Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs

The London Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) Project is an ambitious pan-London programme to improve the way that local safeguarding partnerships deal with child protection referrals, bringing a range of partners together into a single multi-agency safeguarding hub to share information quickly and efficiently as soon as a notification of possible harm to a child is received. Steered by a high level strategic partnership of local government, health, police, probation and the GLA, the ambition is for every borough in London to implement MASH in their own area by autumn 2013. This briefing summarises these proposals.

Overview

The main aim of a MASH is to improve the quality of information sharing and decision making between agencies at the earliest opportunity. This is historically a weak point in multi-agency child protection work and consistently cited as a factor in serious case reviews and high level child protection inquiries (including those into the deaths of Victoria Climbie and Peter Connelly). In time, it is anticipated that MASH will develop to consider vulnerable adults, as well as children.

A MASH team comprises of a group of practitioners, still employed by their individual agencies (local authority, police, probation, health services, etc) but co-located in one office. It operates on the basis of a ‘sealed’ intelligence hub, with clear information sharing protocols giving partners the confidence and trust to engage fully in effective multi-agency working. By combining the information held by the full range of agencies working with a child or family, the MASH process allows practitioners to build up a fuller picture of an individual child’s circumstances and history before deciding the most appropriate course of action to keep them safe.

Notifications to the MASH are considered by a social work manager who makes an initial judgment as to the level of risk to the child and categorises the referral as red, amber or green. This determines the timescale for a decision to be made, ranging from a few hours (four hours in urgent cases) to a few days. Information is shared securely within the hub and is gathered from practitioners such as teachers, GPs, health visitors, school nurses or police officers, who are contacted by their professional lead from within the hub. Once this information has been gathered together, a social work manager makes a decision as to what further action is required.

The MASH process was strongly endorsed by the Ofsted report, ‘Good Practice by Local Safeguarding Children Boards’ and ‘The Munro Review of Child Protection’, and has a high level of buy-in from all the key agencies working with children and families in the capital.
The London roll out is led by a high level Project Board facilitated by the London Safeguarding Children Board, with senior representation from a range of key delivery partners including local government, the Metropolitan Police Service, NHS London and London Probation. At time of writing, six multi-agency safeguarding hubs are already operating in London, in Enfield, Haringey, Harrow, Havering, Lambeth and Westminster, and all boroughs are in line to implement MASH within the coming 12 months. The full schedule for roll out is available at www.londonscb.gov.uk/mash/ alongside a range of guidance and templates to support local implementation.

Analysis

Flexibility versus consistency of process

The profile and need of London’s local authorities varies enormously. A process which works for a high volume, inner London borough, such as Hackney, may not be suitable for an outer London borough with lower levels of need, such as Havering or Kingston. The importance of local flexibility in the precise process and make up of the hub is therefore strongly built into the London roll out, but five factors have been identified as core components which every MASH will need in order to work effectively:

1. **All notifications relating to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children to go through the hub.**

   All concerns of whatever level must be routed through the hub to ensure that low level repeat concerns from a variety of partners can be identified in the MASH, preventing these from being masked through volume or lost in the bureaucracy of a partnership. This focuses on anything with regard to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, and will enable effective interventions at the earliest opportunity. Having one route in and one decision making process ensures a standard of risk assessment and decision making that can be regularly base-lined and audited.

2. **Co-location of professionals from core agencies to research, interpret and determine what is proportionate and relevant to share.**

   This is critical to ensuring all partners have the confidence and trust to engage fully in effective working. The duty of care for agency information remains with the ‘owner’ at all times, and the decisions to share information are made on a case-by-case basis within the statutory framework to ensure information is available upon which to make the best decision. All information should be disclosed within the security of the hub.

3. **The hub is fire walled, keeping MASH activity confidential and separate from operational activity and providing a confidential record system of activity to support this.**

   This provision is required to ensure sensitive information will remain in a confidential environment, where only those who actually need to know get to see the information. Information is disclosed on a strictly ‘need to know basis’.
4. An agreed process for analysing and assessing risk, based on the fullest information picture and dissemination of a suitable information product to the most appropriate agency for necessary action.

