



# INTRODUCTION

First Response is Bristol's front door to Social Care, Families in Focus, and Early Help services. It is the service where people can report if a child is being abused or neglected, or if a family or child are in need of additional support within the Bristol area. For members of the public concerns can be raised by telephoning the service. If a referrer has additional needs and are unable to communicate verbally, they can request a First Response Advisor make contact via their preferred communication method. For professionals there is the option of calling First Response if their concern is urgent, otherwise they are to complete an online form. It is a well-established service which has helped to underpin Bristol's response to concerns for the welfare of children and young people, including managing requests for help, information and advice for families in need of early help services.

It was recognised by management in both Quality Assurance and First Response that referrals directly from children and young people directly to social care or early help may help reduce risks of harm to children and young people. Young people's awareness of risks and their knowledge of their local community often outweighs that of the adults around them.

The Shadow Board within the Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership is a group of young people who support the shaping of services, known as the strategic side. They come from a range of backgrounds and meet regularly to undertake projects and have direct conversations with senior leadership to suggest change and advocate for their peers. Research in Practice's news article from Care Leavers in Devon highlights the importance of involving young people in shaping services:

*Having a non-tokenistic approach to involving young people in service design is important. It only works if it's done properly. Young people are the experts on their experiences, so ask them for their opinions- they have a voice, let them use it.*

The Shadow Board were asked to undertake 'secret shopping' of First Response. Secret shopping is where someone pretends to require the service but uses the opportunity to analyse what the experience would be like for users. This links directly with priority two of the Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership Strategic Plan: *increase and find different ways to work with citizens of Bristol to improve our polices, systems and processes.*

The key aims were:

- To understand the accessibility of First Response for children and young people for them to make referrals about themselves or their peers
- To understand the barriers, if any, preventing children and young people from making referrals to First Response

## PREVIOUS LEARNING

Research in Practice published a strategic briefing on risk-taking adolescents and child protection. It looks at the Safeguarding Young People study. This study highlights young people's 'heightened awareness of the potential impacts of disclosure,' saying they are less likely to ask for help than younger children. The paper also states that young people were often worried they would not be believed or did not know who to tell about their concerns. It also says that children and young people do not understand the difference in professional roles or the safeguarding process overall.

Learning from a Bristol Serious Case Review of Child D acknowledges that male young people in the city of Bristol are less likely to ask for help. They are more likely to be involved in youth offending and to be excluded from school. Reports following Operation Brooke, which looked into cases of Child Sexual Exploitation in Bristol and the surrounding areas, had a list of findings for how service improvements need to be made. Finding number 1 says that the voices of young people will be raised through consultation with the Shadow Board. Finding number two suggests that the former Bristol Safeguarding Children's Board is to support local and national campaign work to encourage reporting of concerns, including messages from the Shadow Board.

The Department for Education's 2014 paper; *Listening to and involving children and young people*, refers to the voice of children within education. It says that *effective leadership is engaging pupils as active participants in their education and in making a positive contribution to their school and local community.* This sentiment is reflected in the involvement of the Shadow Board to shape safeguarding services.

Another important document that links into this project is Bristol's 2015 CSE Strategy. This strategy says: *Access to support services for those at risk of or those*

*who are being sexually exploited should be simple and straightforward, recognising their immediate need for support as victims of sexual violence and abuse.* This gives us a basis for exploring how accessible First Response is for children and young people to make self-referrals or to raise concerns about their friends.

## FIRST STEPS

Conversations were held with management within Quality Assurance and First Assessment service and it was felt that Secret Shopping would be an insightful way to understand how First Response meets the needs of young people who were worried about themselves and their friends. The Shadow Board were asked if they would like to take part and four members requested to be involved. When it came to undertaking the project, only two members engaged fully. This was partly due to the COVID-19 restrictions and their own timetables around school or college commitments alongside part-time employment.

COVID-19 risk assessments were carried out and the two young people met with the Participation Project Officer on separate occasions at City Hall. This ensured that they were supported through the calls and any risks of distress reduced. Telephone calls were made to First Response whilst on loudspeaker. The young people took the lead with the telephone call and acted as if they were making a true referral to First Response. Management within First Response were informed when calls were due to take place and were also notified after a call was completed. Details of the cases were passed on to management within First Response to ensure this was either not placed on LCS (Bristol Children's Services database) or a note was placed on the system.

Out of the two young people who joined in the project, one of them offered their time twice which made three telephone calls in total. Both young people have experience using services within Bristol throughout their lives and were keen to be involved in the project.

Following the calls, reflective conversations took place between the Shadow Board member and the Participation Project Officer. Their thoughts and feelings were explored and their suggestions for changes were noted.

## FINDINGS

### Accessibility

It is important to note that First Response is set up to respond to serious concerns about children and young people. During these calls the Shadow Board members did not go into enough detail to generate a referral, rather they used the opportunity to

understand First Response as a gateway to passing on their concerns. Well-grounded and helpful advice was provided by the First Response Advisors.

The Shadow Board members found the automated options at the start of the call clunky. They spoke of feeling intimidated and daunted at the length of the voice recording and that the option of members of the public raising concerns is not until option 4. This made them question the relevance of their telephone call. The automated options spoke of urgent and 'serious concerns,' which the Shadow Board members felt would have put themselves and their peers off from continuing the telephone call. The option for members of the public says 'calling to report concerns about a child, or to request help, advice or support for yourself or someone else.' They said that if the call had been real, they would have minimised their own concerns as not being serious enough.

