

ChoiceProtects

Improving placement quality and choice

**good
practice**
in commissioning
services for children
living away from home...



...building
partnerships
for positive
outcomes

Commissioning services for children living away from home

“As practitioners, we are sometimes just grateful to find a placement for a child, especially at 5.30pm on a Friday. But if children are just being warehoused, that simply isn’t good enough We need to be looking at quality.”

PHOTO REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Contracts manager Gary Heathcote – one of the interviewees in this Choice Protects newsletter – highlights a key issue for everyone involved in children’s commissioning. We want to know that children and young people living away from home are healthy, safe, achieving and developing as they should. But how can we achieve this?

- How can we make sure they are getting the best quality care in their placements?
- How can we ensure that placements are looking after all their needs, including their physical health, emotional and psychological well being, education, leisure and so on?
- How can we reduce the number of moves children make, creating greater stability in their lives?
- How can we keep children close to home, where they can maintain links with family, friends and community?

Part of the solution is the need to build strong partnerships among the key agencies that commission children’s placements. These multi agency partnerships must be focused clearly on a coordinated approach to planning and commissioning in order to improve children’s care and life chances.

Focus on good practice

This newsletter features good practice among local authorities and agencies that are already working together to improve the way they commission. They are beginning to create better quality and better value children’s placements.

Message from Tom Jeffery

The outstanding projects highlighted in this newsletter demonstrate the excellent work being taken forward at regional and local level for looked-after children. They show that, by taking an innovative approach to working together, more constructive partnerships can be built – both amongst authorities and between commissioners and providers. This can only be a good thing for looked-after children who benefit, as a result, from better planned and more personalised services. This is the kind of approach which is at the heart of our vision for services for all children and young people.

Tom Jeffery
Director General for Children and Families – DfES

The projects featured on these pages demonstrate the key elements of better commissioning. The agencies:

- Look closely at the needs of children in their area
- Commission jointly
- Share the task of visiting and assessing placement providers
- Share information on regional provision
- Work with providers to drive up the quality of placements
- Plan long-term
- Take action to reduce the numbers of children sent out of area
- Keep control of costs, leading to better care for more children.

The practitioners and managers interviewed here repeatedly spoke about the need to avoid fire fighting and the '5.30pm Friday' crisis. All of their activity aims to move to a more planned approach to commissioning. This means knowing about your local population of children, so you can plan to meet their needs. It means knowing your service, and the placements that are available, so you can see clearly where you need to develop capacity. And it means creating strong partnerships:

- working jointly with other agencies to ensure children are being cared for holistically in placements
- working closely with providers to drive up quality
- teaming up with other commissioners to develop services regionally.

This good practice guide is part of a package of resources to help commissioners take action locally. These include a Commissioning Checklist, which works as a step-by-step guide to help local authorities improve their commissioning practice for children living away from home, a leaflet for front-line practitioners on considering the costs and consequences of different placements, and an Invest to Save booklet for elected members. These documents can be downloaded from the Choice Protects website www.dfes.gov.uk/choiceprotects

To find out more about the Commissioning Checklist, please contact Doug Lawson or Judy Stone of the Looked After Children Taskforce:

Tel: 020 7972 4928

Email: Doug.Lawson@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

Judy.Stone@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

The SEN Regional Partnerships

Encouraging agencies to work together, analysing the costs of placements and collecting high-quality information on the needs of individual children are all among the initiatives to improve the commissioning of services for children with special educational needs being pioneered by the SEN Regional Partnerships.

The Department for Education and Skills sponsors 11 SEN Regional Partnerships, covering all local authorities in England, to improve the quality of provision for children with SEN through collaborative planning and working. They are currently being evaluated by the National Foundation for Education Research and have agreed funding until 2006.

The Partnerships are finding ways to improve all aspects of commissioning SEN services and placements. Their projects include the following:

National Contract The partnerships, working in collaboration with NASS (the National Association of Independent and Non-Maintained Special Schools), the LGA and the ADSS, have developed a revised and updated national contract for use by schools and local authorities for the placement of children and young people in day and residential independent and non-maintained special schools.

Eastern Region The Partnership has worked to (a) develop a regional database of the out-of-authority schools and children's homes used by the ten local authorities; (b) analyse the costs of these placements; (c) develop inter-agency pre-placement information which is also included on the inter-agency regional database.

West Midlands Producing a multi-agency framework for monitoring outcomes for children and young people attending out of authority placements in independent and non maintained special schools and children's homes. They hope trials of the framework highlighting outcomes/case studies will be available early in 2005.

Contact: Claire Lazarus National Adviser to the Partnerships
Email: claire.lazarus@dfes.gsi.gov.uk
www.teachernet.gov.uk/sen

Intelligent commissioning

Ten councils in the east of England have come together to pursue a common goal – better commissioning of children’s placements. The contracts system they have developed is helping them to share information, save duplication of effort and drive up the quality of services.

