

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 Thursday, 19 January 2012.

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 and Mr M J Northey

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

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr A Ireland (Corporate Director, Families and Social Care) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

33. Minutes of the meetings of this Committee held on 17 November 2011 and the Corporate Parenting Panel on 5 December 2011.

(Item A4)

1. RESOLVED that, subject to an amendment to Minute 26, para 2 g) to separate references to Adoption and Fostering, the Minutes of the meeting of this POSC held on 17 November are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman.
2. The Minutes of the Corporate Parenting Panel held on 5 December are attached for information only and are noted.

34. Oral Update by Cabinet Member

(Item A5)

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

The Children's Services Improvement Plan is progressing with a number of issues:-

- Phase 1 improvements now need to become embedded.
- The focus of Phase 2 is to raise the quality of assessments, and will include workshops and audits.
- A recent meeting of the Staff Advisory Group had identified the need to get supervision right, and this is a key issue. It is still the aim to increase the establishment of experienced social workers.
- There is still a need for more Adopters and Foster Carers in the areas where LAC are, which will help particularly with reducing the number of LAC from outside the Thanet area being placed there. A dedicated Adoption website is being developed, which will be launched at the County Show in July.

- The contract between the KCC and the Coram charity, to address issues round Adoption, is progressing, and the number of Adopters recruited has risen by 50% in the last year.
- Budget pressures in this area continue to grow, eg accommodation and education support needed for 16–18 year olds, and preventative services.
- The multi-disciplinary Trafficking Sub-group of the Kent Safeguarding Children Board is holding its third meeting on the same day as the POSC. It gives a very useful forum for partners such as the NHS, the Police and the UK Border Agency to highlight and discuss issues around trafficking and missing children. More than 3,000 episodes of a missing child have been recorded, but many children abscond repeatedly and so show up more than once in these figures.
- The costs to the KCC of dealing with missing children in Kent, as well as the costs associated with the long-standing issue of LAC placed in Kent by other local authorities, should be brought to the attention of the Minister, and Mrs Whittle stated her intention to do this, adding her concern that even children placed within 20 miles of their home, to comply with the 20 mile protocol, are still too far from their family and social networks.
- At a recent meeting of the Dartford Local Children’s Board, Mrs Whittle had heard about some exciting new work being undertaken by a paediatrician.

2. Mrs Whittle and Mr Ireland responded to comments and questions from Members, and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) the KCC follows the British Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) national guidelines but always welcomes external checks. Martin Narey’s report on Kent’s Adoption Services had recommended a streamlined process, and the Coram charity, in their work with the London Borough of Harrow, had successfully increased the number of Adopters from 200 to 400 and reduced the waiting time for placements to 6 months. Coram’s expertise could also help address Members’ concern, previously aired by the Committee, that questions asked to prospective Adopters are sometimes irrelevant and unnecessarily intrusive. KCC’s Adoption website should include more emphasis of the rewards and support available to Adopters;
- b) assessing the correct age of UASC when they arrive in the county is a challenge as many do not have any documentary evidence of their age. Without supporting paperwork, there is always some scope for variation in judgements;
- c) Mrs Whittle undertook to respond to a letter recently received from the Canterbury District Advisory Board of Children’s Centres about the rise in thresholds leading to an increase in the number of Tier 2 and Tier 3 cases which Centres are asked to deal with, and the resultant reduction in the time and resources left to devote to their other work. She commented that more work is needed to identify the correct role for Children’s Centres and to ensure that the most vulnerable parents are

getting the support they need. *A report on the work of Children's Centres will be made to this Committee's March meeting; and*

- d) Members expressed concern that, when seeking Adoption placements for siblings, older children could be harder than their younger siblings to place, and the family could end up being split to find the best solutions for children of different ages. Mr Ireland commented that such judgements are always difficult for social workers to have to make, and he undertook to look at a specific local case referred to him by a Member of this Committee.

3. RESOLVED that the oral updates and the information given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks.

4. The Chairman congratulated Mr Ireland on having 'hit the ground running' since taking on the post of Corporate Director of Families and Social Care in November.

35. Kent Safeguarding Children Board - Overview Progress Report (December 2011) and Annual Report for 2010/2011
(Item B1)

Ms M Blyth, Independent Chair of the KSCB, and Ms P Davies, Board Manager, were in attendance for this item.

1. Ms Blyth introduced the report and summarised the Board's work in strengthening its role since the Munro report of 2006 and enhancing its scrutiny role. Three main areas of change are:-

- Governance and accountability,
- Performance framework – establishing a clear and full picture of need and integrated work to address that need, including discussions around thresholds (on which there has been an audit report) and detailed analysis of the appropriateness of referrals,
- Multi-agency child protection and safeguarding training and close working with partners to monitor performance and improve public confidence.

