

**CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**Minutes of the meeting of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee**  
**held on Thursday, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2011 at 6.00 p.m. in the Scrutiny Meeting**  
**Room, Civic Offices, Telford**

**PRESENT:** Councillors G. Green (Chairman), M. Ion, J. Loveridge, A. Mackenzie, Co-optees A. Atkinson, S. Ali, E. Ofori, M. Ward.

**Also Present:** Cllr. A. McClements; Jim Collins, Head of School Improvement; Karen Perry, Interim Head of Safeguarding; Christine Marsh, Early Intervention Manager; Stephanie Jones, Interim Scrutiny Group Specialist; Tracy Clarke, Scrutiny Officer.

**CYPSC-13 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

**RESOLVED** – that the minutes of the meeting of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee held on the 19th September 2011 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

**CYPSC-14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Councillors P. Watling Cabinet Member for Children & Young People, J Greenaway, C. Turley.

**CYPSC-15 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None.

**CYPSC-16 WORKSHOP ON CHILD POVERTY**

At the Children & Young People Committee meeting in August, members had selected Child Poverty as a topic for the work programme. Members had been informed that a meeting of officers and Cabinet members was due to be held to start to develop a shared understanding of poverty and its causes and to develop strategies for tackling child and family poverty. A workshop had been held with Cabinet members, and the purpose of the work shop at this evening's meeting was to enable scrutiny members to input into the process by generating ideas which could be taken away for consideration and development.

The Early Years Advisor facilitated the workshop. The context of poverty was set. The causes of poverty were complex and could not just be attributed to financial hardship. The effects of poverty on aspirations, self-esteem, personal relationships, educational attainment, employability, health and well-being could be life-long. Research had highlighted the fact that a child from a more affluent family whose early stage attainment is lower than a child deemed to be in poverty will achieve a higher level of attainment at the end of their schooling. The cycle of poverty can be

perpetuated over generations and the cycle needed to be broken. Poverty had substantial implications for public spending on benefits, criminal justice, education and social care.

Nationally 21% of children were living in poverty. There was a growing understanding nationally that the causes of poverty need to be addressed and not just the symptoms. Historically, national and local poverty indicators and performance targets had focussed on the symptoms (such as teen pregnancy, child care, NEETS) rather than on the causes. New indicators were being developed through the Child Poverty Act to measure severe and persistent poverty which would have a focus on the causes.

Nationally the Child Poverty Strategy key drivers were:

- Tackling worklessness
- Tackling poverty
- Strengthening families
- Tackling educational failure
- Tackling poor health

The number of children living in poverty in Telford & Wrekin was 24.1% which equates to between 8,000 and 8,500 children. Furthermore, there were seven wards in the borough with above national average figures for children in poverty.

Brookside had been selected as a pilot area to identify the causes of poverty and how to tackle it. A multi-agency team was in place to take this forward.

There were a number of misconceptions about poverty including:

- That unemployment was just about financial hardship. Unemployment can impact on the aspirations of the whole family and can contribute to a culture of worklessness in families.
- That financial difficulty equated to poverty. This was not necessarily a true indication; good parenting was not always about affluence and there was evidence that good parenting and routines for children could overcome the potentially negative impacts of financial hardship. However, parents locked into an every day battle may require additional support.

Members asked a number of questions:

**How do we define a “child”?**

A child is defined from 0 – 18 years.

**The members agreed that assumptions were being made as to why there are such high figures of poverty in Telford and Wrekin. Can the figures relating to the number of children in poverty in each ward be broken down into street level?**

This data is in the process of being broken down to street level in the pilot area of Brookside. However, this data cannot be published because it may identify specific families and would contravene data protection legislation.

**Why is it important to increase good quality child care provision?**

To put this into context each child aged between 3 – 4 years old is entitled to 15 hours of free childcare over 38 weeks, and research has shown that the outcomes for children improve if they have access to good quality childcare.

