

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**
held on Tuesday, 19th June, 2012 at Committee Suite 1,2 & 3, Westfields,
Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

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

Councillors P Butterill, L Brown, D Neilson, G Merry and M Sherratt

Apologies

Councillors H Gaddum, R Domleo, P Hoyland, W Livesley and B Silvester

In Attendance

Councillors Rhoda Bailey and D Flude
John Knight – Sandbach High School
Sally Hampson – Sandbach High School
Megan Griffiths – Sandbach High School
Joshua Savage – Sandbach School
Jonathon Davies – Sandbach School

Officers

Peter Cavanagh – 14-25 Manager
Nicola Axford – 14-25 Officer
Mark Thornton - Project Advisor (Early Years and Childcare)
Carol Sharples - Early Years and Childcare Manager
Debbie Torjussen - Principal Accountant, Schools Finance
Gill Betton - Policy and Strategy Manager
Julie Lewis - Principal Manager Cared for Children
Mark Grimshaw – Scrutiny Officer

1 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 April 2012 be approved as a correct record.

2 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None noted.

3 DECLARATION OF PARTY WHIP

None noted.

4 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME/OPEN SESSION

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

5 INFORMATION ADVICE AND GUIDANCE (IAG) : UPDATE

Prior to inviting the officers to present their report, the Chairman drew the Committee's attention to the fact that students from the two respective Sandbach secondary schools had been co-opted onto the Committee. He also noted that Mr John Knight, a careers advisor at Sandbach High School was present. They were invited to participate fully in the discussion and the Chairman stated that their involvement would provide an invaluable insight into how careers advice was being delivered in the Borough.

Peter Cavanagh, 14-25 Manager, provided the Committee with an update on Information advice and guidance (IAG) and in particular the Council's changing role within this landscape. He explained that the Government had passed legislation to amend the responsibility for providing careers guidance to young people, which had previously been provided by Local Authorities via Connexions services. Peter explained that following these legislative changes, from September 2012, schools themselves would be responsible for securing access to independent and impartial careers guidance for pupils in Year 9-11. He also noted that the Government had established a National Careers Service for England which would provide information and guidance to young people through a helpline and website. Within this new framework, schools would be free to make arrangements for careers guidance for young people that fitted the needs and circumstances of their pupils, and would be able to engage, as appropriate, in partnership with external, expert providers.

In terms of the Council's engagement with careers guidance, it was no longer an expectation that the Council would provide a universal careers service. Rather, the Council's role would be to fulfil its statutory duty to encourage, enable or assist young people's participation in education or training, particularly with respect to the Government's commitment to raise the participation age to 18 by 2015.

Peter reported that the Council also had a responsibility to support vulnerable young people to engage in education and training, intervening early with those who were at risk of disengagement. Peter explained that the Council used the local Client Caseload Information System (CCIS) to record and track progress against a young person's post 16 plan. The Council was expected to report monthly on participation and this generated the Council's 'NEET' figure.

Building on this latter point, Peter reported that the Council had transferred former Connexions staff into the local authority and that it was these who were being used to target intervention to those school pupils identified as at risk of disengagement.

The Chairman invited the representatives from the Sandbach schools to outline how careers advice was administered in their settings. Mr John Knight from Sandbach High School explained that it was his role to offer a universal careers service to the students. This began at Year 9 when students selected their options and continued through to Year 13. John added that in Year 11, students were given an individual interview to which parents were invited.

The two students from Sandbach School reported that their school did not have a designated member of staff for careers advice and instead, they had an informal system in which teachers and Head of Years offered guidance. Both Joshua and Jonathon agreed that they preferred this system as they felt the teachers knew them personally and therefore had a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. They also acknowledged however that it was important to reach those students who were not seeking careers advice and were unsure of their future options.

