

## **CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL**

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**  
held on Tuesday, 14th February, 2012 at Committee Suite 1,2 & 3,  
Westfields, Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

### **PRESENT**

Councillor A Kolker (Chairman)  
Councillor K Edwards (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors L Brown, P Hoyland, D Mahon, D Neilson, W Livesley, G Merry,  
G Wait and B Silvester

### **Apologies**

Councillors M Sherratt, H Gaddum, John McCann and Jill Kelly

### **In Attendance**

Councillors R Bailey and D Flude

### **Officers**

Lorraine Butcher – Strategic Director for Children, Families and Adults  
Cath Knowles – Head of Service, Social Care  
Jonathan Potter – Principal Manager, Cheshire East Family Service  
Judy Bell - Group Manager, Fostering  
Rob Hyde - Organisation and Capital Strategy Manager  
Mark Grimshaw – Scrutiny Officer

### **138 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

RESOLVED – That subject to the names of John McCann and Jill Kelly being added to those in attendance that the minutes of the meeting held on 17 January be approved as a correct record.

### **139 DECLARATION OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP**

None noted.

### **140 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME/OPEN SESSION**

There were no members of the public who wished to address the Committee.

141      **CABINET RESPONSE TO FOSTERING TASK AND FINISH REVIEW**

Cath Knowles, Head of Service – Social Care, drew attention to the action plan which had been drafted in response to the recommendations in the Fostering Task and Finish Review. Touching on a few of the main issues, she continued to invite comments from the Committee.

A query was made with regards to the relationship that the Council had with the Cheshire Fostering Association (CFA). It was explained that a number of meetings had been held with the Chair of the CFA last year (2011) and that following this officers had reassured Members that a number of issues were being looked into in the hope these could be resolved. Attention was drawn to a letter that had recently been received which described how Cheshire East no longer recognised the CFA and how this had resulted in the charity ceasing operation. It was stated that this was a concern as it was well documented how important independent advice could be to foster carers.

Lorraine Butcher, Strategic Director of Children, Families and Adults explained that attempts had been made to broker an agreeable way forward, to the extent of the Lord Lieutenant becoming involved in negotiations. Moving forward, there was a continued commitment by the Council to look for a service to provide independent advice and that this would formally go out to the market for tender. It was noted that the CFA could make a bid should they wish to do so and that this would be considered in line with the Council tender and procurement procedures. In conclusion, Cath Knowles stated that there was an independent advice service available to foster carers and that support groups had also been established (as a result of a Task Group recommendation) to much success.

With regard to point 3.32 in appendix 1, it was queried what impact the newly enacted welfare reforms and in particular expectations around shared accommodation, would have on care leavers. Cath Knowles confirmed that this was something that a 16 plus working group was looking at and the recommendations from this group would be fed into the Children's service senior management team.

Attention was drawn to point 3.31 in appendix 1. It was queried whether or not the Council was planning to proceed with the replacement of the current electronic recording system. Lorraine Butcher confirmed that the Council was going ahead with the replacement and that this would be funded by a £6 million investment from the Children and Adults Directorates. She continued to explain that as this was a complex process, it was likely that the replacement would only be fully realised in 18 months time.

A number of points were made with relation to issues that had come to light following experience of participating on the fostering panel.

- It was stated that respite foster carers often mention that they find it difficult to access a computer so that the child can use it when in their care. It was suggested that the Council look to provide such a service, perhaps making use of a charity which refurbished computers and laptops. Cath Knowles agreed that she would look into this as a possibility.

- It was asserted that transport reviews for cared for children carried out by social workers should be systematic and pro-active, ensuring that the best option for fostering independence was available. Cath Knowles assured the Committee that the relevant processes were in place but that she would take this comment away and ensure that they were being fully implemented.
- Attention was drawn to the problem that working foster carers had with accessing training. It was queried whether existing training and/or qualifications could be used in order to prevent duplication and to help save time. Judy Bell, Group Manager – Fostering, explained that existing training qualifications were not always appropriate for caring for children. Additionally, she noted that the Council were looking to expand online training to help working foster carers.

It was suggested that the Committee should receive an update report in 12 months and that this in particular should touch upon the impact of the welfare reforms on care leavers.

As a final point, a number of Councillors offered their thanks to Councillor Flude for Chairing the Review and also to the officers who gave up their time to be witnesses.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the report be received.
- b) That an update report be brought to the Committee in 12 months with a particular emphasis on the welfare reforms and their impact on care leavers.
- c) That thanks be noted for both Councillor Flude for Chairing the review and for the officers who gave up their time to provide evidence.

## 142 **THE FUTURE OF CAREERS ADVICE, TARGETED YOUTH SUPPORT AND UPDATE ON CONNEXIONS.**

Lorraine Butcher attended to present a Connexions update along with information on careers advice developments. Providing the context Lorraine Butcher explained that due to significant budget reductions and legal advice, the Council had made the decision not to extend the contract for Connexions for the further period of 2 years requested by the Company that it had once held in partnership with Warrington and Cheshire West and Chester Local Authorities. This had been ratified in November 2011 and had led to the start of complex discussions in which staff working on the Cheshire East contract would transfer back to the Council under TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings – Protection of Employment) by April 2012. Lorraine Butcher reported that a new model for youth support would offer the Council a number of benefits including the ability to provide a more targeted approach to the needs of young people while also offering better value for money.

