



100hr Short Breaks City of York Council Memorandum Report

For: Registered Manager – Short Breaks
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Introduction and scope

- 1 Short Breaks are provided for families who have children with a permanent and substantial impairment or illness, that has a profound effect on their health, development, and social functioning. They are provided for families that are unable to access universal activities, services and provision without additional support.
- 2 Short Breaks can be for a few hours or longer, in some circumstances overnight. They can be provided in many ways. A Short Break could include: additional support so that a child or young person can join a club or recreational activity in their community; someone caring for a child in their own home or within the child's home; or it could be extra support for the disabled child to join in family leisure and social activities.
- 3 It is a fundamental principle of York's approach to Short Breaks that children with disabilities are supported to access services from universal, and some targeted, services within the community without the need for assessment.

Objective and scope

- 4 The purpose of this audit was to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the systems in place (both procedures and controls) to ensure that;
 - There is a defined process in place for those seeking Short Breaks and granting the 100hr allocation.
 - Eligibility criteria is clearly defined.
 - Financial records are held to support all payments.
 - Monitoring and reviewing of arrangements occurs regularly to ensure that the service is supporting its users.

Overview

- 5 At the time of the review (July 2022), families with a child who has a disability are entitled to apply for 100 hours of short breaks funding through the Local Offer. There were different types of Short Breaks available, depending on the assessed needs of the child or young person. These can include support provided directly from the council, including Community Short Breaks, Residential Short Breaks and Short Breaks Foster Care. Alternatively, families can use their budget to be supported by a Direct Payment or independent agency (Snappy and Salvere).
- 6 All applications are received through the website, where families make their request. When they submit the request, they will be contacted to enquire about their child's disability and the type of short breaks they would like to access. The website states that no assessment is necessary and that they can claim 100 hours of funding if their child has a disability.

- 7 When an application has been approved, families receive £80 every four weeks for activities or two hours a week at £9.90¹ per hour for a Personal Assistant (PA) as a Direct Payment via Salvere. Children are eligible to receive Short Breaks payments until the age of 18 and once accepted these payments continue to be made every 4 weeks.
- 8 In most cases a payment of approximately £1,000 is made to the family each year until they are 18 years old.
- 9 The Short Breaks service has seen budget overspends for the previous five years. In 2021/22 the budget was £110k however the actual spend was approximately £400k.
- 10 Families who apply for short breaks do not need to provide any evidence that the money has been spent as intended. There is no requirement for the families to inform the council of any changes to the need for the short break. There is no review process, therefore approved applications for short breaks are rolled forward until the applicant turns 18 years old.
- 11 As there is limited contact with the families, the service may not be notified if the family move out of area and are no longer eligible for funding. This can result in an overpayment of the short breaks payments which is not recovered.
- 12 The service has no qualitative information to evidence the benefit of the service, or that the monies spent have been on authorised activities. There is no monitoring or review of the short breaks processes or payments to families.
- 13 Since April 2022 there have been 118 Short Breaks applications, but the number of applications per month can fluctuate significantly. There are currently approx. 400 families in receipt of short breaks payments.

Key findings and recommendations

There is a defined process in place for those seeking Short Breaks and granting the 100hr allocation

- 14 There is a process in place for those seeking Short Breaks. Currently, families are made aware of the service via their lead practitioner, such as the school, health visitor, social worker or CAMHS². Families or third parties then submit their application via the Yor-OK website. The application form currently only requires basic information from applicants, including contact details, why they have made the request at this time, the child's diagnoses and any other assessments which have been made (DLA, PIP, EHCP).
- 15 Families or professionals completing the referral form can skip boxes within the application form asking for information. There are no mandatory boxes to ensure the required information is included and that

¹ 2022 rate

² CAMHS: The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

the form has been completed in full at the point the application form is submitted online.

- 16 Once the application form has been submitted it is received into the early years inbox and an acknowledgement email is issued stating that the application will be reviewed within 12 weeks. Application details are then uploaded onto Mosaic by the administration team and the Short Breaks Coordinator (SBC) is notified of the new application. Incomplete applications increase the processing time, and delays communications to families. The Short Breaks Coordinator must ensure that all the necessary information is included on each application that has been submitted before the application can progress.
- 17 The completed application for short breaks is reviewed and a decision whether to approve the application and associated funding is made. Currently this action is carried out by the Short Breaks Coordinator³.
- 18 The above information has been ascertained through discussions with key staff within the service. There are no formal procedure notes in place.
- 19 The review found that there is no single process or policy document which details the stages that the application goes through for families / applicant. Limited information is provided through the Yor-OK website and portal. The lack of information can lead to increased demands of the service for information

Recommendation

- *The online application process should ensure that the correct data is captured throughout the application process prior to it being submitted. Incomplete fields should be flagged for the applicant and key information fields should be made mandatory.*
- *Procedures for processing applications should be formally documented. Applicants should be made aware of the processes and any key timescales and conditions for formal approval of their application.*
- *An applicant friendly version of the procedures should be uploaded to the portal or included within the FAQ information.*

Eligibility criteria is clearly defined

- 20 The website informs families that there is no assessment necessary to be entitled to short breaks funding. This has meant that no proof of diagnosis was required, just the declaration of the applicant. The service has taken on trust the information submitted on an application.
- 21 There was also no clear guidance on what disabilities would be eligible under the scheme. Families with a child who has a learning disability or Autism are not automatically eligible as short breaks are provided for families with children who have a permanent and substantial impairment or illness, which has a profound effect on their health.