A discussion was had over the merits of both systems. It was agreed that the benefits of having teachers advising on careers was clear. They would have a relationship with the students that had built up over time and therefore they were in a good position to make an accurate judgment. Having said this, it was asserted that sometimes teachers were not best placed to advise on careers as they might have limited knowledge of industry and be naturally inclined to suggest an academic route. Furthermore, it was noted that having a designated officer such as that found in the Sandbach High School model would have the advantage of helping the school to be proactive, so that there was universal coverage. The Committee noted that was missing from both systems was a fully independent careers service and that it was likely that this would have to be commissioned externally. It was suggested that the Council could put together an IAG best practice model, taking into consideration the aforementioned points. It was also queried whether the Council could provide such an independent advice service and whether it was marketing its expertise to the fullest extent. Peter Cavanagh explained that the Council only had a small amount of transferred staff and that these were predominantly focussing on the targeted support services. Having said this, he also noted that the Council had sent letters to schools regarding their services and they had received 10 expressions of interest.

It was queried how the Council would interact with schools following the changes to legislation. Peter explained that the Council would work with those students who had been identified as being at risk of being a NEET and/or disengaged. He noted that there were 15 indicators which generated this list which would then go through a final iteration after a discussion with the school. Those children still on the list would then receive additional and focused support. Peter added that every school in the Borough would receive this support, including Academies.

It was questioned how the careers service engaged with care leavers. Peter reported that if a young person was in care then this would be recorded on the NEET risk indicator. He added that work was being developed to make links with the Family Intervention Service and the Virtual School. It was requested that Peter draft a short position paper outlining this work for the benefit of the ongoing Care Leavers Task Group.

It was queried whether the Council had any ability to hold schools to account for not offering independent careers advice. Peter confirmed that he would seek an answer to this question and circulate it by email.

A question was also asked about the capacity of the service and how it would cope with a potential increase in workload following schools commissioning IAG services from the Council. Peter confirmed that he would provide an answer to this via email.

A number of further comments were made about careers advice and guidance:

- That schools should be encouraged to tap into a network of parents to provide assistance with advice and work experience
- Careers advice was not just for future work but also useful for gaining part time employment and experience.
- Careers advisors needed to be very knowledgeable and it should be respected as a specialist and technical job.

Moving forward it was suggested that the Committee could receive an update paper on the progress that schools had made against the new legislation in six months. The students were invited to return when this paper was scheduled and they agreed to this idea.

RESOLVED

- a) That the report be noted
- b) That the 14-25 Manager be requested to provide to the Committee via email:
 - a. A short position paper on the work being developed with the Family Intervention Service and the Virtual Head with regards to Care Leavers and careers advice.
 - b. Information on whether the Council has any powers to hold schools to account for not offering independent careers advice.
 - c. Information on the capacity of the IAG service and in particular the potential ramifications of schools commissioning additional support from the Council.
- c) That 14-25 Manager explore developing an IAG best practice model for schools.
- d) That an update report be brought back to the Committee in six months detailing the progress that had been made by schools in delivering their new careers guidance and advice responsibilities.
- e) That the Scrutiny Officer contact the Head teachers from Sandbach High School and Sandbach School commending the contribution that the students had made to the meeting.

6 EARLY YEARS PROVISION - CARE AND EDUCATION

Following a request made at the previous meeting, Mark Thornton, Project Advisor (Early Years and Childcare) and Carol Sharples, Early Years and Childcare Manager, attended to present an initial background paper on what the Council could do to help stop children arriving at school with below average levels of cognition and behaviour.

Carol made the initial point that whilst good quality early years provision was important for enhancing behavioural and cognitive outcomes, it was only part of a broader picture that included a good early years home learning environment.

Carol continued to outline the service that the Council provided. She noted that the Council was responsible for securing sufficient childcare to enable children to access their 2/3/4 year olds Free Early Education Entitlement and to enable parents to access work and training. This early years provision could be delivered by a range of settings such as childminders, day nurseries, maintained nurseries or crèches. A list of settings is provided to the Council via Ofsted and all providers and children in receipt of the Free Entitlement were known to the Council. Carol noted that of the provision that delivered the Free Entitlement, over 78% was 'good' or 'outstanding'.

