

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Corporate Governance Committee

29 April 2009

AUTHOR/S: HR Manager

AUDIT OF EMPLOYMENT PRACTICE - SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN

Purpose

1. To provide information to the Corporate Governance Committee in respect of the Councils duty to safeguard children and vulnerable adults and the audit requirements in relation to safer recruitment practices.

Executive Summary

Background

2. Following the tragic deaths of two schoolgirls from Soham in 2002 and the subsequent conviction of the school caretaker, Ian Huntley, Sir Michael Bichard was commissioned by the Home Secretary to conduct a review of child protection procedures, this review was known as the Bichard enquiry.
3. There was much criticism of employers and the Police in terms of vetting and checking backgrounds and information sharing. This criticism was the focus of media attention and resulted in significant reputational damage.
4. Following the findings of the Bichard enquiry into the recruitment of Huntley in the Soham case, a number of recommendations were put forward in terms of improvements to the recruitment and employment arrangements for all employees who will work with vulnerable clients. These include better vetting/checking, more robust information sharing and training for those conducting interviews.
5. One of the outcomes of the enquiry has been to form Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) on the basis that children can only be safeguarded properly if the key agencies work effectively together. Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) are designed to help ensure that this happens.
6. LSCBs have been established by the government to ensure that organisations work together to safeguard children and promote their welfare. In Cambridgeshire this partnership includes Social Care Services, Education, Health, the Police, Probation, Sports and Leisure Services, the Voluntary Sector, Youth Offending Team, Connexions, Early Years Services. South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) is a member of this partnership.
7. Section 11 of The 2004 Children Act places a duty on all partnership organisations to have 'robust and recruitment and vetting arrangements in place to prevent unsuitable people from working with children.
8. South Cambridgeshire District Council has an internal working group which has been working with the Cambridgeshire LSCB's Safer Employment Advisor to develop

policies, procedures and practices that demonstrate SCDC's commitment to the safeguarding agenda. Membership of the group is from all service areas of the Council. Although the Council does not provide direct services for children, i.e. education, social services, it does have contact with vulnerable children and families during the course of providing housing services, environmental services, benefits, home improvements, sport development and travellers services. It is important therefore, that the Council employs suitable people who will maintain appropriate professional relations. It is equally important that staff know what to do if they see evidence of child abuse during the course of their duties.

9. In addition, the HR Manager and the Housing Services Manager attend the county-wide Safe Employment Implementation Group, this has been helpful in terms of identifying best practice. This forum has recently disbanded due to the loss of the Safe Employment Advisor post.
10. The Council has a named senior manager, who is responsible for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children throughout SCDC. Currently this is the Executive Director, Operational Services.

Key Safeguarding Standards

11. The LSCB devised Key Safeguarding Employment Standards (KSES), these include a series of standards in relation to safe selection, recruitment and working practices for adults who work with children. In 2006, the LSCB agreed that all LSCB partners (this includes SCDC) would carry out a review of policies, procedures and practices against the KSES. This was carried out on a self assessment basis and the results were provided to the LSCB, see appendix 1.
12. In April 2008, the Safe Employment Advisor from LSCB, wrote to all Chief Executives in the County. The letter, attached at appendix 2, requested that each LSCB partner should make arrangements, with their internal auditor, to conduct a formal audit/assessment of progress in relation to the KSES. The LSCB set a deadline of December 2008 for the return of audits and action plans.
13. RSM Bentley Jennison, internal auditors, were commissioned to complete the audit for SCDC and this took place in October 2008, a copy is attached as appendix 3. The audit concluded that the Council had demonstrated adequate assurance levels for the controls that were currently in place. Eight recommendations, in the category of 'Merits attention' were highlighted – see pages 3 & 4 of the report.
14. Following on from the self assessment and the internal audit, the SCDC Safeguarding group have been building on the action plan to ensure that the Council has the right policies, procedures and practices in place for the recruitment and training of staff.

Conclusion

15. The Council has a duty to safeguard children as outlined in the 2004 Children Act. There is a responsibility to ensure that adequate vetting and checking processes are in place in terms of the recruitment of staff. This includes recruitment training for managers. It also means that staff should be aware of what to do if they suspect or witness child abuse including how to report suspicions.
16. The primary driver for Key Safeguarding Employment Standards is quite rightly to protect and safeguard children and vulnerable adults. However, there is also the need to minimise the risk to the Council. A headline case whereby the Council is

found to have made errors which have resulted in a child being put at risk would mean significant reputational damage.

17. The work being undertaken by the internal working group is being directed by the findings of the safeguarding audit and although the internal auditors reported:

“Taking account of the issues identified, in our opinion the Council can take adequate assurance that the controls upon which the organisation manage this area, as currently laid down and operated, are effective.”

There are still actions that need to be followed through to ensure that processes, policies and practices are robust. The audit and the self assessment exercise have been valuable in focussing officer attention on key improvement areas.

Implications

18. Financial	Costs associated with undertaking the audit. £2,400. Future costs in terms of additional background checks on candidates – unknown at this stage. Cost associated with staff training.
Legal	Referred to in the body of the report
Staffing	Some of the workload is an unknown quantity. At this time it is intended to implement the requirements of the act and the Bichard enquiry recommendations within existing staffing resources.
Risk Management	To eliminate the risk to children and vulnerable adults. To minimise the risk to the council’s reputation in relation to a poor recruitment decision.
Equal Opportunities	If the key recommendations of the Bichard enquiry are not actioned it may lead to a widening of safeguarding inequalities for children in the district.

Recommendations

19. The Corporate Governance Committee is recommended to;
- a) Note the content of the report.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

The Bichard Enquiry report, The implementation of Key Safeguarding Standards, The 2004 Children Act, Guidance for Safer working practice for Adults who work with children and young people..

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