A fat file sits on the desk of Gary Heathcote, Contracts Manager within Hertfordshire County Council’s Children, Schools and Families Directorate. It is the Eastern Consortium contracts toolkit that governs the commissioning of services for children and young people across ten local authorities in the region. It represents a quantum shift in the cooperation between councils and other agencies in the region to improve the way services are commissioned and the quality of care children receive in placements.

Gary, who plays a key role in the contracting and commissioning of services in his merged department, chairs both the ADSS Eastern Region Children’s Group and the Out of County Group of the Eastern Region SEN Partnership. The two groups have been a driving force towards what he calls ‘smarter commissioning’. ‘This focuses firmly on achieving good outcomes for children and value for money for the local authority,’ says Gary.

The contracts process the consortium has created has several advantages. It standardises the commissioning process across the different agencies involved – particularly education and social services – but also prevents the need for duplication of effort in assessing placements across the ten local authorities of the eastern region.

Reliable

So how does it work? The consortium has taken as its starting point that commissioning agencies share the need to:

- plan ahead for the services they will need
- make the best use of their budget and
- have reliable checking systems to quality assure the services offered by providers.

Four authorities within the region: Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire and Peterborough have devised a system of three standard forms which are completed by the service provider, a contracts officer and a practitioner. Together, they give a comprehensive picture of the service provided; information that is stored on a shared regional database, accessible to all the local authorities in the consortium.

The system is used by the authorities in the consortium to share the important task of visiting and assessing placement and service providers. Gary explains: ‘Rather than different people doing it a dozen times, it is done once to a very high standard, and we share the resulting information.’

Colin Pennington is a social services manager who has first hand experience of using the forms to assess providers. and can say what difference they are making practically. Colin, who manages Peterborough’s looked after children and leaving care team, is clear about the issues. He says: ‘We are paying a lot of money – up to £5,500 a week for some of our looked after children – and we want to know we are getting a quality service.’

Quality

As a small authority with a small number of in-house residential services and high numbers of looked after children – about 311 in August 2003 – Peterborough are dependent on a lot of external providers.

Colin’s team have been sending the first form to external provider children’s homes for information on their services, plus written documents such as their registration, statement of purpose and inspection documents. A contracts officer then completes the second form on a site visit. ‘It goes into real specifics about staffing, health and safety policies and so on,’ he says. ‘It is a really substantial document.’

“We talk with children and the young people themselves because they often hold the key”

At the same time, a practitioner such as a social worker is completing the third form. 'That is a more subjective document,' explains Colin. 'It is looking at the atmosphere of the place, the interaction between staff and children and the way the children seem. Do they have a weekly residents' meeting, what recourse to complaints do they have, do they seem happy? We talk with children and the young people themselves because they often hold the key. If staff aren't willing to let you do that, that would say an awful lot about them'

Information

Once a commissioning agency has completed the forms, the information about a provider can be used by anyone in the consortium. Gary Heathcote says that storing this rich seam of information on a shared, internet-accessed regional database will be a key way to improve services in the future.

'It saves duplication, because the assessment is very thorough and any local authority can look on the database. For example, say I am a social worker looking for a facility for an eight-year-old with autism. I tick all the boxes and all the options will come down. It is also about getting evidence that homes are actually as good as they say they are – and if homes are found to be failing in some way, we can create an action plan to put it right. It is helping to redress the balance in favour of commissioners, so we can demand high quality services and spot the gaps in provision.'

The consortium is now developing the fourth form, which will be an outcome measurement tool. Gary says: 'All of this work must ultimately be about achieving positive outcomes for children, and making sure the services we commission are of value to them.'

Contact: Gary Heathcote
Tel: 01707 280711
Email: Gary_Heathcote@hertscc.gov.uk



How the system works

Form A is sent by post to all care homes and special educational needs schools for providers themselves to describe their services. The information is stored on a regional database.

Form B verifies what they have said: a contracting officer goes out to visit the home or school and fills in a detailed form about the services provided. The provider is, in effect, asked to prove what they have said in Form A.

Form C is a more personal perspective: a front line practitioner visits the provider and reports on the quality and atmosphere of the place, including children's views – less tangible, but crucial, information.

The new system, which has been in place since January 2003, is proving an effective way of:

- Raising the quality of placements provided
- Giving the authorities that have teamed up in the consortium more commissioning clout
- Identifying gaps in services and developing placements to meet the – sometimes specialist – needs of children and young people.

Long-term vision

When Telford's joint education and social care commissioners sat down to look at the practice of sending looked after children out of borough, they found they were spending some £2.25 million a year on 15 children. 'It can cost £150,000-£200,000 a year to maintain a child out of borough, so you don't need very many children for the cost to the local authority to spiral massively,' says Tracy Penrose, PFI Project Manager.

