

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**
held on Tuesday, 12th April, 2011 at Committee Suite 1,2 & 3, Westfields,
Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

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

Councillors A Barratt, D Flude, J Goddard, A Kolker, W Livesley, G Merry,
A Ranfield, M J Simon, J Wray and John McCann, Ray Woolgar

Apologies

Councillors T Jackson and M Parsons and Jill Kelly
Councillor Hilda Gaddum

In attendance

Councillor R Bailey

Officers

Andrew Wade	Complaints Manager
Debbie Watson	Lead for Children's Centres
Cath Knowles	Head of Safeguarding
Fintan Bradley	Head of Strategy, Planning & Performance
Mark Grimshaw	Scrutiny Officer

42 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

43 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved –

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 February 2011 be approved as a correct record.

44 DECLARATION OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

Ray Woolgar declared a personal interest on the grounds that he was a Governor at Springfield School.

45 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME/OPEN SESSION

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

46 CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES

Andrew Wade, Complaints Manager, attended to provide a report which summarised the information regarding the compliments and complaints received between April 2009 and January 2011 and which outlined the proposals for improving the related processes and procedures.

It was explained that there was a long established compliments and complaints procedure at Cheshire East, much of which was inherited from previous authorities. Attention was drawn to the possibility that as the public were increasingly using the internet to submit compliments and complaints; it was very likely that the volume of these would go up considerably. With this in mind, it was explained that there was a need to review how compliments and complaints were managed. Indeed, it was noted that research had indicated that high performing organisations value and encourage feedback from their customers/service users. Therefore, it was vital for Cheshire East to ensure that its processes and procedures were as good as they could be.

Andrew Wade continued to highlight and outline the main areas for development that had been identified by the service. Firstly, it was explained that work was being done to try and get more young people contributing compliments and complaints. It was noted that the service were liaising with Barnardos in their role as advocates for young people in an attempt to improve this.

Furthermore, it was reported that attempts were being made to improve how stage 1 complaints were being managed. In particular, attention was drawn to the way that the service was putting more emphasis on mediation so that any issues that arose would be dealt with prior to reaching the complaints stage.

After considering the report in detail, the Chairman made the comment that as this was an important service and something that was subject to Ofsted inspections, it was very pleasing to see the work that was going on.

In opening the questions, a query was raised over graph 1 in appendix 1 which illustrated that the number of complaints in Macclesfield was higher than in other areas. It was questioned whether this was solely due to the recent closure of the Langley Unit or whether there were other reasons behind this. It was confirmed that the closure of the Langley Unit could have had an impact on the figures but it was explained that just because the figures were high this did not necessarily have negative connotations. Indeed, it could be indicative that the complaints procedure was working well in those areas. Conversely, it was explained that there could be cause to investigate those areas which had a low complaints figure.

A comment was made in reference to the top of page 4 of the report. It was suggested that the phrase 'successful in diverting complainants away' could be adjusted to 'successful in resolving complainants' issues'.

Attention was drawn to the way that the current database did not correlate with the structures being put in place. It was confirmed that this was being rectified as soon as was possible and that the resource was still available for making the requisite change.

As a final remark, Cath Knowles noted that it was often difficult to get social workers to flag up the compliments that they often got for their work. With this in mind, it was explained that the number of compliments would possibly outnumber the number of complaints. Andrew Wade agreed with this and reaffirmed the point that receiving compliments was just as important as complaints for shaping future policy.

RESOLVED – That the following recommendations be agreed:

- Training for all workers across Children's social care in handling complaints
- Training for Consultant Practitioners on Stage 1 investigations
- Training for Group Managers around undertaking stage 2 investigations
- Development of complaints information for young people
- Updating of the complaints database so it reflects the current structure and requirements.
- Recruitment and training of volunteers to sit on stage 3 panels.

47 REVIEW OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Following the mid-point meeting held on 15 March 2011, Members requested that the report on Home to School Transport be brought back to the Committee so that further and more detailed questions could be asked.

As the report had already been reviewed and explained, Fintan Bradley suggested that it might be more germane if the Committee received the presentation that had been given at the consultation events.

