

Actions:

Re: Q6.1 – Legal Staff in Children’s Services – 31st January 2011 OSC

In response to the rising cost of legal services the Committee requested a briefing note on what was being done to drive costs down and a breakdown of how money was spent in the service (Action No. 167.1).

21st February OSC

Paragraph 15.18 (Period 8) – Looked After Children (LAC) –The Committee stated its concern about the large overspend in this area and the unsettling nature of moving looked after children from one placement to another. Officers were reviewing how and why placement moves for these children had come about and any special action taken – a briefing would be provided to the Committee when this piece of work was complete. (Action No. 176.3) (*Cllr Winskill*)

21st February OSC

In response to questions about whether the Council had entered into discussions with magistrates about how the legal side of children’s placements could be improved, officers reported that the Director of Children’s Services had recently met with the Head of the Court Service about the legal process and costs. The Committee requested feedback from this meeting. (Action No. 176.4) (*Cllr Winskill*)

The Children & Young People’s Service Relationship with The Courts Update from The Director: 14th March 2011

The working relationship between any Children’s Services Department and the court system is an important one – often critically so when trying to secure the best quality outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. That is just as much the case in Haringey as anywhere else, and arguably more so given our history.

In the aftermath of the Peter Connelly case it felt for many that this relationship had all but broken down. This manifested itself in the extent to which social workers (and others) did not feel trusted by the courts, that their evidence was somehow less than complete or competent and that our judgement was not to be trusted. This was not universally so; but frequent enough for it to be a concern.

Some evidence to support this theory may be adduced from the number of appearances often taken to resolve some of our care proceedings. Whilst the Public Law Outline (PLO) had sought to reduce the number of appearances and bring speedier resolution to care cases in 4 to 6 appearances, Haringey found itself with some cases appearing 20+ times before resolution. This is unsatisfactory at a number of levels. Not only does it mean that workers are tied up with cases at this stage for much than intended by the law itself, with all the attendant costs that brings, protracted proceedings delay the right outcome for child and family, prolonging uncertainty and the opportunity to ‘move on’.

Efforts to meet with judges locally to discuss and, hopefully, resolve these issues did not succeed. The Director therefore became involved in discussions with the Greater London Family Panel (all judges and magistrates across London hearing care cases) and their chair (and Lead Judge for London) HHJ Altman. This has culminated in the Director being invited to join the London Family Justice Panel. This Panel, chaired by

HHJ Altman, is the practice body for all London care courts where practice is monitored and new approaches developed to try and improve the work of the courts.

The Panel meets quarterly. The Director will join the Panel for the first time in June 2011, though he is involved in work prior to that reviewing proposals by the Panel to the Family Justice Review being undertaken by the Government.

This is an exceptional opportunity for any local authority – and particularly so for Haringey where the offer represents further acknowledgement that our practice has improved to the point where the invitation to represent views across London describes confidence in what we do and those leading the changes.