In terms of future career advice options, Lorraine Butcher noted that the current policy context was only just becoming clear. There had been the promise of statutory guidance and that this was expected to state that there would be a

statutory duty on schools to become more accountable for the successful progression of pupils to further education, higher education and employment. In summary, whilst there was much debate and discussion ongoing, there would be an expectation on schools to pick up a universal careers offer to all students and that local authorities would continue to have a tracking and targeting approach.

There was agreement among Members that in their experience careers advice was relatively limited. Therefore the chance to reform this was welcome and that the Council should take this opportunity seriously albeit acknowledging that the statutory duties on provision resided with schools.

The point was made that schools might have lost some of their ability to provide careers advice since Connexions had taken over the service. It was queried therefore whether the Council would be providing schools with help and support to take on careers advice responsibilities. Lorraine Butcher confirmed that the Council were engaging with schools and that a service would be offered which schools could choose to buy into.

It was questioned who would be responsible for monitoring the quality and independence of careers advice. Lorraine Butcher reported that it was expected that the Council would retain a responsibility to track and monitor and that NEET and EET profiles would prove a useful tool in doing this.

Attention was drawn to a Member led group which was responsible for youth support following the Council's withdrawal from Connexions. It was suggested that this group report to the Committee in the near future.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the presentation be received.
- b) That the Member group responsible for youth support report to the Committee in the near future.

## 143 **FAMILY SUPPORT**

Jonathan Potter, Principal Manager – Cheshire East Family Service, attended to provide a report to update the Committee on the steps taken to implement the recommendations of the Family Support Services Task and Finish Review which suggested a move towards an early intervention model. He explained that whilst it was still early days regarding the introduction of an early help offer, there were signs that positive progress was being achieved. Indeed, feedback had been received from families who were reporting that their issues were being addressed earlier and that they were seeing a more joined up offer from agencies.

Having said this, Jonathan Potter also drew attention to a number of issues which needed further development. These were outlined as follows:

- 1) Securing Good Ofsted inspection outcomes for Cheshire East's Children Centres
- 2) Developing the CEFS workforce to work at an early intervention level.
- 3) Training the workforce
- 4) Building strong partnerships.

Regarding this latter point, it was commented that it would be a challenge for the service to build strong partnerships and that communication would be key for achieving this. It was suggested that the service build a relationship with a local university so that any background information or research could be collated by a research student. Jonathan Potter acknowledged that this could be beneficial and stated that he would look into it further.

Reference was made to a finding in the Task Group report which stated that family centres were not getting the relevant information quickly enough from the various agencies. It was queried whether this had improved. Cath Knowles confirmed that improved systems were now in place and that data was coming through in a much more timely fashion.

It was queried whether the Council's Children Centres carried out any outreach work. Jonathan Potter confirmed that they did and that relationships with health visitors were particularly a strength in this respect.

It was suggested that the annual Children in Need report be distributed to the Committee for information.

As a final point, it was suggested that Councillors could be informed of the Children Centres in their respective wards and that perhaps they could be invited to visit. Jonathan Potter agreed that this was a good idea and that he would contact Councillors with information on the centres on a ward basis.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the report be received.
- b) That the annual Children in Need report be distributed to the Committee.
- c) That Councillors be provided with information regarding the Children Centres aligned to their respective wards.

#### 144 **SCHOOL ADMISSIONS CODE AND ADMISSIONS APPEAL CODE 2012**

Rob Hyde, Organisation and Capital Strategy Manager, attended to present a briefing note on the changes introduced in the School Admissions Code and Admissions Appeal Code 2012. He continued to highlight the main messages from the changes:

- 1) That the 2012 Code was about simplification
- 2) The changes would alter some aspects of the nature and balance in the relationship between schools and the Local Authority
- 3) Cheshire East was currently consulting on changes to Admission arrangements and this ends 1 March.

It was queried what the Council was planning to do with the Admission Forums now that the statutory requirement for local authorities to set these up had been removed, Rob Hyde confirmed that the Admission Forums had proved a useful body and therefore the Cheshire East Admissions Forum was expected to remain in place.

It was suggested that a progress report be brought to the Committee once the consultation period finishes so that Members could be briefed on how the changes had been received in reality.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the briefing note be received.
- b) That a progress report be brought to the Committee once the consultation period had ended.

#### 145      **WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE**

Members considered the work programme. It was suggested that a report be received on the three new residential children's homes that had been established by the Council. It was also agreed that the Task Group on Care Leavers be reconvened and that the Membership of this be left to the discretion of the Chairman.

It was suggested that it would be useful for the Scrutiny Officer produce a Cabinet Member Decision Briefing as a standing item in subsequent meetings.

As an aside, it was noted that Ash Grove Primary School in Macclesfield which had once been a struggling school had recently been shown to be the second most improved school in the country and the most improved school in Cheshire and the North of England. It was agreed that congratulations be passed to the school from the Committee. Cath Knowles also drew attention to the fact that the residential home in Claremont Avenue had remained at 'Outstanding' following an Unannounced Inspection.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the work programme be noted with the following additions:
  - a. Report on the three new residential homes
  - b. Reconvened Care Leaver Task and Finish Group.
- b) That the Scrutiny Officer produce Cabinet Member Decision Briefings as a standing item in subsequent meetings.
- c) That congratulations be passed to both Ash Grove Primary School and the Residential Home at Claremont Road for their recent achievements.

#### 146      **FORWARD PLAN - EXTRACTS**

The Committee gave consideration to the extracts of the forward plan which fell within the remit of the Committee.

RESOLVED – That the forward plan be noted.

#### 147      **CONSULTATIONS FROM CABINET**

There were no consultations from Cabinet.

The meeting commenced at 1.35 pm and concluded at 4.10 pm

Councillor A Kolker (Chairman)