The Members agreed that good quality care allows a parent to work but recognised that childcare can be very expensive. The Early Years Advisor highlighted that grants and voucher schemes are available but even with these, the cost of childcare can still make it difficult to manage financially. A Member added that with a higher than average number of low skill levelled jobs in Telford and Wrekin the type of work available often involves weekend and shift work and the availability of child care may not accommodate shift patterns. The Early Years Advisor agreed that good quality care can be even more difficult to find for those working shifts or weekends, or for lone parents, as there is limited good quality overnight provision for children.

**Has the National Curriculum become a contributing factor to the number of children in poverty because prior to this there was a more balanced curriculum including social skills such as budgeting, cooking and planning?**

The National Curriculum focuses on raw standards of attainment, and although some additionality may have been squeezed out, issues of child poverty existed before the introduction of the National Curriculum and no causal link had been established. Additionally, many schools still provided these additional activities.

**How do you think the cycle of poverty can be broken, and why do some manage to break out of it and not others?**

There was a general discussion about this question and various observations were made. Some children appeared to have a greater resilience than others to see a different way of living which inspired them to break the cycle of poverty. The trigger could be a significant person in the child's life such as a relative, teacher, youth service worker etc.

In terms of strategy it was important to consider how to target children most in need of support, including those with unequal access to extra-curricular activities such as music, sport or drama, and there needed to be positive intervention to reach those who do not come forward to access services. The Early Years Advisor highlighted that Children's Centres were set up to provide opportunities for children who would normally not have access to activities. Cllr. Mackenzie commented on the success of the family centre in Sutton Hill. The service was well used and had assisted parents who were not working to become more motivated and get back into education and training by providing a supportive environment.

**Why do you think that the Family Centre in Sutton Hill is a success?**

The family group project in the Community Centre is well established, trusted and appreciated by the community. The centre is well used by toddlers and "young mums" and there is a "buzz" about it. Trust has been built up over a number of years and there is a strong support network so that people help each other. The project is a good example of how community and voluntary groups could provide support and offer stable and reassuring role models of people who have broken the cycle of poverty and are managing their lives. Community Ambassadors are being looked at as a way of building similar "home-grown" projects from within the community. The Council has a role to play in supporting voluntary groups and helping them to attract

funding, and this is being done as part of the Brookside pilot through a multi-agency approach. Sutton Hill can be used as an example of good practice, but Ambassadors will need to be recruited locally in Brookside who know and understand the area and are trusted by the community. The pilot is about genuine consultation with local people to listen to what they want to and to involve them in the design and delivery of local services.

It was agreed that a sub-group of the Committee would visit the Sutton Hill centre to find out more about how the group works and the reasons for its success and report back to the Committee and the service area.

Cllr. Ion made the point that in addition to long-term prevention strategies, immediate financial pressures, such as debt to loan sharks, also needed to be dealt especially in the light of cuts to the Citizen's Advice Bureau and suggested that more should be done to promote credit unions.

Members considered three areas as part of the workshop, and the following points and recommendations were agreed. These would be taken forward for further consideration.

### **1. Causes**

- Low income is too simple a definition – there is more to it than that
- Parenting/caring skills
- Broken homes
- Educational skills for work
- Organisational skills
- Low aspirations
- Life skills

### **2. What would help?**

- Breaking the cycle
- Re-igniting the aspirations – modelling peer coaches
- Relationship – someone to take a real interest in you / mentor
- Targeting help/support where it is most needed
- Improving access to services or activities
- Positive messages – celebrating success

### **3. Recommendations**

- Successful family group
- Community Ambassadors
- Voluntary groups from the community
- Role models of local people who have turned their lives around
- Support mechanism of assistance for local voluntary groups such as the parish council
- Simple model like the Sutton Hill Family Group
- Partnership with Local Authority Services
- Tackle the difficult issues such as:
  - Rogue debt
  - Genuine engagement

- Communities on design and delivery of local services

## **RESOLVED**

- **That a sub group of the Committee would visit the Sutton Hill family group project to find out more about how it works and the reasons for its success and report back to the Committee and the service area.**

## **CYPSC-17 THE PHASE 2 CHILDREN'S SERVICE REVIEW**

The Head of School Improvement and the Interim Head of Safeguarding delivered a presentation on the Phase 2 Family & Community Services and Safeguarding structure proposals. This followed on from the meeting in August when the Committee received a presentation on the Phase 1 proposals.

