

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CHILDREN'S CHAMPIONS BOARD

MINUTES of a meeting of the Children's Champions Board held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 12 February 2009.

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

ALSO PRESENT: Mr P B Carter, Mr L Christie, Ms C J Cribbon, Mr A D Crowther, Mr D S Daley, Mrs T Dean, Dr M R Eddy, Mr M J Harrison, Mr P M Hill, OBE, Mr D A Hirst, Mrs S V Hohler, Mr A J King, MBE, Mr S J G Koowaree, Mr P W A Lake, Mrs J Law, Mr T A Maddison, Mrs M Newell, Mr W V Newman, DL, Mr M J Northey, Mr G Rowe, Ms B J Simpson, Mrs P A V Stockell, Mr R Tolputt and Mr F Wood-Brignall

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr M Ayre (Senior Policy Manager), Mr P Thomason (Independent Child Protection Consultant), Dr I Craig (Interim Joint Managing Director, CFE), Mr K Abbott (Interim Joint Managing Directors, CFE), Mr B Anderson (Director Children's Social Services), Miss T Grayell (Democratic Services Officer) and Miss J Purvis (Improvement & Engagement Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

23. Chairman's Announcements

(Item A3)

(1) The Chairman welcomed all those Members who had attended in response the Board's invitation and thanked them for taking the time to discuss this vitally important issue.

(2) She explained that the report was Phase 1 of three phases of a major review of Children's Safeguarding issues commissioned by the County Council.

24. Protecting Children in Kent

(Item B1)

(1) Mr Ayre and Mr Thomason introduced the report and presented a series of slides (*which are appended to these Minutes*) setting out the key findings of Phase 1 of the review. With Dr Craig and Mr Anderson, they answered a number of factual questions from Members about the findings of the review and its recommendations, and responded to Members' concerns. Mr Ayre emphasised that the Board was not required to agree the recommendations at today's meeting. There was general cross-party support for the robust and thorough report that had been produced, and Members added their thanks and congratulations to the review team.

(2) In discussion, and in officers' responses to questions put by Members, the following points were highlighted:-

- (a) Questions asked of Children's Social Work teams had been based on the issues covered by the Haringey Joint Area Review (JAR). Questionnaires had been sent to 52 members of staff, with 34 responses having been received - a response rate of 65%. Staff chosen to receive the questionnaires were Team Leaders, District Managers and Heads of Service;
- (b) Findings arising from the questionnaire had confirmed information identified in the Haringey JAR. Key issues were staff shortage and increased case loads, delays in giving written acknowledgement of referrals and allocating cases, leaving Managers holding cases. However, Mr Thomason and Mr Ayre emphasised that they had found professionalism, compassion and much excellent practice in the work of social work teams, including the following:-
 - (i) Most children in care had an allocated social worker;
 - (ii) An initial meeting with a child always happened within the prescribed time span;
 - (iii) No child with a child protection plan (CPP) was without an allocated social worker;
 - (iv) Case files were very comprehensive; and
 - (v) There was much good practice in multi-agency working
- (c) Findings presented in the slides had been identified by looking at five serious case reviews (SCRs) of very complex cases and 14 cases from the ICS. At the end of December 2008, there had been some 1052 CPP cases in Kent;
- (d) Case loads changed frequently and it was not possible to identify an ideal case load size. Even for some experienced social workers, two child protection cases going on at once could be too much to handle. Child protection cases were allocated to a team manager before being allocated to a social worker, but team managers would not normally hold such cases. The Haringey JAR had highlighted case load size as an issue and Kent's review had found that case load monitoring and management was done very well;
- (e) The Integrated Children's System (ICS) was a problem shared by many other local authorities, and Directors of Children's Services in the South East and London Boroughs were working together to lobby the Secretary of State to delay further development of it until some consolidation of the system could be done. A task force had been set up by the Secretary of State to look into this;
- (f) Potential benefits of the ICS included freeing up qualified social workers from time spent inputting information, but dis-benefits included administrative staff having to put on hold other admin work to do the inputting. Change to the inputting regime would need to be both managed and gradual. The Cabinet Member reported having found out that social work staff spent 20% of their time inputting information on the ICS;

- (g) The ISC had been intended as a work aid, and staff had tried very hard to make it work. However, some fundamental problems, such as an incompatibility between the court proceedings data base and the ICS, had been identified. The ICS had been developed rapidly while funding was available. It was not possible to scrap the system but it would need to be consolidated and progress made very carefully. Three relatively minor problems areas - the nature of the forms, hardware and software - when added together made a major problem. When the system worked it worked very well, but the problems still persisted. Many staff responding to the questionnaire felt that case recording had become more difficult and time consuming since the introduction of the ICS. The review had identified the quality of file recording as very good;
- (h) The appointment of the Area Consultant Practitioner (ACP) post in recommendation 4 would cost some £60-70,000 per year, per children's social services area, of which there were three - East, Mid and West Kent;
- (i) Recommendation 5 proposed a Senior Consultant Practitioner (SCP) /Head of Profession post reporting to the Chief Executive rather than to the Managing Director of CFE, as social work professionals were not just employed in Children's Social Services but in Adult Social Services, drugs teams and others. This was intended to support the key professional role of social workers and had been welcomed by the Head of Children's Services;
- (j) The practice audit proposed in Recommendation 6 was intended to demonstrate to the public that Kent had a systematic way to police its own work, and should increase public confidence;
- (k) Vacancy rates in social work teams were volatile and changed often from district to district in Kent and varied over time between local authorities. Only one district in Kent had a 24% vacancy rate. Nationally, one in 17 social work posts was currently vacant. Vacancy rates were calculated by using a formula (*the number of vacancies in qualified social work posts in full-time equivalent form in the funded establishment, expressed as a percentage of the total number of posts*), although the definition of what constituted a vacancy changed over time. An increase in the vacancy rate in Kent had been steady and was not dramatic;
- (l) The additional £1.5m allocated to Kent from the Government would be spent on supporting and resourcing social work posts to reflect the increase in demand caused by an increase in CPP cases. The total fund allocated would cover and support 40 social work posts;
- (m) Courses offered by universities needed to train and equip new social workers fully for the realities of social work. Newly-qualified social workers had a protected case load for their first year and extra training, ensuring that they were armed with practical knowledge to be able to identify physical symptoms of abuse and how deal with them;
- (n) Phase 2 of the review would be concerned with partnership working, and the review team had recently met with the Kent Safeguarding Children Board (KSCB) to discuss the approach to be taken;

