

Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST)

Scrutiny Inquiry Report

Conclusions and Recommendations



Introduction

1. In November 2008, the Scrutiny Board accepted a request for scrutiny from Councillor Brian Selby, relating to the proposed withdrawal of funding from the Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST) project in east Leeds.
2. The Board established a small working group to meet as quickly as possible and report back to the full Scrutiny Board on the following issues:
 - the decision-making process with regard to the decision to withdraw funding from the MAST project
 - any consultation carried out with stakeholders
 - the current proposals for the future of MAST and for wider behaviour support at area level
3. The working group met with Councillor Selby; senior MAST team staff; a local primary school head; and officers from the Director of Children's Services Unit, Children and Young People's Social Care and Education Leeds in December.
4. As a result of the working group's deliberations, the Scrutiny Board has produced the following conclusions and recommendations.

Background

5. The Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST) was initially set up as a pilot project in 1996. The team works with children, their families and schools in the Seacroft Manston family of schools, covering 16 primary and 3 high schools. The team is involved in helping schools where there is concern about a child's emotional well-being or behaviour. Their work can take place in the child's home, at school or at the MAST base. The team provided us with detailed information on the wide range of their activities.
6. The MAST team currently provide help with:
 - children who cannot concentrate or settle in school
 - children/families reacting to negative/traumatic life events eg parental separation, divorce, bereavement
 - children who are emotionally and socially withdrawn
 - children/families experiencing bullying
 - children engaged in bullying
 - children/families who may have experienced some form of abuse
 - advice on educational matters eg exclusion, truancy, school meals
7. The team deals with individual referrals and case loads, but also

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provides a number of group activities. Team members work in a variety of ways. They

- undertake individual work with children eg art work, drama therapy, counselling and play therapy
 - provide therapeutic family sessions
 - undertake issue-focussed groups with children
 - provide advice to schools, parents/carers and children on a wide range of issues
8. MAST receive complex referrals. Following an assessment, a range of planned interventions are used to support positive outcomes for children and their families. The work undertaken is not time limited but is determined by the needs of the children and through regular reviews of cases. We received some case study examples of the team's work.
9. Certain cases may be closed following initial assessment whereas others could be open for up to 18 months. The average time for a case to be open is 8-10 weeks. All work is evaluated through questionnaires.
10. It was also confirmed that the team continued to work with clients for as long as required even if they move out of the immediate area. This could
- happen especially for example as a result of domestic violence, or for looked after children moving placements and schools.
11. In 2006/07 MAST received 112 referrals from 16 schools. Of these 112, 75 individual cases were taken up. In other cases group work was recommended or children were referred elsewhere.
12. We heard that a key feature of the team's success is local people's willingness to engage with MAST staff, and the lack of stigma attached to attending their premises or accessing their services. This is in contrast to a common resistance to work with social services.
13. The MAST team were also highly valued as a source of advice for support staff in schools, and were a key resource for signposting to other services.
14. It was clear to us that the work of the MAST team, both individually and collectively, was generally very highly regarded and valued by children, families, schools and other professionals.
15. As at 1 April 2008 the MAST team staff were:
- Manager
 - Deputy Manager - a full-time teacher/drama therapist
 - 2 half-time Social Workers
 - Youth worker (20 hours)

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- Education Leeds Project Worker
 - Education Leeds Play Therapist
 - Administrator
16. The youth worker moved to a different role in the summer of 2008 as part of a restructure of the Integrated Youth Support Service. She has not been replaced. The administrator left for another job due to the uncertainty over future funding of the project. One of the Social Workers is currently on maternity leave.
 17. The team is currently based at the East Leeds Family Learning Centre in Seacroft, although the future of this accommodation has been uncertain for nearly a year.
 18. The MAST Team Manager is also the Manager of the BEST team (Behaviour and Education Support Team) based at John Smeaton School, and the two teams merged in 2006.
 19. There is a MAST Management Group, chaired by a local headteacher, which meets six times a year. A constitution and action plan for MAST was first produced in 2007/08, and closer monitoring and evaluation of the team's work by the Management Group is now taking place than was previously the case. The MAST Management Group reports to the Seacroft Manston Family of Schools.

