
Minutes of the meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held in Committee Room 1 County Hall, Chelmsford, CM1 1QH on Thursday, 8 February 2018

Present:

County Councillors:

M Maddocks (Chairman)
J Chandler
J Deakin (substitute) (until 1.58pm)
A Erskine
J Henry
J Lumley
P May
M McEwen
J Moran
P Reid
C Souter
L Wagland

The following officer was present in support of the meeting:
Graham Hughes, Senior Democratic Services Officer

1 Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest
The report of the Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations was received and noted. Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Baker (for whom Councillor Deakin substituted), Egan and Wood. There were no declarations of interest

2 Minutes
The minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2018 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3 Questions from the Public
There were no questions from the public

4 Essex Safeguarding Children Board - update

The Committee considered report (PAF/03/18) providing an update on the work of the Essex Safeguarding Children Board. The following joined the meeting to introduce the item and participate in subsequent discussion.

Phil Picton – Independent Chairman, Essex Safeguarding Children Board (ESCB)
Paul Secker, Director, Safeguarding & Quality Assurance (C&F)
Clare Livens, ESCB Child Exploitation Project Manager

Background and structure

Recent legislation had removed the statutory footing for local safeguarding

children boards but still required multi-agency safeguarding arrangements to be in place with the exact structure determined locally. ECC was the lead partner of the current Board structure which worked closely with similar bodies established in Southend & Thurrock. It was stressed that the role of the ESCB was not about operational responsibility for delivering services but about overseeing that partners are properly co-ordinating services and monitoring and evaluating their own work.

Current membership of the ESCB included the Chief Constable, a Director of Nursing representing the Essex Clinical Commissioning Groups, a Director from North East London Foundation Trust (as main provider of Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Services in Essex), ECC Director of Children's Services, ECC Director of Education, representative from the provider of the 0-19 contract, representatives from schools, Director of Probation Services and a representative from lower tier councils in Essex.

There were 6FTE and 2 PTE officers (including a comms officer) supporting the work of the safeguarding boards. Partners had been happy to maintain their financial contributions to the work of the Board due to the increasing burden on the board and safeguarding more generally. ESCB is funded more than the adults' board but that was a historical issue. Members suggested seeking sponsorship but this was not usually viewed as a long-term option with many companies not wanting to associate themselves with these issues.

Whilst there was no formal legal prescribed escalation procedure, where the ESCB was struggling to enforce change from a partner it was thought that he would ultimately be able to escalate the matter through the Chief Executive of the partner, Overview and Scrutiny and even to the relevant Government Department.

Context and focus

Whilst the family environment and domestic violence remained an important focus of safeguarding work, many cases had now become more complex (often situated outside the family environment) and Safeguarding had now developed more into a community model to acknowledge that.

One of the key roles for Safeguarding Boards was to ensure good dissemination of information and that professionals were equipped in their early preventative work. The multi-agency approach was now more towards prevention and supporting young people in a wider community and social context. Two of the priorities in the Essex Community Strategy being developed related to safeguarding.

In addition, an increasing gang culture could incorporate drug and criminal exploitation) as well as child sexual exploitation and was being seen in some schools. The Police and Crime Commissioner was developing a specific strategy for gangs although partners also needed to distinguish

where a 'gang' may just be a group of vulnerable people needing help. The youth offending service were leading on developing a framework of gang prevention work and working closely with local authority community safety partnerships and with Essex Police on enforcement activities when it is the right thing to do.

An increasing number of families were being relocated from London Boroughs into Essex.

Child deaths and suicides

Members highlighted that Essex was reported to have the highest domestic homicide rate in the country. However, most cases did not involve children directly although there could be some involvement from safeguarding boards if vulnerable people were involved. Perhaps more significant was to concentrate on minimising domestic abuse.

Child deaths tended to be categorised as expected (life limiting/neo natal) or a not expected lessons learnt exercise through unexpected health issues such as serious harm, suicides, car crashes. The ESCB had been informed of 65 deaths of children during the 2016-17 reporting year. The vast majority of those cases were children born with significant medical needs. All child deaths had a separate review process (after any coroner involvement) to look at any lessons to be learnt. For those under age 4 there was no one clear cause of death but often there are factors behind it which will help to minimise risk in future - e.g. encouraging smoking away from children, safe sleeping etc

There had been an increase in teenage suicides with a significant number in the past year. It was now a national issue about how to support young people and the need to put strategies in place to help them. Further guidance was to be issued by ESCB.

