

REPORT TO:	Scrutiny and Overview Committee 18 January 2011
AGENDA ITEM:	9
SUBJECT:	NOTICES TO SCHOOLS TASK AND FINISH WORKING GROUP – FINAL REPORT
LEAD OFFICER:	Julie Belvir Council Solicitor and Monitoring Officer, Director of Democratic & Legal Services
CABINET MEMBER:	Not Applicable
PERSON LEADING AT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING:	Councillor Graham Bass, Task Group Chairman

ORIGIN OF ITEM:	This item arises from the Committee's decision on 7 September 2010 to commission a Task and Finish Working Group to investigate 'policies and procedures pertaining to distribution of notices to schools in the event of child protection and welfare issues'.
BRIEF FOR THE COMMITTEE:	To consider the Group's final report and agree any recommendations to be made to the Cabinet and other agencies.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 On 7 September 2010, the Committee agreed to commission a Task and Finish Working Group to investigate 'policies and procedures pertaining to distribution of notices to schools in the event of child protection and welfare issues' (see Minute No. A48/10).
- 1.2 The report of the Task and Finish Group is appended to the report for the Committee's consideration and approval of its recommendations.
- 1.3 In completing its review, the Group has also undertaken an evaluation of the Task and Finish process to identify learning points for any future Task and Finish Working Groups that the Committee may commission.

2. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES PERTAINING TO DISTRIBUTION OF NOTICES TO SCHOOLS IN THE EVENT OF CHILD PROTECTION AND WELFARE ISSUES

2.1 At its meeting on 15 June 2010, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee agreed a protocol for the commissioning and operation of Task and Finish Working Groups. In accordance with that protocol, the Task and Finish Working Group has undertaken its investigation and its final report is attached at appendix A.

2.2 Sections seven and eight of that protocol state that:

(7) After the Group has collected the necessary information and evidence, its Members will prepare a report for the Scrutiny and Overview Committee to consider, detailing its work, findings, conclusions and any proposed recommendations to the Council, the Executive or relevant non-executive Committee, partner agency or Partnership Board; and

(8) The Scrutiny and Overview Committee will consider the report at its next ordinary meeting and resolve to endorse, amend or reject the recommendations based on the evidence presented.

2.3 The Committee is therefore asked to consider the attached report and determine whether to endorse, amend or reject the recommendations made by the Group before submission to Cabinet and any other relevant bodies.

2.4 During the investigation of this issue, the Group also heard a range of evidence relating to difficulties faced by schools with regard to working with Children's Social Care Services. In recognising that this issue was outside of its remit, the Group agreed to include an additional recommendation that the Committee consider including this issue for investigation in a future work programme.

3. EVALUATION OF TASK AND FINISH PROCESS

3.1 At the conclusion of the review, Members of the Task and Finish Group took the opportunity to evaluate the use of the Task and Finish process. As this was the first such review conducted under the Council's new constitutional arrangements for Scrutiny, Members felt that any learning points identified would be of benefit to future reviews undertaken using the Task and Finish approach.

3.2 The key learning points identified by the Group were:

- i) That the new constitutional arrangements had allowed the Committee to review an issue identified by the Committee Members that was of concern to local communities;
- ii) That the undertaking of the review had been 'Councillor-led' and that this approach was successful;
- iii) That the approach had allowed the Members to consider a broader evidence base than was normally available at full Committee meetings;
- iv) That the operation of the Task and Finish procedures had been successful in undertaking and completing the review, though the overall

- success will be judged on whether the Group's recommendations are implemented;
- v) That the structure of the review had been good and this had contributed to success of the Group's work;
 - vi) That undertaking the review required a high level of commitment from Councillors in a concentrated period of time; and
 - vii) That at the outset of any review, it would be useful for Task Group Members to give consideration to inviting onto the Group any person they believed would add particularly relevant knowledge & experience.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 The Committee is recommended to endorse, amend or reject the recommendations contained within the Task Group Report for submission to Cabinet and any other relevant bodies.
- 4.2 To note the learning points from the evaluation of the Task and Finish process undertaken by Members of the Group.

Appendices

- 1) Notices to Schools Task and Finish Group Final Report.
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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

- i) Task and Finish Group Start Up Document;
- ii) Notes of Task and Finish Working Group meetings on 20 September 2010, 15 October 2010 and 1 November 2010; and
- iii) Written responses to consultation with Chairmen of Governors and Head Teachers.

