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Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)  
Cabinet Member (Children and Young People)

3 April 2014  
8 April 2014

**Name of Cabinet Member:**

Children and Young People – Councillor G Duggins

**Scrutiny Chair Approving Submission of the report:**

Education and Children's Services – Councillor F Abbott

**Ward(s) affected:**

All

**Title:**

The Voice of the Child – Recommendations from Task and Finish Group

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**Is this a key decision?**

No

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**Executive Summary:**

The issue of the 'voice of the child' refers to the way that a child's opinions and feelings are heard, listened to, and reflected in the decisions made about their life. The voice of the child is an important central theme in Children's Social Care and it is a constant priority of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2). The work carried out by the task and finish group formed part of the Scrutiny Board's ongoing overview of the voice of the child but was also prompted by two specific pieces of work which also highlighted the issue.

The Local Government Association Peer Review found gaps in the approach to the voice of the child and results from a Voices of Care survey found that almost half did not know or weren't sure why they were in care. The results of the survey were discussed at the following Voices of Care meeting and the young people shared their views on the questions asked.

As a direct result of the issues raised at the Voices of Care meeting, the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) agreed (at its meeting of 8 July 2013) to set up a Task and Finish Group to specifically consider the voice of the child

The group met with different areas of the Council that have a role in the voice of the child and, from these discussions, the Task and Finish Group identified a number of recommendations that would contribute to improving the way that the voice of the child is heard in Coventry.

**Recommendations:**

1. The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) is asked to:
  - a) consider and approve the report of the task and finish group included at Appendix 1; and
  - b) to refer the recommendations set out in section 11 of the report to the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) for the appropriate actions to be considered.
  
2. The Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) is asked to:
  - a) note the report of the task and finish group included at Appendix 1;
  - b) consider any additional comments arising from the 3<sup>rd</sup> April meeting of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board; and
  - c) consider and agree the recommendations set out in section 11 of the report.

**List of Appendices included:**

Report of the Task and Finish Group – the Voice of the Child

**Other useful background papers:**

None

**Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?**

Yes - The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) considered the report of the Task and Finish Group on Thursday 3 April 2014.

**Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?**

No

**Will this report go to Council?**

No

**Report title:**

Report of the Task and Finish Group – the Voice of the Child

**1. Context (or background)**

1.1 Between October 2013 and February 2014, a Task and Finish Group of the Education and Children Services Scrutiny Board (2) explored how the voice of the child is currently heard by the Council and the ways in which it could be improved. This report summarises the outcomes of work and makes recommendations to the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People).

**2. Options considered and recommended proposal**

2.1 The full report of the Task and Finish Group, summarising the issues considered and the background to the recommendations is attached at appendix 1.

**3. Results of consultation undertaken**

3.1 To help inform their deliberations, the task and finish group heard evidence from a small number of stakeholders within the Council. The stakeholders included representatives from training, education, Social Work teams and Independent Reviewing Officers. The emerging outcomes of the review were also discussed at meetings of the Corporate Parenting Board and Voices of Care Council.

**4. Timetable for implementing this decision**

4.1 If the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) approves the recommendations, timetables for each area would need to be developed as part of the next stages of work.

**5. Comments from Executive Director, Resources**

5.1 Additional resources have been identified to fund additional social work staffing in the Referral & Assessment Service, and Neighbourhood Teams, and to fund Independent Reviewing Officer staff within the Safeguarding Service. This funding is time limited until March 2015, and will help to alleviate some of the capacity issues. Any further discussions in relation to permanent additional staffing resource will need to form part of the 2015/16 budget setting process.

Training and Life Story work will be delivered within the existing budgetary provisions available.

**5.2 Legal implications**

There are no specific legal implications in relation to this report, as it forms part of the Council's constitutional process whereby the Council's Scrutiny Boards can make recommendations to Cabinet (including a Cabinet Member exercising decision making functions under section 3.2.6. of the Constitution). Where such recommendations do not constitute a change in policy the Cabinet Member may take such action on the recommendations as the Member deems appropriate (section 4.5.16.2 of the Constitution).

**6. Other implications**

**6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / Local Area Agreement (or Coventry Sustainable Community Strategy)?**

One of the Council's corporate priorities is to protect and support the City's most vulnerable people and to keep children safe from harm. The work of this Task and Finish Group and the consequent recommendations will support this priority by helping to embed the voice of the child.

**6.2 How is risk being managed?**

Should the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) decide to approve the recommendations, any risks and mitigating measures will need to be considered as part of the next stage of detailed work to develop proposals.

