

Commissioning Strategy for Children in Care

Summary

The Luton Borough Council Commissioning Strategy for Children in Care was developed to address the high numbers of children in care in the borough; increasing budget pressures across children's social care services; the changing needs of the vulnerable children; and to improve key performance indicators.

Authority/partner organisation(s):	LUTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
Improvement East theme:	PERFORMANCE
Improvement East initiative (workstream):	CHILDREN'S SERVICES
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Main Messages

This project was developed to improve the effectiveness of services for children in care and those at risk of family breakdown in Luton. This included:

- The Luton Children in Care Commissioning Strategy: a three year strategy 2008-2011 which has been in place for approximately 16 months
- Three commissioning priorities: work with families to prevent and reduce the number of children in care; narrow the gap in outcomes for children in care; improve placement choices that meet the specific needs and provide a value for money service
- An identified commissioning budget and performance targets for each workstream
- A positive impact on the service in terms of outcomes and budgetary control through the development of cross-cutting work streams

Case study

Luton is a unitary authority with a population of approximately 200,000. The borough has a diverse population with a significant Pakistani and Bangladeshi community and has considerable areas of deprivation as compared to other local authorities in the East of England.

The Luton Children in Care Commissioning Strategy sought to address:

- The continuing high numbers of children in care in Luton when compared to national trends and statistical neighbours
- The increase in length of time that our children remain as Children in Care
- The evolution of the Multi-Agency Family Support Panels and the team around the child approach
- The need for services to be personalised to the needs of children, families and carers
- The development of increased family support, placement choice and stability
- Alternative solutions and packages of support to prevent family placement breakdown building on Family Group Conferences
- Improved outcomes delivered through joint aims and objectives
- Overall budgetary pressures within the service and the ongoing need for increased accountability and budgetary control.

Analysis of the children in care population, numbers of children entering the care system, performance data for vulnerable children, and budget information over the previous three years

was undertaken to identify trends and inform the Commissioning Strategy and action plan. This analysis identified the following areas for change at various stages over the three year period:

- The coordination of services at tier 2 improve early identification of services required
- Extend intensive support at tier 3 services to prevent admission to care/rehabilitate children back home
- Improve decision making and case management of work with vulnerable children/children in care
- Strengthen commissioning and contracting of services through the brokerage unit in the commissioning team
- Yearly targets for increasing in-house foster placements to meet the predicted need identified in the commissioning strategy
- Priorities for performance improvement to deliver the targets in the commissioning strategy linking improved outcomes for children with value for money.

The Commissioning Strategy addressed the pressures of a volatile budget and resource service. The analysis of future need, although robust, could not completely take into account risks such as increases in the population through migration, the predicted growth of children with severe disabilities which Luton has begun to identify and over the last year national issues particularly Baby Peter and the national increase of numbers of children in care and the Southwark Judgement.

The commissioning priorities each had a lead officer responsible for management and review. Progress on the strategy has been reviewed on a quarterly basis alongside performance reporting.

For the first year of the Strategy, increased funding was targeted to increase the number of foster carers and increase the number of staff in the intensive support team to support families in crisis. Senior managers are involved in decision making to bring children in to care and at tier 2 chairing multi agency family support panels. The remit of the brokerage team has been extended to manage procurement and contract management of services and this has successfully put in place procurement processes to improve quality and value for money.

The Commissioning Strategy essentially used existing funding streams and set targets to bring spend in line with budget allocation. £160,000 was allocated as “pump priming” funding for year 1 of the strategy in the fostering and intensive support teams to accelerate progress.

In order to ensure learning between partners, the Commissioning Strategy has been shared with other local authorities in the region.

The Commissioning Strategy will be reviewed at the end of this financial year to revise targets and strategic objectives.

In conclusion, the Commissioning Strategy, with cross cutting priorities and aligning performance and finance targets, has provided a framework to improve key performance indicators, improve contracting and procurement systems, create value for money initiatives and bring volatile budgets under control.

Key outcomes

The Commissioning Strategy has so far delivered the following:

- Reduction of children in care from 386 (March 2008) to 340 (December 2009) exceeding the 2009-10 target of 368. There has been a marked reduction in the number of children entering the care system and an increase in the number ceasing to be looked after.

- The number of purchased foster care placements has reduced from 84 in March 2008 to 65 currently. The cost of purchased foster placements in 2007-8 was £3,913,000 and in 2008/9 was £3,796,000. The current projection for 2009-10 shows a further reduction.
- A target of 30 for the number of in-house foster carers to be recruited was exceeded in 2008-9 (39 recruited) providing 56 placements and will be exceeded this year also.
- Purchased residential care expenditure has reduced significantly from £2,427,000 in 2007-8 to £1,895,858 in 2008-9 and is currently projected for 2009-10 to be £1,879,060
- There have been considerable improvements in providing placements closer to Luton. The number of children during 2008-9 placed beyond a 20 mile radius has reduced to 2.3% compared to 11.5% in 2007-8 and 18.8% in 2006-6.
- Preferred provider agreements are in place with Independent Fostering Agencies providing a reduction in costs and improved quality of services. Procurement and contract arrangements for transport of children in care and supervised contact have also provided efficiencies and improved quality of service.
- Long placement stability is improving from 58.7 in 2007-8, 66.7 2008-9 and is currently 72.0.
- The number of care proceedings instigated has stayed stable overall whereas in a significant number of local authorities figures have increased significantly following the Laming Review.

Staff across the Children and Learning Department and in partner agencies, have supported the implementation of the Commissioning Strategy. They have valued the extended role of the commissioning team's brokerage unit and the involvement of senior managers in decisions about care proceedings, children coming into care and provision of resources to keep children at home where appropriate.

Learning

An overview of the critical factors for success include having cross cutting priorities to address the issues of overspending budgets, improvement required in performance and developing commissioning and contracting process. This Commissioning Strategy provided the framework for doing this and for monitoring and review. A range of staff were involved in creating the strategy including finance officers and a multi-agency steering group for children in care. The Corporate Parenting Board has reviewed progress regularly and the strategy was agreed at the Council executive. This has provided challenge and scrutiny at a variety of levels.

Key areas to address within the strategy were improving procurement and contracting processes; improving decision making and care planning; developing multi agency decision making and resource allocation for tier 2 services; aligning budget information with performance.

This was addressed by enhancing the role of the brokerage unit in the commissioning team and bringing two finance officers within the brokerage unit; through the establishment of a care management panel chaired by and attended by senior officers from children's services (including education) and CAMHS considering decisions about entry to the care system and allocation of resources; regular and accessible budget information being analysed alongside performance; developing the multi agency family support panels at tier 2; and finally the pump priming funding in the first year of the strategy enabled an increase in Luton foster carers and increased prevention work while the strategy became embedded.

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