

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SAFEGUARDING SUB-COMMITTEE (A SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE POLICY AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE), HELD AT COUNTY HALL, CHELMSFORD, ON WEDNESDAY 22 DECEMBER 2010

Membership

Councillors

- * Mrs T Sargent (Chairman)
- * Mrs A Brown
- * Mrs T Higgins
- * J Knapman
- * C Riley
- * Cllr John Aldridge (*ex officio*)

Non-Elected Voting Members

- * Mr R Carson

(* present)

Cllr Graham Butland was also present.

The following officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Graham Redgwell	Governance Officer
Matthew Waldie	Committee Officer

The meeting opened at 12.30 pm.

40. Apologies

None.

41. Declarations of Interest

No new declarations of interest were recorded.

42. Minutes

The minutes of the Safeguarding Sub-Committee meetings held on 10 & 11 November and 2 December 2010 were approved as a correct record.

43. Dave Hill, Director of Children's Services

The Chairman welcomed Dave Hill and asked him to address the meeting. Mr Hill drew attention to a few general points about his role:

- There are 330,000 children in Essex, the vast majority of whom require no attention from the Council's Children's Services. Overlying this first group are layers of decreasing numbers of children, with increasing levels of need, culminating in the 1550 children taken into care

- With regard to schools, some areas have particularly poor results. The biggest factor in children's achievement is the aspiration of their families. In a deprived area, where aspirations are often low, the local school can either merely mirror this back in the way it deals with the children, or it can serve as a beacon of possibility. Part of Mr Hill's role is to congratulate good achievement and to point out where things have not been done well, if appropriate
- Essex needs to get better at spotting problems earlier – not only will that make situations easier to resolve, and ultimately mean fewer children in care, but should also be considerably less expensive (the average cost of keeping a child in residential care is £62k per annum). It needed to change the way in which money is spent – putting it into the low end of the system, breaking into the vicious circle and preventing the child abuse that leads in time to adult dysfunctional behaviour.

Safeguarding There are two problems with safeguarding: 1, the "unsatisfactory" rating in the Ofsted Report; 2, intervention by the Government. The Improvement Board has been overseeing the process of change. The prime aim is not to get ourselves out of intervention, but to do the job well; exit from intervention will come in consequence.

Phase 1 The changes introduced by Mr Hill's predecessor, Malcolm Newsam, have been very effective, and Essex performance indicators are now in the second or even top quartiles, as measured against other authorities.

Phase 2 Quality audits – 150 cases are assessed randomly each month; most of these are satisfactory, and many good. Most things are now in place and it is hoped that Essex will come out of intervention in the summer 2011.

Mr Hill added that the very existence of the Safeguarding Sub-Committee was a positive element as far as the Government were concerned, as this demonstrated further the Council's commitment to keeping an eye on what was happening and bringing about change.

Members made comments and raised various issues:

- In response to a query on the separation of activities relating to children and adults, Mr Hill confirmed that work was being done to join up as many areas as possible, and this included these two, as children should not be seen as isolated but as part of families
- Although certain improvements were acknowledged, in speed of assessment, for example, the issue remained – how would the Committee know that the lives of children were being improved? Mr Hill admitted this was not always easy to measure. He would like to see the observation of social workers at work (in the same way that teachers were subject to observation in the classroom), to ensure they were up to a suitable standard. A crucial element was the quality of the relationship between the different parties, eg social workers, foster

parents and Council staff. In particular, long-term relationships were necessary.

- Asked about the likely approach to dealing with standards in schools, Mr Hill suggested different approaches for the three groups: 1, the worst performing schools would receive radical intervention; 2, the middle-performing schools would tend to raise their own standards, when they saw the poorer ones improving; 3, he was only interested in the best schools insofar as they might be able to help others. He confirmed that he intended to visit every school and would adapt his approach to each as appropriate
- There seemed some uncertainty about the point of schools becoming “academies”. Mr Hill confirmed that the old-style change, which was used for failing schools, seemed to have been quite effective, but it might not be the right approach for all schools. The new-style academy was aimed at better schools and would give them greater control over their own budgets; but Mr Hill confirmed that the County Council would still be expected to maintain control over them
- Some concern was expressed over the forthcoming changes to healthcare, especially with relation to healthcare workers, and how these might impact on safeguarding. In response, Mr Hill affirmed his confidence in his senior staff, who were aware of what would be changing and would be able to respond appropriately
- Asked what members could do to help in this process, Mr Hill suggested that continuing to exercise the scrutiny function, asking questions and actually finding out, for example, about what social workers do, were all important and beneficial.

45. Terms of Reference

Members **Approved** the two modifications to the Terms of Reference, as set out in Recommendation (1) of the first Stage Report.

46. Safeguarding Scrutiny Stage 2 Work

Members **Approved** the programme for the period January to July 2011, as circulated, and **Agreed** that it should go to the January meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Board for approval.

47. Date of Next Meeting

To be confirmed.

The meeting closed at 2.00 pm.

Chairman