

Item 1

Minutes of the Children's Services Improvement Panel

Meeting held: 7 March 2012, 15:00, 3rd Floor Meeting Rm Brenchley Hse

Present:

Mrs Whittle (Chair)
Mr Christie
Mrs Dean
Mr Lake
Mr Ferrin
Mrs A Hohler
Mr Cubitt
Mrs Allen

Officers:

Jean Imray
Jennifer Maiden-Brooks
Karen Ray
Maureen Robinson
Michelle Pennellier (clerk)

Apologies:

Mr Smith

1. Previous Minutes

1.1 The minutes were approved as an accurate record of the last meeting and agreed for distribution to Cabinet.

2. Progress Report

2.1 Ms Imray confirmed that the Central Referral Unit (formally the County Duty Team) went fully live from 23 January and gave details of a recent positive example of how the CRU is now successfully bringing agencies under one roof and enabling interventions to work together.

2.2 Ms Imray confirmed that we are continuing to improve our Initial Assessment timeframes and that we are currently hitting the target of completing IAs within 7 days. We are also continuing to keep down the numbers of Core Assessments and Initial Assessments that are out of this time.

2.3 Alice Hohler asked how long on average it takes to allocate cases. This will depend upon how many are S47 – which are allocated immediately - but allocation is usually somewhere within the 28 day window. Further reporting on unallocated cases and the timeframes for each can also be provided to Members if this would be helpful. Levels of allocated caseloads are also recorded and this averages 20 cases per worker, although the aim is to bring this down to 15 for Looked After Children (LAC).

2.4 There has been significant and rapid reduction in the number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan (CPP). This is partly down to 200 LACs being removed from CPPs. Ms Imray enforced the fact that this is something which is not about numbers, but ensuring the right children are subject to CPPs (Kent had a much higher than average number of children on CPPs than other similar authorities).

2.5 Specialist LAC teams are now fully up and running.

2.6 The Children's charity, Coram, has now taken over the management of Kent Adoption Service.

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2.7 Kent is currently reviewing the marketing of our In-House Fostering Service to bring this in line with our competitors. The new website will be launched in the early Summer.

2.8 Ms Imray spoke about the need to look at the outcome of assessments in more detail. There are currently a higher proportion of cases than anticipated ending with no further action. Only 22% of S47 end with an Initial Child Protection Conference. We may be a little too quick in some cases to do a S47 investigation and it is crucial that we balance resources in the future as we become more confident with our decisions.

2.9 Keith Ferrin commented that there seemed to be a disconnect between the reduction in the number of CPPs whilst LAC numbers are steadily increasing. Ms Imray explained that it will take time to see the trend coming down and that work to address this is currently waiting to come on stream.

2.10 Members commented that there were no timeframes included in the progress report. Jean suggested that a report detailing when all services are due to come on stream could be provided to Members for a future meeting.

2.11 A progress report from Coram will be delivered in the next six weeks.

2.12 Ms Imray confirmed that we remain committed to making £3.5m of savings, but that different ways of achieving this are currently being looked at. The number of LAC will be reduced by removing the financial disincentives for foster carers to take children on under a Special Guardianship Order (SGO).

2.13 Les Christie raised concern that the summary of the Progress Report included the line that 'in some districts good practice is common place'. Ms Imray stressed that Kent is still in an Improvement Notice following the Ofsted 2010 inspection which rated safeguarding as inadequate. The Deep Dives did show inconsistencies across the county and there is lots more work to do to bring practice up to the high standard expected. We are still looking at a 3-5 year journey for going from inadequate to good/outstanding.

2.14 Members commented that annual trends were not evident from the data presented. Ms Imray pointed Members in the direction of the Scorecard and Performance Reports for more detailed information, but offered to present the Progress Report in a different format in future if this would be more helpful to Members.

3. Ofsted Adoption Inspection Report

3.1 Ms Imray gave a brief history to the adoption performance concerns in Kent. Martin Narey was appointed before the Ofsted inspections took place, the first of which was in November 2011 against the older inspection framework. Ofsted were then made aware of Martin Narey's report and re-inspected Kent under a different framework which will be implemented across the country from 1 April 2012 which looks at a wider picture and is more about the 'journey of the child'. Kent was deemed inadequate in organisation (the number of children who have waited longer than 12 months to be placed with adoptive parents),

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which is a limiting judgement and therefore we were judged as inadequate overall.

3.2 Martin Narey had recommended that Kent commission an external organisation in to manage the Adoption Service. Coram took over management of the service in January 2012 and their Project Manager joined us in February to lead on the service action plan. Coram are currently providing the Adoption Senior Management Team for 2 years with an option to extend.

3.3 Concerns were raised that when Coram leave they may take their staff with them and do we therefore have adequate provision for 'knowledge transfer'. The County Adoption Manager currently seconded to Coram is a member of Kent staff and there is a commitment regarding staffing built into the contract with Coram. Ms Imray emphasised that Martin Narey's report highlighted that we needed to do something very quickly and that it was vital that we bring in expertise from outside Kent to work with the staff we have to turn the service around. Coram had an outstanding track record and are currently working with 10 other local authorities on adoption services.

