

Report to Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 29 November 2010

**Subject: Interim Report of the Children's Task and
Finish Panel**

Officer contact for further information: Julie Chandler (01992 56 4214)

Committee Secretary: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246)



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- 1) To receive an interim report of the Children's Services Task and Finish Panel**
- 2) To note the Panel's concerns in regard to Essex County Council's recent amendments to the county structure for Children's Services which will see the deletion of District Children's Partnerships from the core business, and concerns in respect of the planned Essex-wide and preferred partner approach to commissioning children's services**
- 3) That Overview and Scrutiny Panel consider whether it wishes to respond formally to Essex County Council in regard of the above**

Executive Summary

The Children's Services Task and Finish Panel was initially established to inform a decision on whether the Council should sign up to the Memorandum of Understanding with Essex Children's Trust in respect of Safeguarding Children. It also sought to gather information regarding local provision for children and young people, including the Council's own Community Services work and Youth Services function provided through Essex County Council.

The initial meeting of the Panel was held on September 21st and it was noted at this meeting that Essex County Council had announced a revision of Children's Trust arrangements. This was stated to be in line with the new coalition government guidelines and in response to findings of the County Council's second Ofsted in August, which deemed the Council's Safeguarding arrangements and some Children's Services provision to be 'Unsatisfactory'.

Within this new structure it would not be necessary for local district councils to sign the memorandum. The terms of Reference of the Panel were therefore amended in light of this. It was also noted that the only evident change to the Essex structure for children's services was the deletion of the District Children's Partnerships and this had raised serious concerns amongst local stakeholders on Epping Forest Children's Partnership, including schools, voluntary sector and Managers of Essex Youth services.

More recently the Panel were informed of the concerns of officers and Education Leads from Epping Forest, Uttlesford and Harlow Council's on the decisions being taken by Essex in regard to county-wide commissioning.

The following detailed report outlines actions undertaken by the Panel to date.

Report

1. The Council's Cabinet Committee received a presentation from Essex County Council in April 2010, which outlined the Essex Children's Trust Structure and Memorandum of Agreement requiring signing by Districts in respect to Safeguarding and Children's services. At this meeting, Cabinet took the decision not to sign the Memorandum of Agreement on the basis that an adequate explanation could not be given to explain to the committee what 'aligning of resources' would actually require of the Council. In addition, members of Cabinet and interested members of the Council attending the meeting had been very concerned by the Ofsted report on Essex County Council which had 'red-flagged' some areas of Children's Services provided.
2. The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee was therefore asked to establish a Task and Finish panel to consider the Council's role and approach to delivery of children's services under the new trust arrangements and to make recommendations as to whether the Council should sign up to the Memorandum of Understanding with Essex Children's Trust.
3. The Task and Finish Panel were also asked to gather information regarding local provision for children and young people, including the Council's own Community Services work, work undertaken by the voluntary sector and Youth Services provided through Essex County Council.
4. The initial meeting of the Panel was held on September 21st 2010. At this meeting Members were advised by the Council's Lead Officer that Essex County Council had announced a revision of Children's Trust arrangements including withdrawal of the Memorandum of Agreement. This was stated to be in line with the new coalition government guidelines and in response to findings of the County Council's recent Ofsted in August, which had again judged some of the Council's services to be 'Unsatisfactory'. Revised Terms of Reference for the Panel were therefore agreed in light of these changes. (As included in Background Papers to this report).
5. Members were also advised that the County Council had instigated a series of Commissioning meetings for West Essex, in regard to the proposed commissioning of specific Children's Services across Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford. These were to be held in October with the purpose of confirming local priorities to ensure effective commissioning from April 2011.
6. The Panel were presented with an overview of children's and young people's service provision across the district, outlining the key work delivered through the EFDC Council's Community Services Teams; Essex Youth Services and the Voluntary Sector. The presentation also highlighted the proposed new Essex structure for children's services and the deletion of the District based Children's Partnerships as part of this. Members were advised of the importance of the Epping Forest Children's Partnership (EFCP) to local stakeholders including schools and the voluntary sector, who see this forum as a key route to improving children's services for Epping Forest children. This had been demonstrated through the effective partnership and collaborative working that takes place.
7. It was also noted that this partnership had been effective in securing further delivery of several key and successful projects that had been closed down as part of the County's withdrawal of Performance Reward Grant Funding. This had been achieved by actively pooling financial and physical resources.
8. The presentation also detailed the County-wide structure for Safeguarding Children and young people and the Council's contribution to this. It was noted that EFDC's own Section 11 Inspection in regard to Safeguarding had been held up as a model of best

practice, whereas Ofsted had judged Essex Safeguarding as 'improved' but still 'Unsatisfactory'.

