

SPECIALIST CHILDREN'S SERVICES POLICY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Specialist Children's Services Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in the Darent Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Tuesday, 21 June 2011.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen (Chairman), Mr M J Angell, Mrs P T Cole, Mr H J Craske, Mr T Gates, Mr J D Kirby, Mr S J G Koowaree (Substitute for Mr M J Vye), Mr S Manion, Mr M J Northey, Mr J M Ozog Mr C T Wells

ALSO PRESENT: Mr P W A Lake Mrs J Whittle

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr M Newsam (Interim Corporate Director of Families and Social Care), Mr A Pettigrew (Interim Director, Specialist Children's Services) Miss T Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

3. Election of Vice-Chairman

(Item A4)

Mrs A D Allen proposed and Mr S Manion seconded that Mr M J Vye be elected Vice-Chairman of the Committee.

Agreed without a vote

Mr Vye was duly elected.

4. Declarations of Members' interest relating to items on today's agenda

(Item A5)

Mr S J G Koowaree made a general declaration of interest as the grandparent of a child who is in Local Authority care.

5. Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel on 27 April 2011

(Item A6)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the first meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel, held on 27 April 2011, be noted.

Matters Arising

Under Minute 5, Mr Wells commented that the wording of the points listed gave the impression that the services provided in the Virtual School Business Plan were unevenly distributed between East and West Kent. The true picture is that some appointments in West Kent were made earlier than those in East Kent and so more information is available on progress made in that area.

6. Dates of Future Meetings

(Item A7)

The Committee noted the dates reserved for its meetings for the remainder of 2011, as follows:-

Wednesday 28 September 2011 – 2.00 pm

Thursday 17 November 2011 – 10.00 am

7. Oral Update by Cabinet Member

(Item A9)

1. Mrs Whittle set out a number of recent and current developments, as follows:-

New Children's Services governance arrangements are now established, including the new Corporate Parenting Panel and Children's Services Improvement Panel, which had each held their inaugural meetings. Work on the Staff Advisory Group Panel is still ongoing.

The Shadow a Social Worker scheme had had good take up by KCC Members, and feedback from those who had already participated showed it to be a good experience.

The Children's Services Improvement Plan: There are currently some 2,700 cases which have been without an allocated social worker for 28 days or more, due to social worker vacancy levels. The establishment of social workers is now nearly at full strength but the percentage of experienced social workers needs to be increased. A recruitment and retention package is being introduced to address this, and pay levels are only one aspect of this package.

On 20 June, Cabinet had received a report from Liz Railton, the Chairman of the Independent Improvement Board, which had been very complimentary about the KCC's approach to addressing this issue, while highlighting the increase in referral rates, Child Protection Plans and LAC.

CAMHS. Ofsted had identified failings in this service, but much progress is being made with NHS colleagues to develop jointly-commissioned services and aligned budgets. The most pressing need is faster referral times.

2. Arising from comments and questions from Members, the following points were highlighted:-

- There is still a high percentage of agency social work staff, but this will decrease when more experienced social workers are recruited.
- it is vital that KCC Members remained involved in Adoption Panels, and that time taken to process adoptions be shortened. Martin Narey, formerly head of Barnardo's, has been engaged to address this aim.
- Members wished to have more up-to-date statistics than those given (for the end of March), but it was explained that the statistics reported to POSCs were governed by the Core Monitoring timetable. Members are sent monthly updates of statistics.

- Members welcomed news of progress on addressing CAMHS shortfalls, as this had been a long-standing concern. Members need frequent updates on progress on this issue, and a further report was requested for the POSC's next meeting.
- although some £750,000 additional government funding had been made available to fund mental health service provision for 16- and 17- year olds, one aspect of funding which needs to be addressed is the CAMHS costs to Kent of young people placed by other local authorities, which is either not recouped or only slowly recouped, leaving KCC to carry the cost.
- morale amongst social work staff had understandably suffered as a result of the Ofsted report and staffing difficulties.

3. Members placed on record their thanks and deep appreciation of the difficult work undertaken by social work staff but acknowledged that this needs to be supported by ensuring that those staff have reasonable and manageable workloads.

4. It was proposed, and generally supported, that a recommendation be made to Cabinet that it urge PCTs to retrieve from the placing authority the costs of providing CAMHS services to young people placed by those authorities.

5. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information given in the update and in response to Members' comments and questions be noted, with thanks;
- b) a recommendation be made to Cabinet that it urge PCTs to retrieve from other local authorities the costs of providing CAMHS services to young people placed by those authorities; and
- c) social work staff be advised of Members' thanks and deep appreciation of the difficult work they undertake and the acknowledgement that this appreciation needs to be supported by ensuring that they have reasonable and manageable workloads.

8. Proposals for a KCC Assisted Boarding Scheme and DVD about the Royal Alexandra and Albert School

(Item B1)

Miss F Adams, Policy Officer, was in attendance for this item

1. Mrs Whittle and Miss Adams introduced the report and described the work being done by the Royal Alexandra and Albert School in Reigate, Surrey with vulnerable young people on the edge of care, to help them stay with their families. Members were shown a DVD version of the school's prospectus and one of former pupils talking about their experiences of being in care and at boarding school. The key points of the proposed boarding scheme were highlighted, as follows:-

- the number of young people who could be accommodated in a boarding scheme at such a school would be small, but the quality of the experience and the benefit to those young people would potentially be huge. Demand for such a scheme would be likely to escalate in the future.

- the scheme would start children as boarders between ages of 10 and 12, and they would be fully involved in deciding whether or not they wish to attend.
- the scheme would not normally include children with Special Educational Needs unless there were very specific circumstances.
- the cost of the scheme compare well with the costs of fostering a child. A fostering placement can cost the KCC between £800 and £1,000 per week. Once the contribution made by the schools grant is taken into account, a year's boarding for one pupil in such a scheme need cost the KCC only £5,000 – 8,000 per annum, plus extras such a school trips.
- although the Royal Alexandra and Albert School is in Reigate, Surrey, it would be near enough for Kent parents to visit their children, but it would be helpful to build up a selection of schools able to offer the scheme in various locations across Kent.
- once placed, a child would continue to be funded and supported by the local authority all through their education. They would not leave unless they wished to do so.
- suitable children would be identified via family group conferencing. At the Royal Alexandra and Albert School, the Head Teacher also interviews prospective candidates to ensure that the school will suit them. Some 50-60% of candidates get through the selection process.

2. In discussion, Members made the following comments:-

- a) some Members talked about their own positive experiences of boarding school, as pupils and one as a former housemaster, and outlined the potential benefits to young people. The image of boarding schools as somewhat draconian institutions no longer matched the reality;
- b) Members broadly welcomed the proposals as a positive option for some - but not all - vulnerable children, and cautioned that children who could benefit from such placements would need to be carefully chosen;
- c) the costs of not sending a child to such a placement should also be taken into account; and
- d) the fact that children with Special Educational Needs would not be accepted would exclude many who could potentially benefit.

3. Mr C T Wells proposed and Mr J M Ozog seconded that the recommendation in the report be changed from 'to note' to 'to endorse the business case ...'

Agreed without a vote

4. It was then suggested and generally agreed that the Committee make a recommendation that Cabinet be urged to support the proposed boarding scheme.

Agreed without a vote

5. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the business case for establishing a Kent assisted boarding scheme, appended to the report, be endorsed; and
- b) a recommendation be made to Cabinet urging them to support the proposal.

9. 'Putting Children First'; Kent's Safeguarding and Looked After Children Improvement Plan
(Item B2)

1. Mr Newsam introduced the item and added that Liz Railton had praised the KCC for its good progress on the Improvement Plan. He confirmed that the minutes of the regular Children's Services Improvement Panel (CSIP) meetings would be referred to the POSC once they had been approved.
2. RESOLVED that the update report be noted, with thanks, and that a similar report be brought to each meeting of the POSC.

10. KCC's Performance Management Framework
(Item C1)

The Chairman secured the Committee's agreement to consider this item as urgent business as the papers had not been placed on public deposit with the required five days' notice.

Mr D Whittle, Policy Manager, was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Whittle introduced the item and apologised for its lateness, but pointed out that this slight delay had allowed more up-to-date information to be offered.
2. Members commented that issues covered in the Improvement Plan linked into the Performance Management Framework.
3. RESOLVED that the information in the report be noted, with thanks.

11. Core Monitoring Report
(Item C2)

Mr R Fitzgerald, Performance Manager, was in attendance for this item.

RESOLVED that the information set out in the report be noted, with thanks.

12. Savings Monitoring Report
(Item C3)

The Chairman secured the Committee's agreement to consider this item as urgent business as the papers had not been placed on public deposit with the required five days' notice.

Miss M Goldsmith, Finance Business Partner, was in attendance for this item.

1. Miss Goldsmith presented a series of slides which set out progress against the savings targets currently rated as 'red' or 'amber'. Mr Newsam and Miss Goldsmith then responded to comment and questions from Members, and the points highlighted included the following:-

- a) the KCC will look at how it works with its various partners to assess where potential savings could be made in services which are delivered by multi-agency working;
- b) although Members had been advised that some savings would be made on 'back office' staffing, it should be borne in mind that, when such reductions had been made in the past, the reduced levels of support had impacted on front-line staff. For instance, when social work assistants had been reduced, social workers had had to divert some of their time and energy towards doing their own data input, reducing the time available to spend with clients;
- c) for young asylum seekers who have exhausted their right to stay, the government will stop making payments to the KCC, which will then have to bear the cost of their care while they await repatriation. The KCC had successfully re-negotiated a reduction of these costs, and Members welcomed this; and
- d) future reports would be able to give more detail on some of the specific savings targets listed; for instance, the costs of, and income from, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people, and in particular the resources and costs involved in foster care accommodation for asylum seekers under 16;

2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to Members' comments and questions be noted, with thanks.

13. Kent Environment Strategy and ISO 14001 Update

(Item C4)

This report was not available at the time of the meeting. The Democratic Services Officer undertook to send it to Members when it was available, and questions arising from it could then be directed to the report author.

14. Update on Select Committee Work

(Item D1)

1. Members emphasised the importance of the student journey for Looked After Children and commented that this would need to be well covered by the Select Committee.

2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report be noted, with thanks.