

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Leader and Cabinet

8 April 2010

AUTHORS: Cllr Bridget Smith, Chairman of the Task & Finish Group

REPORT OF THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP - SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

Purpose

1. To report on the work of the task & finish group looking at how well the Council works with partners to provide services for children and young people; and to seek endorsement of its recommendations.
2. This is not a key decision.

Background

3. During the 2009/10 programme setting process, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee agreed that it would like to look at services for young people. The focus was initially expected to be around equal opportunities, but it became clear that there was more scope to improve the way in which the Council works with partners to provide services for children and young people.
4. On 5 November 2009, the Committee agreed to set up a cross-party task and finish group based on the scoping document at **Appendix A**; with the following terms of reference:

To review how effectively the Council works with partners to meet the needs of young people and recommend areas for improvement.*

*This was later amended to 'children and young people' in line with partners' definitions.

5. The following Members 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 for this task and finish group but later withdrew due to the meetings being held during the daytime.

6. The relevant portfolio holders were copied on all documentation.

Report of the task and finish group

7. The children and young people of South Cambridgeshire are the focus of a wide variety of services provided by the public, private and voluntary sectors. South

Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) has a direct role to play in providing or commissioning some of those services, such as arts, sport and leisure services and housing. It has a far greater role, working with partners, to ensure the adequate provision of other services such as education, transport, safeguarding and health needs.

8. The focus of this review was to look at how well SCDC works with partners to serve South Cambridgeshire's children and young people, specifically focusing on the relevant partnerships in the Cambridgeshire Together family - shown in darker font at **Appendix B**. Evidence was also gathered regarding some of SCDC's other partnerships relating to children and young people, in the search for what makes partnerships work well.
9. The aim was to discover whether the Council's partnership work could be used more efficiently or effectively to serve our children and young people. Could SCDC influence the strategic direction of the partnerships? Should we be sending different people to some partnerships, or even stop attending some altogether? Are there gaps and duplications? How well do we share outcomes and learning? Above all, we wanted to know which partnerships are making a difference in areas that really matter to children and young people themselves.
10. Inevitably, while intending to focus on services for children and young people, our investigations examined the more general issue of partnership working itself. Therefore some of our learning and recommendations would apply to any of our partnerships, whatever the focus or client group.

The needs of Children and Young People (CYP)

11. We wanted to find out what really matters to children and young people but it was difficult to find any recent reliable research: so we did our own. Three members of the task and finish group visited schools and youth groups in five villages of varying sizes. These involved around 30 children and young people aged 9-17 years. Another seven were consulted via email and two attended a task and finish group meeting. The feedback was remarkably consistent.
12. Comments were generally positive in that most participants said they valued the rural nature and community spirit of their village, the quality of their school, the youth cafés and the feeling of belonging.
13. With regard to improvements that they would like the Council or its partners to provide, there were some recurrent themes:

<p>Children and young people need things to do, places to go and affordable, accessible public transport to get there.</p>

14. To understand something of the needs of Gypsy and Traveller children and young people, we met with SCDC's Travellers Officer. We learned that their specific needs relate to poorer health outcomes, prejudice, access to education and skills training, and literacy support. This is supported in the as-yet-draft report '*Children and young people living in deprivation, the disaffected and those at risk of disaffection*' commissioned by Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire Children and Young People's Area Partnership.

15. We then set about finding out how effectively the Council can influence and improve such services through the partnerships supported by SCDC, as well as other services designed to help and support children and young people. The answers were mixed.

Transport

16. The channel for SCDC to influence children and young people's transport issues is through the Children's Trust. We found that their Big Plan 2 contains a one-page CYP Transport Plan developed by young people themselves; this is at **Appendix C**. This contains some suggestions for district and county councils to progress. However, there was no evidence of this Plan being actioned or refreshed; for example it does not capture the issues identified by the task and finish group. The chairman of the Children's Trust said that the worsening financial position was now "increasing the focus on vulnerability and away from universal services for children and young people". Cllr Bridget Smith has now asked the Children's Trust to discuss transport for children and young people at a future meeting.

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.

17. The Council is also able to influence transport issues through the Transport and Access Group, which is currently contributing to consultation on the County Council's Local Transport Plan (LTP). Following a suggestion from the task and finish group, SCDC's response to this consultation has highlighted the need for the LTP to take into consideration the Children and Young People's Transport Plan from Big Plan 2.
18. We also sent a copy of our feedback from children and young people to the SCDC officer coordinating consultation on the now agreed Community Transport Strategy (CTS).
19. It was evident that our feedback was the only direct evidence from children and young people that would inform either the LTP or CTS. 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. Some good practice may be rolled out from the work done with children and young people by SCDC, for example in the development of parish plans and the emerging youth participation strategy.