2. Ms Blyth responded to comments and questions from Members, and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) KCC must hold to account all bodies which work with Kent's vulnerable children, and it is appropriate for Members to scrutinise and question the Board's Progress and Annual Reports. The Chairman added that Members must be told of the bad as well as the good news so they have a full, clear picture;
- b) an interim Programme Manager will be recruited shortly; and
- c) the report on the 2010/11 period introduces issues which have since become familiar and views which have since been proven correct, such

as the issue of thresholds. Members asked to see the audit report on thresholds which had been produced and Ms Blyth undertook to supply this. Future Board reports will include audit data as standard, as well as information on serious case reviews.

2. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the report, and the progress and improvements it demonstrates, be welcomed;
- b) a copy of the report be sent to the Leader and all Members of the County Council; and
- c) Members be sent a copy of the audit report on referral thresholds, and future KSCB annual reports include this and information on serious case reviews.

36. Missing Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

(Item B2)

Ms T Gallagher, County Manager, Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, DCI A Pritchard, Public Protection Unit, Kent Police, and Mrs L Totman, Head of Corporate Parenting, were in attendance for this item.

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

- a) KCC's emphasis in its work with UASC is on welfare issues such as their mental health, while the UK Border Agency's emphasis is on immigration issues, so the two services have to reconcile these differences to work together effectively. This joint working is not always straightforward but has improved;
- b) the average age of UASC is 16 – 17½ , with the youngest being 9 and many others ranging between 13 and 15. It had been highlighted earlier in the meeting, however, that the age of some UASC is difficult to verify;
- c) Members suggested that issues relating to trafficked UASC could be included as part of Members' Corporate Parenting training, although they were advised that the KCC's responsibility in this area is not clear-cut. It does not have the legal responsibility and power to do what it would like to do to protect these children. Kent can liaise with other countries to report and try to trace missing children, but cannot issue a recovery order if it does not have parental responsibility for the child in question (eg if they had been placed in the care of a relative). KCC would not normally or often seek to take parental responsibility for other LAC aged 16 – 17½ as they would be about to leave care. The legislation relating to the subject is complex, with different statutes and types of orders, although all UASC who arrive in Kent are treated the same way by Children's Social Services;

- d) a child's immigration status is what tends to dictate their actions, and those who do not seek asylum are harder to track. Many go missing at the stage at which they know they have exhausted their rights to stay and are about to be repatriated; and
- e) the fact that a child is missing does not necessarily mean that they are not safe; they might have settled somewhere, found employment and accommodation and be living quite happily, but just do not want to be found.

2. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be welcomed and noted, with thanks; and
- b) the Cabinet Member, Mrs Whittle, be asked to take forward and address the concerns expressed by Members about the complexities and limits to what KCC can do to help and protect UASC, set out above.

37. Early Intervention and Prevention - a Progress Report on the Commissioning of New Services

(Item B3)

Ms H Jones, Head of Commissioning, Families and Social Care, was in attendance for this item.

1. Ms Jones introduced the report, which updated the report given to this Committee's previous meeting, mainly setting out the development of the two-stage commissioning strategy and the procurement plan (for which, detail was still being developed). There had been many expressions of interest received, including from local voluntary organisations, and the first specifications will be advertised on 30 January. Existing contracts have been rolled over for 3 or 5 months so the establishment of new services will be on a rolling programme. Since the last report to this Committee, additional Government investment of £2.75m has been secured, which will allow the commissioning of specialist services, eg intensive adolescent service, and additional services required as a result of the Southwark judgement.

2. Ms Jones and Mr Ireland responded to comments and questions from Members, and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) detail of how the extra funding can be allocated, and how prescriptive the Government will be about how the money can be used, is not yet known;
- b) the Customer and Communities Directorate will lead on the use of this funding, but Children's Services will also be involved. Liaison between the two will ensure there is no duplication;
- c) to ensure the optimum use of available resources, and to ensure that needs are met, District and Preventative Services Managers are

involved in shaping service specifications. Each District will have a Commissioning Officer to support contract management and localised commissioning; and

- d) Mr Ireland pointed out that, although the most cost-intensive services will be reviewed with the aim of optimising value for money, the aims of shaping the service go much beyond delivering savings. The strategy has three strands and aims to achieve:-
 - i) better commissioning of care placements, from emergency to long-term, and negotiation around the costs of long-term placements;
 - ii) a practice which ensures the most appropriate and efficient throughput of cases, achieving either adoption or a return home, and avoids drift, which can lead to a child becoming too old to be placed successfully for adoption. This practice will rely on good quality decision making and the best use of available resources; and
 - iii) preventative services which are targeted to those who can most benefit from them, eg in terms of their age or risk level.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks; and
- b) the Committee welcome the additional Government investment and look forward to hearing of further progress at future meetings.