School Notices Task and Finish Working Group Draft Final Report

Scrutiny and Overview Committee

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Introduction

This report details the findings and conclusions of the Scrutiny Task and Finish Working Group investigation into 'notices to schools in the event of child welfare and protection issues'.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee originally identified this issue during the formulation of its work programme in June 2010. The issue arose following a number of alleged abduction attempts of school children in and around the Croydon area that were reported in the local press. Following these reports, debate surrounding the validity of these alleged abductions was also played out through the local press.

These events led some Members of the Scrutiny Committee to express concern regarding the processes and procedures for the management and flow of information to schools from public agencies in the event of child protection and welfare issues.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee agreed to formally commission a task and finish working group review of 'notices to schools in the event of child welfare and protection issues' at its meeting on 7 September 2010.

Terms of Reference

At its meeting on 7 September 2010, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a formal commissioning document. The Committee agreed the following:

Task and Finish Working Group Membership

Councillor Graham Bass (Chairman)

Co-Opted Member James Collins

Councillor Justin Cromie

Councillor Bernadette Khan

Councillor Ian Parker

Councillor Gerry Ryan

Matters to be Included in the Investigation

- Identify what policies and procedures exist, if any, to allow public agencies to quickly disseminate information and advice to schools in response to child protection and welfare issues.
- Consider under what circumstances schools would benefit from advice and guidance provided by other public agencies.
- Consider if the LEA is best placed to broadcast such information and what method should be used.
- Consider how others schools, such as academies or private schools, are affected by any such policies or procedures.
- Work with stakeholders to recommend new or revised procedures for the broadcast of information to schools in the event of child protection or welfare issues.

Matters to be Excluded from the Investigation

The Group will not attempt to investigate the recent reports of attempted abductions or any other specific incident. The Group will also not consider the general flow of normal information between agencies and schools.

Timescale

That the group complete its work by 7 January 2011, and to report its findings to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee on 18 January 2011, at which time the Group will be disbanded.

That the overall timescale of the investigation be three months with meetings approximately every three weeks.

The type of outputs and added value expected from the review

The Group will make recommendations to amend or create policies and procedures to ensure that schools are given appropriate advice and information in the event of child protection and welfare issues.

By ensuring that there is a timely flow of accurate information to schools in the event of a child protection or welfare issue, the Group will help agencies protect and safeguard school pupils.

Methodology

The Task and Finish Working Group has operated using a 'Member Led' approach. Members of the Group have taken responsibility for all of the actions required by the investigation.

At its first meeting, the Group considered the methodology it would use to complete its investigation within the context of its terms of reference. The Group agreed to pursue the following lines of enquiry:

- (a) What are the 'issues'?
- (b) What are the policies and procedures of each relevant (public) agency – Council, Police, NHS and any others?
- (c) Notify schools or not to notify schools. Who decides?
- (d) In what circumstances would schools benefit from information and guidance?
- (e) Any establishments other than schools (from all sectors) that need to be informed?
- (f) Which agencies are likely to receive information that should (or should not) be disseminated to schools?
- (g) What changes are already being considered in the light of recent experience?
- (h) Who broadcasts the information and is any advice given as to how the school should deal with the information?
- (i) If the LEA is not best placed to provide this information to schools, who is?
- (j) How is the information broadcast (telephone/e-mail/post)?
- (k) Who within the school is the information sent to?
- (l) Who maintains the list of those to be notified and keeps it up to date? Are recipients expected to acknowledge receipt and indicate the actions they are taking or choosing not to take?
- (m) What statistics are available to help direct the group's work?

The Group also agreed a detailed project plan that programmed the different elements of the investigation into six meetings and allocated tasks to be completed between meetings.

In undertaking its investigation, the Group gathered evidence through the following channels:

- (i) All Chairs of School Governing Bodies and Head Teachers were invited to contribute to the groups work. This yielded three responses.
- (ii) Three Head Teachers, one Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator, one Chair of Governors and one Governor attended a meeting with the group on 15 October 2010 to give evidence to Members.
- (iii) Representatives from the Metropolitan Police Service, Croydon Health Care Trust (Children's Services and Safeguarding), NHS Croydon and London Borough of Croydon Children Young People and Learners (School Improvement, Safeguarding Children's Board and Strategy and Communications) and Community Services (Public Safety) Departments

attended a meeting with the group on 1 November 2010 to give evidence to Members.