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

20. Our representatives on the Improving Health partnership reported that it had achieved several outcomes which could not have been achieved without the partnership: for example reductions in childhood obesity and improved self-esteem via the TEAM project.
21. SCDC's officer representative on the partnership felt that participation was very useful, although he would like some other partners to take a more active role. This need for 'active participation' was echoed by others we met.

22. Our elected Member on this partnership had reservations about the usefulness of her attendance, where decisions seemed to have already been made. She would like to be able to influence the agenda to discuss, for example, Traveller children, health visitors and so on. This viewpoint was voiced by representatives on other partnerships too, and the chairman of the Children's Trust when asked, was keen to see this put right. Cllr Bridget Smith has now asked the Children's Trust to discuss at a future meeting, children and young people's access to information on mental health services.

Recommendation 3: That SCDC representatives work with the chairman of their partnership to influence the agenda and seek officer support in doing so.

23. SCDC belongs to several other partnerships which contribute to health initiatives aimed at children and young people: for example the County Food and Health Group, the County Obesity Partnership, the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Tobacco Control Alliance, and the South Cambs and City Locality Obesity Group.
24. These have led to several successful projects: 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.
25. However, there was evidence of some risk of duplication of obesity-focused activities and discussions are underway regarding a possible merging or reallocation of these.

Recommendation 4: 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.

Arts and Sport

26. We spoke to staff in SCDC's New Communities team and heard that they participate in a range of other partnerships outside the Cambridgeshire Together family. For example they work jointly with eight village colleges to part-fund five local arts development managers.

Children's services provided by the County Council

27. We learned during the course of our review that the County Council had recently completed a review of its Children, Schools and Families budget. This had led to a redesigned service whose budget would reduce overall by 25% within five years. Some youth services would see a reduction of over 30%.
28. In this new scenario, the County Council may less often directly provide services, but instead commission them from the voluntary sector and others. The chairman of the Children's Trust explained that there would need to be "some funding flexibility to allow one-off bids for projects - but it would have to be one-off rather than a revenue commitment".
29. One County Council service that is greatly valued was the education service for Gypsy and Traveller children and young people. This service has ensured that many children and young people continue attending school, who otherwise might not. Formal education is commonly dropped by the age of 13 in this community and then people 'drop off the radar'; for example, they are not counted within NEETS statistics

(Not in Education, Employment or Training). Referrals and support therefore rely on close partnership working at a grass roots level.

The Children's Trust

30. Cllr Bridget Smith represents SCDC on the Children's Trust, which is run by Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) to fulfil the requirement of Section 11 of Children Act 2004. As chairman of this review, she was able to provide first hand experience of this partnership, albeit based on just six months in the post so far.
31. The Children's Trust defines itself as "the commissioning body for the development and delivery of services for children and young people in Cambridgeshire." It aims to "develop an overall picture of children's needs and put in place provision through public, private, voluntary and community providers to meet those needs".
32. The Trust is also responsible for creating, implementing and annually reviewing the county's Children and Young People's Plan - currently called Big Plan 2 - and Cllr Bridget Smith was confident that SCDC has a key role in supporting delivery of this.
33. SCDC's Executive Director, Steve Hampson confirmed that the Children's Trust Executive does provide a useful forum for 'joined-up-working' on safeguarding the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.

General areas for improving partnership working

34. A key concern, reinforced by everyone we interviewed, was the sheer **number of partnerships** that the Council belongs to. The basic structure at Appendix B is supported by a layer of sub groups. There are other partnerships which are not linked to any of these. This often generates overlaps or occasionally leaves gaps.
35. Most witnesses agreed that the diagram of partnerships (at Appendix B) may be clear enough but when the sub groups are added the picture is too complex to understand. This may add to the difficulty of identifying who does what, and the risk of duplication. It can also mean an extra set of meetings to address the commissioner/provider split.
36. SCDC has a process for regularly reviewing the most significant partnerships against a risk matrix. Significance is rated according to financial and statutory impact, and the relationship to our corporate priorities. There is no assessment of usefulness or 'return on investment'. The Council's excellent Partnerships Toolkit recommends that all partnerships have an exit strategy and yet we found little awareness of the Toolkit amongst representatives. We felt that it should be revisited to make it more user-friendly, and to reflect our recommendations.

Recommendation 5: That the Partnership Toolkit is amended to be more easy 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.

37. 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. We explored the idea of reducing and rationalising the existing partnerships structure and found general support for this.

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.

