



Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board

Wednesday, 26 October 2011

-: Present :-

Councillor Thomas (J) (Chairman)

Councillors Bent, Brooksbank (in place of Barnby), Butt, Darling, Kingscote, Parrott, Pentney and Pountney

(Also in attendance: Councillors Davies, Faulkner (J), James, and the Mayor)

345 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Penny Burnside and Leon Butler.

In accordance with the wishes of the Conservative Group, the membership had been amended for this meeting by including Councillor Brooksbank instead of Councillor Barnby.

346 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Board held on the 21 September 2011 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

347 Children's Partnership Improvement Plan

The Board considered a report on the Children's Partnership Improvement Plan. The Executive Lead Member for Children, Schools and Families introduced the Children's Partnership Improvement Plan to the Board. The Board was advised that the Plan would deliver a marked improvement over a two-year period. The Board was informed that a backlog of cases had been addressed and that caseloads were reduced from more than thirty to approximately twenty per social worker.

The Acting Director of Children's Services acknowledged previous assurances given around improvements being made in six months and indicated that improvements would take at least two years. The Board was advised that the Plan would involve children and young people, a group of parents, and frontline staff from across agencies. The Board was informed of further details of the Plan, including the appointment of an experienced project manager to the project and the formation of a project board. Arrangements to help learn best practice from high performing Children's Services at other local authorities were outlined to the Board. The Acting Director of Children's Services indicated a need to change culture within Children's Services and that this was an aim of the improvement plan.

In response to questions concerning social worker capacity and training, the Board was advised that national guidance on the number of cases per social worker was set at fifteen to twenty and that this had informed the improvement plan. The Board was advised of investment in new staff and new training. The Board was informed of a continuing national shortage of qualified social workers.

Members asked for details of how many senior social workers were employed and were advised of investment in a career development pathway and the retention of a senior social worker practitioner role.

Members questioned the availability and accessibility of safeguarding training to the community and voluntary sector. In reply, the Board was advised that training was available. A representative of the sector advised the Board that further clarity on accessing the training was needed. The Board was advised that national safeguarding improvement week would take place the week beginning 21 November 2011.

Members questioned the impact on other areas of Children's Services of £500,000 of extra funding for intensive family support. Members were advised that savings would be achieved from reduced employment of agency staff. The Board members were advised of increasing costs of placements for children in care and that alternatives through intensive family support were less costly and would achieve better outcomes.

In reply to questions concerning the overall financial impact of the improvement plan on Children's Services and other Council services, the Acting Director of Children's Services indicated that difficult decisions would need to be taken about the range of services provided currently and whether they focused on improving outcomes for children and young people. The Board was informed that the Council would look to work in partnership with the voluntary sector.

Members questioned the links and transition for users between Torbay's children's social care services and adult social care services. The Acting Director of Children's Services indicated that this area had not been looked at in as much detail as others and that Children's Services would be adopting a locality model of working similar to that introduced by adult social services.

With reference to previous requests from the Overview and Scrutiny Board for monthly performance data relating to safeguarding, Board members questioned the reduced frequency of performance data and management mechanisms. In addition, the Board members asked whether the progress reports for and from the safeguarding improvement board would be shared with Overview and Scrutiny. In reply, the Acting Director of Children's Services indicated that performance data was circulated bi-monthly, that meaningful analysis of data was all-important, and that the reporting of progress needed refining and he would be able to discuss the requirements of Overview and Scrutiny at a later date.

In reply to questions about public confidence in the Bay's capacity to deliver safeguarding improvements, the Board was advised by a representative of the

community and voluntary sector that leadership and communication had improved under the direction of the Acting Director of Children's Services. The representative of the community and voluntary sector described frustrations with the stated desire of the Council that the voluntary sector be involved in safeguarding at the same time as the withdrawal of grants to the sector was proposed as part of the Council's Budget consultation for 2012/13. The Board was informed that adult social services in Torbay provided training free for the voluntary sector whereas Children's Services charged voluntary sector organisations. The Board was advised by the representative of the community and voluntary sector that the Council's commissioning processes needed to be simpler and more consistent for competing for contracts. The chair of Torbay Safeguarding Children Board indicated the importance of raising public confidence.

In reply to questions, Board members were advised of a shortage of care placements across the region, the high cost of such placements, and how the improvement plan focused on an alternative strategy to placements.

In response to questions, the Acting Director of Children's Services advised that there would not be an offload of work to the voluntary sector; he indicated that the sector had significant capacity to provide solutions, including advocacy, in a different manner.

Members questioned the extent to which corporate parenting was understood and embedded throughout the Council and whether it was included in appraisals for senior staff. The Chief Executive Officer, Torbay Council, advised that corporate parenting responsibility would be considered for the next set of targets for Executive Head posts and above.

