



**Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny  
Committee  
1 February 2017**

**Report from the Director of Policy,  
Performance and Partnerships**

For information

Wards affected: ALL

**Signs of Safety Scrutiny Task Group Report**

**1.0 Summary**

- 1.1 The Community and Wellbeing Committee agreed in its work plan for 2016/17 to set up a number of task groups to review important matters of council policy. Members agreed that during 2016/17 they would set up a task group in order for scrutiny to evaluate the introduction of Signs of Safety by children's services.
- 1.2 Signs of Safety as a subject for a scrutiny task group was judged by members to have met the IMPACT criteria which scrutiny has developed to evaluate and filter whether or not a subject is appropriate to be included in its annual work programme for 2016/17. The task group scoping document in Appendix A sets out the task group's remit, methodology, research methods and its objectives.
- 1.3 The task group started its review in October 2016 and completed its work by January 2017. A copy of the full report is attached in Appendix B.

**2.0 Recommendations**

- 2.1 Members of the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee to discuss and agree the contents of the task group's report as set out in Appendix B.
- 2.2 Members of the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee to discuss and agree the recommendations of the scrutiny task group.
- 2.3 Members of the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee to refer their finalised recommendations to Cabinet.

**3.0 Background**

- 3.1 Signs of Safety is a practice framework for working with children and families and child protection which was developed in Australia in the 1990s and is used today by a large number of children's services departments in local authorities in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States, Australia and Canada.
- 3.2 In 2014, Brent Council was awarded funding from the England Innovations Project, which is managed by the Department of Education, to introduce Signs of Safety as a practice model in children's services. Since early 2015 the department has begun implementation of Signs of Safety as its practice model.
- 3.3 Participation in the England Innovations Project and introduction of Signs of Safety is a corporate priority for Brent Council. It is identified in the Corporate Plan 2015 as a key priority, and a commitment to the effective implementation of Signs of Safety was signed by the Chief Executive and Council Leader in 2015.
- 3.4 Ofsted in 2015 made its own recommendations for scrutiny at Brent Council. The inspectors' view was that that the work programme in 2015/16 had not sufficiently addressed children's social care and scrutiny had made little impact.
- 3.5 The task group started its review in October 2016 and completed its work by January 2017. This was done using the methodology as set out in the report.
- 3.6 The chair of task group was Councillor Aisha Hoda-Benn. The other members of the task group were Councillor Shama Tatler, Councillor Bhawanji Chohan, Councillor Suresh Kansagra, and Councillor Dr Amer Agha.

#### **4.0 Detail**

- 4.1 The task group gathered evidence from qualitative face-to-face interviews with practitioners and officers as well as looking at quantitative data.
- 4.2 The scope of the enquiry by the scrutiny task group was limited to its terms of reference. These were:
- review and comment on specific challenges to the effective implementation of Signs of Safety
  - compare implementation in Brent with implementation in the nine other local authorities which are part of the England Innovations Project
  - reflect on the experiences of front-line social workers, families and children in working with Signs of Safety
  - highlight areas of good practice and any issues of concern
  - examine the budgetary implications for successful implementation of Signs of Safety
  - evaluate realistically the depth as well as the scale of implementing Signs of Safety
  - assess the extent to which the model is being implemented in terms alignment of policies and procedures, quality assurance, workforce training, and research

- evaluate the commitment of the officer and political leadership to Signs of Safety.

#### 4.3 The recommendations in the report are as follows:

1. An engagement programme with partners such as schools, GPs and other health professionals is developed to help further raise awareness of Signs of Safety.
2. The effectiveness of training in Signs of Safety is monitored by using existing workplace surveys to benchmark effectiveness and highlight any issues which may prevent the proper development of training.
3. The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People updates scrutiny annually about progress in implementing Signs of Safety, including social worker retention and other factors which may affect development of the practice.
- 4(a): Measurements are developed for assessing how effective Signs of Safety has been in the long-term in improving outcomes for children and young people.
- 4(b): Brent works with other local authorities who use Signs of Safety to share information about developing measurements for assessing the effectiveness of the model.

### 5.0 Financial Implications

- 5.1 There are no immediate financial implications arising from this report.

### 6.0 Legal Implications

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

### 7.0 Diversity Implications

- 7.1 There are no diversity implications immediately arising from this report. It is anticipated, however, that the more effective and consistent application of the Signs of Safety framework will enhance the safety and protection of the borough's children who are most at risk of harm, and will ensure a child-centred and needs based approach to assessments.

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### **Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Signs of Safety in Brent, Scope for Scrutiny Task Group**

#### **1. Subject**

Signs of Safety was first developed in Australia in the 1990s for social workers as a practice framework for working with children and families and child protection. Since the 1990s it has been adopted by at least 30 local authorities in the United Kingdom as well as children's social care departments in the United States and Canada. <sup>1</sup> The approach of Signs of Safety puts the family at the centre and aims to develop its own strengths and resources to enhance safety for children who have suffered or are at risk. It has its own tools, principles and processes for working with children and families effectively. <sup>2</sup>

Brent Council's children's services first introduced Signs of Safety in 2012; however, it was not widely adopted as social work practice in the department. In October 2014, Brent and nine other local authorities were awarded funding from the England Innovations Project, supported by the Department for Education, to introduce Signs of Safety as their practice framework, which Brent started in early 2015.

