Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday, 13 November 2012

Meeting with Chairs of Child Protection Committees – Note of meeting

1. As part of its inquiry into decision making on whether to take children into care, on Tuesday 13 November 2012 the Committee met five Chairs of Child Protection Committees (CPCs).

2. The following issues arose during the discussion—

**Leadership**

- It was acknowledged that good leadership is a pre-requisite for establishing consistent good practice in this area. Good leadership should involve taking responsibility and pushing all agencies to deliver strong outcomes;
- Committee members were advised that CPCs provide a framework for everyone to work together, make strategic decisions and set high-level standards and expectations and question them constantly, ensuring that relevant guidance is up to date and making improvements where appropriate. CPCs discharge to staff the responsibility for the individual child and are in turn held to account by Chief Officers;
- Links to Community Planning Partnerships are important as they can play a key role in providing guidance and unblocking blockages. It was noted that these links are not currently as good as they could be;
- The challenge for those working in child protection is to build individual successes into the collective strategic picture;
- It was noted that, although individual CPCs set objectives, there is no single agreed set of management objectives for all CPCs;
- It was noted that qualitative indicators are harder to put in place although the Scottish Government’s SHANARRI\(^1\) indicators offer this to some extent;
- CPC Chairs acknowledged the work of With Scotland in providing national co-ordination, looking at trends and providing training and research on good practice;
- CPCs try to spot issues of capacity or resource and flag to chief officers where appropriate;

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\(^1\) Safe, Healthy, Active, Nurtured, Achieving, Respected, Responsible and Included
In respect of sharing of best practice, it was noted that significant case reviews are beginning to look at cases where everything went as planned as well as cases where things went wrong;

It was noted that some councils are trying to identify the children in their area with parents who have an alcohol or drug addiction. In one local authority 600 such children have been identified, but there are only 50 on the child protection register. It was noted that many of these families get by with support from different agencies;

There was agreement that leadership by CPCs and by Community Planning Partnerships will be particularly important in the context of tightened budgets.

It was noted that the challenges of the current financial climate and changes to the welfare system are already impacting upon training budgets.

Multi-agency working/sharing of information

Issues around multi-agency working and the sharing of information were raised. It was noted that inter-agency co-operation works in the child protection context because it is clear what to do. There are, however, legislative blockages to sharing of information where the child is not subject to child protection procedures, as a result of having to seek parental consent;

For example, GPs are aware of the legal constraints upon them in respect of sharing information (they can only share information on specific issues). It was noted, however, that work is ongoing with them to ensure that the best possible information is shared where appropriate and within legislative requirements. It was acknowledged that this may be an area that the Committee may wish to consider further.

A more general concern was expressed that council resources need to become more child-friendly and joined up. There can be many different agencies working with the same family at the same time, but, depending on the local authority structure and level of information sharing by departments, they may not always be aware of each other’s involvement. An example given was that of Housing Officers, who may regularly be in and out of homes where there are looked after children but who do not necessarily communicate this to other professionals, such as children and families social workers who may be dealing with the same family at the same time. This was highlighted as an area that the Committee may wish to consider further;

It was noted that, in order to ensure clear lines of communication between the child protection system and the children’s hearings system, a representative of the children’s reporter sits on the CPC and that CPCs do training with panel members;

Thresholds for intervention/resources

Different thresholds for intervention and over-optimism in parents’ ability to change can lead to bad results;

Issues of different thresholds for intervention do not relate to children at significant risk of harm – they relate to families where professionals have niggles/gut feelings about the family but where there is not clear cut evidence that the child should be removed;
Therefore, the key issue is that of neglect. There are many children who are not at significant risk of harm and are not on the child protection register but are being neglected to some extent by their parents. The level of resources available and the short-term benefits of removal are factors in deciding whether to remove a child in such situations. If there are no appropriate placements available the child will not be removed. There is currently a shortage of permanent placements;

The issues, therefore, are around vulnerable children who have not reached the child protection system and who, due to resource considerations are not prioritised. **It was acknowledged that this is an area where the Committee could make a difference;**

Related to this issue is the fact that there are differing professional perspectives on what constitutes “good enough” parenting;

Decision making on whether to take children into care can be dependent on the age of the child. For example, removing children in their early teens can cause more problems than it solves;

It was noted that there may be a case for the Committee making a distinction between decision making on whether to remove younger children and whether to remove older children, as different factors have been taken into account, such as older children wanting to remain at home;

Examples were alluded to of older children being removed, at which point professionals received a disclosure that revealed issues that occurred earlier in their lives and which had not been picked up at the time;

It was noted that, from the perspective of child protection, there are three categories for monitoring children – (1) children at risk; (2) children where there are concerns; and (3) children for whom there is universal service provision;

It was noted that, in addition to parental drug or alcohol misuse, other factors, such as parental mental health issues, are often prevalent in child protection cases;

It was also acknowledged that parental drug and alcohol misuse is only an issue in this context if there is a clear impact on the child;

It was noted that child protection issues can affect families at all ends of the social spectrum. It was noted that middle class parents and their solicitors were able to advocate very strongly on their own behalf rather than the child’s needs, which can, in turn, prove disheartening for staff, who can feel intimidated by this. The increasing involvement of solicitors (which is not solely confined to middle class parents) was mentioned in this context;

It was noted that professionals are under pressure and those pressures are likely to increase as a result of changes to the welfare system. It was also noted that there is a feeling that families are becoming more hostile;

It was noted that assumptions about a link between poverty and poor parenting are not always correct;

**Timescales**

The length of timescales before permanence is achieved has improved in the last few years, particularly following work carried out by the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration on the matter;
• Investment in the early years is the key to breaking the cycle. This requires agencies to have the resources to enable them to take the right decisions early;

Accessibility
• It was acknowledged that the different systems (child protection/children’s hearings etc.) are complex and can be difficult for children and families to understand.