³ The current Short Breaks Coordinator has been in place for 7 months

- 22 Whilst there are certain criteria which need to be met for an application to be accepted, the eligibility criteria are not listed on the Council website and there are no policy documents available to families outlining the criteria for short breaks funding or defining a disability.

Recommendation

There needs to be clear eligibility criteria available so that potential applicants can assess their suitability prior to applying. It should be made clear which types of disabilities are eligible with clear definitions.

- 23 The review found that there was no assessment tool available to the Short Breaks Coordinator (or any other officer who may need to assist in assessing eligibility) for confirming short breaks eligibility. At the time of the review, the decision to award funding was made solely by the Short Breaks Coordinator using a 'common sense approach'. Whilst, we had no issue with any of the decisions made, none had been through a formal authorisation process.

- 24 Whilst there is only one officer⁴ carrying out the process, there needs to be a formal assessment tool in place to remove subjectivity and bias from the process. This assessment tool should cover all the eligibility criteria and proposed outcomes for the child.

Recommendation

- *An internal document outlining the process for defining eligibility from individual disabilities needs to be available. This will provide clear guidance for all individuals in the authorisation process to ensure a consistent approach is undertaken.*
- *Formal paperwork supporting the eligibility criteria will capture key information on which criteria the application was passed and by whom etc. Where variation to this process is undertaken, this should be formally recorded on the authorisation paperwork.*

Financial records are held to support all payments

- 25 In the current financial year, 112 individuals are receiving payments relating to Short Breaks. The projected spend on Short Breaks is £114k for 2022/23. The Short Breaks spend sits on the same budget code as direct payments. It does not have its own budget code allowing for clear budget monitoring.

Recommendation

Short Breaks should have its own cost code going forward (from April 2023).

- 26 Families of applicants do not have to supply receipts for any payments made through Short Breaks. Two thirds of families accessing short breaks funding request that money is paid into a personal bank account. It is

⁴ The Short Breaks Coordinator

therefore not possible to confirm that all monies were spent on the individual's need, as outlined in the application form.

Recommendation

Families should provide receipts for all monies paid out through the Short Breaks process or a system which enables more control on areas of spend should be introduced (pre-payment cards). This should be a condition of the application process that the families sign up to.

- 27 Payments to families for their child(ren) will continue until they are identified from a review of the monthly payments schedule as no longer being eligible. They can be no longer eligible for a number of reasons (e.g. reaching 18). Once identified, the business support team sends the families a letter via email to notify them that the short break payments will stop.
- 28 The monthly payments schedule is sent to the Service Manager of short breaks for review from the finance and fostering team. However, due to workloads this schedule does not often get reviewed in the detail required. Therefore, payments made be made to families in error.

Recommendation

Monitoring of payments by an approved officer should be carried out, monthly prior to any ongoing payments being made.

Monitoring and reviewing of arrangements occurs regularly to ensure that the service is supporting its users

- 29 There is no panel or review process for applications. The decision on whether to accept the application or not is made solely by the Short Breaks Coordinator. The Short Breaks Coordinator does not currently have any delegated authority to commit expenditure on behalf of the authority.

Recommendation

- *Applications should be approved by an authorised officer (Short Breaks Coordinator) up to a de-minimus amount (e.g. £600). Over that amount, the application should go to a panel for review and authorisation. This will ensure that there is oversight on high value applications.*
- *The Short Breaks Coordinator should be given delegated authority up to the de-minimus amount.*

- 30 There is no ongoing monitoring of active short break payments to ensure that the activity identified is still meeting the need of, or relevant to the child/young person. This would involve case reviews for families who have been in receipt of payments for longer than two years.
- 31 Payments should stop when the child turns 18yrs or moves out of the area but as there are no review systems in place this is not always the case. Payments that should be stopped are identified on an ad hoc basis through the review of the payment schedule. A review of the payments

made this financial year identified that one individual turned 18 on 1st May 2022 but received a payment in May and June of £99.16.

Recommendation

A monitoring process should be built into any revised procedures to ensure that the short breaks payments are still effective for the child/young person. Monitoring information should include key information checks, including DOB checks when child is over 17 years old.

