

Message to all children's social care staff from Gail Hancock, Interim Director of Safeguarding and Care and Wendy Williams, Assistant Director for Integrated Children and Families Commissioning. Please do not click 'reply' - your email will be automatically deleted

Dear Colleagues

Re: Panel Activity

It has been over a year now since the introduction of the Access to Resources Panel and we thought it was time to update you on the progress that has been made and offer you some advice and guidance about a few things that will support you with future Panel requests.

Progress so far...

In respect of financial progress, last financial year in 2019/20, there was an overall cost avoidance of around £500k and this financial year, so far in 2020/21, there has been a cost avoidance of around £100k.

We have seconded a Housing Officer to support Social Workers and ensure families are receiving the correct housing benefit. We are also in the process of recruiting a 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) Family Support Worker who will work with all teams to support families with NRPF.

Our long-term plan is to have a comprehensive framework of providers and professionals which will allow us to access specialist support that is being requested by Social Workers. For example, this will include requests for a Parenting Assessment Manual assessment (PAMs assessment), mentoring for young people and drug testing. This approach will reduce the need for individual due diligence arrangements as services on the framework will all be pre-checked and approved to assure the quality of provision.

All of this activity, and the role of the Panel, is to ensure we work in the most efficient and effective way, providing quality services for children and families which will ultimately help up deliver value for money.

Some reminders....

Retrospective Requests

Retrospective requests are on the rise and whilst we acknowledge that there will be some exceptional circumstances from time to time where resources and services need to be put in place immediately this should not be very often. We would like to remind you that although the Access to Resource Panel does not officially sit every day, the Panel inbox is monitored daily from 9am - 5pm and any urgent requests can be picked up for a same day decision. To highlight an urgent request requiring same-day decision please identify the email as 'urgent' in the subject header.

The Panel continues to track and report on all retrospective requests to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Currently there is an increase and the details will be reflected in the report that SLT receive. Its also important to remember that the Panel is supported by Strategic Finance Officers and any expenditure that has not been approved by Panel will automatically be classified as retrospective spend. Please can we ask all Team Managers, Service Managers and Heads of Service to encourage good planning, with timely Panel applications to ensure all spend is approved using the existing Panel process.

Blood Testing

Gloucestershire Children's Services has taken the decision to not undertake blood tests, as a way to measure alcohol consumption. As a result, these requests will not be approved by Panel. Further work is being undertaken by a working group led by Julie Miles, Head of Service, to review blood testing and other forms of drug and alcohol testing options. An update will be provided with more information as soon as the available options are made clear over the coming weeks.

Family Court Care Proceedings and Specialist/Expert Assessments

One of the key requests for Panel relates to specialist or expert assessments required in family court care proceedings. Many Panel applications ask for several different assessments all at the same time by different providers/professionals. This doesn't always appear to be very well thought through and can lack the opportunity for sequencing, reflection and consideration for how individual assessments need to inform next steps. It also raises concerns about how overwhelming this approach could be for families. Sometimes there are requests for repeat assessments even when an assessment has only been completed very recently.

The Public Law Outline (PLO) process is a 'front loaded' process designed to ensure that local authorities are well prepared to issue court care proceedings and progress proceedings in a timely manner. This does not however mean that we need to undertake all assessments to address all aspects of the child's needs, risks and circumstances prior to issuing. The PLO pre-proceedings process can helpfully flag assessments that will be required but may also identify assessments that may more helpfully be discussed with other parties joined to the proceedings in order that joint letters of instruction can be agreed. A common approach and a joint letter of instruction will mean that all relevant parties can agree the instructions and share the costs. This is good practice and Panel will therefore ask questions about the pre-proceedings process and the court strategy. Panel may push back when it appears that families are being over assessed and / or when there may be preferable or advantageous to seek joint instructions and shared costs for more specialist assessments.

We would like to ask Heads of Service, Service Managers and Team Managers to consider the issues outlined above as part of the legal planning process and be prepared to discuss these queries with Panel members when seeking approval. If a number of assessments are required, it will be important to evidence the rationale by providing the legal planning meeting strategy and the child's plan

Transport Request:

It is more important than ever after experiencing the disruption of CV19 that our children are able to attend school. For many children this may involve the need to ensure that suitable transport arrangements are in place. The Panel will review requests for transport and ensure that where children are eligible to receive transport via alternative means these arrangements and/or funding streams are utilised to meet all or some of the transport costs. For example, where children are placed with Independent Foster Agencies (IFA), there are contractual requirements in place for transport and Panel will need to ensure these are met. If this is not possible contractual adjustments will need to be made before any additional funding for transport can be approved.

Please be mindful that when placing a child where the Foster Carer or Residential Provider is not able to provide transport to school or for contact, Commissioning need to be informed so this adjustment is reflected in the contractual arrangements. Currently, an IFA Foster Carer is funded for 500 miles per week, which amounts to quite a substantial cost.

Just as a snap shot, this week in the run up to schools re-opening the Panel has received in excess of thirteen separate requests for school transport to be provided for the beginning of the academic term. We have known for some time that all children will be returning to school this week, so the delay in Panel applications not only puts pressure on the Panel process, but also presents additional challenges for our colleagues in the Transport hub.

Future Developments...

The Panel is developing a web report as well as a performance dashboard. These will enable social workers and managers to see up to date data on current spend and emerging trends. We will also continue to work on developing the professional framework so that social work teams will be able to secure appropriate resources and engage specialist / expert professionals and we will update you again when further details are available.

Highlighting good practice...

The Panel would like to highlight the high level of management oversight in both the Cheltenham and the Forest of Dean Localities. Requests from both of these Localities reflect robust planning and provide a clear rationale for the Panel request with much of the necessary information that is required to make an evidence informed decision. Thank you to colleagues in Cheltenham and Forest of Dean for going the extra mile – it is much appreciated.

We hope this is a helpful and informative update. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact the Commissioning Service.

Kind regards



Wendy Williams
Assistant Director
Integrated Children & Families Commissioning



Gail Hancock
Interim Director for
Children's Safeguarding & Care