

Annex 10 – Minutes of an oral evidence session with Lou Williams,
Service Director for Children and Safeguarding, Cambridgeshire County
Council, on 5 August 2020

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No Wrong Door Task Group

Minutes of a meeting with the Service Director for Children and Safeguarding,
Peterborough City and Cambridgeshire County Councils

Microsoft Teams
3 pm on 5 August 2020

In attendance:

Councillor Chris Botten (Acting Chairman)
Councillor Robert Evans
Councillor Liz Bowes
Councillor Barbara Thomson

Benjamin Awkal, Scrutiny Officer

Lou Williams, Service Director for Children and Safeguarding, Peterborough City and
Cambridgeshire County Councils (witness)

Key points from the discussion:

1. The Chairman relayed apologies from Councillor Kay Hammond, Chairman of the Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee, and Councillor Lesley Steeds, Chairman of the No Wrong Door Task Group and Vice-Chairman of the Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee.
2. The Acting Chairman explained that Surrey County Council intended to introduce the No Wrong Door model with support from North Yorkshire County Council. This followed the rating of the council's children's services as inadequate by Ofsted in 2018.
3. The witness explained that he assumed his current post after the decision to adopt the No Wrong Door had been made and was responsible for its reversal. He commented that the model is attractive and is one about which North Yorkshire County Council is passionate. At the time, in Cambridgeshire, there were a significant number of young people that were in and out of placements and escalating up the hierarchy of placements to costly residential care; the No Wrong Door looked like a good model to follow.
4. The witness had visited North Yorkshire County Council and found that there were unique, charismatic and visionary officers running the model at the time and believed that, if a local authority did not have those people, it would struggle to implement the model successfully. He added that, whilst the most recent grading of children's services in Cambridgeshire by Ofsted was 'good' at this time, there were a significant number of issues that needed to be addressed by children's services in the county and so adopting a new model at the same time felt like trying to tackle too many priorities at once. Furthermore, the area in which the residential unit for the model (a pre-existing council-run residential home) was to be located, was one where there were already a lot of independent residential homes and

where recruiting sufficiently skilled staff, particularly management, was not possible. It was also difficult to recruit foster carers.

5. The Acting Chairman queried whether there were similar recruitment issues with children's social workers. The witness responded that children's social workers need to understand the model and adopt its culture, and that fundamental practice issues in Cambridgeshire needed to be addressed before it would have been appropriate to change how services were delivered.
6. The Acting Chairman asked whether the staff for a No Wrong Door model required a particular skillset which may be hard to find. The witness responded that the location of the children's home in question in Cambridgeshire was one where there were a high number of residential homes due to low property prices and where there was a small pool of talent from which to recruit staff; adding that, wherever the model is to be introduced, consideration will need to be given to the local context.
7. Councillor Thomson asked whether Cambridgeshire County Council had since adopted any elements of the No Wrong Door model. They had not done so but had sought to develop a multi-disciplinary approach to supporting the most at-risk young people – this was not wrapped around a specific residential building and did not utilise a specific pool of foster carers.
8. The Acting Chairman asked whether this was because of the aforementioned issues with implementing the model or issues inherent to the model. The witness replied that there was a particular skillset required of the people responsible for engaging challenging young people and turning their lives around, and the people capable of doing so were not that common but had been present in North Yorkshire when he visited the local authority. The witness added that in North Yorkshire there was little difficulty in recruiting skilled foster carers, unlike in Cambridgeshire.
9. Councillor Evans asked if the witness had set out with the intention of implementing the model but could not recruit the requisite staff or if he had been dissuaded after witnessing the quality of practice in North Yorkshire. The witness replied that he had fully intended to implement the model and the decision not to implement it was primarily due to the issues of recruiting the appropriately skilled staff for the residential home and recruiting sufficient numbers of foster carers. Ultimately, the residential home was closed due to the staffing issues, despite being the only council-run children's home in Cambridgeshire.
10. The Acting Chairman commented that Surrey County Council has consistently experienced problems when recruiting children's social workers; the council is competition with East and West Sussex; and Surrey is adjacent to London, but the council does not pay London allowances to staff. He commented that the council had placed significant hopes on the No Wrong Door being a route out of special measures.
11. The Acting Chairman asked if there was alternative delivery model which could reduce the number of hand-offs between services. The witness reiterated that No Wrong Door works when staffed by the right people and it was this issue, in conjunction with the fundamental issues within children's services, which lead to Cambridgeshire County Council deciding

against the model's introduction. He added that the recent passing of Surrey County Council's Executive Director of Children, Lifelong Learning and Culture, Dave Hill CBE, whom he knew well, and the necessary resulting change in leadership was an issue to which Surrey County Council should have regard. When it intended to introduce the No Wrong Door, Cambridgeshire was happily considering itself to be a good authority, but beneath the surface it was not and there were a lot of issues to be fixed which made the introduction of the No Wrong Door impractical. The Acting Chairman commented that Dave Hill was exactly the sort of charismatic, visionary leader for whom the model would have been absolutely perfect.

12. Councillor Bowes commented that her expectation would be that all of the council's social workers were of a certain calibre and asked how Cambridgeshire County Council's approach to delivering children's services was able to succeed despite lacking some commitment and expertise. The witness responded that the version of the No Wrong Door proposed in Cambridgeshire had been challenging in terms of recruiting staff to work with challenging young people in residential homes and recruiting a sufficient number of foster carers to do the same; but, if a council has a complement of social workers who are relatively stable and have manageable caseloads, then to some extent the model and framework around them matters less. It was the staffing and foster carer issues which Cambridgeshire County Council chose to priorities.
13. The Acting Chairman asked whether Cambridgeshire County Council had reached a point where the witness was satisfied with the caseloads for social workers. The witness believed the council was getting there. The council was aiming for an average of 15 cases per fulltime-equivalent social worker in its adult safeguarding teams; average caseloads remained at approximately 20 per full-time-equivalent children's social worker and he intended to bring that figure down to 15, which he believed to be a good, safe level – the Acting Chairman noted that Dave Hill had shared that objective. Cambridgeshire County Council had been experiencing vacancies in children-in-care teams and increasing numbers of children in care, which were driving higher caseloads. The witness commented that there is a correlation between social worker caseloads and Ofsted ratings.
14. The Acting Chairman asked if care leavers in Cambridgeshire were reporting positively on their experiences of the care system and if they felt that they didn't needed to explain their story too many times. The witness replied that this was increasingly the case and that a big challenge was a lack of in-house fostering, adding that his role covers two local authorities, Peterborough City and Cambridgeshire County Councils, and that there was a remarkable difference in culture and challenges between the two; a significant number of children in the care of Cambridgeshire County Council were placed out of area, making it harder to support them as care leavers. In Cambridgeshire, care leavers were increasingly saying that they are better supported than previously and looked-after children were experiencing fewer changes in social worker.
15. Councillor Bowes asked if it was true to say 'don't rearrange the chairs on the Titanic', concentrate on the fundamental issues instead and that the Task Group should recommend those issues be prioritised and, until then, the No Wrong Door would not solve the issues within Surrey County Council's children's services. The witness agreed but added that, if

Surrey County Council possesses or can attract the right staff, the model could help to improve children's services.

16. The witness agreed that the minutes of the meeting could be published in the Task Group's report.

The meeting concluded at 3.25 pm.