



South  
Cambridgeshire  
District Council

# Working in partnership to support children and young people



April 2010

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**The scrutiny and overview committee (SOC) acts as a local watchdog for the people of South Cambridgeshire, looking at how to improve local services, whether or not they are provided by the Council. This work is designed to complement the work done by the council's cabinet. It provides a forum for non-cabinet councillors to use their knowledge and skills to benefit residents.**

The committee can also challenge decisions made by cabinet members, or help them to develop new policies. This work demonstrates the council's commitment to openness and accountability.

SOC often sets up small task and finish groups to look at an issue in depth. These groups are usually cross-party and often involve other participants, such as residents or representatives of partner organisations.

In November 2009, SOC set up a small task and finish group to review how effectively the council works with partners to meet the needs of children and young people.

The following councillors made up the task and finish group:

Cllr Cicely Murfitt

Cllr Charlie Nightingale

Cllr Deborah Roberts

Cllr Bridget Smith (chair)

Cllr Hazel Smith

Cllr Bunty Waters also volunteered but later withdrew due to the meetings being held during the daytime.

The relevant cabinet members were copied on all documentation.

## Services for children and young people

The focus of this review was to discover whether the council's partnership work could be used more efficiently or effectively to serve children and young people. Above all, it aimed to find out which partnerships were making a difference in areas that really mattered to children and young people themselves.

Inevitably it examined the general issue of partnership working itself, so some learning and recommendations would apply to any partnerships, whatever the focus or client group.

To find out what really matters to children and young people, three members of the task and finish group met over 30 children and young people aged 9-17 years and consulted another seven via email. The feedback was remarkably consistent.

**Children and young people need things to do, places to go and affordable, accessible public transport to get there.**

Gypsy and Traveller children and young people's needs related to poorer health outcomes, prejudice, access to education and training, and literacy support.

The review then investigated how effectively the Council can influence and improve such services through its partnerships. The answers were mixed.

## Transport

Cambridgeshire's Big Plan 2 contains a one-page Transport Plan developed by young people themselves; but there was no evidence of this being actioned or refreshed.

**Recommendation 1:** That the SCDC representative on the Children's Trust ensures that progress on the CYP Transport Plan is monitored with a view to completing as many of the actions as possible, and revising it to include more recent evidence.



## Consulting children and young people

Evidence from the review informed the County Council's Local Transport Plan and SCDC's Community Transport Strategy. It was evident that this was the only direct evidence from children and young people that would inform either.



Since transport is such a high priority for children and young people, and since they are least likely to respond to standard consultation methods, we felt that more should be done as a matter of course to consult them effectively in future.

**Recommendation 2:** That SCDC representatives ensure that partnerships adequately and robustly consult children and young people whenever designing or evaluating services that are wholly or partly aimed at them; this should include issues such as climate change and the growth agenda.

## Health

The Improving Health partnership has achieved several outcomes: for example reductions in childhood obesity and improved self-esteem via the TEAM project. Other partnerships have led to the Let's Get Cooking scheme in schools; a new commissioning framework for childhood obesity; a shared database of retailers to contact about under-age tobacco sales; and cookery classes at two children's centres.

However, there was some risk of duplication of obesity-focused activities and discussions are now underway regarding a possible merging or reallocation.



**Recommendation 3:** That SCDC representatives use the Partnership Toolkit to regularly assess whether they need to attend each partnership, and whether any could merge or close or meet less often.

## Active Participation

Even on the successful partnerships, there was concern that some partners should take a more active role. This need for 'active participation' was echoed by others we met.

One councillor had reservations about the usefulness of her attendance, as decisions seemed to have already been made. She would like to be able to influence the agenda and this was voiced by representatives on other partnerships too.

**Recommendation 4:** That SCDC representatives work with the chairman of their partnership to influence the agenda and seek officer support in doing so.

## The value of partnership working at the grass roots level

It was consistently clear that the nearer a partnership was to 'the grass roots', the more effective and successful it was perceived to be.

For example

- the anti-social behaviour task group shares information on individual cases
- SCDC works with 8 village colleges to part-fund 5 local arts development managers
- the education service for Gypsy and Traveller children and young people gains referrals and support via close partnership working

It was harder to see the tangible benefits of more strategic partnerships; but the Travellers Officer emphasised the need for the strategic level for operational groups to report to. A strategic lead is needed in order for grass-roots experience to better inform strategy.

