

## Children's Improvement Board Case Study – Wirral Borough Council

September 2012

### 1.1 Summary

- **What they are doing:** Since 2009, Wirral Borough Council has significantly extended the scope and access of their Short Breaks service, increasing the number of providers that can offer suitable provision to children with disabilities. This has achieved their vision of increasing volume, range, choice and quality of Short Breaks for Children with Disabilities.
- **How they are doing it:** The Council significantly extended the reach of their Short Breaks service by removing the requirement for a social work assessment to gate-keep receipt of the service, thus allowing a far greater number of families to access support. Parents can now *choose* whether they would like a social work assessment to access short breaks (maintaining the traditional route into the service) or to directly access short breaks services themselves. For those families who directly access services, local providers have their own specific criteria and charging policies although generally prices are extremely low for sessional activities, maximising access. In addition, the newly configured Short Breaks team has worked closely with local providers to capacity-build and support them in extending their provision to better suit the needs of local families.
- **Main benefits and outcomes:** There has been overwhelming positive support for the renewed service from local parents, professionals and uptake of short breaks has risen dramatically.

### 1.2 How it works

In 2009 Wirral Borough Council expanded its Short Breaks Service in order to increase the numbers of children with disabilities and their families who were able to benefit from the service. This has been achieved by:

- Removing previously existing barriers to access and simplifying access criteria, enabling parents to bypass the social care assessment route if they so wished.
- Increasing the amount and breadth of provision available for children with disabilities
- Improving access to information about local provision for both professionals and families across the locality
- Supporting local providers to clarify their access criteria so that parents can more easily identify an appropriate service for their child and access it directly.

In line with the expansion of the short breaks service, the definition of 'short breaks' was widened beyond traditional (and somewhat limiting) definitions that had been used in the past and now more fully reflects the whole spectrum of families' needs. For example, the service has now been extended to offer:

- Respite for the primary carer
- Youth leisure provision
- Family-based provision
- Overnight and sitting services (includes both home- and community-based services).

The Short Breaks team consists of a Project Manager, Team Support Officer and 2 Development Officers whose role is:

- To act as a point of contact for incoming enquiries from parents (and professionals)
- To work with local providers to capacity-build, improve access and work with parents effectively
- To respond to workforce development issues (e.g. organising sector appropriate training).
- Coordinate Leisure Link programme, service offer short term intervention to children to access short breaks long term.

The Short Breaks Service is funded through the Early Intervention Grant and the service funds provision for parents by purchasing provision from individual local providers. Parents who choose to access local providers directly or through the team but without a social care assessment are charged for some activities (others are free for all), although costs are generally minimal, usually under £3 per session/person.

#### *Access Criteria and referrals*

Whilst in its previous format, to access the Short Breaks service, children needed to have a social work assessment, the service has now become more creative in its access criteria and has removed the *requirement* for an assessment and replaced this with provider-based access criteria, to reflect the type of provision they offer. Whilst there were concerns about the risk of flooding the service by effectively eliminating this gate-keeping process, in practice this has not happened, and parents are more effectively seeking out provision with respect to their child's particular needs. Each local provider therefore has its own specific access criteria which parents (or their children) must fulfil before being able to access that service. Providers are supported with the establishment of appropriate and robust access criteria by the Short Breaks Team. Parents can however decide to have a social work assessment which will determine the level and type of support they are offered via the Authority. There are therefore now two routes into Short Breaks provision.

Referrals can come into the service either as a self-referral from parents, or through other professionals (e.g. Social Workers, Family Support Workers, SENCOs, Health Visitors).

#### *Increasing the amount and diversity of good quality provision*

By investing in both capital projects and capacity building of local providers, as well as offering them small grants to establish working access criteria, Wirral Council has extended its provision in a more strategic, cost-effective and more intelligent manner, and this is reflected in parental feedback of the new and improved service. Development Officers work closely with local providers to ensure their training needs are met, and that they have the ability to offer appropriate provision for children with disabilities across the borough. Not only are there now a much greater number of places within the Short Breaks service, they represent a far wider diversity in type and client group catered for.

*Improving information and awareness across families and other professionals*

For every referral where there is social care involvement, the Social Worker will also be kept aware of contact with the Short Breaks service. The service has produced a booklet on all services and provision available locally, originally aimed at parents, but that is increasingly also being utilised by professionals to locate appropriate and tailored provision for the children they work with.

