

AT A MEETING of the CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ADVISORY PANEL of HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL held at The Castle, Winchester on 4 OCTOBER 2011.

Chairman:
p Councillor M.J. Tucker

Councillors:

a A. Evans	p D. Keast
p Mrs Charlotte Bailey	p Roz Chadd
p R. Bolton	p Mrs Pamela Mutton
p B.D. Dash	p Mrs Jackie Porter

In attendance at the invitation of the Chairman:

Councillor Roy Perry (Executive Lead Member for Children's Services)

47. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor: A. Evans.

48. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were mindful that where they believed they had a personal or prejudicial interest in any matter considered at the meeting declared that interest at the time of the relevant debate and, having regard to the circumstances described in paragraphs 9, 10, 11 and 12 of the County Council's Code of Conduct, considered whether to leave the meeting whilst the matter was discussed, save for exercising any right to speak in accordance with paragraph 12 of the code.

49. MINUTES

The minutes from the meeting of 31 May 2011 were considered by the Panel, agreed to be a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The Deputy Director for Children and Families updated the Panel on the Government consultation on Special Educational Needs, that had been discussed at the previous meeting. He confirmed that the response had been sent to Government. He also informed Members that the County Council was likely to become a pilot for some of the proposed measures. It was agreed that a full update be brought to the next meeting.

50. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and informed Members that the Vice-Chairman Councillor Evans was still unwell and therefore unable to attend. She wished him a speedy recovery on behalf of the Panel. The Chairman also congratulated Councillor Chadd (née Muschamp) on getting married since the previous meeting.

51. MEMBERS FEEDBACK ON VISITS TO CHILDREN'S HOMES

Councillor Porter reported that she had visited every Children's Home during the summer. She was particularly impressed with the resilience of the staff, who were working in difficult situations.

52. HAMPSHIRE ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT (1 APRIL 2010 TO 31 MARCH 2011)

The Panel considered the report of the Director of Children's Services (Item 6 in the Minute Book) regarding the annual report of the Hampshire Adoption Service.

The report was outlined to Members, who were informed that although Hampshire was doing well in the area of adoption, there was still room for improvement. A number of areas within the report were highlighted, in particular: the recruitment strategy, the success in meeting timescales, the use of Special Guardianship Orders and the mixture between Local Authority and private placements in the adoption market. The nature of Special Guardianship Orders was explained and there was a brief discussion regarding the role of CAMHS and how their services were being accessed. The Deputy Director explained that the CAMHS service was moving towards a universal provision for the County and that this still involved some transitional changes whilst moving away from the previous structure.

Members asked for details of how the needs of individual children were prioritised in the period pending an adoption. It was confirmed that monthly monitoring and a rigorous reviewing system acted as a safety net. In relation to this, reference was made to the new integrated team structure and the Deputy Director detailed the advantages of a potential adopter being able to foster a baby in the first instance.

The County Council's potential membership of the South East adoption consortium was raised. The Executive Lead Member for Children's Services offered to discuss the matter with his counterparts from other South East Local Authorities when he next met with them.

The use of agencies and furthermore the success of agencies in recruiting adopters was discussed. The Deputy Director confirmed that the situation in Hampshire reflected the national picture. He pointed out that some agencies specialised in particular sections of society, such as ethnic minorities, which attracted adopters to them. It was noted that

although agencies were a more expensive option, using them was not as expensive as the cost of prolonging care.

It was resolved:

That the Panel note the report.

53. DELEGATED AUTHORITY: LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

The Panel considered the report of the Director of Children's Services (Item 7 in the Minute Book) regarding delegated authority for foster parents.

The Deputy Director outlined the initiative being undertaken to facilitate foster carers being able to make decisions for the young people in their care. He explained that this would result in a living document that would describe the relationship between the parents, the social worker, the foster carer and the child. He confirmed that this would also be used in the residential sector.

Members asked whether the format and presentation of the document was friendly and accessible for children. It was explained that the impetus had come from both carers and young people. Due to its legal nature, elements of the document were necessarily formal, however the professionals involved in the process would ensure that its content was fully communicated to the young person involved. It was pointed out that young people were generally very vocal about their requirements and therefore consultation received considerable feedback.

Issues surrounding taking a child in care abroad were discussed following the personal experiences of some of the Members in attendance. It was confirmed that with regards the delegated authority document, permission to take a child abroad was something that could be included. More general difficulties in taking a child with a different surname across a border were highlighted and it was noted that the Local Authority was able to provide a letter of authorisation for a child in care to travel.

It was resolved:

That the Panel note the report and praise the direction of travel on this issue.

54. FOSTERING E-COMMS

The Panel considered the report of the Director of Children's Services (Item 8 in the Minute Book) regarding communication with the fostering community.

The Panel received a presentation of the internet pages set up to communicate with foster carers in Hampshire. It was confirmed that this information was secure and only accessible by carers. Areas of the website were highlighted, including: the monthly roundup, the regular announcements page, the policy area, contact and out of hours information, training and events, as well as forums and a social networking area designed to keep carers in touch with each other and with their support officers. It was explained that a particular advantage was that information could be kept up to date without the need for large documents to be re-printed. The Panel was concerned that some carers did not have access to the internet and the Deputy Director confirmed that they were aware of approximately eight percent of carers who do not. He noted that a requirement for new carers was to give the child internet access, therefore this will become a decreasing issue. Members also asked about the rate of usage and it was confirmed that the IT department was able to provide statistics that were used to develop less popular areas of the website. Further feedback on the website was also obtained from a user group that had been established.

It was resolved:

That the Panel note the report and that the officers involved with the website be praised for their hard work.

55. YOT INSPECTION REPORT

In relation to this item, Councillor Porter declared a non-prejudicial interest as the Chairman of a charity which employs two people who were also YOT workers.

The Panel considered the report of the Director of Children's Services (Item 9 in the Minute Book) regarding the recent YOT inspection.

The Head of the Wessex YOT provided the Panel with background information regarding its work and explained that it was shortly going to be restructured into separate Local Authority areas for financial and service reasons.

The Panel was informed that the inspection that had taken place had focused on a number of specific cases rather than the entire scope of the organisation. Whilst some areas of the inspection were disappointing, it was explained that a number of positive areas had also been highlighted, such as the management of high risk cases. It was noted that the outcomes for Hampshire were significantly higher than for the average. It was also noted that as the inspected cases included some that stretched back several years, some of the results were influenced by the situation the service had been in at those times.

Members were particularly interested in the differences between areas of Hampshire. The Head of the YOT detailed the strengths and weaknesses of each area and described measures in place to ensure continued improvement.

The improvement plan was discussed and it was noted that this dealt with some management issues that had been highlighted. Members were concerned that the improvement plan only covered a limited range of issues. However it was acknowledged that this reflected the focussed nature of the inspection. The Deputy Director confirmed that a broader range of actions not covered by the inspection would be easier to implement and assess following the restructure.

It was resolved that:

The Panel note the report.

An update on the report be brought to the Panel in approximately one year.

56. CHILDREN'S SERVICES INSPECTION REPORT

The Panel considered the report of the Director of Children's Services (Item 10 in the Minute Book) regarding the findings of the Ofsted inspection of safeguarding and looked after children that was carried out in Hampshire between 27 June and 8 July 2011.

The Deputy Director thanked members of the Panel for their input during the inspection. He introduced the report and in particular the improvement plan, which was to address the issues highlighted and to set SMART targets. A number of the results were discussed and the background behind them explained. It was confirmed that all the actions in the improvement plan were ongoing and under review.

It was resolved that:

The report be noted and the department praised for its excellent Ofsted result and its capacity to improve.