

# Short Breaks Future Model and Backlog Review Findings and Proposal

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Version	5
Date	16 <sup>th</sup> September 2024

## Current Service and Offer

### 1. Summary

This briefing paper explores the operational aspects of short breaks within Children's Services, focusing on the current workload and backlog issues. As of July 2024, there are 1296 children in the system, reflecting an 85% increase since the introduction of short breaks in 2016. The paper will consider two primary options for consideration for addressing the backlog and improving service outcomes, it will also take into consideration the proposal for the service to move back into Children's Services.

### 2. Legal and policy context

In performing their legal duty, local authorities must provide a range of services which are sufficient to assist parents/ carers to continue to provide care, or to do so more effectively.

The Short Break Grants are a preventative measure. Families are assessed annually for the fund and a support plan is agreed, which allows them to use the money for activities, equipment and services to provide a break from caring. Families often receive additional targeted support either because they have waited too long for their grant or because the grant has not met all their support needs.

### 3. Advice and analysis

#### *3.1 Overview of short break activity and expenditure*

The 2023/24 review into short break sufficiency found considerable variation in how families spend their short breaks grant. Our analysis identified some inappropriate spending, such as purchasing a washing machine, furnishing rooms, buying tablet devices or paying for activities for the whole family rather than just the CYP with disabilities and their carer.

The short breaks grant is a preventative service and should be offered to prevent families coming into the children and young people's disability service. However, the review found cases where the grant had been spent at the start of the year and many families were being referred for specialist support in addition to the grant.

The review also found that the short break grant offer is greater than what is available in other areas. For example, Stockton-on-Tees and Sheffield local authorities award £400 per annum and the latter is means tested. South Tyneside offer £300 per annum and reserve the right to close the scheme if the budget is exhausted. Local Authorities with grant schemes in place have clear guidance outlining how the funds can be utilised.

In Medway our eligibility and inclusion criteria are not clear enough. Robust guidance is needed to ensure that families are utilising the grant effectively for respite, to reduce the reliance and impact on specialist resources and ensure the sustainability of all short break provision in Medway. Our recommendations and rationale for robust eligibility and inclusion criteria are set out in more detail in Appendix A.

### *3.2 Overview of short break resources*

The short break sufficiency review found that demand for the short break grant has increased by 85% since 2016. However, the team who undertake the grant assessments has not.

The Short Breaks function is supported by the SDS Team (currently located in Adult Social Care), which is composed of 1.6 FTE range 4 posts.

The relocation of the function back to children's services was proposed to CADMT on 10th September 2024. CADMT discussed whether the service should be placed with Children's Services Commissioning or Education and Inclusion.

The decision requires the following considerations:

The service requires two new fixed term posts to replicate that of the staffing team in the SDS Team and a reflection of the 85% workload increase since 2016. This would require £67,360.54 to recruit one range 4 post (0.4 FTE) and one range 5 post (1 FTE), bringing the staff total up to three (FTE).

Table 1: Summary of the additional staffing resource required to address the backlog

Existing staffing arrangements (24/25) who will TUPE across	Proposed staffing arrangements (25/26 onwards)	Costs/ annum
0.6 (FTE) Range 4	0.6 FTE Range 4	Neutral (posts already budgeted for)
1 (FTE) Range 4	1 (FTE) range 4	Neutral (posts already budgeted for)
	0.4 (FTE) range 4	£16,953.04 (mid-range, including oncosts)
	1 (FTE) range 5	£50,407.50 (mid-range, including oncosts)
<b>Total</b>		£67,360.54

- **Workload:** New applications are increasing by ~10% each year as new families are introduced to the service. Additional staffing capacity is necessary to keep on top of reviews and assessments.
- **Backlog:** A total of 541 families are waiting to receive their short break grant. This is made up of 268 families whose reviews are 4 months overdue and 273 families who are waiting 12 months for their initial grant applications to be assessed/ paid. In the meantime, families are without essential respite, which can result in referrals to the CYP disabilities team for assessed packages of care.
- **Budget and Expenditure:** The average grant cost is forecast to increase from £751 per person in 2022/23 to £822 per person in 2024/25. Table 2 shows the budget (£491,202) for short break grants is increasingly overspent each year.
- **Financial implications:** The projected cost to address these backlogs is £537,063.92 (inclusive of £67,360.54 for additional staff/ annum). This is the amount that The Council would need to spend in addition to the forecast expenditure for 2024/25 to 2025/26 (depending on when the change is implemented) to fully address the backlog. The forecast expenditure for 2025/26 (£1,118,742) is inclusive of the predicted increases in applicants and the average grant payment rising. It also accounts for the additional staff resource.

Table 2: Summary of short break grant activity and expenditure between 2022 and 2025

	<b>2022/23 (actual)</b>	<b>2023/24 (actual)</b>	<b>2024/25 (forecast)</b>	<b>2025/26 (forecast)</b>	<b>2025/26 (forecast inclusive of backlog)</b>
No. of families (renewals & new applications)		1177	1296	1425	1425
Average grant cost	£751	£791	£822	£863	£863
Total expenditure	£624,881	£648,740.6 2	£674,040	£707,660	£1,118,742

The Finance and Resource Team (Children's Commissioning) would be able to resolve the backlog within one year with the immediate increase in personnel from 1.6 FTE to 3 FTE, which would be possible with the support of the existing 4FTE Finance Officers, providing cover during periods of absence. Nevertheless, it would have an immediate budgetary impact of £537,063.92 (including salary) for the 2025/26 budget.

