

# The costs of short break provision

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## Introduction

The Centre for Child and Family research at Loughborough University was commissioned by the former Department for Children, Schools and Families (now Department for Education) to calculate the costs incurred by Children's Services Departments to provide short breaks to disabled children and their families (Holmes et al., 2010). Short breaks can be delivered in the form of overnight stays, day, evening and weekend activities and can take place in the child's own home, the home of an approved carer or a residential or community setting. The study aimed to calculate the costs of services, provided by both local authority and voluntary service providers, along with the costs of the referral routes by which families access short break provision, and any ongoing social care activity carried out to support the child and family once in receipt of short break services.

## Methodology

The unit costs of short break provision were calculated using a 'bottom up' methodology (Beecham, 2000; Ward et al., 2008). This approach uses social care activity as the basis for building up costs. Activities are organised into social care processes, linked to data concerning salaries, overheads (calculated using the framework developed by Selwyn et al, 2009) and other types of expenditure.

Three local authorities and two voluntary service providers were recruited to participate in this study. The authorities provided data on the short break services they offered and data in relation to the social care activity for key processes. These included the Common Assessment Framework, Initial and Core assessments, Child in Need reviews, and ongoing social care activity. The two service providers supplied expenditure and service data.

The information underlying the unit cost estimations was gathered through five focus groups, comprising 37 professionals. Questionnaires were also distributed to the authorities

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where panel procedures were in place for short break provision. The focus groups and questionnaires explored the time spent on various activities associated with the social care processes, to estimate an average total time for each process. Costs were then calculated, based on out of London and London salary and overhead information.

## **Unit costs of short break provision: social care activity**

### *Access to short break services*

Each of the participating authorities had developed, or were in the process of developing, a 'tiered' referral process, whereby the assessment undertaken with families was determined both by the presenting needs and the intensity of service likely to be required. Short break services could be accessed via a local 'core offer' route for families with lower levels of need, and a referral and assessment route for those with higher need.

The two types of access routes were costed for comparison: the 'traditional' assessment and referral route, which includes an Initial or Core assessment, Resource Allocation Panels, and assessments carried out as part of the Common Assessment Framework; and a local 'core offer' model whereby a local authority offers the provision of a standardised package of short break services to a specific population of disabled children and young people, who meet an identified set of eligibility criteria.

The 'traditional' referral and assessment route was undertaken in the participating authorities when it was considered that the services provided as part of the local 'core offer' would not adequately meet the needs of the child and their family. In such cases a more in depth assessment was undertaken, most commonly an Initial assessment. One authority was also using the Common Assessment Framework where appropriate. Participating authorities reported that a Core assessment was only undertaken with those families whose need is greatest, or when a more intensive service, such as an overnight short break, is required.

### *Ongoing support*

In addition to the assessment of disabled children and their families and the delivery of services, children's social care departments provide ongoing support to families in receipt of short break provision. This ongoing activity includes regular support visits to the family and reviews.

Social care personnel across the three participating authorities identified that a support visit would on average last for one hour. However, travel time varied substantially between the authorities, ranging between 40 minutes and three hours. Activities carried out to complete reviews included: preparation prior to the meeting, including updating and collating relevant paper work and contacting other professionals; travel to and attendance at the meeting; and any administrative tasks after the meeting, including the completion of minutes and updates to the child's care plan.

The unit costs of the short break social care process are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1 Costs of short break social care processes**

Process	Out of London cost (£) 2009/2010 value	London cost (£) 2009/2010 value
<b>Referral and assessment processes</b>		
Local 'core offer' eligibility models	Not available	12.03 <sup>a</sup>
Common Assessment Framework	186.10 <sup>a</sup>	Not available
Initial assessment	335.44 <sup>a</sup>	307.36 <sup>a</sup>
Core assessment	504.79 <sup>a</sup>	710.12 <sup>a</sup>
<b>Ongoing support processes</b>		
Ongoing support	76.61 <sup>b</sup>	99.32 <sup>b</sup>
Reviews	193.25 <sup>a</sup>	260.63 <sup>a</sup>

a Per process per child.

b Per month per child.