Withdrawal of Funding

20. The team is currently funded through Children and Young People's Social Care. The Team Manager's post is 50% funded by Education Leeds, and the administrator is funded by the Seacroft Manston Family of Schools. The Children's Fund has provided funding of over £40,000 per year for at least the past two years, but this reduced to £7,000 in 2008/09. Taking account of this, the cost to the Children and Young People's Social Care budget in 2008/09 was projected to be £152k.
21. As part of budget discussions to arrive at a balanced budget for 2008/09 Children and Young People's Social Care proposed to cease funding to the MAST team, with a projected saving of £80k per year.
22. We were made aware that Children and Young People's Social Care had faced significant financial pressures in setting a budget for 2008/09 onwards. The service had been forced to evaluate all provision in order to identify savings from non-core services. The children and families accessing MAST exhibited needs which were generally well below a threshold which would normally trigger social care intervention, and it was for this reason, combined with the

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reduction in income from the Children's Fund, that it had been identified for funding to be withdrawn.

23. It was acknowledged by officers that the preventative role of MAST would in many instances actually prevent cases escalating to the level where social care intervention was required. However, in the existing financial circumstances, Children and Young People's Social Care felt they could no longer justify continuing funding this team at the expense of the local authority's core social work duties.
24. The first reference we were provided with in relation to the decision to withdraw MAST funding was from the Children and Young People's Social Care Finance Board meeting on 21 January 2008. This was subsequently confirmed in the February 2008 Budget Action Plan 2008/09 to 2010/11, with a projected saving of £80k per year for three years.
25. However subsequent Finance Board minutes indicate that the team's future was still under review in April 2008 after the start of the new financial year. By 25 April 2008 the Head of Children and Young People's Social Care was indicating that the funding would be withdrawn by March 2009 at the latest.
26. It was acknowledged by officers that there was no evidence available to explain how the decision was taken to withdraw funding from MAST rather than other potential areas of saving. It was recognised by the new Children and Young People's Social Care leadership team that there needed to be a more robust and transparent process to support future decision-making, albeit that the decision may still have been the same at the end of such a process.
27. Officers who we spoke to stressed that the decision to withdraw funding in no way implied that the quality of the MAST team's work was in question.
28. The original Children and Young People's Social Care decision to cease funding MAST from April 2008 was subsequently delayed for one year, to come into effect from April 2009. It has now been further agreed to extend the deadline for resolving the future of the team to 1 September 2009, to coincide with the timing of the BEST review (see below) and the start of the new school year.

MAST and BEST reviews

29. The Children and Young People's Social Care decision to withdraw funding from MAST has coincided with a city-wide review of the BEST programme and

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realignment of BEST funding city-wide by Education Leeds, which is still ongoing. Because MAST and BEST are linked in the east of the city, this appears to have relieved MAST in the short term, but also potentially delayed a final resolution of the team's future.

30. A review of the MAST team was carried out at the request of the Director of Inclusion and Integrated Children's Services within Education Leeds, reporting in May 2008. The review followed on from a review of the BIP/BEST teams completed in January 2008. BIP is the national Behaviour Improvement Programme. BESTs are the Behaviour and Education Support Teams set up in schools using BIP funding.
31. The MAST review concluded among other things that there had been a lack of line management and monitoring via Social Care, but that this function had been undertaken more recently through the BEST arrangements and the MAST Management Group.
32. At least partly as a result of this weakness, to date there is a lack of significant amounts of hard data on the successes achieved by the MAST team to complement the anecdotal evidence, survey evidence and case studies which indicate that success has been achieved.
33. In effect the existence of the MAST team has meant that the east area of the city has additional provision to other areas of the city. Whilst there is undoubtedly a high level of demand for the service locally, the current position does not take account of levels of need in other areas of the city and the city-wide review will seek to address this. At a meeting to consider the BEST review report in April 2008, head teachers and senior professionals concluded that equity of access across the city was a key principle for the review to address.
34. Everyone we spoke to acknowledged that it was appropriate to review the overall provision of these type of services at a local level to provide a more sustainable future service.
35. We noted that Family of Schools meeting minutes have referred to concerns over reduced funding for MAST since at least May 2007, but this appeared to be linked to the reduction in support from the Children's Fund initially.
36. We were told that the MAST team has been looking at extending services to other Families of Schools in order to secure additional funding. For example the Temple Moor Family of Schools were accessing the Bridge Centre, and domestic violence support work had also