**6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?**

None

**6.4 Equalities / EIA**

As part of their work, the Task and Finish Group heard evidence from all stakeholders involved about the positive impacts of listening to the voice of the child.

**6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment**

None

**6.6 Implications for partner organisations?**

None

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| Councillor M Mutton  | Chair of Task and Finish Group             | -                                  | 21.03.14                 | 25.03.14                                  |
| Councillor G Duggins   | Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) | -                                  | 24.03.14                 | 25.03.14                                  |

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## Appendix 1: The Voice of the Child – Recommendations from Task and Finish Group

### 1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 To inform the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) and the Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) of the outcomes and recommendations from the work of the Voice of the Child Task and Finish Group.
- 1.2 This report provides some context for the establishment of the group and describes the process that the group undertook. The report identifies a number of issues that were apparent across the different areas and also describes a number of examples of good practice. The final section addresses the outcomes of the discussions and makes recommendations for improvement.

### 2 Information/Background

- 2.1 The issue of the 'voice of the child' refers to the way that a child's opinions and feelings are heard, listened to, and reflected in the decisions made about their life. The voice of the child is an important central theme in Children's Social Care and it is a constant priority of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2). However, two specific pieces of work also highlighted the issue and therefore triggered this particular piece of work.
- 2.2 In March 2013, Coventry invited the Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review team to review safeguarding arrangements and practice within the City Council and its partners. The Peer Review found areas of good practice but also some assessments where "the needs of the children are not clearly identified and are sometimes lost" (p.10).

The full Coventry Safeguarding Peer Review Report, which was considered by the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2013, can be found at: <http://moderngov.coventry.gov.uk/documents/s11864/Report%20for%20SB2%20on%20Peer%20Review%20Jul%202013%20final.pdf>

- 2.3 In 2013 the **Voices of Care Council** undertook a survey with children in care. In the under 12 age category 88% of those asked said that they did not feel that they are involved in the decisions made about them, and almost half of the respondents did not know or weren't sure why they are in care. The results of the survey were discussed at the following Voices of Care meeting and the young people shared their views on the questions asked.
- 2.4 As a direct result of the issues raised at the Voices of Care meeting, the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) agreed (at its meeting of 8 July 2013) to set up a Task and Finish Group to specifically consider the voice of the child.<sup>1</sup>

### 3 Process

- 3.1 The Task and Finish Group comprised Councillors M. Mutton (Chair), Lepoidevin, Abbott, and Mrs Hanson and Mrs Jones (co-opted members of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board).
- 3.2 The Task and Finish Group held an initial meeting on 16 October 2013 to discuss the issues surrounding the topic and to establish the way that the group would operate.
- 3.3 The original scope of the group's work was to focus on Looked After Children (LAC) and the way their voices are heard during the journey through care. After some of the initial

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<sup>1</sup> <http://democraticservices.coventry.gov.uk/documents/s12494/02%20-%20Minutes%208th%20July%202013.pdf>

discussions, the group widened the scope to include those children who are at stage 4 of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process (i.e. those on the edge of coming into care). This widening of the scope reflects the focus on early intervention that the Council believes to be imperative in identifying and addressing children's social care issues effectively.

- 3.4 The group agreed that a series of meetings should be arranged, with each meeting focusing on one of the important themes: training, education, social workers, and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). The group met with officer representatives from each of these areas to discuss how the voice of the child is currently heard and what improvements could be made. The Chair also discussed the issue and the headline findings of the Task and Finish Group with the Voices of Care Council to ensure that their views were included in the report.

## **4 General Issues**

- 4.1 Throughout the discussions with various groups, there were a number of themes that were consistently found to be a factor. There are no specific recommendations made about these general issues (as the specific issues are addressed in the relevant sections later in the report) but it is important to acknowledge the overarching themes across the board.

### **4.1.1 Increased demand and capacity**

Due to increased demands on the service, Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers are currently dealing with caseloads that are too high. This has a detrimental effect on the amount of time spent on each case, which could lead to a reduction in proactive and engagement work. The changes in administrative support have also led to changes in the way that Social Care teams operate.

### **4.1.2 Consistency**

One of the most prevalent themes that came from the meetings of the Task and Finish Group was a lack of consistency in practice. There are many examples of good practice but these are not reliably applied across the service. Inconsistency can be found in communicating with children, case recording, training uptake, supervision meetings, and line management. These issues are explored in further detail in sections 7–11 below.

### **4.1.3 Culture**

The Task and Finish Group observed that the voice of the child is often approached as a separate additional stage to be considered as part of any process concerning children, rather than an inherent and integral element to each part of the process. The Group agreed that there needs to be a change in the culture of Children's Social Care so that the voice of the child is placed at the heart of the service. This change needs to occur at all levels of the organisation, among officer and political groups alike.

