

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CHILDREN'S CHAMPIONS BOARD

MINUTES of a meeting of the Children's Champions Board held in the Swale 1, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 3 December 2008.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen (Chairman), Mr M J Vye (Vice-Chairman), Mr A D Crowther (Substitute for Mr J Curwood), Mrs V J Dagger, Mr I T N Jones, DL and Dr T R Robinson

IN ATTENDANCE: Mrs K Weiss (Head Of Policy & Performance), Mr P Brightwell (Policy & Performance Manager - Looked After Children), Mr A Heather (Principal Educational Psychologist), Mrs S Morris (Head Of Strategic Planning & Review), Ms J Robson (Head of Language & Traveller Achievement Service), Mr J Reymond (Service Manager) and Miss T Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

17. Minutes of Board Meetings held on (a) 21 May and (b) 24 September 2008 *(Item A3)*

(1) RESOLVED that, subject to Mrs J Doherty being added to the list of those in attendance, the Minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2008 are correctly recorded and that they be signed by the Chairman.

(2) The Minutes of the meeting held on 21 May 2008 had already been signed and were included for reference only.

18. Chairman's Announcements *(Item A4)*

The Chairman referred to the increase in interest in and concern about the County Council's Corporate Parenting role that had arisen from high profile media coverage of recent child protection cases. The practice of circulating statistics on the number of Looked After Children and children with Child Protection Plans (previously those on the "At Risk" Register), quarterly, to all Members of the County Council has been established for several years as part of the Board's regular work. These statistics are currently presented district by district but Members have recently asked that they be broken down into figures for each County Council electoral division.

19. The Future Inspection Framework for Children's Social Services, 2009 *(Item B1)*

(Sally Morris, Head of Strategic Planning and Review, was in attendance for this item)

(1) Mrs Morris introduced the report and presented a series of slides (*will be appended to these Minutes*) setting out the key features of the new arrangements. In discussion, and in Mrs Morris's and Mrs Weiss's responses to questions asked by Members, the following points were highlighted:-

- (a) It had been expected that the new inspection arrangements would reduce the burden on children's services teams which inevitably came with inspections, but this reduction had not materialised;
- (b) Members expressed disappointment that the new arrangements might lead to inspection visits which were more numerous but which looked at issues in less depth. This would depend how the new 'annual fieldwork' feature was undertaken. Although the new system would tie up senior staff for a shorter time, this was still an interruption to the daily work of running a good children's social care service. In response to a question about the costs to the County Council of the inspection system, in terms of officers' time, Mrs Weiss said that the costs were extremely heavy and could not be recharged or recouped;
- (c) Members expressed concern that OFSTED had more inspection work to do but had suffered a 30% cut in resources. Mrs Weiss said she expected OFSTED to question how it would evaluate services in the future. The proposed Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) inspection regime now looked more likely to happen;
- (d) The size and diversity of a county like Kent could mask differing performance levels across regions. Officers had raised this concern with the Government, but expected that the advice given would be that a local authority's approach should match its area's geographic diversity; and
- (e) Members were concerned that the self evaluation process could fail to show up problems. For example, Haringey Council had assessed their services as "good" and been assessed in the JAR as good.

(2) Mr Brightwell pointed out that Kent's children's social services had scored very well in quality assurance assessments. As the Manager of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service, he and his team were independent of the operations management team of Children's Social Services so could be challenging. He pointed out that a smaller local authority would not have the scope to organise these roles in this way.

(3) RESOLVED that the new arrangements for the inspection of Children's Social Services, and their impact on the service, be noted, with thanks.

20. Kent's Safeguarding Process - Oral update

(1) Mrs Weiss explained it had not been possible to supply the planned Kent Safeguarding Children Board (KSCB) Annual Report. The paper will not be signed off by the KSCB until the next meeting. Mrs Weiss gave an oral update on Safeguarding within the Children, Families and Education Directorate and responded to questions and comments from Members. She said that the Cabinet Member, Leyland Ridings, took an active role in safeguarding issues, having regular monthly briefings with Bill Anderson and Mrs Weiss, in which he asked searching questions.

(2) Members commented that the relationship between Paul Brightwell and the IRO service was good, but the external perception of this would be that the services, being in-house, were not sufficiently independent. The County Council should be aware of this perception and how the services would appear to the public.

