

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**
held on Tuesday, 15th February, 2011 at Committee Suite 1,2 & 3,
Westfields, Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

Councillor R Westwood (Chairman)
Councillor D Neilson (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors D Flude, A Kolker, W Livesley, G Merry, M Parsons, A Ranfield,
J Wray and John McCann

Apologies

Councillors T Jackson and Jill Kelly

32 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved –

That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 December 2010 be approved as a correct record.

33 DECLARATION OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

None noted.

34 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME/OPEN SESSION

Mr. Fagan, a parent of a disabled child who had been using the Langley Unit as a facility for respite, attended to express his concern over the future of respite provision in Cheshire East and the future of the staff employed at the Langley Unit.

Mr. Fagan explained that the families with children involved in the Langley Unit had been told prior to Christmas 2010 that they would have replacement provision provided but it appeared that this promise had been reneged on. He therefore wanted reassurance that alternative provision would be provided for the families affected.

Cath Knowles responded by firstly making clear that the closure of the Langley Unit was a corporate decision due to health and safety issues rather than a social services decision as a result of budget cuts. It was agreed that it was very unfortunate that the Langley Unit had not been able to stay open long enough to provide an overlap whilst moves towards a personalisation agenda were completed. It was asserted that all efforts had been made to keep the facility open for as long as possible and that the service was putting together personal plans for the children and young people affected as an interim measure. Mr. Fagan was also reassured that the service was working closely with Human

Resources in attempt to retain the skilled staff based at the Langley Unit. It was also accepted that the service would work harder to communicate these key messages to all staff so that the information that parents receive would be consistent and clear.

RESOLVED – That an item on the future of alternative provision following the closure of the Langley Unit be placed on the agenda of the next meeting.

35 SAFEGUARDING

The Chairman opened the item by providing the background to the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee's relationship with the issue of Safeguarding since the formation of Cheshire East Council. It was noted that in the early days of the Council the Committee had been keen to ensure that Cheshire East were 'Laming Compliant', particularly in light of a number of high profile child protection cases that had been prominent in the media. With this in mind a number of Senior Officers had attended a meeting in which it was admitted that the systems inherited by Cheshire East had a number of shortcomings. Following from this, it was explained that consultants had been appointed to identify the gaps and make recommendations on improvements.

After seeing these reports, some of which were concerning, Members of the Committee agreed to take a hands off approach to making the requisite improvements whilst officers proceeded, with it always in mind that the Committee would revisit the topic once the newly designed systems had settled. As an aside, it was noted that a steering group had been established comprising of the Portfolio Holder, Scrutiny Chairman and Cabinet Support Member for Children's services which maintained a level of Member involvement.

Cath Knowles built on the Chairman's points by explaining that the report offered a timely opportunity to brief Members on the future of Safeguarding as the direction of travel had now become clear.

Prior to engaging with the main points of the report, it was made clear that all aspects of the new safeguarding approach had been based on independent, evidence based reviews, not on anecdotal information.

Reporting on the first major change in the new approach it was reported that there had previously been one team to which every child was allocated, regardless of need. This had meant that social workers were forced to juggle competing priorities. It was explained that with the redesign, there were now more bespoke teams, for instance those solely responsible for disabled or cared for children. This had helped to organise work streams and focus work on the child's needs.

Furthermore, attention was drawn to the newly formed Children's Assessment team which had replaced the Access team. It was explained how the establishment of this team had meant that assessments were now being done in a more timely way and that signposting had improved greatly. This had helped make the child's journey more seamless and improved continuity.

Cath Knowles continued to report that although these new systems had only been in place for a short amount of time, Cheshire East had already begun to see the benefit. For instance, it was noted that Cheshire East had received positive

reports in a number of areas and it was explained that the safeguarding aspect was vital in achieving a good review. Additionally, the supervision toolkit that Cheshire East had developed was getting a lot of interest from other authorities as an example of best practice.

In responding to the report, the Committee as a whole noted the considerable progress had been made and wished to congratulate the service on the results they had achieved.

A query was made by John McCann regarding referral training and whether this had yet to start. It was noted that there was referral training in place with the focus of this being to give staff the confidence to manage risk rather than constantly making referrals.

A question was asked about the precise role of a 'practice consultant'. It was explained that this position was based around the 'Hackney Model' in which it was deemed important to enable social workers when they became managers of their unit to continue to practice – facilitating a link between strategy and practice.

A query was raised over whether the service was still recruiting social workers. It was confirmed that the service was still recruiting and this was with the aim of reducing the caseload of social workers to 15-20 rather than the current situation of 20-25.

As a final point, the Chairman drew attention to the virtual school and commented that this appeared to be an interesting idea that the Committee would benefit from hearing more about. It was suggested therefore that the Virtual Head attend a subsequent meeting of the Committee.

