

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SELECT COMMITTEE - CORPORATE PARENTING

MINUTES of a meeting of the Select Committee - Corporate Parenting held in the Swale 2, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 18 March 2015.

PRESENT: Mrs Z Wiltshire (Chairman), Ms C J Cribbon, Mr S J G Koowaree, Mr B Neaves, Mr M J Northey, Mrs P A V Stockell and Mrs J Whittle

IN ATTENDANCE: Miss L Adam (Scrutiny Research Officer) and Ms D Fitch (Democratic Services Manager (Council))

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

21. **2.00 pm - 3.30pm - Jenny Boyd - Director of Local Delivery West, Councillor Dick Madden - Lead Member for People Operations and Chair of Corporate Parenting Panel, Sheila Woodward - Community Involvement and Engagement Manager, Essex County Council**
(Item 2)

The Chairman welcomed the guests to the meeting and invited them to introduce themselves. Sheila stated that her main role was to ensure the voices of children and young people in care were heard and included in the decision making process. Dick explained that he was the elected Member for Chelmsford Central and the Cabinet Member for Children and Adults. He stated that he was responsible for a budget of £515 million which accounted for two-thirds of Essex County Council's budget. Jenny explained that she was responsible for the delivery of social care services for children in West Essex and the county wide strategic lead for children in care and care leavers.

Jenny began by giving a presentation; a copy is appended to the Minutes. The presentation set out the definitions of Corporate Parenting, the duties and responsibilities on local authorities, the role of Essex County Council Members as Corporate Parents and the Essex Corporate Parenting Governance Model. She highlighted the role of Corporate Parenting in district councils. She stated that district councils had equal corporate parenting responsibilities to the County Council but different Corporate Parenting duties such as the provision of housing for care leavers. She explained that many district councils in Essex were not aware of their responsibilities; she was currently engaging with district councils to remind them of their responsibilities.

Dick reported that children's services in Essex had been on a journey over the last four years. Children's services had been rated as 'inadequate' three times by Ofsted but had recently been rated as 'good'. He noted that the number of children in care had reduced from 1604 in 2012 to 1047 in 2015 which he credited mainly to early intervention. He stated that when Members were first elected, they were required to sign the Essex Pledge for children in care. They were also required to attend a Member workshop to make them aware of their role as Corporate Parents.

Dick explained that he was the Chair of the all-party Essex Corporate Parenting Panel which had a number of representatives including health and foster parents. The CPP met every three months and looked in detail at the performance management of children in care including health, education and employment. The Panel also received reports from independent advocates at every meeting and the annual reports on fostering and adoption. He stated that the Agenda for the Panel was prepared by the Cabinet Member and Head of Service to make it interactive for Members, rather than being a reporting mechanism, to enable them to engage at the meeting and absorb the information beforehand. He explained that the Children in Care Council (CICC) was set up in 2009. Children and young people in care were responsible for chairing, organising and facilitating the CICC. The venue for the CICC meetings, County Hall, was chosen by the CICC. He noted that the CICC was very effective; it set the Panel challenging exercises and gave them the opportunity to hear about their lives.

Dick noted that there was a lack of knowledge and understanding in Essex district councils about Corporate Parenting and their roles in relation to housing and child sexual exploitation. He noted that Chelmsford City Council had set up a Corporate Parenting Task & Finish group. He stated that he recently attended an LGA event for Cabinet Members responsible for children's services and reported that many did not want to be Cabinet Members in the current political climate. He explained that Essex had a People and Family Scrutiny Committee which looked at adult social care, education and children and young people. He stated that there was not enough time given to children and young people at the Scrutiny Committee meetings. He noted that the Scrutiny Committee was able to set up Task & Finish groups; they had recently looked at young people leaving care and child sexual exploitation. He reported that there was also a Scrutiny Safeguarding Children and Adults Reference Group which meet every 2 months and report back to the People and Family Scrutiny Committee.

Dick explained that under the previous government, all County Councils were required to have a Children Partnership Board which was abolished by the current government. He stated that Essex County Council had decided to retain the Board in its Constitution; the Board was required to produce a plan which was reviewed annually by full Council. The Board was multiagency and had representatives from Police, social care, health, education and the fire service. He reported that there was also a Safeguarding Children Board which included representatives from the voluntary sector; the Board fed into the CIC/LCS Partnership Board and the Corporate Parenting Panel. The Safeguarding Children Board had set up a Missing Children Task and Finish group which had found that 50% of missing children were children in care. He reported that he and his three deputy Cabinet Members arranged visits each week to meet with front line social care staff. He stated that the visits were welcomed and well received by staff and provided evidence to Ofsted that Members were active; it also enabled him to check the data received by the Corporate Parenting Panel to see if it aligned with staff views.

