



# **Bristol City Council**

## **Commissioning Services for Vulnerable Parents with Young Children**

**Consultation response summary**

**January 2018**

v. 09.01.18

# Introduction and context

## Purpose of this document

The draft plan 'Commissioning Services for Vulnerable Parents with Young Children' set out proposals for commissioning a set of related services for parents with babies and young children. These services are:

**Parent and child assessment placements** – These are short-term placements, usually of about 12 weeks, for families where there are concerns about the parents' ability to safely parent their child(ren). Placements are often ordered by the court in child protection court proceedings to inform the court about whether or not the child(ren) should continue to live with their parent(s). These placements are either in residential centres or with foster carers.

**Homelessness prevention services** – These services are for vulnerable parents with babies and young children who are at risk of homelessness. They include floating support and short-term supported accommodation.

The plan was published for consultation on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2017 and the consultation closed on 6<sup>th</sup> December 2017. Responses were invited online, via the council's Citizenspace, or by email/post and there was also a 'providers and practitioners' event on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2017 with attendees from six organisations. In total there were 30 participants in the consultation.

## What are we trying to achieve?

### Key aims for parent and child placements – residential assessments

- Have a residential assessment centre local to Bristol so that families don't have to move away from their support networks and are assessed in a more realistic environment.
- Reduce spend on residential assessment placements by:
  - Making fewer residential assessment placements, using community-based and foster placements instead where possible;
  - Limiting the number of court-ordered residential assessments, by ensuring there are alternatives that have the confidence of the court;
  - Making sure residential assessments take no longer than necessary to complete and that families move on once assessments are completed;
  - Having a clear contract with external providers, including clear costs and fixed prices for an initial period.
- Commission timely, good quality assessments that the council and the courts can rely on to inform their decisions for children.
- Regularise our procurement practice so that we are no longer reliant on spot purchasing.
- The residential assessment centres where we place families link into the whole-system of assessment and support for those families, including making recommendations that follow the family once they leave the placement.

### Key aims for parent and child placements – foster care

- Have good quality local parent and child foster placements able to accommodate families with a range of needs and levels of risk, including parents aged 24+, single fathers and couples.
- Make increased use of parent and child foster placements in order to reduce our use of residential assessment placements, and reduce overall spend on assessment placements.
- Reduce the average weekly and total cost of parent and child foster placements.
- Commission good quality assessments that the council and the courts can rely on to inform their decisions for children.

- Foster placements and assessments that are linked into the whole-system of assessment and support for the families placed, including making recommendations that follow the family once they leave the placement.

### Key aims for homelessness prevention services

- Balance potentially competing aims of targeting supported accommodation for vulnerable parents with the highest support needs versus the need to use supported accommodation for homeless families who otherwise would need to be housed in higher cost temporary accommodation.
- Limit spend on temporary accommodation for homelessness families.
- Make sure that families in parent and child assessment placements (both residential and foster placements) are able to move on to supported accommodation without delay if this is the best home for them.
- Ensure that there are effective and flexible floating support services to:
  - prevent vulnerable parents with young children from becoming homeless;
  - provide resettlement support to families moving on from the service’s supported accommodation;
  - provide additional support to meet the needs of a small number of families living in the service’s supported accommodation who have particularly high support needs.

## Proposals for consultation

The following proposals were included in the draft plan, and formed the basis for consultation.

### Parent and child placements – residential assessments

We have not yet formed a view about our preferred option for commissioning these placements. During the consultation period, we will seek the views of stakeholders on the following three options.

1	Establish a new five-year open framework for residential parenting assessments. This would be a Bristol City Council framework; other local authorities would be asked if they wish to join the framework as potential purchasers. We would undertake proportionate quality assurance and contract management of providers on the framework. Prices to be fixed for an initial period of two years.
2	Bristol City Council to develop its own 4 or 5 unit residential assessment centre in Bristol. A suitable building has been identified in South Bristol; planning permission would be required for the change of use. The scheme would have to be registered with Ofsted as a residential family centre. The centre’s staff would include family support workers to give guidance and help to families. Assessments would be completed by a specialist senior practitioner social worker working with a clinical psychologist. Places in the scheme could be purchased by other local authorities.
3	Bristol City Council to work in partnership with an external provider to develop a new 4 or 5 unit residential assessment centre in Bristol. The scheme would have to be registered with Ofsted as a residential family centre. The council aims to make a building available on favourable terms. A suitable building has been identified in South Bristol; planning permission would be required for the change of use. The council would wish to block purchase some of the places, probably three. The council would carry out a suitable procurement process to appoint the provider.

### Parent and child placements – foster care

We propose to establish a council-run parent and child assessment foster scheme managed within the council’s existing foster agency. We plan to recruit five specialist foster carers to provide an average of four parent and child assessment placements a year, including to some single parent fathers and couples where appropriate. The scheme will include a senior practitioner social worker to carry out assessments and a

social worker to supervise foster carers. Foster carers will contribute to assessments, by providing observation logs and other input, as well as supporting and supervising the family. The assessment team may also include a clinical psychologist. This scheme would be able to deliver about 20 assessment placements per year of average duration.

