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| MEETING: | CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE |
| DATE: | 11 DECEMBER 2009 |
| TITLE OF REPORT: | SAFEGUARDING AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN SEMINAR TO MEMBERS 9TH NOVEMBER '09 |
| PORTFOLIO AREA: | CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLES DIRECTORATE |

Wards Affected

County Wide

Purpose

To note a summary of the Member's Seminar on the 9th November 2009 concerning Safeguarding and Vulnerable Children and consider issues arising.

Key Decision

This is not a Key Decision.

Recommendation(s)

THAT subject to any further comments the Committee may wish to make the report be noted.

Introduction and Background

Staff from the Safeguarding and Vulnerable Children's services from within the Children and Young Peoples Directorate presented a seminar to Members as part of the Directorate's rolling programme to raise Members' awareness of key service issues. Following an external healthcheck of the scrutiny function, Strategic Monitoring Committee considered the challenges facing the County and key issues identified from public consultation and surveys. They requested that this Committee give priority to considering Safeguarding Vulnerable Children.

Key Considerations

The seminar focused on three significant service areas:

1. **Children in Need:** Members were informed by Lisa Green Service Manager about this area of work where there are approximately 550 children and their families defined as Children in

Need under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989. This number includes the 64 Children with Disabilities whom we work with. Members heard about the process of assessment and the research base used to understand need and provide services for this vulnerable group of children.

2. **Corporate Parenting:** Members received a presentation from Stephanie Rowles, Team Manager for Fostering and Hilary Jones, Project Manager for STEPS outlining some of the work ongoing in Herefordshire to support our 148 Looked After Children and Young People. The context of Care Matters government agenda was set out as were plans to develop a Children in Care Council, a Pledge to our Looked After Group and a Corporate Parenting Panel to oversee this crucial statutory function and ensure that the whole council is involved. Particular challenges were raised regarding costs of agency placements.
3. **Independent Reviewing Function.** Members received a presentation from Sarah Duerden Acting Manager for the Children's Planning and Review Team in Herefordshire explaining this important independent function in ensuring that children Looked After and those with Child Protection Plans are cared for well and have clear and appropriate plans and placements. The role of this team will be strengthened in Herefordshire over the next year to provide more audit time and internal challenge to teams and services to ensure we learn and improve to deliver excellent services to the most vulnerable children.
4. **Questions arising from Seminar with responses:**

(A) Children in Need

1. *Is there education input to Children's assessments and reviews during school holidays?*

Yes. Although the school holidays do present challenges there is usually a whole range of information and support available through Education Welfare service, School support services, School nursing etc. Head teachers are contactable during holidays and often come to meetings. Planned reviews are held at the beginning or end of school holiday periods to maximise attendance from school staff.

2. *Are measures in place to protect lone male social workers visiting at home as they may be vulnerable to allegations?*

Yes. Each case is looked at in terms of health and safety of staff. In any case where there is a perceived risk, joint visits will be arranged. Team Managers take staff welfare very seriously and will assess any risks to workers whether male, female, from ethnic minority or vulnerable through a disability.

3. *Are there cross border procedures in place when children move?*

Yes we have an agreed procedure as part of our joint Safeguarding Board Procedures. We have both a Cross Boundary and a Children moving across Local Authority Boundary procedure giving clear guidance to staff. This can be accessed via the weblink found on the Herefordshire Council intranet.

4. *Is there effective information sharing between agencies and does this also apply to transition to adult care?*

On the whole we do have good systems and processes for ensuring that information sharing is effective.

Effective information sharing is the key challenge for every local authority in the country and requires a sustained effort to ensure that all is working well. In Herefordshire we have the mechanisms in place to support effective working i.e. Herefordshire's Safeguarding Children Board (HSCB) with a recently appointed

Independent Chair, a Children's Trust Board with working outcome groups. These mechanisms bring together key people delivering services to children and help develop jointly agreed ways of working.

Our safeguarding procedures has a good guide for staff in information sharing and we are planning to launch a refreshed Children's Trust Information Sharing Protocol (February 2010) which updates and makes clear everyone's responsibilities.

Auditing of cases across agencies and independently by the HSCB quality assurance group helps to test out information sharing and tweak systems accordingly to ensure we are always improving.

Workforce Development and training programmes from the HSCB and internally to Children's Services address the issues of information sharing to ensure our staff are confident and well informed and know where to go if they are worried.

5. *Is there adequate engagement with Social Care Housing Providers over provision of accommodation?*

This is an area where we need to jointly develop more options especially for under 18s. Engagement is good and the will is there but the issue is complicated by statutory responsibilities and access to adequate funding. A recent meeting between Children's Services and Strategic Housing colleagues helped to set out key priorities and we have agreed a joint strategy will be developed to assist those vulnerable young people under 18 years who cannot live at home. A bid is being made to Supporting People to develop Supported Lodgings for 16/17 year olds and we are looking to develop mediation and support to help young people stay with family or friends.

