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To: Children's Champions Board - 21 May 2008

Subject: PARENTAL ALCOHOL MISUSE AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN IN KENT

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Summary: This report provides a first overview of current information available regarding parental alcohol misuse and its impact on children in Kent

FOR INFORMATION

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## **Introduction**

1. (1) In March 2008 a select committee report in relation to alcohol abuse in Kent was published. The committee examined evidence regarding the extent of alcohol abuse in Kent and the current level of services, programmes and initiatives available within Kent.

(2) The report made a number of key recommendations to Kent County Council and, following this, the Champions Board asked for a report in relation to these issues in respect of children of alcohol misusing parents which had been highlighted in Recommendation 9 of the report.

(3) 'The Committee urges that KCC offers immediate intervention to support those with urgent needs, such as children mistreated by alcoholic parents, young carers of misusers and misusers suffering from alcohol withdrawal crisis. If during assessment, a parent is in need of alcohol treatment, KCC Social Services should ensure that support is provided to ascertain that the children are properly cared for.'

(4) This report provides a first review of the current information available and looks at research regarding the impact of parental alcohol misuse upon children. It looks at what is known of the extent of the issue in Kent and the current services and initiatives that are either in place or are planned.

## **Research Information**

2. (1) Many people drink without negative consequences to themselves or others including their children. However, in families where alcohol misuse is an issue, there can be far reaching consequences for the children involved. Studies (i) suggest that problematic alcohol misuse by a parent must significantly affect the quality of their parenting. Parents can become emotionally unavailable, inconsistent and unpredictable. The conflict and disharmony often associated with problematic alcohol consumption, rather

than the drinking itself, often brings adverse consequences. There is a strong association between alcohol misuse and violence in the home.

(2) Children of problem drinking families have higher levels of a range of problems than children of non problem drinkers which can include:

- Anti social behaviours including aggressive behaviours towards others, hyperactivity and other forms of conduct disorder
- Emotional problems including a wide range of psychosomatic problems including asthma, bed wetting, negative attitudes towards their parents and themselves, high levels of self blame, withdrawal and depression
- School based problems including learning difficulties, reading retardation, loss of concentration, poor performance, aggression and truancy
- Caring responsibilities. Children may have to take on responsibilities for caring for a parent or siblings and running a household. This can impact on their education, peer relationships and social lives.

### **The Extent of the Problem**

3. (1) The numbers of children affected by parental alcohol misuse is not conclusively established either nationally or in Kent. In part this is because the problem often remains largely hidden, with children and parents not in touch with services until the problem has escalated. A recent study (ii) suggested that there are approximately 1,000,000 parents who are alcohol dependent and that this impacts on approximately 1,300,000 children.

(2) Nationally it is also estimated that for 25-33% of children subject to Child Protection Plans, parental alcohol misuse plays a part (iii). In Kent no specific data is able to be collected to identify the numbers of children who are looked after or subject to a Child Protection or Child In Need Plan where parental alcohol misuse is a factor. However, manual counts and samples of caseloads confirm that the proportion where this is an issue of concern can be as high as 50%. It is notable in this regard that Children and Families teams were the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest referrers to the EK Substance Misuse team in 2006-2007, although this only amounted to 49 cases.

(3) Provision for young carers is provided through a variety of voluntary organisations. They also do not keep specific data on the numbers of their children where alcohol misuse is a factor but anecdotally they report that children and young people who care for a parent who misuses alcohol may experience the stigma of caring as well as that of the alcohol abuse itself and therefore this caring may be more "hidden" than other types of young carer activity. Young people who care for a parent in these circumstances may find it difficult to access information and support to make informed choices about their own alcohol use and as a result could be at risk of developing misuse behaviours themselves.

### **Service Provision**

4. The seriousness and extent of the problem is however recognised in a number of projects and initiatives that are currently in place throughout Kent:

- KSCB provides multi agency training to raise awareness and improve responses to parental alcohol misuse
- The substance misusing parents project in Thanet and Dover fast tracks substance misusing parents – drugs and alcohol – into treatment and ensure joint work between Children and Families teams and the drug and alcohol service. They worked with 47 families in 2007/8, 20 of whom identified alcohol as their primary drug.
- The Sunlight Project in Thanet, Canterbury, Dover and Swale provides group work for children 7-13 whose parents abuse drugs and/or alcohol. It aims to build resilience and offer a safe place to learn about substance misuse, identify support networks and coping strategies, develop new skills and have fun. It helps to break down the stigma and fear so many of these children feel. In 2006/7 the project worked with 247 children
- A specialist health visitor working across Kent to provide consultation and support to midwives and health visitors working with families where there is substance misusing parents
- The Windmill Clinic in Medway, Swale and Dartford which develops care pathways and treatment for pregnant substance misusing women.

## **Future Plans**

5. As this survey suggests, however, although good practice exists there is currently a lack of joined up provision, strategic ownership and direction within Kent on this issue. In recognition of this a Hidden Harm working group has been formed under the chairpersonship of Angela Slaven, the Director of Youth offending and substance Misuse. It plans to involve wide range of agencies to work together to:

- Improve outcomes for children of substance misusing parents and the parents
- Develop a multi agency hidden harm strategy for children's services and adult drug and alcohol treatment services through a needs assessment. Key to this approach will be:
  - a review of best practice from national research
  - a mapping exercise of service provision and funding
  - a development of responses based on resilience and reduction of harm
  - an identification of resources and systems to capture need
  - a review of multi agency arrangements and protocols aimed at improving outcomes for children of substance misusing parents
  - ensure the specific needs of young people who take on caring responsibilities for alcohol misusing parents are identified
  - a development of mainstream services as well as services in voluntary sector

- develop the sharing of good practice between projects focused on supporting the children of substance misusing parents and those supporting young carers
- an assurance that drug and alcohol services monitor levels of parental use and have appropriate policies and procedures in place
- the development of a Children and Families process for children of substance misusing parents through universal or adult treatment services.

## Conclusion

6. This report provides a first review of the issues relating to children of parents who misuse alcohol in Kent. It highlights a number of initiatives and projects currently developed but, most importantly, identifies the setting up of the new Hidden Harm group as potentially a major way forward to improve outcomes for this group of children through strategic developments.

## Recommendations

7. Members of the Children's Champions Board are asked to consider whether, in view of their interest in this issue, they commission an updated report on the work of the Hidden Harm group in 12 months to consider the progress made.

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### *Background Documents:*

- (1) Alcohol Concern Keeping it in The Family. 2008
- (2) Hidden Harm Responding to the Needs of Children of Problem Drug Users
- (3) Suffer the Children Adult Children of Alcoholics. Priory Group 2006

### *Other Useful Information:*

None