, contact and transport.

A number of consultants have already been brought into the service in B&D to address budget overspends and to add capacity to identify and action savings, including the LGA and ISOS. To avoid duplication I have been clear that my time limited role was to review actions being taken across children’s social care. To ensure that these are the areas to focus upon and the right actions to take to avoid costs and/or reduce demand and if there are any additional activities that could be taken to reduce spend further. I have identified the likely impact on practice and any risks arising from this. I have been particularly asked to work on the overspend on legal services and No Recourse to Public Funds.

Context

When setting the context for this paper there has to be a mention of the significant changes to the boroughs demographics in the past few years. Barking and Dagenham has the fastest growing under 18 populations in the country, directly related to cheaper housing costs and movement of cases into the borough through welfare changes and families not being able to afford to live in other London Boroughs. There has also been a relative increase in poverty, health figures indicate for multiple deprivation Barking and Dagenham is the 7th most deprived in the country. In the 0-17 population there has been a 30% increase in 10 years and in the 0-4 population, an increase of 54%. Figures indicate that this can be a rise in any month of between 150-250 children. The impact of this dramatic rise on all universal services is significant, i.e., school places, GP practices, but this has also negatively impacted on the ability to manage demand through children’s social care. The figures show that referrals from other boroughs of open cases that have transferred in (children in need and child protection) has also seen a significant rise. There has been a 74% increase in open children’s social care cases, which is an 89% rise in 5 years.

There has been recognition of this growth reflected in the CSC budget with an increase of £9.8 M in the budget from 2008/9, however this is offset by efficiency savings being made from the whole children’s services budget of £14.4 million. Last year’s CSC overspend was bought in on line by offsetting against savings across the rest of children’s services. Actual pressures were £5.77 which were reduced to £4.65 through management action/reserves & including £1.5 DSG pull down which is not available going forward. The main areas are demographic pressures on staffing including significant spend on agency, legal costs including use of counsel and associated court costs, no
recourse to public funds (NRPF) and S17 (preventing children coming into care), transport and placement costs.

Against CIFA benchmarking it shows B&D to be 5th best value VFM comparator (expenditure/performance). It is difficult to evaluate the significance of this data, as you are often not comparing like for like services. The OFSTED inspection in July 2014 correctly analysed pressure of increasing need alongside a growing population but identified that there was not a financial plan to address this. It was acknowledged that the service was ‘working beyond capacity’.

**No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)**

This is a growing issue in a number of local authority areas where families do not have access to public funds ie housing or welfare benefits and claim that they are destitute. Children’s services have a duty under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 to provide support to children and families which are deemed destitute, while their claims for asylum or leave to remain in the country are being considered by the Home Office. This is recognised as a growing issue here in B&D and as demand rises, the impact on the budget is steadily increasing. This area of work is also open to considerable scrutiny and legal challenge through Judicial Review. In effect Children’s Social Care provide financial support for the children (and the adults) and provide housing while their claims are progressed and their legal status decided. However, there have been some recent decisions made by the Home Office (and subsequently challenged) where they give leave to remain but no recourse to public funds – meaning ongoing financial support has to continue to be provided by children’s services on an ongoing basis or until the parent finds employment. This is partially explained by changes in Government policy and immigration, eligibility for families able to claim benefit and also on the crack down on illegal working. Many families have worked illegally for many years but have now been forced to claim as they are no longer able to work or they face being removed from the country. This issue is highly political and very much under the radar. Local authorities are having to pick up these families instead of the welfare benefits system or NASS. Many families will have substantial links with their local authority area and have lived there for many years and will have children who attend school there, others may be newly arrived into the country or authority area.

