

<b>CYP SELECT COMMITTEE</b>		
<b>Report Title</b>	Realignment of Meliot Road Family Assessment Provision	
<b>Key Decision</b>	Yes	Item No. 7
<b>Ward</b>	All	
<b>Contributors</b>	Director of Children's Social Care	
<b>Class</b>	Open	Date: 11 <sup>th</sup> January 2017

## **1. Summary and Summary of the Report**

- 1.1 Following the budget report to Mayor & Cabinet Meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2016 and progress update to CYP Select Committee on 10 November 2016 this report sets out proposals for the Meliot Centre Service to cease operation as an assessment centre and re-align as a contact and intervention centre (with a lesser function of providing interventions and parenting assessments).
- 1.2 This report reviews the Meliot Centre Service detailing its work and demand for assessments and interventions, discusses the proposed service change including need for and patterns of contact, examines capacity within the service to deliver the proposed changes and provides an analysis of financial spend and associated savings.

## **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 The Committee is asked to comment on the contents of the report and to agree to review the full savings report to Mayor and Cabinet.

## **3 Policy Context**

- 3.1 The proposals within this report are consistent with 'Shaping Our Future: Lewisham's Sustainable Community Strategy' and the Council's corporate priorities. In particular, they relate to the Council's priorities regarding young people's achievement and involvement, including inspiring and supporting young people to achieve their potential, the protection of children and young people and ensuring efficiency, effectiveness and equity in the delivery of excellent services to meet the needs of the community.
- 3.2 It supports the delivery of Lewisham's Children & Young People's Plan (CYPP), which sets out the Council's vision for improving outcomes for all children and young people, and in so doing ensuring children stay safe by
- a) identifying and protecting children and young people at risk of harm and ensuring they feel safe, especially from:

- Domestic violence and abuse
  - Child sexual exploitation
  - Serious youth violence
  - Child abuse and neglect
  - Deliberate and accidental injury
- b) Reducing anti-social behaviour and youth offending.
- c) Ensuring that our Looked After Children are safe

3.3 The National Family Justice Review 2011 recommended that criteria for using expert evidence in family proceedings should be strengthened to avoid the lengthy delays which commissioning unnecessary or superfluous reports can create. Provisions in the Children and Families Act 2014 and changes to the Family Procedure Rules 2010 mean that expert evidence can now only be ordered where the judge deems it to be necessary to resolve the case justifiably and where the information sought cannot be obtained from one of the parties. This has significantly reduced the requirement for expert witnesses and Independent Social Worker use by the Court.

## **4 Details**

### Rationale

- 4.1 The rationale for the proposed re-alignment of the Meliot Centre is to meet the corporate objective to deliver efficient, effective and equitable services whilst achieving value for money and addressing the Council's savings requirements given the impact of the Government's austerity measures.
- 4.2 It aims to maximise the skills, development and learning for front line practitioners by delivering a service in line with arrangements with most other local authorities. At the same time this proposal allows for the development of a new 'centre for excellence' model for our in-house contact service, which will include new ways of working with foster carers and families providing quality assured, flexible and appropriate provision to our most vulnerable children. It will ensure that services provided are value for money and delivered within the most effective and efficient arrangements.

### Current Meliot Service Provision

- 4.3 The Meliot Centre sits within the Family Social Work (FSW) service. Members of the staff team are either social work qualified or hold relevant child care qualifications.
- 4.4 The Centre works with families with children from 0–16 years who either reside with their families or are Looked After.
- 4.5 The Centre has independent oversight of cases and produces assessments of children's needs and parenting capacity. It is seen as an independent 'expert' in court proceedings.

- 4.6 The work of the team includes child protection assessments, court directed parenting assessments, transition and rehabilitation work, assertive outreach support and group work.

#### Demand for Assessments and Interventions

- 4.7 Practice statistics demonstrate that 116 assessments were started in the period between December 2015 and November 2016 inclusive (Table 1).

Table 1

Month	Court assess	PLO assess	CP assess	Total assess
Dec 2015	8	4	7	19
Jan 2016	7	3	5	15
Feb 2016	7	5	3	15
Mar 2016	3	4	2 (1CIN)	9
Apr 2016	3	0	4	7
May 2016	2	1	3	6
Jun 2016	1	2	1	4
Jul 2016	4	0	2	6
Aug 2016	8	0	1	9
Sep 2016	4	0	0	4
Oct 2016	7	0	0	7
Nov 2016	14	0	1	15
Total	68	19	29	116

- 4.8 Two Focussed Attachment to Babies (FAB) groups have been delivered this year with 9 parents in attendance.
- 9 parents were involved in the parenting assessment process at Meliot.
  - 8 followed positive assessments, with children returning or remaining at home.
- 4.9 Four Caring and Safe Practical Parenting (CASPP) groups were delivered following 30 referrals received. All parents were known to the Meliot Centre and were either undertaking assessment or having their children rehabilitated to their care.

