

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee for Children's Services held at County Hall, Lewes, on 19 September 2007.

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| PRESENT | Councillor Elkin (Chairman) Councillors Dowling, Field, (Vice-Chairman), Kramer, Ost, St Pierre, Whetstone and Waite Tony Campbell (RC Diocese) Sarah Maynard (Parent Governor) Sam Gregory (Parent Governor) Rhiannon Barker (Health representative) Councillor Paul Silverson (District and Borough representative) Mrs Carole Shaves MBE (Police Authority representative) |
| Chief Officer | Matt Dunkley, Director of Children's Services |
| Legal Adviser | Jonathan Ruddock-West, Assistant Director of Law |
| Scrutiny Lead Officer | Gillian Mauger |
| Also present | Caryl Sequeira, Complaints Manager - Children's Services Jean Haigh, Head of SEN and Disability Fiona Johnson, Head of Children's Safeguards Annie Petch, Democratic Services Officer |

16. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

16.1 RESOLVED – to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the last Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 20 June 2007.

16.2 The Chairman welcomed Rhiannon Barker as a new member to the Scrutiny Committee.

16.3 Under this item those members of the Committee who had recently been on visits to Children's Centres and Special Educational Needs schools in July fed back their comments. Members were impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of all the staff that they had met on the visits and found the environment at the Children's Centres and schools to be safe and welcoming.

16.4 The Committee was advised that the Scrutiny Review Board had decided to focus its review on alcohol misuse amongst children and young people. The Review Board was currently establishing a precise focus for the review. It recognised that this was a wide-ranging topic and it was therefore important to ensure that the focus was clear and that it looked at a particular area around which it could make a difference.

17. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

17.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Gadd and Mr Jeremy Taylor.

18. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

18.1 Councillor Silverson declared a personal interest in item 7 in that he is a Governor at New Horizons School, St Leonards on Sea.

18.2 Councillor St Pierre declared a personal interest in item 7 in that she is a Governor at Ringmer College.

19. REPORTS

19.1 Copies of the reports referred to below are included in the minute book.

20. RECONCILING POLICY AND RESOURCES

20.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Law and Personnel. The report provided detailed planning for 2008/09 and beyond as outlined in the State of the County report.

20.2 The Director of Children's Services introduced the item, providing a broad picture of the Reconciling Policy and Resources process. He reminded members that the Children's Services department employed approximately 13,000 people, ran approximately 190 schools in East Sussex; and had a responsibility for approximately 120,000 children between the ages of infancy and 19 years old.

20.3 The department received two distinct types of funding. Firstly the schools grant, which the department give directly to the schools in line with a set funding formula. School funding was relatively healthy at present, although school numbers were beginning to decline, which would affect the amount of money that schools received in future years. The rest of the funding came directly to the Children's Services Authority (CSA) through direct grants from Government and from Council Tax. This area was where the CSA had most control and discretion. This will be the 2nd year in the 3 year cash limited budget. The amount of the pot is fixed and decisions need to be made as to how to divide this up. It will be necessary to make efficiencies in some areas there are additional pressures where demands for services have gone up e.g number of children on the child protection register has increased. In other areas, inflation is greater than the uplift received for budget.

20.4 The Director welcomed scrutiny input into the Reconciling Policy and Resources process. There were currently 18 policy steers and it would be preferable to consolidate and simplify the list. Suggestions from the Committee at this meeting around how this could be done would be fed back to Lead Members to help in this process. The December Board meeting would then allow members to consider and comment on priority areas for spending.

20.5 The Committee agreed that a radical overview of the policy steers was needed and that the list of policy steers should be reduced. During the discussions members made the following observations:

- policy steers should only be included if there was capacity to ensure that they could be sufficiently delivered;
- the language used in the policy steers was not always clear and straightforward. If the department wanted the policy steers to be read and understood by the general public then the language needed to be clearer and any jargon should be removed;
- as delivery of services was now based around the 5 outcomes for children, as outlined in the Children's Act, so the policy steers should reflect this focus.

20.6 The Committee also questioned whether Equalities and Diversity needed to be included in the policy steers as they affect the whole council rather than just Children's Services.

20.7 The Director confirmed that they are working with CfBT to pilot a scheme for gifted and talented children, the scheme included events held out of schools hours. Also the Council was exploring the possibility of support from a private benefactor.

20.8 Funding for 6th form colleges was about to change as the new Education Bill proposed to take funding away from the Learning and Skills Council and give it back to local authorities. This would mean Children Services would take on the role of commissioner for Further Education colleges and there could also be an opportunity to influence their curriculum.