The Head of School Improvement emphasised that despite budget cuts, the priority for the service remained as always to keep the vulnerable children, young people and adults safe from harm and neglect. However, the budget cuts would have an impact on service delivery and changes would need to be made.

In addition to the information given in the presentation, the following key points were highlighted:

### **School Improvement**

- Relatively few areas of the School Improvement service were affected by the Phase 2 proposals. A key change was the realignment of the Participation Worker for Children in Care post from Safeguarding to School Improvement in recognition of the need to raise levels of attainment for children in care.
- Learning & Behaviour Services had been streamlined to focus on support for Additional Educational Needs (AEN) and away from Special Educational Needs (SEN) in line with the reduced budget and the Green Paper on SEN.
- A review of the management of Pupil Referral Units was on hold pending potential changes in the White Paper which would become the Education Bill.
- Services for the top end of schools at KS4 and beyond would be reviewed in the light of the raising of the school leaving age to 18 by 2013.

### **Early Intervention**

The key aim was to develop three Children and Family Centre hubs based on the Co-operative Learning Communities and Sure Start children's centres working with children aged 0- 19 years to provide a seamless service.

### **Cohesion Services**

This would bring together a range of Council and multi-agency teams to work with families with more complex needs, providing targeted support from universal and family intervention services. This would build on the good work already done on

tacking crime, anti-social behaviour and sexual exploitation and would link into work on homelessness and NEETS.

### **Youth Offending Services**

A strong team was in place but a regional review of the service was taking place and the structure of the service would be deferred until later in 2012 when the West Mercia-wide approach was clearer.

### **Integrated Planning, Placements and Commissioning**

The key principle would be to provide a central team for planning and commissioning of children's services with an enhanced role for the commissioning/contracts officer to support an integrated approach to procuring placements. There would be improved tracking of young people through schools to pick up and support to young people with risky behaviour who may have previously slipped through the net, including young people moving into the borough.

### **Children's Specialist Services**

This would bring all the high-end specialist services for children and young people together in one location to bring economies of scale, drive down costs and improve services. The underlying principles were integrated working and early intervention through multi-disciplinary teams.

### **Family Connect**

Family Connect is fundamental to the reconfiguration of services and restructure. It will provide a single point of contact for all children and family services. There would be a one contact telephone number with a multi-agency team operating a triage system to provide support or sign-post to specialists. The team will be joined-up in one location. This would have a major impact on intractable problems by providing the right support at the right time. The focus will be on early identification, intervention and resolution for presenting issues.

### **Safeguarding**

The key aim was to improve outcomes for children with child protection plans and children in care, to reduce the number of children with protection plans and in care where it is safe to do so, and to improve social work practice in-line with the Munro report.

#### **– Child Protection and Assessment**

The proposal would mainstream the approach to children abused through sexual exploitation. The Safeguarding Duty Desk would be linked to Family Connect and issues would be picked up through the triage process and supported by the Cohesion team and the Safeguarding Advisory Team for complex cases. Child protection issues would be triaged straight to the child protection team.

Assessment and Case Management would be re-aligned into three teams, and there would be a clearer role for non-qualified staff. The link worker to PRH continues but is linked in future to the Community Social work team.

#### **– Children in Care and Fostering**

A senior social worker post would be created to support effective links between the safeguarding service and the placements team. There had been a big,

successful recruitment campaign for foster carers, and the proposals would also strengthen support for foster carers. There would be two fostering teams – one for recruitment and support of mainstream foster carers and a second to support special guardianships, kinship carers and private fostering (i.e. by friends).

- Child In Care and Fostering and Emergency Duty Team (EDT)  
A new specialist Reviewing Officer post would be located into the Safeguarding Advisory Service Conference and Review Team. Foster carers are reviewed on an annual basis or when needed. Training for foster carers was on-going and would be reviewed. Feedback on the EDT would be monitored to ensure it remained effective for the whole community.

