

Date of meeting	14 July 2008
Title of paper	LINKs Nationally and Locally: notes on role and coverage
Agenda item	1.6
Paper number	G
Context	<p>This paper briefly outlines what Local Involvement Networks (LINKs) are and what their role is in terms of legislation and statutory guidance.</p> <p>The Wandsworth's LINK's role and remit within the Borough is described against this background. References are given for further reading.</p>
Paper prepared by	WCA and MAC
Action required	For information and discussion

LINKs Nationally and Locally: notes on role and coverage

New kind of statutory body at local level

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (LGPiH) came into force on 1st April 2008. It created in each English local authority with social services responsibilities (in London this means each London Borough) a new body called the Local Involvement Network (LINK). Across England there are 150 LINKs, replacing Patients' Forums (and the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health) as the official representatives of patient and public voices in the NHS. What is new about LINKs is that for the first time social care is included, so that service users and carers voices and views can be incorporated (except for children's social services). LINKs do not replace any other local bodies. They are meant to be "a network of networks" giving coherence and greater strength to what exists already.

Because they are created by law, LINKs must have policies in place to ensure good governance so that each LINK works in ways that ensure it is accountable for spending public money appropriately and for carrying out its defined role. Each LINK must account to its Members and annually to the Secretary of State for Health for everything it has done.

The LINK role locally

Parliament intended that the role of each network is 1) to find out what citizens want from local services, 2) to monitor and review the care provided and 3) to tell commissioners and providers of local services what the community thinks is good, what is not good and what improvements could be made in local services. To ensure that LINKs can hold services to account, LINKs have certain legal powers - such as being able to enter and view premises where state-funded services are provided, to have their requests for information and questions responded to within set times and to refer matters about which they are dissatisfied to local Overview and Scrutiny Committees (OSCs) and ultimately to the Secretary of State.

LINK Independence, support and resourcing

Parliament specifically intended that each LINK will be independent with its own decision making process about how it organises itself and conducts its business. There is no national model. LINKs are not accountable to the Department of Health but must make an annual report to the Secretary of State. No LINK will be exactly the same because each community will determine how they want their LINK to operate and what local priorities will be. In London it is obvious that LINKs in different boroughs will want to work collaboratively where services stretch across more than one area, for instance acute hospital services or learning disability or mental health services.

Each local authority is required to contract a 'host' organisation to establish and support a LINK in the Local Authority area. Local Authorities have until September 2008 to ensure that an organisation is in place to set-up and run the LINK for their area. Wandsworth Council was one of the earliest to successfully procure a host body – Wandsworth Care Alliance (WCA) by competitive tender. Most surrounding local authorities are still at the setting up stage.

The National Centre for Involvement (NCI) is charged with developing supporting material for LINKs. The Wandsworth LINK Host is already engaged with NCI and following its guidance about best practice in the early stages of a LINK. The outline workplan agreed with Wandsworth Council as part of the tender confirmation is described in Paper J.

The Government has made £84 million available to fund LINKs between 2008/9– 2010/11. The vast majority of this money (£27 million per year) will go directly to local authorities. The amount allocated to each area has been calculated using a formula that takes into account population size and factors such as levels of deprivation. In national terms, Wandsworth is not considered a deprived area. In London terms it is one of the most affluent boroughs, even though there are areas of deprivation within the Borough. For more details see Paper H. Specific information about resourcing for Wandsworth LINK is given in the finance report Paper I.

LINK powers

Each LINK has considerable authority to work directly with the NHS and Local Authority on behalf of the local community. Legislation provides LINKs with powers to help carry out their role and places duties on the Local Authority and the NHS to provide information and access to premises:

- LINK-authorized representatives can enter specific premises and view the services provided
- LINKs can ask commissioners and providers for information about services and expect a response with a set period (using Freedom of Information Act powers if needed)
- LINKs can make recommendations to the Local Authority and NHS and expect a response from within a set amount of time
- LINKs can refer matters to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees for action

A mandatory national code of conduct for LINK Members specifically covering the "enter and view" function is being prepared by the Department of Health and is expected during the summer. The regulatory bodies (Healthcare Commission and Commission for Social Care Inspection) have also issued guidance about this.

References:

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Managingyourorganisation/PatientAndPublicinvolvement/DH_076366 is the main portal for everything Government has issued about LINKs.

More information including a section of Frequently Asked Questions is incorporated in the Wandsworth LINK website www.wandsworthlink.org.uk

The Wandsworth LINK Host is already a member of the National Centre for Involvement www.nhscentreforinvolvement.nhs.uk and its LINKs Exchange network www.lx.nhs.uk