

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING CABINET COMMITTEE
HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2/3, CIVIC OFFICES, ANGEL STREET, BRIDGEND, ON
MONDAY, 20 JANUARY 2014 AT 10.00AM

Present:

Councillor H J David - Chairperson

Councillor M E J Nott	- Leader
Councillor D Sage	- Deputy Leader
Councillor M Gregory	- Cabinet Member - Resources
Councillor L C Morgan	- Cabinet Member - Wellbeing
Councillor P J White	- Cabinet Member - Communities

Invitees:

Councillor N C Clarke
Councillor E Dodd
Councillor D B F White

Officers:

S Cooper	- Corporate Director - Wellbeing
D McMillan	- Corporate Director - Children
M Shephard	- Corporate Director - Communities
C Turner	- Head of Safeguarding and Family Support
N Echanis	- Group Manager - Integrated Working and Family Support
M A Galvin	- Senior Democratic Services Officer - Committees

52 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None.

53 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

54 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED: That the minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Cabinet Committee held on the 28 October 2013, were approved as a true and accurate record.

55 REGIONAL COLLABORATIVE ADVOCACY PROJECT

The Corporate Director - Children updated Members on the decision for Bridgend to procure the Statutory Independent Professional Advocacy and Independent Visiting services for children and young people independently of the Collaborative Advocacy Project, and informed them of updates in relation to the progress on the procurement exercise of the Independent Professional Advocacy and Independent Visiting Service.

By way of background information, the Head of Safeguarding and Family Support confirmed that since January 2012, the Council had been acting as lead commissioner and project manager to a regional multi agency collaborative commissioning project, which initially included five local authorities and two health boards.

He proceeded by stating that an audit of needs undertaken identified a number of gaps in current commissioned provision, and Paragraph 3.3 of the report, outlined the groups of children and young people involved with social services for which the authority had a statutory duty to commission and make available independent professional advocacy or independent visitor services, including the current arrangements to meet these duties.

This paragraph reflected that the Council was not currently meeting all of its statutory duties to children and young people in relation to independent professional advocacy.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support went on to state, that incrementally, partners had withdrawn from the project for their own individual reasons, which resulted in just this Council and the City and County of Swansea partners remaining in November 2013. With only two partners, it was considered that a joint collaboration was no longer considered a viable option for the reasons shown in paragraph 3.5 of the report.

In view of the above, the Council had made a decision to proceed on its own with the procurement of a comprehensive Independent Professional Advocacy service for all the statutory groups involved with children's social services, and an Independent Visiting service for eligible children and young people, independently to the collaborative approach.

Approval to invite tenders had been granted under Delegated Powers he stated, and the procurement exercise for this new contract had commenced in December 2013. It was anticipated that the procurement exercise would be completed by March 2014.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support, confirmed that the Independent Professional and Independent Visiting Contract would be in place for 2 years with an option to extend for up to 12 months following successful evaluation during year 2. The contract commencement date had been set for the 1st April 2014.

He concluded his submission, by advising that as a result of recommendations made by the Children's Commissioner following the Review of Independent Professional Advocacy Services for looked after children and care leavers 'Missing Voices' (May 2012), the Authority had looked to respond positively to any deficiencies in terms of its statutory duty to provide Advocacy Support and Services. This had included a pre-Council Presentation on the subject of this important topic, issuing Members with a handbook on the subject of Advocacy, and appointing the Cabinet Member - Children and Young People Advocacy Champion for Bridgend.

The Cabinet Member - Children and Young People, then thanked the Officer for presenting the report.

He confirmed his disappointment with partners dropping out of the regional multi-agency collaborative Commissioning Project and hoped that the Local Health Board were undertaking their statutory duties and both fulfilling and discharging their legal responsibilities in terms of services required from them in the support of children and young people.

The Corporate Director - Wellbeing suggested that a representative from the Local Health Board could be invited to a future meeting of the Committee to explain the extent of their role in the provision of Advocacy Services, and Members agreed with this suggestion.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- (1) Noted the reasons for the Council's decision to independently, rather than collaboratively, procure the Independent Professional Advocacy and Independent Visiting Services.
- (2) Noted the progress that is being made in terms of the procurement of the Independent professional Advocacy and Independent Visiting Service to ensure all eligible children and young people in Bridgend are able to access the service from 1 April 2014.

48 UPDATE ON CONNECTING FAMILIES INCLUDING PROGRESS OF EVALUATION AND UPDATE ON FUTURE FINDING

The Corporate Director - Children submitted a report, the purpose of which was to provide Committee with:

- an update regarding the progress of Connecting Families including the evaluation of the service;
- an update on the future plans for the continuation of funding for the service

The Group Manager - Integrated Working and Family Support, confirmed that Connecting Families was a Local Service Board (LSB) initiative in Bridgend that worked with the most complex and vulnerable families in the area who placed a large and disproportionate demand on public services and their local communities. It brought together partners from Bridgend County Borough Council, South Wales Police, the Department for Works and Pensions, Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board and the Probation Service, to provide an integrated support service that aided vulnerable or complex families with improving their lifestyles and behaviour.