3.4 Trudy Dean stated that she had previously asked for the current adoption figures. These were reported to the last meeting of CPP and were quoted as 95 children currently waiting for adoption and 81 available adoptive families.

3.5 Ms Imray confirmed that we are currently drafting a complaint to Ofsted, not to argue the judgement, but to question the unusual process taken. Trudy Dean requested to see the evidence that Ofsted would have seen in order that she may arrive at her own view as to whether the judgement was fair or not. Ms Imray promised to make enquiries with Ofsted for this information.

3.6 Members commented that the performance data for districts makes little mention of adoption. Adoption is a county wide service, although children do of course sit within the individual districts. There is a variation in performance across the district teams.

3.7 Ann Allen reported that better management, supervision and a cultural shift are already evident in the last two months as seen at the recent adoption panel meetings.

4. Recruitment report

4.1 We have not yet met the target of no more than 10% of staff being recruited from outside the authority (agency staff) although we have come very close to this figure. Figures do show that we are slightly "over establishment" because of the number of agency staff, but we have not met the vacancy rate target for FTE permanent staff. The restructure should address caseloads going up when agency staff leave and shifting of roles within the districts might be required.

4.2 The cost of recruitment campaigns have been reduced through the use of on-line advertising.

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4.3 We will be looking at reviewing market premiums again. Members suggested that information on gender applying could be looked at. Differences in conditions of service with other local authorities, e.g. maternity pay could also be looked into in more detail.

4.4 There has been disappointment with the number of people we have been able to appoint from those applying. Work is currently being undertaken on the recruitment micro-site and we are looking at recruitment and retention, induction and our strategy going forward, including can we district focus this.

4.5 A Google campaign for experienced Social Workers was begun in February and this will be continuing for Social Workers in March. The thresholds have also been changed for experienced Social Workers from 2 years to 18 months post qualifying experience. Applications from those who hadn't previously met the criteria are therefore now being revisited.

4.6 Karen Ray confirmed that if someone expressed a wish to work in a particular district, we would always shuffle agency staff around to accommodate.

4.7 Peter Lake asked if the Recruitment team are going about things in the right way, or whether they should consider some outside help like adoption and fostering have. Karen confirmed that the Recruitment team does include officers from the Communications team.

4.8 Karen Ray spoke about the relationship with Kent Top Temps (KTT) and the exercise currently being undertaken to establish a consistency of rates. KTT use staff from a number of different agencies and we need to address how they manage the contract with Children's Services, which is not necessarily currently working to our advantage. A new framework for procurement of staff will be effective from 1 April and this will have prices laid out clearly. Quality Assurance checks are identifying staff that have been deemed as not performing in one district being employed in other district teams. Jenny Whittle requested an urgent meeting with KTT .

4.9 Headhunting will soon begin for Senior Practitioners for the Central Referral Unit.

5. Quality of Practice Audit Report

5.1 Ms Imray confirmed that since workshops have been introduced there has been a reduction in cases audited. This process involves a number of people from Principal Social Worker through to Director, although it is not the only way we are auditing cases. An improvement is being seen in some areas and it has identified ongoing weaknesses in supervision.

5.2 Ms Imray commented that this is still a work in progress to ensure judgements are consistently applied and that we are using feedback in the way it is intended. The system is not currently working in the way that we would have hoped but we are not yet at the point of abandonment.

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5.3 Ms Imray agreed that the presentation of information to Members was not entirely helpful and that she would get this rewritten in a way that could be better understood. The information currently presented was that used during the “Deep Dives” exercise with District Managers and therefore it may be too much information for this audience.

6. Data Reports

6.1 Maureen Robinson confirmed that the Scorecard is currently still in development and this is only the second month it has been produced. More measures are to be incorporated around how well we are doing and the data measures will become more useful and accurate as the data is managed more effectively. Some of the banding is also to be looked at again when setting the targets for next year.

6.2 Ms Imray highlighted that it is important that we continue to make a distinction between asylum children, where numbers are somewhat out of our control. Separating out asylum children does make a difference for example when looking at the number of LAC per 10,000.

6.3 Mr Christie asked if a red RAG rating was indicative of poorer performance, for example high numbers of red ratings in Maidstone and Gravesham. Mrs Robinson confirmed that we are addressing this with these districts and that detailed action plans are in place. Ms Imray highlighted that it is important to also look at the quality of work underneath the figures as they only really demonstrate whether or not timeframes are being met. Agreed that we may need to look again at the detail of reports appropriate for this meeting.

7. Any Other Business

7.1 Nothing to discuss.

Dates of future meetings

Agenda Setting*	Time	Meeting	Time	Venue
12 April	4 pm	26 April 2011	12.30	Waterton Lee
3 May	11 am	17 May	4 pm	Swale 3
7 June	4 pm	22 June	9 am	Medway
6 July	3.30 pm	13 July	3 pm	Swale 3
27 July	10 am	25 August	11 am	Swale 3
31 August	2 pm	20 September	2 pm	Medway
12 October	10.30am	24 October	2.30 pm	Cabinet Room
15 November	11am	7 December	3pm	Cabinet Room
4 January 2012	3pm	17 January 2012	2pm	Cabinet Room
14 February	10am	7 March	3pm	3 rd Floor, Brenchley Hse
19 March	3:30pm	11 April	3pm	Cabinet Room