38. There was evidence that the question of **who should attend** was not always reviewed according to each meeting's agenda. Sending the same person to every meeting does promote continuity but may mean that a different or additional officer or member with more relevant expertise is not involved. The changing activities of the Area Partnership for example, means that it needs a mix of those with a governance role and those with an operational or commissioning role. We also examined whether elected members always need to be accompanied by officers, but were advised that this does have several benefits: the member has ready access to timely advice; the officer hears decisions first hand; and actions can then be progressed without waiting for feedback.
39. There was also a concern about **SCDC being unrepresented** when the regular officer or Member was unavailable. This was felt to be a missed opportunity, especially when meetings are infrequent and minutes (with action points) are circulated some time later.

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.

40. The task and finish group found a recurring need for **better communication**. Officers attending operational partnerships, did not always know what was being agreed or discussed by Members at the strategic level. Also, there were examples of gaps in communication between officers and between Members on other partnerships. Some representatives give a written report to full Council; others brief colleagues informally; but some do not have a mechanism for reliably sharing information.

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.

41. Another very basic communication problem was the need to update the web-based lists of partnerships attended by each Member. This would help colleagues to know with whom to communicate regarding any partnership matter. Officer representatives are not listed at all and do not provide feedback reports for general access.
42. Following a review and streamlining of the partnerships structure, it would also be useful to have a comprehensive electronic list, showing which officers and members participate in which partnerships. Much of this information is already on the Council's website or intranet, but needs to be updated and publicised more widely.

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

43. In speaking with a wide range of partnership representatives it was consistently clear that the nearer the partnership was to 'the grass roots', the more **effective and successful** it was perceived to be. For example the anti-social behaviour task group

provides a highly valued and effective forum for sharing sensitive information and agreeing a joint approach on individual cases. However, it was harder to see the tangible results and benefits of the more strategic partnerships.

44. Nevertheless, the Travellers Officer emphasised the need for the strategic level for operational groups to report to. A strategic lead was needed in order for grass-roots experience to better inform strategy. We received one suggestion that perhaps 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.

Conclusion

45. Our review has shone a light on the complex issue of providing services for children and young people through partnership working. There has been no time to fully develop some of the aspects we have touched upon. For example there is scope for more scrutiny work regarding the needs of children and young people from Gypsy and Traveller communities. It would be important to collaborate with or complement the work of other councils on this issue.

46. Other areas for future scrutiny could include:
- Annual review of the Community Transport Strategy as it relates to children and young people, including consideration of the Big Plan 2’s CYP Transport Plan
 - Effective participation of children and young people in the planning of Northstowe and other growth areas.

47. **Implications**

Financial	Working in partnership allows the Council to access some funds not otherwise available. Actions recommended in this report are expected to be achieved within existing resources. They may lead to savings as yet unquantified.
Legal	The Children’s Trust has been set up to fulfil the requirement of Section 11 of Children Act 2004.
Staffing/ capacity	On average, each partnership requires each representative to invest around 30 hours pa. Recommendations in this report are expected to be achieved within existing resources and may lead to savings as yet unquantified.
Risk Management	Key partnerships are already regularly reviewed for risk. Any reduction in partnership participation would need to be risk-assessed. If recommendations in this report are not implemented, there is a risk that the improvements in partnership-working and services for children and young people may not be achieved
Equal Opportunities	An equality impact assessment of the partnership framework is planned for early 2010. This report will be used as evidence. The actions recommended in this report are designed to help the Council and partners to better meet the needs of children and young people, which is in itself an equalities issue.

Consultation

48. The task and finish group sent a written survey to a small number of partnership representatives, both elected Members and officers. This asked for examples of achievements or service improvements made for children and young people by their partnership, as well as ideas for improvement.
49. Three members of the task and finish group consulted over 30 children and young people across the District to find out what services and support they would like the Council and its partners to provide. This included interviewing two school pupils who attended one of our meetings as observers during work experience.
50. Consultation of other officers, Members, partners and children and young people was conducted informally as the opportunities arose, during the period of the review.

Effect on Annual Priorities and Corporate Objectives

51. Improvements to the Council's efficient use of partnership working will help to meet all of the Council's corporate objectives.

Acknowledgements and Thanks

52. Finally, thanks are offered from the chairman of the review, Cllr Bridget Smith, to everyone listed at Appendix A for their help on this review. Without exception every one, officers, portfolio holders, partners, young people and task and finish group members, have brought honesty, insight and a genuine desire to improve services for children and young people.

Recommendations

53. Cabinet is recommended to
 - a) welcome this report and any amendments made by the Scrutiny and Overview Committee on 1 April 2010
 - b) ask officers to report on the feasibility of the recommendations and draft an action plan for consideration at the next meeting of Cabinet

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