

LEAD ARTICLE – NEW WRITING

Early Intervention: Children at Risk

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I have worked for Shropshire Council since 2006. My position as Beacon Co-ordinator over the last two and a half years has been to promote Shropshire Council's good working practices with children and young people around the

country. During an extremely busy couple of years, Shropshire Council has provided support to other authorities who have benefited from the excellent record of the Council in intervening early in situations where children and young people are experiencing problems. The Council has responded positively to requests from other local authorities and organisations to share their learning and good practice; this dialogue with other authorities has also been a learning experience for the Council. Interest in the Council's preventative services has not been restricted to authorities from within the United Kingdom and have included visitors from, for example, Uzbekistan and Finland.

Summary

This article provides a brief background to Shropshire County and how the Council has retained its Beacon status for *Early Intervention: Children at Risk* over the last three years. It also provides detailed information about the Information Sharing and Assessment (ISA)

programme embedded within Shropshire and how Shropshire Council is developing and delivering preventative integrated services within the County.

Introduction: Shropshire and its Beacon status

Shropshire is one of England's most beautiful and most rural counties. With a population of 287,900 (with over 60,000 young people) and at only 0.9 persons per hectare, the County is one of the most sparsely populated and has vast areas of uninhabited land. Delivering services to people living in small settlements and isolated dwellings is one of the greatest challenges facing Shropshire Council and its partners. Shropshire is a great place to live and we have a strong sense of community and identity. Our communities have a rural tradition of self-sufficiency and independence and are keen to devise practical solutions that respond appropriately to local needs.

Shropshire Council and partners share a clear ambition to improve significantly the quality of life for Shropshire people by working together. Against a backdrop of moving to a unitary council, Shropshire Council retained its '4 star and improving strongly' status in 2006 and 2007. The 2007 judgements are 4 out of 4 for Comprehensive Performance Assessment in every service except the service for Environment (which retains 3 out of 4, improving from 2 in

2005). Shropshire Council's Children and Young People's Services were judged by Ofsted in 2007 as one of only two authorities in England to receive the top score possible for all judgement areas for three years running.

In 2006, Shropshire Council became a Beacon Council for its work in early intervention to protect and support children who are at risk. The Beacon Scheme is government recognition that a local authority is providing excellent and innovative services. The Council won an extension in 2007 to the Beacon agenda, in conjunction with the City of York, this time for early intervention: engaging children, young people, their parents and carers in service design and development.

In 2008, Shropshire Council was awarded a grant to continue the Beacon theme of Early Intervention: Children at Risk. The Multi-Agency and Prevention Division and Safer Communities Team of Shropshire Council received funding to support and build the capacity of selected authorities to improve services for the early identification and support for children and young people who have witnessed or experienced domestic abuse.

The article has two major sections; Information Sharing and Assessment followed by a case study of Daniel's Team Around the Child.

Information Sharing and Assessment (ISA)

ISA is described under the following headings:

1. Introduction
2. Multi-agency Teams (MATs)
3. Training
4. Statistics
5. Reconfiguration of prevention and safeguarding services
6. Experiences of a MAT social worker
7. Engagement of children and young people
8. Publications and tools

Introduction

Young people have told the government that five outcomes are key to wellbeing in childhood and later life. These are:

- be healthy
- stay safe
- enjoy and achieve
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic wellbeing

In Shropshire, we have embedded our ISA programme to support young people in achieving these outcomes. We know there are many different people working with young people aged 0 to 18 years of age. The ISA process improves the way these different people share information and work together. It is through partnership working that we meet the challenge of developing and delivering integrated preventative services in our geographically large and sparsely populated county.

Shropshire Children's Trust met recently to agree its priorities for 2008-11. These take into account the need to continue some local authority agreement priorities, new priorities identified both locally and nationally as well as the new national indicators. The nine partnership priorities are:

1. Reducing the harmful effects of alcohol misuse amongst young people.
2. Increasing the stability of looked-after children's placements.
3. Reducing obesity in primary school-age children (reception year).
4. Improving sexual health and reducing teenage pregnancy.
5. Reducing offending.
6. Further develop integrated services for children with disabilities.
7. Further reducing the number of vulnerable young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).
8. Increasing support for parents and carers.
9. Reducing homelessness amongst young people.

There are two additional development priorities:

1. Developing the capacity of Shropshire Children's Trust to meet new statutory guidance on Children's Trust boards.
2. Developing integrated youth support.

