

**Report of the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise:
Family Information Service**

Purpose

1. To present the conclusions and recommendations of the Family Information Service rapid scrutiny exercise established by the Children's Services Select Committee on 26th March and held on 11th May.

Background

2. On 26th March 2012, the Children's Services Select Committee received a report from Carolyn Godfrey, Corporate Director, on the Family Information Service and Parent Partnership Service review. This report had been requested by the Chairman of the Committee and is attached at Appendix 1.
3. A review of the Family Information Service (FIS) and Parent Partnership Service (PPS) had been stated as a priority in the Family and Parenting Support Commissioning Strategy, which was approved by Cabinet in November 2010. The report provided a summary of this review and subsequent dialogue with the then provider of the services, a Voluntary and Community Sector (VCO) organisation called Ask. The services in question covered general information for parents and carers, child care information and information/advocacy for families with a disabled child or a significant special educational need.
4. The review had concluded that there was significant duplication around provision of information for parents and carers, particularly parents and carers of children with disabilities/special educational needs. The Family and Parenting Support Commissioning Group decided that significant changes to the FIS and PPS service specifications and contracts were therefore required and proposed a number of changes that reduced the service specifications in the Council's contract with Ask and the level of funding to be provided. A number of meetings with Ask took place to discuss current service delivery, future service requirements and funding levels.
5. At the time of the Committee meeting on 29th March, a final decision had not been made as to the continuation of the Council's contract with Ask and the level of funding to be provided in the future. The Committee resolved to undertake a rapid scrutiny exercise to explore further the nature of any

duplication in the provision of the Family Information Service and plans for how the service will be provided in future.

6. The Rapid Scrutiny Exercise was held on 11th May, with the following members taking part:

Cllr Mary Douglas

Cllr Jon Hubbard

Cllr Bill Moss

Lead Member for the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise

7. The following officers attended to answer members' questions:

Julia Cramp

Matthew Look

Service Director for Commissioning and Performance

Senior Procurement and Contracts Officer

8. The Rapid Scrutiny Group were provided with a report giving an update on discussions with Ask regarding the proposed changes to the Family Information Service. Ask had accepted the offer of a contract extension to continue to provide the Family Information Service for 2012/13 and 2013/14. Ask had made it clear that it would use its reserves to continue to provide additional support for parents over and above requirements set out by the Council in both previous service specifications and the revised specification.

Summary of discussions

9. It was reported that the development of the Family and Parenting Support Commissioning Strategy had provided an opportunity to look at Family Information Services holistically and strategically, and the service duplications being discussed had been identified as a result of that process.

Outreach services

10. It was reported that prior to the review, Ask had been undertaking outreach work with families, but had not been contracted by the Council to do so. This may have been due to the Council's contract with Ask including a requirement to meet the Council's Section 12 'advice and guidance' statutory duty, with providing outreach possibly being viewed by Ask as one component of doing so.
11. It was reported that Ask were now being asked to 'sign-post' users to the children's centres. Members noted that a report brought to the Major Contracts Task Group indicated that the Council was not meeting its targets in terms of the percentage of children being registered by children's centres (in 2011/12 the children's centres registered on average 57% of the children in their reach against a target of 60%). Members were therefore concerned that children and families previously or currently receiving outreach services from Ask could potentially slip through the net.

'One stop shop'

12. It was reported that some local authorities (e.g. Swindon Borough Council) provide all of their family information services through their customer care team.

It was reported that under Wiltshire Council's new service configuration, every team involved in the Family Information Service had clear roles in terms of what information they were expected to provide. The Early Years and Childcare Team would now be providing all childcare information, which it was their statutory duty to hold anyway. One employee of Ask would be TUPE'd across as part of the revised contract to help provide this information to customers.

Members noted that holding statutory information is not the same as communicating it effectively to customers. It was pointed out that parents 'don't know what they don't know'. Members expressed general concern that the benefit of having a 'one stop shop', providing a wide array of child and parenting information, was that users could be more effectively sign-posted to other services and that breaking up this gateway could ultimately lead to less joined-up provision. The new approach was seen as akin to cutting out the GP, who provides the initial diagnosis and signposts to a range of services, and instead sending patients directly to the consultants, who will only operate within their specialism.

Parent survey

13. As part of the review of the FIS, officers had conducted an online survey to establish parents' current use of the Family Information Service (FIS) at Ask, to establish how parents prefer to look for or be given information and to request their ideas on shaping the service for the future. The results were provided to the Rapid Scrutiny Group.
14. The survey found that the most popular way to access information on childcare, local activities and other family issues was the internet. However, members expressed concern that the results of any survey conducted online were very likely to be skewed towards the internet. It was reported that the results of the survey had not been heavily relied upon to draw conclusions and that it had also been possible to take part in the survey over the telephone or by submitting paper responses.

Other issues

15. It was reported that a the revised contract with Ask would be monitored through the normal contract monitoring processes. The Early Years and Childcare Team were monitoring the numbers of calls they received and the Service Director was in regular contact with the Revenues and Benefits team regarding customer queries about childcare benefits etc, which it was estimated totalled approximately 90 calls per month.

16. It was reported that some costs (as well as savings) would result from the reconfiguration of the FIS: The TUPE arrangements for transferring a member of Ask staff to the Council; and a small investment to upgrade the Wiltshire Parent Council's website to enable it to deliver its new service effectively.

17.

Recommendations

1. **The Rapid Scrutiny Group welcomes the proposed six month review of the reconfigured Family Information Service, but recommends that a wider subset of agencies, partners and service users be involved, including the Police, health visitors, voluntary groups (such as the Trussell Trust), nurseries, pre-schools and the providers of the Family Information Service;**

2. **The Rapid Scrutiny Group is concerned that**

a) **those children and families previously or currently receiving outreach services from Ask must be 'picked up' by outreach services provided by children centres;**

b) **the potential benefits of a 'one stop shop' for family information should not be lost as a result of this service reconfiguration;**

c) **the reconfigured Family Information Service must be monitored to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of vulnerable users;**

and therefore recommends that the Council and Ask work closely together to ensure that these concerns are addressed, including in the proposed six month review of the reconfigured service.

Cllr Jon Hubbard – Lead Member for the Rapid Scrutiny Exercise

Paul Kelly – Scrutiny Manager and Designated Scrutiny Officer

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Background documents

Appendices

Appendix 1 Report to Children's Services Select Committee, 31st May 2012
'Family Information Service and Parent Partnership Service
Review'