- (iv) The Group also investigated what statistical data and national guidance was available to assist its work.
- (v) The Group's findings and recommendations have been tested with all stakeholders that took part in the investigation.

Summary of Evidence

Written Consultation Exercise

The Group's first consultation exercise took the form of an open invitation to all Head Teachers and Chairs of Governors across Croydon to submit their views in writing. While the response to this consultation was minimal, it did raise several points to the Group:

- i) That Head Teachers have a specific difficulty in competing with rumours of incidents being spread amongst pupils, parents and the wider community.
- ii) That it was often difficult for schools to get in contact with officers in other organisations that could give accurate information in a timely manner or to keep them updated as an incident evolves.
- iii) That schools were not always aware of what information they could or could not pass on to pupils and parents.

This exercise also resulted in the Group receiving information on a system used by Surrey County Council that helped manage communication between agencies and Surrey schools when dealing with similar incidents.

This system was based upon the Local Authority employing 'Local Education Officers' that provided support to schools based within geographic areas of that County. Amongst other functions, these officers acted as a conduit in passing information between different schools and facilitated advice and support to individual schools from the Local Authority.

Benchmarking Against Other Local Authority Areas

The Group also undertook preliminary research to identify what good practice was available nationally or if other Scrutiny Committees had undertaken similar reviews. This included consulting with the Centre for Public Scrutiny's library of scrutiny reviews from across England and Wales.

While the outcome of that preliminary research did not identify any available good practice, the Group did receive information from a Head Teacher that described the arrangements operated by Surrey County Council. The Group used this information when considering its conclusions and recommendations.

Witness Session with Head Teachers and Governors – 15 October 2010

The Group's first witness session was held with a number of Head Teachers and Governors. The Group purposely wanted to meet with people involved in schools first to ensure that they had a good understanding of the issues they faced before meeting with professionals from other public agencies. The Group devised its own questioning strategy in advance of the meeting and a list of anticipated questions was sent to all witnesses prior to the meeting.

The session confirmed the points raised during the written consultation. The Group was further informed of the following points by the witnesses present:

Information flow between schools and the Police

- i) That often confidentiality of information can slow its efficient flow between agencies and schools.
- ii) That because of the speed of rumours circulating amongst pupils and parents, Head Teachers needed incidents and risks to be confirmed to them extremely quickly to ensure that they can advise parents and pupils correctly.
- iii) That in the case of incidents involving a police investigation, the police sometimes does not share information as it could be detrimental to their investigation. This limits the level of information that schools can publish on websites or through other channels to compete against rumours spreading through parental and pupil networks.
- iv) That information sent by the Local Authority and Police following the reported abduction attempts had been very helpful to schools in the affected area, though it would have been more helpful if the information had been sent sooner. The information had been considered less relevant by schools that were located far away from the affected area and there were concerns that passing the information onto parents could unnecessarily cause panic and influence behaviours.
- v) That secondary schools appeared to have stronger relationships with their local Safer Neighbourhood Teams than primary schools and that this relationship was further influenced by the location of a school. It was accepted that because of the greater number of primary schools across Croydon, primary schools would not always develop the same relationship with Safer Neighbourhood Teams that secondary schools had established.
- vi) That there were instances of local safer neighbourhood teams not being aware of the details of particular incidents.
- vii) That schools needed to be given guidance on the seriousness of any incident so that they could respond accordingly.

Information flow between schools and the Local Authority

- viii) That it was not clear to all schools who they should contact at the Local Authority when an incident is reported to find out more information or to seek guidance.
- ix) That there were ways of getting in touch with the Local Authority, but that the ability to do so would depend on the experience of the Head Teacher at each school. This problem was compounded by the number of staffing changes at the Local Authority.
- x) That there had been concern regarding an outbreak of E Coli but no information was provided by the Local Authority despite requests.
- xi) That the Local Authority sent a weekly bulletin to all schools and this was an effective communication channel that could be used for spreading routine information more widely. As this bulletin was issued weekly, it would not be suitable for communicating issues about urgent situations.
- xii) That schools had difficulty contacting the Local Authority outside office hours.

