

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE PEOPLE AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNTY HALL, CHELMSFORD, ON THURSDAY 15
JANUARY 2015**

County Councillors:

* I Grundy (Chairman)	* C Guglielmi
D Blackwell	* T Higgins
R Boyce	* P Honeywood
* J Chandler	* R Howard
* M Danvers	* A Jackson
* K Gibbs	* M McEwen
* A Goggin	* C Seagers

Non-Elected Voting Members:

* Mr R Carson	Ms M Uzzell
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*present

The following Members were also present:

Councillor K Bobbin
Councillor M Maddocks
Councillor A Naylor
Councillor J Pike

The following officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Robert Fox	Scrutiny Officer
Matthew Waldie	Committee Officer

The meeting opened at 10.00 am.

1. Apologies and Substitutions

The Chairman reported the receipt of the following apologies:

Apologies	Substitutes
Cllr D Blackwell	
Cllr R Boyce	

2. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Higgins declared a personal interest as a committee member of Stepping Stones Nursery, which is a service provider.

3. Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the People and Families Scrutiny Committee meeting of 13 November 2014, subject to some typographical errors, were approved and signed by the Chairman.

With regard to Matters Arising, Members were informed that Essex Cares was ensuring that its annual accounts would be available on its website. It was also noted that these were already available on the Companies House website.

At the November meeting, the Committee had sought confirmation on the position regarding £1 million set aside for youth work. It was noted that a response to this was expected shortly from the Cabinet Member.

[After the meeting, the Cabinet Member was able to confirm that £1 million capital has been set aside and is in the process of being spent in the manner described in the following, amended minute under Item 7, second paragraph after the numbered bullets:

“In response to the suggestion that £800,000 had been taken out of the budget at the most recent Cabinet meeting, Mr O’Brien pointed out that £1 million has been set aside to fund Capital Youth Projects, as follows:

- £200 k to improve the IT infrastructure in youth centres
- £300 k to improve Essex County Council youth centres
- £500 k to support capitals projects within the premises of voluntary sector youth centres.

Mr O’Brien was unaware of any of this money being taken out of this pot. The Cabinet Member agreed to confirm the precise position.”

This wording was circulated to Members.]

4. Questions from the Public

There were no questions registered from Members of the Public.

5. Re-procurement of community provision for children with a disability

Members received Report PAF/02/15, which had been considered by the Cabinet on 16 December 2014. The Chairman welcomed Dick Madden, Cabinet Member for Children and Families, and Philippa Bull, Head of Commissioning Vulnerable People.

Cllr Madden made several points:

- This initiative concerns the procurement of facilities that will benefit families
- Disabled children have the same aspirations to other children
- There will be no reduction in services, as there will be economies of scale
- Currently most children can access most of these without a social care assessment
- The requirements stemming from the Children & Families Act 2014 will be phased in over the next three years
- At present there are five different types of service, with multiple points of entry. The new model (Option 4) will create a single Lead Provider, which

will act as a focal point and source other, smaller providers to deliver the services locally

- The existing contract arrangements will need to be extended to end September 2015, to permit the changeover, preventing any gap in the current service.

Ms Bull explained that the intention was to have greater flexibility and coordination and more support for the smaller providers (which currently sometimes struggle). The key to its success will be the engagement of families in the design and development of the services.

Cllr Madden and Ms Bull then responded to Members' questions and points. Consideration had been given to achieving this process in house. However, a reduction in management was sought, and this should provide better cover in the localities. There is also the perception of the families involved. The Council does still manage the process.

Families will benefit by ensuring that the providers work very closely with them. Providers will be encouraged to think about personalisation and there will be a system of KPIs in place to monitor this. The Lead Provider will deal with the smaller providers and feedback this information; the County Council's role will be to challenge them and ensure that they deliver. It is similar to the present role, but at present there are a number of providers to deal with.

Ms Bull currently has one other member of staff allocated to this role of managing the community short breaks programme. Managing numbers of staff and volunteers locally will form a key element of the Provider's contract.

One Member pointed out that at paragraph 3.1.1 the paper should simply read that disabled children have the same aspirations as non-disabled children – ie it is wrong to qualify or lessen these.

It was noted that it is not the role of the County Council to ensure that suitable facilities are in place, but that of the Lead Provider, who will liaise with local providers as required. However the Council will monitor the effectiveness of the Lead Provider through the contract monitoring process.

Parents will be able to make their own judgment about which clubs/activities to access, and apply as they see fit. The intention is for them to find out through various channels, eg GPs, school and word of mouth about what is on offer. The County Council has been working with GPs and health workers over the past year to raise awareness.