While these are children with the most severe emotional and educational difficulties – and therefore likely to be the most expensive to care for – money is not the only issue. David Johnson is Head of Planning and Performance, Education and Culture. He says it is also more difficult to control the quality of out-of-borough placements and to reintegrate children into the community.

He explains: 'Placing a fairly large number of youngsters outside the authority is not very inclusive and it is not very good for the young people and their families. We have children very far-flung, from Devon to Preston, so how do you quality control that? And once they are out, it is very difficult for them to come back. Contact with their families is more difficult and they lose contact with their peer group and the Telford and Wrekin community.'

A pioneering children's centre planned by Telford and Wrekin will mean that for the first time the local authority can look after some of its most needy children within the borough. This new approach to commissioning specialist placements aims to provide high-quality care within planned budgets.

Pioneering

Telford is pioneering a solution to the challenge of commissioning care for children with specialist needs in the shape of the Jigsaw Project. This will be a purpose-built centre with the capacity to provide education and care for up to 30 children.

The ambitious project, to be built with Private Finance Initiative (PFI) funding, will consist of a new school and residential accommodation for secondary school children (aged 11-16) with emotional, behavioural, social and health difficulties. An independent contractor with proven experience of combining education and social care will provide the specialist support that they need.

Up to 12 children will be able to live on site, and a further 18 will be brought each day from their foster placements. Children will be taught in small groups, and looked after in a therapeutic, calming environment. 'If they need to, they will be able to withdraw to a quiet place and get immediate counselling support,' explains Tracy. 'As well as study and residential areas, the seven-acre site will have leisure and recreational facilities that the young people can access all day.'

“We are aiming to create a special environment for these children, which gives them the highest quality care”

PHOTO REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

The aim is to get away from ‘last resort’ care and to provide a period of planned, intensive support to help young people in difficulties back onto their feet. ‘These children have complex emotional and behavioural needs and who require support from education, social care and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services,’ says Tracy. ‘We are aiming to create a special environment for these children, which will allow them to stabilise their lives and give them the highest possible standards of education.’

Lasting relationship

Tracy believes some of the project’s chief benefits will flow from the fact that the commissioning partnership are taking a long-term view, allowing them to build a lasting relationship with the education and care providers. The project will allow Telford to replace the practice of spot-purchasing placements by a long-term contract with a single provider.

She says: ‘At the moment, the huge demand for placements means it is a sellers’ market. The Jigsaw Project is very innovative in that, rather than spot-purchasing placements here and there, we will have a relationship with a long-term provider, under a 25-year contract. It will bring the unit costs down and will give us more control over the quality of placements. It will also mean that the provider’s links in the community can really be built up, for example with foster carers and schools. These are the sorts of working relationships that can make a real difference to children’s lives.’

The project is being planned in part as a means of pursuing a strong inclusion agenda for a group of children who can easily become marginalised. David Johnson says the involvement of all the key agencies – education, social care and health – from the outset is an important means of achieving this. ‘When we place children out of borough, their health becomes the responsibility of the local authority where they go, so we can’t be sure they are getting the specialist CAMHS service they need. But with the Jigsaw project, we can make sure they receive intensive, holistic support to speedily reintegrate them. By providing for more children locally, it improves our strategic planning for a very vulnerable group of young people.’

Contact:

Tracy Penrose, PFI Project Manager
 Tel: 01952 203104
 Email: tracy.penrose@telford.gov.uk

David Johnson
 Head of Planning and Performance, Education and Culture
 Tel: 01952 202123
david.johnson@telford.gov.uk

Visit the website: www.telford.gov.uk/learning/hadleypfi

Benefits of the long-term view

- Telford and Wrekin are planning ahead to commission the care some their most needy looked after children will need over the next 25 years. Some of the chief benefits will be to:
 - Bring looked after children with complex needs back into the borough, near their own families and community
 - Give commissioners greater control over costs and quality of placements
 - Create a planned and systematic approach to the care of children.

PFI project

Telford and Wrekin will receive £70 million from the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to fund the Jigsaw Project as part of a wider Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme, the Hadley Learning Community. This nearby ‘full service school’ site will include: a large secondary school with specialist engineering facilities, a primary school, a special school and a children’s centre, plus community learning, arts and sports facilities.

Pooling resources

Surrey have a well-established joint strategy between health and social care for children in need and looked after children, and a pooled budget to commission services. The approach is helping to make sure children with emotional and behavioural, as well as mental health difficulties get fast and effective services.

When foster carer Sue* began experiencing problems with the behaviour of David* – at eight the eldest of four siblings in her care – it could easily have been the start of a slippery slope to the placement breaking down and the children being separated. But instead, Sue received rapid help from Amanda Carpenter, a primary mental health care worker, who offered immediate advice, as well as putting into place an ongoing support plan that drew in social workers and the specialist CAMHS teams.