In going through the presentation, the context behind the changes to the home to school transport charges was explained. It was reported that whilst Cheshire East wanted to provide as good a service as it possibly could, the financial pressures that all local authorities were facing meant that money had to be saved and therefore changes were necessary.

It was explained that making the changes required would have an impact on a number of parties. Most affected would be those using transport to attend denominational schools and those in post 16 education (including students with SEN).

It was stressed that the Portfolio Holder was taking any change to the current policy very seriously and as a result had ensured that a comprehensive consultation process had been put in place. It was reported that consultations had begun through four sessions which 72 people had attended and through an online survey which to date had 333 completed surveys. It was also noted that the respective website had also received 1200 hits and that the service had received a large number of written letters and emails.

In providing a summary of the consultation responses so far, it was explained that whilst most people understood the reasons behind the proposed changes, many did not agree with them. Much of the opposition was coming from those involved in faith schools or from those parents with children with disabilities. There were

also concerns expressed from parents in rural areas and those who had children in schools a considerable distance apart. All of these groups had highlighted that the proposed changes would place an additional financial burden on them and that this would reduce the choice of schools available to them. Attention was also drawn to those in post 16 education who were also losing the Education Maintenance Allowance. It was noted that this group, and in particular those with SEN would be seriously affected.

Prior to opening the session up to questions, the Chairman noted that whilst this was an opportunity for people to offer their opinions for consideration as part of the consultation process, Members would also be able to offer their opinions as individuals in line with the mainstream consultation methods. It was also suggested that the respective officers could produce a report on the consultation results to bring to the next meeting of the Committee. It was noted that by doing this Members would be able to offer their views on the proposed changes from a more informed position.

A number of general concerns were expressed over the proposed changes. There was a particular worry about reducing the choice that parents and young people had in their selection of educational settings. It was also noted that a 20% in charges was a considerable amount of money and that this would be a significant burden to families, especially with more than one child.

A question was asked regarding what would happen to those children and young people who needed to go to a specialist school that was outside of the mileage range. It was confirmed that provision would still be available in such a case.

It was queried whether due thought had been given to those young people who attend post 16 education courses in Macclesfield but live in Congleton. It was reported that the service were aware of this issue and that it was being considered in the consultation process.

Reassurances were sought that parent's paying for post 16 transport would not be subsidising transport for under 16's. It was confirmed that this point would be considered and included in the report due to come to the next Committee.

Attention was drawn to the amount of pressure that the consultation process was putting on officer resources. It was also noted that the proposed changes could have a knock on effect of increasing the number of school appeals, putting extra pressure on officers and their time. It was suggested that this should be considered as part of the consultation process.

It was queried whether the impact on road congestion and the green agenda that the proposed changes could result in had been considered. It was confirmed that this had been considered and was forming a part of the consultation process.

In bringing the item to a close, the Chairman highlighted that there would be a number of unintended consequences as a result of the proposed changes, many of which had been noted in the 'risk awareness' section of the report. It was hoped that the officer would take the Committee's comments into consideration as part of the consultation process. Furthermore, it was stated that the Committee would need to take a firm line when scrutinising the consultation results at the next meeting as this is a topic of considerable importance.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the Committee note the contents of the report
- b) That the Committee defer the recommendation to endorse, subject to any proposed changes to the policies being approved, that the Starting School and Transferring to Secondary School booklets be updated.
- c) That the Committee support the need to review the efficiency of the current home to school transport appeals process, due to be undertaken prior to any future policy changes taking effect.
- d) That the Committee endorse that a separate review of transport arrangements for cared for children in foster placements travelling to/from school be undertaken.
- e) That the Committee receive the full results from the consultation at the next meeting on 31 May 2011 to make further comment.

48 CHILDREN'S CENTRE PROGRAMME RE-SHAPING

Debbie Watson attended to present a report on the Children's Centre Programme Re-shaping. It was explained that the government wanted the network of children's centres to be retained but focused much more effectively on those families who need them most. Within this context, it was reported that the children's centre programme in Cheshire East had been reviewed to ensure that it was best placed to respond to the opportunities and challenges ahead.

It was explained that as part of the re-shaping, the service had ran a consultation process throughout February and March. Within this, it was explained that the programme of 19 centres would be re-shaped and some children's centre footprints merged resulting in a reduction of 'designated' centres to 13. It was made clear that any merging of the centres would not result in any change or reduction to services and that children and families would continue to have access to needs led services from the same venues that they currently used. Indeed, it was noted that these changes were not driven by savings but by the need for more effective management.