This is not just a budget pressure for B&D but in London and larger urban areas. Comparable authorities with a similar demographic have experienced a parallel rise in numbers of families seeking NRPF. In a recently published report commissioned by the ADCS looking at Safeguarding Pressures – Phase 4, the increasing budget pressures from NRPF was reported upon and comparable information provided. Twenty seven authorities responded and altogether they reported spend of £17.5M on families with NRPF in 2013/14. Of these 19 also provided information on the number of families supported. These 19 authorities spend £10.4 M on 1,119 families (an average spend of £9,318 per family) although the amount spent per family varied significantly. It is not clear whether this cost included accommodation and clearly it was an average across Local authorities, so would have reflected those high cost areas as well as areas where costs are low. In B&D it is estimated that the average spend has been around £16K. Five out of the 19 authorities were funding over 100 families, four of these were in London and another a ‘core’ city. Four out of five spent over £1M in 2013/14 on NRPF. Across the 19 authorities who responded their spend increased by £4.2M between 2012/13 to 2013/14. One London Borough spent in excess of £3M on NRPF, another London Borough’s expenditure had risen from £1.75 M in 2012/13 to £5.2M last year.

The impact on this budget in B&D has been considerable - in 2012/13 the budget was £382,500, the outturn - £1,207 M; in 2013/14 the budget was £393,800, the outturn - £1,238,100, an increase of over £2M over the last two years. The pressure of £1.7 M (2013/14) is on housing costs. In
November 2014 there are 93 families of which 139 children which is costing £1,532,000. As of 24.11.14 there are 102 children - there has been a reduction through rigorous assessment and moving on of a number of families. This is a further rise of £300K which is related to a rise in subsistence costs due to JR decision/judgement and rates of payments to families which is under constant challenge through the courts / case law. There is also additional pressure on the S17 budget to pay for families who are intentionally homeless and providing accommodation costs (usually first month’s rent and deposit).

There has already been a great deal of work undertaken to address the issues of growing number of families subject to NRPF in B&D and a working group has been set up chaired by the Divisional Director to progress actions. A number of the areas outlined below are already identified and actions being progressed. There is a dedicated NRPF team made up of a part time deputy team manager and three workers, two of whom are social workers. The expectations are that all presenting families have an assessment to ascertain whether a child is in need (S17) and an assessment to ascertain whether the case is eligible for support because the family have no recourse to public funds (Human Rights assessment). The team have to have an extensive level of knowledge to understand the complex and changing immigration landscape and legal support to challenge the process when necessary.

The service has identified a number of areas that need further development and this includes the ability to rigorously assess families including families financial circumstances and investigate fraudulent cases. The team need to be able to rigorously challenge legal/immigration status and be able to resist the challenge of local solicitors to Judicially Review the decisions made by the department. This includes the need to be able to scrutinise families financial circumstances more fully. Often Social workers are not necessarily the best people to undertake this role. Social workers are needed though to undertake the s17 assessment but are often not the right ones to make limiting financial decisions. There is a need for the rigour of a fraud officer to interrogate bank balances and be clear with families what is required and without cooperation, assistance will be removed.

The NRPF team have purchased a package called Connect which allows them to track all applications to the Home Office and if families have claimed/lived elsewhere. They are also part of a working group with other Local Authorities to model the growing numbers /costs etc. A number of authorities have assistance from the Home Office (Hackney /Thurrock) to support their interview process and add more rigour to assessing families. It is also essential to have a rigorous process involving Home Office and challenge through fraud investigations. The deterrent effect of work on fraud is not to be underestimated, as families and solicitors will move onto boroughs that they perceive are not robust in these areas. B&D are exploring the option of having a part funded or shared fraud officer with housing department or using a joint post with the Home Office to undertake this role of investigating families circumstances.

The service is aware of the impact of delay through the Home office and has met with the Home Office representative to discuss and progress this matter. There is a need to keep cases constantly under review to see whether any should have been progressed by the Home Office appeals progressed. There is an issue with the length of wait for decisions from Home Office — expected within 6 weeks — none had met the timescale of the 102 children currently in B&D. Further delay also means that the council pays for families for longer. There is a need for a robust process to hold Home Office to account. There needs to be a robust legal challenge when not responded to within required timescale. The delay in getting decisions on some cases in B&D dates back to 2009 and this is a real drain on resources. This would be another plus with having a Home Office post as they could
progress chase these cases on behalf of the borough. Recent decisions by Home Office has meant 20
cases were given leave to remain but still no recourse – this outcome has to be challenge as this
means that children’s social care have to continue to provide ongoing assistance. The argument also
being put is that subsistence rates should be increased as lower allowance/ temporary
accommodation is given on basis that this is short term solution during an assessment process and
is not permanent. This judgement or legal challenge may further increase the spend. This is being
challenged both in B&D and in other London Boroughs.

Therefore there is a need for robust legal challenge to the Home Office on timescale. Reportedly
that this does not happen with in house provision which has not been as rigorous as is needed in
these circumstances. Legal response to this is to say that they are not getting instruction from the
teams in timescale needed. B&D have considered outsourcing the legal work. The benefits of
outsourcing would be that an external team could give greater ‘push back’ to local solicitors, who
are often aggressive and adversarial. An outside firm could adopt a similar approach as they were
not hampered by council policy and complaints process. An external firm could also challenge the
Secretary of State and Home Office – though in reality there was no reason that inhouse solicitors
could do this, but had not done so. The decisions on giving leave to remain and NRPF also needed
challenging. There has been learning undertaken by managers to understand how other London
Boroughs have responded to NRPF which has fed back to the working group and actions are being
progressed.

The service are working with housing to look at cheaper options for providing housing. From
September 2014 – 3 preferred providers have been identified which has driven costs down from £80
-£120 a night to £35/£40. When family have no formal links with B&D accommodation is
considered out of borough –Kent, Clacton and Blackburn have been recently used. The team is
working with the housing department to consider providing Foyer type provision – a paper is going
to committee in January to look at developing this. This would provide emergency type
accommodation, to keep costs down and prevent use of B&B. This could also impact on families
coming forward if they know they will not remain in borough or will not be provided with privately
rented accommodation.

Work needs to be undertaken in communities to raise awareness of requirements and challenge
process but this action may also find more families requiring support, as many are being supported
by churches. It is also important to develop arrangements with local solicitors around expectations
and challenge.

The recommendations below are a mixture of cost avoidance and savings but will require some
investment to achieve or redirection of current budgets. Most of these areas have already been
identified and are being progressed.

Recommendations and actions already in place:

- Continue with existing governance arrangements to progress actions.
- Review skill mix within team – do you need SWs or more people with right skills, consider
  need for fraud officer /links with housing – in hand
- Link with Home office (part time post - funding ?) to undertake joint interviews and provide
  investigative capacity – in hand
- Establish more effective finance system to track spend – in hand
- Links with housing to review provision/ access to cheaper commissioned and emergency
  housing – set up Foyer type project – in hand
• Consider out sourcing legal advice to private legal firm to provide challenge to Home Office and more robust response to JR applications - in hand
• Review and update NRPF policy – action progressing
• Provide information and advice to communities about NRPF – in early stages of development but recognised as an action
• Review all cases regularly / sufficient staff – in early stages of development – needs capacity

Legal

Legal support was historically outsourced in B&D and brought back in house in 2008. It is reported that not enough resource was committed to children’ services at that point of returning the service back in house. Demand has been relatively steady at 70 + care proceedings a year though there has been a recent hump of over 100 cases but this has now reduced back down to previous levels. However, recent new legislation has required that care proceedings are concluded in less than 26 weeks. This has had a greater impact on staff and expectations on social workers. Work is being undertaken on the legal budget to clarify what is being costed against this budget line by a dedicated interim finance manager. It would appear that budget covers not just legal (in-house solicitors and external counsel) and court costs but use of experts/ independent assessments which are commissioned as a part of the proceedings. Currently legal costs are predicted to overspend by £839K. It is currently difficult to differentiate the budget and what its being spent on – there is a need for separate cost codes to differentiate budget lines and track spend accurately. Historical data shows that in 2011/12 legal costs were £557, 300, number of cases 110; 2012/13 - costs were £613, 700 number of cases 112; 2013/14 costs were £1,112,700 number of cases 103. Independent experts also appear to be costed to this budget. Some of the rise in costs are explainable by increasing numbers of cases from abroad so that there is additional expenditure on interpreter costs including getting legal bundles translated and independent assessments commissioned abroad.

The legal recharge to Children’s Services is £730K (increase of £69K from previous year of £661K – this is the only increase this year across all recharges to children’s services) There appears lack of clarity about what costs this covers ie how many inhouse solicitors does this pay for and does this include cost for NRPF legal advice? There are currently six employed solicitors including a dedicated advocate. There is discussion about increasing the number of advocates to reduce use of external counsel. Use of external counsel instead of in-house was reportedly driven by service until recently. This issue has now been addressed. However, capacity with the in house advocate had reduced due to maternity leave and sickness. External counsel costs approx. £1K a day.

Required action to reduce expenditure, is a need to maximise use of solicitors on short hearings and in house counsel in other cases. Only use external counsel on longer hearings, ie all in house solicitors manage one day hearings, inhouse 2/3 day hearings, anything above outsourced to external counsel. Look at commissioning through cheaper chambers but ensure quality not compromised.

There are a number of practice issues that are impacting adversely on the current budget position. It is reported by legal that compliance to court direction timescales are poor, his includes on occasions by legal themselves, resulting in wasted costs orders, which is an avoidable cost to the council. This also causes reputational damage to the council as there are then issues of confidence in the authority by local solicitors and courts and causes delay for children. Both the legal department and senior managers are working with courts to address this. However, an improvement in court compliance has been noted following the appointment of a new interim court progression manager.
and a doubling, from 3 to 6 of Team Managers to add capacity to the care management teams. The pre existing case tracker was not effective. The newly developed tracker has helped with improvement in court compliance. In the pilot boroughs where this post was developed initially, this post was crucial to keep SWs to the 26 week timescale and help/support SWs in compiling evidence and writing statements. This is a SW responsibility rather than the responsibility of the legal department. If solicitors are having to rewrite/ rework cases this is not a good use of their time. It is reported by legal that evidence from SWs is poor, with a lack of analysis. Managers are not quality assuring statements prior to submission. It is suggested that the interim court progression manager speaks to colleagues in other boroughs about their case tracking process and tracking meetings. I also understand until recently there was not a final Legal Planning Meeting (LPM) to confirm the care plan and scrutinise evidence for court. This has now been addressed.

The Threshold panel model (from Thurrock) has now been initiated in B&D, this should cut down need for LPMs to be initiated. This model ensures that cases are scrutinised at a senior level and risk is shared, where children need to be accommodated and agree those that need to progress to Care proceedings. It should also indicate how many cases progress from Police Powers (raised by OFSTED as an issue) and ensure only those children who need to are taken into care and progress into legal proceedings – do so.

Further consider use of legal in other meetings and reduce use/number of LPM, so that solicitors can manage more cases. Consider whether legal attendance is necessary or could be reduced ie attendance at LSCB or level/extent/attendance of legal/advice on adoption to Adoption Decision Maker.

The service has put in place measures that have already reduced significantly the use of external assessments including through Social workers doing more assessments. Further consideration should be given to the use of framework orders and preferred providers to reduce costs. Reduce use of external experts by internal staff undertaking assessments. If necessary commission staff to undertake work on contractual basis rather than independent assessments through agency staff, for example SGO and connected persons assessments. Explore sharing arrangements with other authorities for these ie community based assessment model (Thurrock)

Legal advice on NRPF – to reduce reliance and impact of likely JR; see recommendations above.

Recommendations and actions already in place:

- Tracking of cases- ensuring cases meet timelines and plans/statements submitted - tracking of cases in place
- Address quality assurance of court statements and evidence by managers – guidance and expectations set
- Effective budget management and specific codes for counsel/court costs etc so that scrutiny of spend possible – work underway
- Independent assessments- clarify expenditure, bring more in house including community assessments/working with other boroughs – CPM to visit other boroughs.
- Introduce SLA for use of external counsel and internal staff for court hearings
- Ensure that all staff have up to date training in use of PLO and pre proceedings
- Use of legal when not necessary – reduction in LPMs
- LSCB to pay for legal advice if legal required to attend

Financial management
I understand that a new financial efficiency programme is in hand incorporating a recently implemented ORACLE programme. I was not able to establish whether there was sufficient financial support for managing budgets and how this was implemented across children’s social care. I was led to believe that junior managers in children’s social care do not understand how to manage their budgets and whether they had sufficient admin to support this. How well are managers supported to understand and provide good financial planning and monitoring? Awareness of austerity, are there ideas coming out of staff briefings about ways to save money? Additional support has been bought in to help break down and make sense of budgets including putting in place appropriate budget lines/cost codes and support from the LGA.

As well as the Corporate Directors’ weekly meetings, the Divisional Director has put in place weekly spend review meetings and monthly budget meetings with senior CSC managers to holds them to account for their spend and over spend and any identified savings. Need to close down old finance system – have confidence in budget reporting. Need more detailed budget report with more cost centres that people use and accurately record. Richard Tyler has been brought in to add additional capacity and he is working to put in place sufficient budget lines and additional codes to enable the budget to be properly managed. He is also working on a zero base budgeting exercise to ensure that budgets are built up and understood by managers.

Recommendations/ actions in place:

- Cost codes easily understood by managers and reflect expenditure – in hand
- Monthly budget meetings with managers and finance - in place
- Zero base budget exercise - RT working on this

Placements – The area of greatest spend in all children’s services is the placement costs for children and young people who are in the care of the Local Authority. There are a series of new expectations for Local Authorities including implementation of the LAPSO Act last year (new regulations regarding Local Authorities picking up the full cost for remand beds and extra responsibilities for 17 year olds becoming LAC). This year has also seen the introduction of Staying put guidance and expectations, with a small grant budget given to implement this, which most councils are clear will not cover the additional costs and expectations. In most authorities there is also an increasing cost for Special Guardianship Orders/Residence Orders, when children are placed within extended family following care proceedings. The main ways to address spend on placements is to have in place robust and tight gatekeeping of children coming into care (reduce demand), moving children and young people into less intensive and costly placements ie in house carers from IFA or from residential into semi-independent accommodation (address placement mix). The commissioning and procurement of placement by reducing placement costs is another key area (reduce costs of placements).

Currently the demographic growth of the general child population in B&D and the rise in Child protection numbers has not yet been reflected in more children coming into care. CIFA benchmarking has not identified B&D as being an outlier in costs or performance data in numbers. However the recent rise in numbers of children subject of child protection plans may convert into greater numbers coming into care in the longer term. The increasing complexity of cases, rising awareness of CSE and need to take action to place children away from the borough may impact further on numbers of children coming into the care system. Use of residential care is low against national and statistical neighbours.

Current projected spend on placements in Oct 2014 £4.377M, which is an overspend by £2.225M. LGA paper reports that this is offset by £1.750 (adoption grant £300 & £1.4 m DSG and placement
team staffing) The education element for placements has seen £1.4M move from the DSG to support these placements. It is also recognised that funding from health for expensive residential placements (often disabled children and young people) has not been forth coming. There is an expectation that there will be income generation from health of £250K. I am not sure how realistic or achievable this is in the current economic climate. Recent action by the fostering service to increase the number of inhouse foster carers has had a positive impact on the number of in house carers, reducing costs by approx. £30K per month.

The threshold panel for accommodation and care proceedings has been recently been introduced which will ensure consistent thresholds of children coming into the system including addressing children being accommodated through Police Protection and ensuring appropriate cases moving into care proceedings. This will also reduce need for LPMs. The service is good at on exits to the care system, either returning children to their own families or considering extended family. There needs to be further focussed work on numbers due to leave care, including children with disabilities and timely transfer into adults services. There should also be consideration of all 16 plus year olds in residential and what plans there are to move them into more semi-independent provision. The service has started to review all high cost placements (top 20 initially, especially if there are any younger children under 13 in residential care and consider plans for alternative accommodation and timescales to achieve this and predict this into the budget. Introduction of LAC surgeries to address care plans and monitor drift for children looked after could be introduced, as well as managing the spend on placements.

I am not aware of the arrangements to commission and procure placements. Clearly there is considerable room for savings if spot purchasing placements occurs rather than entering into framework orders, working with other LAs to tender ie semi-independent provision etc.

Recommendations and actions already in place:

- Tight gatekeeping of all children and young people becoming accommodated including through care proceedings with threshold panel- in place.
- Review top 20 most costly placements, especially focusing on all 16+ in residential placements and consider move on plans to semi independent accommodation if appropriate – in place 16+ a strong area of work.
- Review commissioning arrangements and explore shared arrangements with other LAs.

Transport – I note the actions and proposed savings around SEN transport. There is considerable risk involved with offering this up – this saving is likely to be taken but political implications and fall out from families will probably be considerable.

Staffing/Agency – National data obtained from the ADCS Safeguarding pressures document on recruitment and retention indicates an average vacancy rate of frontline social workers of 14% with a range of 0-50% with the highest being in London, Eastern region and West Midlands. Many of these posts are covered by agency staff. Across the authorities that took part, the average agency rates are 12% with again a range of 0-51%. The average caseloads are 17 CIN cases per FTE SW, with a range of 6-36. The current vacancy rate is 55% in B&D with a caseload of approx. 22 (though recent discussions have indicated a much higher rate with 22 being the minimum with much higher caseloads in some care management teams).

The over spend on staffing in B&D is currently reported at £1.074 and mainly within the Assessment & Care Management teams. Teams are also reported to be over establishment so these costs are reflected as well as cost of agency staff. Additional management capacity at first line management
has been added as the ratio of SWs to managers was too high, as well as additional staff to manage growing demand. A recognised structure with establishment charts has only recently been agreed and put in place. This should ensure post numbers that managers should adhere to, so that budgets and staffing can be managed appropriately. It appears these structures and discipline were not in place before. This should give the opportunity to hold to account and identify where overspends occur.

There are actions in place to reduce the number of agency staff but this is a medium / long strategy. A dedicated recruitment officer is in place who is looking at a number of strategies to recruit permanent staff. This includes offering key worker housing, encouraging staff to move from agency to permanent, recruiting newly qualified social workers. This is a national problem but more acute in London and the South East (see above). I have not had an opportunity to consider the structure and whether there are posts that could be removed from this. I note the actions to reduce by 10 agency staff per month and while this is aspirational I am not sure that in the short term this will be achievable. There may be a short time period where posts are double funded ie NQSW get up to speed and cover is needed for their reduced caseloads.

The idea of increasing caseloads in service that is already stretched is highly risky and caseloads are already reported to be too high. This will also have a negative impact on staff recruitment /retention. The focus should be on reviewing all open CIN /CP cases and see what can be closed down/stepped down and have clear timescales for achieving this. The new interim Group Manager for Care management is already undertaking this exercise with her Team Managers. There may well be slack in the service but the only way to ensure caseloads are maintained is to achieve through put in the system. This might only address an increase in demand and maintain caseloads at a reasonable level (not above 20).

Tier 2 services are reported to be good in B&D (ISOS report). Is there scope to review funding of some of these services through Troubled families initiative now the criteria changed?

Recommendations and actions already in place:

- Review caseloads and action to be taken to reduce numbers including through put of work – in hand.
- Introduce CP/CIN ‘surgeries’
- Review structure and capacity within service including ratio of SW : Managers.
- Continue actions identified above , to address recruitment /retention
- Funding from other sources to fund early offer services ie Troubled families

**Short breaks funding**

The proposal to reduce short breaks funding could become a political hot potato. Often by reducing support/short breaks there is escalation and families are no longer able to cope, with a worst case scenario being that the child can become looked after as a result. All packages of support should be reviewed and be clear about ongoing commitments to families and reduce where safe to do so. This could generate some reduction in packages, especially focusing on lower level of need?

Recommendation and actions already in place:

- Review all short breaks / packages of care to reduce spend – in hand.

**Contact**
The contact service is an area considered by ISOS in their report and a series of options were produced, as a result of this work. It is clear from their report, that a more flexible staff model is needed. This could be achieved with more part time staff working at times of the day when contacted needed ie after school and not during the morning. The over spend in this service is through agency costs at 21% - this can be reduced substantially. Rather than employing agency staff, consider recruiting a bank of staff who could undertake contact, who had been trained by the council and could provide the quality of contact required. Often staff in schools are prepared to work after school hours or weekends and all have DBS and some level of understanding of child development. This group could be utilised to form the hub of contact staff and may be prepared to provide weekend contact when needed too.

It is also necessary to review all ongoing contact arrangements to ensure supervised contact is no longer being provided on s20 cases or when court proceedings have completed, and only on a time limited basis. On occasions courts make unrealistic expectations of contact and therefore robust conversations and preparation about what contact will be offered is considered as part of care proceedings, not as an after though, which is often the case.

One of the proposals of the ISOS report is to outsource the service. If this is the case, the savings need to be taken out of the service first. The actions below are what I believe an outside agency would do to reduce costs.

Recommendations:

- Review all cases where contact ongoing for longer than 6 months, s20 or outside court process.
- Review current staff and reduce one FTE post to 2 part time posts to work at end of day.
- Recruit bank of staff to cover extra demand and peak times.

**IRO service**

This service is over spent by 250K. The whole service from Senior Manager to the individual IROs/CP chairs are agency. These roles are usually easier to recruit to as they are not responsible for frontline operational services. What efforts have been made to recruit to these posts or ‘convert’ the current agency staff to permanent staff members? Are agency paid a daily rate or per conference / statutory review? I understand that additional CP chairs and IROs were recruited because of high numbers of CP/LAC. Currently the salary scale for IROs/CP chairs are paid at a lower rate that other first line managers. The Care Planning regulations expect them to be on same grade as first line managers within the authority. This might also support recruitment.

If the service is all agency would commissioning the service out be cheaper (IROs only) to an agency such as Aidhour? IROs current caseload are 70 cases which is not above the Care Planning Regulation required number.

The service also provides two people who chair CIN meetings – usually undertaken by Team Managers within the operational teams. This is good practice having the independence of these posts but is not required by statue. There is also additional capacity within the team to provide auditing and quality assurance.

Recommendation:

- CP/CIN surgeries chaired by senior manager, involving CP chairs /IROs and SW and Team Managers. This will help review thresholds and cases needing step down (or up)
Consider outsourcing or converting agency to permanent staff

Accommodation

Further areas for consideration by the authority is the accommodation for the service. Has every opportunity been taken to consider more cost effective/mobile working arrangements for staff. SWs and their managers do not have the necessary mobile technology to work more effectively and off site. There is also considerable pressure on accommodation and access to desks and computers. This puts additional pressures on staff who are unable to work at home or flexibly and access their ICS systems or email. Not all SWs are able to access their laptops remotely. More ability to have flexibility of working is needed to maximise use of accommodation and will also enable SWs to work more efficiently.

B&D also use a recording system (ICS - Northgate) which is one of the oldest and least user friendly ICS systems on the market. Staff do complain about the inability of the system to print out documents or access what they need. This area needs to be seriously considered, again it has R&R impact too and is not marketing the authority as a modern forward looking service. It will also impact on the services ability to have a recording system that reflects quality practice.

Conclusion

There are considerable pressures in B&D caused by demographic changes that are greater than seen in most authorities and the subsequent impact on demand for services and increasing caseloads. This also impacts adversely on service provision and an already overstretched budget. There are over spends in a number of areas of the budgets - mainly staffing, agency costs and legal budgets. A series of actions have been put in place by the current Deputy Director who has a close grip on the service, understands the pressures, practice issues and has robust plans in place to address the poor performance of the service in terms of compliance and budget management.

The areas already identified for budget reduction – this is cost avoidance – rather than specifically savings, are the areas that I would focus on to reduce spend. I have made a series of recommendations that either are already in progress in the borough or additional actions that should reduce spend further.

Nicky Pace
22.12.14