Amanda is one of three primary mental health care workers (two are part-time), whose role is to offer foster carers advice, support and training in order to support placements and make a success of them long-term. It is one of the new services that has grown out of Surrey's joint CAMHS commissioning strategy.

Strategic approach

The strategy recognises the key importance of mental health services for looked after children and other children in need. The county's strategic approach means key agencies commission services together as part of a wider plan to intervene early and effectively in the lives of children and young people.

Managing one of Surrey's children's homes for six years before taking up her current post meant Amanda Carpenter was ideally placed to work across social services and CAMHS to make sure children and their carers are well supported. She says: "I am there to support the carers in their parenting of the children, to give them a greater understanding and some skills and coping mechanisms."

Transforming

The role of primary mental health worker is transforming the way foster carers experience services. Not only can Sue pick up the 'phone to Amanda when she needs advice, but Amanda can make a faster, direct link to specialist services, should David need them.

Amanda highlights the way joint CAMHS commissioning can support the county's wider permanence policy. "It is critical that we should support this placement because it is about creating permanence and stability for these children who in other circumstances would be bouncing around the system."

Angela Sargeant is the CAMHS Strategy Integration Manager, responsible for helping to implement the joint strategy. She is clear about one of the key aims: "We want to make sure we have the right services for children who may not have a diagnosed mental health problem which requires specialist input, but who nonetheless are showing emotional or behavioural difficulties. We want to intervene early before their problems develop into something worse."

Pooled budget

A joint CAMHS commissioning group oversees the way the pooled budget is spent. This has led to innovative commissioning to shape services based on the principles of early intervention and joint working:

- a team who work intensively with families to prevent children becoming accommodated
- 16 primary health care workers who support school nurses, youth workers, GPs and others with young people's mental health
- plans for a mental health worker in the leaving care service.

Perhaps the fullest expression of the county's joint commissioning strategy is the plan to develop by October 2004 a fully integrated health, education and social care service for children with very complex needs. This will use a pooled budget to provide education geared to the needs of the individual child, in a therapeutic setting, plus intensive community outreach work.

"We are trying to reach those young people who often fall between services," explains Angela. "They don't have a diagnosed mental illness, but they actually have highly chaotic lives – they bounce between services and eventually social services pick them up and they go to out-of-county placements with rather poor outcomes. We want to get away from the attitude 'They haven't got a mental health need, so health won't fund them; they haven't got a social care need so social services won't fund them'. We are looking at them as our children, and we need to provide them with an integrated service. That is a much better way of commissioning, because it leads to better outcomes for children, and because in the long run it produces better value services." *not their real names

Contact: Angela Sargeant
Tel: 0845 6009009
Email: Angela.Sargeant@surreycc.gov.uk

Why we need seamless services

PHOTO REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Rachel Affleck of Barnardos at a North East MALAP event to explore the role of arts and creativity as part of healthy care at the Baltic gallery, Gateshead. Rachel is pictured in front of young people's artwork which was on display at the event.



Excellent mainstream services that work seamlessly together must be one of the bedrocks of effective commissioning. That is the message from John Brown, North East Regional Development Worker, who is one of the people behind an initiative to make sure services are high quality and work well together in the interests of looked after children and young people.

The Multi Agency Looked After Partnership (MALAP) project is part of the Healthy Care Programme. It aims to find effective ways of dealing with what John calls 'fragmented corporate parenting', or services failing to work together, which can blight a child's life chances.

John explains: "As a parent, if you have a problem with your child's health, education or you want to buy him roller skates or salopettes for going on the school ski trip or you are worried about his drugs activity or mental health or sexual activity or health – you will be the person who will provide information, support and advice.

But when the local authority is the corporate parent, if your child has a drugs problem you get your support from the drugs adviser team; if you have a mental health problem, you go to CAMHS; education you have to go to the education support team for looked after

children; or for creative support you have to go to the leisure department. For every aspect of a child's normal life you have a different department in the local authority. They have to work together if we are ever going to approach the standards of ordinary parenting."

John insists that very well established multi agency working among mainstream services is an essential background to commissioning high-quality placements and services for children. One of the key tasks of the Healthy Care Programme is to put multi agency partnerships into place. As part of this in the North East, seven pilots to trial MALAPS have been put into place. John says: "What we are trying to do is to deal with fragmented corporate parenting. There is a very real sense in which commissioning has to be about building this sort of capacity in the local authority, because if the mainstream services aren't working well, you can't deliver the highest quality care. So the strategic planners in social services are going to have to work with all their partners to create a healthy care setting."