The service had been evaluated in the summer of 2013, when the project had been operating for just over 18 months. A draft report was produced in October 2013 and a final version was published in November 2013. The Group Manager - Integrated Working and Family Support referred Members to an Executive Summary of this (including an Evaluation Report), at Appendix 1 to the report.

The main aims of the evaluation she explained, were to:

- Examine the impact that Connecting Families has been perceived to make to the lives of families who have used the service.
- Gather evidence on the implementation and delivery of the Connecting Families Project regarding what is working well and what could be done better to inform future practice.

The Group Manager - Integrated Working and Family Support, stated that the evaluation identified a number of areas in which the investigations found significant improvements for families and for children and these were identified as follows:-

- Lowering of the legal status of the child due to improved parenting practice.
- Better family relationships.
- Broader wellbeing of the family.
- Increased parental wellbeing and confidence.
- Help with practical issues.

- Support from partner agencies.
- Positive relationships with other services.
- Sustainable changes and costs avoided.

These were expanded upon individually within the report.

In terms of the reports financial implications, the Group Manager - Integrated Working and Family Support confirmed that Connecting Families was originally a 3 year project which was funded through ESF Grant Funding, LA Core budgets, earmarked reserves and SMAT.

She explained that the ESF grant funding came to an end in December 2014, and the earmarked reserve will be fully utilised by the end of March 2014. An invest to save business case had been completed for the continuation of the project into 14/15, and it had been agreed that funding of £131k will be provided from the Strategic Change Programme Fund for 2014/15.

By focusing on preventative work, and helping to curb or reduce the number of children becoming Looked After, or families breaking down, the project had resulted in cost savings across a wide range of partners. Consequently, in order to continue with the project going forward from 2014/15, the Council needed to seek financial contributions from these partners.

Members then proceeded to watch a short DVD regarding the benefits the Connecting Families Project could bring to certain families.

The Cabinet Member - Children and Young People advised that it was positive to note that projects such as Connecting Families were in being, as this provided excellent support and intervention that helped prevent individuals from being placed in care.

A Member noted also that support for the project was saving the Authority a considerable amount of money, i.e. well in excess of £1m, and not only this, a considerable number of organisations other than the Council, were also benefitting from the Project.

He added that there was an effective synergy between services such as Connecting Families, and the Integrated Families Support Service, and Officers agreed with this comment.

A Member whilst recognising the considerable benefits of the Project, asked Officers to consider exploring further avenues of external funding to continue with it, as opposed to financially assisting its support centrally through the Departments budget, which for LAC this year as in previous years, was showing an overspend.

The Corporate Director - Children felt that funding for continuation of the Project in the future, could perhaps come from a form of cashable savings and/or the setting-up of a Community Budget, one of the issues that would be discussed with the Local Service Board at a workshop that had been arranged next week.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the contents of the report.

54 **DRAFT STRATEGY TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN (LAC) AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN BRIDGEND**

The Corporate Director - Children submitted a report, which informed the Corporate Parenting Cabinet Committee of the Council's "refreshed" Strategy to reduce the number of LAC in Bridgend.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support, stated that Members would be aware that throughout the last decade, there had been a significant increase in the overall number of Looked After Children in Bridgend, with a 31% increase being experienced in the last three years. This had resulted in major pressures upon Safeguarding and Family Support Services and associated budgets. It was also suggested that a significant number of children and young people in Bridgend are not experiencing childhoods conducive to wellbeing or achieving their full potential. Consequently, in order to direct a strategic response to the growing numbers of Looked After Children, the Council intended to publish a strategy to reduce the number of Looked After Children, and draft of this was attached at Appendix 1 of the report, together with an Action Plan that would be developed in due course.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support confirmed that the Strategy recognised that to be effective in reducing numbers of looked after children will require that the Strategy is continually reviewed, sound leadership, rigorous approaches to prevention and early intervention, targeted interventions to children and families with complex needs, (particularly where there are children on the cusp of care), clearly defined approaches to social work practice, a strong collaborative working approach to working with children and families and a proactive use of relevant data, information and intelligence in respect of looked after children. All of these components were detailed in the draft Strategy he added.

The Strategy had recently been presented to the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the People's Partnership Board. Members of both bodies welcomed the Strategy, but endorsed the importance of it being managed as a bespoke project. Consequently, the Corporate Director - Children had submitted a bid for additional funding to resource a Project Manager to oversee the delivery of the Strategy.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support then shared with Members some key information from the Strategy covering the following areas:-

1. Purpose and aims of the Strategy;
2. History of Bridgend's Social Services (where are we now?);
3. Findings from national and local research and related plans and strategies;
4. Trends in Bridgend's LAC population and family characteristics (including statistical information and data);
5. Current services, including Multi-Agency Community Teams;
6. Resource Implications;
7. Where BCBC want to be;
8. How does it get there.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support confirmed that the increase in the number of children and young people becoming LAC, had seen an inevitable correlation in an increase in associated council budgets, and Appendix 2 to the report, provided financial information relevant to the aspects within this report.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support, confirmed that as a result of research that had been undertaken by external consultants in order to shape the Action Plan, one of the key findings to come from this was that for BCBC's Strategy to be successful, the Authority had to be very clear of its population numbers in terms of LAC. From this, Children's Services were then able to have a less difficult job of identifying those at risk, and subsequently taking action to put in place a permanency plan for these individuals.

