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**Report of Andrea Houlahan, Strategic Manager, Families First North**

**Electoral division(s) affected:**

None.

**Purpose of the Report**

- 1 This report will provide an overview of the Pre- Birth service which was implemented following a Children Social Care restructure in February 2018. The Pre-Birth service went live in May 2018.
- 2 This report will detail an understanding of the service's priorities and the work which the team undertaken within the team and in partnership with Early Help service and partner agencies to ensure the early identification of vulnerable unborn babies and the way in which support offered ensures that early permanency planning is implemented for these children post birth.

**Background**

- 3 In 2012 a Pre- Birth Intervention Service was created as a 2 year pilot in County Durham. It had been identified that there was a significant number of parents who had children removed previously and went on to have more children, resulting in these children also being removed. Too often these children were facing delay in their permanency planning due to parents not receiving significant support or assessment until after the child was born. This had a negative impact on children longer term due to issues in forming positive attachments to parents and carers, as well as obvious financial implications for the Local Authority.
- 4 The criteria of the service is to work with parents where either mother or father have had a child previously removed by a Local Authority through care proceedings. The aim was to support parents pre-birth by providing an intensive 20 week pre-birth and 20 week post birth intervention and assessment, which focusses on addressing the adult issues and their capacity to change, forming positive attachments and increasing knowledge on child development and parenting. One consistent Social Worker and Family Worker provided the assessment and intervention, with support from a multi-agency team including a midwife, health

visitor, and relevant adult services. The team of professionals supported parents to address the issues that resulted in their older child's removal, and evidenced a parent's capacity to change. Intensive post birth intervention was provided to support parents to sustain the changes made. If parents were unable to demonstrate change then the evidence gathered allowed for timely permanence decisions, that children could be placed with alternative carers via Special Guardianship Orders or adoption at the earliest opportunity.

- 5 The pilot was proven a success with 50% of children returning to parents care and where it was not possible to do so, children were placed with permanent carers at the very earliest opportunity. 50% of babies were in their permanent placement from birth, 94 % had one move or no move at all. The average age for babies in their final placement was 21.1 weeks old. This is obviously very positive in terms of forming positive attachments to their parents or carers, which has long term benefits. The average length of care proceedings lasted 21.2 weeks, one concluded at 6 weeks and another within 8 weeks and only 3 out of 12 sets were contested hearings.
- 6 The service received national recognition winning three awards and featured in social work publications and conferences nationally.
- 7 At the end of the pilot, a decision was made for the model to be used by all Social Workers within the Child Protection teams. Staff were trained and resources were provided. Unfortunately over the past 3 years, it was shown that working intensively with families at a pre-birth stage and front loading work was very difficult alongside running a standard Social Work caseload. Due to the complex and varied caseloads held, the pre-birth cases were not given the priority they required and many of these babies again began to experienced delay in their permanency planning.
- 8 A decision was made that County Durham was to undergo a restructure in Children's Services in early 2018 and the Pre-Birth Team would be re-introduced based on the initial model implemented in Durham.

## **Pause Model**

- 9 In August 2016, Durham County Council commissioned the Pause program to carry out a scoping exercise to provide a detailed analysis of the mothers of repeat removals of children between April 2014 and May 2017, an interim report was provided in September 2017.
- 10 The key findings from this highlight that during this timeframe 424 children were removed from a cohort of 127 women, an average of 3.3 children per women. The women had complex and interlinked needs 70% having issues of domestic violence, 61% of mental health, 48% of substance misuse and 40% being involved themselves with the Local

Authority as a child. The report highlights the needs for intensive and targeted intervention for these mothers.

- 11 The Pause model focuses on working with mothers who have had 2 children permanently removed from their care and works intensively with her whilst she has no children in her care. The program requires that the mother uses effective contraception for the duration of the program whilst an intensive bespoke program of support is provided. The focus is on the previous issues and accessing support to change their lives. The program does not offer parenting support or assessments and is a preventative service. The report highlighted that based on average assumptions 20 women from this cohort would give birth to 8.1 children over an 18 month period.
- 12 There are clear links between the Pre-birth intervention model and the Pause model and the findings from the Interim Scoping report clearly supports the need for work to be done differently with these families.
- 13 Durham has recently implemented the Pause model to support mothers who have had children permanently removed in the past before they become pregnant again. The Pre-Birth Service will work alongside the Pause practitioners to identify potential candidates for the service with a view of supporting mothers to address their issues and change their circumstances before they decide to become pregnant again in the future.

### **Implementation of the Pre-Birth Service**

- 14 The team consists of a Team Manager, a Social Work Consultant and 5 social workers. Two of which were members of the original pre-birth team so are familiar with the intervention plan and procedures. The team is based in Ferryhill but each worker covers a specific locality area within the county so they can make use of the flexible working arrangements and develop contacts within their specific locality. The team began working with families in May 2018.
- 15 Work undertaken by the team focusses on providing support and undertaking intervention work with parents at the earliest stage to support them to meet the needs of their child. There is a focus on both the child's needs and the parent's needs through the completion of intervention plans and assessments with families pre-birth and by utilising historical assessments to inform parent's capacity to change.
- 16 The team work intensively with multiagency partners to support parents to change and ensure early decision making which invariably reduces delay in permanency planning for children.

- 17 One of the principles of the team is to embed and promote 'fostering to adopt' placements for babies where adoption is the only safe option.

