

EDUCATION, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY PANEL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING of the Education, Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel held on Monday 28 January 2013 at 7.00 pm in the ground floor meeting room 5, Civic Offices, Portsmouth.

(NB These minutes should be read in conjunction with the agenda for the meeting.)

Present

Councillors Darron Phillips (In the Chair)
Will Purvis
Ken Ferrett
Lynne Stagg
Matthew Winnington
Alistair Thompson

Michael Robson, Charter Academy
Governor Representative

Also Present

Stephen Kitchman, Head of Children's Social Care & Safeguarding
Detective Sergeant Stewart Hall, Child Abuse & Investigation Team, Hampshire Police
Sharon George, Youth Support Commissioning Manager
Karen Jones, Transformation Manager
Teresa Deasy, Local Democracy Officer

1 Declarations of Members' Interests (AI 1)

There were no declarations of interest.

2 Apologies for Absence (AI 2)

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Jon Gardner, Youth Offending Manager, and Kate Freeman, Looked After Children's Service Commissioning Manager. Sharon George, Youth Support Commissioning Manager, attended on behalf of Jon Gardner at this meeting.

3 Child Abuse Investigation Team, Hampshire Police

Detective Sergeant Stewart Hall gave some statistics regarding the incidents of looked after children and their involvement with the police.

Firstly, he advised that of the number of looked after children recorded as missing during 2012 there was a total of 48 looked after children. Looking at the top ten who were reported as missing the average is 35 occurrences. The numbers of occurrences of particular children in the top ten ranged from 52 occasions to 19 occasions. Detective Sergeant Hall explained that there was a process in place to deal with any missing child whether looked after or not. The procedure requires the officer to return the child to the carer and a

welfare visit is then followed up by the Social Care Service. If the officer has any concerns about the safety of the child or whether there is any criminal involvement, this would be included in the officer's report.

Members raised the matter of child sexual exploitation referring to the young girls who had been groomed in Oldham. It was explained that Detective Chief Inspector Colin Mathews or Inspector Dave Elkins would be able to give more information on this. There is a police sergeant appointed to deal with this issue. Detective Sergeant Hall advised that there were some enquiries in progress regarding sexual exploitation of young people locally. However, they were not talking about numbers anywhere near those in Oldham.

Stephen Kitchman referred to the Missing Exploited and Trafficked children (MET) Group involving four authorities: Portsmouth, Hampshire, Southampton and the Isle of Wight. Detective Inspector John Geden and Kate Freeman were the joint chairs of this group which was looking at children and young people at risk in Portsmouth. Sexual exploitation is a key risk facing regarding children who abscond from their foster carer's home or care home. Councillor Stagg asked for more information to be provided for the next meeting.

Members also raised the matter of the asylum seeker looked after children and asked whether they were more likely to be at risk of sexual exploitation. Stephen Kitchman explained that there are missing issues among some individuals in this category but this was due to their individual circumstances. He added that some young people come into care specifically because of the risk of sexual exploitation and therefore they have to be carefully monitored while they are in care.

Detective Sergeant Hall commented on the top five crimes against looked after children. For example, one child was the victim of two sexual offences, another was the victim of two incidences of assault, another was the victim of an indecent assault and child abuse and another was the victim of an offence but was not classed as a crime.

In response to a question from the panel Detective Sergeant Hall explained that when a child goes missing, an officer makes an initial assessment regarding the risk to the child. The initial report is to determine whether the child is at low, medium or high risk.

Looked after children in residential homes go missing for a number of reasons which may include visiting friends or family or even indulging in crime or drugs. He went on to say that most of the children who go missing were known to the police. Sometimes it was difficult to assess the degree of risk because these children tended not to like talking to the police. Therefore Children's Social Care & Safeguarding has an arrangement with Barnardos who are working with looked after children to build a rapport with them. Children's Social Care & Safeguarding in PCC is working with Barnardos to deliver a support service to young people.

Detective Sergeant Hall mentioned that there were good relationships between Children's Social Care & Safeguarding and the police and that channels of communications were good.

In response to a question from panel members regarding the response by the police to children who are habitual absconders, Stephen Kitchman explained that it would depend on the individual and the patterns of behaviour. There could be a need to amend the care plan for example. Some children abscond in order to return to their parent for example. It was pointed out that the police service has a missing person co-ordinator who works with the social care service and collects data on missing young people.

Panel members asked about the information flow between different police forces. Detective Sergeant Hall commented that generally it was not the practice to transfer information to another police authority if a looked after child moved out of the area. However, Stephen Kitchman explained that if a looked after child living in Portsmouth moves out of the area to Hampshire the City Council maintains responsibility and holds all the information about the child. However, they involve local agencies. In other situations, the authority into which the child is moving would call a case conference and request the transfer of information from the police, if applicable. There is a locally agreed protocol regarding missing young people. The protocol was last reviewed on 5 September 2012 and is due for the next review on 19 September 2013.

Detective Sergeant Stewart Hall left at this point at 7.25 pm.

4 Information from Sharon George, Youth Support Commissioning Manager

Sharon George advised that she was taking the place of Jon Gardner, the Youth Offending Manager, who was unable to attend this meeting due to family concerns. She tabled a hand-out prepared by Jon for the panel entitled "Looked after children and involvement with the Youth Offending Team".

(TAKE IN HANDOUT)

Sharon explained that Jon had undertaken an assessment of reoffending rates among young people between January and March 2011. Seventeen per cent of those in the sample were identified as looked after children but between them they had committed 40% of all further offences. This means that looked after children have a reoffending rate higher than that of non-looked after children. She added a note that, despite the fact that some of this cohort had been incorrectly identified as looked after children by the Prevention of Youth Offending team, the findings locally reflect the national picture i.e. 7.3% of looked after children enter the criminal justice system compared with 3% of all children. At the present time 20% of young people on statutory intervention are classified as looked after children. There is concern in relation to the disproportionate amount of looked after unaccompanied asylum seekers who are involved in the criminal justice system at this point in time.

At this point panel members requested a breakdown of the age profile of looked after children offenders. They also requested information about the length of time children were in care before they started offending or if they had been involved in the criminal justice system before they came into care.

Members also commented on the high cost of placing a child in a youth offending institute. They also mentioned the fact that the government was considering changing the sentencing policy from custodial sentences to restorative justice. It was pointed out that there was also a significant discussion around the criminal age of responsibility and the high reoffending rates among young people and it was commented that the Home Office was not moving quickly enough.

Members also commented on the future closure of Kingston Prison mentioning that the work done by the "Through the Gate" project might be adversely affected by the closure. This project had managed to cut the reoffending rate among young people.

Sharon George mentioned the effective practice report produced by the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO). She said she would send the web link to the panel members.

Panel members were advised that from 3 December 2012, all children and young people remanded into youth detention are subject to looked after child status. They will be eligible for leaving care status if they are remanded beyond 13 weeks. A budget will be transferred for this new responsibility from April 2013. The likelihood is that funds will be based on historical three year average with no contingency for spike events. Therefore, Portsmouth City Council faces possible budget pressures. If remand numbers for 2011/12 are replicated for 2013/14, the potential shortfall in funding could be in the region of £150,000.

Regarding the leaving care status, Stephen Kitchman explained that young people were entitled to support up to age 21 or even 25 in some cases where they were in further education. Sharon went on to explain that the Youth Offending Team employed diversionary strategies to prevent young people from entering the criminal justice system. A triage system was operating which involved a three week intensive programme with the aim of preventing young people being recorded in the criminal justice system. The service enjoyed good relationships with the police and a police officer was based in the Portsmouth Youth Offending Team.

Members commented on the troubled families study, suggesting that, as a result, there could be more looked after children or perhaps fewer looked after children. It is hoped that, if the proposals are effective, children could be prevented from becoming looked after. Stephen Kitchman commented on the fact that prevention and early intervention are key factors.

Sharon finished her presentation by inviting panel members to address any further questions via the clerk to the panel.

At this point Sharon George left the meeting.

5 Social work matters relating to support for staff

Karen Jones, Transformation Manager, gave a hand-out to the panel and gave a presentation.

(TAKE IN HANDOUT)

Karen referred to the Eileen Munro report which resulted from the Baby P situation a few years ago. The report focuses, among other matters, about what needs to change regarding supporting social workers. She referred to the key elements in supporting social workers as outlined in the presentation. As a result, a transformation programme entitled "Social Work Matters" was developed. This programme is aimed at improved capacity in children's social care and safeguarding.

The Social Work Matters programme aims to

- reduce the amount of administrative burdens on social workers
- improve the retention of key workers through a more supportive supervision structure
- re-design processes and structures to create more efficient working practices.

Karen mentioned that the Children Improvement Board had made funding available to local authorities to carry this out. Portsmouth City Council had been granted £20,000 and they were one of only nine sites in the United Kingdom that have this status.

A review had been carried on the level of administration support currently in place in Children's Social Care and Sharon George was heading up the implementation of the findings of this survey.

Karen highlighted the fact that retention was an issue amongst the Protection and Court teams. This had an impact on the level of experience of the team. This put a burden on experienced longer serving team members who were constantly having to train new staff, as staff turbulence was high. The key issue is how to support and retain front line staff.

