

Annex B4: Review of High Cost, High Harm Families

key questions the review will address

1. Who are these families? How can we define them and how many of them are there?

In most cases the problems are caused by the families themselves and tend to be inter-generational – so regardless of the inherent potential of children and/or young people in those families, they are unable to escape their background. Families at risk of falling into the high cost, high harm category will have some or all of the following characteristics:

- low income – especially whose earnings are close to the national minimum wage
- poor literacy and numeracy skills
- a history of sustained periods of unemployment and/or reliance on benefits
- violence or abuse by one or both parents or other family member
- frequent contact with and reliance on social services
- members of the family in prison or on probation
- members of the family with significant health problems, disabilities or learning difficulties
- family breakdown and absentee parents

In some cases, children and young people themselves can cause fragmentation and break down in an otherwise benign family setting. Causes may include:

- mental health problems
- various types of special educational need which puts pressure on other family members – especially behavioural difficulties and autism
- sibling abuse
- bullying
- poor school attendance and/or exclusions

2. What progress has already been made in addressing the needs of high cost, high harm families?

Government policy and local authority practice has been designed to address all the above issues, but progress has been limited and will be under growing pressure:

- There is a growing number of children and young people with behavioural difficulties – mainstream schools are unable to cope with a rising tide of poor behaviour; more pupils are in PRUs or specialist EBD settings. Problems are growing fastest among teenage girls and the infant and junior age groups – for which there is a shortage of specialist support and provision across London.
- There is a growing number of children with complex disabilities, health problems and special needs that put significant extra burdens on families – including transporting children to and from school and to other

support services; a need for more respite; much greater pressure on family budgets.

- A comprehensive CAMHS has yet to be achieved which allows quick referral and access.

3. Can we better align local services to improve identification of these families earlier on and before they become high cost high harm?

The move towards children's trusts and children's services departments is helping to integrate education, health and social care for children. But there must also continue to be an alignment with adult social services to ensure that wider family circumstances can be reflected in care planning.

A fully integrated database across all services, with triggers to highlight when families may require early intervention or additional support (i.e. an extension of the child index and common assessment framework to cover wider family issues) would be helpful. A useful piece of work would be to develop some clear recognisable triggers that could be used by all services consistently.

4. Are current incentives and levers adequate to deliver co-ordinated responses for families across relevant services such as health, education, housing, social services and the police at local level?

There is a huge degree of willingness within local authorities and other services to develop integrated working practices but we are hampered by lack of capacity to carry out the necessary planning and implementation work. The changing role of local authorities and PCTs, from provider to facilitator has also meant that we are having to negotiate changes, often with front line managers who have their own resource pressures and other priorities relating to the wider group of children or families rather than the most dysfunctional.

5. What interventions here and abroad have been shown to work in reducing the harm caused by these families and supporting them to exit the cycle of low achievement?

More investment is needed in family learning centres. Croydon has a successful centre based at Beckmead school for boys aged 8-16 with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties which works with families to develop family support and address family issues leading to bad behaviour. This centre largely serves pupils on register at the school. This facility could helpfully be extended on a much wider basis.

6. What is the appropriate balance between support and sanctions for these families?

Sanctions will not work unless families are given strategies to improve their situation. Therefore early identification and intervention must be the priority and support rather than sanctions must be the next step.

Sanctions may have a place in cases where family members are unwilling (rather than unable) to take responsibility. Incentives are likely to be more effective as sanctions, but need to be offered in the form of opportunities rather than rewards for failure.