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been opened up across the whole of the east wedge.

Consultation with stakeholders

37. Councillor Selby outlined his concerns that there appeared to have been little or no consultation with staff, service users or schools on the proposed withdrawal of funding. He was also concerned that there was little written evidence of the Director of Children's Services or Executive Member's involvement in the decision, although it was explained that this was in part because some briefing had only been verbal
38. There had also been no consultation with local ward councillors in either of the two wards affected.
39. He acknowledged that since he had made his request for scrutiny there had been regular meetings involving local councillors alongside the Locality Enabler, the Area Management Board and the Family of Schools. However the service itself was still reducing and new cases were not being dealt with.
40. Councillor Selby also acknowledged the need for a review of provision due to the ad hoc nature of the development of MAST and BEST over a 12 year period. His concern was about the

risk of withdrawal of the existing highly valued service before any replacement provision – whatever shape that might take – is agreed.

41. MAST staff informed us that they initially heard about the planned funding cut from a third party, and were only formally notified by managers in May 2008.
42. The working group deplored the idea that staff in the MAST team heard about the risk to their jobs from a third party rather than directly from management. This is symptomatic of the lack of clear lines of management and accountability which need to be resolved for this and any other multi-agency projects.
43. It was acknowledged by officers that Children and Young People's Social Care had not consulted staff or schools about the proposed cuts. There had been no expectation on the part of Children and Young People's Social Care that other funding would be withdrawn, but neither had consideration been given to the likely impact of unilateral action. It was accepted that this did not match the expectations of integrated working embodied at a strategic level by Children's Services, but had been driven by hard financial expedients.
44. As a result of the uncertainty about the future, the service has

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been reducing, with new referrals not being taken on and at least one member of staff leaving. The MAST Manager explained that the current case load was about 50 cases, plus group work activities. He estimated that when fully staffed the team could handle 15-20 additional individual cases.

45. The team and the local schools are concerned about the loss of local knowledge as well as the loss of service pending a resolution of the wider review of behaviour support services across the city.

Future

46. By July 2008, the Locality Enabler (East), based in the Director of Children's Services Unit, had been tasked with developing a new model of multi-agency provision for the wedge, to be locally commissioned and funded, to operate from 1 April 2009. The timescale for this has subsequently been extended to 1 September 2009 to coincide with the start of the new school year.
47. The Locality Enabler outlined his current thinking on progressing a decision on the future of provision in the east wedge. He had convened a steering group of key stakeholders, including local councillors. The aim was to take a pragmatic approach and seek to more effectively match up the

available resources with staff and functions that needed to be carried out.

48. At the same time effective management and administrative arrangements (for example banking and employer functions) also needed to be put in place for whatever services are to be provided. The Locality Enabler offered to provide minutes of the steering group to the Scrutiny Board to keep members updated with progress.
49. He also confirmed that he was now meeting regularly with the MAST team to keep them updated on the situation, and that he was committed to being open and honest with them in doing so.
50. The working group welcomed reassurance that local stakeholders, including ward councillors, are now involved in developing a proposed model of integrated children's services to replace MAST/BEST in the east. The momentum for this process needs to be maintained to successfully resolve the future for behaviour support in this area of the city, especially as we understand that funding continues to be tight for all parties. The lessons learned here also need to be applied to transition planning for future service changes.

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51. The working group was also concerned that the proposals to redistribute the existing BEST funding 'equitably' across the whole city begged questions about the definition of 'equitably' and about the adequacy of overall resources. Members were informed that once a distribution of resources between wedges was decided, it would be up to the schools in each local area to determine how those resources would be deployed.