Members questioned the partnership working in relation to Devon Partnership NHS Trust. The Board was advised by a representative from Torbay Care Trust that more could be done to prevent individuals falling between services and that improved communication and understanding was needed.

The Board was advised that the change in office accommodation for the Children's Services social care team reflected both the priority accorded the service by the Council and recognised that integration was an important element of the culture change desired. The Chief Executive, Torbay Council, indicated that an open culture in which staff and young people were listened to was desired.

The representative of the community and voluntary sector advised the Board that there was some cultural resistance between partners but, partly due to the political and financial environment, change was beginning. The chair of Torbay Safeguarding Children Board suggested that at a practitioner-level partnership working was performing well and it had improved significantly at Board-level.

Members asked for information about the challenges identified by Operation Mansfield. In reply, a representative of Devon and Cornwall Police and safeguarding manager for Operation Mansfield advised that improvements had

been introduced locally, that a Serious Case Review was to occur in relation to Operation Mansfield, and that child exploitation was a national problem.

With reference to the experiences of recent visits to social work teams undertaken by members of the Overview and Scrutiny Board, members questioned what mechanisms were in place to support social workers emotionally. Members were assured that support was available to individual social workers.

Members questioned partnership working between social services for adults and Children's Services. In reply the Board was advised of measures that would strengthen partnership working including the Shadow Health and Wellbeing Board, the return of the Director of Public Health post to the Council in April 2012, and the return of the Director of Adult Social Services post to the Council. A representative of the community and voluntary sector suggested a voluntary sector member on the Health and Wellbeing Board would aid further partnership working.

In response to questions, Board members were advised of the quality assurance mechanisms of the safeguarding improvement plan, including the involvement of parents and young people.

Board Members questioned the quality of assessments and asked for the percentage of children with more than one referral. The Board members were advised that in relation to national figures and to statistical neighbours, the percentage of children under protection plans who had previously had a protection plan was low. Members debated the desirability of a low re-referral rate.

The Mayor addressed the meeting and welcomed the greater involvement of young people indicated within the improvement plan. He indicated the nature of the problems confronting the Bay meant that a quick-fix solution was not possible and the two-year plan of steady improvement was needed.

Members recapped key information presented and considered possible findings. A number of points were raised during the ensuing discussion, including:

- the previous assurances offered to Overview and Scrutiny for improvements by April 2011 and the value of beginning an overview and scrutiny review panel;
- the value of including corporate parenting within an overview and scrutiny task and finish panel examining children's safeguarding;
- the value of visiting frontline staff and the different perspectives obtained from such visits;
- the advisability of disseminating the findings of Operation Mansfield and assuring that communities are protected;
- the need for appropriate information sharing between adults' and children's services;

- the value in engagement with young users of the service;
- a need to improve relations with the voluntary sector and also to recognise that children can often relate more to a volunteer than to a professional;
- the value of a Deep Dive-style investigation to facilitate improved working between the Council and the third sector;
- the need for Overview and Scrutiny to be involved in performance management issues, whether monthly or bi-monthly;
- that the review requirements of Overview and Scrutiny be sensitive to the workload of Children's Services;
- the relevant Children's Champion report to Overview and Scrutiny more regularly; and
- the key role of partners and merit in assuring their level of commitment.

(Note: Prior to consideration of the item in Minute 347, Councillor Butt declared a personal interest as a member of the People Policy Development (Children's).)

(Note: Prior to consideration of the item in Minute 347, Councillor Parrott declared a personal interest as a member of the People Policy Development (Children's).)

(Note: Prior to consideration of the item in Minute 347, Councillor Pentney declared a personal interest due to her granddaughter receiving support from Children's Services.)

348 Councillor's Call for Action – Levels and appropriateness of methylphenidate (including Ritalin) prescribed for children and young people in Torbay

The Board considered a Councillor Call for Action on the issue of methylphenidate prescriptions for children and young people in the Bay, with a view to determining whether to request the preparation of a full report on the matter for submission to a subsequent meeting of the Board.

Councillor Parrott outlined to the Board his reasons for the Councillor Call for Action, including his attempts to pursue other avenues to obtain relevant information.

Resolved: (i) that the Board be provided with a full report on the matters raised by the Councillor Call for Action, including:

- available information on methylphenidate use in Torbay;
- the numbers of children and young people (that is to say, 0-18 year olds) on Ritalin-type medication in Torbay, in particular 0-5 year olds;

- detail of the increase in Ritalin-type prescriptions within Torbay for the last ten years and an explanation for the increase;
 - comparative and contextual information for the above, e.g., comparative prescription rates between Torbay and other areas;
 - details of alternatives to medication offered in the first instance to children, including the local protocol for Ritalin-type medication; and
 - incidences of misuse by adults of Ritalin-type medication prescribed for children with ADHD as a recreational drug.
- (ii) that Councillor Parrott lead on the issue for Overview and Scrutiny.