

TASK AND FINISH PANEL

PROVISION OF CHILDREN SERVICES TASK AND FINISH PANEL

Origin:

The Cabinet at its meeting on 8 March 2010 considered a report about Essex Children's Trust. The Children's Act 2004 provided the legal underpinning for the national framework established by "Every Child Matters: Change for Children" with District Councils having a duty to cooperate in the making of arrangements to improve well being for children and young people 19 years or under. The most specific duty is to safeguard and promote the welfare of children alongside the more general "duty to cooperate" within Children's Trust arrangements.

At the inaugural meeting of the Essex Children's Trust Partnership Board on 27 November 2009 it had been agreed that a Memorandum of Agreement be entered into by all the constituent partners with the aim of demonstrating a commitment to a shared approach and to get all the partners working together to achieve common objectives.



The Cabinet decided that the Memorandum of agreement should not be signed as it did not appear to be clear, concise and contain specific proposals to safeguard the welfare of children or an assurance that Essex County Council would embrace best practice. The cabinet expressed the view that the emphasis appeared to be on bureaucracy rather than results, with as much responsibility as possible delegated to the borough and district councils. The Cabinet also requested that a Task and Finish Scrutiny Panel should be established to examine the Council's approach to Children's Services and its provision throughout the District.

At its meeting on 15 April 2010, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed that a Task and Finish Scrutiny Panel should be established to examine the Council's approach to Children's Services and its provision throughout the District and to review the provision of the Essex County Council Youth Service within the District.

Term of Reference:

1. To review the purpose, operation and effectiveness of Children's Services in Essex and the new Essex structure.
2. To review current provision of children's and young people's services in the District including identifying the level of activity directly provided by the Council and the key responsibilities devolved to the Council under the Children's Trust arrangements.
3. To review the provision of Essex County Council Youth Services in the Epping Forest District, seeking to identify future needs and how these can best be met by the various Agencies involved in the delivery of Young People's Services.

4. To review current arrangements for Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Epping Forest's Children, seeking to identify communication pathways and effectiveness of information sharing, including:
- the Council's own policies and procedures;
 - West Essex Stay Safe Group;
 - ECC Stay Safe Group, and,
 - Essex Safeguarding Children Board

The Panel

Under the Chairmanship of Councillor Mrs Wagland, they gathered evidence and information in relation to the topic through the receipt of data, presentations and by participation in fact finding visits.

They consulted with Partners, Agencies, and Stakeholders. They established key issues and future needs and evaluated all relevant facts in relation to the topic under review in an objective way and to produce recommendations for future action. They sought to establish whether there were any resource implications arising out of the topic under review and advised Cabinet for inclusion in the Budget Process.

The Task & Finish Panel consisted of the following members:

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

The Lead Officer was J Chandler, Assistant Director (Community Services and Customer Relations).

The Panel was set up in response to the potential cuts to Children Services following the funding cuts made by the Government and how they would affect the services provided by Essex County Council and Epping Forest District Council. EFDC's services were primarily provided for children and young people aged 5 years plus, although there are some targeted programmes for under 5's and young people up to 25 years with special needs. The main programmes are mainly centred on sports and health improvement, holiday play schemes, dance, theatre and arts projects and community based initiatives. There was also a wide range of social inclusion work done on Super Output Area's (SOAs) and disadvantaged areas targeted at young people. There were also in-school road shows and projects to promote health, safety and well being (Crucial Crew and Reality Road show).



A significant proportion of the work is funded through external funding secured via competitive application processes to provide initiatives such as social inclusion programmes and programmes targeted at children with additional needs including those with confidence issues, low self esteem, low achievers or those with moderate

disabilities. Where the Council is restricted from applying to funding bodies, voluntary groups and parishes are supported to apply for funding for joint projects.

It was noted that Essex County Council was the key service provider from pre-birth to age nineteen. They were responsible for providing:

- Education (Primary, secondary and targeted);
- Social care;
- Youth services;
- MAAG's – Multi Agency Action Groups (Youth Services, Social Care, Schools, Police etc.);
- Children Centres.

The new structure for Essex CC Children's services had been revised for the second time in two years following a recent Ofsted and now included an 'Improvement Board' at the top overlooking a 'Strategic Joint Commissioning Group'; an Executive; local children's commissioning and delivery boards and local children's partnerships.

It was also noted that ECC were still not performing well in terms of Safeguarding and Child Protection, as their latest 'Ofsted' report was classed as unsatisfactory.

EFDC has its own Safeguarding Policy which had been updated in June 2009 and a Corporate Safeguarding Group which had representatives from all service areas, member representation and the voluntary sector. We were the first council in Essex to do so and this has been praised as an example of best practice in Essex.

At their first meeting the Panel decided that the various members should research different aspects of this theme:

- Councillor R Brookes to look at general activities; trampolining programmes for children with additional needs and to attend the Epping Forest Children's Partnership.
- Councillor T Cochrane would look into the special needs and how to improve its delivery to this district.
- Councillor L Wagland to talk to 'Kids Company' and get their views on Essex County Council services;
- Councillor L Wagland to look at Fostering at Redbridge Council and to get comparative information from them;
- Councillor J Hedges to investigate general services such as Crucial Crew and also to look at obesity.
- Councillor J Knapman to look at and report back on the Essex Safeguarding Children Board;
- Councillor L Wagland to also look at the District's "Killed or Seriously Injured" stats for young people.
- Lead Officer to report back on Essex County Council services in general.

Councillors reported back to the meeting on their findings after undertaking their individual research into their allotted topics.

After their two unfavourable Ofsted reports, ECC had set up a new organisation, the "West Essex Local Children's Commissioning Board" with a new structure designed to change things. They were also looking into commissioning third parties to provide for adolescent and mental health services. At a recent meeting they had made it clear that only £100k was to be made available to our district for all current children services. Officers voiced their concerns about this and are in top level negotiations with ECC at present and will report the outcome to Cabinet.

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.

In November 2010, the Panel provided the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an interim report on their findings to date. They were very concerned that Essex County Council was pursuing the commissioning of children's services via a preferred partner option, on an Essex-wide approach. This method of commissioning ruled out the opportunity to build on existing successes in a range of locally commissioned work and was also in direct contrast to the Governments' plans for 'Big Society' and 'Place Based Budgeting'.

In March 2011 the Panel invited Essex County Councillor Ray Gooding the Deputy Portfolio Holder for Schools, Children and Families and a 'West' Children's Commissioning and Delivery Board Member to their meeting along with the ECC Director for Commissioning, Schools, Children and Families and the ECC Locality Commissioner in West Essex, where they exchanged views and held a question and answer session.

The Panel produced its final report (available on line) in May 2011 and presented it to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