20.9 When questioned about input from parents, the Director confirmed that through the various planning mechanisms (including Children's and Young People Plan) parents, children and young people were involved. He agreed that the process could be clearer to explain how information flows from the Children's and Young Peoples Plan to the Children's Trust and into the Council Plan.

20.10 RESOLVED to (1) request that the policy steers be grouped under the 5 outcomes for children as listed in the Children's Act;

(2) request that the language used be simplified and the use of jargon limited;

(3) note the architecture for the Reconciling Policy and Resources process this year,

(4) establish a scrutiny Board to meet on 17 December at 10am, to consider the proposed portfolio plan. The Board will act on behalf of the committee with regard to future input into the Reconciling Policy and Resources process this year.

21. CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE ANNUAL REPORT

21.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services reporting on the functioning and effectiveness of the Complaints Procedure.

21.2 The Complaints Manager explained that four key changes had impacted on procedure this year: the introduction of new regulations in relation to complaints; extension of the complaints service across the whole of Children's Services, reconfiguration of social care teams; and the introduction of a new database. The Council only has a statutory responsibility to report social care complaints, but complaints about other aspects of Children's Services (with the exception of schools) were also being reported. The framework within which all complaints, compliments and comments could be reported was inconsistent at present, whilst the social care infrastructure was being introduced to the rest of Children's Services. Future reporting should more accurately reflect activity in this area across the whole of the department. The Committee were informed that the complaints statistics did not include complaints to schools.

21.3 The Committee agreed that the language being used when dealing with complainants should be tailored to suit the individual and their needs.

21.4 Members sought clarification over the difference between staff conduct and inappropriate conduct complaints and were advised of the definition of both and how they were categorised.

21.5 Members asked how staff ensured young people understood the complaints process. The Complaints Manager explained that social workers were initially responsible for explaining the procedure to them. Children who are looked after receive a letter from the Complaints Manager at the time of their Looked after Children reviews. Reviewing Officers are also aware of the procedure, as is Xpress Advocacy and so they are able to advise young people also. Information fact sheets are also available. When a complaint from a young person was received by the Complaints Manager it was acknowledged by phone and they were offered the

support of an advocate. Young people had been involved in reviewing information provided to them about complaints, comments and compliments and this has resulted in the development of a dvd, a booklet and a pocket-sized information card, which are being produced and should be available later this Autumn.

21.6 Members raised the issue of the general public contacting them with complaints because they can often be frightened to contact the Council directly. The Committee required clarity around how they should deal with them and how these are then processed and monitored. The Committee requested a short briefing for all Members on the correct procedure for them to report and deal with a comment, compliment or complaint.

21.7 It was suggested that consideration be given in the future to evaluating how well people understand the complaints process as a tool for helping further develop it.

21.8 RESOLVED – to (1) request a briefing for members on the correct procedures for them to report and deal with a comment, compliment or complaint.

(2) request that appropriate language be used in all communication with general public around complaints and that more consideration be given to tailoring information to individual client needs;

(3) congratulate all staff on the increase in the number of compliments received and the Complaints Manager for her enthusiasm, particularly as it is a difficult role ; and

(4) request that the section on compliments be expanded to include quotes in the next annual report.

22. AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER POLICY AND STRATEGY

22.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services which included the draft Autistic Spectrum Disorder policy and strategy documents.

22.2 The Committee was advised that since the report had been published, it had been agreed that the Children's Trust Executive Group would consider the policy ahead of it being presented to the Lead Member.

22.3 In response to questions from the committee members were advised that:

- The policy and strategy had been developed to ensure that there was a common framework for all people involved.
- The increase in young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder at secondary school was due to better identification of Autistic Spectrum Disorder at the primary school stage and these children then moving through the school system.
- The Assessment process could always be improved but the department was confident that recognition of Autistic Spectrum Disorder had already substantially improved.
- The increase in the number of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in the County was in line with the national average.
- The increase in the number of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder was believed to be partly due to better survival rates for children with complex needs, and parents having children later on in life.
- All East Sussex learning difficulties special schools had recently been re-designated to make explicit their capacity to support children with autism.
- A training programme was open to all school staff, social care staff and parents; however information for parents prior to diagnosis could be improved.

- It is possible for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder to be in the same class group as children who are 'fragile'. However special schools make every effort to ensure no child is put at risk and if necessary children are placed in different class groups that best suits their need.