If additional parent and child assessment placements are required, we will purchase these from suitable providers on the existing sub-regional IFA framework with the assessment being completed by a Bristol City Council social worker.

### **Homelessness prevention services**

We propose to have one contract to provide an integrated supported accommodation and floating support service for vulnerable parents with young children aged up to two years. The service will be for parents of any age. The contract will be to provide:

- Support at the 36 units of accommodation used for the current specialist young parents homelessness prevention service. We will require a higher level of support at 15 units of accommodation, potentially with a 24 hour seven day a week staff presence. (We will be seeking views on the need for a 24 hour staff presence during the consultation.)
- Floating support that is linked to the supported accommodation units. This will be support to prevent homelessness, help vulnerable families settle into accommodation and link into support networks in their local community and will provide additional ‘bolt-on’ support to vulnerable families in lower support accommodation where needed.

We are proposing that the current level of funding for the floating support element of the integrated service be reduced to allow for additional funding to be provided to increase supported housing in the city for homeless families. This aligns with the aims of the linked commissioning plan - ‘Preventing Homelessness Accommodation Pathways – families and adults (22+)’ - to increase the overall level of supported family accommodation in order to reduce the level of expenditure of more expensive spot purchased emergency temporary accommodation.<sup>1</sup>

The proposed service will be for vulnerable parents (of any age) with babies (up to the age of 2 years) who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, as well as providing move-on accommodation and/or support to families moving on from parent and child assessment placements. In relation to the latter families, the support the service provides will be informed by any recommendations from the assessment placement and work in partnership with the family’s social worker and other practitioners working with the family.

The maximum budget envelope for the new integrated service will be £368,000 but we may seek to reduce this.

### **Procurement proposal**

We propose to commission the integrated homelessness prevention service for vulnerable parents by negotiating with the current provider of the specialist young parents homelessness prevention service (BYPA). We are doing this as we think that there is a limited market of organisations that can bring suitable accommodation and skills to provide what we seek to procure.

In order to test this assumption, during the consultation for this commissioning plan we are seeking responses from organisations who are able and interested in providing 36 units of suitable accommodation, and who have the knowledge and skills to provide a medium/high support service to vulnerable families with young children. The accommodation will need to be suitable for the client group and provide a geographical spread across Bristol, with units in different areas of the city. We will also be issuing a PIN (Prior Information Notice) to determine if there are other providers with suitable accommodation and the ability to provide a quality support service to the client group.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.bristol.gov.uk/en\\_US/housing/commissioning-homelessness-prevention-services](https://www.bristol.gov.uk/en_US/housing/commissioning-homelessness-prevention-services)

If there is clear evidence that there is a wider market able to provide suitable accommodation and support, then we will pursue a competitive tender for these services.

The contract will be for five years with the option to extend for up to a further two periods of one year each.

## Service improvements

In addition to the commissioning recommendations set out above, we also propose to implement a number of improvements to the whole-system of assessment and services for vulnerable parents with young children:

	<b>Service improvement</b>
1	BCC social workers will identify how to improve the assessment process for families in assessment placements. This will include how best to identify what will be needed from the family and any services supporting that family if the outcome of the assessment is to be that the family stay together.
2	BCC children’s services will liaise with current providers of homelessness prevention services for young parents to agree how to work better together, including making sure assessments and recommendations follow the family as they move on from residential or foster placements as well as how to enable better communication between practitioners. A working protocol may be developed.
3	In order to facilitate timely move on from residential assessments into supported accommodation (reducing spend on residential assessments) commissioners will consider options for covering the costs of voids.
4	Improve the system of referrals into the current BYPA floating support service. Increased focus on working with the wider family (family, friends and relatives who may have asked the family to leave their accommodation) to prevent homelessness.
5	Improving and rationalising the waiting lists on the Housing Support Register so that they more accurately and transparently prioritise nominations into the current BYPA supported accommodation service to households with support needs.

# Summary of consultation responses

The following is a summary of the responses that were received relating to specific questions. Responses were received in different formats, but all relate to the questions.

## Parent and child placements – residential assessments

### Which option, or combination of options, would be preferable and why?

Of the 13 responses to the online questionnaire, 7 (54%) felt that the council should go ahead with option 1 - establish a new five-year open framework for residential parenting assessments – either on its own (2 responses) or in combination with option 2 (4 responses) or 3 (1 response).

Option 2 - Bristol City Council to develop its own 4 or 5 unit residential assessment centre in Bristol – was the most popular option, with 9 respondents (69%) feeling that this was the preferable option, either on its own (5 responses) or in combination with option 1 (4 responses).

Option 3 - Bristol City Council to work in partnership with an external provider to develop a new 4 or 5 unit residential assessment centre in Bristol – was less popular, with only 3 responses (23%) preferring this option either on its own (2 responses) or in combination with option 1 (1 response).