**To find out more about the North East MALAP pilots, contact: John Brown
Tel: 0191 202 3566
Email: jbrown1.gone@go-regions.gsi.gov.uk**

Strength in numbers

“We hope to gain savings, but we can’t be sure that we will. What we will achieve is better quality placements and better outcomes for children.” Sheela Vara is the Partnerships Policy Officer for AGMA, charged with driving forward the association’s joint service delivery projects. One of these focuses on finding better ways to commission out of area placements for children and young people.

AGMA was formed from the ten local authorities of Greater Manchester (with Blackpool and Blackburn as associated members) to find opportunities for partnership working. Some research on commissioning estimated that the total cost of out of area placements for children across the partnership amounted to £62.8 million a year, with a potential saving of £3.6 million.

Shared approach

AGMA aims to find a better way of making the most of this large commissioning budget. Derek Collins of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), which is funding the work as a pathfinder project (see box), said: “When AGMA began to look at their children’s services commissioning, they found they were competing against each other for placements and paying the same providers different rates, simply because some authorities had driven a harder bargain than others. There had to be benefits in teaming up and taking a strategic approach.”

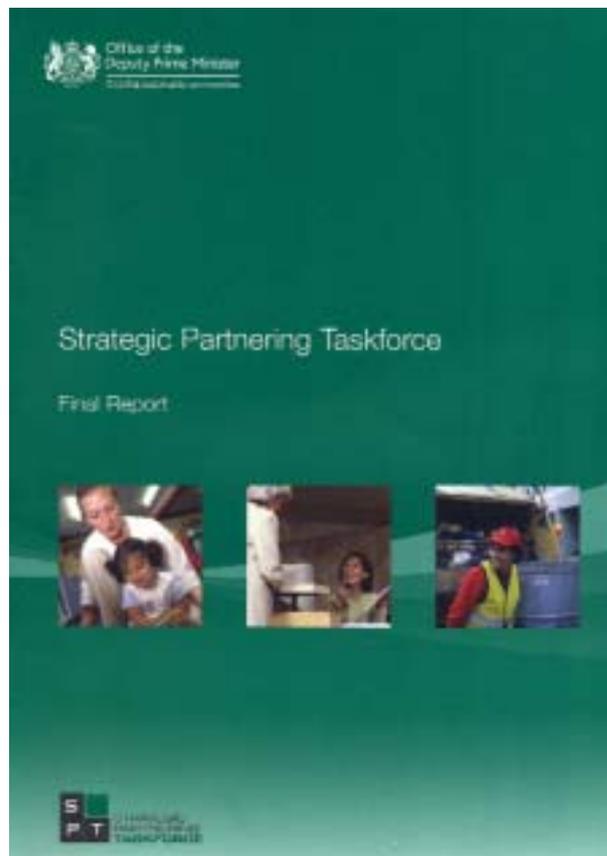
The association has established a Joint Commissioning Unit to develop a shared approach to commissioning that could take a comprehensive view of children’s needs across the 12 authorities, introduce agreed commissioning contracts and prices, and work with placement providers to drive up the quality of care.

The project focuses on commissioning services for children with special care or special educational needs. Sheela says that the first, and perhaps the greatest challenge, has been to get all the agencies that need to commission jointly working together as a matter of routine. “Working across 12 local authorities is one issue in itself,” she says. “But within that, you have education and social services. And then there are other key partners, such as health. So in total you are working with 24 different agencies within the local authority, then 12 primary care trusts and the strategic health authority: you can see the complexity of the problem.”

The 12 authorities of the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) have teamed up in order to get the most from the £63 million-or-so they spend a year on out of area placements for children. They are working together to improve the quality of placements, increase local provision and achieve better outcomes for children.

Communication

Sheela is insistent that improving communication between these agencies is of fundamental importance, and she is tireless in her efforts to achieve it. “It is no good if departments see themselves as separate, instead of providing a seamless service to children. When a child goes into foster care, their education is an essential dimension to consider. The other key one is health. Some of the children have severe mental health problems, or disabilities, and we really need health to be sitting down with social services when placing these children.”



AGMA’s Out-of-Area Placements initiative is one of the pathfinder projects of the Strategic Partnering Taskforce. The Taskforce is part of the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and aims to help local authorities find better ways to deliver services.

Visit www.odpm.gov.uk/ssdp for the final report of the Strategic Partnering Taskforce, including details of the AGMA scheme.

“It is no good if departments see themselves as separate, instead of providing a seamless service to children”

What are Manchester commissioners aiming for?

- A shared, strategic approach to commissioning
- Agreed processes across the 12 authorities
- Better quality placements
- Standardised prices
- Better outcomes for children
- Opportunities to develop local provision and reduce out of area placements.

In order to drive the project forward, Sheela established in early 2003 a small management group made up of assistant directors from education and social services, as well as a senior contracts officer and a legal officer from AGMA. They have made it a priority to develop an agreed, joint process to accredit providers and monitor the services they are providing. They are developing four contracts covering placements in foster families, residential education, children’s homes and secure units.