#### The Venue

- 4.10 The Meliot building is a one story, detached structure situated within a housing estate in New Cross. The centre is served well by public transport. The staff team moved to the premises in April 2015. The building operates Monday to Friday 8am – 6pm with staff working a shift system to maintain these hours. The building is open occasionally at weekends for contact by prior arrangements. The health and safety and security of the building is maintained by the manager at Meliot.

- 4.11 The building comprises of 3 family rooms, an art room and 2 small meeting rooms. There is a room with a one way mirror and taping facilities. There is a room for staff training, meetings, parent groups and workshops. An upstairs office accommodates the majority of the staff team, whilst the small downstairs office supports and monitors reception and greets service users and contract workers.
- 4.12 The Centre was chosen for its layout and would be conducive for contact purposes.

#### Proposed Service Change

- 4.13 It is proposed that Meliot Centre ceases operation as primarily an expert parenting assessment centre and becomes the 'Meliot Contact and Assessment Centre,' re-aligning as principally a contact and intervention centre retaining a lesser function of providing parenting assessments.

#### Current Supervised Contact Provision

- 4.14 Lewisham has no in-house supervised contact provision and consequently supervised contact is arranged via spot purchase. Proposed changes will therefore have the benefit of both saving money on supervised contact and allowing contact to be provided in a consistent premises within a Council service that allows flexibility of response to need as well as enabling stronger quality assurance than exists under the current spot purchase arrangement.
- 4.15 Lewisham spot purchases three main providers for supervised contact: A&A, NRS and Proactiv. A&A have recently ceased operation. Contact services are also spot purchased out of area if children are placed at a distance.
- 4.16 These arrangements have been reviewed and officers assess them as not representing best value for money. The provision is not benchmarked by the Local Authority against quality standards. There are no contracts in place with the current providers therefore there will be no notice period required to terminate them. (Appendix 1: Current Provision).

#### The Statutory Context in Relation to Contact

- 4.17 The Children Act 1989 stipulates that every Local Authority has a duty to promote contact Looked After Children, and, where required, to provide safe contact for Children in Need. In any situation contact must be in the best interests of the child and should not be harmful or detrimental to the child. The child's own wishes and feelings must be taken into account, having regard to their age and degree of understanding. Prior to making any order, the Court is required to consider the issue of contact.
- 4.18 It is essential to be clear about the purpose of contact for each child in the context of their care plan and based on the assessment of all of their

individual needs. The paramount consideration in planning contact, as for all other aspects of their care plan, is the best interests of the child.

- 4.19 Any contact plan should give due consideration both to the child's wishes and feelings and also to their parents' wishes and feelings, but ultimately it must be based on an assessment of the child's developmental needs and how contact can contribute to meeting these in the context of their plan.
- 4.20 Contact is not just between children and their birth parents but is also considered in relation to the child's needs for contact with others in their family including siblings, if placed separately and with their friends.
- 4.21 Contact may benefit both the child and birth relatives in numerous ways (Appendix 2) but it is important to recognise that these benefits will not be present for all.
- 4.22 Supervised contact safeguards children and their families, whilst allowing contact sessions to be recorded so those observations can support and inform assessments.

#### Proposed Programme of Work and Capacity

- 4.23 Parenting assessments will be undertaken mostly during normal working hours but will also involve some contact on Saturdays to meet service user need and availability.
- 4.24 Parenting groups will be run between 9am – 10am weekdays, as there is reduced requirement for supervised contact during these times. Groups will be set up and delivered to meet requirements.
- 4.25 Supervised contact will generally be provided for cases involved in court proceedings only. Approximately a hundred hours of supervised contact will be delivered per week between 10am – 6pm. Saturday contact will be provided to meet assessed need.
- 4.26 Regularity of contact will vary from case to case as some children are involved in multiple contact arrangements, which if not carefully managed allow them little time for anything else. Regularity and duration will be informed by:
  - Court order
  - Previous levels of contact (non-resident parent /extended family);
  - Purpose of contact i.e. assessments;
  - Emotional capability of the child and parent to cope with the contact;
  - Views of the child;
  - The potential disruption and stress to the child' caused by the contact arrangements;
  - Ages of children;
  - Previous parental engagement with supervised contact service.

