

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 25th MARCH 2015

POSITION STATEMENT BY THE LEAD MEMBER

CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

In my statement to the Council in September 2014 I referred to the need for us to be prepared for the increasing focus on safeguarding children from sexual exploitation. Sadly, that cautionary message has proved to be borne out through the national reporting of large scale cases.

The arrangements that we had already put in place, on a temporary basis, to create a multi-agency team with the police to respond to this increasingly prevalent area of child protection has now been secured through the growth in budget for Children and Family Services. That team has now been further strengthened by the involvement of health partners. The Assistant Chief Constable and our Director of Children and Family Services have established an Executive Group to oversee the work of this team.

The operational liaison which the County Council has with the Chief Constable and his officers is first class. I noted from his statement made on Monday, that the Police and Crime Commissioner wants “to facilitate greater partnership activity” and is inviting funding bids. The Commissioner has never sought to meet with me as the Lead Member with responsibilities in this area and I would be interested to know what he is proposing. If additional funding is available from his budget to deal with child sexual exploitation, it would be sensible for bids to be made on a multi-agency basis and to recognise the contributions partners are already making.

The Commissioner has sought to provide reassurances about the past. However, we need to acknowledge that there are examples of child sexual exploitation, commonly referred to as CSE, in the county and these are being swiftly responded to; perpetrators are being investigated and children and young people are being effectively supported.

A clear multi-agency Action Plan to tackle and respond to CSE is in place through the Local Safeguarding Children Board, and the County Council’s own CSE Action Plan sits alongside it. I continue to receive bi-weekly reports about children in care who go missing – children who are vulnerable to CSE, and I monitor the progress of the CSE Action Plan through my weekly Lead Member meetings with the Director.

In the autumn, new arrangements were put in place for Member oversight of children’s social care services. As part of these new arrangements an all-Member Child Protection Panel was set up to provide assurance, at elected Member level, that the County Council is discharging its duties in relation to child protection. I would strongly advise the Council that the Panel is the place to discuss these issues in more detail.

An awareness raising campaign is in place for the general public, schools, licences and taxi firms, children, young people and their families. A few weeks ago, along with Leon Spence and Peter Lewis, I attended a high profile conference for all agencies working in our local area and listened to the experiences of families from other parts of the country that have anguished over their children's experiences of CSE.

Learning from these families first hand is an important way to understand how best to develop our own plans to prevent CSE, respond swiftly to it when we learn about it, and support the victims of it towards their recovery.

Preventing harm to children and young people from those seeking to exploit them sexually must continue to be a priority for the Council, and one which I will continue to challenge and seek re-assurance about from the department regarding its work.

The recent surge in cases prompted, I believe we all recognise, by national reporting of CSE, has placed unprecedented demands on the Children and Family Services department, but I am very pleased to be able to tell you that, nevertheless, there continues to be much to recognise and celebrate:

- As a result of the support that we provide to engaging young people in positive activities there are three things that I would like to mention:
 - firstly, on Monday, our Children in Care Choir took centre stage at Sheffield City Hall, in the Voice in a Million concert, raising awareness about the plight of millions of children worldwide, who are orphaned, abandoned or separated from their birth parents, and in need of a loving family for life. An extraordinary thing for our own children in care to promote.
 - secondly, in February, members of our Children in Care Council participated in the All Party Parliamentary Group discussion in Westminster on involving children in care planning, making sure that the voices of Leicestershire children are heard by those creating national policy;
 - and thirdly, on a similar theme, in January this year, Rina Roy, a Leicestershire member of the UK Youth Parliament, was one of only 60 young people in England invited to join with MPs to celebrate 750 years of Parliament.

These significant experiences for our young people are only possible as a result of our committed workforce and I would like to mention Sam Harris, a youth worker supporting vulnerable young people across Hinckley and Bosworth, who was recognised in the national Youth Worker Awards early in the New Year.

- Our schools have also had successes. Of note is Redmoor Academy, in Hinckley, that has become a national finalist in the 2015 Pupil Premium Award in recognition of its effective use of the pupil premium in raising the attainment

of disadvantaged pupils and improving their outcomes. I continue to work on behalf of our schools through the F40 group to achieve fairer funding. In January I met with DfE funding officials and on 4th March I met with Nick Gibb, prior to a Back Bench debate in the House on 10th March about the issues around school funding and the need for confirmation that the recently provided additional £390m will appear in future years' allocations.

- And finally, our Supporting Leicestershire Families work continues to receive high national profile. On 10th March, Eric Pickles announced our successful latest figures in the House of Commons and also mentioned the letter of support for our programme that had been sent by a Leicestershire head teacher.