

Future of Education Support Services for Children with, dual sensory impairment, hearing impairment and visual impairment

Background

Since 1996 the former Avon local authorities - Bath & North-East Somerset (BANES), Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire - have jointly commissioned a Sensory Support Service (SSS). This service has traditionally provided support to children with dual sensory impairment, hearing impairment and visual impairment from 0 to 16 to support their educational development. The service is provided by Bristol with the three other authorities contributing to the overall cost of £1,6m according to a formula agreed at the time of the original contract.

In 2015-16 the local authorities commissioned NATSIP, (National Sensory Impairment partnership) recognised experts in this field, to undertake a review of the service in light of new and significant legislation changes from the Children & Families Act 2014. The review has helped the commissioners to consider the immediate offer, long-term future and direction of the service.

In November 2017 the commissioning authorities agreed to develop a new and revised service. The service will continue to support those children with the highest levels of need who have Education Health and Care Plans and support the identification, assessment and provision at lower levels of need for children and young people to the age of 25.

At this initial stage the intention is for the revised service to continue to be jointly commissioned by the four existing authorities. The new service specification will include shared outcomes across the four authorities who will monitor the delivery of the service to children, young people and families.

The aim is for the new service under a new contract to begin operation from 1st September 2019.

Participation and engagement

It is vital that all those who have an interest in the service are given the opportunity to offer their view and help shape the new service offer. This will be done through the setting up of a Stakeholder Reference Group. Children and young people, carers and parents and relevant organisations from across the four authorities will be invited to join the group. The role of the group will be to advise and influence the co-production and development of the new service specification. The first meeting will be in May 2018.

For those stakeholders who do not attend the group there will be an electronic survey for wider stakeholders to contribute during March 2018. The responses to the survey will be fed into the engagement process.

The new service must be compliant with the statutory functions of Local Authorities under the Children and families Act and related legislation. Final decision making will remain with each Local Authority.

The four commissioning authorities are committed to ensuring that the new service provides the highest quality and cost-effective service to those who will make use of it and welcomes the participation of all stakeholders in the project of developing a new service.

Resources

As part of the move towards a new service offer, commissioners from the four Local Authorities have been working with the present service provider to realign existing resources towards the probable direction of the new service. Working closely with the service it has been possible to identify initial efficiency savings of £204,000 to be implemented in 2018-19. The manager of the service has undertaken an impact assessment which indicates that at this stage, no significant impact on service delivery as the vast majority of the posts impacted by the changes have been vacant for some considerable time. The commissioning authorities will of course monitor the service closely over the next year to ensure this situation remains the case.

The new service will be required to work within the agreed budget and this will be determined by each Local Authority based on the needs of the children, young people and families within their areas. Further savings are not a pre-requisite of the new service offer. However, due to increasing pressures on all public sector budgets and services, all services are subject to financial scrutiny and further efficiency savings may be required. The commissioners will ensure that if there is any reduction to the overall value, the impact of this will be subject to impact assessments.