He added that on occasions the Department also had to respond to needs of children and young people as a matter of urgency, through the Courts.

In the last ten days, Officers had to pursue through the Court's three Emergency Orders, to take over the custody of children who were the subject of abuse and/or neglect by the parents or parent, of three different families.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support confirmed that the above events and resulting course of action typified the difficulties that Children's Services experienced in the support of LAC, which as Members were aware, was a very volatile service area.

He emphasised the need for both an inter and multi-agency approach in relation to support mechanisms for LAC, i.e. from organisations such as the LSB and other key partners, and he hoped that the draft Strategy would encourage this.

A Member noted from page 4 of the Strategy that the service had improved, though historically and at present there were difficulties that sometimes could not be easily overcome with regard to numbers of LAC rising. There had also been difficulties previously experienced with the recruitment and retention of social workers and sickness absence. He asked if currently these problems were reducing.

The Corporate Director - Children confirmed that there was a considerable amount of pressure on social workers due to both the nature of their work and the rising number of cases of LAC. This often resulted in these Officers experiencing absence due to stress related illnesses. This form of absence was sometimes long term, and in cases such as this, the service then had to engage the support of agency staff.

She added that to look to combat the above, and look at ways to reduce the number of caseloads of social workers the Department were introducing a Workforce Strategy. A marketing campaign was also underway to recruit more experienced social workers rather than just those that were newly qualified.

The Corporate Director - Wellbeing added that social workers also worked long hours and this compounded stress levels. She felt that it would be helpful for Members if a further report was presented to a future Committee Meeting on the outcomes that arise from the Workforce Strategy.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support recognised the financial knock-on effect to the Authority as a result of the long-term sickness of social workers, but stressed the importance of replacement staff having to be called upon if such a situation arose, as quite simply, the Authority could not put children at risk by not providing them with adequate support. He added that previously (3 years ago) there were 27 agency staff in Children's services and this had now reduced to just 3.

A Member pointed out that it was important for social workers to have in place sound mechanisms of support for any stress related illnesses they may experience, for example, through counselling and direct support from their Manager, who should receive training to identify early the signs and symptoms of stress in staff who undertake this very important role within the Authority.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support advised that such a policy/procedure was in place in Children's Services. He reiterated that social workers were vulnerable in that they were more exposed to stress than certain other employees due to the nature of their work, the number of caseloads they had, and the deadlines they were required to meet which were monitored through performance indicators.

The Chairperson had noted that there were a considerable amount of teenage girls within the County Borough becoming pregnant at a young age, and sometimes as a result of this, they were not fully capable of looking after their children who were then having to be placed into care. He felt that this issue required to be looked into by all the supporting agencies that had an involvement in LAC.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support advised that there was a multi-agency approach in terms of looking at ways to reduce cases of the above, and this matter could be addressed through the Strategy's Action Plan.

The Chairperson acknowledged this, but added that the Actions required in the Action Plan needed to be monitored and time scaled, with dates inserted as to when they would be implemented.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support replied by stating that some Actions in the Plan were in the process of being implemented, and as was alluded to earlier in the debate, they would all be completed soon, with the outcomes then subsequently being presented to Committee. The aims and objectives of the Strategy would also in turn be monitored in terms of performance through meetings of the Corporate Performance Assessment.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted and considered the contents of the report and attached Appendices.

55 INFORMAL FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME - JANUARY - APRIL 2014

The Corporate Director - Children submitted a report that attached at Appendix 1, a list of items that comprised the above Work Programme, to be considered at both today's and the next scheduled meeting.

The Head of Safeguarding and Family Support asked Members if they had any suggested items for inclusion in the Informal Forward Work Programme (IFWP), to be placed on the agenda of the next meeting of the Committee after the April meeting.

Members and Officers debated this matter and suggested that consideration be given for the following items to be added to the IFWP and earmarked for future meeting(s).

- (a) Update on LAC Strategy.
- (b) Workforce Efficiency and Development (including cost implications).
- (c) Inspection of Vulnerable and LAC (all 22 Welsh local authorities subject to an inspection).
Note: This report will outline the findings and any subsequent actions required as a result of the Inspection.
- (d) Inspection of Fostering Service (Report to consider and recommend upon the outcomes of this Inspection).

The Corporate Director - Wellbeing added that she would also circulate in due course to Committee Members the responsibilities of the Corporate Director - Children, the Head of Safeguarding and Family Support and herself, and how these were going to be managed and integrated (where appropriate), going forward in the future, due to the close relationship of their respective roles.

RESOLVED: That the Corporate Parenting Cabinet Committee approved the Informal Forward Work Programme as appended to the report, together with the additional items:-

- (1) Update on LAC Strategy.
- (2) Workforce Efficiency and Development.
- (3) Outcomes/Actions of the Inspection of Vulnerable and LAC.
- (4) Inspection of Fostering Service

The meeting closed at 12.12pm.