One of the Shadow Board members struggled with the language used during the calls. This young person is also part of the Youth Parliament and is aware of more professional language. However, there were certain phrases and questions that the young person did not understand and felt they would intimidate and confuse their peers. Even with their understanding of professional language, the young person was unclear what was meant by 'ethnicity' and did not know what a 'designated safeguarding lead' was. They were confused by certain questions asked, including 'how does the child present?' wondering what the First Response Advisor meant by this.

During the debrief with the Shadow Board member, it was discussed that the language they used themselves during the call came across as professional too. Whilst reflecting on this, the young person was able to clearly say that they personally did not understand certain phrases. Their use of certain terms comes from their lived experience of services and their frequent contact with professionals. The young person emphasised that their role within the Shadow Board is to advocate for their peers and this is why they are concerned that the professional language used was not accessible.

The other Shadow Board member did not feel that language was a barrier during their call and that the terminology used was appropriate and easily understood in relation to their concerns about homelessness.

## **RISK HOLDING**

Until the two Shadow Board members were involved in this project, they were not aware of First Response or its role within safeguarding. The Shadow Board have been asked to rebrand First Response to make it more appealing for children and young people to make their own referrals as management are aware that it is not a well-known service amongst children and young people.

Both Shadow Board members commented on how they were left feeling after the telephone calls. The advice given to the young people was appropriate and helpful, signposting to the relevant services that the Shadow Board members would not have otherwise known existed. The Shadow Board member who called with regards to the homeless young person stated they felt relieved that there are services available that would help homeless young people immediately that evening. The calls did not provide enough information to generate a referral. However, both members said they felt they were left holding the risk and that the emotional toll to ensure their friends were safe was left on them. They felt that there were perhaps other ways in which a system could be set up to be more flexible to young people's needs.

## **CONSENT**

Following the first telephone call, the First Response Advisor contacted the young person with more information and the appropriate services available. Although this was relevant for the case, it was noted by the Shadow Board member that they did not consent or provide their number to the First Response Advisor and felt that some clarity around obtaining their details would have been helpful.

The second Shadow Board member had a different experience. They were not called back as they were given a large amount of information during the call, but they were not asked if they would like to provide their telephone number. The young person's feedback was that they were glad they were not asked for their number at the time but felt that this should be an option. Given their personal experience of services, this member felt that the option of providing their number and the First Response Advisor contacting services on their behalf would have helped remove some of the stress they had experienced as a young person when they were trying to find support for themselves.

## **OTHER LOCAL AUTHORITIES**

Devon County Council runs a Youth Enquiry Service, known as YES. The service is based within three different area offices, including Exeter, Newton Abbot, and Ivybridge. YES provides a face-to-face service as well as a telephone line, offering advice and support around; employment and education; health and wellbeing; leaving care; housing; relationships; substances; travel.

Bridgend County Borough Council have an IAA Team (Information, Advice and Assistance) specifically around concern for children's wellbeing. Although this is not aimed directly at children and young people accessing information, it does provide advice rather than a referral process. Bridgend also have their Youth Support service. This provides young people with support via the telephone, Skype or a forum. There is an option to have an instant online chat with a youth worker between

the times of 9am and 4pm. They provide support for; health and wellbeing; education and employment; young people's voice; and housing support.

Within Hampshire County Council's website there is a direct link from the social care pages to their support for young people. Within this webpage there are links directly to support for young peoples'; future; sexual health; young carers; YOT; and volunteering. There is also a clearly marked tab to take children to the Children's Services referral page.

Eastleigh Borough Council has a clear section on their home page for young people. This directs them to links for support, as well as direct links to Hampshire's Children's Services pages too.

## SUGGESTIONS

The Shadow Board acknowledge that First Response is not an advice line. They feel that there is value in an advice line as there is not currently a designated place in which children and young people can call for advice specific to support available in Bristol. The Shadow Board members feel that First Response could benefit from some additional child-friendly changes to be more inclusive for children and young people to self-refer or raise concerns about their friends:

- Change the order of the automated options at the start of the call
- Include an option for children and young people- separate line
  - This line to be manned specifically to cater for children and young people rather than professionals or adults
  - Advisor on this line to use child-friendly language
  - Advisor to provide more of an advice line
  - Evidence gathered during call to be placed on LCS as it would if a call to First Response was made with enough information to identify the child
  - Clear explanation about how the young person's details and the information given will be used
  - Option of passing the young person's details to the services and requesting the services contact the young person back directly, reducing the level of risk held by the young person

# CONCLUSION

The Shadow Board have done a great job at providing their free-time and experience to help consider ways in which we can better help and support vulnerable children and young people. First Response is set up for professionals and members of the public to report serious concerns and risk of harm to children and young people. It is also a pathway to early and help and advice for parents. It has proven to provide appropriate and relevant advice during this project. It may be worth acknowledging that if young people were to contact First Response for advice on a large scale it would impact the service's capacity.

The suggestions for change have been proposed by the Shadow Board as they feel simple changes would help First Response to be more accessible for children and young people. They feel the main gap for children and young people accessing help is knowing where to get support in the first place, and that with a few changes, First Response would have an important role to play in helping young people access the support they need.