1.2.1 Main benefits

The main benefits of the new Short Breaks service in the Wirral have been both the greater ease with which parents can now access the service, and also the massive increase in the numbers of children receiving a service. Between 2009 and the present time, the numbers of children provided for per quarter has increased from approximately 160 in 2009 to nearly 700. It is believed that the greater numbers of children accessing the service is reflective of children getting picked up, who would have previously not been picked up by the system (either because they did not have a social work assessment, or their needs were not seen as meeting eligibility thresholds). In this way, the service is plugging a gap in connecting greater numbers of children into community provision who are likely to otherwise have been at risk of social isolation.

The elimination of the requirement for a social work assessment has substantially decreased the time taken to access a short breaks service, and in addition, Development Officers can advocate on behalf of families with local providers to enable greater leverage into a service. The role of the Development Officers in supporting local providers has also been instrumental in capacity-building the independent sector across the authority, thereby reducing the dependency on the Local Authority for delivery of provision.

The re-configuring of the service has also enabled the team to re-set criteria for access so that local provision is more tailored to local need. The Short Breaks team in effect acts as a broker between parents and local providers and in this way, offers a seamless route into service provision.

1.2.2 Has the project improved outcomes? Any evidence from user feedback/staff?

The service collects output and outcome data from all providers on a quarterly basis, as well as feedback from parents about the service they receive. Feedback from parents has been extremely positive and parents are also well-represented in governance and feedback structures within the Authority.

The Authority has also been selected by Impact (a partnership between the Short Breaks Network and Serco) as a Sector Champion with respect to its Short Breaks provision, acting as a regional champion in sharing good practice and supporting other local authorities in developing provision in this area.

1.2.3 Has the project led to cost-savings?

Although the team does not explicitly measure potential cost-savings of the service, anecdotal as well as localised intelligence suggests that the service is indeed saving the Authority overall money.

For just one provider, with respect to one type of short break provision, it was estimated that 17 social work assessments had been avoided because of the reconfiguring of the

service, at a cost of £90 each. This level of saving can therefore be worked up on a much larger scale to factor in the various providers, types of provision and overall numbers of children to give some indication of just one type of saving across the borough. In addition, commissioners of the various providers collect data on a unit-cost level for comparative and projection purposes and anecdotally it is felt that the service in its current form is likely to be contributing to the avoidance of crises and breakdown in care arrangements.

