

7 February 2020

Pre-Birth Service Update

Report of John Pearce, Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the work being undertaken within the Pre-birth intervention team.

Executive Summary

- 2 The Pre-Birth team was re-established in Durham's Families First Service in May 2018. The pre-birth team works with families where either parent has previously had a child removed from their care through public care proceedings. The model and ambition is to enable babies to remain with their parents, or at least within the birth family where it is safe to do so. This is achieved by completing as much work as possible before the baby is born and by ensuring that the parents receive intensive support to help them to achieve sustainable change. Where this is not in the best interests of the child, then the ambition is to ensure that the baby is permanently placed with alternative carers as soon as is possible after birth and to reduce the number of carers the child experiences.
- 3 The report reflects a lot of positive work undertaken by the Pre-Birth team, which has resulted in good and timely outcomes for children which was acknowledged in the recent Ofsted report.

Recommendation

- 4 Members of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee are requested to:
 - (a) Note the content of this report

Background

- 5 The Pre-Birth team was re-established in Durham's Families First Service in May 2018. The criteria are a referral prior to 21 weeks gestation where either parent has had a previous child permanently removed from their care through care proceedings and does not currently have a child in their care.
- 6 The team profile consists of a team manager, a social work consultant, 4 full time social workers, 1 part time social worker and a part time team co-ordinator.
- 7 To ensure early and intensive intervention and support the agreed maximum social worker caseload within the Pre-Birth team is between 10-12 with the aim of giving parents the best possible opportunity to effect positive change and enable them to successfully and safely parent their newborn child.
- 8 Unlike their colleagues in the other Families First teams, the social workers in the pre-birth team work with children throughout their journey within children's statutory social care services, whether this be a successful placement with parents, early permanence with an alternative family member or friend or within an adoptive placement.
- 9 Social Workers work alongside Early Help practitioners from the One Point Service. Together they deliver intensive assessment and support, with the aim of enabling parents to safely care for their children or gather evidence to make timely decisions in relation to permanence plans. Where children remain in the care of their parents, they have established relationships with professionals based within local Children's Centres to ensure that support can be sustained and readily accessible to parents.
- 10 The pre-birth team have received praise from Ofsted for their good practice and the positive outcomes they achieve, both within the focused visit which took place early in 2019 and within the more recent inspection which was conducted under the ILACs framework. This recently published inspection report highlighted that "The work of the pre-birth service is strong and effective".

Outcomes for Children

- 11 From May 2018 to December 2019 the Pre-Birth team have received 92 referrals. Of these referrals 76 families were deemed to be appropriate referrals and progressed to open cases. Nine families did not receive a service as the pregnancies did not progress, 6 did not meet the criteria and were transferred to the relevant Families First team.

- 12 Since May 2018, 55 children have been born following a pre-birth assessment being completed by the Pre-birth Assessment Team:
- (a) 8 children have gone home to live with parents on CP/CIN plans, without legal intervention;
 - (b) 1 child is at home on a Care Order
 - (c) 10 children have a plan of adoption and have been made subject to Placement Orders;
 - (d) 8 have secured permanency with family or friends via Special Guardianship Orders;
 - (e) There have been 2 children who are now adopted who were in foster to adopt placements. There is currently a further child who is living within a foster to adopt placement;
 - (f) 11 children who were removed from parental care at birth were placed with possible long-term carers within 2 months of their birth;
- 13 Due to some staffing vacancies in the team, 14 were transferred to different teams having had a pre-birth assessment completed.
- 14 At the time of writing this report, the Pre-Birth team are currently working with 38 families. Of these, 16 are unborn and are in the pre-birth assessment stage, with one unborn child being subject to a child protection plan. There are 22 babies who have post-birth assessments ongoing. Of these,
- (a) 2 babies are in their parents' care and 4 are placed with family or friends;
 - (b) 12 are living in foster care, and 4 are in adoptive placements;
- 15 There are currently 13 children who are subject to care proceedings, of these children, 7 have plans of adoption ratified, rehabilitation plans are progressing for 2 children and 4 children are living within their extended family

Performance data

- 16 Assessment work in the team is timely and the majority of pre-birth assessments are completed by 29 weeks gestation to allow sufficient time for planning for the baby prior to birth. At this point, a multi-agency planning meeting explores all options for the safe and appropriate care of the baby at birth and makes recommendations to this effect.