- (o) Long term neglect was as damaging to a child as physical abuse, and was a very difficult issue to work with. Social workers needed objective, expert supervision to avoid becoming numbed to the effects of neglect cases. Sadly, there were some neglect cases being reviewed by the KSCB, and the outcome of these cases was never predictable. Haringey JAR had said that local authorities needed to be more robust in conducting SCRs, although the quality of Kent's SCR process had been identified as good;
 - (p) When a CP case file was to be closed, this would not a decision just for social services but would be subject to multi-agency discussion, and any ongoing monitoring of the child's case, once closed, would be shared between agencies. The decision in 2007 to cut admin staff was being reviewed in the light of the ongoing problems experienced with the ICS;
 - (q) A Member who served on an adoption panel pointed out that some 98% of case coming to adoption panels involved drugs and alcohol issues, yet the Kent Drug and Alcohol Action Team (KDAAT) was not referred to in adoption papers. The KSCB was soon to look at improving links between agencies and would address this issue;
 - (r) Mr Ayre confirmed that the legal responsibility for the County Council's child protection function rested with the "Director of Children's Services" (in Kent, the Managing Director of CFE) and "The Lead Member for Children's Services" (in Kent, The Cabinet Member) and the Chief Executive;
 - (s) Lessons learnt in the review of child safeguarding could be used in the safeguarding of adults. Work by the University of Kent at Canterbury and Kent Adult Social Services had identified that adult protection, although not a statutory function, carried the same risks and shared some of the same issues as child protection; and
 - (t) Mr Abbott reassured Members that savings identified in this year's budget from vacancy management did not include keeping unfilled any social work or social work support staff posts.
- (3) In discussion, Members expressed the following concerns *(listed in order of the recommendations they relate to)*:-
- (a) Recommendation 1: Members were concerned about the size of the sample which had been used for the review. What was needed was a complete audit of all cases.
 - (b) Recommendations 2 and 3: Members expressed disappointment at the persistent and ongoing problems experienced with the Government imposed ICS system, despite much effort from officers to make the system work.
 - (c) Recommendation 4: Members asked to be given evidential proof of the effectiveness of the proposed Area Consultant Practitioner post.
 - (d) Recommendation 5: Members expressed concern about the Senior Consultant Practitioner/Head of Profession post reporting direct to the Chief Executive.

This post should report direct to the Managing Director of CFE, as the proposed arrangement would undermine the role of the Managing Director of CFE, which had been dictated by the report which followed the Climbié investigation.

- (e) Recommendation 7: The new Managing Director of CFE would need to have the opportunity to give a view on this recommendation and the discussions with the universities.
- (f) The Board would need to meet in private later to explore the issue and question the Cabinet Member more closely.
- (g) Members expressed concern about the independence of the review team and the fact that no non-social services person was involved. Mr Ayre explained that the team had been chosen to be independent of the line management of both CFE and Children's Social Services.

(4) Mr Carter congratulated the review team on a clear and concise report and said Kent should not let anything get in the way of reaching a conclusion. The new Managing Director of CFE has been appointed today and would be key to taking forward the issues raised in the review report. Mr Carter said he particularly supported recommendation 4 of the review report, which would provide a champion for the professional development needs of social work staff across all disciplines. He stated his intention to make a report to Cabinet to take forward the recommendations in the report.

(5) The Cabinet Member, Mr Ridings, also congratulated and thanked the review team for the report, which, he said, was rational, objective and professional. He hoped that all Members would be able to support it. He confirmed that the Directors of Children's Services and Kent Adult Social Services and the Cabinet Members for Adults and Children would meet to discuss how best to co-ordinate adult and child protection issues.

(6) In conclusion, Members expressed a need for more information on some issues and be able to come to a formal view before submitting a report to Cabinet, and asked that their comments, reservations and concerns be fully reported in the Minutes of the meeting, which would be sent to Cabinet. There was still much work to do before the Board could report to Cabinet with any recommendations.

(7) RESOLVED that:-

- (a) the report be noted and welcomed, and the review team be and thanked for it;
- (b) the Minutes of this meeting, setting out the comments, reservations and concerns set out in paragraph (3) above, be considered at the Board's next regular meeting on 11 March 2009, and the information requested during discussion be made available for that meeting;
- (c) Phase 2 of the review go ahead in the meantime; and

- (d) the Board submit its views to the Cabinet at a future date when it had been able to see more information requested and assess the outcomes of Phase 2 of the review.