“There wasn’t a clear accreditation and monitoring process throughout AGMA, so some were doing it, but in other authorities it wasn’t happening because they didn’t have the capacity,” says Sheela. “But it is a very important part of quality control. You need to know you have placed the child in the right place and once they are there, is it really working for them?”

The project is also working on plans to engage providers in the process of change and improvement and work with them as partners. “The way we are looking at it is that this process will only work if we engage providers and they sign up to it,” says Sheela. One of the first tasks will be to agree standardised prices. “Once we have all the contracts in place, the providers will recognise they are working for an AGMA authority. Collectively, as AGMA, we can negotiate agreed prices.”

Benefits

One of the chief benefits of teaming up will be the opportunity to develop a strategic view across all the authorities of children’s needs, placements on offer and available budgets. That is why the work is being underpinned by an ambitious data collection exercise. This aims to establish key facts about the children needing placements, their needs, how much it is costing and the scope of current provision.

Sheela explains that getting hold of the information has proved extremely difficult: “Education and social services hold data on children in different formats, and it takes a tremendous effort.” She is convinced, however, that it is an essential first step, so that any action the partnership takes is based on accurate facts about the children and the market. “Greater Manchester Research Unit are doing the mapping exercise for us. It is really huge, but it is a really crucial piece of work – one of our foundations. We can’t move forward without it.”

“Rather than sending them to the Lakes or to Cornwall, we can keep them here near home...”

The Joint Commissioning Unit believe that significant benefits will flow from the partnership approach. Sheela says: “We will end up with a regional database of accredited placements which will be accessible to social workers and senior managers and their equivalent in education. We will work with providers to keep it updated constantly, and that will save a lot of time that is spent looking for placements.”

The Joint Unit will also examine information from the mapping exercise to look at opportunities to develop provision locally, servicing clusters of authorities. Sheela says: “We hope to understand exactly what it costs, where are children placed, how many years have they been there, are they boys, are they girls, how old are they, what are their physical, mental health and education needs. We can then see if there is a pattern of placements so we can start to develop local provision. Rather than sending them to the Lakes or to Cornwall, we can keep them here near home, near their families and community. That will be much better for the inclusion agenda.”

**Contact: Sheela Vara
Tel: 01942 705725.
Email: s.vara@agma.gov.uk**

Out of Authority Placements – DfES

- There is clear evidence that looked after children placed out-of-authority tend to achieve poorer outcomes than children living within their home authority. That is why the Department for Education and Skills is putting together a programme of work to help all local authorities (a) work towards reducing the number of out-of-authority placements over time, through better planning and commissioning, and (b) provide better support for children and young people who do have to be placed out-of-authority, through both reinforcing existing measures (such as notification) and developing new ones (eg around monitoring and inspection).

A unique overview

Social workers in the London borough of Westminster don't have to face the all-too-familiar '5 o'clock on a Friday' crisis, desperately hunting on their own for an emergency placement. Why? Because if a social worker needs any kind of placement for a child, a referral first comes to the Access to Resources team. This six-strong team have a unique overview of all the authority's placement resources, as well as detailed knowledge of children in care.

The team's key tasks are to approve placements, plan a child's care with social workers, start and close placements and monitor them for quality and value for money. Team members gather information about the child's needs, how urgently he or she needs to move and other key facts. They will then come back to the social worker with the best placement for the child, backed if necessary by a package of support services.

This system has proved a highly effective way of creating a central source of knowledge about children's placements; a valuable extra layer of care planning for each child and of strategic planning within the authority's social care budget.

Clear aims

The team's clear aim is to make the best possible use of the authority's resources in order to achieve optimum outcomes for children in care. Their role as gate keeper to all the borough's placements puts them in a unique position to achieve this. Louise Eastland is one of three social workers in the commissioning team. She says: "You can take better decisions, both in terms of cost and quality, if you have the full range of knowledge about placements that are available. If you have an overview you can use those placements more effectively and efficiently."

The hub of the team's operation is an accurate, up-to-date database, maintained to a high standard by the team's information officer. This contains comprehensive information about Westminster's 300-or-so looked after children – including details of their care histories and plans – and the borough's placement resources.

Team members go out and do their own visits and approvals – information that is stored on the database. This is kept constantly updated with feedback from placements, including exit interviews with children when they leave placements.

In Westminster, all placements for looked after children are commissioned through the Access to Resources Team. This small, central team have a comprehensive overview of the council's resources and can devote time and attention to careful matching of children to the best placements.

"A social worker might tell us that a carer didn't make much effort to get a child into school, or a mother and baby unit may have done a particularly good piece of work, and we will add this information to the database," explains former team manager Sue Walker.* "That is the sort of information that could get dissipated if we didn't keep it centrally." "We are dedicated to this task and so we are building up expertise and knowledge about the children and the placements," adds Lisa.