Sheila stated that engagement with children and young people in care ranged from indirectly collecting their feedback to direct face-to-face contact. She explained that the Essex Pledge was a set of promises to children and young people in care; the success of the pledge was measured against qualitative data collected from a large sample. The data set in 2013/14 included the views of 667 individual children and

young people in care. She reported that any child or young person in care was a member of the Children in Care Council and invited to participate in its activities. The Council was split by age: Junior (8 – 11) and Seniors (12 and over) and 18 plus. Members of the CICC involved with the Corporate Parenting Panel were given training to develop their skills in representing the views of their peers, presenting data and meaningfully inputting into conversation with the Panel. A number of positive activities, as well as personal and social development opportunities, and opportunities to inform service evaluation, design, delivery, governance and commissioning were organised for the CICC in addition to attending formal meetings.

Sheila explained that all the qualitative and quantitative data from children and young people in care, parents and carers was aggregated into a scorecard which was presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel and senior leaders. The scorecard was built into business plans for each of the four quadrants which were responsible for children's services. She reported data from the scorecard against the Essex Pledge. Under priority 1, 93% of children and 95% of young people in care felt cared for, respected and valued. She stated that the scorecard provided very robust gap analysis with a RAG system against each pledge. The data also enabled children's services to bust myths; data showed that children had positive experiences of social workers and most families saw the benefit of having a social worker.

Sheila reported that there were opportunities for children and young people in care to directly influence policy and practical developments such as supporting the Leaving Care Review, the introduction of Foster Care Profile Cards and All about Me cards. She explained that all foster carers now had a profile card which was given to a child or young person to find out about them before being placed in their care. The All about Me cards were filled in by the child or young person with a professional and given to social workers, independent reviewing officers and foster carers to enable them to find out about the child or young person before meeting them. Both these initiatives were introduced following feedback from the CICC. She explained that CICC Seniors were given extensive training which enabled them to deliver training to their peers, social workers through the Essex Social Care Academy and elected Members. They had recently delivered peer training on child sexual exploitation, launched a DVD on advocacy and CSE and held an event to celebrate their successes. During the summer, 20 young people facilitate a five day event for 120 children and young people in care. The event combines positive activities with the opportunity for children and young people to provide feedback and develop and design future services.

Q – What is the main challenge?

Dick explained that his main area of concern was care leavers. He stated that a Staying Put policy had been introduced to support a young person's transition to independence. Jenny reported that it was very difficult to find suitable accommodation which was available for 16, 17 and 18 year olds. She stated that some young people were not ready to live independently and required additional support. Dick added that elected Members were also anxious about children in care who were placed outside of Essex. He stated that a core group of Members were being trained so that they could go and visit the 80 children placed out of the county. Members had committed to 10 visits to different areas where children had been placed.

Q – How are the CICC representatives on the Corporate Parenting Panel selected?

Sheila explained that there was an open offer to all children and young people in care. A core group of representatives had been formed ; the representatives had been involved with the CICC for a period of time. The core group received training to enable them to understand the issues discussed, cope with challenge and positively engage. The CICC representatives were supported by Sheila’s team on the day of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

Q- What is the current burning issue at the CICC?

Sheila stated that the burning issue was having a house key to their foster carers’ house. The issue was being discussed by the Directors of Local Delivery following feedback from the CICC.

Q – What training do Essex County Councillors’ receive to exercise their Corporate Parenting role?

Dick explained that Members were required to sign the Essex Pledge and attend a workshop once elected. The new Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel received additional training from Officers and met with the CICC to gain a further understanding of the issues. All Members received a quarterly email from the Cabinet Member for Children and Adults about children’s services. He stated that he encouraged Members to contact him if they had faced challenges in their role and provided support to them. Jenny reported that it was difficult to actively engage and involve young people. She stated that it was a big challenge to ensure their contribution was meaningful; it required very passionate people to drive it through the organisation. A Member requested additional information about the CICC and Corporate Parenting training in Essex which Dick stated that he would provide to the Research Officer

Q – How does Essex County Council respond to missing young people?

Sheila explained that a Missing Person Return interview was offered to every young person known to family operations who went missing; social services received a police notification when the missing person had returned. The interview was carried out by an independent person to the young person. A young person would also be offered the opportunity to draw up an action plan to voice actions which may prevent them from going missing again and be provided with information on how to stay safe. Jenny reported that all senior managers reviewed a weekly report with a list of all the names of missing young people. The information was collated from the Initial Response Team and the Emergency Duty Service for Children in Care. She stated that there was an item on missing young people on every Corporate Parenting Panel agenda. She reported that there was a multiagency strategy in place to deal with the issue. Dick offered to send the multiagency Missing Person strategy to the Research Officer.

Q – How does Essex County Council respond to missing young people from London Boroughs?

Jenny explained that missing young people who had been placed in Essex were also included on the weekly report. This enabled the County Council to identify any trends such as young people going missing from an independently managed children's home. She reported that all social workers were notified when a child on their case load was reported missing. Sheila said that Kent had sent a letter to all LA stating that it is their responsibility to offer Independent return interviews to their young people placed in Kent and Essex is looking to emulate this approach. The information and intelligence from the interview was shared with the missing person's local authority.