22.4 The Committee requested that the strategy be published to all members and that any subsequent action plan be brought to a future scrutiny meeting for consideration.

22.5 RESOLVED – to request that the action plan being developed to support the strategy, be brought to a future scrutiny committee meeting for consideration.

23. SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN – LOCAL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD

23.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services advising members of the inter-agency arrangements in place to safeguard children in East Sussex.

23.2 The Committee expressed concern over their lack of involvement in monitoring the work carried out by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. The Director of Children's Services offered to meet with the Leaders of all three parties, the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee, a co-opted representative and senior officers to agree a way forward.

23.3 When questioned the Head of Children's Safeguards and Quality Assurance advised the Committee that:

- All LSCB partners carried out an annual audit and review of their services against the standards laid down in the Children Act. They had received a good return which will result in a lot of evaluation and review work. This had been useful for the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and organisations.
- A child safety sub-group had been established which was reviewing arrangements for child safety in the community. A full report is due to be published later year.
- The Banardos report on a review of inter-agency systems regarding young people at risk was due to be published in November following the presentation of the finds at a conference.
- The LCSB covered all aspects of Children's Services and therefore included the Youth Development Service. They were interested in working with the Voluntary sector and where contractual arrangements are in place the voluntary organisations have the same legal responsibilities as the statutory agencies.
- The two hospitals mentioned in the report (Eastbourne DGH and Conquest) were the only two hospitals used by Children's Services when a forensic medical examination was required.

23.4 The Head of Children's Safeguards and Quality Assurance suggested ways in which the Committee could become more involved in the monitoring of the LSCB work:

- The outcomes from the audit and review of services by LSCB partners could be looked at by the Committee on an annual basis.
- The Local Authority Designated Officer who worked to ensure that safe recruitment systems were in place could provide an update on this work
- Child Safety sub-group findings could be brought to the Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

23.5 The Committee was concerned that the department would not have the resources to review and investigate all child deaths in the county. The Head of Children's Safeguards confirmed that this was one of eight pilots in the country and was still in its infancy. Resources

were not proving a problem at present as some deaths which were deemed to be straightforward would not be looked at in great detail however the issue of resources would be examined closely within the pilot process and findings reported to national government. Much of the work involved was in enabling inter-agency communication about work already done rather than undertaking new work.

23.6 The Head of Children's Safeguards advised that the Government might provide funds to resource the work and lobbying is taking place to request it. A conference to assess the pilot will be held in approximately 18 months and this would be timely for members to consider the findings of the pilot.

23.7 The 'Children Are Unbeatable' campaign was highlighted and the Committee questioned whether the work being done by the campaign was supported by the LCSB. The Head of Children's Safeguards advised the matter had been debated in the past and it was agreed it was a difficult area as some elements were seen to be political. She confirmed the matter would be discussed with the Chair of the Safeguarding Board.

23.3 RESOLVED – to (1) request the Local Safeguarding Children Board consider working with 'Children are unbeatable' campaign

(2) arrange for representatives to meet with the Director of Children's Services and senior officers to develop a clearer monitoring role for the Committee in relation to the work done by the Local Safeguarding Children Board; and

(3) add wording in the report under the section entitled 'health data for year ending 31 March 2007' to ensure it is clear that the hospitals listed are the only two hospitals used for Children's special forensic medical examinations.

24. SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN – MEMBER AND SENIOR MANAGEMENT OVERSIGHT OF SERVICES

24.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services advising members of the findings of the monitoring systems in place for senior managers and Lead Member to ensure that services to safeguard children are properly co-ordinated and managed effectively.

24.2 The Committee expressed concern that 'concerns about feedback given to referrers and other agencies' was still listed as an area for development. The Head of Children's Safeguards advised it was often a case of officers forgetting to feed back to people what they had done, but the Department had now introduced electronic systems which should ensure this happens in future.

24.2 RESOLVED – to note the findings of the report.

25. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2007 WORK PROGRAMME

25.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Law and Personnel.

25.2 The Committee agreed to discuss and further develop the work programme at their away day on 15 October. The Committee was keen to develop the meeting agendas so that they had fewer reports for consideration and comments.

25.3 RESOLVED – to note the work programme.

26. FORWARD PLAN

26.1 The Committee considered the Forward Plan for the period 19 September 2007 to 11 March 2008.

26.2 RESOLVED – to note the Forward Plan without comment.

The Chairman declared the meeting closed at 1.20pm