

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SAFEGUARDING SUB-COMMITTEE (A SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE POLICY AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE), HELD AT CATHEDRAL CHAPTER HOUSE, CHELMSFORD, ON TUESDAY 19 OCTOBER 2010

Membership

Councillors

- * Mrs T Sargent (Chairman)
- * Mrs A Brown
- * Mrs M Hutchon
- * J Knapman
- * C Riley
- * J Aldridge (*ex officio*)

Non-Elected Voting Members

- * Mr R Carson

(* present)

The following were also present throughout the meeting:

Cllr Theresa Higgins
Marian Uzzell

The following officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Graham Redgwell	Governance Officer
Matthew Waldie	Committee Officer

The meeting opened at 11.00 am.

22. Apologies

The Committee Officer reported the receipt of the following apologies:

Cllr M Hutchon
Cllr J Knapman

It was noted that Councillor Hutchon was still recovering from an operation.

23. Declarations of Interest

No new declarations of interest were recorded.

24. CQC/Ofsted Report Outcomes in respect of Safeguarding/Looked after Children - Areas for Improvement

The Chairman welcomed Paul Fallon, Chairman, and Nicola Park, Business and Performance Manager, Essex Safeguarding Children Board (ESCB), to the meeting. The Chairman introduced the item by pointing out that the Sub-

Committee did not wish to duplicate any work being carried out, but it did want to ensure that appropriate progress was being made in relevant areas. Paul Fallon provided a brief overview of his position and that of the Board. He reminded members that the Children Act 2004 had created the Safeguarding Children Boards in place of the old Area Child Protection Committees. Their role is twofold: 1, providing a “critical friend” to all parties involved in protecting children (eg, county council, police, NHS, any contributing agencies, etc); and 2, providing a locus for parties to come together. The Board also has a statutory obligation to consider serious case reviews and to review every death of a child in Essex (whatever the cause).

Mr Fallon was appointed as an independent chairman, with no personal interests, nor any executive function, and he is contracted to 45 days’ involvement per annum. The latest CQC/Ofsted Report states that the ESCB had demonstrated a “significant level of progress” since the review in 2008, with changes beginning to have an impact. However, the Report wants to see more senior representation within the Board (paragraph 32 of the Report).

Three areas in particular had been criticised in 2008:

1. inadequate leadership. This has changed, with the appointment of an independent ESCB chairman - and of the bringing in of Malcolm Newsam as interim Director of the County Council’s SCF directorate
2. the process of serious case review had been in chaos. Only one case is now outstanding; whereas in 2009 there had been 13
3. there had been a lack of attention to clear, safer recruitment. New standards have now been implemented, and the benefits were being seen in the quality of new staff

The implementation of Section 11 Audits (under the Children Act 2004) has helped raise standards – not necessarily through the reporting mechanism itself, but because going through the process itself forces each party to take stock of their own situation.

So, in Mr Fallon’s view, although they have not yet reached their goal, changes have been made that are taking effect, and they should not change general direction.

The Board is charged with two tasks in the latest Report. The first is to ensure Group 3 interagency and Level 3 health safeguarding training is commissioned and provided. Nicola Park confirmed that this training is included in the Improvement Plan and pointed out that formerly, it had been conducted by professionals in the field, but this had had the negative effect of taking these usually senior and experienced practitioners away from the front line. Now the Children’s Trust have taken on the responsibility for this and would put it out to tender.

The Board’s second task is to monitor safeguarding arrangements across the partnership, which it continues to do. He pointed out that the work carried out by the ECC since Malcolm Newsam’s arrival has exposed gaps in the services of some others, which will require attention. Another positive development is

an increase in dialogue with adult services and the reincorporation of families into the Children's agenda. It is important to focus on parents and parenting, as most abuse features adult problems such as drugs or alcohol dependency and mental health issues. He drew attention to the existence of an Improvement Plan, to which all parties subscribe, with named officers being held responsible for specific targets and target dates.

There is a good level of commitment from all parties, but the impending Government cuts do give rise to some concern. He noted that in June, the Secretary of State for Education had asked Professor Eileen Munro from the Department of Social Policy at the LSE to conduct an independent review of child protection in England, and Professor Munro had just produced her first report, in which she set out her approach to the project and which areas need to be looked at in detail.

Members raised a number of issues.

As a "critical friend", how does the Board hold parties to account? Mr Fallon pointed out there were two main approaches: 1, by performance indicators, which are set against safeguarding procedures and processes, and all parties use. These are shared and considered at meetings. He added that every case review and child death review has an action plan attached, which is reviewed quarterly, and these are not signed off until they are actually finished. 2, he, as Chairman, has one-to-one meetings with senior executives, as appropriate. These help clarify situations and resolve potential problems and Mr Fallon confirmed that he is always given very good access to senior staff.

One member suggested that the emphasis must be on prevention, rather than trying to deal with situations once they have developed; and he asked if the Board took this view. Mr Fallon agreed – one of the main tasks was the recruitment and retention of committed, competent staff, who would be vital in spotting potential problems and dealing with them before they escalated. With regard to timing, ideally everything would be caught early, but clearly those actually being harmed must be dealt with first. A major element in this is a group of families who will not engage with the Council, and so need some coercion. This was an area that demonstrated the importance of health workers.

In response to a member's suggestion that the Board might be seen as trying to justify its existence to Ofsted, Mr Fallon suggested that the intention was not to pander to Ofsted, but to achieve a level of confidence in our services, from the general public, press, public sector, etc, was crucial. Another element of this was the public's non-interventionist "it's not my business" culture. Mr Fallon had 2 responses to this – 1, that there were good people working within the system who would help; and 2, there is no desire to remove children from families unless this was seen to be absolutely necessary.

One member suggested that there were too many committees involved in the process. Mr Fallon pointed out that they had been quite successful at

weeding out unnecessary groups, but that they were constrained by current statutes. Another member added that a lot of good work was carried out by some groups at lower levels. Reference was also made to the Government White Paper on NHS reform, which proposed the creation of a “Health & Wellbeing Board” in each county, to oversee health issues; but it was unclear just how this would function and so how it would impact upon safeguarding matters.

Concerns were voiced about resourcing. Clearly, the imminent cuts in public spending would have a significant impact on the work of the Board and Council department. Mr Fallon agreed that the Board saw this as a real issue. He pointed out that they have kept the focus very tight on safeguarding, and had not considered wider issues such as safety in the playground, for example. They do have concerns about GPs commissioning on a countywide basis, as this may not allow GPs time for child protection issues.

Also, a new set of guidelines were about to be published. These had been simplified and consequently allow a greater level flexibility for those using them.

It was noted that the Board brought together the different parties – but could they be confident that communication was effective between them? Mr Fallon conceded that some things would fall into gaps, but he pointed out that very sound procedures were now in place, which, if adhered to, should prevent problems. He added that the size of Essex, both as an authority and a geographical entity, had tended to extend lines of communication historically.

Overall, he believed that considerable improvements had been made and that the Council was progressing in the right direction. They must not be complacent, but greatly improved structures were now in place and a lot of work was being carried out by the Council staff in particular to raise the safeguarding standard.

The Chairman thanked Mr Fallon and Ms Park for their contribution. She noted the ongoing work and urged Mr Fallon to ask for the Sub-Committee’s assistance, if he believed it could help in any way.

25. Date of Next Meeting

Committee Officer to confirm the date in due course.

The meeting closed at 12.30 pm.

Chairman