Information flow between schools and the NHS

- xiii) That schools had received good information from the NHS about public health issues such as norovirus and swine flu.
- xiv) That the NHS was generally very good at getting information to schools.

The Group also heard that inaccurate and sensationalist reporting in the local press caused schools further difficulties when accurate information is not available to them.

The Group also heard evidence regarding some issues that were outside of the scope of its investigation. A key issue that was reported by all witnesses was the difficulty faced by schools when trying to liaise with Children's Social Care Services on issues raised regarding the general well-being of individual children and families. The Group heard that these issues were long standing and that there was no sign of improvement.

While this issue was outside the remit of the Group, the Group would recommend that the Committee consider including this issue for investigation in a future work programme.

Witness Session with Public Agency Professionals – 1 November 2010

The Group's second witness session was attended by representatives of the Police, NHS Croydon, Croydon Healthcare Trust, Croydon Children's Safeguarding Board, Croydon Council's Children, Young People and Learners Department and Croydon Council's Community Services Department. The Group again devised its own question strategy in advance of the meeting and a list of anticipated questions was sent to all witnesses prior to the meeting.

The Group used the session to ask questions to assist the investigation in general and to test the evidence heard from schools at the previous witness session. Key points from the session included:

Information from the Police

- i) That all schools across Croydon have a named contact in the Police, normally within their local Safer Neighbourhood Team. Nine schools and colleges had a specific Safer Schools Officer for their facility.
- ii) That following an incident, the Police would contact neighbouring schools and the local Safer Neighbourhood Team to provide messages of reassurance for parents.
- iii) That the problem of rumours spreading quickly through parental and community networks was accepted as an issue.
- iv) That Police held contact lists for Head Teachers and their PAs.
- v) That the Police would not be the lead agency for some issues, such as chemical spillages.

Information from the Local Authority

- vi) That the Local Authority communicates with all schools every Friday via email. All email failures are investigated ensuring that contact details are up to date.
- vii) That every school has a named contact in the School Improvement Team and that the Local Authority needs to ensure that staff in that team can direct schools correctly. The Local Authority was confident that every school would be aware who their contact was in the School Improvement Team.
- viii) That safeguarding practices, training, advice and guidance are being reviewed to ensure that schools staff and governors receive the right information. Adult learning had received an 'outstanding' grade for safeguarding practices and the Local Authority was applying good practice from adult learning into practice with schools.
- ix) That out of hours calls were directed to the CCTV control room, which would make an assessment of the issue and could refer matters to a duty social worker.
- x) That the out of hours control room could contact the Director of Public Safety and the Director of Education and Learning at any time if the need arose.
- xi) That guidance to schools must be kept up to date to ensure that schools have the correct contact numbers at any given time.

Information from the NHS

- xii) That the NHS worked with the Director of Public Health and Director of Education to communicate with schools on wider health issues such as swine flu.
- xiii) That School Nurses and Health Visitors were briefed daily on any emerging health issues. A recent example included swift and successful action to remove a batch of vaccines from schools following communication from the Department of Health.
- xiv) That all GPs in the area had recently been reminded of the need for them to inform the Healthcare Trust regarding public health incidents.

Information regarding the Safeguarding Board

- xv) That the Safeguarding Board was undertaking an exercise to ensure that people across all agencies knew who to contact across each others' organisations.
- xvi) That any issues relating to children's social care should be able to be reported through a number of agencies, such as the health service, police or the council. Meetings were being set up with Head Teachers to discuss child protection and safeguarding more generally.

Further Dialogue with Witnesses

Following the witness sessions, the Group circulated all written notes to all witnesses that attended to give a further opportunity to respond to evidence that the Group had heard. This included giving witnesses the opportunity to respond to points from the notes of witness sessions other than the ones they had attended.

The Group also shared its draft report and initial recommendations with all parties and invited comments on the suitability of those draft recommendations.

Only one piece of written feedback was received, from the Children, Young People and Learners Department, that stated “the recommendations seemed sensible but there was concern that there should not be a separate out of hours method of communication to the one the council already has”.

