

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**
held on Tuesday, 13th March, 2012 at OakencloUGH Children's Centre,
Wilmslow

PRESENT

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

Councillors L Brown, P Hoyland, D Neilson, W Livesley, G Merry, M Sherratt
and B Silvester and John McCann

Apologies

Councillors H Gaddum, D Mahon and G Wait and Jill Kelly

In attendance

Councillor R Bailey

Officers

Fintan Bradley – Head of Service: Strategy, Planning and Performance
Barbara Dale - School Admissions and Organisation Manager
Mark Grimshaw – Scrutiny Officer

149 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 February 2012 be approved as a correct record.

150 DECLARATION OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

Councillor David Neilson declared a personal interest with regard to item 6 on the grounds that a letter he had written was referenced in the report.

151 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME/OPEN SESSION

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

152 SUMMARY OF ACTIONS RESULTING FROM THE ANNOUNCED INSPECTION OF CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES

Fintan Bradley, Head of Service: Strategy, Planning and Performance, attended to provide an update on the progress which had taken place across a range of service areas as a result of the Announced Inspection of Children & Family Services in June/July 2011. The published report from Ofsted had outlined a series of areas for improvement within specified timescales and these had been distilled into a specific action plan by the Children and Families senior leadership

team. Fintan Bradley noted that actions from the April 2011 Unannounced Inspection had been merged into the plan and that it was being monitored through the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) Performance Management sub group.

It was queried whether the department had been surprised with the number of actions that had emerged from the inspection. Fintan Bradley confirmed that the department had not been surprised as they were already aware of the service gaps. He stated that it was important for the department to be self aware and self critical and that it would have been more of a concern if the actions had come as a surprise. Following from this point, it was stated that considering six out of the seventeen areas required immediate attention this demonstrated that the self assessment processes must not have been robust. Fintan Bradley acknowledged that this was partly due to the flux as a result of being a new Council but continued to assert that the service would need to improve the systems around 'deep dive' self review.

It was questioned if there were any processes in place for feedback to be provided to residents/professionals who had made a referral to the Council on a child safeguarding issue. Fintan Bradley confirmed that feedback systems were in place and that the Council would always seek to offer the referrer alternative routes for dealing with the issue if it was not escalated to the Common Assessment Team.

Attention was drawn to the action which recommended that the Council 'Ensure that service users are actively and consistently engaged are able to contribute to service development'. It was noted that there were 'still issues' with this action and it was queried what these were and whether the service was confident that improvements could be made. Fintan Bradley acknowledged that the department needed to get better at listening to service users and then doing something positive with that information. Whilst this practice was going on, there were still issues of consistency. The Committee was reassured that the performance management sub group of the LSCB were looking at this issue carefully and that a report could be brought to scrutiny in three months to provide an update on progress.

It was noted that a 16 plus working group had been referenced in a number of action points. Bearing in mind that a recent Task Group had been established to look at the issue of care leavers, it was queried whether the Committee was duplicating work streams. Fintan Bradley confirmed he would seek clarification on this point.

A point was made regarding the proposal to discontinue the monitoring of the foster carer support groups. It was queried whether it would be more appropriate to maintain the monitoring in order to determine that the groups were being effective as a support mechanism. Fintan Bradley confirmed that he would take this comment back for further consideration.

As a number of the actions related to the PARIS recording system, it was queried what was being done to improve this. Fintan Bradley explained that the issue with the PARIS system was multifaceted. Firstly, as it was a system that was bought 'off the shelf'; it lacked the flexibility to fit around the needs of the service. He described that the department was currently looking to procure a new system that would be bespoke to the needs of service whilst allowing it to meet the relevant

statutory requirements. It was noted that this process of design would take some time to get right.

It was asserted that the Committee should be informed of the procurement process for the new ICT, particularly in terms of cost. In such a report, it was remarked that the Committee should also be informed on what steps were in place to ensure that the PARIS system was being supported/improved in the interim/transition period.

