

## **Future of the Placements for Looked After Children (LAC) Task Group**

### **Purpose of the report**

1. To recap on the work done by the Task Group since it was established in March 2010 and to propose its future direction.

### **Background**

2. The Placements for Looked After Children (LAC) Task Group was established by the Committee in March 2010 with the following resolution:

*"To establish a task group to scrutinise the draft Placements for Looked After Children (LAC) Commissioning Strategy and make recommendations to the Children's Trust Board and the executive as appropriate."*

3. The Commissioning Strategy had initially been expected to be received by the Children's Services Select Committee, but was not ready for public consideration in time for the Committee's March meeting. The Task Group was therefore established in order to scrutinise the Draft Commissioning Strategy before being approved by the Children's Trust Board and Cabinet.
4. In reality, the Commissioning Strategy has been an evolving document and the number of issues that touch upon placements for LAC (accommodation, educational attainment, placement brokerage, family & parenting support etc) have required a rolling task group, meeting a number of times to consider the full scope of services for looked after children.

### **Task Group's work and future direction**

5. The Task Group has had four meetings in total and has considered a large amount of information under the broad umbrella of Placements for Looked After Children. All the documents and information that have been considered are listed in a table at Appendix A, along with brief summaries of the particular issues and concerns that have arisen during members' discussions.
6. At the Task Group's meeting on 18 February 2011, members recapped on the work done so far and discussed how they would like the Task Group to move forward. It was agreed that members of the Task Group have gained considerable knowledge of the family placements service and related areas and that this would be essential in continuing to scrutinise these issues.

7. It was also noted that the Task Group had now agreed the format for the performance monitoring document, containing past, present and target Key Performance Indicator (KPI) data for the Family Placements Service, including regional and national benchmarking figures. These KPIs were chosen by members as the ones that reflect the Commissioning Strategy's impact on the historically volatile placements budget, and most importantly on outcomes for looked after children. This data is collected as part of the services' normal monitoring arrangements and officers are happy to provide it in the format that members have requested.

8. It was noted that the Council's new Business Plan 2011-15 lists Vulnerable Children and the Family Placements Service as a key priority for the Council over the next four years. The Financial Plan includes an additional investment for Vulnerable Children of £0.675m in 2011-12 and further investments of £0.650m each year until 2015, equalling an uplift in the base budget by year four to £1.325m. It reads as follows:

*"The number of looked-after children has continued to increase... We have responded to these pressures by developing an in-house fostering provision, recruiting local carers and expanding schemes such as supported lodgings and semi-independent accommodation for vulnerable teenagers. Our service needs to continue to expand to meet the increase in numbers; dedicated foster carers are needed for unaccompanied asylum seekers, disabled children, those requiring respite and vulnerable teenagers..."*

*Our Family Placement Service (FPS) also needs to strengthen its post-adoption support to meet the needs of those young people who have been adopted with complex health needs due to maternal drug and alcohol misuse and parental health issues.*

*The Family Placement Service will be strengthened to meet the needs of Wiltshire children in Wiltshire local family placements...Children adopted will receive good quality post adoption support."*

9. How the Select Committee will use the Business Plan to inform its work programme overall is discussed elsewhere in this agenda. However, members of the Placements for LAC Task Group feel that the Task Group is the most appropriate forum for scrutinising this particular key priority and propose its continuation to the Committee.

10. The Committee may also wish to note the recent activity of the Corporate Parenting Panel, which to a large extent shares its membership with the Placements for LAC Task Group. In 2010, members who sat on both bodies expressed some concern that the Corporate Parenting Panel was going outside of its advisory role by scrutinising and monitoring performance data and that consequently the two bodies were often receiving the same information and duplicating effort. Partly in response to these concerns, the Corporate Parenting Panel formed a small working group to look again at its approach to performing its role. At the Panel's most recent meeting, members agreed a revised way of working and in future will be placing less emphasis on the scrutiny and monitoring of performance data and receiving less formal

reports. Instead it will focus on exploring young people's issues and conducting research to aid understanding of their service needs. This leaves the Placements for LAC Task Group to scrutinise and monitor the performance and budget of the Family Placement Service.

11. Given the conclusions described above, it is proposed that the Placements for LAC Task Group continues its work with the following terms of reference:
  1. To monitor and scrutinise the implementation of the Placements for LAC Commissioning Strategy and its impact upon a) outcomes for Wiltshire's looked after children and their families/carers, and b) the Placements for LAC budget.
  2. To consider issues that have particular relevance to looked after children, including, but not limited to, accommodation and homelessness, fostering and adoption processes, educational support for looked after children, and support for their parents/carers and families.
  3. To monitor and scrutinise how the Council addresses the Family Placements Service as a key priority within the Business Plan 2011-15, including the specific objectives listed under this priority.
  4. To meet four times per year, with meeting dates agreed in advance where possible.