Essentially, this is a partnership giving itself the best opportunity to make effective and efficient decisions through having the most complete information at the earliest stage. By utilising a standardised risk assessment and threshold model, a consistency and clarity of decision making will be achieved. MASH will provide proportionate and relevant information to the most appropriate agencies.

5. A process to identify victims and emerging harm through research and analysis.

MASH provides a secure environment where information is subjected to ongoing research and analysis. This will identify victims and perpetrators by understanding repeat notifications and the identification of individuals who will suffer increasing levels of harm in the future. The identification of these individuals and the families around them will enable services to intervene at a much earlier time, thereby providing opportunities to reduce harm and long term costs. The provision of analysis within the MASH enables the commissioning and prioritisation of resources to improve safeguarding provision.

Evaluation and evidence of improved outcomes

As with any new initiative, it is vital that the effectiveness of the MASH process is fully evaluated and the London Project Board is currently developing a comprehensive framework to assess the effectiveness of the new hubs. An evaluative study commissioned by Devon County Council, which rolled out the first MASH in the summer of 2010, is already showing early indications of improvements in decision making and outcomes for children and young people as a result of agencies being co-located, with better information sharing leading to improved responses to referrals.

The first London MASH went live in Harrow in February 2012 and the most recent in Westminster in October, so it is still early days for the project in London. However, some anecdotal evidence of improved information sharing leading to more effective decision making is already emerging, as outlined in the case studies below:

A referral was received regarding police attendance at a 17 year old’s home to execute a drugs warrant. This was initially rated at amber due to the child’s age and lack of further information, and checks were then undertaken by the full range of agencies in the MASH. Police information revealed that the child was well known for gang involvement, with the stepfather known for drugs. Health officials shared details of previous hospital admissions for the child, and the local authority was able to highlight the presence of younger children in the household. Due to this presence of younger siblings, the referral rating was changed to red and passed to the assessment team for more urgent action. The range of information gathered enabled the social work assessment to be focused and clear about a family with a significant criminal history, and to be appropriately risk assessed in terms of impact for the younger siblings.

An unborn baby referral was received from a GP, advising that the mother was 13 weeks pregnant and had previously had children placed in care. This was initially rated as amber. Following MASH checks with the local authority, police and health, a significant history of concerns was revealed, alongside current concerns involving the physical abuse of her previous children and ongoing criminal behaviour. The case was subsequently rated as red, a formal child protection enquiry is progressing and the information gathered has enabled the pre birth assessment to begin with all the necessary information to plan for care proceedings.
Future developments
The eventual aim of the MASH initiative is to develop a process that enables partners to effectively and securely share information to safeguard both children and vulnerable adults, although experience and research has cautioned against widening the remit to vulnerable adults until the MASH process in a local area is fully developed and embedded for children. Safeguarding process in the multi-agency arena is a complex matter, and it is considered that unnecessary risks will be introduced if it is extended too quickly into adult safeguarding. However, this does not mean that stakeholders involved in adult safeguarding should do nothing, as the time in the interim can be usefully used to scope the partnerships arrangements and preparedness and identify the right time to extend the remit of MASH.

Commentary
The London MASH Project represents a significant opportunity for boroughs to strengthen their existing safeguarding partnerships and make a real difference to the effectiveness of multi-agency child protection work locally. Although a number of local authorities have attempted similar initiatives in the past, they have rarely been successful in engaging and co-locating the full range of agencies working with children in the area. The level of practical buy in to the London MASH Project is unique in this respect, with high level sign up from all of the key players through the London Project Board.

At a senior level, health, police, probation and London local government are all clear on the benefits that MASH can bring to multi-agency child protection work, and boroughs should see this as a real opportunity to improve the way they work with partners to secure the best possible outcomes for children in need of support. Information sharing is consistently highlighted as a key weakness in child protection work, often drawn out in serious case reviews and particularly notable in the high profile cases of Victoria Climbie and Peter Connelly. It is clear that there is no magic bullet in this respect, and it is particularly important that children and families identified as needing additional support through this improved approach to information sharing are able to access the help that they need from local services. However, the early signs from London and elsewhere are that multi-agency safeguarding hubs can make a huge difference in allowing practitioners a greater understanding of the individual circumstances behind a referral, and give the local safeguarding partnership the best possible chance of making the right decision for the child.

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