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|                         | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>London Borough of Hammersmith &amp; Fulham</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>CHILDREN AND EDUCATION<br/>POLICY AND ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>20 APRIL 2015</b></p> |
| <p><b>INTERIM REPORT OF THE CHILDCARE TASK GROUP</b></p>   |   |
| <p><b>Report of the Chair of the Childcare Task Group:<br/>Councillor Natalia Perez Shepherd</b></p>     |   |
| <p><b>Open Report</b></p>  |   |
| <p><b>Classification - For Information</b><br/><b>Key Decision: No</b></p>                               |   |
| <p><b>Wards Affected: All</b></p>  |   |
| <p><b>Accountable Executive Director:</b> Andrew Christie, Executive Director of Children's Services</p> |   |
| <p><b>Report Author:</b> Steve Comber, Policy Officer</p>  | <p><b>Contact Details:</b><br/>Tel: 020 8753 2188<br/>E-mail:<br/>steve.comber@lbhf.gov.uk</p>  |

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. Following discussions around Childcare Provision held at the Children and Education Policy and Accountability Committee (CEPAC) meeting on 3 September 2014, a Childcare Task Group was formed.
- 1.2. The task group met for the first time on 17 October 2014 to agree the terms of reference and then subsequently met on six occasions to consider findings and reports from expert witnesses across a range of topics.
- 1.3. The group also conducted surveys and held focus groups with key local stakeholders to gain feedback on the current provision of childcare in the borough and identify areas for improvement.
- 1.4. The interim report of the group is attached, which outlines the key findings of the group, including the following sections:
  - Executive summary
  - Terms of reference for the group

- Methodology
- Statistical context – The Family and childcare trust
- Current childcare provision in the borough

### **Evidence Gathering**

- The Childcare Sufficiency Assessment
- Local Families
- Childminders
- Discussions with other providers
- The Family Information Service
- Ensuring the quality of Private, Voluntary and Independent providers
- The delivery of the 2-year-old offer
- 8-6 childcare in schools pilot
- Out-of-hours childcare

### **Policy and additional information**

- Support for parents with affordability of childcare
- National policy developments
- Future partnership working

1.5. The interim report identifies several key areas that the task group would like to investigate in more detail, reporting to CEPAC on each of these throughout the next municipal year. These areas are as follows:

- The importance of accurate information for local families and the current performance of the Hammersmith and Fulham Family Information Service (FIS)
- Improving support for childminders and the effectiveness of the offer of childminding services for local families
- The role of Children’s Centres in delivering effective, high quality childcare in Hammersmith and Fulham
- Building on the findings of the 8-6 out-of-core-hours pilot for support in schools
- Innovative solutions for growing a skilled workforce

1.6. While the 2-year-old offer was included in the terms of reference and was considered by the group (findings can be seen in section 12 of the report), it was agreed that the ‘business as usual’ updates that are provided to CEPAC will continue to be the vehicle for scrutinising work in this area.

1.7. The first of these detailed reports is regarding the importance of accurate information for local families and the current performance of the Hammersmith and Fulham Family Information Service, and is included at section 3 of this report for the Committee’s consideration.

## **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **2.1. The Committee is asked to:**

- review and comment upon the contents of the interim report of the task group;
- consider the detailed information on the Family Information Service contained within this report

### **2.2. With regards to the Family Information Service, the overarching recommendations are as follows:**

- To explore the options for the Family Information Service website to be improved. This should include the potential for automatic updating of childminder information via the Ofsted data feed, the sharing of data between existing sources of information and for the website to deliver a more user friendly experience for families and childcare providers.
- That the local authority reviews the location for the management of the FIS within Children's Services including options for future staffing arrangements.
- That the corporate communications team are consulted about promotion of a new improved service once it is implemented.

## **3. DISCUSSION ITEM**

### **“THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCURATE INFORMATION FOR LOCAL FAMILIES AND THE CURRENT PERFORMANCE OF THE HAMMERSMITH AND FULHAM FAMILY INFORMATION SERVICE”**

#### **Introduction**

- 3.1.** The interim report of the Childcare Task Group identifies that a wide range of childcare services are available in Hammersmith and Fulham. All of these services can work together in various combinations to meet the differing needs of families in the borough.
- 3.2.** During discussions with parents, the Task Group found that access to up-to-date, accurate and personalised information is vital to support them with understanding the options that are available to them and identifying the correct childcare solution for their circumstances.
- 3.3.** Another finding from the Task Group is that there are a wide variety of national schemes to support parents with the cost of childcare, each of which has their own slightly differing eligibility criteria and benefits. Sometimes the difference in accessing one type of financial support over another will provide only marginal benefits and the unique circumstances of each family in the borough means that different approaches work for different families. A survey of local parents, which was conducted by the

Task Group, found that a significant number of respondents did not know which benefits they are entitled to for support with the cost of childcare, indicating that there is confusion in this area.