(3) A Member stated that the County Council should ensure that channels of communication were as open as possible, from the bottom up. A case was cited of a non-Kent child in another authority, whom the Head Teacher had noticed was behaving in a disturbed fashion. Referrals to the local safeguarding service had been unsuccessful. It later transpired that the child's father had killed the child's mother. The Member asked what help a Head Teacher would receive in Kent. Mrs Weiss explained that, in Kent, the Head Teacher could have contacted the Education Safeguards Service run by Kel Arthur, Policy and Standards Manager, Education Safeguards, and they would have a supported discussion with Children's Social Services. Head Teachers are aware of Kel Arthur's Team, which has a good working relationship with them, with Kel's team being well thought of. Some LAs do not have this sort of team/service.

(4) Mrs Weiss explained that there had been an increase in the number of children who are subject to Child Protection plans (previously those on the 'At Risk' Register) in the last 3 years. This correlates with the reduction in the number of Looked After Children.

(5) The largest number of cases are due to neglect and emotional abuse. All children who have a Child Protection plan have an allocated social worker, and all social workers have regular supervision. Performance in respect of the Performance Assessment Framework indicators is mostly very good. 99.8% of case conferences are held on time. Kent performs well compared to its statistical neighbours.

(6) Members asked if Kent could be sure that ALL its children were safeguarded, to which Mrs Weiss replied that it was not possible to give a 100% guarantee that there would never be a Child Protection incident. Some families may not be involved with social services. When families are known, social workers and managers work to manage risk as safely as possible and in the best interests of the child. When there is an incident, the KSCB will hold a Serious Case Review. The KSCB was previously chaired by the Managing Director of CFE, and recommendations for improvements are monitored.

(7) In response to a question about risk, Mrs Weiss replied that risk is managed in part by having competent staff. Children's Social Services have a recruitment and retention strategy in place, together with a programme of continuous professional development. Turnover and vacancy levels are lower in Kent than in many other local authorities, but it is necessary to take continual action to maintain staffing levels and Children's Social Care has vacancies it would like to fill. Kent uses mostly the County Council's own social workers and uses agency staff as little as possible. Members commented that cuts, when they are made, tend to remove back office staff, with the result that social workers have to do their own paperwork and case recording. This takes time away from their contact time with families.

(8) In response to a question from Members, Mrs Weiss explained that the Department for Children, Schools and Families had introduced the Integrated Children's Service (ICS), use of which is mandatory. This requires social workers to input information and case notes directly to the ICS system, which is very time consuming and impacts on direct work with children and families.

(9) In response to a question about the number of court proceedings, Mrs Weiss explained that the Public Law Outline (PLO) had been introduced in April 2008. This requires various assessments and services to be completed before care proceedings are instigated, except in emergencies. There has been a reduction in the number of applications for care proceedings nationally. However, a reaction to the case of Baby P is that this pattern has now being reversed, at least in the short term. Children's Social Services is monitoring its court proceedings, however it is too early to comment on the impact of the PLO. Members commented that the County Council spends £2.7m per annum on case preparation, using external solicitors, and questioned if it would be cheaper to use the County Council's in-house solicitors.

(10) Regarding a question about the availability of placements to accommodate a child when they go into care, Mrs Weiss said that she was not aware of any case where a child needing to be Looked After was refused because no placement had been available. KCC would use an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) when absolutely necessary.

(11) Members referred to the lobbying it had previously done to reduce the number of children placed in care in Kent by other local authorities. It's good that Kent, being a very large county, had the capacity to accommodate its own requirement for child placements. Members asked if it was possible to be given some figures for the number of placements available. Mrs Weiss commented that some local authorities had not developed in-house services as they preferred to place in Kent and possibly found it less expensive. Most of Kent's Looked After Children are fostered. Kent's fostering service is inspected yearly and scores well.

(12) Members acknowledged that the work that social workers undertook was sometimes harrowing and difficult to cope with. Mr Brightwell added that the Head Teacher at Wilmington School (referring to a recent case) had been very complimentary about the support received from Kent Children's Services.