The Cabinet Member asked any Members with issues in their divisions to bring these to him.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Madden and Ms Bull and suggested that the Committee should revisit this in 2016, to monitor progress.

6. Children in Care

Members received Report PAF/01/15, which had been considered by the Corporate Parenting Panel on 16 December 2014, plus the Report of the Ofsted inspection of Children's Services in January-February 2014. The Chairman welcomed Dick Madden, Cabinet Member for Children and Families, and Nicky O'Shaughnessy, Director for Local Delivery Children, Young People & Families Mid, and invited them to address the meeting.

Cllr Madden introduced the item.

The Committee intended to consider the issues covered here in 2014, but this was delayed by the Ofsted Inspection, which took place in January and February 2014. The inspection went well, with services for children attaining a "Good" rating in each category. This should be seen as a real success for the authority, as three to four years ago the service was rated "inadequate" and was made subject to Government intervention. There has clearly been a significant change since that time and Essex is even engaging with other authorities who are currently experiencing what Essex did these few years ago.

The Cabinet Member drew Members' attention to several areas:

Numbers. The number of children in care in Essex is reducing, in contrast to the national trend, which is for rising numbers. In 2011 it was 1,600; now it is 1,070. The authority has set itself a nominal target figure of 1,000, although the figure does seem to have reached a plateau at roughly this figure.

Preventative Support. Early intervention is crucial in dealing with problems as they develop. When children near to the edge of being taken into care, a lot of support is provided at this point, aimed at keeping the child within the family if possible, and this includes extended family if necessary and practicable. Various schemes are in place to this end: DBITS (which has a very good record at keeping families together), Multi-Systemic Therapy and Family Solutions. It may not be possible to achieve a figure much lower than 1,000, as children's safety is always paramount

Finance. Although the financial impact is secondary to the wellbeing of the children involved, in purely financial terms this represents a dramatic reduction in costs. Were the numbers of children in care in Essex to rise in line with the national trend, this would make a difference of over £50 million per annum.

Education. It is a historic fact that children who have been in care do not leave school as well qualified as those from conventional domestic backgrounds, and there has also been a high level of absenteeism. These are areas targeted by Essex. Recent results now place Essex children in care in line with those nationally; this is much improved from the situation four years ago. And the attainment gap between children in care and those not is also narrowing. Regarding absenteeism, Essex makes daily checks with schools and the rate has dropped to 4.6%, which is better than the overall figure for Essex main schools.

Corporate Parenting. The Cabinet Member reminded Members of their role as corporate parents. There is a Corporate Parenting Panel, the role of which is to challenge what is happening. The Cabinet Member enjoys excellent cross-party support from his fellow panel members. He suggested that any Member with a particular issue should approach him direct.

Ms O'Shaughnessy made several points:

- Family Operations is delighted with the Ofsted result, and there is a very positive feeling with the staff. However, there is no complacency, as the intention is to achieve an outstanding Ofsted rating – not for the sake of having it, but as a result of the belief in good quality social work
- The system has been stripped down to achieve better results. There has been a re-assessment of the families being worked with; and now the service is much better at targeting the right people and families.
- There are fewer agency workers and individuals' caseloads have decreased significantly: formerly, some social workers had 40 cases; now the average is around fifteen
- There have been improvements in the IT provision and in its use
- Taking a child into care needs the approval of the relevant Quadrant director – an important requirement
- Essex has been reaching out to other authorities, to help them (eg Wolverhampton, Birmingham and Slough); and Essex is seeking funding from the DfE to develop this
- Not only was the service recommended by its own staff as having one of the best management teams in the country, but one member of staff, Zahraa Adam, won two national awards: Newly-qualified social worker of the year and Overall social worker of the year.

Cllr Madden and Ms O'Shaughnessy then responded to Members' questions and points.

The Corporate Parenting Panel is looking at the period 18-25 years old. Legally, youngsters at this age must have access to someone with whom they have a meaningful relationship. In practice, each one has a worker, although usually an "adviser" rather than a social worker. So visits continue, as before, and staff make particular efforts to assist in the areas of education and employment. But there is only one further statutory review post 18. Although it is preferable for 18-year olds to remain within their families at this age, some do leave, for whatever reason, and need accommodation. This can result in negotiations with the districts and Cllr Madden asked Members to assist in this process where they are able.

The emphasis is on communication and building relationships, not just with those in care but with all other parties. For example, the attitude of many schools has been quite negative in the past, but the authority has worked hard particularly to develop relationships with head teachers, who will on occasion contact Ms O'Shaughnessy directly. Schools have a unique opportunity for spotting certain behaviour patterns and can alert the authority to potential problems before they meet the necessary criteria for remedial action; this may enable social workers to intervene at an early stage and avert future difficulties.