Carol explained that since Local Government Reorganisation, the Early Years service had become more focused and targeted. This was achieved by using data and impact measures to direct work to those areas most requiring support. Carol reported that the service also provided a variety of training for all practitioners and that this helped to ensure high quality support in settings.

Carol made reference to the recent Plymouth case, the lessons from which had led the Council to make changes to its safeguarding processes. Part of this was to ensure that all settings that had a contract with the Council completed and submitted a safeguarding audit. The service was also planning to follow this up by awarding a safer Cheshire East kite mark to those settings that met a safeguarding criterion.

Mark added that another key focus for the service was to provide training to practitioners to work with parents. Carol drew attention to the fact that the service's Quality Support Training programme had been taken on by Whitehall as an example of good practice.

It was commented that it was pleasing to see the positive results that the service had achieved and how dedicated and passionate Carol and Mark were about achieving positive outcomes for the Borough's children.

It was queried whether the service was funded from the Direct Schools Grant (DSG). Mark confirmed that for the 3 to 4 year olds there was a statutory entitlement and therefore this was funded through the DSG. In terms of the 2 year old, this was not yet statutory and consequently it was funded from the un-ring fenced Early Intervention Grant. Mark added that when 2 year old provision became statutory in 2015 then the funding would be provided by the DSG.

It was questioned how the figure of 78% for 'good' or 'outstanding' provision compared with national figures. Carol confirmed that she would circulate this information via email.

In terms of the remaining 22% of settings that were not deemed 'good' or 'outstanding', it was queried what measures were being taken to improve them. Mark confirmed that the service had an action plan for each setting which was then monitored. He added that they were currently drafting a quality assurance document which would assist this. Those settings that required improvement also received additional targeted funding and programmes.

A comment was made that as this was such a detailed policy area, it would be difficult for the Committee to fully understand it in such a short session. It was suggested therefore that a small group be established to follow the early years service and in particular the introduction of the 2 year old programme.

RESOLVED

- a) That the report be noted
- b) That the Early Years and Childcare Manager be requested provide:
 - a. Information on national comparator figures for settings rated as 'good' or 'outstanding'
 - b. The 'Supporting families in the foundation years' DfE document
 - c. The 'Early Years Foundation Stage' DfE document

7 SCHOOL FINANCE UPDATE

Debbie Torjussen, Principal Accountant, attended to provide the Committee with an update on two areas relating to school finance. Firstly, she provided a summary of the government's most recent funding reforms for schools, proposed for implementation from April 2013.

Debbie explained that the implications of the proposals for reforming schools funding would have a significant impact on all schools. One of the major changes was how the Council would be expected to allocate lump sums to schools. Debbie reported that the current arrangement was to provide up to £60k to primary schools and £360k for secondary schools. Under the new arrangements the DfE would expect that one lump sum (between £100k-£150k) would be attributable to all schools at the same rate. It was suggested the implications of this change be included in the scheduled paper on the school organisation plan as it could potentially effect whether the Council had the most efficient allocation of school places.

Debbie continued to outline changes to deprivation funding, funding for pupils with high needs and early years funding. Each area had its own workstream and associated timeframe. It was suggested that a Members training event could be arranged to go through the potential impacts of these changes in more detail

Debbie moved on to summarise the Borough's schools balances at the end of 2011/12. She noted that the balances at the end of 2011/12 were £14.962m. Debbie explained that it was not surprising that schools had held back balances in light of some uncertainty in terms of future funding. Having said this, Debbie stated that the Council was attempting to encourage schools to use funds for children currently in the system. If a large surplus in terms of schools balances remained, Debbie confirmed that the Council would monitor this and take appropriate action.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the Committee endorse the approach outlined in the paper in respect of changes to schools funding and the impact on Cheshire
- b) That the implications of the proposed changes to lump sum allocation be included in the scheduled school organisation plan paper.
- c) That a Member training event be arranged to go through the potential impacts of the government's recent funding reforms for schools.