These are consistent with the priorities for Shropshire Council's Children and Young People's Services Plan, the overarching Corporate Plan and partners' strategic plans, e.g. PCT Local Delivery Plan. The Shropshire Partnership Community Strategy brings together the key priorities for the County, and so reflects Shropshire Children's Trust priorities. The Trust is also one of the four delivery agents of the Shropshire Partnership at the heart of the strategic planning for the County.

The Children's Trust is also ensuring a coherent strategic approach to early intervention by developing a combined strategy for Children's Centres, Extended Schools and Children's Fund, focusing on joint planning, support and monitoring.

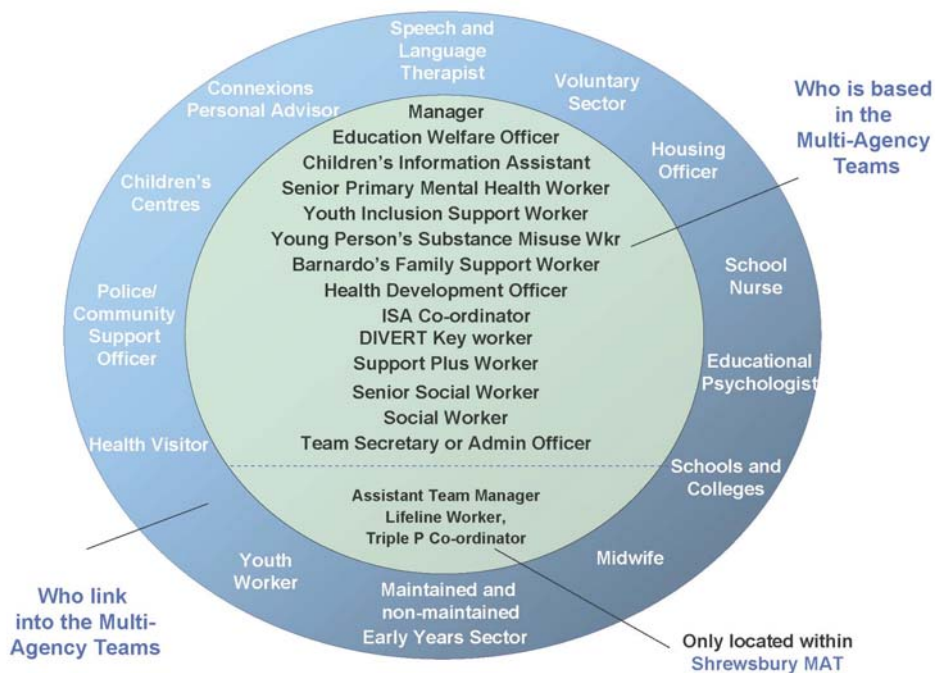
Multi-Agency Teams

The Children Act 2004 places a responsibility on local authorities to enhance and improve multi-agency working and information sharing, working more collaboratively around a preventative agenda. Shropshire Council's commitment to early intervention for children and young people (0- 18 yrs of age) led in 2005 to the development of five locally based Multi-agency Teams (MATs) across our large rural county. Practitioners from a range of agencies offering targeted support are based together, and 'virtual' members linked into the Teams.

These include schools, health visitors and police. Over the past three years, the five MATs situated around the County have had considerable success in enhancing the delivery of early intervention services.

Co-location led to improved understanding of roles and responsibilities, and improved information sharing. Teams have made a difference: they worked together more effectively to support children and their families, using the 'Team Around the Child' (TAC) model. Children, young people, families and practitioners tell us that they like this way of working. It is open, transparent, and ensures that children and their families are central to decision making. Shropshire Council is now moving from co-location to integration, with managerial support for the teams (see section on Reconfiguration of prevention and safeguarding services).

A key innovation has been the team of four ISA Co-ordinators, based in the MATs (one ISA Co-ordinator covering two MATs in the South of the County). They support practitioners by mentoring them when they first use the process and then offering practical support in arranging meetings, sending out TAC plans, etc. They are able to show practitioners the benefits of this way of working.



Generic Multi-agency Teams in Shropshire

Working with partners, the Council has developed an inclusive model of service delivery for those children and young people who require support. All key partners are committed to using the one set of common processes whenever possible, which includes the CAF (Common Assessment Framework), and sharing information appropriately – so reducing the need for families to repeatedly give the same information. The common processes support agencies working together in a timely and co-ordinated way, reducing the number of separate meetings and plans that there were before, and improving the shared understanding of the child's needs.

The strength of our way of working is the TAC model. The child's individual needs and strengths are identified and solutions are tailored to meet needs while building on strengths. We have developed our Service Directory to link directly to the child's plan and this helps us promote the increased use of existing services. In this way we contribute to local sustainability and help build strong communities which are best placed to meet local needs, particularly in areas of rural deprivation.