All the various ECC vehicles in place, such as Family Solutions, will be under one director, Ms O'Shaughnessy; this should encourage better communication.

The aim of reducing the number of children in care to below 1,000 is not really a 'target' as such, but an indication of the authority's belief that keeping children within their own families is the best approach. Clearly, the actual number in care will depend on the actual situation of every individual child.

Regarding "children in need" these are defined by law and there are clear guidelines. Much effort has been put in to developing this area; team managers have contributed greatly here.

Essex has very high standards in selecting those suitable for adopting children. Initial workshops are held before any decisions are made, as it sometimes emerges, for example, that the fact that an individual cannot have children remains an unresolved issue. Much support and training, as required, is provided by the authority.

When a child is taken into care, any plan for his/her future will depend on circumstances. Usually the initial intention is for the child to return to its family, ie reunification is Plan A and fostering the contingency plan. The aim is to have every child adopted, irrespective of age. To this end there is a family-finding team that specifically seeks matches with suitable families. Adoption break-downs are very rare. In 2013, 99 children were adopted. In response to a question on the proportion of foster children aged one year or less, the Cabinet Member agreed to respond to this outside the meeting.

It was confirmed that children in care have regular healthcare assessments, which achieve 90% coverage – usually there are a number of 15-16 year olds who forgo these. These would expect to pick up any long-term/developing conditions, such as problems with hearing or eyesight.

Concerning opportunities for Members to visit, because of statutory requirements (namely those under 'Section 33'), Members are selected from the Corporate Parenting Panel to carry out any visiting and undergo special training; so there is no opportunity for other Members. This contrasts with the Adults situation, with a large number of residential homes and different regulatory requirements. However, Cllr Madden is looking into possible ways of getting a wider involvement for Members, possibly through the Children's Council.

Members were reminded that there are several adoption & fostering panels, on which there are opportunities to serve. Anyone interested was asked to contact Cllr Pike in the first instance.

The statutory age to which the authority has a duty of care is 21. If the individual is still in education, the authority will continue to provide support; and if the person decides to do a degree, contact will be re-established and maintained until he/she had finished their studies. However, if the individual goes into employment, contact will be lost after 21.

A review has taken place of the Children with Disabilities and Adult Transitions Teams. In response, services have been reconfigured and will now be provided within two age groups: 0-15 and 16-25, all managed under Family Operations. It

is hoped that a more joined up approach will be achieved, resulting in better outcomes for children and young adults.

Poverty levels are measured by a combination of median wage levels and those living in temporary accommodation. The overall level of children living in poverty in Essex, at 16%, is well below the national average, although in certain areas (viz Tendring, Harlow and Basildon) the rate is at the national level.

The authority received 13 good key findings, with 10 areas for improvement. There is already an action plan in place to deal with these – not for the benefit of Ofsted, but because the concern is to get everything right.

The Ofsted Report also made reference to asylum-seeking children. Most come from Eritrea and Syria. There is a specialist team who deal with these, who are well trained in judging ages – which is often an issue in these cases.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Madden and Ms O'Shaughnessy for their visit. He suggested that members should consider visiting the Quadrants based in their own divisions and could also get involved in Children in Care Council events.

7. Updates from Task & Finish Groups

Members received a brief oral report on the status of Task & Finish Groups:

Carers. Cllr Higgins has taken over the chair. The Group will receive a report from James Bullion, Director for Integrated Commissioning & Vulnerable People (Mid), who is responsible for implementing the Care Act within the ECC. A visit either to the Carers Centre in Tendring or the *Essex Cares* carers' facility in Harlow is also intended.

Educational Attainment. In January and February, Members will be hearing evidence from the Cabinet Member, school governors and staff, and Members of the Education department of Anglia Ruskin University, and will be making a site visit to two schools rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. A full report is expected at the March Committee meeting.

Commissioning Services for Vulnerable People. The initial terms of reference were very wide ranging. The Group has pared these down to considering:

- Needs of local communities
- Transition services (viz, young to adult)
- Vulnerability and housing services.

Next meeting date to be confirmed.

8. Scrutiny tracker and work programme

The Committee noted the tracker and work programme.

The Chairman pointed out that the Care Act will take effect in April 2016, so there will be a briefing on this.

9. Committee meeting dates 2015-16

The Committee noted the full committee meeting dates to 12 May 2016.

10. Date of next meeting

The Committee noted the date of the next meeting:
Thursday 12 March 2015, 10.00 am, in Committee Room 1.

The meeting closed at 12:23 pm.

Chairman