The relocation of the service to the Children's Commissioning Team offers the potential for collaborative efforts with the Access to Resources and 0-25 Children with Disabilities Panels, which will facilitate fast and effective decision-making for individuals who require Head of Service oversight.

Additionally, the team is responsible for the processing of invoices and payments for a variety of services, including placements, floating support, directly commissioned short breaks (ROCC), and transport. This will grant the Short Breaks service access to a comprehensive cost package that was not previously available under the SDS Team. Additionally, the team includes an experienced Pay Run Officer who reviews payments prior to their final submission. This will facilitate the reduction of risk for the service and the establishment of more extensive audit trails for decision-making.

Therefore, consideration needs to be taken over how backlogs are reduced but also the financial pressure this causes.

## 4. Options for Consideration

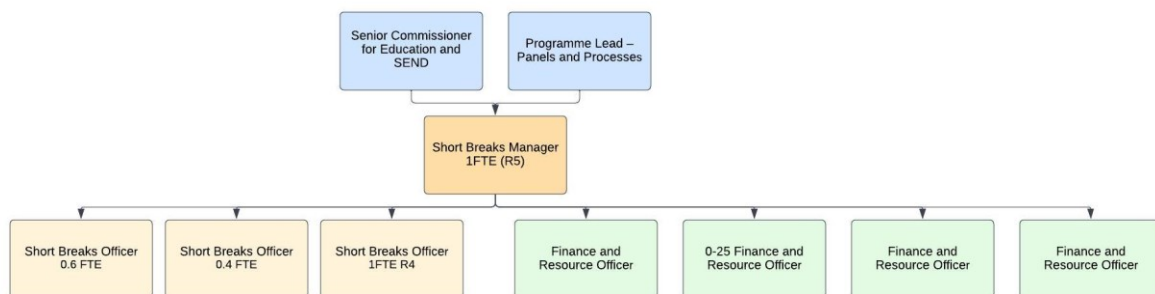
### *Option One: Recruitment to Clear Backlog*

Implement new criteria and guidance (as proposed in Appendix I) from the outset and transfer the operational function and existing staff to the Children's Commissioning Team. Recruit additional staff (1.4 FTE) to address the backlog over 12 months while simultaneously implementing unique rigours review methodology.

Taking into consideration the growth in applications and average payments the team would need an additional 2 members of staff (1.4 FTE) at a cost of £67,360.54 per annum. To resolve the existing backlog, this alternative without changes to the criteria would result in an immediate budgetary constraint of £469,703.38 for short break grant expenditure. Total £537, 063.92.

Transferring this work to Children's Services Commissioning Team will align the short break grant programme with other priorities outlined in the short break sufficiency strategy. This option maintains strategic input from the SEND Commissioner and provides consistent financial management in accordance with other services, such as placements and additional services.

*Figure 1: Proposed Team Structure*



Implementing new criteria and embedding a consistent approach to reviewing applications in conjunction with a panel has the potential to reduce costs as the team process the backlog of application over a 12-month period.

Budget pressures can be offset by the £2,810,338.33 savings achieved in Q1 and Q2 2024/25 by children's services commissioning for a cost neutral impact.

### *Option Two: Phased Approach with New Criteria*

Implement new criteria and guidance (as proposed in Appendix I) from the outset and transfer the operational function and existing staff to the Education and Inclusion Service. Allow 18 months to resolve the backlog.

The objective of this method is to alleviate budgetary constraints over time and prevent the imminent expenditure of £469,703.38. Acquiring one additional range 5 officer (£50,407.50) to oversee the service. It requires a smaller budget for staff and the impact of addressing the budget will be spread over time but families will continue to wait for necessary respite.

This option requires strategic input from the Head of Inclusion SEND, alignment to the local offer role and presents an opportunity to capitalise on the learning from the review of how EHCNAs are undertaken in Medway.

The team would require an additional 2 members of staff (1.4 FTE), costing £67,360.54 per annum.

Implementing new criteria and embedding a consistent approach to reviewing applications in conjunction with a panel has the potential to reduce costs as the teamwork through the backlog of application over an 18-month period.

## 5. Conclusion

Both options have their merits and risks. Option One offers a quicker resolution to the backlog but at a higher immediate cost, whereas Option Two proposes a more gradual approach with potential long-term benefits but a longer period of service strain.

## 6. Recommendation

Given the significant budget pressure and the need for a sustainable solution, Option One is recommended. This approach balances the need to clear the backlog with the opportunity to revise criteria and processes, potentially leading to more efficient and effective service delivery in the long term.

## 7. Next Steps

1. Assessment: Conduct a detailed assessment of the current backlog data using the new criteria.
2. Planning: Develop a comprehensive plan for the phased approach, including recruitment timelines and new criteria implementation.
3. Implementation: Begin the recruitment process and initiate changes to criteria and guidance.
4. Monitoring: Regularly monitor progress and adjust the approach as needed to ensure the backlog is managed and future demands are anticipated.