Recommendation 1

That the Director of Children's Services ensures that the staff of the MAST team are given clear information about the current plans for the future of the team as a matter of urgency, and that the staff are kept regularly updated on progress.

Recommendation 2

That the present MAST team is retained until revised service proposals are in place.

Recommendation 3

That the Director of Children's Services informs the Scrutiny Board of plans for future provision of the type of service offered by MAST, in the East area of the city and city-wide.

Recommendation 4

That the Director of Children's Services ensures that the local knowledge of staff is properly recognised and retained. Also that the MAST name is retained in some way if it works for local people.

Conclusion

52. The Scrutiny Board recognises the value of the work done by the MAST team.
53. As recently as a year ago the MAST team was held up as a model for multi-agency working and staff were advising colleagues elsewhere on their practices. It seems to us that the whole thrust of Every Child Matters and the establishment of Children's Trusts is designed explicitly to ensure that more multi-agency work of this type takes place, and that appropriate governance arrangements are in place to support this.
54. The Board is therefore disappointed and alarmed that the widely acknowledged benefits of this project are apparently being threatened by a return to 'silo mentality', whereby the service operates in isolation rather than taking account of the wider implications of its decision.

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55. This inquiry has demonstrated how the funding difficulties of one partner can jeopardise the wider achievement of Every Child Matters objectives. The creation of children's trusts is designed to harness and multiply the benefits of joint working and therefore we must find a way of avoiding a repeat of this situation.

Recommendation 5

That the Director of Children's Services produces clear guidelines which support partners to manage existing and future jointly funded activities, projects or teams, with clear lines of accountability for key areas such as personnel and performance management.

Recommendation 6

That the Director of Children's Services produces a protocol with partners which promotes proper consultation with all partners involved in jointly funded activities, projects or teams before the removal of funding. The protocol should allow for the consideration at a strategic level of the implications of the potential loss of any such service within the overall priorities for Children's Services.

Evidence



Monitoring arrangements

Standard arrangements for monitoring the outcome of the Board's recommendations will apply.

The decision-makers to whom the recommendations are addressed will be asked to submit a formal response to the recommendations, including an action plan and timetable, normally within two months.

Following this the Scrutiny Board will determine any further detailed monitoring, over and above the standard quarterly monitoring of all scrutiny recommendations.

Reports and Publications Submitted

- Review of the Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST) – May 2008
- Financial Analysis of the MAST Project
- MAST and decision making within Children and Young People's Social Care
- Summary Notes of Agreed Action from MAST meeting 18 July 2008
- MAST Update – extract from Executive Member meeting notes – 24 July 2008
- Letter to Chair of Seacroft/Manston Family of Schools – 23 July 2008
- Minutes of Seacroft/Manston Family of Schools meetings – 2007 and 2008
- MAST Enquiry – summary of dates
- Information on the work of MAST provided by MAST team (Appendix 1 includes confidential information in relation to staff members)
- MAST briefing from Director of Children's Services Unit
- Report to School Forum – Behaviour and Educational Support Teams (BEST) Review – 18 September 2008
- Leeds Inclusive Learning Strategy 2007-2010

Evidence



Witnesses Heard

Councillor Brian Selby	Ward Councillor (Killingbeck and Seacroft)
David Weetman	Manager, MAST team
Ann Dix	Deputy Manager, MAST team
Ros Hamer	Headteacher, Crossgates Primary School and Chair of MAST Management Group
Ken Morton	Locality Enabler, Director of Children's Services Unit
Tony Griffin	Children and Young People's Social Care
John Fryett	Project Director, Education Leeds

Working Group Members

Councillor Ronnie Feldman
Mr Tony Britten
Mr Ian Falkingham

Dates of Scrutiny

13 November 2008	Scrutiny Board meeting – request for scrutiny
15 December 2008	Working Group meeting
5 February 2009	Scrutiny Board meeting - Inquiry report agreed