As part of the England Innovations Project, Brent Council is working with the child protection consultants Professor Eileen Munro, Andrew Turnell and Terry Murphy, who are leading practitioners and authors of the model.

To introduce Signs of Safety, Brent has co-ordinated its policy and procedures for working with children and families within this new framework, and has set out to train staff who work with families from the service 'front door' through to those involved in child protection case conferences. It has also trained staff from all sections of the department, including those in the leadership team, and has given more extensive training to 115 practice leaders from different teams so that the introduction of Signs of Safety can be more sustained by the department in the long-term. In addition, new staff to the department are trained in the model.

The central objective has been to redesign fundamentally the existing system so that a high-quality practice in Signs of Safety is introduced.

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<sup>1</sup> Munro, Turnell and Murphy, 'Transforming Children's Services with Signs of Safety Practice at the Centre', August 2014, p.15

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p.3

## 2. Rationale

The implementation of Signs of Safety as a framework for working with children and families is an important priority for the children's services department at Brent Council. Participation in the England Innovations Project was identified as a key activity in the 2015 Corporate Plan to improve the quality of social work practice, and a commitment to the effective implementation of the framework was signed by the Council Leader and the local authority's chief executive.<sup>3</sup> Since early 2015 the department has invested resources through the project in training and changing its procedures and policies so they are aligned with Signs of Safety. As this implementation started more than a year ago it is timely to have a review by scrutiny members.

Ofsted observed consistently in an inspection last year that when Signs of Safety was used, it had made a significant difference to how well social workers work with children.

For example, Ofsted noted that:

**"Where social workers and other professionals use this approach, assessments of children's needs contain fuller information, better analysis and a stronger focus on children's wishes and feelings. This leads to plans and the services that meet children's needs."**<sup>4</sup>

Ofsted's inspectors saw that Signs of Safety was being used in children's centres where family support workers receive case supervision from the Early Help team using the model as well as in the Brent Family Front Door, core groups and case conferences. However, in 2015 it was neither being used uniformly by staff across the department nor fully embedded in all practice when interacting with children and families who they work with.<sup>5</sup>

Ofsted also recommended that scrutiny at Brent Council should focus more on children's social care and be challenging in a way that contributes to the improvement of services. The inspectors' view was that scrutiny's work programme for 2015/16 had covered education, health and early years, but gave too little consideration to children's welfare and safeguarding, and it was not possible to see what impact scrutiny had made.<sup>6</sup> By incorporating a review of the implementation of Signs of Safety the new Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee will be addressing this gap and ensure oversight by scrutiny is maintained.

## 3. Outcomes

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<sup>3</sup> Brent Corporate Plan 2015-16, p36

<sup>4</sup> Ofsted, Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, 30 November 2015, p28

<sup>5</sup> Ibid pp.11-14

<sup>6</sup> Ibid pp.7-30

The task group's objective is to develop up to ten recommendations which are clear and directive and based on a rigorous challenge and supported by detailed evidence. Rather than carry out a policy review, which may result in very little change, the task group will make recommendations which can then be implemented by the Cabinet. The scrutiny task group will provide its own perspective on the introduction of Signs of Safety which may be different to that of social work practitioners, senior officers and Brent's Cabinet, and will be questioning about the implementation of the practice model to date.

#### **4. Methodology**

The task group will gather qualitative and quantitative evidence to develop its recommendations. In particular, the task group will do a series of face-to-face interviews with those who are implementing Signs of Safety or are affected by this approach.

They can include:

- front-line social workers
- family and children who social workers work with
- heads of service
- Strategic Director of Children's Services
- Cabinet Member for Children and Young People
- academics and policy experts on Signs of Safety.

It can also talk to representatives of partner organisations who children's services work with such as Barnado's, NHS, or Brent Police.

The task group will also be able to review internal audit documentation regarding the impact of the Signs of Safety approach undertaken within the department.

The task group will also request quantitative information to inform its work and better understand the introduction of Signs of Safety. This could include:

- the number of families and children supported by Early Help
- the number of families and children supported by Child Protection plans or Child in Need plans
- social worker numbers and staff turnover
- the ratio of agency or interim to permanent staff.

It will also draw on wider research into Signs of Safety such as that carried out by King's College and the LSE as well as recent national developments.

#### **5. Timescale**

The task group will report back to the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee on 20 September 2016. The detail of the meetings will be in the task group's project plan.

## **6. Terms of reference**

The terms of reference for the task group will be to:

1. Review and comment on specific challenges to the effective implementation of Signs of Safety.
2. Compare implementation in Brent with implementation in the nine other local authorities which are part of the England Innovations Project.
3. Reflect on the experiences of front-line social workers, families and children in working with Signs of Safety.
4. Highlight areas of good practice and any issues of concern.
5. Examine the budgetary implications for successful implementation of Signs of Safety.
6. Evaluate realistically the depth as well as the scale of implementing Signs of Safety.
7. Assess the extent to which the model is being implemented in terms alignment of policies and procedures, quality assurance, workforce training, and research.
8. Evaluate the commitment of the officer and political leadership to Signs of Safety.

## **7. Membership**

Councillor Aisha Hoda-Benn, task group chair

Councillor Shama Tatler,

Councillor Bhawanji Chohan

Councillor Suresh Kansagra

Councillor Dr Amer Agha

## **8. Officer support**

Scrutiny Officer James Diamond from Strategy and Partnerships in the Chief Executive's Department will support the task group.