Members commented that there is evidence that social work staff leave Portsmouth City Council's employ because other neighbouring local authorities pay more. Stephen Kitchman advised the service was doing a lot internally to support staff to make Portsmouth a better prospect for employment for social workers. He commented that social workers in Hampshire received more pay and it could be presumed that working in more rural environment would be less stress than working in an urban environment such as Portsmouth. A recruitment and retention review had been held and, as a result, a new strategy had been developed. There were challenges around the structure and procedures involved. Therefore, the structure of the frontline teams had been remodelled to reduce caseloads. A consultant practitioner, an experienced worker, is employed to monitor and support less experienced staff but not in a managerial role. Members commented that the same problems of recruitment and retention of social workers had been discussed for the last ten years.

Karen went on to explain that the emphasis in this new strategy is to look at things from the social worker's perspective. It is not only a matter of looking at the administrative burdens on social workers, but also examining the processes from the professional side of the job.

Members suggested the introduction of iPads and other technology to improve the administrative side of the job. Karen explained that this was being considered and various other technologies were also being looked at. She commented that, for example, hospitals used digital pens and this might be an option. Stephen Kitchman added that the ICS system is very time consuming but it had been prescribed by the government as the system for social workers to use. A website had been created for staff to find updates with a forum based element.

The Social Work Matters programme aims to grow a stable and experienced workforce, to reduce staff turnover which might help to reduce the number of looked after children. The focus was on court teams and the frontline teams. Portsmouth is not alone in experiencing retention issues in social work; it is also a national issue. The service is establishing a healthy network of links with other local authorities. For example, they are sharing good practice with Medway Council. It is believed that networking is benefitting the service.

Stephen Kitchman explained that this is a Portsmouth model. The trailblazer in this field is Hackney Borough Council; as an authority it had managed to reduce the number of looked after children significantly. Therefore, Portsmouth City Council is hoping that investment in staff will lead to improvements for children. The emphasis is to create a culture where staff feels valued.

In response to questions from the panel regarding staff sickness rates among social workers, Stephen Kitchman explained that in small teams any member of staff on long term sickness absence could distort the figures. It was recognised that the sickness issues may relate to the stress of the job. It was also accepted that there was a need to attract the right people to social work and to give them enough support; for example: people with the right skills and qualifications.

In response to a question about whether a cost benefit analysis had been carried out, Stephen Kitchman explained that the budget pressures had been considered and evidence to date of such programmes demonstrated cost effectiveness but that this required up-front investment. The main pressures on the service were Looked After Children costs, which this programme could significantly address. Karen Jones added that the experience at Hackney Borough Council had demonstrated that if you get the fundamentals right you can improve the efficiency of the service thus making it less expensive to deliver.

Officers commented that it was important to get the work environment right so that you can retain staff. The costs associated with a turbulent workforce are only just recruitment costs but also the extra support and training that newer staff need, in addition to the fact that they need to work with lower caseloads than experienced staff. All this drives up the cost of providing the service.

Members referred to the changes in housing benefit which might increase the risk of vulnerable families from London and other areas where rented accommodation was more expensive moving to cheaper housing in Portsmouth. It was suggested that this could lead to higher numbers of looked after children.

The matter of support for foster carers was mentioned and Stephen Kitchman explained that each foster carer was allocated their own social worker. There was buddying support from other carers and there was also professional training for foster carers. There was also support from the CAMHS team for looked after children and they also provided out of hours support.

At this point at 8.30 pm Karen Jones left the meeting.

6 Adoption Report

(TAKE IN REPORT)

Referring to league tables on adoption, Stephen Kitchman explained that there were two indicators:

- (1) the time when a child first becomes looked after prior to moving to adoption
- (2) the time the decision is made regarding adoption to moving in with an adopted parent.

Portsmouth achieved a good score on indicator 2 but did not do so well on number 1. However, he commented that the results were often distorted in Portsmouth as there would often be a small cohort of children who could be difficult to adopt for medical reasons, for example.

In order to deal with this situation, the government has introduced a new indicator which relates to the time that it took for fostered children to become adopted by their foster carer. In that situation Portsmouth's rate went up.

Members stressed that it is important to look at our statistical neighbours in relation to adoption.

Members also referred to the work with Barnardos mentioned by Detective Sergeant Hall and asked for more information on this work. The clerk was requested to find out more about this and either to invite a representative to attend the next meeting or to ask for a short information report to be submitted to the next meeting.

7 Date of Next Meeting

Panel members agreed that the next meeting should be an informal meeting to discuss the way forward. However, depending on whether information from Barnardos is submitted, they might need to hold part of the meeting as a public meeting and part of it as an informal meeting.

The date for the next meeting was agreed as Monday 25 February at 7.00 pm in the ground floor meeting room, Civic Offices.

The meeting concluded at 8.45 pm.

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