38. Specialist Children's Services Budget Forecast Report 2011/12 (Item C1)

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

- 1. Miss Goldsmith introduced the report and referred to the report previously published for Cabinet in December, which had been circulated again with the agenda papers to provide additional background information for POSC Members.
- 2. RESOLVED that the latest monitoring position for revenue, capital and savings be noted, with thanks.

39. Budget 2012/13 and Medium Term Financial Plan 2012/15 (Item C2)

- 1. Miss Goldsmith introduced the report and she and Mr Ireland responded to comments and questions from Members:-

- a) Members requested and were directed in the papers to detail of the saving of £893,000, listed in the Medium Term Financial Plan against Children's Centres;
- b) the proposed removal of qualified teachers from Children's Centres is the subject of a current consultation being led by Mr Ireland and Mrs Whittle. The proposal has two aims:- re-shaping the role and work of Children's Centres as well as delivering a budget saving.

2. Mrs Whittle added that consultation on this issue will be as robust as possible and will respond to advice on the subject given by the Children's Minister. Consultation will include meetings with the union representing the teachers employed at Children's Centres.

3. RESOLVED that the revenue and capital budget proposals for the Specialist Children's Services portfolio be noted.

40. September 2011 (Quarter 2) Update for Performance for Specialist Children's Services and a Summary of the National Statistical Release for 2010-11

(Item C3)

Mrs D Shkalla, Head of Management Information, was in attendance for this item.

1. Mrs Shkalla introduced the report and explained that it contained additional elements not included in previous years' reports, eg comparative information for each indicator from Kent's statistical neighbours. It had been prepared using Government statistics for the period April 2010 to March 2011, to which had been added Kent's progress since March, following the implementation of the Improvement Plan, to ensure a full picture is presented. Key issues highlighted were as follows:-

- The rate of successful adoptions had not been high in the last year, but the reasons for this have been much documented, eg at meetings of the Corporate Parenting Panel, and action is in place to address and improve the rate. It is hoped that Kent can raise its rate to get very near the national target by the end of the year;
- The number of children subject to a Plan has fallen, which is good, and Kent's aim is that Plans will only be established for children who most need them.
- The number of looked after children (LAC) is still rising. District plans are currently being scrutinised to ensure focused management is in place to achieve this target.
- The Children's Services Improvement Plan had brought much progress against national performance indicators.

2. Mrs Shkalla responded to a number of comments and questions from Members, and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) caseloads are now within the target of 20 cases per social worker. The number of unallocated cases is monitored weekly and exceptions are

reported to Mr Ireland and Mrs Imray, the Interim Head of Specialist Children's Services;

- b) a central referral unit has added robustness and led to a welcome reduction in the number of referrals, meaning that those which do go forward are at an appropriate level. The volume of referrals is at a safe level, but more work is required to continue this reduction;
- c) workflow is tracked, and the number of cases which require 'no further action' (NFA) or have 'other outcomes' etc are monitored by the Senior Management team and all staff in SCS. An audit of referrals leading to NFA cases was undertaken five months ago and tabled at the Improvement Board. Members asked that future reports to this Committee include this information, following an additional audit on NFA cases and NFA from referral, with an explanation of why no further action was required and what outcome these cases had; and
- d) the Children's Services Improvement Panel will be considering a report of the number of re-referrals, and Members asked that this report also be supplied to this Committee. The number of re-referrals is an indicator of the appropriateness of the way in which each case was handled upon being first referred.

3. Mrs Whittle reported that this would be Mrs Shkalla's last POSC meeting before leaving at the end of January to start a new life in Australia. She placed on record her thanks for and appreciation of Mrs Shkalla's work to improve the quality and transparency of Children's Services data available to Members and the public. Members supported these comments and added their best wishes to Mrs Shkalla for the future.

4. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks;
- b) future reports to this Committee include the information on referrals and cases requiring 'no further action', and POSC Members be sent a copy of the report on re-referrals, as requested in paragraphs c) and d) above; and
- c) Children's Services Scorecard information (produced monthly) be made available to the Committee.

41. Select Committee Update *(Item D1)*

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