

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Children Services Task and Finish Panel **Date:** Monday, 28 March 2011

Place: Committee Room 2, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 5.30 - 7.55 pm

Members Present: Councillors Mrs L Wagland (Chairman), Ms R Brookes, Mrs P Brooks, Mrs T Cochrane, Mrs R Gadsby, Ms J Hedges and J Knapman

Other Councillors: Councillors R Barrett and A Boyce

Apologies: -

Officers Present: J Chandler (Assistant Director (Community Services and Customer Relations)) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance: Cllr R Gooding, W Ogle-Welbourn and Ms L VanClay

27. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that there were no substitute members.

28. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Pursuant to the Member's Code of Conduct, Councillor John Knapman declared a personal interest in Item 6 of the agenda – Discussions with ECC, by virtue of him being a member of the ECC Children and Young Person Scrutiny Committee.

29. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The notes from the meeting held on 25 January 2011 were agreed as a correct record.

30. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Panel noted their Terms of Reference.

31. DISCUSSION WITH ECC

The Chairman welcomed Essex County Councillor Ray Gooding, the Deputy Portfolio Holder for Schools, Children and Families and a West Children's Commissioning and Delivery Board member; Wendi Ogle-Welbourn, ECC Director for Commissioning, Schools, Children and Families; and Lonica VanClay, ECC Locality Commissioner in West Essex.

Wendi Ogle-Welbourn tabled notes on what the Schools, Children and Families section did and their strategy for the delivery of services within a constrained budget.

The Council knew that savings were on their way and they needed an analysis of spending and where cuts could be reasonably made.

The Panel noted that:

- The County had a budget for 2011/12 of £228million and would have to make a saving of £46 million over the next three years;
- They were looking at back office functions and taking out duplications of actions, both outside and within the Council;
- They were improving the IT systems and access to information;
- They were re-negotiating on pricing with providers of residential and school places;
- There was about £30million spent on fostering and about £7million on school placement;
- They were presently going through a tendering process;
- Last year there were cuts in commissioned services related to Area Based Grants (sustainable travel, school travel advisors, school development projects, teenage pregnancy);
- There will be a restructure and re-provision of Children's Residential Services;
- ECC will now look at each child's needs and tailor services to fit;
- That child care was to be reduced by just over £8 million;
- The integrated youth services budget was to be cut by approximately 50% from £14million to about £7million;
- They will carry out a 'Needs' analysis and a 'Value for Money' analysis;
- £1.5million would be held back on NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training);
- There will be a review of Home to School transport provision to remove the discretionary elements (escorts to be provided on a needs basis). The review will be on needs, the transport provisions would not be just withdrawn;
- Cumulative total savings across 3 years would be just over £46 million;
- They hope to reduce the number of Children that needed to be looked after, particular those in residential care (noted that there are 1600 looked after children in Essex, other similar authorities have about 1300, if this could be reduced large savings could be made);
- However, of the 1600 looked after children only 120 were in care homes. It should be emphasised that most of the children were not in care homes.
- If the number of looked after children are reduced and savings made, ECC would reinvest 25% of that saving into childcare; and
- They were also looking to increase the number of foster carers for difficult to place children, instead of putting them in homes.

The meeting was then opened up for questions:

Q. Child Protection issues, this is something faced by most Councillors, what should they do? I was told that there were no resources to deal with this and that cases like this should not be dealt with by local councillors but left to the professionals.

A. The way care was structured made it difficult to know who to go to. The new structure would make it easier. If you have any concerns you should go to the 'safeguarding board'. There are now systems in place which should be help. Officers hoped that the Munroe Review would help once completed.

Q. On child protection, does ECC do random testing of their services, and how do you measure outcomes?

A. We have had good outcome from the 'Initial Response Team' which is now staffed with experienced social workers. Once they come to a conclusion about a

referral they would contact the initial referrer and notify them of the outcome. Any problems should be referred back to ECC so they are aware of problems.

Q. Social Workers are not the easiest of people to contact. A structure was needed to deal with this as there was not enough information on what people could do.

A. There was a need to raise awareness especially of the Initial Response Team for any initial contacts. There was also a need to be clearer on the various agencies responsibilities.

Q. Is there any revised training that Councillors could undertake?

A. There is an e-learning package that needs to be widely publicised.

Q. We need social workers who are not filling in forms all the time; is that likely to happen?

A. This is why the Munroe Review will be important. Social Workers do have too many forms to fill in at present, which is distracting from their real work.

