

The Hertfordshire Care Planning and Placement Choice Approach

The decision to bring children and young people into the care of the Local Authority is a very significant one, and should only be considered when comprehensive, evidence based assessments determine there are no available alternatives. If a child becomes Looked After it is essential to consider placement choice. The right children and young people need to be accommodated at the right time, and they must also be matched with the right placements at the right point on the placement continuum.

When exploring placement choice, we need to ensure that this is always based on an appropriate assessment of need, taking into account desired outcomes and value for money. We know from research that effective intervention offered at the lowest possible level offers the best outcomes for children and young people and also allows us to spend money on services targeted to support children and young people to remain with their families.

An assessment of need should encompass:

- Safeguarding issues/identified risks
- Contact with family and friends
- The individual identity needs of the child/young person
- Educational needs and current school place
- Mental and physical health needs
- Where relevant, a sibling assessment and active consideration of whether siblings should be placed together.
- Contact with family and friends

Whenever a decision is made to look after a child there should be short, medium and long term plan for their care, this should include an exit strategy from care at the **earliest appropriate point**

When identifying the appropriate placement, this assessment needs to be considered in conjunction with the following placement principles, and an awareness of services along the care continuum:

1. Placement with **extended family/connected persons** is usually the next best option to home. This can be considered on both an informal and formal basis, but must include a clear risk assessment. Children can go and live with other family/friends without our intervention. If we don't place then it is a private

arrangement. If a formal placement is pursued, this must comply with standard procedures for Looked After Children and be referred promptly to the Family and Friends Team once a viability assessment has confirmed it is an appropriate option to explore.

2. If family is not an option, then a **foster placement** should be considered for all children and young people (please see 6 below for 16+ young people). In almost all circumstances, an in house placement will be sourced in the first instance as it keeps children local and ensures that HCC can tailor support services to the placement as required. It is sometimes appropriate to consider an independent fostering agency (IFA) placement to ensure that best use is made of our wider resources, but this will be decided at senior management level.
3. If a child or young person has a high level of need, it may be appropriate to consider a **specialist foster placement**. This should have been discussed with the relevant Service Manager, and a clear plan discussed around what the specialist provision is being commissioned to deliver. Such placements may be either internal, being offered under the ARC umbrella, or external commissioned by the Brokerage Accommodation Team.
4. If none of the above placements can meet the young person's needs, a **residential placement may** be considered. Rarely will a child or young person require a residential environment and the preferred option will always be in house foster care. Young people will only require a residential environment in rare circumstances, and the preferred option will be an in-house residential unit. An independent residential home will only be used if in house resources cannot meet the young person's needs, and will require authorisation at Operations Director level.
5. **Specialist residential placements; welfare secure; and/or other joint funded provisions** should be discussed with the relevant Head of Service before any placement is sought. These placements are rare, but can be extremely costly and often take considerable time to plan and resource. Early escalation is essential to ensure that children and young people with complex needs are kept safe whilst this process is underway and to prevent any potential drift in care planning. Relevant panel attendance is necessary: HARP for social care funded placements and MAP for joint funded placements. For welfare secure agreement must be given by the AD Safeguarding or the AD Specialist Services in their absence.
6. Young people aged 16 years or over who are being accommodated for the first time must also have an assessment of need carried out in the same way as younger children. There is a general rule that **semi-independent**

accommodation will be considered as the first option for young people of this age, to ensure that they are being prepared appropriately for independence. However, foster placements may also be considered if a young person has identified additional needs.

7. Disabled children and young people who require accommodation will usually have their education, health and care needs met locally. Specialist placements may need to be considered where there are limited local services available. Decisions taken need to give due consideration to education, health and social care needs. Residential short breaks may be used as part of a long term support plan for a disabled child or young person, but this does not necessarily confer Looked After status (see Short Breaks Policy).
8. It is important to establish whether the child has presented to any other authority prior to arriving in Hertfordshire. If this is the case or if s/he is staying in the area of another local authority, that relevant authority must be contacted and the child returned to that area.

If it is established that the child is the responsibility of CS then the assessing Social Worker must pursue two parallel courses of action:

- Clarification of immigration status;
- Child and Family Assessment of need.

As part of the IA, an assessment of age must be completed (An assessment may be undertaken by the police out of hours if no social worker is available to carry out the assessment but this must be followed by a full 'Merton' Compliant assessment). Until this assessment has been completed, a decision on S20 will not be made by H of S/HARP unless the young person is assessed as under 16 in which case S20 and a foster placement will apply from the outset .If the young person appears to be 16 years on initial assessment they may be supported under S17, with bed and breakfast and subsistence on a daily basis until the assessment is concluded. The age assessment must be 'Merton' compliant.

9. Emergency placements

The care continuum described above applies to all children and young people who are entering care in a planned way. However, we recognise that this is not always possible, and that sometimes the safety of a child or young person in a Child Protection or family breakdown situation can only be ensured by

their emergency accommodation. In such situations, it is expected that the same assessment of need takes place and a child or young person is placed appropriately on the care continuum if at all possible. One of the main reasons we avoid unplanned accommodation is to try to minimise the possibility of a child being placed inappropriately and then experiencing one or more placement moves. Placement stability is a critical factor in achieving positive outcomes for Looked After Children, and **must** be a primary consideration in making any placement. If a child has been placed in an emergency this placement should be considered at the first available relevant panel. If it is established that the placement is inappropriate plans will be made to move the child. Usual levels of authorisation will apply. However, this decision needs to be made in the wider context of placement stability and all such plans must be authorised at Operations Director level, highlighting the significance of any such move for the child or young person.

Any concerns or difficulties in applying this care planning approach should be escalated as soon as possible to ensure that individual children and young people do not experience drift in their care planning due to real or perceived lack of placement choice.

All social care funded placements should be ratified at HARP (Hertfordshire Access to Resources Panel)

Where there is an identified therapeutic need or unmet education needs cases should be referred to MAP (Multi Agency Panel) following a multi-agency meeting to agree the care plan.

Other than a connected person the Brokerage Accommodation Team are the only service to arrange placement moves.