## **5 Good practice**

- 5.1 The Task and Finish Group found a number of examples of good practice in their discussions with officers and it is important these are recognised so that they can be applied more widely in the service.

### **5.1.1 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)**

The IROs have previously proactively approached the Voices of Care Council to engage with the young people to hear about their experiences in the system and to also ask for their feedback and input into the creation of a child-friendly plan. The practice of involving young people in feedback and service design is key to improving young people's experiences of care and also giving them a voice in the system.

### 5.1.2 Senior Social Workers

There is work underway to reduce the caseloads of Senior Social Work practitioners so that they have the time to be able to provide support to Social Workers and extend best practice. The voice of the child will be a particular focus in this peer support model.

### 5.1.3 Social Workers

There are many Social Workers that know the children in their care incredibly well and, when asked, they are able to comprehensively articulate the conversations that they have had with the child and it is clear that the voice of the child is at the forefront of their work. It is important that this is recognised and rewarded so that there is a service-wide focus on the child.

There are many different ways that the Council engages with families and children (e.g. the Children and Family First Teams) and this provides the greatest opportunity for young people to find somebody that they can build rapport with and talk to. The LAC mentoring service is one way that the Council can help to provide a stable mentor in a young person's life as they move through changes. This service provides children and young people with someone to talk to in a more informal situation and relationship.

The development of cluster working in the service is instrumental to progress peer support and sharing of experiences. This also provides greater continuity in instances of Social Worker sickness or absence as each cluster discusses their cases.

### 5.1.4 Communication tools

The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) visited the Coundon Neighbourhood Office on 16 January 2014 and were shown a variety of tools that are available for Social Workers to aide their communication with children of different ages and abilities. The variety and quality of the tools available impressed members of the group and it was felt that tools such as these can help to address the differences in communication needs and abilities in children.

### 5.1.5 Early intervention

Coventry has a number of early intervention methods that provide good outcomes for those who engage with the services. One example of this work is the Coventry Family Group Conference Service. The service facilitates family meetings where strengths and resources within a network of family and friends can be drawn upon to make a family plan which offers support, care and safety for children and young people. Programmes such as this have improved outcomes for many children and are promoting communication with children as part of the solution.

The following sections of the report (sections 7-11) detail the discussions that were held in each meeting of the Task and Finish Group. These sections will give some context to and the rationale behind the Group's recommendations that are listed in section 12.

## 6 Training

6.1 In order to explore the training element of the voice of the child, the group met with two practice educators. The main areas of interest in the meeting were:

- Training requirements

Newly Qualified Social Workers have a programme of University training that is mandatory however after completing that there is no mandatory training other than safeguarding training. There is an expectation that Social Workers will complete additional training as and when training needs are identified but this is not mandatory.



Training needs should be identified during supervision sessions with line managers and the relevant actions should be established.

- Voice of the child

The voice of the child should be central to all elements of social work training so there is not one specific training course about the voice of the child. There used to be a lack of courses that dealt with how to communicate effectively with children, which led to the creation of a specific course 'communicating with children'. There was discussion about how the Council could learn from other local authorities and how they embed the voice of the child into practice.

Training currently offered for Social Workers does contain elements of the voice of the child but the application of the training can sometimes become a 'tick-box exercise'.

Training about the importance of the voice of the child must be undertaken by everyone who works with children (including teachers, school governors, youth leaders, and foster carers).

- Consistency

Training is only one part of a number of processes that can increase consistency and raise standards. Effective case auditing, a culture of personal development and constructive feedback are all necessary to embed good practice.

## **7 Education**

### **7.1 The Task and Finish Group met with the Looked After Children's Education Service (LACES) and the discussion covered, among other issues, the following:**

- Individual needs

Each young person has different needs and abilities therefore the processes should reflect that. Some young people do not wish to attend some meetings and so it is important to hear their voice in the best way that suits them.

- LACES' relationships with schools

LACES has good relationships with the majority of stakeholders (LAC co-ordinators, head teachers, school staff, teaching assistants). It is the role of the LAC co-ordinator to deal with all stakeholders and LACES is there to oversee the LAC co-ordinator.

- Relationships

It is crucial that young people have the opportunity to build a bond with one particular person so that they feel comfortable in communicating their feelings, wishes and emotions. These young people can have a large number of professionals in their lives and so there can be barriers to forming positive and consistent relationships.