The Group arranged an additional meeting with the Director of Education and Learning to discuss the draft recommendations. The key point of the discussion was to establish if existing out of hours contact arrangements were sufficiently suitable and whether ‘one number’ could also be used outside office hours to ensure ease of use for schools. The Group heard that existing out of hours contact arrangements were sufficient but that it was accepted that additional training and guidance may need to be given to ensure that the existing out of hours response was sufficiently wide ranging to meet the needs of schools including communication with wider groups of schools.

The group also heard that the Children, Young People and Learners department had begun investigating the possibility of providing Head Teachers with ID cards that had the relevant emergency contact numbers printed on the reverse as an aid to ensuring that the correct contact numbers were available to schools.

The Group agreed to include an additional recommendation to reflect these two points.

Findings and Conclusions

Having conducted its evidence gathering exercises, the Group met to discuss its findings and conclusions.

The Group agreed that its approach would be to look at the issue from the perspective of each organisation involved to identify the issues that they faced and suggest solutions based on the evidence gathered. The results of this exercise can be summarised as follows:

Schools Communicating with CYPL and other Agencies

- In the event of an emergency, the school contacts the primary agency responsible first, eg police, ambulance or social care services.
- After contacting primary agencies, schools should have one number to contact the Children, Young People and Learners department so that they can report incidents that may need disseminating to other schools. The number should put schools through to a suitably experienced professional and the number should be attached to a position rather than an individual.
- The number should be available for use outside office hours and any out of hours call handling service should have access to school emergency contact numbers.
- Schools should use their own judgement as to what incidents are serious enough to be reported.
- The receiving officer to assess if information should be shared more widely and with whom.

Agencies Communicating with Other Agencies

- There should be one point of contact for each agency that can respond in a timely manner at all times.
- Police and Health services should have access to the same point of contact in CYPL as used by schools.
- When receiving information, CYPL should assess and escalate to senior management as appropriate.
- CYPL should also assess and provide suitable information to the Communications and Press Office teams.
- If an agency receives a report of an incident that other schools should receive details of, the agency should report the details of the incident to the central contact number in CYPL for dissemination to schools.

CYPL and Other Agencies Communicating with Schools

- Agencies to have either direct or indirect access to Schools out of hours contact details, though where information is to be disseminated to a number of schools it should be channelled via CYPL.
- Agencies to determine which schools to be informed of an issue and what method of communication to be used depending on the nature.

- Communications to schools can be either direct from an agency or via CYPL, so long as there is a consistent message.
- CYPL single point of contact to alert schools of incidents and acknowledge reports from incidents.
- CYPL to lead on press office support, contact details of other relevant persons and relevant guidance.
- CYPL to provide information of incidents to relevant schools quickly (ie minutes and hours rather than days).

Recommendations

In making its recommendations, the Task and Finish Working Group has given consideration to which agencies these recommendations should be made to. The implications span a number of organisations and the Group therefore submits its final report and recommendations to all agencies involved in the review, namely:

- i) Croydon Council
- ii) Croydon Police
- iii) Croydon Safeguarding Children's Board
- iv) Croydon PCT
- v) Croydon Healthcare Trust

Recommendation One

1A That all relevant agencies operating in Croydon adopt the procedure detailed in the group's findings and conclusions as per pages 11 and 12 of this report.

1B Suitable persons within those organisations should be given a clear responsibility to operate these procedures in the event of relevant future child protection and welfare issues and be appropriately trained to carry out that role.

1C That the procedure detailed in pages 11 and 12 of this report be commended to Croydon Schools and their Governing Bodies for adoption.

1D Agencies should be aware of the speed by which modern communication methods can disseminate information to a wide audience and give consideration to how these methods can be more effectively used.

Recommendation Two

That those organisations should agree a mechanism for ensuring that up to date contact details are available across each agency to ensure the smooth and fast exchange of information in future incidents.

Recommendation Three

That the Children, Young People and Learners Department ensures that existing out of hours response arrangements be sufficiently wide ranging to meet the needs of schools including communication with wider groups of schools.

Recommendation Four

That safeguarding training for schools contains information on who to contact in public agencies and how to contact them when faced with child protection and welfare issues.

Recommendation Five

That the operation of the procedure described in pages 11 and 12 of this report be tested in six months and reviewed periodically thereafter.

Recommendation Six

That the Children, Young People and Learners Department facilitates a method of communication to non-maintained and independent schools.