Q – How have you engaged with district councils about their Corporate Parenting responsibilities?

Jenny stated that the role of district councils was identified as part of the Care Leavers Review due to their housing responsibilities. She reported that the Cabinet Member for Children and Adults had written to the Chief Executives of the district councils in Essex to remind them of their Corporate Parenting responsibilities in January 2014. She explained that she was invited to give a presentation to the Essex Leaders and Chief Executives meeting, she had then followed up with district councils individually. She noted that there had been a better a response from some districts than others such as the Task & Finish group set up by Chelmsford City Council.

Q – The Kent Corporate Parenting Panel recently spoke with apprentices who were in care. They were scared about leaving care; do you have a similar problem in Essex?

Sheila explained that anxiety about leaving care was normally identified at 14 – 15 years. The CICC had recognised this as an issue and had done a lot of work to relieve anxiety and build resilience. She reported that the CICC was developing an independence programme which young people delivered to their peers. She stated that it was important that care leavers were not left to fail at the first hurdle; she stressed the importance of stakeholders such as district councils in understanding care leavers needs and supporting them with things such as tenancy. Jenny reported a number of changes had been implemented to improve transition such as young people keeping their social worker from the children in care service until they are 18 years old. In addition, under legislation they have the support of a personal advisor until the age of 21.

Q – Do district councils have the same statutory Corporate Parenting duties as county councils?

Jenny stated that district councils did not have the same statutory duty as county councils but in accordance with the Children Act 2004 were bound to assist county councils with the discharge of their duties such as housing and supporting vulnerable care leavers. She explained that district councils were not sufficiently engaged; Essex County Council was trying to have a greater presence at a local level such as attending local housing forums. She reported that Chelmsford City Council was offering free leisure passes to children and young people in care which while welcome had caused problems as not all district councils were providing the same support. Dick reported that county council officers were working with their district council colleagues to remind them about their corporate parenting responsibilities.

Q – Are you the only council to move from ‘inadequate’ to ‘good’ in an Ofsted rating?

Dick stated that we were one of very few. He explained that the Council had appointed a dynamic leadership team which had created a supportive environment for the workforce. The leadership team had established the four quadrants to enable effective local management. There had been a significant reduction in agency staffing and caseload. He stated that three years ago 65% of social work staff in North Essex were agency staffing and one social worker had a caseload of 115 which had now been reduced to 12. A new IT system had been implemented; the system had been so successful, it was due to be introduced to adult social care. He noted that Essex County Council’s Virtual Academy Team for Adults had recently won a national award; he stated that the Children’s Team was equally good.

Dick reported that he regularly visited quadrant offices. He stated that when he met with student and Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) social workers he would ask about the support they were receiving; only one had had an issue which he was able to resolve. He explained that he had recently spoken to a social worker who said that it was now good to be a social worker rather than be a form recorder. He stated that he always spoke with the cleaner on visits too. He reported that Edith, the cleaner, at the North quadrant’s office had said that there were lots more smiles in the office. He noted that Essex County Council had been on a journey; it was now trying to achieve an ‘outstanding’ rating.

Q - How have you managed to attract and retain social workers?

Jenny reported that children’s services had a very clear recruitment strategy and had received lots of help from HR. They had put in a number of measures to attract new social workers and support existing social workers to stay including lowering caseload, improving supervisions, providing training through the Essex Social Care Academy and revising the salary.

Q – How are Members of the Essex Corporate Parenting Panel selected?

Dick explained that there was a quota allocated to each political group and the leaders of each group chose the membership. He stated that within his political group, he would meet with interested Members to see what skills they could bring to the Panel. He stressed that the Panel’s focus was on children which meant it was committed non-political Panel.

Q – How does the CIC/LCS Partnership Board communicate with the Corporate Parenting Panel?

Jenny reported that the CIC/LCS Partnership Board was made up of senior officers from a range of organisations including health and education. The multiagency Board created specific tasks and actions for each stakeholder. She stated that she chaired the Board and reported directly to the Corporate Parenting Panel which enabled a two way dialogue between the Board and Panel. She stated that CICC was represented on both the Board and Panel.

Q – What is the one thing that made the council move from ‘inadequate’ to ‘good’ in Ofsted ratings?

Dick stated it was the leadership of officers. Jenny stated that it was leadership across the organisation.

Q – What should we be challenging the new government about to benefit children in care?

Dick reported that the current Minister for Children and Families, Edward Timpson, had been outstanding and was very committed to the role. He noted that the Ofsted Annual Report was very high on the Agenda for all political parties. He stated that irrespective of government, health and social care integration would be a key feature of the next Parliament and that children would be a significant part of integration.

22. 3.40pm - Paul Brightwell, Head of Quality Assurance, Specialist Children's Services, Kent County Council
(Item 3)

The Committee noted that Mr Brightwell was unwell and therefore not able to attend the meeting