Training

The emphasis is on delivering support through universal services whenever possible, so schools, health visitors and other front-line professionals are key to our success. Practitioners are trained in using the common processes and then supported by their local ISA Co-ordinator. Training is designed in response to local needs and is delivered throughout the County, based on the MAT localities. By training a wide range of practitioners together we give them the opportunity to build their knowledge of local support and services, understand each other's roles and benefit from local networking. Over 1000 practitioners have been trained to date. The range of people trained includes: Head Teachers and senior staff within schools; Education Welfare Officers; Health Visitors; Connexions Workers; Youth Workers; Social Workers and Family Support Workers.

Statistics

The information below represents statistical information relating to ISA activity in Shropshire from April 2007 to March 2008.

Common Assessments completed **440**

Initial TAC meetings held **376**

Review TAC meetings held **833**

Episodes closed: TAC determined satisfactory outcomes **122**

Reconfiguration of prevention and safeguarding services

Encouraged by the findings of a pilot which ran in the south of the County from January 2007 and following consultation with staff and partner agencies Shropshire Council reconfigured its prevention and safeguarding services. The aims of the reconfiguration were as follows:

- To enhance the whole of safeguarding services
- To assist with the early identification of vulnerable children
- To provide a seamless system, removing barriers that were preventing access to service
- To improve outcomes
- To provide working arrangements for staff that enhance the delivery of service and increase job satisfaction

The aims are being achieved by replacing district based social work teams with the following:

1. A county-wide Stay Safe service. There are two teams covering North and South Shropshire that come under the same managerial line and therefore have consistency built in. The development of this new service has created an opportunity to build upon working relationships with key partners.
2. A county-wide Looked-After Children's Service to ensure that vulnerable children receive a focussed and effective service.
3. Enhanced MATs, which now include managers, social workers, 'support plus' workers (formerly social work assistants) and administration staff. The MAT managers are offering greater support to practitioners in the use of the ISA

process. They also ensure better co-ordination of services, more effective planning, scrutiny before cases are closed and supervision of staff working with more complex cases. Social workers are invited to TAC meetings and offer consultation or undertake focussed work with the child and/or the family.

The improvement for children and families is demonstrated by the number of TAC plans which have had satisfactory outcomes and by case studies that describe individual outcomes.

Experiences of a MAT Social Worker

Amanda Pascall, social worker based at Market Drayton MAT, describes her experiences as follows:

Over the last few months I have started to observe some of the many benefits to multi-agency working. Working alongside professionals from other disciplines (for example, mental health practitioners, education welfare officers and substance misuse workers) has helped me to develop a broader perspective of their roles. The MATs are relatively new but I can already see previous boundaries between agencies being transformed as we all develop a better understanding of our roles and responsibilities. From this there has developed good team morale.

I now have the opportunities to help other agencies gain more awareness of child protection thresholds. This is important because one of my responsibilities is to provide consultations with professionals who have concerns or who are in need of advice regarding the families they are supporting. I am already starting to see a more

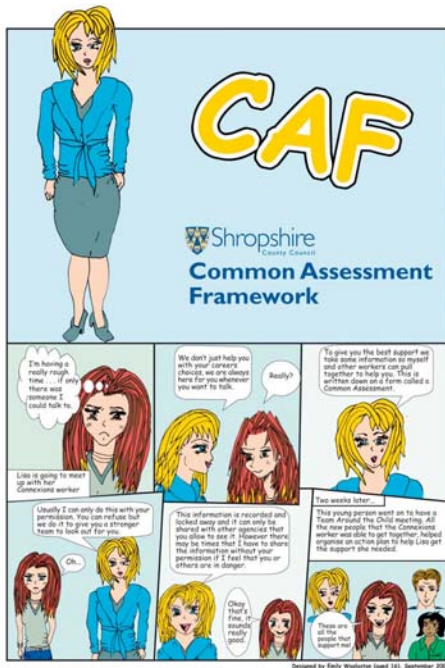
rapid and seamless response to families, as referrals are made within the team to colleagues in other disciplines and the sharing of information is quicker and more effective under the ISA protocol. This is an exciting time for the development of the MATs within Shropshire and I am looking forward to the way in which the social worker role continues to develop.

Engagement of children and young people

Shropshire Council has a corporate commitment to community and customer engagement and is committed to the *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* agenda which requires us to involve children, young people and their families in shaping their services. To meet these very challenging commitments we have embedded mechanisms for seeking the views of children and young people within the County.