Sexual abuse

Comparing and benchmarking sexual abuse/violence cases data could be difficult. Greater awareness of services can lead to increased reporting and it was difficult to benchmark with other local authorities due to differences in data collection.

There were a relatively low number of people who originated from countries where FGM is practiced but work had been undertaken to raise awareness.

Education

Partner organisations did not automatically have authority to go into the homes of children being educated at home. Partners organisations were

dependent on other people highlighting concerns before any action could be taken.

There was important ongoing work with parents, carers and schools to provide the support for them to spot early signs of abuse and know how and where to report it. Having Mental Health co-ordinators in schools was important but support needed to extend beyond just schools. Guidance on self-harming for schools had been published last year. The restructuring of the Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service for children and young people still had some significant issues around accessibility, referrals and diagnosis times.

Young people who are excluded from school will often be found alternative placements but it was acknowledged that this could be just further concentrating a group of people with vulnerabilities into fewer locations and increase the safeguarding risk.

The increased use of social media made it harder to control negative influences on young people with normalisation of sex talk, sharing of personal photos, and arranging to meet people who they don't know. Through partners the ESCB was looking to empower parents to have conversations with their children and to know where support was for young people.

Missing children

There was a relationship between missing and exploited children with about 30% of those exploited having had a missing episode. Data was collected on children missing more than three times (for three days or more) in 90 day period. At the next safeguarding reference group there would be an item on missing children. The police also now had a dedicated service for this and there was more robust recording of absences.

Champions

ESCB have so far developed approximately 800 CSE trained champions to work within organisations to be someone who staff can go to for advice, information and support and also to disseminate information. There had been a significant take up in primary and secondary schools and the ESCB were looking to extend the scheme to local authorities.

Business Plan - principles.

With the ESCB constituted as the second largest board in the country it was expected that there should be a significant range and depth of experience that should be exploited. However, it was agreed that reference to capitalising on this opportunity in the ESCB Business Plan should not be stated as a principle but rather as an aspiration.

The witnesses were thanked for their attendance and then left the meeting

Thereafter the meeting was adjourned for lunch at 12.20pm and reconvened at 1.30pm.

AFTERNOON SESSION

The following joined the meeting:

Rachel Brett - Director, Essex Council for Voluntary Youth services
Janis Gibson - Chief Executive Officer, Castle Point Association of Voluntary Services

At the invitation of the Chairman, in turn, both witnesses provided some feedback from the educational, clinical and community/voluntary sector in relation to how children's safeguarding is managed and overseen in Essex.

In summary, the system structure seemed to ensure clear levels of support and referrals worked well when professionals were adequately trained to field those situations. The Family Solutions service worked well and was considered to be an invaluable support and social care was very responsive when a serious risk was identified. There were opportunities to seek advice in a more 'informal' manner before deciding on a course of action. The provision of information to guide access to services was generally good but not all professionals were aware of services available in their area.

Communications probably remained the biggest issue with the voluntary sector 'left in the dark' after making a referral as to whether the person was then receiving support as a result or not. It was stressed that there could be opportunities for them to provide support if they knew formal agencies had not taken the case on.

Another major concern was the failure to support families who choose not to engage. The high thresholds for insisting families engage meant that the majority of support work fell with the community and voluntary sector. Whilst social care were considered very responsive to serious risk cases it was felt that there was a substantial void between the service for those and the majority of lower level support work which then often fell onto schools

Whilst the educational sector knew that early intervention works they did not always have the information available to them when they needed it. The resource and time required to participate in the referral process was time consuming and placed further pressure on schools in particular.

Many projects had been established in the voluntary sector to provide mentoring support but there were pressures on them due to high levels of demand.

Often families would step-down from high levels of support to almost none overnight.

As regards structures, there was no longer voluntary sector representation on the ESCB and that was considered to be a 'gap'. The voluntary sector wanted to be more involved particularly at a higher strategic level. It was also thought that the profile of the ESCB could be higher.

It was **agreed** that the issues on communications and voluntary sector representation on the ESCB should be raised with the Independent Chairman of the ESCB.

5 Work Programme

The Committee considered and noted report (PAF/04/18) on the Work Programme.

6 Future meeting dates

The Committee considered and noted report (PAF/04/18). The next meeting of the Committee was scheduled for Thursday 15 March 2018, 9.30am.

7 Urgent Business

There was no urgent business

There being no further business the meeting closed at 2.15pm.

Chairman