"You can take better decisions...if you have the full range of knowledge about placements that are available"

Key role

A key role of the commissioning team is to work closely with social workers to gain a thorough understanding of the child's needs at the point of referral and to make sure that placements are planned to the highest possible standards. For a social worker who is referring a child, having a discussion with a team member who has a lot of expertise about the council's range of care options can be an invaluable help. "When a child is referred to us, we will have a discussion with their social worker about the child, their needs and what we want from the placement," says Lisa.

This extra layer of planning in the commissioning process has several benefits. One is to help find the best placement for an individual child. "If they were finding placements without our help, a social worker might just go back to someone they know, or a placement which worked before, even though it might not work again for a different child. Yet there might be something out there the social worker doesn't know about that would work better." Another key benefit is to help set clear goals for the placement, and to make sure placement providers know what is expected of them.

The service offered by the team includes putting together a comprehensive package of support if necessary, for example therapeutic services or respite care. The team also put a priority on making tailored education plans a key part of placements, working closely with Westminster's education for looked after children team.

Achieving

Team members also track and monitor placements to make sure care plans are actively pursued – a role that helps Westminster get the most from its care budget by ensuring that placements are not drifting, but are achieving positive outcomes for children. This is particularly important for the more expensive, residential placements for children with complex needs.

“One of our roles is to be aware how much placements cost,” confirms Lisa. “Sometimes you will look at a placement that is very expensive but really wasn’t very effective with the young person, but someone else charging less could do better. Just because you are throwing money at it doesn’t mean it will work. On the other hand, we have just looked at two placements for a child whose care we are planning jointly with education, and in his case, the more expensive placement was the better one.”

* The team is now managed by John Mythen

The role of the Access to Resources team is to:

- Have a central overview of Westminster’s fostering and residential placements
- Help social workers thoroughly assess the needs of each child
- Carefully match children to placements
- Plan support services for the child and the placement
- Commission the highest quality placement, within planned budgets – the most expensive is not always the best!

“Sometimes you will look at a placement that is very expensive...Just because you are throwing money at it doesn’t mean it will work”



Contact:
Team manager, John Mythen
Tel: 020 7641 8047
Email: jmythen@westminster.gov.uk

Louisa Eastland, social worker
Email: leastland@westminster.gov.uk

Fostering better commissioning

The Government is committed to increasing stability for looked after children and young people. To do this, local authorities need to develop robust commissioning processes for foster care – the main provision for children living away from home. Here we feature two routes to improving the commissioning of fostering services.

Listen then Commission

Children and young people are a crucial source of information about placements. That is the conclusion of a Department of Health report: Listen, Then Commission, which examines how the views of young people can be included in the commissioning process to best effect.

The report was produced jointly by Ena Fry, Development Worker for Young People at the Fostering Network, and Jenny Robson from The Who Cares? Trust, between December 2002 and January 2003. Young people from Luton and the London borough of Hackney took part, and the authors also studied eight local authorities to gather good practice.

The report's central conclusion reflects the Government's emphasis on the importance of listening to those actually using the services being commissioned – children and young people. "Yes, it is absolutely crucial to listen to children, but you shouldn't expect children to do your job for you. That was the crux of it," says Ena Fry.

"They have to be involved with school – I might need some help"

A young person on potential foster carers

"Why aren't there any meetings between the local authority and the agency to see how the placement is going?"

A young person placed far from home

The report made a series of recommendations for commissioners trying to build in consultation with young people to the commissioning process:

- Commissioning foster care services is ultimately an adult responsibility. However, it is essential that it reflects the views and experiences of young people who have been fostered.
- Make proper use of existing mechanisms to gather young people's views, for example care planning and reviews, foster care reviews, pathway planning and so on – all of which should be drawn together to inform the commissioning process.
- The sons, daughters and grandchildren of foster carers make a unique contribution to the foster care process: therefore their views must be considered.
- Make every effort to include young people with learning or other disabilities, or those placed out of authority – they are rarely consulted.
- Be careful not to over-exploit the willingness and availability of young people to be consulted.
- Make sure the health, education and well being of young people are central to the foster care service – ask placement providers to demonstrate their commitment in these areas.
- The population of looked after young people is diverse, and this must be reflected in the placements you commission. This includes religious, racial and cultural origins, sexuality, disability, religion and language.

The report concludes that there needs to be a strong commitment within local authorities to the rights of young people to have a voice and to be involved in improving commissioning practices.

Contact: Penny King
Information Officer
The Fostering Network

Tel: 020 7620 6400
Email: info@fostering.net
Web: www.fostering.net

Listen, Then Commission is available for download from the Choice Protects website www.dfes.gov.uk/choiceprotects

The vast majority of looked after children are in foster care, so making sure children are thriving in these placements is a key task for commissioners.



