
Introduction

In May 2010, a brief scoping exercise was undertaken by The Commissioning Support Programme to see if there were any discernable links between placement stability for looked after children and the way in which Local Authorities organised and carried out their placement finding activity for individual children and young people.

Nationally available (NI62) statistics for all Local Authorities over a 5 year period were looked examined. A number of both well and poorly performing Local Authorities in relation to placement stability were identified and contacted with a request for information about their placement finding models and activity.

Responses were received from:

- 16 Local Authorities with placement stability consistently better than the National average / or having a marked year on year improvement.
- 13 Local Authorities with placement stability consistently worse than the National average over the past 5 years.

It is important to note that statistics for March 2010 were not available at the time of this review, and as such the most recent NI62 data was collected in 2009. This made it difficult to analyse the impact of placement procedures that have been introduced in the last 18 months.

Initial Findings

Responses from individual Local Authorities indicated that there are a number of factors that appear to be having an impact on improved stability in practice. These are:

- Once it is agreed that a child needs to be looked after, it is beneficial for the referral to be 'project managed' by an individual who is not the Social Worker. This does not mean removing any decisions from the Social Worker – the best arrangements seem to have a high degree of clarity about who is responsible for the decision to look for a placement and who for the decision to place.
- Having a dedicated person or team acting as an independent 'broker' in looking for the most suitable placement and other services seems to work particularly well in terms of improving outcomes and achieving cost savings including through:
 - Better choice of placements which improve the chances of a good match, which in turn reduces the likelihood of expensive placement breakdowns and provides a better chance of delivering positive outcomes

- Ensuring that each placement is made on a value for money basis and costs are scrutinised in accordance with individual needs. It is not uncommon for brokerage officers to facilitate savings of between £50,000 to £100,000 per annum in respect of individual placements.
- Determining the most cost effective placement for an individual child by taking 'whole costs' into account. Some brokerage teams are able to consider not just the placement costs but also the 'additional' costs of wrap around support and travel services.
- Ensuring that invoices are checked against the contract and that the Local Authority only pays for actual services provided (avoiding substantial over-claims in some cases).
- Leading on or contributing to tenders for framework contracts ensuring that value for money is a key criterion for qualification.
- Acting as the 'bridge' between provider and purchaser enables strong partnership working. Brokerage teams can be extremely effective in supporting purchaser / provider disputes, acting as a mediator and thereby preventing placement breakdown and/or time for Social Workers and providers alike in relation to resolving problems.
- The person responsible for managing the referral and placement finding knows the market well and has built positive and trusting partnerships with the independent sector. Other essential skills include: an ability to be analytical, an ability to work under extreme pressure, an ability to remain impartial and independent, good organisational skills, and contracting and financial skills. There is evidence that this role can be carried out effectively by individuals both with and without a social work qualification.
- All referrals are quality checked prior to being sent to Providers from all sectors (not just with regards to the accuracy of assessment, but to make sure that criteria and specification is presented in a way that is meaningful). Existing statutory documentation is not adequate for the commissioning task – most effective placement finding teams have created separate referral forms with which to identify a placement which include reference to desired outcomes.
- Having an approved list of fostering providers and a system of emailing these all at the same time with a referral (not contacting providers 'one by one' on the telephone as this does not effectively facilitate a choice of options).
- Having a robust matching policy which acknowledges each child's needs are different and varied. In matching children to carers, well performing LA's ensure that decisions are made after careful consideration of the carers' skills and knowledge.

Impact of Brokerage Models

As the initial scoping exercise indicated that Authorities with embedded brokerage models are more likely to experience positive and improved placement stability, a follow up exercise was conducted including more in-depth interviews with some of the 'best' performing areas in the cohort in relation to placement stability.

It was interesting to note that brokerage teams seem to be described in different ways across the Country, for example: Access to Resources Teams, Commissioning Units, Placement

Teams. For the purpose of this research, a brokerage model was defined as a team that (a) is independent of the Authority's own provider services and (b) manages the process of identifying a suitable placement for an individual looked after child.

Example Models

Bournemouth

Bournemouth Council has reduced its NI62 rate (3 or more placements in a year) from 18% to 4.4% over a 5 year period to 2009. Following a scoping report submitted in June, further in-depth conversations have been held with the council to ascertain the reasons behind their success.