It was reported that following the consultation process there had been no objections to the proposed re-shaping.

After considering the report, it was suggested that the Committee reconsider the item in 6 months time to assess the efficacy of the re-shaping.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the contents of the report be noted
- b) That the item be placed on the work programme for review in 6 months time.

49 FOSTERING SERVICES TASK AND FINISH REVIEW

The Committee received the final report of the Task and Finish Group who conducted a Scrutiny Review of the Fostering Service. Councillor Flude, as Chairman of the group explained the main thrust behind the recommendations.

It was reported that throughout the review it had become clear that Cheshire East had some excellent staff working in the Fostering & Adoption Services and that the new systems being put in place would reap some notable benefits in the future. Having said this, the Group did identify some gaps after an extensive research process, particularly after benchmarking against other well performing authorities and it was hoped that the service could take the relevant recommendations on board to supplement the good work already going on.

Attention was also drawn to the fact that the Group had carried out the review in a very short time scale. Considering the complexity of the topic, it was impossible to cover all the issues in a sufficient amount of detail. With this in mind, the Group had made a number of recommendations for other Task and Finish reviews to 'branch off' from this review in the future.

In considering the report, a number of amendments were suggested for the recommendations.

- Recommendation 11.1 – that 'Fostering & Adoption' be substituted for 'Cared for Children'
- Recommendation 11.7 – that the word 'investigated' be added
- Recommendation 11.11 – that the phrase 'explore web-based opportunities' be added
- Recommendation 11.15 – that the sentence 'the possibility of reciprocal relationships with adjacent authorities be explored in terms of respite facilities – particularly for Cheshire East children placed out-of-Borough' be added.
- Recommendations 11.16, 11.17 and 11.18 – that the specification of working alongside the Cheshire Foster Carer Association be removed as certain services were still subject to a tendering process. With regards to Recommendation 11.18, the recognition that the Cheshire Foster Carer Association had ran an awards night remained whilst not committing that this would be necessarily be a future policy.
- Recommendation 11.20 – that this be changed to 'That foster carers be provided with the contact details of their local Councillors'

An additional recommendation was also suggested. This was as follows: That a Task and Finish Review be established to examine the 16 plus service for cared for children.

The Chairman wished to acknowledge the work of the group in producing an excellent and comprehensive report. Thanks were also extended to Julie Lewis for her support and expertise.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the report of the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group be welcomed and supported.
- b) That the recommendations of the Group, following the amendments below, be endorsed, and referred to the Cabinet for consideration and

necessary action, and that the Cabinet be invited initially to comment on the details of the recommendations.

- Recommendation 11.1 – that ‘Fostering & Adoption’ be substituted for ‘Cared for Children’
- Recommendation 11.7 – that the word ‘investigated’ be added
- Recommendation 11.11 – that the phrase ‘explore web-based opportunities’ be added
- Recommendation 11.15 – that the sentence ‘the possibility of reciprocal relationships with adjacent authorities be explored in terms of respite facilities – particularly for Cheshire East children placed out-of-Borough’ be added.
- Recommendations 11.16, 11.17 and 11.18 – that the specification of working alongside the Cheshire Foster Carer Association be removed as certain services were still subject to a tendering process. With regards to Recommendation 11.18, the recognition that the Cheshire Foster Carer Association had ran an awards night remained whilst not committing that this would be necessarily be a future policy.
- Recommendation 11.20 – that this be changed to ‘That foster carers be provided with the contact details of their local Councillors’
- That recommendation 11.34 – ‘That a Task and Finish Review be established to examine the 16 plus service for cared for children – be added.

50 FEES AND CHARGES

The Committee considered the changes to the schedule of fees and charges relating to the Children’s and Families Service. As most of these related to the previously discussed Home to School Transport item it was suggested that whilst the item could be noted, there would need to be recognition that the Committee could only accept the changes following the ongoing consultation process.

RESOLVED – That the Committee note the item and accept recognition of the increases whilst noting that they would be subject to consultation.

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 12.40 pm

Councillor R Westwood (Chairman)