Learning from each other

A key aim of commissioning is to ensure high standards among providers of services and placements. Fostering agencies in the North East have taken the initiative themselves by establishing a local forum with the aim of sharing best practice and raising standards in the sector.

The North East Forum was set up by independent fostering providers (IFPs) to share information as a key way of influencing practice.

Walter Young, one of two directors of a fostering agency based in the North East called Team Fostering, helped to set up the initiative. He said: "There is far less cooperation in fostering than between competitors in far more cut-throat industries such as manufacturing. The fostering sector generally is not famous for high levels of trust and cooperation between IFPs themselves and also between local authorities and providers. We felt very strongly that we could actually cooperate very much more than we do with our competitors, particularly around what we do for children and young people."

The forum was set up in late 2002 and includes independent fostering providers and voluntary agencies such as Barnardo's and NCH. The primary aim of the group is to raise standards in the sector. Walter says: "We aim to do this by sharing good practice ideas, seeking to influence practice positively, pooling some resources and providing members with access to information through Fostering Network."

Examples of the way members are beginning to use the forum to raise standards include organising a talk in May this year by American psychologist and speaker Frank Kunstal, who presented members with strategies for foster carers working with children who have experienced abuse, neglect and trauma. Members have also used the forum to compare notes on good practice issues such as vetting carers and how to raise standards.

Walter hopes to set up a more ambitious project in the future – a formal competitor benchmarking exercise. He believes this process, usually associated with business and commerce, could be a key route to improving practice.

He explains: "You look at the market leader in a particular area – in our case, fostering services – and go through all elements of the service or business, making a direct comparison between two organisations doing the same thing. How do you benefit from that? It is partly about stimulating creativity through the process itself: for example, this is how we recruit foster carers, this is the medium we use and this is how much we spend on it. It enables an organisation to get a good understanding of what you do, what others do and how you can improve."

Walter, who used to be a fostering team manager in Northumberland, accepts that he will need to build on the cooperative spirit being created by the forum, to overcome any fears among agencies about losing their competitive edge by giving away information on best practice.

He says: "It is partly about efficiency. In social work we are more comfortable talking about standards but we are not always so good on talking about value for money. The idea of making what you do a more efficient business as social workers seems a bit hard nosed. But if the local authority spend more than they have to, then someone loses. And that is a very strong moral argument for making ourselves more efficient."

Contact: Walter Young
Tel: 0191 262 8855
Email: walter@teamfostering.co.uk

Notice board

Find out more about commissioning children's services here

The Choice Protects website

www.dfes.gov.uk/choiceprotects

Visit the website dedicated to the Choice Protects initiative to improve the choice and quality of children's placements, where you can:



- Download commissioning materials:
 - Commissioning Checklist
 - Invest to Save leaflet for elected members (please see below)
 - Costs and consequences practice guide for social workers.
 - This newsletter
- Find out more about Choice Protects.

Making Ends Meet website

www.joint-reviews.gov.uk/money/homepage.html

A website launched at the end of 2003 by the Government's Joint Review of local authority social services. Includes lots of information on commissioning, and examples of good practice or innovation.

Publication – Fostering Now

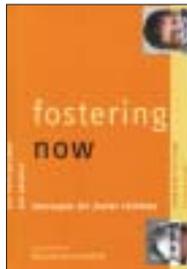
Aimed at different stakeholder groups, this comprises six leaflets, summarising messages from research, and a DVD which includes filmed interviews with fostered children, foster carers and birth parents.

How to order:

Email: dfes@prolog.uk.com

Telephone: 0845 6022260

Fax: 0845 6033360



You can download this publication or order copies online at www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications

Copies of this publication can also be obtained from:

DfES Publications

PO Box 5050

Sherwood Park

Annesley

Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Tel: 0845 60 222 60

Fax: 0845 60 333 60

Textphone: 0845 60 555 60

email: dfes@prolog.uk.com

Publication – Invest to Save

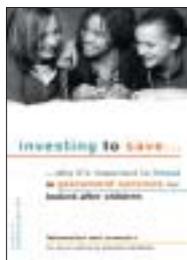
A leaflet produced by the organisation Research in Practice aimed at elected member about the Invest to Save strategy in foster care. In essence, good practice examples of local authorities which have invested in developing their own fostering services in order to save long term.

How to order:

Email: dfes@prolog.uk.com

Telephone: 0845 6022260

Fax: 0845 6033360



Please quote ref: GPN/2004

PPFMP/D32/1004/53

© Crown copyright 2004

Produced by the Department for Education and Skills

Extracts from this document may be reproduced for non commercial education or training purposes on the condition that the source is acknowledged.

department for

education and skills

creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence