

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 Medway Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 17 November 2011.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen (Chairman), Mr M J Vye (Vice-Chairman), Mrs P T Cole, Mr H J Craske, Mr T Gates, Mrs E Green, Mr J D Kirby, Mr S C Manion, Mr M J Northey and Mr J M Ozog

ALSO PRESENT: Mr P W A Lake and Mrs J Whittle

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

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

24. Minutes of the meeting of this Committee held on 28 September 2011, the Corporate Parenting Panel held on 7 October, and the Children's Services Improvement Panel held on 25 August and 20 September (Item A4)

1. RESOLVED that the Minutes of the POSC meeting held on 28 September 2011 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising but the Cabinet Member tabled a written update on issues which had arisen at the September meeting. This was referred to under the next agenda item.
2. The Minutes of the Corporate Parenting Panel meeting held on 7 October, and the Children's Services Improvement Panel meetings held on 25 August and 20 September are attached for information only and are noted.

25. Chairman's Announcements (Item A5)

Malcolm Newsam

1. The Chairman announced that this would be Mr Newsam's final POSC meeting before he was due to leave the Council at the end of November.
2. Members expressed their gratitude and thanks for his leadership and commitment to improving Children's Services and putting together and taking forward the Improvement Plan.

Jean Imray

Members welcomed Mrs Imray to her first POSC meeting in her new role as Interim Director of Specialist Children's Services.

26. Oral Update by Cabinet Member
(Item A6)

1. Mrs J Whittle gave an oral update on the following issues:-

Ofsted Inspection – the recent unannounced inspection had had a very good outcome. The number of referrals has fallen and the number of cases unallocated after 28 days is down to 100. Priorities to focus on now include the quality of assessments and moving a child into a permanent placement as soon as possible.

Kent Assisted Boarding Scheme update – Mrs Whittle had recently met with Tony Doran, the Royal National Children's Foundation and Head Teachers of boarding schools. The focus now is to identify the children who will benefit from the scheme and to increase SCS staff's understanding of the concept of assisted boarding.

Reducing Court delays – Mrs Whittle and Mrs Imray recently met with a Judge to discuss reducing the delay in hearing child protection and adoption cases

Phase 2 of the Improvement Plan – a specialist LAC team has been established, whose aim is to return a LAC to their family, if appropriate, or place them for adoption. Reducing the number of children becoming LAC is still a priority. Regular casework audits will be undertaken to assess the quality of the service, and district teams will be subject to mock inspections.

CAMHS waiting times – waiting times have now been reduced to 16 weeks, with a fast track service for LAC. The commissioning of a community CAMHS model will help deliver services.

Southwark Judgement – this judgement, 18 months ago, which had said that any young person under the age of 18 who presents as homeless should be offered accommodation by the local authority, will have cost implications for the KCC of £1.0m – £1.5m per annum.

Reimbursement of health costs of LAC placed by other local authorities – this is now starting to be recouped, following a recommendation to Cabinet by the POSC. *An update on this will be presented to a future meeting of the POSC.*

2. Members then discussed the issues raised in this and the written update tabled, and the following views were expressed:-

- a) Mrs Whittle and Mr Newsam were congratulated on the huge progress which had been achieved with the Improvement Plan and other issues. Members found the sense of achievement very encouraging, and commented that their confidence in the information they are given has now been restored;
- b) for the boarding scheme, KCC should not set up special state schools, which might segregate LAC from other children, but should place them

in existing private and independent schools. The school chosen should be the one which best suits the child;