The most significant development in recent years has been the formation of an Access to Resources Team (ART). The team is separate from Children's Social Care Services and is overseen by the Director of children's strategic services, thereby preventing any potential conflict of interest between purchasing and providing services.

ART operates at both a strategic and an individual level. As well as leading on commissioning strategies and managing tenders for services, it also receives referrals from a range of lead professionals who require a service for an individual child. The officers in the team work closely with lead professionals to ensure that referral information is accurate and useful. ART's Manager described a 'supermarket model' whereby the team has an in-depth knowledge of a range of services available in the local area and neighbouring authorities (for example: child minding, domiciliary care, outreach, mentoring, foster care, residential services). By having this knowledge of the market place, it can be more effectively managed through the use of framework contracts and service level agreements. This knowledge is described as key, as the demand for services and the way in which they are provided changes over time and it is not reasonable to expect lead professionals working with children to have up to date information regarding the range of provision available.

ART has a clear remit in relation to placement finding: To consider the referral and to come up with a choice of placements / services that will meet the child's individual needs. This brokerage service is carried out by officers with a range of skills and experience. No referral is the same and the work required will range from seeking a temporary child minding service for a child with relatively low needs to co-ordinating a multi-agency team to identify a specialist residential placement for a child with extremely complex needs within a critical timescale. A similar framework is applied to all referrals and each referral is in effect 'project managed' by a member of the ART team.

If a referral for a placement has been requested, the ART will consider what is the most appropriate placement finding strategy for that particular child. This is determined by two main factors: the complexity of the child's needs and the time available. In most cases, an initial referral will be sent by ART to the council's in-house fostering service requesting them to provide a choice of placements. If, at any stage, it looks unlikely that the in-house service will be able to provide an appropriate placement, then ART will forward the anonymised referral to providers in the independent sector with a request for them to provide information on suitable and available placements.

The decision making process for placements is described as being key to Bournemouth's success, and it incorporates the principle that Children's Social Care managers make the crucial decision about whether a child should be brought in to care or not. ART will then

check that information received meets the agreed criteria and is authorised to look for the best matching placements. Information about the available placements and costs is then shared with the child's Social Worker. The decision regarding which is the most suitable placement for a child rests with the Social Worker and their Team Manager. This is based on both the quality and cost of available options.

ART takes ownership of the 'business side' of social care and leads on market management, co-ordinating and administering referrals, negotiating terms and conditions, invoicing and contract management, dispute resolution and general provider / purchaser enquiries.

Benefits for Social Workers

A recent survey of social workers, health and education professionals showed that:

- 100% agree that ART provides an appropriate placement finding service.
- 100% agree that ART provides appropriate advice and guidance and support.
- 100% agreed that the services delivered by ART help Social Workers make a difference to the lives of Children and Young people

Additional feedback from Social Work Managers also revealed that Social Workers feel the ART process has freed up capacity for Social Workers to concentrate on the Social Care part of the role therefore making a significant difference to their work (see also below).

Cost Effectiveness

In creating ART, a number of existing posts were transferred into the team, for example: finance officers, contract officers, family support development officers. Funding for the 'duty officer' in the in-house fostering team was transferred to ART to fund a placements officer. 'New' funding of approximately £55k was necessary to recruit a Placement Co-ordinator.

The funding of this post was difficult in a time of fiscal restraint and the Resource Manager was tasked with evidencing the savings that would be made. A target of £200k per annum was set to offset the cost of the Placement Co-ordinator and this has already been exceeded.

Freeing up Social Worker capacity

There are 14 members of staff in the ART team and only one has a social work qualification. The Head of the Team is not social work Qualified. Bournemouth have recognised that, the skill set required to effectively commission services for children is different to that required for front line social work. Officers taking on brokerage roles have experience of customer services, are good at working under extreme pressure and to tight deadlines. They have project management skills, analytical skills and are apt at negotiating complex terms and conditions. Some have experience in the social work or education sector. They work closely with Social workers and support them by relieving them of the specialist and technical procurement tasks for which they have probably received no training.

The Resource Manager claimed that a significant factor in the team's success is the fact that they are co-located. This enables the pathway for a referral to be effectively managed and for the team to share knowledge and skills.