- 4.27 With regard to cases in court proceedings, in most cases contact three times a week of 90 minutes duration is usual. This would allow a child to balance contact with other social commitments. In considering overall contact arrangements, in general all children should have at least 2 days per week when they are free to enjoy normal social activities within placement.
- 4.28 If parents are presenting separately and each wishes to be assessed as a sole carer for the child a level of twice per week with each parent may be appropriate even though this is slightly more intrusive.
- 4.29 Parental contact with newly-born babies and infants may be higher, particularly if the mother is breastfeeding, though sessions may be of shorter duration as there is increasing evidence that even 5 times a week is disruptive and stressful for the baby or infant and again, that such frequent contacts should be avoided to allow the child to settle in its new placement.
- 4.30 A proposed schedule (Appendix 3) has been drawn up detailing the purpose and context of contact. This will be used with social care staff to regulate the level of contact arranged to ensure consistency in the best interests of children and their families. It will also be put to the courts to inform and support care planning thus inhibiting the need for the court to set levels of contact.

#### Judiciary

- 4.31 Following informal discussions between the Director, Children's Services, Principal Lawyer for Lewisham and Lewisham's Link Judge, indications were of essentially being in agreement with the proposal for social workers to undertake, and present to court their own parenting assessments rather than using Meliot as an expert assessor.
- 4.32 The independently chaired Family Justice Review (2011) concluded that there was a culture of 'routine acceptance' of the need for 'experts' in family law cases and raised concerns that this was duplicating the work of the local authority, leading to delays and potentially compromising the welfare of children (Family Justice Review, 2011a.)
- 4.33 The interim report of the Family Justice Review (2011b) cited evidence that suggested an over-reliance on experts may be, in part, a result of a cycle whereby the courts assessed that social work evidence was of insufficient quality which, in turn, affected the confidence of social workers and led to local authorities relying on experts to inform decision-making and planning. More recent research has indicated that reforms to the public law system since 2014 have resulted in the local authority social worker being seen as the primary expert in proceedings and this has empowered social workers to take ownership of their cases (Ipsos MORI, 2014.)
- 4.34 The government has also developed standards to improve the quality of expert evidence by Social Workers who want more support to provide

“effective and confident” evidence to courts. Development work is also in place locally to enhance this.

#### Staff Consultation Process

- 4.35 Informal discussions with staff have been taking place looking at how the refocused service could work. This will help inform the proposals for formal consultation. Affected staff and their trade unions will be fully consulted on proposed changes in accordance with the Council’s Management of Change Policy.
- 4.36 Questionnaires were also sent to FSW staff to seek their views. Responses indicate that 50% felt they already had the skills to complete parenting assessments on their own cases and had done so over the last year; around 50% also said they would be keen to learn new skills to assist their social work practice and would be interested in co-working with colleagues who already undertake parenting assessments or group work and 75% said they already used tools to assist them with direct work and assessments. The main worry for staff was capacity to complete assessments.
- 4.37 The retention of parenting assessment capacity within Meliot will ensure that there is consultation and joint work with the Family Social Work service and capacity to do a high percentage of court ordered assessments. The main impact for the service will be completing Child Protection assessments and Public Law Outline assessments which is what would anyway generally be expected of social workers in most local authorities as it is in line with their skills and formal training.
- 4.38 Irrespective of this proposed change, plans are in place for a review of capacity and skills development aligned to the Children’s Social Care Workforce Strategy.

#### Analysis of Spend

- 4.39 In order to meet the corporate objective to deliver efficient, effective and equitable services, whilst delivering value for money and addressing the savings requirements on Children’s Social Care following the Government’s austerity measures, the review of the Meliot Centre has considered and concluded that Meliot should change from primarily a family assessment centre and re-focus as a contact and intervention centre with a lesser function of providing parenting assessments.

#### Health & Safety Costs

- 4.40 To ensure that the service meets health and safety requirements a ramp and handrail should be fitted to facilitate access to the Meliot Centre front door.

#### **Expenditure**

**-£9k**

- 4.41 A gate and fencing is required to aid security to the Meliot Centre, this is to ensure the security of children and other service users during periods of contact; this addresses the risk of children being taken from the centre by their parents during contact.

**Expenditure**

**-£8k**

Establishment Costs

- 4.42 A reorganisation of staffing arrangements will release a saving of £93k. Some staff will also transfer to provide an in-house supervised contact service.

Bringing Supervised Contact In-house

- 4.43 The cost of spot purchasing supervised contact by external providers calculated from paid invoices for the 15/16 Outturn = £643k; 16/17 to Nov.16 = £381k. A reduction of £30k has been made for provision of spot purchase as required for children placed some distance from Lewisham.