There is still work to do in this area.

6. *Is there help for parents who want their children taken into care?*

Yes. We offer a range of services to children and families where relationships are at breaking point. We carry out thorough assessments, with other agencies involved. We know from national research that coming into care is not always best for children and should always be a last resort. Therefore a range of interventions will be tried to help families to stay together where possible. These include social work and family support staff working directly with families, specialist intervention from Action For Children, Family Group Conferencing, mediation, referral to CAMhs

7. *Does the Child Protection Team have a good working relationship with the police?*

Yes. The referral and assessment teams and our three fieldwork teams work on a daily basis with both the Family Protection Unit and the uniformed police service and describe excellent working relationships most of the time. Senior Managers have regular and various meetings between the two agencies to resolve any problems. Our police colleagues are keen to develop an interagency team approach in the referral and assessment team meaning that police and social workers will work alongside one another to ensure that child protection work is carried out together.

8. *What is the local Member involvement and is the most made of their knowledge? Members often refer families to Social Care services and can be crucial in ensuring that vulnerable children are 'captured' and receive appropriate services.*

Members are not routinely contacted regarding all referrals to Social Care. This would not be feasible or necessarily appropriate. However innovative ways to ensure that local knowledge is used would be welcomed.

(B) Corporate Parenting

1. *Are children's views reported onto the system?*

Yes –in all sorts of ways. One of the roles of the Independent Reviewing Officer is to ensure that children's views are sought and considered properly with regard to their plans and important things in their life. Our Voices and STEPs teams work with young people in care to give them a stronger voice about what they need from us as corporate parents. We are developing a Children in Care Council which will provide an even more formal route to senior managers and Members to involve young people in designing and delivering services.

2. *Can Members be informed about carers in their ward?*

Not necessarily. Carers have been asked in the past about this and have not always wanted Members to know on an individual basis. The best route would be to develop links with the foster carers group in Herefordshire and offer support that way. Councillor Jenny Hyde will be sitting on the Fostering Panel from 2010 so another positive link is being made.

3. *Recruiting /retaining foster carers and competition with Agencies*

This is a problem nationally as agencies pitch their fees at sometimes treble what local authorities can afford to pay. Most agencies are national and so have large corporations within which to expand to all counties. We are looking at joining sub regionally to gather strength in commissioning to drive prices down. We are also looking to develop our in house package to foster carers to make being a Herefordshire carer more attractive. An invest to save proposal could be considered to recruit carers away from Agencies or at least be more competitive but financial constraints across the Council makes this unviable at the moment.

4. *Councillors need information and support to be good corporate parents.*

Yes this is accepted and the Corporate Parenting Panel will look to improve this area with regular updates and ideas.

5. *Should every member be informed about every Looked After Child in their ward?*

I think we need to explore that as part of the Corporate Parenting Panel and with young people themselves. There are obviously huge confidentiality issues regarding individual cases; however it is definitely worth exploring and feeding back to Members in early 2010.

(C) Independent Review Function

1. *How do we measure long term outcomes for Looked After Children-into adulthood?*

This is an interesting area and something that we don't do in Herefordshire. It is something we can consider and look into with regional colleagues as to best methodology. It may involve partnering with researchers at a local university.

2. *Are there statistics of young people living with family and friends but not formally in care system and are they entitled to support?*

We have some statistics of Kinship placements but mainly with younger children. This is an area that we need to develop and can be done through development of frameworki reporting. We have allocated a specialist worker within the referral and assessment team to work with potentially homeless young people and our colleagues

in housing also work directly with many of these young people. Scoping the extent of the need is a good idea and we will look to do this – reporting back more fully in March 2010.

3. *More work is needed to build public confidence to report concerns for a child.*

Yes this is always needed. We are launching a new Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board website in January which will give us a vehicle to give much more advice to the public and young people themselves. The Safeguarding Board has a clear role in this regard and will be working to develop further. The development of Locality Teams will help in having professionals aligned to communities where safeguarding in its broadest sense can be better publicised and understood.

4. *Have we got adequate ICT tools to record the work done by social workers?*

Not yet. The implementation of Frameworki has helped to systemise workflows and is enabling clearer recording, easier access to information and better performance reporting. We are adapting systems to make as simple as possible for social workers to use and enabling them to spend as much time with children as possible. We do need to develop some form of mobile working. Mobile working is essential in such a rural county and to fit patterns of visiting families which is often after office hours.

Financial Implications

None

Background Papers

- None identified.