(13) Responding to a question about the Educational Psychologist service and its role, Mr Heather said that the Educational Psychologist service was able to give a very rapid response to the incident at Wilmington School, and two psychologists were at the school earlier that morning. He had been able to keep up good communication

links with them to monitor the situation. He explained that the educational psychologist service distinguished between “critical incidents” and “sad events”. Critical incidents occur with more frequency than people would think; recent evidence suggests that there are some 23 to 25 of these a year. One of the key issues that needs consideration by all those involved in these incidents is how to manage with accuracy and sensitivity the flow of information to the press and public. The service is concerned with supporting and helping school systems manage these types of difficult occasions. The service is also able to signpost additional involvement to support individual cases, where this is necessary, to other agencies such as the Child Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and CRUSE.

(14) RESOLVED that the information given on the work of the Children’s Social Services and Educational Psychologist teams, and the stringent auditing and monitoring systems which are applied, be noted, with thanks.

21. Education Provision for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People *(Item B2)*

(1) Ms Robson introduced the report and pointed out that the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People (UASCYP) Service had achieved much since the last report to the Champions Board, but there was still more to do. It was important to be realistic about what was possible to best meet young people’s needs.

(2) Mr Reymond highlighted the challenges around providing young asylum seekers with the education that would be most useful to them in adult life. Being accepted for, and embarking upon, vocational courses often required a young person to be able to read and write English to a higher standard than they could realistically achieve, and the school environment was not necessarily the most productive or appropriate for some young people. The service needed to achieve the right combination of life skills and language skills which would prepare young asylum seekers and give them maximum scope to benefit from any opportunity which was open to them. Even if they were ultimately repatriated to their country of origin, they would be as well prepared as possible during their time in Kent. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) had supported a pilot of an independent living skills course to help with this preparation.

(3) In response to questions, Ms Robson, Mr Reymond and Mr Brightwell explained that:-

- (a) Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People and Looked After Children were able to access careers advice from the Connexions Service in the same way as could any other young person;
- (b) Although the Asylum Seeker Duty Team made thorough records of a young person’s country of origin, language and circumstances of arrival, the immediate concern was to look after a lone young person who was confused, traumatised and malnourished after a long journey, and who had possibly also been abused. Their first need was for a thorough needs assessment. Any country experiencing war or crisis at any time would generate numbers of young unaccompanied asylum seekers, and Kent was inevitably in the front line as a destination for them as they crossed mainland Europe;

- (c) The recent Joint Area Review (JAR) had praised Kent's UASCYP Service and the work undertaken to protect and support young people;
 - (d) Befriending or 'buddying' initiatives were important in supporting young asylum seekers, and a project by the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO), being piloted as part of the Riverside Project in Gravesend should improve outcomes for young people. Evaluation of this pilot would help plan future work;
 - (e) Members praised the difficult and emotional work undertaken by the UASCYP Team on a very restricted budget. The work of the team had no precedent to follow and had to try out initiatives and test what worked.
 - (f) Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People following courses at Kent colleges were generally positive and well motivated and provided good role models for other young people. Once in the education/training system, they were able to access the same social networking and choices of career path as could others in their peer group, and in the same way; and
 - (g) Members expressed interest in, and asked about the possibility of, visiting the Appledore Centre to see the team's work at first hand.
- (4) RESOLVED that:-
- (a) the progress made in developing and extending the education provision for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People be noted, with thanks; and
 - (b) the ongoing discussions with strategic partners to ensure better outcomes for this vulnerable group, and the commitment set out in Kent's Pledge to Looked After Children, be supported.

22. Future Work - discussion

- (1) At the conclusion of the meeting, Members reflected on issues covered in the meeting and had a brief discussion of the role the Board could play in future in engaging with and addressing the issues covered.
- (a) Members would need to identify what information to ask for, and examples of things which would be useful were:-
 - The percentage of cases checked/monitored by Mrs Weiss's team;
 - A tracking report on the number of cases (including those of Looked After Children) currently being investigated.
 - (b) Members also asked to see the full report on the Haringey case as soon as it was available;

(c) Members could also invite the Cabinet Member to address a future meeting on his role in the Children's Care Council.

(2) The County Council's Corporate Parenting role, together with the Board's revised Terms of Reference, would also be discussed by the full Council on 11 December 2008.