8 FOSTER CARER CAPITAL SUPPORT POLICY

Gill Betton, Policy and Strategy Manager and Julie Lewis, Principal Manager Cared for Children, presented a report which sought endorsement from the Committee to the proposed policy for foster carers to access capital funding to expand or maintain existing placements.

Gill continued to expand on and explain the proposed policy noting that it was in line with a recommendation from the Foster Services Task and Finish Review. It was hoped that the policy would help to unblock barriers preventing the Council from recruiting more in-Borough placements and expanding on existing placements. This would then reduce the Council's reliance on expensive out-of-Borough and private placements. Gill reported that whilst there was some risk for the Council in pursuing the policy, these had been adequately checked by legal and finance and in summary there was a strong cost benefit to the policy.

A comment was made with regards to bullet point 4 on page 47 of the agenda regarding individuals having to pay tax on a grant. It was asserted that it was unfortunate that people would be left out of the pocket and it was asked whether a solution to this could be found. Gill Betton confirmed that she would look into this further and report back to the Committee.

A discussion was held over the principle of the policy. Councillor Louise Brown suggested that the £250k allocated for the proposed policy would be better spent on recruiting more foster carers rather than extending existing carer's homes. She asserted that there only seemed to be a utility for providing a loan/grant for those carers who would be caring for children with special needs. Councillor Brown also outlined a number of areas in which she felt the policy lacked the requisite legal detail.

Julie Lewis noted that this was not an either/or policy and that the Council would still be attempting to recruit new foster carers. Gill added that the budget for the policy would come from capital funding and therefore could not be used for recruitment. Gill also ensured the Committee that the legal detail did sit behind the policy.

The Chairman stated that the salient point in the proposed policy was that foster carers would have to demonstrate a business case outlining how there would be a substantiated cost benefit to the Council. If this was adhered to, he contended, the risk to the Council would be minimised whilst providing a very clear benefit.

It was also commented that the policy should be kept as simple as possible so that some flexibility would be retained for the officers making the decisions on whether a grant or loan should be provided to an individual.

The Committee voted to endorse the policy. Councillor Louise Brown wished to place on record her objections and that she would have wanted to see more detail on the policy before voting.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the Committee endorse the proposed outline of the policy set out in Appendix 1 to the report.

- b) That the Committee receive an update report six months after the policy implementation.

9 WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

Members considered the work programme. Reference was made to an earlier discussion regarding the establishment of an early years working group. It was agreed to set this up but it was suggested that email be sent to the Committee Members regarding membership as there was a number of Councillors absent who may wish to participate.

Mark Grimshaw also made reference to the budget task group, a sub group of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee, which had invited representation from each Scrutiny Committee as non-participatory observers. It was suggested that Mark Grimshaw send an email to the Committee Members asking for a volunteer.

In light of the recent Audit and Governance report into Lyme Green it was suggested that the Committee receive a report on the current capital projects under the aegis of the Children's service detailing their current budgetary position.

It was also requested that the Committee receive an update report on the replacement electronic recording system. It was suggested that such a report include information on:

- The procurement process
- Work that was being done to improve the current system and ensuring a smooth transition
- Approximate costs of the new system and justification/value for money

RESOLVED –

- a) That the work programme be noted
- b) That an early years working group be established and that the Scrutiny Officer email Committee Members requesting an expression of interest for participation.
- c) That the Scrutiny Officer email Committee Members requesting an expression of interest for the Committee's representative on the budget task group.
- d) That a report on the current capital projects under the aegis of the Children's Service and their budgetary position be requested for the next scheduled meeting.
- e) That an update report on the replacement electronic recording system be requested for the next scheduled meeting. That this report include information on:
 - The procurement process

- Work that was being done to improve the current system and ensuring a smooth transition
- Approximate costs of the new system and justification/value for money

The meeting commenced at 1.35 pm and concluded at 4.30 pm

Councillor A Kolker (Chairman)