### **7.2 The Looked After Children Education Service (LACES) has a range of tools that are used during the young person's Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting. These meetings are held twice a year and the form that accompanies the meeting has a section that asks about the young person's views. The tools help the worker to complete this section with the young person. The PEPs (through their forms) are audited to ensure that the young person's voice is heard (in the best way for them). Young people were involved in the redesign process of the forms and the changes that were made to the form have increased the level of satisfactory completions.**

## **8 Social Workers**

### **8.1 Social Work has a clear role in promoting, hearing and listening to the voice of the child. The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) visited the Coundon Social Work Neighbourhood Office where they talked to staff members about their work including the voice of the child. The Task and Finish Group also met with three Social Workers from different teams and the two Social Work Service Managers. These two sessions covered the following main aspects of the voice of the child:**

- Communication tools

As part of the visit to the Neighbourhood Office, the service shared a number of the tools, guidance, and techniques that are available to help to find ways of communicating with children of different ages, needs, and communication skills.

- Building relationships

It takes time to build rapport with young people to give them a place to discuss their feelings, thoughts and wishes. The current high caseloads and the bureaucratic processes in place mean that there is less time for this proactive, qualitative work. However, there are different types of workers across the Council that spend time with young people and families that give opportunities for this work (e.g. youth clubs, family assistants etc.).

- Training

The differences in training needs mean that there needs to be a range of training opportunities such as formal training courses, online learning materials and peer support learning.

- Life story work

Recording the story of the lives of children in care is a very valuable activity for the child. For children in long term care life story work is just as critical as it is for adopted children. Life story work needs to be continually updated to make it as effective and relevant as possible. There have been some backlogs in this work, and a workshop has been set up about life story work.

- 8.2 The way that Social Workers listen to the voice of the child is something that is not just self-reported, it is part of their development, their supervision, and IROs also have a role in scrutinising their success. The effectiveness of line management support and supervision must play a role in the inconsistencies in social work practice that we have heard about from children in care.
- 8.3 The Task and Finish Group felt that the voice of the child is often lost due to changes in personnel during their journey through Social Care. As a result of escalation, it is possible that the child deals with different workers from the Referral and Assessment Service (RAS), the Neighbourhood Teams, the Family First Team and Route 21. This risk can be even greater when Social Worker turnover and sickness absence is considered.

## **9 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)**

- 9.1 The role of the IRO is crucial to ensuring that the young person's views are heard and taken into account. The group met with members from the IRO team and the Head of Safeguarding and the discussion covered:
- Capacity  
Similar to the Social Workers, the IROs currently have more caseloads than the recommended amount and this can influence the type of work they are able to do. It has been approved to increase the number of IROs from 11 to 16 and, once recruited, this will significantly help the service.
  - First impressions  
The first interactions that the Council has with children and young people are absolutely crucial in determining their level of future interaction and communication. Therefore it is important that these first experiences help to encourage two-way communication.
  - Measurement  
There was discussion about how it would be possible to know how well the voice of the child is heard, and how to evaluate any changes made to practice on the voice of the child. This is something that would need to be investigated to make sure that the measurement truly represented the voice of the child.
- 9.2 The IROs are in a good position challenge social work practice and the recent approval to increase IRO numbers from 11 to 16 should strengthen their ability to do so effectively. On

recruiting the extra IRO posts, the service should use the opportunity to refresh current practice and strengthen the importance of the voice of the child.

## 10 Voices of Care Council

10.1 As a member of the Voices of Care Council with Elected Members, the Chair took an update back to the Voices of Care Council meeting on 19<sup>th</sup> February. This was an opportunity to talk to the young people in Voices of Care about the work the Task and Finish Group had been doing, what they had found, and to hear about the young people's experiences. The questions asked and a brief summary of the discussions are below:

10.2 *What were your first impressions when you came into care? What could we do differently?*

Some of the young people talked about the confusion that they felt when they came into care and how they weren't told very much about their situation. Others said there were lots of people checking if they were okay and they were able to ask questions and get answers. There were a number of examples where the young people were taken somewhere to wait for a placement to be found (such as the Social Work office or the police station) and, again, some had good experiences while some were confused or scared.

10.3 *What different ways do you tell the Council what you think? Would you like to do it online?*  
There were a lot of different people that the young people could talk to about what they think about the Council, such as their foster carer, the participation team or their Social Worker. There are lots of leaflets that are given to young people in care but they aren't always very child-friendly. Children under the age of 14 might not have access to the internet but those over 14 years old might want to use the internet to tell the Council what they think.

