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Non-executive scrutiny panel: Southend Safeguarding Children Board

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Brief description

Through a series of reviews, issues about Local Safeguarding Children Boards have been highlighted to ensure that they have robust and appropriate governance arrangements in place. In Southend, a scrutiny panel has been created, which includes elected council members and non-executive members of partner agency boards including the Primary Care Trust and the Police Authority.

Overview – the board’s message

‘The scrutiny panel brings a completely different dimension to the work of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). They are lay people without the day-to-day involvement in, and expert knowledge of, safeguarding children issues that board members have and they bring a different perspective; they ensure that the board focuses on, and its activity is relevant to, the needs and priorities of the community. They have helped to develop our work and have raised the profile of safeguarding children across the borough.’



Helen Wilson, LSCB Business Manager

The good practice in detail

Three years ago, the Southend Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) undertook an audit of its activity following the format laid out in the guidance from the Office for Public Management.

LSCB Business Manager, Helen Wilson says, 'Following the audit, it became clear that we needed to improve our governance and the "lay" oversight of our activities that was being recommended.' To achieve this, the initial scrutiny panel was established. At first it was made up solely of elected council members, but it has since been expanded to include non-executive members of partner agency boards including the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the Police Authority. As the panel has grown, so it has evolved and panel members now take an active role not only in scrutinising the ongoing work of the board, but also in raising issues with the board and ensuring that the work of the board is relevant and meaningful to the community living in Southend. The panel is represented on the main SSCB board by the lead member for children's services Councillor Mark Flewitt who has also held portfolios in adult social care, health, housing, and transport and planning. Councillor Flewitt says, 'the work of the LSCB scrutiny panel has helped elected members and non-executive members of partner boards to really understand what agencies do to keep children in Southend safe. Unless you can question in detail why particular actions have taken place, it can be difficult to understand. The scrutiny panel members can ask the sort of questions which are asked by members of the public – from a non-professional, common-sense perspective – and can help in both challenging received wisdom and in helping professionals to communicate good practice in a way the public will understand'.

The scrutiny panel meets a couple of weeks before each full board meeting and reads through selected papers. As Helen explains, 'Panel members are very interested in things which have a direct impact on the community, for example the Child Death Overview Panel reports on things that will ensure the safety of the children in Southend both from a child protection point of view and also in terms of wider safeguarding issues such as road safety and sea and beach safety'. If there is something in the board papers which the panel feels needs further explanation they will speak to the relevant board member or an appropriate representative from the organisation.

For example, the PCT was asked to attend the panel to explain how changes in their approach to midwifery and health visiting services might impact on the safeguarding of children. Once the panel was satisfied that everything had been taken into account, it confirmed to the board that its members were happy with the new arrangements. The police have also been asked to attend the panel meeting to discuss custody arrangements for young people held in custody suites. Through these activities the panel has become more knowledgeable about issues that affect children and young people in their community and can provide a link between the community and the board ensuring that the activity of the board is relevant to the needs of the community.

Members involved in the panel have been able to improve their safeguarding knowledge, understanding the critical importance of providing both high-quality child protection services and appropriately targeted preventative and early intervention services. As a result of this knowledge they have worked to ensure that these services are protected from wider council budget cuts. They have also been able to use their knowledge to increase understanding of safeguarding issues across the council and have insisted that all council members have at least undertaken basic child protection awareness training. The scrutiny panel made a presentation to the council about their work and have continued to raise the profile of safeguarding among other members, committees and across the PCT and police authority.

All panel members receive an induction and further training in child protection and safeguarding. As many councillors sit on other committees across the council they have also been able to use their knowledge to influence other areas, for example town and highway planning, to help reduce the numbers of children killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions.

An example of this influence stemmed from a recent Serious Case Review which was scrutinised by the committee. One of the issues which arose from the review regarded houses of multiple occupancy. By being involved in the scrutiny of the review, the panel was able to understand the impact and the risks that houses of multiple occupancy can have, in particular for young families and for 16 to 18-year-olds living alone in such accommodation. As a result of this, the [protocol](#) was updated so that when a member of the public wishes to convert a house to a residence for multiple occupancy, and applies to the council for a licence, both the adult and children's safeguarding boards are now consulted. The council's planning department considers the risks associated with these dwellings and tries to ensure that landlords do not cluster the houses in high density areas and that young people who live in them have adequate safeguards to protect them.

As all the panel members are lay people they are able to bring a new dimension to the board and can look at things a little differently, ask pertinent questions and offer alternative suggestions. Helen says, 'We changed the way that we do the annual safeguarding audit for schools as a result of a suggestion from the scrutiny panel. Previously we sent an audit to headteachers and relied on the information that they gave us about their safeguarding efficacy. The panel suggested giving the responsibility to the schools' governing bodies, which makes sense, as they are a little more objective and it enables them to fulfil their duty as governors making sure that the school is ensuring the safety of the children who attend.' Following this suggestion, SSCB developed a [template](#) to assist governors to undertake a safeguarding monitoring visit to the school and develop an action plan to address any areas for development. They then return this to the SSCB who collate the returns and offer assistance to schools where necessary through the School Improvement Officer. 'In the first year we got a 90% return rate. The following year this rose to 100% although the information wasn't as comprehensive as it could have been. This year we got 100% again but the information is of a much higher quality. This just goes to show that the profile of safeguarding has gone up among schools and governing bodies and that the issues are being dealt with across the Borough', Helen explains.

The panel also brings a proactive approach to board proceedings; they were recently struck by the report of the Child Death Overview Panel which demonstrated that there had been no deaths from drowning in the Southend in recent years. The panel took the view that the sea presented a real risk to the children in Southend and that they should not wait for a death to address the risk. They asked for data to assure themselves about the ability of the children in the community to swim and the result was that 74.5% of Year 6 children could swim 25 metres, which the panel felt was not enough. The data identified that there were a small number of schools in which a large proportion of the non-swimmers had been identified. Over the summer, six of these schools participated in an intensive swimming programme for those children who could not swim. Three of these schools achieved a 100% success rate following the programme.

Chris Doorly, the SSCB Chairperson, says, 'The panel has made a real difference to the board in terms of ensuring that what we do is relevant and understandable, but the biggest difference they have made is in taking their expertise back to the council, the PCT and the police authority to raise the profile of safeguarding and to ensure that their knowledge is used when decisions are being made which might affect children and families in the community.'

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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