## General areas for improving partnership working

SCDC has a process for regularly reviewing the most significant partnerships against a risk matrix. But there is no assessment of usefulness or 'return on investment'. SCDC's excellent Partnerships Toolkit recommends that all partnerships have an exit strategy and yet we found little awareness of the Toolkit.

**Recommendation 5:** That the Partnership Toolkit is amended to be easier to read, and to reflect the recommendations in this report, especially representatives' obligations to attend, participate and communicate fully.

The Toolkit should then be re-issued to all of SCDC's current and future partnership representatives.

A key concern was the sheer number of partnerships that the Council belongs to. Most witnesses agreed that the picture was too complex and may add to the difficulty of identifying who does what, and the risk of duplication.

The unfolding financial climate will make it even more important to work with partners to pool resources and jointly design and deliver efficient services. But it will be ever harder to resource some of the current partnerships. There was general support for reducing and rationalising the partnerships structure.

**Recommendation 6:** That the Leader makes a request to Cambridgeshire Together for a thorough review of the partnerships, with a view to creating a slimmer, more efficient structure, where partnerships follow the principles in SCDC's Partnerships Toolkit, including the need for an exit strategy.

There was evidence that who should attend was not always actively reviewed. Sending the same person to every meeting does promote continuity but may mean someone else with more relevant expertise is not involved. Conversely, absent members did not always send a substitute.

**Recommendation 7:** That active consideration is given to deciding the most appropriate officers and members to attend each partnership, and each meeting, according to the agenda and the expertise required. Where a representative is unable to attend, a high priority should be placed on sending a well-briefed substitute, to ensure maximum input, influence and benefit.

There was a recurring need for better communication. Some representatives give a written debrief; others do so informally; but some had no mechanism for reliably sharing information about the partnerships attended.

**Recommendation 8:** That all partnership representatives ensure that there is an effective mechanism for briefing and debriefing relevant officers and elected members, and that all action notes or minutes are electronically available.

There was also a need to update the web-based lists of partnerships attended by each councillor. Officer representatives are not listed at all and do not provide feedback reports for general access.

**Recommendation 9:** That an updated list of partnerships and the officer and member representatives is provided on the SCDC website or intranet as appropriate.



There was support for the idea that strategic groups should meet much less often and consider setting up short-life task groups to complete joint projects.

**Recommendation 10:** That SCDC representatives on strategic partnerships recommend fewer meetings, and the use of task groups for specific projects, such as now being used by the Children's Trust.

## **Acknowledgements and Thanks**

We offer sincere thanks to everyone who helped on this review. Without exception every one, officers, portfolio holders, partners, young people and task and finish group members, brought honesty, insight and a genuine desire to improve services for children and young people.

The task and finish group were very grateful for the help and support supplied by:

### **External witnesses**

CCC Director of Children's Services, Gordon Jeyes

CCC Area Manager Localities and Partnership, Sarah Ferguson

CCC Head of Planning and Performance CYP Services, Mary Whitehand

Children's Trust chairman, Martin Curtis

SCDC Leader, Cllr Ray Manning

Portfolio holders: Cllrs David Bard and Sue Ellington

Young residents

### **SCDC witnesses**

Community Development officers Andy O'Hanlon, Susannah Harris and Jane Thompson.

Corporate Manager New Communities, Jo Mills

Corporate Manager Environmental Services, Dale Robinson

Environmental Health Officer, Iain Green

Housing Advice and Options Manager, Sue Carter

Housing Services Manager, Anita Goddard

Senior Planning Policy Officer, Claire Spencer

Travellers Officer, Debbie Barrett

### **SCDC support officers**

Executive Director, Steve Hampson

Partnerships Manager, Gemma Barron

Partnerships Officer, Kathryn Hawkes

Scrutiny Officer, Jackie Sayers

## How to get involved

The process of scrutiny is strengthened by involving partners, residents, service users and so on. They bring expertise, local knowledge, fresh ideas and an element of external challenge.

If you would like to know more, please ring the Scrutiny Development Officer, Jackie Sayers on **01954 713451** or email **[scrutiny@scambbs.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@scambbs.gov.uk)**