The most popular single response was option 2 on its own, followed by options 1 and 2 combined.

*“I think it’s very important for Bristol to have its own assessment centre so families do not have to move to different parts of the country away from family and friends”* – Tenant Support Officer.

Having an assessment centre in Bristol, so that parents are able to maintain relationships with existing support networks throughout the assessment process, was supported by several respondents. There were also several comments about the importance of well trained and experienced staff, including access to psychology.

*“We would welcome the input from BCC to work collaboratively with us to ensure the residential assessments we provide are quality assured, provide consistent service and good value for money. We currently rely on debriefing with the individual Social Work teams at present and a more formal process would provide further reassurances about the quality of our service.”* – Provider

*“I would worry if only one type of service was available it would not be flexible enough”* – Social Worker

### Providers

3 providers of residential assessments responded to the consultation. One provider – Richmond House – expressed an interest in joining an open framework for residential parenting assessments. 3 providers expressed a possible interest in developing a residential assessment centre in Bristol.

## Parent and child placements – foster care

### Do you have any views about the proposal to establish a council-run parent and child assessment foster scheme?

All of the responses to the consultation were positive about the proposal to establish a council-run parent and child assessment foster scheme. Identified potential benefits included:

- Ensuring that the foster carers were sufficiently skilled to provide this kind of service;
- An anticipated saving on using external agencies or residential placements;
- Better quality assessments if the views of the foster carers are properly considered;
- The potential for regular experienced psychological input; and
- The potential to create smoother exit plans for families once the assessment is complete.

Potential downsides or risks of a council-run specialist scheme included:

- Perceived vulnerability to further cuts;
- The risk that a court may not view an assessment done by the council as sufficiently independent;
- Difficulty in recruiting foster carers with the right skills.

## Homelessness prevention services

### **Do you agree that we should commission an integrated accommodation and floating support service for this client group (rather than separate accommodation and floating support services)?**

9 of 11 responses (82%) agreed that we should commission an integrated service. 2 people disagreed and 2 did not respond.

Generally respondents felt that having an integrated support service would lead to a more efficient and joined up approach to supporting families. There was also support for the current service which is an integrated service. The only concern was around a possible conflict of interest, although this was not described in detail.

There was also widespread agreement that there should be a smoother route between residential assessments and the homelessness prevention services for vulnerable parents.

### **Do you agree with the proposal to change the client group from young parents aged 16-24, to vulnerable parents of all ages who have young children?**

On the online questionnaire, 10 respondents (77%) agreed with this proposal against 3 who disagreed. Respondents largely felt that access to the specialist service should be based on presenting need rather than on age.

Objections to the proposal, including one emailed response, were around three key areas:

- The issues faced by young parents are distinctive and not the same as those faced by older parents, as described in the LGA report *A framework for supporting teenage mothers and young fathers*. This report recommends that there should be 'specialist staff with skills to tailor behaviour change interventions to support young people'.
- The disproportionate effect on young parents (including care leavers) because increasing the age range without increasing the number of units effectively restricts young parents' access to the service.

*"We have to consider our corporate parenting role as Children in Care are 3 times as likely to be a parent before they are 18 and 50% of young women leaving care are pregnant within 18-24 months."* – Councillor

- Mixing young parents who may be vulnerable as a result of age and lack of support with older parents whose needs may be more complex could be problematic.

### **Do you think that there is a need to have a 24/7 staff presence at some of the accommodation units?**

8 respondents (61%) thought that there is a need to have 24/7 staffing at some of the accommodation. Only 1 respondent (8%) disagreed, with 4 respondents (31%) saying that there is 'maybe' a need.

There was very little agreement on the numbers of families who would need 24/7 supported accommodation, with numbers fairly evenly spread over all the options from 1-2 to 15+ at any one time.

## Service improvements

Comments around what can be done to ensure the service improvements are effective focused primarily around communication. For example:

*"Better communication with our service if we are involved with clients as this will help ensure placements are suitable and relevant information is shared."* – Senior Nurse

But there were also a couple of specific suggestions:

*“I think it would be a good idea for the local authority to consider funding additional support to the parent by the foster carers once they have left the placement.” – Fostering agency*

*“Improved planning for residential assessments to avoid extensions and unnecessary delays of placements. This includes legal representatives timetabling the assessment in line with the Courts and our assessment programme.” – Provider*

*“Accessible Roof Over my Head courses that offer crèche facilities as many clients have nobody to ask to care for their children while attending these well evaluated courses.” – Senior Nurse*

*“I would like some work to be done on supporting vulnerable adults whilst they are still in hospital with their young children” – Social Worker*

*“A more effective response to the homelessness issue would be to improve the initial assessment process and the knowledge of the different sorts of provision amongst Housing staff, providing training for housing providers on vulnerabilities and safeguarding risks for young parents and their children, and reviewing the Home Choice process to enable them to move on faster to free up spaces for those on the waiting list.” - Councillor*