- c) Mrs Whittle pointed out that, as part of addressing concerns about public money being used to fund private school placements, it should be borne in mind that statistics show that a LAC is more likely to go to prison than to university. In giving a LAC the best possible start, their future demands on public money can be reduced;
- d) the adoption process now takes too long – sometimes two years - and work should aim to reduce this time back to the few months that it used to take in the 1950s and 60s;
- e) some of the questions asked of prospective adopters by Adoption Panels are very intrusive and must deter some people from applying. The process should be streamlined and the questions reviewed, which should also make the process quicker;
- f) the progress on the CAMHS service is encouraging, but Members would like to know the costs of these improvements. *A report on various health commissioning issues, including the reimbursement of health costs for LAC placed by other local authorities, will be made to the POSC's March 2012 meeting;*
- g) in increasing the number of Foster Carers, Members sought reassurance that quality checks are not being rushed. Mr Newsam confirmed that vetting is as rigorous and robust as ever but could also be quick. Martin Narey's report will be helpful in addressing a range of issues relating to adoption;
- h) the KCC communications team is currently looking at the location of Foster Carers across the county in relation to the location of LAC, to see if the former are where they are most needed. Placement of LAC with Foster Carers tends to be driven by supply of Carers rather than by the needs of LAC. *A report on Kent's Foster Carer recruitment campaign will be made to the February 2012 meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel;*
- i) it had previously been management policy to place a child with in-house Foster Carers before using Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). This meant, however, that some children were being moved further away to find the nearest in-house Foster Carer, rather than using an IFA carer closer to their home, and this policy has subsequently been discontinued;
- j) social worker recruitment has made use of social networking media to reach and attract experienced social workers from across the UK. Kent's recruitment campaign has had to be robust to attract good quality candidates; and

- k) there is a need for more detail and increased monitoring of children recorded as 'missing', although Members were assured that Kent has a very strong process to address missing children and trafficking. A report by the Children's Commissioner, addressing trafficking, is due shortly and is expected to recommend Kent's process as a model for other local authorities to follow. As a port authority, Kent will always have to be aware of, and robust in, dealing with trafficking, although this issue is a national and international one. *A report on this issue will be made to the POSC's January 2012 meeting.*

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information given in the oral and written updates and in responses to comments and questions be noted; and
- b) Members' thanks and congratulations be passed to the officers who have worked with Mrs Whittle and Mr Newsam to achieve progress on the Improvement Plan and other issues.

27. Draft Kent Early Intervention and Prevention Strategy and Commissioning Framework
(Item B1)

Mrs M White, Business Strategy Manager, and Ms H Jones, Head of Commissioning, Families and Social Care, were in attendance for this item.

1. Mrs White and Ms Jones introduced the report and, with Mr Newsam, responded to comments and questions from Members. The following points were highlighted:-

- a) the new commissioning plan for early intervention and prevention had been prepared from scratch in less than a year, to respond to issues arising in the Improvement Plan. Much work has been put into its development, and the staff involved were congratulated and thanked;
- b) the aim of the strategy is to introduce appropriate pre-referral support and put in place services which will underpin this, by using commissioning and tendering processes. Members expressed an interest in the specifications of the five services listed in the report which are to be tendered first, and what role the voluntary sector might be able to take, and asked for more detail on this outside the meeting;
- c) the two-stage tendering process means that those who are successful at the first stage will be accepted on to a framework of providers who are then able to tender for specific work contracts, although being on the framework does not necessarily guarantee them work. The second part of the process will evaluate the value for money, price and quality which each provider's bid can offer;
- d) the Strategy is one of the seven steps of Phase 2 of the Improvement Plan and will address the need to reduce the number of children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan. The Strategy will ensure that

work with vulnerable children is meaningful and will lead to long-term improvement. The success of this process can be measured by the services delivered to young people and their families;

- e) joint working between all agencies with a responsibility to protect young people – KCC, NHS, Police, schools – is vital, and no one body should take this responsibility alone. Effective joint working will ensure that resources are focussed on those who most need help;
- f) the tendering stage for the new services will be staggered over 4-5 months to minimise disruption caused during the transition process. *A timetable and more detail of the tendering process will be reported to the POSC's January meeting; and*
- g) the Strategy links closely with the Common Assessment Framework and the services delivered and commissioned by Children's Centres, *and a report on these areas will be made to the POSC's March meeting.*

2. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted; and
- b) Members' thanks and congratulations be passed to the staff involved in developing the new commissioning plan in a very constrained timetable.

28. Kent Safeguarding Children Board - Overview Update Report (2011)

(Item B2)

Ms P Davies, Kent Safeguarding Children Board Manager, was in attendance for this item.