Children, young people, their parents and carers are regularly consulted on the services they receive and their views have helped to develop the TAC process so that it meets their needs. Their views are systematically sought at the review of TAC plans and when agency involvement ends. Those views are provided to the MAT managers, who can follow up as needed. For example, training has been changed to reflect that young people and families prefer smaller TAC meetings.

The ISA Co-ordinators are also increasingly involved in engaging children and their families: they meet with families if needed to explain the consent-based nature of the process, and to explain a process that is 'done with you' and not 'done to you'. In consultation, a number of child-friendly instruments have been devised for seeking the views of children and young people within the County.



Some examples of ISA tools which have been designed by young people

Publications and Tools

Shropshire's ISA Practitioner Toolkit promotes early intervention and integrated working, and places children and families firmly at the centre. The Shropshire Children's Trust has a Statement of Commitment which requires all agencies to:

Develop common processes for assessing children and young people's needs and sharing information appropriately so that families do not have to repeat their history unnecessarily.

The ISA Toolkit can be used by the children's workforce in ensuring this commitment is turned into action. It is a guide to support effective multi-agency working, maximising the skills, knowledge and expertise of practitioners in working together to support families in a co-ordinated and timely way, and it includes the common processes that have been developed by a wide range of agencies. But it is more than this. It has supported the development of a common language, enabling the children's workforce to understand much more about each other's roles, services, and how we describe children's needs. However, most significantly, it has promoted the common culture of accountability for every child by every

practitioner from every agency. It is by working together in this way that we ensure that every child in Shropshire has the best opportunity to achieve positive outcomes.

Leadership and strategic management needs to be communicated to those involved. Since April 2007, there has been a regular newsletter for staff working in all agencies involved in the ISA programme. The newsletter has communicated the strategic direction that the Council and its partners have taken to increase the focus on prevention, and brought the issue to life by the input of a wide range of professionals.

The ISA section within the council web domain has grown dramatically in usage over the last few years and is now our main dissemination tool. In November 2006, 890 people visited the site but this has grown to 13,833 visitors in November 2008.

Case Study: Daniel's Team around the Child

Daniel, aged 11, had been getting into trouble while out with friends. He had been spoken to by the police after an incident where he had

thrown stones at moving traffic, putting himself and motorists in danger. His parents were very concerned and felt they had lost all control of him at home. Daniel never told his parents where he was and came in very late. Daniel was missing a lot of school and his behaviour while he was at school was causing the Head Teacher some serious concern.

The Head Teacher contacted the ISA Co-ordinator to check the ISA Child Index to see who else was involved, if a Common Assessment Framework (CAF) had been completed or if there was a Lead Professional. The ISA Co-ordinator found no other involvement. In agreement with the parents, the Head Teacher then completed a CAF with them.

The CAF identified that the parents needed support with parenting skills. This was provided by Shropshire Barnardo's project, a family support service. The CAF also identified Daniel's offending behaviour and need for anger management. Support for this was provided by DIVERT, a service to divert young people from antisocial behaviour.

A TAC meeting was convened by the Head Teacher. Daniel and his parents were helped to feel at ease during the TAC meeting and understood what was expected of them. It was agreed that at the following TAC someone from the secondary school would be included to support transition.

At the next TAC meeting Daniel was very positive and proud of the fact that he was improving and spending much more time with his family, instead of getting into trouble. Daniel's Head Teacher had also received positive feedback from Daniel's teachers. Transition work was underway for Daniel and he was supported by a mentor and a family support worker.

The whole family, including Daniel's siblings, had benefited from the TAC process. Daniel's parents went on to make changes to their daily family life. Both parents were surprised at how easy it was to bring about the change. They had previously felt everything was out of their control. Even though this was the final TAC meeting, the family still had access to support from a family support worker if they felt they needed any assistance.

The outcomes for Daniel were:

1. Daniel is now at secondary school and is progressing well.
2. He spends time with his immediate family and also in activities with his extended family.
3. He is no longer involved with antisocial behaviour.

Conclusion

The Information, Sharing and Assessment (ISA) Programme within Shropshire has been successfully developed to improve information sharing, multi-agency working and to support early, effective and integrated services for children, young people and their families.

We believe that this new way of working is making a difference to children's life chances, and is inclusive, effective and efficient. Our common processes and Team Around the Child model are transferable to other authorities, both rural and urban. We continue to learn, and we expect our model of preventative working to evolve and improve.

For more information on ISA, please visit:
www.shropshire.gov.uk/isa.nsf