10.4 *Is there someone that you know well and can talk to you about what you think? How do you know this person?*

The young people named lots of different people that they can talk to, such as their foster carer, siblings, other members of Voices of Care, and the participation team. When asked about the mentoring scheme, they thought that this shouldn't just be for the people who misbehave (as they tend to be the people who get offered a mentor). The group thought it would be good to have someone with similar interests that they could talk to.

10.5 *Have you got a Life Story book (or box)? What could we do to make Life Story work better?*

Some have life story books and some don't. It should be something that gets started as soon as someone enters care and foster carers should help to put them together. They need to be of a good quality and individual needs should be taken into account.

10.6 *What happens if you start to work with someone new from the Council? Does it happen often?*

Again there was a variety of responses to this topic. Some had only had a few Social Workers and the changeover was well-managed. Others had lots of different Social Workers but the handovers seem to be improving. It is difficult when something happens and you have to deal with the Duty Social Worker as you do not know them, they don't know your situation and you might not want to tell them certain things.

10.7 *There are lots of different meetings that children in care are part of (such as LAC reviews and PEP meetings). What do you like about these different meetings? What would make them better?*

Sometimes these meetings can feel like the people are talking about you, rather than to you. There can also be a lot of people at the meetings so it can feel like a lecture so perhaps three or four people would be better.

## 11 Recommendations

The Task and Finish Group found a lot of crossover in the different meetings and areas that were considered, and therefore the recommendations have been grouped by theme in this section rather than department.

### Social Work practice

- 11.1 All Social Workers should provide evidence at their annual reviews of their practices in terms of the voice of the child.
- 11.2 Managers should monitor the training undertaken by their teams to ensure that every Social Worker has undertaken the training identified in their Personal Development Plan (PDP).
- 11.3 That Senior Social Work Managers review the current supervision process and assess its consistency and effectiveness. This work should involve input from all levels of the social work team structures to ensure that the process provides the best support and constructive challenge possible.

### Training

- 11.4 Explore the possibility of shorter, more focused training courses being delivered in the social work offices to save the Social Workers' time.
- 11.5 A training course should be delivered to all staff employed in schools to emphasise the importance of the voice of the child and how it should be embedded in everything. If there are issues with delivery during the normal working week, this could be undertaken during teacher training days.
- 11.6 A voice of the child training course should be included in the School Governor Training Programme. It should be open to all Governors but a mandatory requirement for those Governors who are responsible for safeguarding and Looked After Children (LAC).

### Life story work

- 11.7 Although the Children's Social Worker should be responsible for ensuring that life story work starts when a young person becomes looked after, all carers should be aware of the importance of this. Every LAC should be made aware of those persons directly responsible for them and the names and contact details should be included in their 'pack' and most importantly, be reviewed and up dated throughout the child's journey.
- 11.8 A training course on life story work should be included in the Foster Carers training programme.
- 11.9 Every young person should be given a memory box and up to date, age appropriate documentation about procedures and the reasons for those procedures.

### Communication

- 11.10 That qualified and appropriate interpreters are used when necessary to ensure that all children understand their situation and have the opportunity to discuss how they feel.

- 11.11 That a dedicated telephone line be created for anyone to raise concerns about a child. The telephone number should be a local number that is easy to remember and widely publicised. This would allow the public to access the correct team in the Council, as many do not currently know who they should contact in such a situation.
- 11.12 That an online solution be established that would allow young people to enter their concerns and worries. There should also be a facility for adults to register their concerns about individual children. The online solution should be child-friendly and should involve children in its development. Once developed, it should be widely advertised and the launch should receive maximum publicity in order to reach the widest audience. This should be monitored regularly to ensure an appropriate response time. The task and finish group looked at various policies and practices from other local authorities and concluded that the Sheff Kids website that Sheffield City Council set up was something that could be explored in Coventry as part of this recommendation (see [www.sheffkids.co.uk](http://www.sheffkids.co.uk)).
- 11.13 Explore the possibility of expanding the LAC mentoring service so that every child has the opportunity to have a mentor who is matched to them and will remain their mentor throughout their journey through care. Mentors would receive support and training from the Council. Organisations such as Barnardo's have expertise in this area so the Council could approach them for advice and support.
- 11.14 That relationships with other Social Care Departments are strengthened at all levels (both officer and political) to provide a genuine culture of learning, innovation and improvement. Each Council is facing similar issues and therefore it is important that best practice is shared and ideas are discussed in a wider arena. This has the potential to improve services and efficiencies.
- 11.15 That IROs examine the PEP forms before and after the redesign and speak to the service in order to understand the process that they undertook during the redesign and how the service and process integrates the voice of the child. This knowledge of the process could be used to redesign the LAC review processes and questionnaires so that they are a better reflection of the voice of the child.

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