**5 Financial implications**

- 5.1 Apart from the minor alterations of the building there are no capital implications of this savings.
- 5.2 The main cost of the supervised contacts is for the hire of rooms and using the Meliot Centre will avoid these high rental costs. Some of the existing staff will supervise the contacts in the future making an overall saving on supervised contacts of £417k.
- 5.3 The saving does allow for transitional work with the Family Social Work service to support delivery of the new arrangements.
- 5.4 This will allow an overall estimated saving of £600k to be made in a full year. The original saving proposal put forward to the Mayor in September 2016 was £734k and officers will consider alternative savings to close the gap.

**6 Legal implications**

- 6.1 There are no particular legal implications arising, save that our HR procedures will be adhered to in relation to staffing issues.
- 6.2 The conduct and timetabling of Public Law applications in relation to children is now governed by the Children and Families Act 2014, and the practise directions issued from time to time in relation to this. The duties to promote contact to Looked After Children and to provide support services to families arise from the provisions of the Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 2004.

**7 Crime and disorder implications**

7.1 There are no crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

## **8 Equalities implications**

8.1 The Equality Act 2010 (the Act) introduced a new public sector equality duty (the equality duty or the duty). It covers the following nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

8.2 In summary, the Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

8.3 The gender and ethnicity breakdown for the service is attached (Graph 16). All posts are currently occupied by women, 5 of which are from BME groups. This is a higher proportion than the Council as a whole.

## **9 Environmental implications**

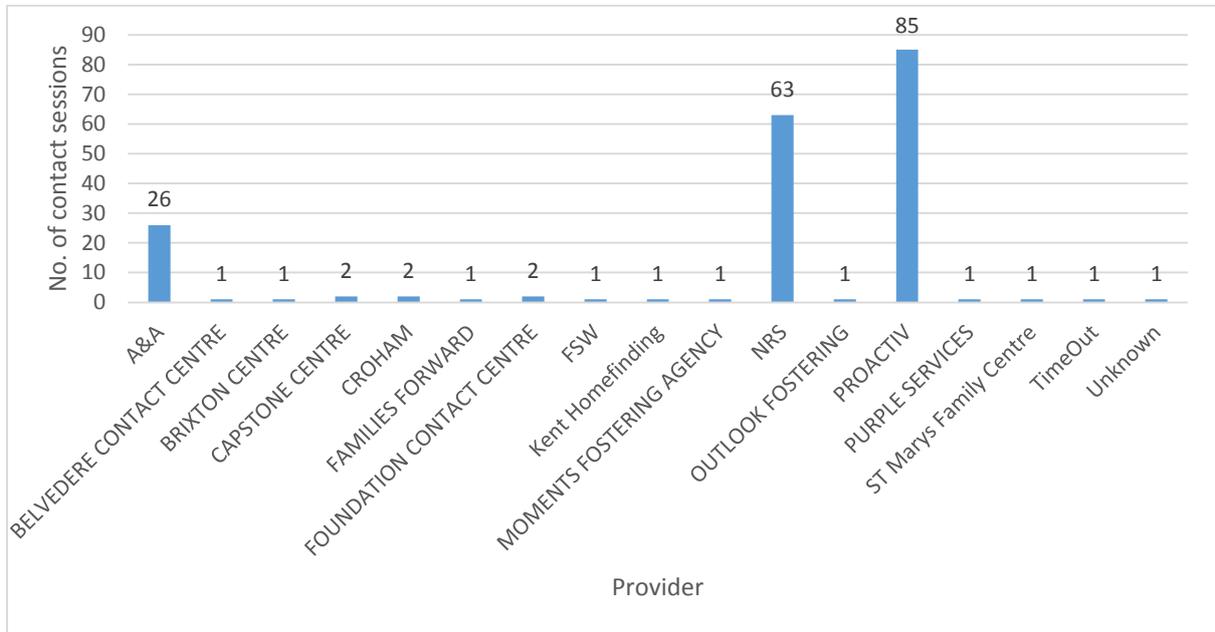
9.1 There are no environmental implications arising from this report.

