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Direct Payments, Emergency Planning, Respite and Carers' Assessments (Families of Disabled Children)

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, I would like to request access to policies, protocols, and procedural documentation relating to how the Trust supports families of disabled children with complex needs. This request does not relate to any specific case but is focused on the general frameworks and guidance used by the Trust when assessing and responding to such family situations.

Section A – Direct Payments for Families of Disabled Children

- 1. Please provide a copy of the Trust's policy, procedural guidance, or operational framework for assessing and awarding direct payments to families of disabled children.**

Please see attached policy - Operational Policy and Procedural Arrangements Relating to Direct Payments (Attachment 1)

- 2. Where a direct payments request is rejected, or only partially approved (i.e. fewer hours / support than requested), is the carer or parent automatically provided with:**

- A written explanation of the decision;**
- A copy of the panel's reasoning or assessment summary?**

Parent/carer is notified, via their Social Worker, of the outcome and the reason for the decision of the Allocation and Resource Panel. This is the panel that considers all resource applications, which includes Direct Payments. There is a minute taken of the meeting and this can be shared with the parent / carer, if requested.

If not, please explain:

- Whether such a record exists;**
- Under what circumstances families are entitled to receive this information.**

As above, a minute is completed and can be shared, if requested by the family.

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3. What is the formal process by which families may:

- **Challenge or request a review of a decision on direct payments;**
- **Lodge a complaint regarding the outcome of a support assessment?**

If parents / carers disagree with the Allocation and Resource Panel decision, they can make a complaint via the Belfast Trust Complaints Procedure.

If information is missing / assessment requires further review, this can be completed by the Social Worker and re-presented to the Allocation and Resource Panel.

A re-assessment can be progressed if a family's circumstances change and this can be presented to Allocation and Resource Panel.

Section B – Emergency and Respite Care Provision

4. Does the Trust have a formal emergency protocol or crisis response policy for families of disabled children whose care needs exceed what can safely be provided at home? If so, please provide a copy.

Belfast Trust has an escalation process in which the Principal Social Workers meet with the Head of Service each week to review families that are at significant risk of family breakdown at home. This is escalated to the Senior Management Team depending on the emergency / crisis arising. The Social Worker and Multi-Disciplinary Team continue to work with the child / family and their network to provide strategies / services / resources to reduce the risk, manage the crises and prevent family breakdown.

5. How does the Trust ensure that, where a child meets many but not all of the eligibility criteria for existing overnight respite facilities, their statutory rights are still upheld?

For example:

- **A child may meet all criteria for a respite unit except age, or**
- **May meet all criteria for another facility except having a life-limiting or medically complex condition.**

All cases open to the Children with Disability (CWD) Service receive a holistic assessment to consider each child's needs, which includes their diagnosis, presentation, behaviours, challenges, family, extended family support. This assessment engages parents / carers / extended families and other professionals involved with the family.

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Services / supports / resources are considered and explored as part of this assessment process, which includes a range of support services to meet identified needs and is not limited to overnight respite facilities.

Each overnight respite facility has their own Statement of Purpose and admission criteria. This is essential to ensure that the service is suitable to the child / young person's needs.

In such cases — where a child does not qualify for any existing facility, but still has high care needs - how does the Trust ensure that its legal duty under Article 18 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to support children in need and prevent family breakdown is being fulfilled?

This is part of the Social Work Assessment, as outlined above. The Social Work Assessment will consider the assessed need of the child / young person and will present this to the Allocation and Resource Panel. This considers all support available, dependent upon the assessment undertaken.

6. Does the Trust maintain a record of the proportion of respite placements allocated to:

- **Children with primarily medical/physical conditions, versus**
- **Children with primarily behavioural or neurodevelopmental conditions?**

If such data is not recorded, please confirm.

Belfast Trust maintains a record of children / young people with disabilities who are availing of respite placements or are awaiting these services. This allocation of respite placements is dependent upon the statement of purpose of the respite facility and the specific needs and risks of each individual child / young person.

7. Has the Trust undertaken any equality impact assessment (EQIA) or legal review to ensure that prioritising respite for certain categories of need (e.g. children with physical disabilities) does not amount to indirect discrimination under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, particularly with regard to:

- **Families of children with learning disabilities, autism, or challenging behaviour;**
- **Carers of children whose needs fall outside the standard physical / medical model?**

Each Trust respite facility is required to have a Statement of Purpose, which outlines the criteria for children / young people to avail of the service. This requires approval from the Regulator to ensure that the service can meet the needs of the children / young people in the facility.

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Belfast Trust continues to review capacity, demand and projections for continued expansion of service provision to meet family's needs. This remains a priority by the Senior Management Team in Belfast Trust.

8. **In cases where a family is denied access to all respite options due to not meeting any existing service criteria, what alternatives are offered? How does the Trust ensure its statutory duty under Article 18 of the Children (NI) Order 1995 – to support children in need and prevent family breakdown – is still fulfilled?**

When I refer to a child being “denied access to all respite options”, I mean situations where a family has been formally assessed by the Trust as being in need of overnight respite, but is nevertheless told that they do not meet the criteria for any of the existing overnight respite services.

By respite, I mean overnight short-break facilities, whether delivered directly by the Trust or commissioned externally. To give examples:

- *A child is assessed as needing overnight respite but is not deemed medically complex enough for medically led facilities.*
- *A child is assessed as needing overnight respite but is below the age threshold (e.g. a facility that only caters for 10+ years).*
- *A child is assessed as needing overnight respite but presents with behavioural challenges that fall outside the admission criteria of existing respite settings.*

In such cases, what alternative support does the Trust provide to the family in order to meet its statutory duty under Article 18 of the Children (NI) Order 1995 (to support children in need and prevent family breakdown)?

If a child is assessed as requiring overnight short break, the social work service will be required to consider which overnight respite service is appropriate to meet the needs of the child and is in line with the service criteria. The options considered would be within the Trust's current service provision. Unfortunately, at present, there is more demand than capacity for overnight respite and it is a priority for the Trust to work to expand provision in this area.

As part of the holistic assessment as referenced in response to Question 5 above, the assessment will consider all services, supports and resources available to meet the identified needs. The assessment engages parents / carers / extended families and other professionals involved with the family to consider a range of services within the statutory, community and voluntary sectors.

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Section C – Carers’ Assessments

- 9. Please provide the Trust’s policy or internal guidance on offering and delivering Carers’ Assessments for parents of disabled children.**

Please see attached - Staff Information Pack (Attachment 2).

- 10. Are carers expected to explicitly request a written copy of their Carer’s Assessment, or should this be automatically provided once completed?**

Carers’ assessments are not routinely shared with parents at the point of completion. However, if requested, they are shared.

- 11. Please provide any guidance, leaflets, or information packs issued to carers explaining:**

- **Their right to an assessment;**
- **What the process involves;**
- **What they can expect in terms of written records and outcomes.**

Please see attached - Carer Support leaflet. (Attachment 3)