- 3.4. Section 12 of the Childcare Act 2006 (the information duty) reflects the importance of clear and accurate advice regarding childcare by placing a statutory duty on all top tier local authorities in England to deliver information, advice and assistance to parents of children up to the age of 20. The key paragraphs from this section are outlined below:

*Duty to provide information, advice and assistance*

*An English local authority must establish and maintain a service providing information, advice and assistance...*

*The service must provide to parents or prospective parents information which is of a prescribed description and relates to any of the following –*

- (a) the provision of childcare in the area of the local authority;*
- (b) any other services or facilities, or any publications, which may be of benefit to parents or prospective parents in their area;*
- (c) any other services or facilities, or any publications, which may be of benefit to children or young persons in their area.*

*The service must provide advice and assistance to parents or prospective parents who use, or propose to use, childcare provided in the area of the local authority.*

*The service must be established and maintained in the manner which is best calculated to facilitate access to the service by persons in the local authority's area who may benefit from it, including, in particular, persons who might otherwise have difficulty in taking advantage of the service.*

- 3.5. Local authorities deliver this through provision of a Family Information Service (FIS).

**Feedback received via the Task Group**

- 3.6. In order to understand the effectiveness of the FIS in Hammersmith and Fulham, a series of questions were asked of parents in the Task Group's online Childcare Survey.
- 3.7. 60.4% of the respondents to the online childcare survey stated that they had not used the FIS to obtain information about local childcare.

3.8. Of those that had used the service, 22% thought that it was either poor or very poor, while 34 % deemed it to be only satisfactory (leaving 44% who rated it as good or excellent).

3.9. Parents also provided some narrative on the performance of the Family Information Service and how information regarding local childcare could be easier to find. Some representative quotes are as follows:

*"We have been in Fulham for 7 years. We used a day nursery and a school nursery only thanks to the advice of friends. We have no idea of where to find information on either childcare in the borough, or after school clubs"*

*"I have no idea what the Family Information Service is, or does...I had never heard about it until I did this survey."*

*"The Family Information Service is not very well laid out. I have struggled to find details that I knew were on the site as they didn't appear in any of the areas I anticipated that they would."*

*"Details of all nurseries available in the borough (private and state) could be made available in one place including ages from which children can attend. Also would be good to have a source for approved childminders, nannies, and baby sitters in the area"*

3.10. The Task Group also consulted with Childminders to discuss their experience of providing childcare in Hammersmith and Fulham. The FIS represents a cost-effective opportunity for childminders to promote their service to local families; however, they were quite critical of the quality of service that is currently provided by the FIS.

3.11. When considering the promotion of their service, most childminders (94%) found word of mouth to be a very effective method of promoting their services and it was felt that the Quality Childminder Forums were a key enabler of this. Many of the childminders (62%) found the internet or social media as an adequate way to promote their services, although this method requires active management on an individual level.

3.12. Most of the childminders (67%) found the FIS to be either 'not very effective' or 'not at all effective' in promoting their service. The childminders reported that their information is not kept up to date on the FIS website and that changes to their details are not made when they are requested.

3.13. The key issues regarding the FIS can therefore be summarised as follows:

- The service is not being used by the majority of families in the borough
- The service is not well promoted and families are unaware of the website

- The website itself is not easy to navigate and it is difficult for families to find the information they require
- Providers have been unable to update their details directly and requests for updates have not been responded to

### **The management of the Hammersmith and Fulham FIS**

- 3.14. When it was first introduced, the FIS was managed within the Family Support Localities Service. During this time the FIS had up to four dedicated officers to ensure that the content of the site was managed, ensuring that information is accurate, up-to-date and continually improved upon through strong links with key stakeholders and providers in the borough. These officers were also responsible for responding to telephone calls to the service, providing an avenue for families to discuss their childcare needs in person.
- 3.15. The Family Services Front Door was created in 2013 and, following a reorganisation of the Family Support Localities Service, the management of the FIS website was integrated into Front Door. In previous years the FIS Officers in the Localities Service had experienced a steep decline in the number of phone calls they received, with residents evidently preferring to use the website to get the information that they needed. In recognition of this, the telephone service for the FIS was incorporated into the council's externally commissioned contact centre, which is based in Rochdale.
- 3.16. The main function of the Family Services Front Door is to screen contacts that are made with the local authority in respect of child protection and safeguarding and to ensure that appropriate referrals are made when required.
- 3.17. The Front Door team is made up of a Principal and a Senior Social Worker and two Access Officers whose primary function is to screen initial contacts with the local authority. Following the reorganisation, it was the Access Officers who took on the additional responsibility for the maintenance of the FIS website.
- 3.18. Following the feedback received regarding the FIS, the Task Group met with Rabia Bouchiba, the Team Manager for the Family Services Front Door.
- 3.19. When meeting with the Task Group, Rabia Bouchiba indicated that the transition of the FIS from Localities to the Front Door in 2013 was rapid and that the handover process was not considered adequate to support the Access Officers that had no prior knowledge of FIS or strong existing links with childcare providers.
- 3.20. Since the FIS moved to the Front Door in 2013 the responsibilities that the Access Officers have taken on in addition to their regular duties can be summarised as follows:

- addressing emails sent by the public regarding childcare queries
  - dealing with enquiries and requests from the contact centre (usually to send letters and information to clients)
  - Managing the Ofsted feed (data received directly from Ofsted regarding the registration of new providers). This includes updating of all new and existing childcare provider details.
  - Updating other existing listings
  - Producing and maintaining a process map for the contact centre to follow when receiving an enquiry regarding childcare
  - Updating the site to promote childcare related activities being offered by external organisations
- 3.21. The demands (and priorities) of screening initial child protection and safeguarding contacts has meant that the Access Officers in the Front Door Service have not been able to give the FIS website the required attention to deliver a consistently high quality service. This means that email contact to the service may not be replied to in a timely fashion, while there is no one person who is taking responsibility for ensuring that information currently on the site is accurate and that new providers are added to the site and old providers are removed.
- 3.22. Furthermore, the performance of the website has been affected by technical issues. The 'certificate' which allows the site to access Ofsted data lapsed in 2013 and it was not possible to re-instate this for a period of eight months. This meant that information on newly registered childminders was not updated during this period. Following feedback from childminders regarding this, the team are now allocating additional hours to the FIS website to manually update records and ensure that information presented on the site is accurate and up-to-date.
- 3.23. The website itself is now considered to be dated and due for an upgrade. It does not have the features that other FIS websites have incorporated to make the management of information more efficient and make it easier for users to find the information they need.
- 3.24. As the telephone service for the FIS is outsourced to an external contact centre, the information given to parents will only be as good as the information available on the website. Due to their separation from the local authority, the contact centre operatives lack the local knowledge that a dedicated local officer can offer. Parents also fed back that, as the call centre is accessed via an '0845' number, the cost of calling is prohibitively high.

### **Good practice and potential future developments**

- 3.25. Other local authorities have been able to maintain an effective FIS by continuing to have a dedicated resource for the service based in a setting that is more closely linked to childcare services. One example of this is the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, who have a very well regarded

FIS that is strongly linked in with local providers and relevant childcare services across the local authority.

3.26. Following the implementation of the Children and Families Act, the requirement for all local authorities to have a 'Local Offer' of services for children with special educational needs and disabilities has prompted Hammersmith and Fulham to work with Open Objects (the providers of the current LBHF FIS website) to build a new website that contains many of the functions that the Task Group would like an updated FIS website to have. These include:

- ability for users to create an account and shortlist desired services
- ability for users to search for services based on their postcode and see on a map where services are situated in relation to their home
- ability for providers to submit details of their services and have access to amend these when required (this is moderated by local authority officer)
- ability to translate each page into multiple languages

3.27. As this site has been developed by Open Objects, there is the potential to build upon it to upgrade and improve the FIS website so that it better meets the needs of local residents. Furthermore, some initial work has been undertaken in Children's Services to scope the variety of systems used for websites, including the FIS and Local Offer sites, across Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster, to establish whether they could be set up and managed more efficiently across the three boroughs.

3.28. Expert witnesses that reported to the task group considered that connections with other hubs of local knowledge will help to improve the overall experience for users and add value to the service that the FIS provides. For instance, Children's Centres have reported that they often advise parents on the childcare that is best suited to their needs and the financial support that they can access to help with the costs. It is for this reason signposting parents to centres where detail is available should be a key focus of any new FIS site. This could help to address the issues around the call centre in Rochdale being disconnected from local knowledge.

### **Recommendations for the Committee to consider**

3.29. Considering the information provided within this section, the overarching recommendations for the Hammersmith and Fulham Family Information Service are as follows:

- To explore the options for the Family Information Service website to be improved. This should include the potential for automatic updating of childminder information via the Ofsted data feed, the sharing of data between existing sources of information and for the



website to deliver a more user friendly experience for families and childcare providers.

- That the local authority reviews the location for the management of the FIS within Children's Services including options for future staffing arrangements.
- That the corporate communications team are consulted about promotion of a new improved service once it is implemented.

#### **4. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1. As this report is intended to inform initial discussions of the members of CEPAC, there are no immediate equality implications. However any equality issues will be highlighted in any subsequent substantive reports on any of the items which are requested by the Committee.

#### **5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1. As this report is intended to inform initial discussions of the members of CEPAC, there are no immediate legal implications. However any legal issues will be highlighted in any subsequent substantive reports on any of the items which are requested by the Committee.

#### **6. FINANCIAL AND RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1. As this report is intended to inform initial discussions of the members of CEPAC, there are no immediate financial and resource implications. However any financial and resource issues will be highlighted in any subsequent substantive reports on any of the items which are requested by the Committee.

### **LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000** **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN PREPARING THIS REPORT**

| <b>No.</b> | <b>Description of Background Papers</b> | <b>Name/Ext of holder of file/copy</b> | <b>Department/ Location</b> |
|------------|---|--|-----------------------------|
| 1.         | None                                    |  |                             |