- 17 There have been 3 cases where Care Proceedings were concluded within 14 weeks of being issued as a result of good planning and thorough assessment which has meant no delay for the baby once born.
- 18 All Initial Child Protection Conferences, Review Child Protection Conferences and child Looked After Reviews have been completed within timescales.
- 19 Children's Services introduced a new children's electronic case recording system in February 2019 called Liquid Logic. The introduction of a live dashboard has transformed the performance information available and helped to improve managers' line of sight and social workers' compliance in relation to performance and practice. There are plans in place to develop a dashboard specifically for the pre-birth team.
- 20 All staff are currently working within the agreed caseload parameters. There has been a number of vacancies over the past 3 months within the team. Following a recruitment drive, we have successfully appointed a team manager and 2 experienced social workers. There is currently 1 social worker vacancy within the team which we are actively recruiting to. These staffing issues have temporarily had an impact on the number of families in receipt of this service but these are now resolved.

Governance

- 21 The Pre-Birth operational group meet on a bi-monthly basis. The group includes representatives from internal services such as fostering, First Contact, One Point and Public Health and external services such as housing, midwifery, substance misuse services, domestic abuse services to ensure a high quality multi agency response to these vulnerable parents and their children. The group is also responsible for disseminating best practice in working with pre birth work across the safeguarding partnership.

Interface between Pre-Birth Team and Pause Programme

- 22 The Pause program works with mothers who have had 2 or more children removed permanently from their care, before they become pregnant again. The aim of the service is to help mothers address their own individual issues before they become pregnant, so that they stand a better chance of keeping their babies. This may be supporting them to access services to address their mental health issues, self-esteem, relationship issues, substance misuse issues, housing etc.
- 23 Barnardo's were commissioned to deliver this service within the east of County Durham over an 18-month period with non-recurrent funding

from Adult Services as part of a regional commissioning arrangement. The funding ceases on 30th April 2020. The service worked with 23 women within the first 12 months of the project and 12 women were considered to have successfully engaged with the project. The Pre-Birth team has worked alongside this service to identify mothers to access the program so that they receive ongoing support where children have been removed from their care and stand the best chance of breaking the cycle of having children removed repeatedly.

- 24 Children's Services are currently exploring alternative ways to support these families post proceedings and achieve a longer-term reduction in the number of repeat pregnancies and referrals leading to care proceedings and removal of children. We are exploring the option of locating some additional support workers within the Pre-Birth team, as an extension of the current team and its remit, to work and support families where they no longer have their children in their care. This work is in the early stages of development.

Conclusion

- 25 There is a lot of positive and effective work being undertaken within the team, and practitioners are committed and passionate about achieving good outcomes for children. Outcomes for children continue to be positive. Plans for 2020 include ensuring that best practice is embedded across all of the services working with vulnerable parents who are pregnant as well as developing the model to provide a continuation of support to parents in situations where they are unable to safely care for their babies with a focus on reducing repeat pregnancies until sustained change has been achieved.

Background papers

- Previous Cabinet reports

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The Children Act 1989 sets out the legal requirement on the local authority to support children in need and to carry out safeguarding investigations and where necessary, issue care proceedings to ensure that children are protected from harm.

Finance

One off funding for this initiative expires on 31 March 2020. Finance is being actively sought to continue with a 'pause' type initiative.

Consultation

No implications.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

No implications.

Climate Change

No implications.

Human Rights

No implications.

Crime and Disorder

No implications.

Staffing

No implications.

Accommodation

No implications.

Risk

No implications.

Procurement

No implications.