### **1.3 How it was achieved**

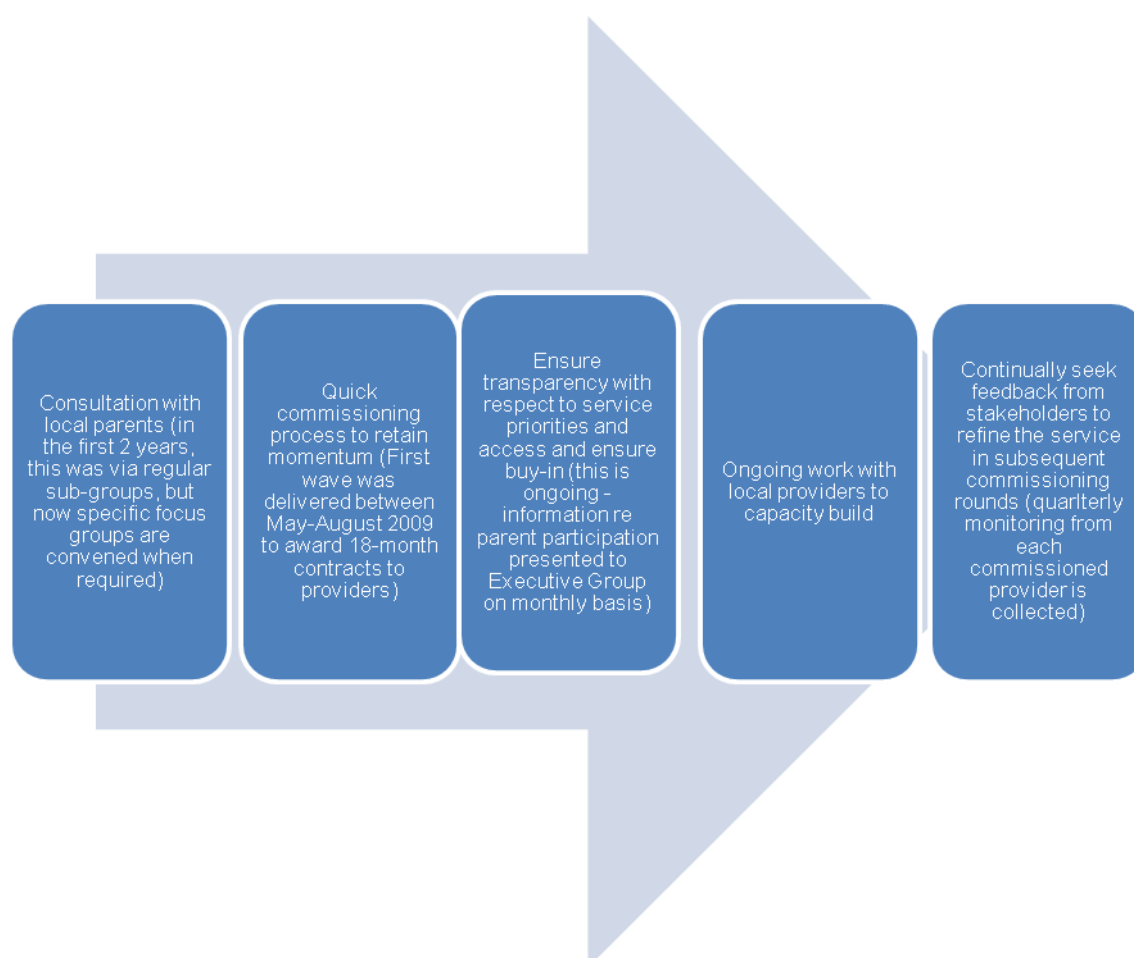
#### **1.3.1 What was the rationale for the service?**

Feedback from parents as well as national research and best practice suggested that the process for accessing the Short Breaks service was too complicated and drawn out for parents, and needed simplifying. In addition, it was not felt that the provision at the time reflected the needs of local families, but instead a fixed menu of options which did not allow for flexibility.

As such, it was decided to strip out the bureaucracy from the service, and offer a suite of diverse provision to engage more successfully with local parents. This was the main driving force behind service development.

#### **1.3.2 Key steps towards integration with time-frames?**

The key steps involved in re-inventing the service in its current format included:



### 1.3.3 What were the key challenges, and how were they overcome?

The key challenges in establishing this service were:

- Working within a **culture that fears change** – both from professionals and parents. This was addressed through being clear and transparent at all times, both about the impetus for change, but also what was realistically achievable in the short- and medium-term.
- **Ensuring buy-in from key stakeholders** was at times very difficult, due to cynicism and wariness and required robust persuasion and negotiation skills.
- **Ensuring all monitoring information is collected** in a timely and robust fashion can be difficult across a variety of providers.
- **Not dismissing what has already been built up** over time, both in terms of intelligence gathering and service delivery
- **Budget pressures** and future uncertainty means **sustainability issues** for the service as a whole which has raised a number of ethical issues in relation to expanding a service to such an extent if its future could not be guaranteed.

### 1.4 Learning points

The main lessons learnt have been:

- **The importance of using quick wins** early on in the service development to ensure buy-in from parents and professionals and to ensure momentum is not lost.
- **Using word of mouth to build on early successes**
- **Working with parents in a transparent way** has facilitated greater trust between them and the Authority to improve what was historically a more oppositional relationship.
- **Don't be scared to change the status quo:** whilst there were many fears from professionals around removing the requirement for a social work assessment to access the service, this has been a key lever in expanding the reach of the service.
- **Set eligibility criteria in line with what providers can realistically offer.**
- **Understand the nature of piloting a new service and change things if they do not work as planned.**

*'Be brave – have the confidence to shed bureaucracy and don't be scared to pull the plug if things aren't working'*

(Julia Hassall, Acting Deputy Director of Children's Services)

## 1.5 Key contact

For further information, contact Dawn Tolcher, Project Manager on 0151 666 4847 or [dawntolcher@wirral.gov.uk](mailto:dawntolcher@wirral.gov.uk).