

## **County Council**

**20 April 2018**

### **Agenda Item 10(a) – Notice of Motion by Mrs Pendleton**

#### **Think Family Programme - Briefing Note**

Think Family is the local expression in West Sussex of the 'Troubled Families' initiative, a national programme set up by the Government in 2012 to work with vulnerable families who are at risk of instability and breakdown due to the issues they face. The aim is to 'turn the family around' through supporting its members to achieve stability in their lives. It helps to deliver our stated ambition of 'Giving Children the Best Start in Life'.

Vulnerable families tend to experience a range of interconnected issues which can imperil their progress and in particular the welfare and life prospects of their children. Typical problems include unemployment, debt and risk of homelessness. In these circumstances mental health, substance misuse and domestic abuse can often become presenting issues. There may be criminality and anti-social behaviour. Children may experience poor parenting, nutrition and general wellbeing and be absent from school. These children are receiving a pattern of learned behaviour which they are likely to replicate in their own adult lives, thus creating a generational cycle of under-achievement.

The relatively small proportion of families with these characteristics inevitably represents exceptional demand on public services generally. They are more likely to come to the attention of the police; they may have unplanned admissions to hospital; there will probably be a heavy reliance on various kinds of State Benefit; and members may need specialist interventions for a range of mental health and behavioural problems. In the most extreme cases it may sadly be necessary for the County Council to take children into care for their protection. In short it is possible to show that the additional resources applied to Think Family pay for themselves in terms of the costs avoided across the public service spectrum. These benefit a range of organisations in different ways; the major benefit to the County Council arises from avoiding expensive interventions to protect children from harm.

The County Council firmly believes that the best place for children to prosper is within their birth family, where this can be managed safely. Within the Think Family programme support is provided through an intensive intervention from a keyworker provided by the County Council or one of its partners. Where the family has multiple, complex problems, a 'team around the family' comprising a range of specialist skills is frequently assembled; but the relationship of trust developed with a single point of contact is known to be vital in building the family up towards self-sufficiency. We work intensively and assertively with the family over a number of months, taking the entire family as a single unit. We call this 'Early Help' and we now have increasingly sophisticated data sources to help identify the families who most need this kind of support.

The County Council gave strong leadership and responded enthusiastically to the challenge of preventative Early Help, matching central government funding with its own spending from 2012, together with partners, to create a cohort of keyworkers who made a big practical difference to the lives of nearly 1,200

families. During the initial phase of Think Family, 2012-15, the results in West Sussex included:

- 665 families with at least one adult family member back into work;
- 932 families with members resolving their anti-social behaviour;
- 158 families with members reducing criminal behaviour; and
- 660 families with children back in education (at least 85% attendance)

In the second phase, 2015-20, there has been a much greater recognition of the complex inter-relation of the other factors, including Health, Domestic Abuse and Children in Need. The Think Family Partnership has continued to excel, including much closer working arrangements with Health and schools. To date, a further 1,939 families have been turned around against the more complex criteria, and we are on target to deliver the Government's targets for the entire scheme, which ends in March 2020.

West Sussex has indeed emerged as a national leader in the programme. As well as delivering outstanding results, we have been praised in a range of publications, including the recent Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government programme report for 2017/18. A Harvard University study in 2017 singled out West Sussex for praise for its delivery of outcomes, while the participant families themselves give continual testimony to the transformation of their own lives. This is due ultimately to the leadership and investment that the County Council has displayed.

It is important to evaluate the resources saved and benefits gained. National research shows that for every £1 spent, a gross fiscal benefit of £2.11 is achieved across the public sector. We recognised early on that Early Help makes social sense, but also sound financial sense. In terms of grant received, from 2012-20 we expect to have achieved around £14m, comprising £2.5m Service Transformation grant, £7.0m Attachment Fees and £4.5m Reward grant for successful audited outcomes.

It is clear that were it not for Think Family, the demand and cost pressures on Children's Social Care would have been very much more severe. At the same time, while significant progress has been made, the levels of need for preventative early help have proved to be higher, more complex and intense than the original programme conceived. Examples are the impact of widespread financial indebtedness on a family's wellbeing; and the revelation of the extent of children's mental health problems, which has caused national concern. A wave of child abuse scandals across the country has led to far greater awareness and consequent reporting of issues. Austerity at national level and the need to reform the benefit system has also exerted an influence.

This means that the withdrawal of funding for the national programme in March 2020 presents the County Council with a budgetary dilemma, at a time when resources generally are strained as never before. The County Council recognises that its interventions support healthy, happy families and strengthen the communities in which they live. Local and national research has shown this is change that can be sustained, most especially to support today's children successfully into adulthood, into the workplace, and into effective parenthood in their turn.

**Kim Curry**

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