1. Ms Davies introduced the report and responded to comments and questions from Members. The following points were highlighted:-

- a) the timetable for the preparation of the Board's Annual Report had changed this year, and it will be reported to the POSC's January meeting;
- b) this year's Annual Report will include the unannounced inspection which took place in October; and
- c) notable changes since last year's Annual Report include an increase in resourcing across the service, a reduction in waiting times and faster and more robust responses and assessments. Kent's response time is now faster than the national average.

2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks, and the Annual Report be submitted to the POSC's January meeting.

29. Annual Unannounced Inspection of Contact, Referral and Assessment Arrangements in Children's Services

(Item B3)

1. Mr Newsam introduced the report and responded to comments and questions from Members. The following points were highlighted:-

- a) the outcome of the inspection had been very positive. Ofsted's findings, set out in the letter appended to the report, had tallied with the issues Members had been told about in recent update reports, with no issues having been highlighted as 'priority for action'.
- b) the 'areas for development' recognise the progress which has been made. For example, Kent now exceeds the national average for the percentage of assessments completed on time;
- c) it is important not to become complacent, and it is still critical that Phase 2 of the Improvement Plan proceeds well so that good continued progress can be shown at the next main inspection, due in 2012;
- d) Members asked that their congratulations on the progress achieved in service improvement be passed to all staff concerned;
- e) the new case audit framework will help to identify common themes and highlight any need to improve processes. Results from this audit will be reported to Members regularly;
- f) the replacement of the ICS system is now nearing the end of the procurement stage. The chosen provider will be asked to phase in the replacement system through 2012. Good staff training on the new system is vital; and
- g) Members expressed concern about the service being able to maintain the current good rate of progress through the ongoing budget restrictions. Mr Newsam reassured Members that sufficient resources are available to sustain progress.

2. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the good outcome of the inspection be welcomed;
- b) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted; and
- c) Members' congratulations on the progress achieved in service improvement be passed to all staff concerned.

30. Specialist Children's Services Budget Forecast Report 2011/12

(Item C1)

Miss M Goldsmith, Families and Social Care Finance Business Partner, was in attendance for this and the following item.

1. Miss Goldsmith introduced the report and explained that, although some areas had shown underspends, the SCS budget was predicted to have an overall overspend of £8.8m. She responded to comments and questions from Members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) future reports will include a more detailed breakdown of figures, for example separating out the 'legal costs' mentioned on page 84 of the meeting papers. In the meantime, this detail could be supplied to Members outside the meeting;
- b) Mrs Whittle highlighted the need to manage service demands such as the number of LAC and the financial impact of court rulings such as the Southwark judgement, and ensure good investment in the right place - for example, in measures which will reduce the number of LAC. Although some reimbursement of costs is now being achieved, this is, as yet, making only a modest contribution to the SCS budget; and
- c) in the final stage of the budget year, it will be possible to request virement of funds from the areas of underspend to offset areas of overspend, and to start the new financial year with this amended budget allocation.

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

31. Revenue Budget 2012/13 and Medium Term Financial Plan 2012/13 to 2014/15

(Item C2)

1. Miss Goldsmith introduced the report and responded to comments and questions from Members. The following points were highlighted:-

- a) Mrs Whittle explained that Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People who have exhausted all rights to stay and are awaiting repatriation have LAC status and the right to receive accommodation and services from the local authority. Failure to fund these young people may result in them disappearing, so this issue must be managed carefully. KCC has urged the UK Border Agency to provide sufficient resources to cover this period of care and to shorten the length of time it takes to process their case and expel them. The KCC is not currently receiving sufficient government funding to cover of the costs of providing services; and
- b) Mr Newsam added that, in the near future, it should be possible to start to identify how KCC will be able to capitalise on the investments being made in SCS and where future savings could arise from these investments. It is expected that savings will start to appear in the next financial year and take full effect in Year 2. *A report on this issue will be made to a future meeting of the POSC.*

2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks. No potential savings were identified, but it is hoped that the service improvements being made will lead to future savings in service costs.

32. Update on Select Committee work
(Item D1)

RESOLVED that the information set out in the report be noted, with thanks, and the forthcoming Select Committee topic review on Domestic Abuse be welcomed.