### **Expected Outcomes**

- 18 Some of the expected outcomes of the service delivery includes:
- (a) Parents will be provided with intensive support to evidence they have changed sufficiently to safely care for their child and where this is not possible children are secured in placements of permanency as early as possible;
  - (b) Positive attachment relationships to be developed between a baby and their parent/ carer so that the child's outcomes are maximised throughout their childhood and adulthood;
  - (c) Babies to spend minimal time in the Looked After system if it is required;
  - (d) Reduced time for babies becoming Looked After to becoming adopted;
  - (e) Reduced placement moves for children;
  - (f) Reduction in repeated pregnancies for parents.

### **Training**

- 19 All Early Help Practitioners (EHP) based within the children's centres have been trained to deliver the pre-birth intervention alongside the social workers. They will co work the cases and receive joint case supervision by the pre-birth Team Manager.
- 20 There will be quarterly workshops held and will include the pre-birth Social Work team and the EHP's. The purpose of these are to increase the knowledge of all staff together, ensure there is a shared understanding of information, to ensure consistent messages are given to families as well as building relationships between the workers. The topics to be covered are yet to be agreed however joint learning on areas such as attachment, working within the legal framework, impact of substance misuse or domestic violence are topics that would be of benefit.

## **Referrals and Current Performance**

- 21 Referrals are made via First Contact from any person who becomes aware that a mother matching the criteria is pregnant. This is usually the midwife at the booking in appointment. These referrals are sent directly to the pre-birth team from First Contact. To date we have received 39 appropriate referrals on unborn babies since the team went live in May 2018. 31 assessments have been completed and 8 are ongoing. Of these babies 10 have been born, 6 are in parents care from birth, 4 are currently Looked After, 2 with family members and 2 with foster carers. 4 families are in care proceedings, 5 are on a child protection plan and in PLO processes and 1 is open as a CIN case.

## **Working Relationships with Partner Agencies**

- 22 An operational group has been established and has been meeting regularly in the developmental stages of the service. This is well attended by all partner agencies and will continue to do so until the team is well established.
- 23 The operational group is currently expanding its terms of reference so that they will also have a focus on those mothers within early help services who may be vulnerable or are already identified and receiving additional support through the vulnerable parent pathway.
- 24 The Pause lead practitioners will also become part of the operational group membership so that any identified themes from the project can be shared with children social care and partners and consideration be given to any preventative actions which partners may want to implement.

## **Performance Management and Governance**

- 25 Key Performance indicators will be collated monthly, quarterly and annually to measure the success of the service. Some will be gathered from discoverer reports and some manually collated by the Team Manager. Once agreed Liquid Logic will be approached to ensure all data is collated directly from the system. Weekly reports will include; assessment timescales, statutory visits, ICPCs in timescales.

## **Supporting One Point and Families First**

- 26 There are currently 163 unborn babies across Children's Services 94 are in Families First, 39 in the Pre-Birth team and 30 in One Point. The team is now progressing to offer support and guidance on working with pre-birth cases that do not meet the criteria for the service and are allocated to the families First and One Point teams. The focus will be on producing good quality proportionate assessments and intervention to families and ensuring early permanence planning takes place for these

families. There are 4 workshops planned to take place with all workers in the families First Teams to look at good quality assessments, intervention and care planning as well as to explain the consultative role of the team on these cases. The pre-birth team is currently working with the Early Permanence Planning board to devise flow charts with a step by step guide for case workers to highlight what is needed at each stage of the pregnancy to ensure cases are progressed in a timely way. Pre-birth social workers will be a point of contact for staff holding pre-birth cases and provide a level of oversight to ensure cases are progressed with appropriate plans and without delay. The pre-birth Team Manager will provide a monthly management oversight to all pre-birth cases in Families First to ensure care planning is taking place and to flag any issues with the Team Manager or Operations Manager if issues are identified. This will commence in January after the workshops have been held.

- 27 Family workers within One Point and Families First have been trained in the intervention plan so relevant elements of the intervention plan can be delivered to all pre-birth families across County Durham to support families and inform good quality assessments.

## **Conclusion**

- 28 The pre-birth team is working with 39 families currently and caseloads are steadily increasing. The team is developing to ensure practice in relation to all 163 unborn babies currently open to Children's Services is improved across Durham. All of these babies need proportionate levels of support and intervention to ensure early permanence planning is undertaken in all of these cases. The service is also working alongside the Pause program to ensure mothers who have had children previously removed receive on going longer term support prior to becoming pregnant to increase their chances of caring for children successfully in future.
- 29 The overall aim of the pre-birth team is to provide a high quality service to all children born in County Durham at the very earliest opportunity to ensure that all plans of permanency, whether this is for the child to remain with birth family or be placed in alternative long term care are implemented in a timely manner for the child.

## **Recommendations**

- 30 Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel are recommended to note the content of the report.

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

All children referred to the Pre-birth team will be considered within the public law outline. There will be a higher proportion of children within the pre-birth service who are subject of care proceedings whereby the local authority obtain legal orders to secure they long term care outside of the birth family

### **Finance**

The inception of the pre-birth service has historically resulted in efficiency savings for the local authority due to swift care planning.

### **Consultation**

N/A

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

N/A

### **Human Rights**

N/A

### **Crime and Disorder**

Birth parents of those children allocated to the pre-birth service are more likely to have a history of crime and disorder offences by the nature of the referral criteria. These offences are considered within the context of the public law outline and all pre-birth and post birth assessments.

### **Staffing**

The pre-birth service was developed as part of the children social care restructure in Feb 2018 and the creation of additional social work capacity.

### **Accommodation**

The pre-birth service are a county wide team. They are currently based in Ferryhill, however staff predominantly hot desk and work from all locality offices across Durham County.

### **Risk**

N/A

### **Procurement**

N/A