- 32 There is no clear system of review assessing whether the monies spent had any impact for the child/young person. The service does not ask families to confirm the effect that the short break money has had on the individual or family. There is no assessment of the activity undertaken in meeting the needs of the child, as identified through the application form.
- 33 The service does not receive any formal feedback from parents. Therefore, there is limited qualitative feedback available as to the value of the Short Breaks Service.

Recommendation

- *Families should be asked to complete a monitoring form which will provide key feedback on the service and help to assess its outcomes. This should be for all activities/services provided. For parents in receipt of ongoing activity payments feedback should be requested at regular intervals.*
- *Any process put in place should marry up the requirements of the child from the original application and the outcomes of the activity in key areas (to be identified by the service).*

Changes introduced during the review

- 34 During the review, several changes to process were undertaken by the Short Breaks Coordinator. These changes have seen tighter procedures and greater financial control over the application process. This is due to the Short Breaks Coordinator being the main point of contact in all Short Breaks Processes and processing all applications.

Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP)

- 35 If there is no EHCP recorded on the system to support the application for Short Breaks, the Short Breaks Coordinator will contact the family and request a copy of the EHCP or other documentation confirming the diagnoses of the named child, and this is uploaded into the system.
- 36 This is key to providing evidence for eligibility for the child and for understanding how the Short Breaks will benefit the child. The child will in most cases have an EHCP and therefore does not require any additional information from the families.

Personal Assistant (PA) Requests

- 37 One third of short break payments are made through Salvere for personal assistants. This service is not effectively reviewed or monitored. During the review it was found that the service had been paying for a PA for an

individual from when the application had been processed and not from when a PA had been allocated to the family. This had resulted in a large balance within the applicant's account. It was also stated that there are some individual accounts with large balances where no PA has been found for the individual.

- 38 Changes to PA requests (via Salvere) have been made so that the Short Breaks Coordinator asks the family to find the PA themselves and then notify the service when one has been found. Details are then passed on to Salvere who arrange all the details and set up the payments. Details input onto a database then flags when the arrangement is due for review (they will be reviewed annually).
- 39 This revision in the process by the Short Breaks Coordinator has allowed payments to be made once a PA has been allocated to an individual and not when the request is made to Salvere, therefore no large balances should accrue going forward.

Recommendation

Salvere accounts should be reviewed to ensure only active applications are in payment. Inactive accounts should be identified to see if a PA service is still required by the individual. All payments made to inactive accounts should cease until the individual circumstances have been reviewed.

Activity Payments

- 40 There has been a trial variation in the issuing of activity payments for new applicants. This involves speaking with the families to determine what type of activity is required and how much it will cost. The annual total amount is then paid to the family as a single lump sum payment. Payment to the family closes their application, and if the family then require further support the onus is on them to re-apply the following year. For families with historic applications in payment, they still receive their activity payments, paid at £80 every 4 weeks.
- 41 This variation in the process of activity payments has placed a definite timescale on the application process once both the needs and an activity (including the cost amount) have been identified. The application does not then roll over indefinitely until the applicant reaches their eighteenth birthday as it has been closed when the payment has been made.
- 42 Monies saved within the Short Breaks service with this new approach has funded additional group activities. Families known to the service have been contacted and invited to specific group activities. These activities are in addition to their individual requests.
- 43 The Short Breaks service is looking into how they may better manage their budget by having application windows for families to apply for funding and posting online when the budget had been spent for the current year.

Authorisation Process

- 44 Currently the Short Breaks Coordinator is responsible for all application and authorisation processes. The Short Breaks Coordinator has implemented a sound control environment for the application and authorisation process of short breaks. They authorise all payments to individuals through the application process for the Short Breaks service. This position (Short Breaks Coordinator) does not currently hold the correct delegated authority to authorise this expenditure.

Recommendation

- *No individual should be the control for the entire processes. All actions carried out by the Short Breaks Coordinator should be included into any formal processes or procedures/guidance with adequate separation of duties considered for the tasks required.*
- *A clear authorisation process should be established and formally adopted in the services procedures.*
- *The Short Breaks Coordinator post should be allowed to authorise expenditure for the service up to an agreed de-minimus level. Any amounts over this level up to and including £1040 should be taken by a specified panel or management group.*

Consultation Processes

- 45 A consultation survey in May 2022 asked users of the short breaks service to help to gather information on how the council could best develop the current short break service around the local offer. The information and views gathered within the survey were to be used to look at how service provision can be developed to meet the needs of children and their families within the City of York.

Conclusion

- 46 The service has taken positive actions since the review began to tighten controls however there are several fundamental control weaknesses that need to be addressed within the processes.
- 47 Recommendations included within this report are for the service to introduce into the changes to the procedures and controls that they are addressing. We can, upon request, assist with identifying control gaps and any risks when the service completes its review – prior to any implementation of the revised systems, processes, and controls.