Q. £46 million was a lot of savings to make.

A. Some of the money will go elsewhere, such as schools, to do some of the work that we can't.

Q. Officers need to get better at doing their jobs; going on refresher courses at least once a year would be helpful.

A. There are monthly audits done, with senior managers looking at processes. There are also some mystery shopping exercises happening.

Q. Why do we not have a local Care-home in Epping Forest?

A. We are looking for Foster carers nowadays. Children Homes are only used for youngsters so the numbers would be quite small. There is 'The Willows' in Epping Forest. We like to keep the children in the same school and look to their individual needs and not just put them in the nearest home.

Q. A lot of foster carers cite money as the reason they do the job. Can we complete with other areas financially, especially as we are so close to London?

A. We go to outside organisations to provide foster carers and pay the national standard rate. However, a lot of London Boroughs purchase foster carers in Essex so we end up in a bidding war. It's a balancing act. We need to build good partnership with the providers and ensure that the carers have access to resources for their use. A great many foster carers are not just looking at the financial package but at the overall package (background resources) provided by the authorities. Along with this, money needed to go into preventative work.

Q. What about prevention work, a small intervention in the beginning would save a lot in the long run.

A. The individual agencies have been given a 'pot' of money to help individual children and give them some practical help.

Q. Some councils use older people as grandparents, do we?

A. We will be looking into this.

Q. What about the transformation and redesign of pre-school services?

A. They are looking at the minus 5 month (pre-birth) to 5 year age range, and at such things as giving families access to more information. They are also looking to go into the communities to look at the people who do not use children centre's and why.

Q. Is there a shortage of Health Visitors?

A. Yes, a massive shortage in the Essex area, but there is a large programme going on for up-skilling current health workers and recruiting new ones.

Q. A couple of local schemes have enormous positive outcomes such as trampolining and the 'Crucial Crew' initiatives. Will these be kept?

A. We will still retain local funding and this will be looked at again next year when we may need to go out to procurement. It cannot be predicted what would be cut back in years to come.

Q. What will the effect be on Youth services such as Connections?

A. It would make a big difference to these services, we will continue with web based access but we will go out to the voluntary and community sectors instead of doing it in house, as they have the expertise. Connections would take the biggest hit; staff would be made redundant or redeployed, as the services would not be re-commissioned. Schools will be asked to take up the slack and they would get extra money for this.

Q. A cut in the budget of 50%, £7 million out of £14 million needs some analysis, what will happen to youth workers?

A. Youth services will continue and will be divided into quadrants. There are no recommendations as yet to close them down. Universal youth services will fall. In the long term we will go out to tender for youth workers, a lot of services will be put out to the voluntary sector and other providers. It will have a big impact.

Q. Do you have any statistics for children in care in Epping Forest and other more generalised information we could use to back up our arguments for both us and our residents

A. Yes, we can supply you with it if you like.

Q. There has always been a lack of social workers, as I have experienced over the years.

A. We are looking to develop a breath of courses from looking after young children to adults and their needs, not just concentrating on children's needs. We are also looking at short breaks for families etc.

Q. Parents get worn down by all this, we need good structures in place to handle the disconnect of managers to those on the ground. Better outcomes and more common sense was needed.

A. We share your concerns, we now have a social workers academy which we put new social workers through to improve their skills. The Munroe Review will also help us in this. We are hopeful and confident that things will change, but not overnight. Recent cases have made social workers risk adverse, they need backing and to get rid of the blame culture.

The Chairman noted that local councillors needed to see improvements in the service offered as there was concern in the council about the service offered in the past. Unfortunately once a reputation has been lost it was very difficult to build up again. We need to see some positive experiences.

Q. People are not happy with the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHs) centrally commissioned services, it needed to be adjusted for local conditions. It need not cost a lot; small things such as a trampolining programme could help improve children's self esteem and has worked very effectively here in Epping Forest.

A. The Children's fund has set up the Local Priority Fund and this has two big priorities of emotional health and well being and CAMHs. We have protected the CAMHs grant and there will be some local money going to the districts for smaller local services.

The Chairman commented that there were concerns about communications, not losing things that work and knowing what to do when councillors come across problems. There was a lot to be said for producing written protocols.

Councillor Knapman said that elected members must have the right to judge outcomes and hold the experts to account. To do this they would need outcome data and not just the process data so they could address the quality of performance. Councillor R Gooding said that he did not disagree with that assessment.

The Chairman thanked County Councillor Gooding and County officers Wendi Ogle-Welbourn and Lonica VanClay for coming to answer the Panels questions and help them in their scrutiny. Local Councillors would really like to help the county in their role and would like to know what they could do. She would also like to take up their kind offer to come back and let us know the outcome of the Munroe Review.

32. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was introduced.

CHAIRMAN