## **10 Background documents and originator**

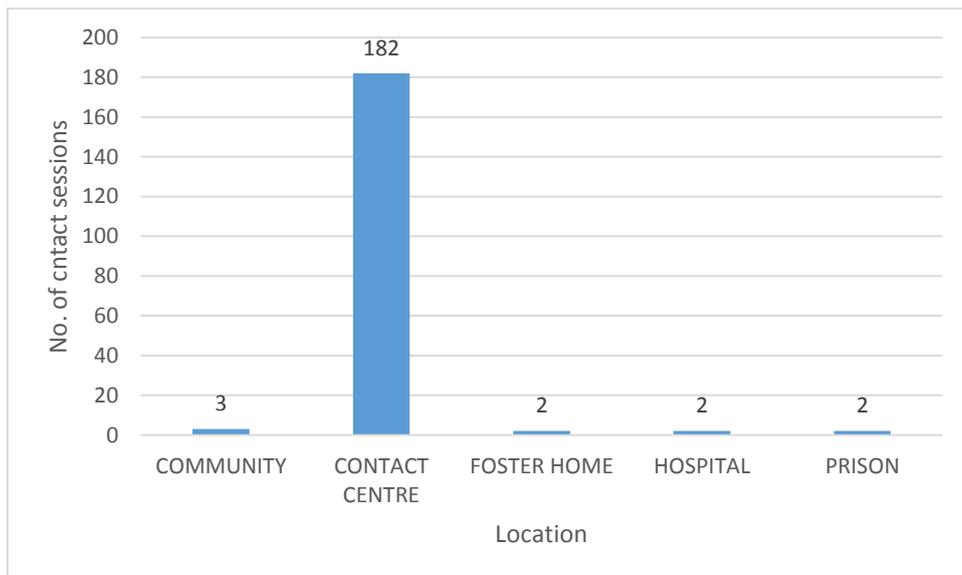
If there are any queries on this report please contact Stephen Kitchman on 020 8314 8140.

## Appendix 1: Current Provision

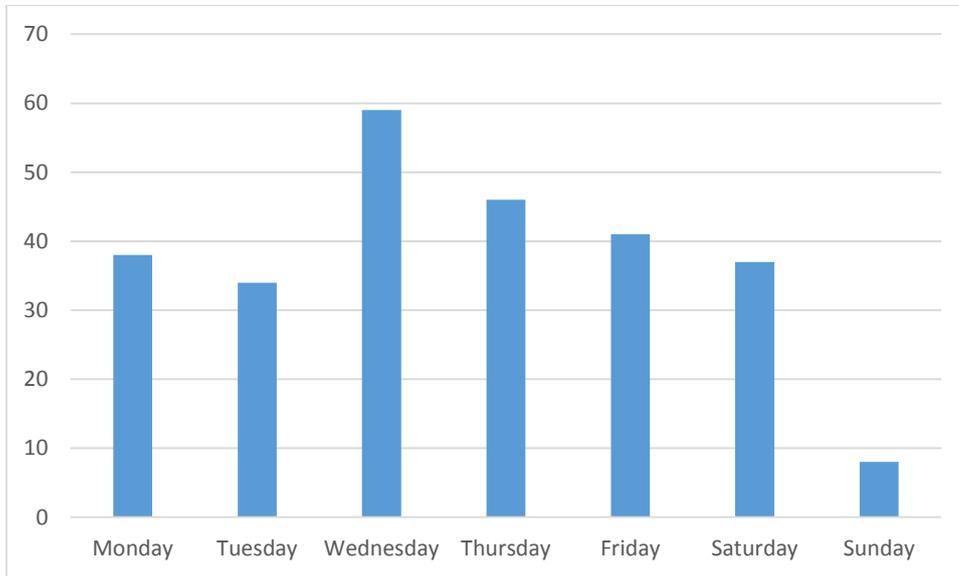
Graph 1: Contact agencies used to provide supervised contact during the period between 1/1/15 -18/10/16:



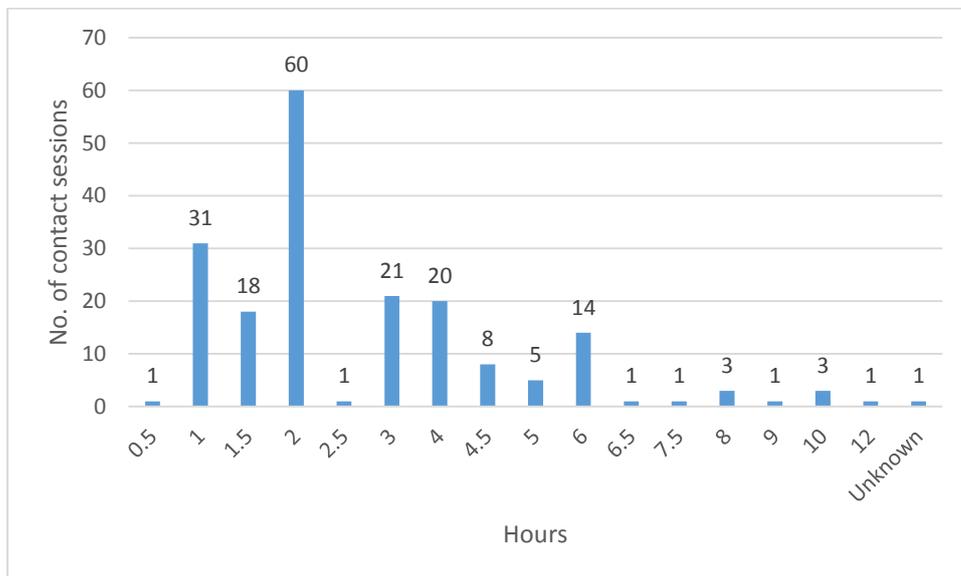
Graph 2: Where supervised contact took place during this period:



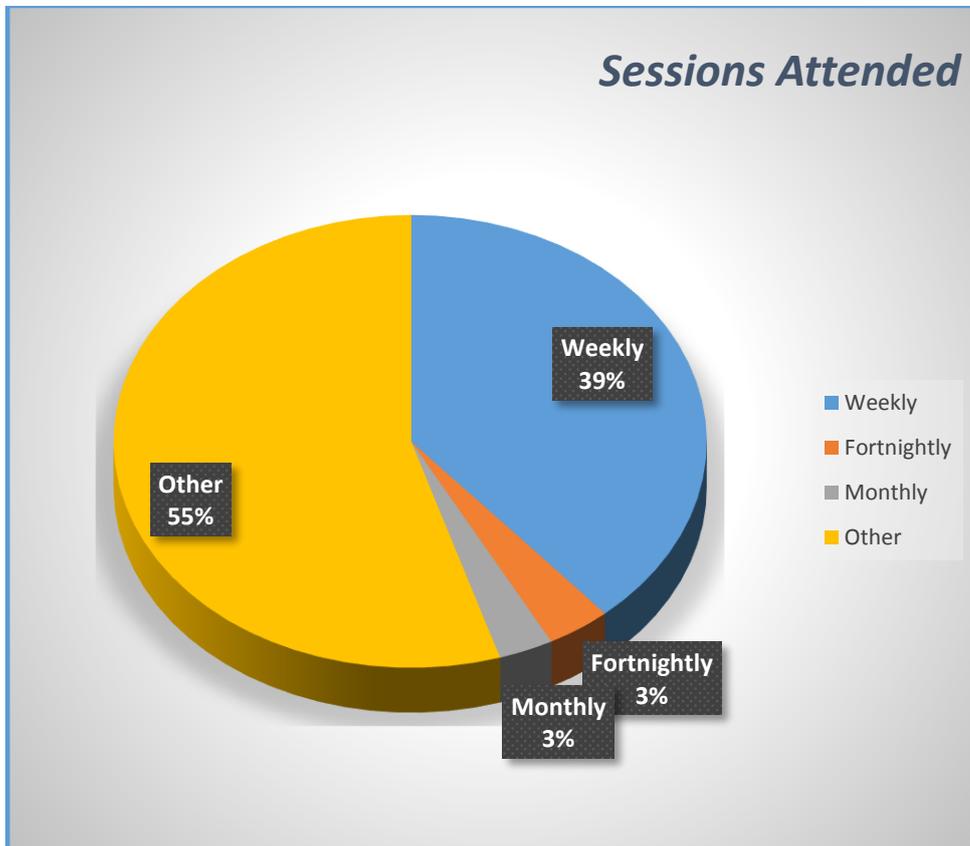
Graph 3: All supervised contacts needed during the period 1/1/15 -18/10/16:



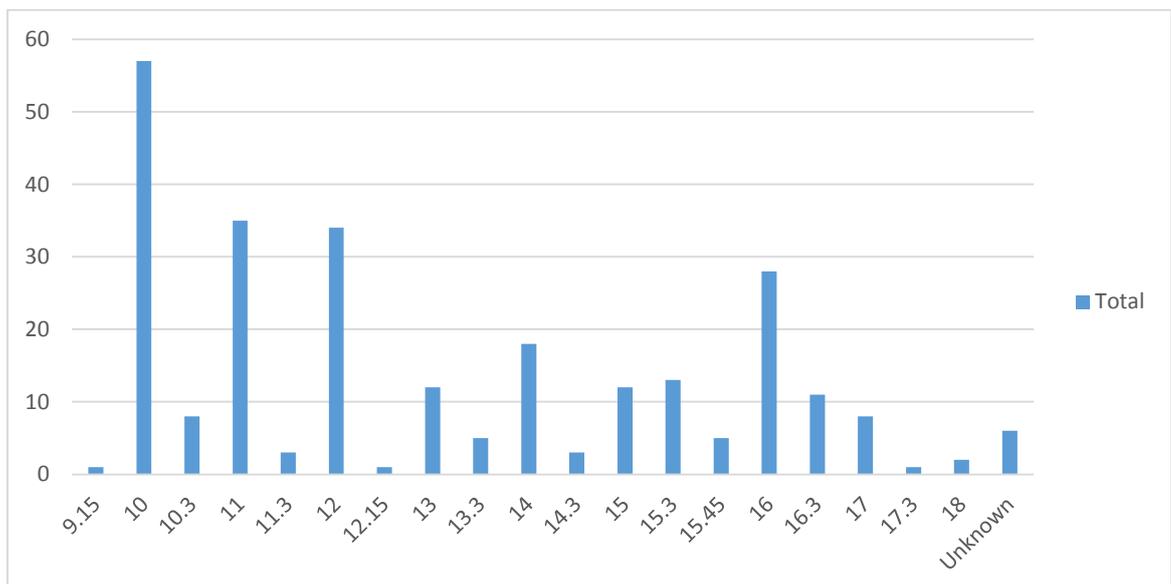
Graph 4: The number of hours per week, per family, that were set up during 1/1/15 -18/10/16:



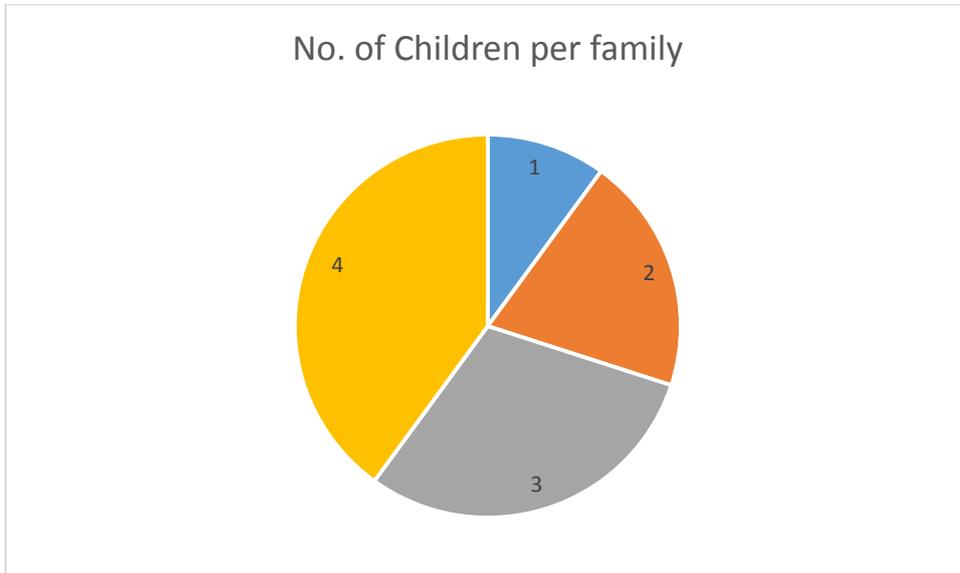
Graph 5: The percentage of weekly, fortnightly, monthly and other sessions attended by families between 1/1/15 until 18/10/16:



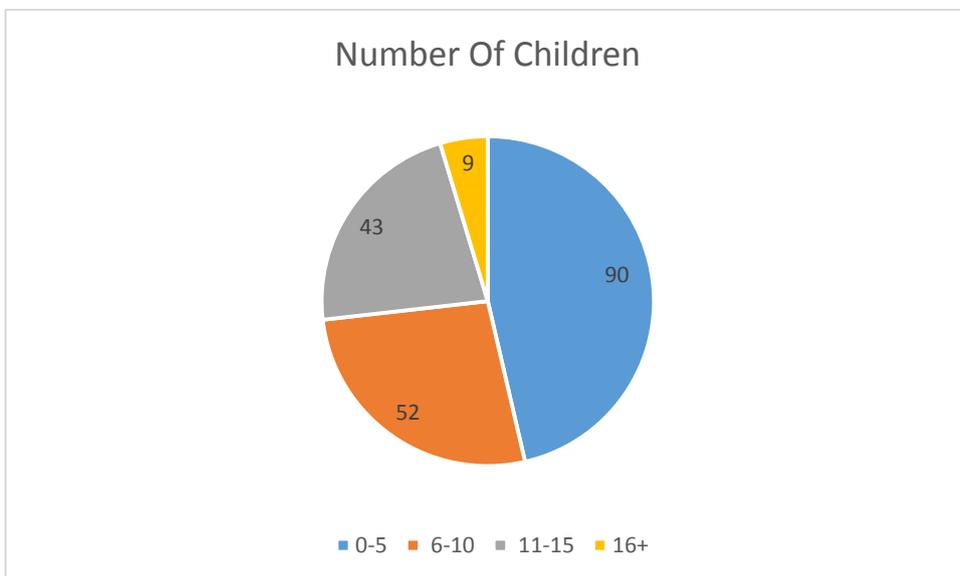
Graph 6: Contact start times throughout the day:



Graph 7: The number of children, per family, that attended supervised contact sessions:



Graph 8: The ages of children requiring contact during the period 1/1/15 - 18/10/16:



## Appendix 2: Benefits of Contact

For the child contact may assist in:

- Helping to ease their sense of loss and provide reassurance about the well-being of birth relatives and significant others.
- Maintaining relationships that are important to them.
- assessing whether reunification with the birth family is possible.
- Maintaining relationships so that reunification is possible.

For children in long term placements including adoption, the contact may also assist in:

- Helping them to come to terms with the past.
- Providing an opportunity for the young person to gain more knowledge and understanding about their personal and family history.
- Helping them to maintain links with their race, religion and culture of origin – which may enhance their self-esteem and identity.
- Linking their past and present.
- Enabling them to see their birth family acceptance of their carers and therefore reducing feelings of potential conflict.

For the birth family contact may assist in:

- Helping to ease their sense of loss.
- Maintaining relationships so that reunification remains a possibility.
- Assessing and developing parenting skills.
- Promoting sibling contact.

In long term placements contact may also help birth families through:

- Enabling them to come to terms with the new circumstances including acceptance of the carers.
- Enabling them to give the child a link with the past and reassurance.

For the carer contact may assist in:

- Providing reassurance for the child, reducing anxiety, fear of rejection and improving placement stability.
- Improving the carers' understanding of the child's birth family and providing information from the past which may assist in understanding current and future behaviour of the child.

In long term placements the contact may also assist carers in:

- Working with the child's story throughout the course of childhood rather than closing off the child's past.
- Encouraging discussion with the child and help them to understand the situation better.
- Allowing birth families to give carers permission to parent the child.
- Helping the carer to give the child a view of relationships which can change over time as circumstances change.

### Appendix 3: Proposed Schedule

SUPERVISED CONTACT FOR CASES IN COURT PROCEEDINGS (CASES NOT IN COURT PROCEEDINGS TO BE SUPERVISED BY FAMILY MEMBERS/CONNECTED PEOPLE)			
PURPOSE AND CONTEXT OF CONTACT			
AGE	DURING ASSESSMENT	RE-UNIFICATION (PRO-ACTIVE AND TIME LIMITED)	PERMANENCE
0 – 2	3 x per week –maximum for 1.5 hours. (Where possible and if appropriate the foster carer will supervise contact).	5 x per week – 2 hours Leading to some overnight stays (Placement with Parents as applicable), when assessment indicates this is appropriate and re-unification is likely.	If direct contact agreed minimum 1 x per year, 1 hour; maximum 2 x per year – 2 hours (Adoption) Indirect contact, one or two way, minimum 1 x per year maximum 2 x per year
3 – 4 (pre school)	3 x per week –maximum for 1.5 hours. (Where possible and if appropriate the foster carer will supervise contact).	3 x per week – 3 hours Leading to some overnights (Placement with Parents as applicable), when assessment indicates this is appropriate and re-unification is likely.	If direct contact agreed minimum 1 x per year, 1 hour; maximum 2 x per year – 2 hours (Adoption) Indirect contact, one or two way, minimum 1 x per year maximum 2 x per year
5 – 10 (primary school)	2 x per week –maximum for .5 hour (after school). (Where possible and if appropriate the foster carer will supervise contact).	3 x per week – 1 hour (midweek) weekend 2 hours leading to some overnights (Placement with Parents as applicable), when assessment indicates this is appropriate and re-unification is likely.	<b>Adoption.</b> If direct contact agreed 1 x per year – minimum 2 hours, maximum 2 x per year – 4 hours. Indirect contact, one or two way, minimum 1 x per annum maximum 2 x per year. <b>Long term fostering</b> 1 x visit per school holiday up to 2.5 hours plus indirect and phone contact, as agreed.
11 – 16 (senior school)	1 x per week – maximum 2 hours	2 x per week – weekday 1.5 hours weekend 3 hours. Leading to some overnights (Placement with Parents as applicable.) When assessment indicates this is appropriate and re-unification is likely.	<b>Long term fostering</b> young people of this age will be much more involved in the contact plan. Once per school holiday (i.e. 6 times per year).