### **Proposal**

12. Members are asked to agree that the Placements for LAC Task Group should:

Continue its work with the terms of reference listed at paragraph 11, retaining the current membership:

Cllr Jon Hubbard (Chairman)  
Cllr Peter Colmer  
Cllr Andrew Davis  
Rev Alice Kemp  
Cllr Bill Moss  
Cllr Helen Osborn

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**Cllr Jon Hubbard – Chairman of the Placements for LAC Task Group**

**Paul Kelly – Designated Scrutiny Officer and Scrutiny Manager**

Report author: Henry Powell, 01225 718052, [henry.powell@wiltshire.gov.uk](mailto:henry.powell@wiltshire.gov.uk)

### **Appendices**

Appendix A – Summary of areas considered by the Placements for LAC Task Group

Summary of the areas considered by the Placements for LAC Task Group

Appendix A

THEME	COMMENTS
<p><b>The Commissioning Strategy and its objectives</b></p>	
<p><u>Documents considered:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Commissioning Strategy (working draft)</b></li> <li>• <b>Project Plan for implementation of the Strategy</b></li> <li>• <b>A map of where weaknesses have been addressed within the Project Plan</b></li> <li>• <b>‘Master plan’ for the aims and objectives of the Strategy</b></li> <li>• <b>Proposed KPIs to be use to assess effectiveness of the Strategy</b></li> </ul> <p><u>Issues raised:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Concern that the former Wiltshire County Council had undertaken a similar review of placements for LAC but with seemingly no gains made.</li> <li>b) The need to see the start, middle and end points of the project in order to know whether the Strategy was having the desired impact on outcomes. Members therefore requested a ‘master plan’ with measurable targets, against historic and benchmarking data, using a RAG-rating system.</li> <li>c) A draft list of KPIs appeared to suggest that officers did not know which KPIs were currently being collected. Officers clarified that the national indicators were currently under review by the coalition government.</li> </ol>	<p>Members have agreed the format for a performance monitoring document, containing past, present and target Key Performance Indicator (KPI) data for the Family Placements Service.</p>

## Placement procurement

### Documents received:

- **Report on the new Brokerage Function**
- **Details of current fostering allowances**
- **Snapshot of the distribution of current placements**
- **Children in Care – financial benchmarking data**

### Issues raised:

- a) Members were supportive of the new Brokerage Function, which would allow greater strategic management of the procurement of placements and more robust contracts being put in place. Management of the Council's 200+ contracts with placement providers represented a significant workload.
- b) Members were concerned there were 25 different fee levels for placements and 32 different placement providers, some of them "one-off" suppliers. The new Brokerage Service would help to rationalise the number of providers and ensure only respected are used.
- c) Improvements to the placement budget were due to officers' negotiations with providers, a reduction to the block contract with Quarriers and more robust gate-keeping.
- d) The use of non-specialist but still very expensive placements was being actively reduced, with a list of preferred placement providers being compiled.

## Accommodation for LAC

### Documents received:

- **Report on Accommodation for Care Leavers**
- **16-24 Accommodation Commissioning Strategy**
- **Housing Pathway for 16-17 year olds**
- **Homelessness protocol between DCE, Housing & WASfYP**

### Issues raised:

- a) In cooperation with Housing, Children & Families aim to reduce the number of children and young people in 'unsuitable' accommodation. Officers are focusing on Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) as the main provider of accommodation for those leaving care.
- b) Historically, ad hoc arrangements had been made with a wide variety of organisations, which had led to a rather chaotic accommodation system. A comprehensive directory of voluntary placement providers was being drawn up and service level agreements (SLAs) were being drawn up to ensure consistent provision.
- c) Members welcomed the Homelessness protocol as a useful document for professionals working in the field. They suggested that a more summarised version or a briefing note would be useful for Councillors.
- d) In October 2010, Towpath House, Trowbridge would due to be reopened as a stepping stones provision (or 'crash pad') for young people leaving care, contracted to an external provider.

Work has begun on a Briefing Note explaining the various rules and protocols around homelessness.

## Adoptions and Fostering

### Documents received:

- **Action Plan for Developing the Wiltshire Fostering and Adoption Service**
- **A verbal briefing on 'Private Fostering' and the Council's strategy for raising awareness of this issue**
- **A DVD produced by the Council describing the real life experiences of Wiltshire children in the adoptions/fostering process.**

### Issues raised:

- a) The recent inspection of the authority's adoption procedures had been positive and all of the actions contained within the consequent action plan would be achieved by end of November 2010.
- b) Following some concern that the adoption process may be overly difficult to negotiate, Members were invited to visit the Adoption Team to learn more about the adoption process.
- c) More foster carers had been approved but most of these provide respite care.
- d) Greater focus was therefore now being put on attracting foster carers who were able to take the more difficult cases.

Members congratulated officers on how well-made and moving the DVD was, and recommended that it be shown to members before the next available meeting of Full Council.

## Education for LAC

### Documents received:

- **Verbal report on the educational support for LAC**

### Issues raised:

- a) One of the goals of Placement Panels was to align the placement location with the young person's school. The Panels' roles were to scrutinise proposals for placements and retrospectively scrutinise emergency placements.
- b) Members asked what was done when LAC refused to attend school, referring to a previous scrutiny review where Quarriers had expressed concern at receiving referrals with no education plan in place. The recruitment of two children's services buyers would lead to performance measures such as LAC's attendance at school being specified within placement contracts.
- c) There have been no permanent exclusions of LAC in Wiltshire in the last year, despite the numbers of LAC increasing. There has also been an increase to the numbers of LAC in some form of training or education.
- d) Two years ago, the Council was one of the authorities selected by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to pilot a scheme where education for all LAC was overseen by a Virtual Headteacher.

**Other**

Documents received:

- **Family and Parenting Support Commissioning Strategy**

Issues raised:

- a) Members conveyed the following to Cabinet prior to its consideration of the Commissioning Strategy:

“The Task Group endorses the Family & Parenting Support Commissioning Strategy in terms of providing a stable framework for future commissioning and defining the Council's key priorities in this area. However, the Task Group does have concerns regarding the sources and levels of future funding for Family & Parenting Support and will be seeking reassurances that the changes proposed to how these services are delivered represent the most effective use of the funds available and lead to improved outcomes for families in Wiltshire.”

The Family and Parenting Support Commissioning Strategy was subsequently approved by Cabinet.