It was also hoped that the new software system would align itself with new Ofsted Inspection framework by linking in with the child's journey through the system. It was commented that this had been an issue in terms of recording equality and diversity issues and in particular the child's religion. This was a concern as fostering requirements desired that the child's religion be considered during placement. Fintan Bradley assured the Committee that the new electronic recording system would allow the service to accurately track the child's journey. Adding to this point, Fintan Bradley commented that the service was not waiting until the new system was available to tailor the recording system to the child's journey. Indeed, a software patch had been developed for PARIS in order to make chronologies clearer.

Reference was made to an action which moved that the Council needed to 'ensure that there was minimal need for cared for children to move placements thereby reducing the number of placement moves'. It was queried what actions were being carried out and how would they achieve the necessary outcomes. Fintan Bradley explained that he did not have this information to hand but that he would distribute it to Members by email.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the report be noted.
- b) That a report of the sub-group of the LSCB looking at the active engagement of service users be brought to a future meeting (3-4 months).
- c) That clarification be sought over whether the work of the 16 plus working group duplicated the Care Leavers Task and Finish group.
- d) That continued monitoring of foster carer support groups be considered by the service.
- e) That a report on the procurement process of the new electronic recording system be brought to a future meeting. That this report also include what steps were in place to ensure that the PARIS system continued to be supported in the interim/transition period.
- f) That information on what actions were being carried out to 'ensure that there was minimal need for cared for children to move placements thereby reducing the number of placement moves' be emailed to the Committee.

153 **DETERMINATION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY COORDINATED
SCHEME AND ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS**

Barbara Dale, School Admissions and Organisation Manager, attended to present a draft Decision Paper which outlined the outcome of the statutory consultation undertaken during the Sprint Term 2012 on the Council's proposed admission arrangements and co-ordinated admission scheme for 2013. She explained that the paper sought Cabinet approval to determine these arrangements prior to the 15 April 2012. The Committee was asked to consider the paper and offer advice to officers regarding the proposed changes and procedures implemented.

Attention was drawn to point 10.7 in the draft decision paper which described how several comments received during the consultation had requested that a number of successful schools be allowed to grow their pupil admission number (PAN) in order to meet demand and foster parental choice. Barbara explained that the Council had a responsibility to manage such requests carefully as expanding capacity could have significant knock on effects on the viability of other nearby schools.

A discussion was had as to whether this was the policy that the Council should be implementing. It was asserted that the Council should not be giving priority to keeping open schools and rather be rewarding good performing schools with more places. In response to this, a number of comments were made which argued that the Council had a responsibility to improve the standards of all schools and take a long term view of placement strategy. Indeed, it was stated that a system that responded to the preferences of a particular set of parents at a particular year could be unworkable as communities could lose their local school. It was also noted that increasing school capacity could bring with it traffic congestion issues.

The Chair asserted that a difficult policy balance needed to be sought – one which firstly addressed the issue of parental choice and secondly made sure that local communities were served by improving the standards of all schools.

It was queried whether there were any examples of children who had to travel a significant distance as they could not access a local school. Barbara Dale explained that if this happened the Council would look at school placement allocation in order to try and get all children attending a school within a 'reasonable' distance from their home. 'Reasonable' in this context might be 2 miles for a primary school child and 3 miles for a secondary school pupil, although this could not be guaranteed. In all cases, arrangements would be administered fairly for all families. She also described how the Council occasionally used some of the held back dedicated schools grant money to supplement any staffing issues arising from further admissions.

RESOLVED – That the report be received.

154 **WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE**

Members considered the work programme. It was suggested that the following items be added to the work programme:

- Strategies to improve underperforming schools

- Finance and performance reports on a quarterly basis starting from June 2012
- SEN policy

It was also suggested that a 'workshop' session could be arranged in May in order to plan the 2012/13 work programme.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the work programme be noted with the following additions:
 - a. Strategies to improve underperforming schools
 - b. Finance and performance reports on a quarterly basis starting from June 2012
 - c. SEN policy
- b) That the Scrutiny officer explore organising a 'workshop' session in May 2012.

155 **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.

The meeting commenced at 1.35 pm and concluded at 3.30 pm

Councillor A Kolker (Chairman)