Providing a choice of placements for individual children

The Resource Manager believes that the improved stability is largely down to the fact that they are 'getting it right first time'. The new procedures allow for a choice of placements to be offered to the social worker for each individual child. On average there is now a choice of three placements, whereas historically it was difficult to get one offer of a placement. This is as a result of several factors for example: robust information supplied at the referral point so providers know what they are expected to deliver and can better assess their ability to deliver; in complex cases providers are interviewed and are required to evidence how they can meet the needs of the child or young person; offers are made within the in house and private provider sector with support package options attached if required

The essential principle that they 'do not need permission to look, but they do need permission to place' means that ART can be creative and resourceful in looking for a range of potential placements for a child.

The emphasis on matching has been significant in improving stability. Having the complex procurement task taken care of, the Social Worker can focus on supporting the child and carefully consider which provision will best meet the child's long term needs.

Quality Monitoring & Value for money

Many Local Authorities have significant challenges in relation to capturing information about the quality of placements for use in the management of contracts and service development activity. ART have developed a systematic monitoring system that means that:

- Expected outcomes are detailed in the initial referral and Individual Placement Contract (IPC) and agreed by both Purchaser and Provider.
- IPC information is forwarded to main carer prior to a review – the team would expect the carer to have an IPC at point of placement and know the outcomes prior to placement under the providers matching process.
- The IRO ensures that the feedback regarding the progress of each outcome is discussed at the placement review.
- The Child's Social Worker feeds back to ART regarding progress made.
- ART will take appropriate action (feed information into framework quality monitoring, negotiate reduced or increased fees (in accordance with any changes in needs), assist with dispute resolution, complaints or compliments, and lead on contract compliance issues.

Over the past 5 years, the former Contracts and Placements Team and newly formed ART have developed a healthy and respectful relationship with Providers in the statutory, third and private sectors. They are increasingly working towards a 'level playing field' and quality monitoring of placements is carried out in a systematic and robust manner for children in all types of placement, regardless of whether or not they

are in the in-house or independent sector. This then allows ART to consider quality and value for money and compare provision on a like for like basis.

Commissioning Preventative Services

The ART has expanded their remit beyond children in care. They also broker for children and families requiring a range of services including those on the brink of care, where they will facilitate and administer 'pre-accommodation meetings' and work pro-actively with a team around the child to provide the right support to prevent a placement. Again, this is where knowledge of the market place is critical - if there isn't capacity within the Council's statutory services, ART is able to identify alternative community support from the third sector and private providers at the time that it is needed to prevent children from coming into care.

Northamptonshire Council

In 2005 Northamptonshire Council considered its placement (in) stability statistics to be overly high. Its figure of 21.3 was one of the worst in the country. In 2006, Northamptonshire established a brokerage model and has since seen the figure of 21.3% of looked after children experiencing high levels of placement moves reduce by almost half to 12%.

The Authority has four Childcare teams and one permanence team. Prior to the creation of a brokerage team, these individual teams were responsible for looking for placements for children. Referrals are now sent to the brokerage team to manage and the team has a process similar to that of the Bournemouth model. Referrals are quality checked, sent to a range of providers chosen by brokerage officers, offered placements are checked against essential criteria, choices are shared with child's social worker and budget holder for a final decision on where to place the child.

The key to success is reported to have been getting the right people in the team. The qualities and attributes of brokerage officers are described as essential for success. It is considered that that the team are able to work under pressure and that they are confident to challenge decisions if they felt that the child's needs could be better met or if a more cost effective placement could be found. In Northamptonshire, all officers are social work qualified, although at the time of recruitment this was not an essential criteria and it was acknowledged that individuals with experience of the fostering of residential sector could potentially be very effective at managing a referral.

The team has a good knowledge of local services delivered by a range of partners. It has developed good relationships with both social work teams and with other providers. Although there was initially some resistance to change, particularly from social workers long used to previous methods, there is a growing acknowledgement that the revised arrangements are freeing up social worker capacity. Overall, social work teams are reported now to view the changes in a very positive light.

Northamptonshire are currently looking to make further improvements. In particular, they are keen to increase contracting and financial skills within the team. They are looking to review some decision making responsibilities to ensure referrals are processed with an even smarter balance of costs and quality.