

LONDON BOROUGH OF HAMMERSMITH & FULHAM

Report to: Cabinet

Date: 06/06/2022

Subject: Business Case for Covid Funding for Children's Front door Services

Report of: Councillor Alex Sanderson, Cabinet Member for Children and Education

Report author: Amana Gordon, Operational Director for the Children and Young People's Service

Responsible Director: Jacqui McShannon, Director of Children's Services

SUMMARY

All referrals to Children's Services that meet the threshold for support from social care services must be progressed quickly and accurately to our Contact and Assessment Service (CAS) for fuller assessment and safeguarding intervention. The effectiveness of our front door service is critical to meeting our statutory duties to support and protect vulnerable children and families.

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a reduction in referrals through the front door; however, we are now seeing activities returning to above pre-pandemic levels with contacts increasing from 1667 contacts in 19/20 before the pandemic, to a forecast of 1884 contacts in 21/22. The Early Help (FS) team are now predominantly dealing with attendance issues and have less capacity to work with families requiring other early help support. Delays in commencing other early help work can lead to more entrenched concerns and the need for statutory intervention.

High case allocations were highlighted as a concern by Ofsted in the 2019 Inspecting Local Authorities Children's Services (ILACS) and in the January 2022 Focused Visit and if this continues, is likely to impact on the quality of safeguarding service provided and retention of the workforce. This presents a risk to our vulnerable families and the council in meeting its statutory duties.

This report therefore seeks approval to establish an additional team in CAS for a fixed period of two-years; this increased staff capacity will enable CAS to meet the increased need and latent demand following the pandemic. The service already has a number of workstreams in progress to address the demand on statutory services, including interim additional resourcing of the school attendance front door function.

It is imperative that additional resource is in place by the start of July, and recruitment commences as soon as possible. The longer the additional resource is not in place, the higher the risk of not meeting current levels of demand, fulfilling our statutory duties and providing high quality safeguarding services. Over the next two years, we will continue to assess demand and evaluate the need for fourth CAS team going forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Approval of an additional investment of £551,266 per year to fund an additional team in CAS and two additional workers in Early Help (FS) specialising in attendance support to schools for a time limited two-year period (total funding of £1,147,500), funded from Covid reserves.

Wards Affected: All

Our Values	Summary of how this report aligns to the H&F Values
Creating a compassionate council	Safeguarding our children and young people and supporting vulnerable families through the provision of a robust CAS and Early Help (FS) service.
Being ruthlessly financially efficient	Additional resource in CAS and Early Help (FS) is an invest to save initiative which will enable more robust early intervention, in turn avoiding escalating costs of specialist interventions, care and placement costs. It will also reduce agency spend in the long-term.
Taking pride in H&F	Investing in our CAS and FS service to best support our vulnerable children and young people and improve life chances.

Financial Impact

The cost of funding an additional team in CAS, consisting of a team manager, deputy team manager and six social workers is expected to be £440,000 per annum for a fixed two-year period. Assuming a fixed term period of two years with start dates of July 2022 funding is requested as follows:

- 2022/23 £330,000 at 2021/22 pay scales assuming July 2022 start dates
- 2023/24 £440,000 full year effect at 2021/22 pay scales
- 2024/25 £110,000 for the period April 2024 to June 2024
- Provision of £35,800 to cover estimated pay inflation of 2.3% per annum for the 2 year fixed term period.

Total funding £915,800 requested

The estimated cost of funding two new Early Help (FS) Practitioners is £111,300 per annum.

- PO1 pt 30 at £47,300
- PO6 pt 43 at £64,000 (including on costs)

Assuming a fixed term period of two years with start dates of July 2022 funding is requested as follows:

- 2022/23 £83,500 at 2021/22 pay scales assuming July 2022 start dates
- 2023/24 £111,300 full year effect at 2021/22 pay scales
- 2024/25 £27,800 for the period April 2024 to June 2024

- Provision of £9,100 to cover estimated pay inflation of 2.3% per annum for the 2 year fixed term period.

Total funding of £231,700 requested

A total of £1,147,500 is requested over the medium term from covid reserves.

*Original Finance implications drafted by Tony Burton, Head of Finance, 25 April 2022 and revised by Jill Lecznar, Head of Finance, 12th May 2022
Verified by Emily Hill, Director of Finance, 18 May 2022*

Legal Implications

The proposals in this report are for the funding of functions relating to the care and protection of children under the Children Act 1989. These are duties on the local authority, so it has a statutory obligation to fulfil them and make available sufficient funding to enable them to be undertaken effectively.

*John Sharland, Senior solicitor (Contracts and procurement) email:
john.sharland@lbhf.gov.uk, 12 April 2022*

Background Papers Used in Preparing This Report

None

DETAILED ANALYSIS

Proposals and Analysis of Options

Increase in referrals and pent-up demand

1. Following the pandemic, we are seeing activities returning above pre-pandemic levels and are experiencing increased complexity. Increased need in our community, exacerbated by the ongoing cost of living crisis, has put additional pressure on our capacity, seen in higher caseloads, and is leading to challenges in staff retention, morale and in the ability to progress work in a timely manner.
2. LBHF is a clear outlier in respect of timely completion of assessments due to the volume of children allocated to each practitioner and to having a three-weekly duty rota. The three-weekly duty rota system allows minimal time for social workers to progress cases. The expectation is that, during a duty week, assigned social workers are available to respond to emergency referrals; the subsequent two weeks between duty rotations give social workers a short period of time to progress their ongoing work with families. This results in delayed provision, a backlog of work, subjects families to longer intervention and unnecessary escalation to the Family Support and Child Protection (FSCP) service. In the January 2022 Focused Visit, Ofsted noted that despite exceptional challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and high caseloads, assessments of children in the CAS are comprehensive and analytical;

however in their verbal feedback, they indicated that this was not sustainable without action to reduce caseloads.

3. The impact of the pandemic on the safety and welfare of young children nationally has been a major cause for concern, as has the increased numbers of children missing from education. Attendance at school is a protective factor for children, as is a robust and rigorous multi-agency network led by Children's Services.
4. Since the pandemic, there has been increased focus from central government and the DfE on attendance concerns. LBHF has brought in an independent consultant to look at this as national data sets indicate that non-attendance in the borough remains higher than London and national comparators. Additional interim investment in this service was noted positively in our recent Ofsted Focused Visit but the review has determined that our current attendance function in Early Help is under resourced. Currently, there are 155 families allocated to practitioners and of these, 80 relate to unresolved issues relating to education. Further capacity is needed to manage the increased referrals to the service.

Reduced staff morale, service resilience and workforce competency

5. The recent staff survey in February 2022 also highlighted a pattern of social workers being at increased risk of 'burn out' due to high caseloads and the three-week duty system. This has been exacerbated by the pressures and isolation many have experienced working remotely. Again, it was noted in the Focused Visit that, due to high caseloads, staff have reduced time to engage with supervision and training. This directly correlates to staff retention, increased staff sickness and reliance on agency workers, and impacts on progression of work and services for families.

Value for money

6. Retention issues have led to an increased reliance on agency workers to cope with increased demand since Covid. In 2020/21, CAS used agency workers equating to circa 5 Full Time Equivalents (FTE) for temporary cover at a cost of £266,547. In 2021/22 agency costs were £430,273 at circa 7.5 FTE. The cost of agency staff is approximately 10 to 15% higher than employing staff through council contracts and after allowing for pay related oncosts. Children's Services are committed to the corporate need to reduce agency workers to ensure best value for money and utilising Covid recovery funding to establish an additional team will significantly impact on this.
7. The assessment teams are crucial to the delivery of a safe service which maximises the outcomes for children by ensuring effective and timely decision making, risk management and throughput of work. If CAS are unable to sufficiently maintain this quality of service due to unmanageable demand, the throughput of work to other services will increase, including children subject to longer term intervention under Child in Need or Child Protection Plans and increases in children becoming looked after. This will worsen outcomes for families and increase longer-term costs through greater reliance on more expensive, higher-tier services.

8. Early Help (FS) is an integral part of the front door offer and has an essential role in managing the demand on statutory services. The CAS service will step-down cases to the Early Help (FS) service, ensuring families receive the right support at the right time. However, capacity issues within Early Help (FS) may delay transfer from CAS, creating additional unnecessary pressure in the system and on families.
9. Therefore, the proposals are:
 - To introduce a fourth CAS team in order to spread the load which will immediately reduce caseloads and create a 4-week duty rota, in response to the higher workloads we are now experiencing following Covid. Should the current CAS structure move to a four-weekly rotation and the number of children per worker reduce, social workers would have reduced exposure to crisis, increased opportunities for direct work with families and to participate in training; this would improve job satisfaction and staff retention, reduce reliance on costly agency staff and ultimately, provide a better service for vulnerable families.
 - To increase capacity of the Early Help (FS) team by 2 FTE practitioners with specialisms in Education Support, to focus on addressing attendance concerns; freeing up capacity in the rest of service to support families with other, pressing early help needs and reduce step-up into statutory services. This will in turn support with managing the pressure on the CAS team.

Option 1 – do nothing (not recommended)

10. Without additional resource to address the pent-up demand from Covid, the volume of children per worker will remain high. This will impact on the timeliness of assessment and quality of work with families, meaning longer interventions, more children in the system and a risk that our current Ofsted grading of “Good” will be downgraded. These pressures are already affecting staff morale and if this continues, are likely to increase staff retention issues, reliance on costly agency workers and further exacerbate service pressures. Doing nothing presents a risk both to our vulnerable families and the wider council in meeting its statutory duties.

Option 2 – Increase staffing capacity in CAS and Early Help (FS) to manage Covid pressures (recommended option)

11. With this option, we will have:
 - Four teams in CAS with each team consisting of a team manager, deputy team manager, two senior social workers, two basic grade social workers and two ASYEs (newly-qualified social workers).
 - Two additional Early Help (FS) practitioners with specialisms in Education Support, to focus on addressing attendance concerns.

This option will address the concerns raised by Ofsted, enable us to maintain our current ‘good’ grading and evidence continued practice improvement in the next inspection. Most importantly, increased service capacity will enable us to better manage increased referrals and pent-up demand following the pandemic and continue to deliver high standards of safeguarding and support to vulnerable families.

Staff would be recruited on permanent contracts, however the additional resource would be a fixed-term project of two-years to give us the space to mitigate immediate pressures. Once these are reduced, we will be able to evaluate whether this additional resource is needed in full going forward.

Forecast based on *full-year* cost of all staff

	Based on desired salaries
CAS Forecast	439,966
Early Help (FS)	111,300
TOTAL	551,266

Reasons for Decision

12. The Contact and Assessment Service (CAS) is integral to the safeguarding of children and support of vulnerable families. Without additional resource, CAS will struggle to meet the current levels of demand. This will be detrimental for our families but also poses a wider risk to the council in relation to its duties to keep residents safe.
13. Without additional resource in Early Help (FS) to address attendance issues, capacity issues within the service will mean that some families will not receive the timely and effective intervention required to prevent family crisis, step-up into statutory services and ultimately, lead to poorer outcomes for our children and young people.
14. Capacity issues within both CAS and Early Help (FS) present a risk to our vulnerable families and the council in meeting its statutory duties. It is critical that we mitigate all Covid pressures across the service and therefore our recommendation is to resource both CAS and Early Help (FS) teams as set out above.

Equality Implications

15. There are no direct equality implications for groups with protected characteristics, under the Equality Act 2010, by the approval of these funding proposals set out in the Recommendations.

Risk Management Implications -

16. The recommendations set out in this report are made to ensure the Council can continue to meet its statutory obligations to some of its most vulnerable residents and is in line with the objective of creating a compassionate council. The report identifies a number of risks of not appropriately resourcing the Contact and Assessment and Early Help services which support vulnerable children in the borough, including failing to meet the needs of children and families, failing to ensure the wellbeing of staff and the potential for adverse inspection judgements. While ensuring vital safeguarding services are in place, the report recommendations will also protect against the risk of legal challenge, which is in line with the council priority of being ruthlessly financially efficient.

David Hughes, Director of Audit, Fraud, Risk and Insurance, 11 April 2022

Climate and Ecological Emergency Implications

17. The main climate and ecological impacts of the budget virement and increase to services are relatively low with the main impact being that of additional staff travelling into the borough. To mitigate this impact, we will encourage all staff to walk, cycle or use public transport when travelling into the borough.

Hinesh Mehta, Strategic Lead – Climate Emergency, 13th April 2022

LIST OF APPENDICES

None.