9. The panel agreed that the various members should research different aspects of the Children's Services Review and a range of responsibilities were allocated, with members required to report back at the next meeting in November.

10. In the intervening period, the Lead Officer sent a range of correspondence to Essex County Council which included a letter outlining EFCP concerns around the proposed deletion of Children's Partnerships from the County structure. The response from the County Locality Manager for West Essex advised that the Children's Partnerships in West districts were unique, as there were no others established in place across Essex. Two further papers were sent to the Locality Manager providing suggestions for local commissioning. These were based on the successes of locally developed interventions to address self esteem and emotional welfare issues amongst disadvantaged children and those with additional needs, and key, evidenced programmes to tackle obesity in primary school children.

11. During this period the County commissioning meetings took place and a range of concerns were raised by West area stakeholders in regard to the apparent drive by Essex to commission services on an Essex-wide basis. This led to a meeting of District Council Officers, Education Leads and Children's Centre providers from West Essex, prior to the planned final commissioning meeting on November 4th.

12. At this meeting, the concerns of local partners were realised as it was confirmed that Essex had indeed pursued a preferred partner route and Essex-wide approach to commissioning key services for children. This approach being in complete contrast to the Governments' plans for 'Big Society' and 'Place Based Budgeting'. In light of this, it was agreed that the group would present their concerns as a united body at the final commissioning meeting and request that County consider a local commissioning arrangement within West Essex.

13. The second meeting of the Panel was held on Friday 5th November. At this meeting the panel members fed back on their findings in respect of local provision for children with disabilities and special needs; work undertaken on emotional health and well being and programmes specifically designed to reduce obesity in children and families. A report was submitted on the work of Epping Forest Youth Council in identifying the best youth facilities across the district and Community Services Officers provided detailed presentations on key work programmes.

Several issues were highlighted for further consideration:

- a. Epping Forest Youth Council Mystery Shopping Exercise – To consider adding a new category to the annual Civic Awards list, in respect of an award for the best youth provision in the Epping Forest District.
- b. Tottenham Hotspur Foundation – to consider the impact of the cessation of the current level of service funded through a Section 106 Agreement
- c. Trampolining Project – to investigate opportunities to continue with and sustain the delivery of this project, which has been identified by schools as extremely successful in improving the self esteem and attainment of disadvantaged children and children with additional needs
- d. Essex Commissioning – to forward the views of local stakeholders to Essex County Council, in regard to the need for services to be locally commissioned and developed and for this to include innovative interventions as opposed to traditional methods of approach

- e. Capacity Building – To consider the Council’s ability to support local communities in developing services to meet locality needs
- f. Safeguarding – To further review the effectiveness of Safeguarding arrangements at West and County level, in light of recommendations emanating from Serious Case Reviews.

Reason for decision:

The Children’s Services Task and Finish Panel are very concerned that Essex County Council is pursuing the commissioning of children’s services via a preferred partner option, on an Essex-wide approach. This method of commissioning rules out the opportunity to build on existing successes in a range of locally commissioned work and is also in direct contrast to the Governments’ plans for ‘Big Society’ and ‘Place Based Budgeting’.

Options considered and rejected:

To accept Essex County Council’s commissioning plans.

Consultation undertaken:

Children’s Task and Finish Panel, West Essex District and Education Leads.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: NIL

Personnel: NIL

Land: NIL

Community Plan/BVPP reference:

Relevant statutory powers:

None

Background papers: Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Terms of Reference. Children’s Services presentation (J Chandler)

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications:

Key Decision reference: (if required)