### Short break services

Disabled children and their families are not a homogenous group. The population of disabled children within any one local authority may represent a wide range of needs and personal circumstances. The research identified a wide range of services provided by the local authorities, each designed to meet local need. A range of locations, staffing and funding arrangements were in place. It was possible to identify some generic service types under which the services identified could be categorised. However, a wide variety of services were found within each service type. As such, costs of each service type also varied within and across participating authorities according to the provider; the type and number of staff; the length of the activity; the number of children attending; the needs of the child or children accessing the service. Table 2 summarises the costs of each service type.

**Table 2 Costs of short break services by service type**

Service type	Unit	Average cost (£) 2009/2010 value		Range (£) 2009/2010 value
		Mean cost (£)	Median cost (£)	
Residential overnight	Per child per night (24-hour period)	262.77	288.28	69.97 – 405.74
Family based overnight	Per child per night (24-hour period)	171.25	147.12	140.36 – 226.26
Day care	Per child per session (8 hours)	130.99	121.52	99.21 – 204.83
Home support	Per family per hour	21.75	21.75	17.54 – 25.60
Home sitting	Per family per hour	18.53	18.53	10.98 – 26.07
General groups	Per session	332.53	380.38	97.39 – 614.77
After school clubs	Per session	280.19	271.47	239.77 – 331.17
Weekend clubs	Per session	311.20	312.46	296.68 – 324.17 <sup>a</sup>
Activity holidays	Per child per break	1283.50	829.06	113.39 – 3,701.15 <sup>b</sup>

a This cost is for a 2-day break.

b This cost is for a 7-day break.

### Data from voluntary service providers

As with the participating local authorities, the nature of the finance data supplied by the voluntary service providers (VSPs) varied. The costs of overnight services calculated from the data obtained from the local authorities were comparatively similar to those calculated

from data supplied by the VSPs. Calculated costs of local authority provided residential services ranged from £223 – £419 per child per night for local authorities, compared to £229 – £500 per child per night for VSPs. Family based overnights ranged from £140 – £226 per child per night for local authorities compared with £97 – £265 for the VSPs. A greater diversity in the unit costs was identified across the other services types.

## Key findings

### *Social care activity and need*

This study highlighted that in the majority of cases the level of social care activity was determined by the needs of family. The referral routes used in each of the authorities reflected the level of need of each family as were the frequency of visits to children and their families. For instance, children receiving support as part of the local ‘core offer’ were subject to lower levels of ongoing support, determined on a case-by-case basis in each of the authorities. Children with higher levels of need accessed services through Initial or Core assessments and received a higher level of ongoing support.

However, in each of the participating authorities, when a family had made a request for direct payments, an initial assessment was required, regardless of the needs of the child and their family. As a result of the initial assessment, a family in receipt of direct payments is subject to regular visits and reviews. Social care professionals in each of the authorities noted that this level of intervention was not always appropriate for the needs of the families, which in many cases, may be comparable to those receiving services as part of the local ‘core offer’.

### *Additional costs*

Some of the services required additional activity before a child could access them. For instance, in addition to the costs of an overnight short break placement, costs are attributable to the time spent by social workers to introduce the child to the placement. The time that social workers spent introducing a child to a new overnight short break placement varied according to the needs of the child. Social workers reported that it took on average 7¼ hours at an average cost of £288.04. This included visits to the new foster carers or residential unit prior to placement, a pre-placement meeting, and the completion of necessary paperwork.

### *Commissioning and setting up services*

The study also identified that additional costs may be incurred when commissioning and contracting services. Service managers from the participating local authorities and the service providers reported that setting up and maintaining contracts takes up a substantial proportion of their time. Service providers reported that the tendering and negotiating for contracts was a time consuming process. Further work to identify the time spent on these activities would enable accurate and more comprehensive calculations of the full cost of commissioning services.

It was also noted by participants across the three local authorities that a considerable amount of time was spent on the development and implementation of various services and referral routes. Two of the participating authorities reported that they actively sought out families who would be eligible for local ‘core offer’ services. This involved contacting special

schools, GPs, specialist nurses and other professionals working with disabled children. These activities also incur costs.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the range and variability of short break services being offered to disabled children and their families. The research also outlines that some of the services are some of the most costly provided by Children's Services Departments for children not looked after. Some disabled children and their families require high levels of social care support. However, research suggests that short break services produce positive outcomes for some of the most vulnerable families. Some research has suggested that the provision of short break services can prevent children from being placed in more costly permanent placements (Beresford et al., 1994; Chan & Sigafos, 2001).

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