With reference to the action plan, provided as an appendix, the Committee wished to note that they were pleased with the clarity of the plan.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the Committee note the report and the improvements that have been put in place within Children's Services as part of the ongoing overall improvement plan with the aim to ensure Cheshire East children and young people remain safe and have opportunities to achieve.
- b) That the Committee note the improvements made within the Unannounced Inspection Action Plan.
- c) That the Virtual Head attend a subsequent meeting to brief the Committee on his role.

36 CORPORATE PARENTING STRATEGY

At a mid-point meeting of the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee held on 20 January 2011, Julie Lewis attended to brief Members on the newly devised corporate parenting strategy. Within this brief a number of aspects such as the 'pledge', the 'principles' and the measures of success had been outlined.

Since that point, it was reported that the draft version of the strategy had been circulated to all officers as a consultation document and that it was due to be presented to corporate management team on 21 February 2011.

Considering the importance of the strategy, Members wished to have an opportunity to ask any further questions that they had after having more time to review its content.

Firstly, Councillor Flude questioned how the service intended to make sure that 'the pledge' would be published in an appropriate manner so that children and young people could understand it. It was confirmed that work was being carried out with Barnardos to structure the pledge so that it was clear for all audiences and that this would then be distributed to all children when they enter care.

Secondly, Councillor Neilson when reviewing 'the principles' had noticed that there was no mention of cared for children having a right to appropriate equipment, something that had been earmarked in the review of Residential Provision. Additionally, it was noted that there was no mention of kinship carers within the strategy. It was asserted that these issues would be looked at.

Thirdly, Councillor Kolker suggested that within the 'local indicators for Cheshire East' section, there could possibly be an indicator which measured the number of disruptions in fostering and adoption placements. Again, it was said that this was something that would be considered when drafting the final strategy.

Finally, a point was made from the Chairman regarding education and cared for children. In his mind, this was the most important aspect for improving the life chances of children in care and that it was vital that when placements are made, this should be considered. It was reported that the new structure outlined in the safeguarding report would greatly improve this.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the Committee endorse the strategy at this juncture and look forward to reviewing the final version at a subsequent meeting.
- b) That the following issues be considered in the drafting of the final version:
 - The 'right to appropriate equipment' be added to 'the principles'
 - The role of kinship carers be considered as part of the strategy.
 - An indicator regarding disruption of foster and adoption placements be included within the 'local indicators for Cheshire East' section.

37 COUNCILLOR ENGAGEMENT INTO SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEMS

With reference to the earlier item regarding 'Safeguarding', it had been suggested that as the new structures and systems had been formulated, it would appropriate in the new civic year for Members to engage themselves in these systems to monitor their efficacy. In particular, Members had expressed a desire and interest

in observing the Social Care Services to enable them to gain even more understanding and insight into the child's journey through the statutory process.

Cath Knowles outlined how such a process could be managed:

- A strategy discussion in respect of s47
- A legal gate keeping meeting where there is a potential for children to be placed in care.
- Shadowing/observing staff in the new Children's Assessment Team
- Observing an Initial Child Protection Case Conference
- Observing a Core Group Meeting
- Shadowing/observing staff in the Child in Need/Child Protection Team
- Shadowing/observing staff in the Safeguarding Unit.
- Observing the LSCB in action, including an opportunity to meet the Chair
- Opportunity to follow a child's journey through the various stages of the statutory process.

Furthermore, it was explained how at any given time during this observation Members would have an opportunity to ask further questions/challenge processes through an agreed protocol, which would ultimately assist Members in gaining an overall sense of the experience of how statutory intervention was managed.

RESOLVED – That the Committee favour the approach outlined and in the new civic year would take up the proposal.

38 WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Committee considered the items in the 2011 Work Programme.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the Work Programme be received and noted
- b) That the following be added as items to consider:
 - A report on the short (interim), medium and long term options for alternative provision following the closure of the Langley Unit.
 - The possibility of a Task and Finish Review of the Adoption Service
 - The attendance of the Virtual Head to explain the role and remit of his team.

39 FORWARD PLAN - EXTRACTS

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

RESOLVED –

- a) That the forward plan be noted
- b) That the items regarding 'Whole System Commissioning' and 'Learning outside the Classroom' be considered at a later date following the Cabinet decision.
- c) That the item regarding 'Determination of Admission Arrangements for September 2012 and subsequent years' be considered at the mid point meeting due to be held on 15 March 2011.

40 CONSULTATIONS FROM CABINET

There were no consultation from Cabinet.

The meeting commenced at 10.35 am and concluded at 12.40 pm

Councillor R Westwood (Chairman)