There were no great changes to the children in care team and changes were more about the redesign of social workers into groupings around groups of children in care following the Munro recommendations.

- Safeguarding Advisory Services and Corporate Parenting & Professional Social Work lead.  
These services were covered in the presentation slides, but there were no specific points made at the meeting.

Consultation on the School Improvement proposals would end on 4<sup>th</sup> January and consultation on the Family & Community Services and Safeguarding would close on 18<sup>th</sup> January.

Members asked a number of questions:

#### **How are kinship carers monitored?**

All kinship carers are assessed in the same way as other foster carers and will be subject to an annual review. The fostering social worker will support the carer but the child's safety and wellbeing will always be the priority.

#### **What rights do grandparents have with respect to care and contact?**

Grandparents can become kinship carers. When children cannot be looked after by their parents, then other relatives will be assessed to see if they are suitable and this will include grandparents. The local authority can offer support and financial assistance consistent with the foster carers' allowance. Telford & Wrekin has a robust decision making process as to when it is appropriate to make the grandparent a carer. If it is not appropriate and the child is placed elsewhere, the team would assess whether it is in the best interests of the child to have contact with the grandparent and extended family. If it is not appropriate, then the grandparent would need to pursue access to the child through the courts.

#### **How would Members report an issue in their ward?**

Members can phone in and report any issues that are of concern. The single point of contact through Family Connect will take away the confusion of knowing who to report the problem to.

**Why is the number of children coming in to care rising, and is this an indication that some children are being taken unnecessarily into care?**

If support can be put in then children's needs might be managed through a child protection plan and they will stay at home rather than going into care. The child will be taken off the protection plan if they go into care or if the child is no longer deemed to be at risk.

There were now 301 children in care and there had been an increase over the previous months. This was a national trend and the recession had had an impact. Benchmarking was done with other authorities, and the number of children in care per 10,000 children in Telford & Wrekin was lower than for statistical neighbours. Compared to the West Midlands benchmarking group, only the shire counties had a lower pro rata number. Hard work was being done to keep children out of care through earlier intervention, but the priority remained keeping children safe from harm.

**The Family Connect single point of contact is very welcome but a human voice on the end of the phone is very important. Will calls be answered by a person or an automated voice?**

The calls will all be answered by a member of the team.

At the end of the discussion, the following points were agreed:

**RESOLVED**

- **That the Committee would submit a response to the Phase 2 structure proposals. Members would e-mail questions to the Scrutiny Team to request a response. A further meeting would be held in December for the Committee to agree its response.**
- **That there would be a standing item on each Committee meeting agenda to monitor the number of children in care and placement stability.**

**RECOMMENDED**

- **That a Members' Information Seminar should be held to inform members about the Family Connect service and the telephone number.**

The Head of Safeguarding agreed this would be offered to Members.

**CYPSC-18 FORWARD PLAN**

The Chairman advised members that site visits of the Dawley Sports Co-operative Learning Community would take place on 26<sup>th</sup> October and members were welcome to attend. Details would be circulated by the Scrutiny Officer.

It was noted that following the discussion about raising the aspirations and attainment of children in care at the previous meeting, Shaukat Ali had contacted the Scrutiny team and had offered to help broker a scheme with Wolverhampton University and New College to offer contact events for children in care. This was

being taken forward by the Extended Services Manager and further reports would be brought to the Committee.

There was a discussion about future meetings and the following changes to the Forward Plan were agreed:

- A meeting to take part in the consultation on the planning of school places and secondary school provision would be held in December. A report was due to go to Cabinet on 10<sup>th</sup> November.
- A sub-group of the Committee would visit the Sutton Hill family centre.
- The suggestion to consider the Council's relationship with schools in light of the introduction of academies and free schools would be added to the work programme.
- An update on the Mott MacDonald investigation at Abraham Darby would be brought back to the Committee. Members were seeking assurance about the impartiality of the report given that the work would be funded by Kier.

The meeting ended at 8.14p.m.

**Chairman:** .....

**Date:** .....