

Meeting of the Council – 18th July, 2011

Annual Report of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Purpose

1. To consider the annual report of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee for the review of the year 2010/2011.

Background

2. Article 6 of the Council's Constitution requires Scrutiny Committees to report annually to the full Council on their workings and to make recommendations for future work programmes and amended working methods if appropriate. It has previously been agreed that the annual report of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee (previously the Select Committee on Children's Services) should be made to the July meeting of the Council.
3. The work of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee is governed by the following terms of reference:

"To fulfil all of the overview and scrutiny functions of a Scrutiny Committee as they relate to children services and in particular, the functions and responsibilities of the Council and of the Children Act 2004 and associated guidance and regulations including:

- a) The roles and responsibilities of relevant partners
- b) Listening to and involving children.

with the objective of improving the well-being of all children in the Council's area by developing the "Every Child Matters" outcomes."

4. The Scrutiny Committee is particularly concerned to ensure that their work focused specifically on the five outcomes in "Every Child Matters", namely:
 - Be healthy
 - Stay safe
 - Enjoy and achieve
 - Make a positive contribution
 - Achieve economic well-being

and the following key national objectives:

- Improving outcomes for looked after children
- Reducing teenage pregnancies
- Improving education standards

5. No dedicated working groups were set up during the year 2010/11. The Scrutiny Committee (previously the Select Committee for Children's Services), however, set aside part of the September meeting for an in-depth practical discussion about review of adoption processes. A report by the Acting Director of Children's Services was received setting out the legal framework and the process for adoption of children, who are looked after by the local authority. The report included details of the number of children adopted in Dudley over the last five years. A hypothetical case study was also presented. A Children's Guardian, the local authority adoptions manager, and the principal solicitor were in attendance to answer questions from members of the Scrutiny Committee. A very stimulating discussion ensued which enabled members to understand better the legal and Council processes that have to be followed in adoptions, and some of the difficulties and dilemmas, which may arise.
6. The Acting Director of Children's Services provided the Scrutiny Committee with a comprehensive summary of all the new legislative and policy changes affecting education and children's social care, which have been introduced by the Coalition Government since May 2010. This document is updated at regular intervals for the information of members of the Scrutiny Committee.
7. The Scrutiny Committee's work programme covers a wide spectrum of activities across education and children's social care, which includes children in need, disabled children, looked after children, schools, partnerships and performance, including the outcome of OFSTED inspections.
8. The following issues from the Scrutiny Committee's work plan are worthy of specific mention:

Revenue Budget Strategy 2011-2012 (January 2011)

9. The proposed revenue budget strategy for 2011 to 2012, and the medium-term financial strategy from 2011 to 2014, for the services provided under the terms of reference of the Scrutiny Committee were considered. The report noted the budget pressures created by increased numbers of looked after children in external residential placements and independent foster care. The report set out proposed efficiency savings in Children's Services. The implications of budget reductions for Council and voluntary sector services were discussed. The Acting Director of Children's Services agreed to brief Members at a later date, when details regarding Government grant for children's services became available.

Scrutiny Committee issues

Parent – Governor representation (September 2010)

10. The report noted that arrangements for the election of representatives from the primary, secondary and special school sectors were made in June 2010, but no nominations had been received. It was proposed to restart the election process in November 2010 and Members of the Committee were invited to seek nominations. No nominations were received in respect of Primary and Secondary sector parent governor representatives arising from the election process undertaken in November but a representative from the special education sector, Mr Tinsley, was elected and is now in office. Further elections for the primary and secondary sector representatives will take place shortly.

Children in Need

Child Poverty (September 2010)

11. The report explained the implications of the Child Poverty Act 2010, which requires Councils to carry out a child poverty needs assessment and to produce a joint child poverty strategy, in partnership with other agencies, in order to mitigate the effects of child poverty. The national target is to reduce the number of children living in relative poverty to less than 10% by 2020. Currently, approximately 22% of children in Dudley are living in relative poverty.

Disabled Children and Young People

Aiming High for Disabled Children (November 2010)

12. Aiming High for Disabled Children is a Government programme to ensure that every disabled child can have the best possible start in life. Specifically it seeks to increase the availability of short breaks to the disabled children and their families. Dudley has been successful in gaining funding to become a pilot site for the programme. The report to the Scrutiny Committee set out progress against the 10 work streams, which form Aiming High for Disabled Children. As well as short breaks, these work streams include transition, personal budgets and community equipment, where work is being undertaken jointly with the Directorate of Adult, Community and Housing Services.

Funding and Commissioning for Young People with Learning Disabilities or Difficulties (January 2011).

13. The report explained the transfer of responsibility from the Learning and Skills Council to the local authority for funding and commissioning learning provision for Young people aged 16 to 19. The report also informed the Scrutiny Committee of the revised budget allocation devolved to the Council for 2010/2011, following the transfer of responsibility. The Directorate of Children's Services was working closely with the Principals of the three Further Education colleges to ensure that the necessary educational provision for pupils was in place. The report also set out further changes to the funding of 16 to 19 education and training announced by the new Government in July 2010. From 2012 – 2013, the Young People's Learning Agency budget for learners with learning difficulties or disabilities will transfer to the local authority; the budget in the current year is £1.6 million.

Looked-after Children

Looked after Children Results (November 2010)

14. The report highlighted an improvement in GCSE results in Maths and English achieved by Dudley's looked after children. 25% of children achieved five A* to C GCSEs in 2010, compared to 7% the previous year, against the national average of 13%. These results reflect the success of the private tutor/mentor programme funded jointly by the Creating Chances charity and Dudley MBC.

Head of the Virtual School (January 2011)

15. The Virtual School for looked after children supports the education and attainment of these pupils. The extra tuition programme caters for up to 300 looked after children with one-to-one support. Looked after children are also supported through designated teachers and governors in each school and through personal education plans. The Head of the Virtual School is responsible for coordinating this activity. Test results at key stages two and four have significantly improved. Overall attendance of looked after children in 2009 to 2010 was 93.2%. Dudley is now considered to be one of the highest performing local authorities in relation to the education of looked after children.

Education

Elective Home Education (November 2010)

16. The report advised the Committee of the work being undertaken by the Directorate of Children's Services to monitor and support children who are educated at home. The report indicated that 182 children are on the elective home education register in 2009 to 2010, a substantial increase since 2002. 21 other children had returned to school with the agreement of their families. Up-to-date information is held on the Elective Home Education database. Home education is monitored by home visits, which are accepted by the vast majority of parents; more frequent contact is made where concerns have been identified about the child's education or welfare.

Children's Travel and Transport (March 2011)

17. The report set out the work undertaken by the Travel and Transport Team in the Directorate of Children's Services. £3.3 million has been spent on transport to school during 2010/2011. Two thirds of the budget is spent on home to school transport for the children with special needs, and a further £700,000 is allocated to transport for Children's Social Care. Pressures on the transport service are significant; for example the increase in the numbers of children with complex medical conditions, who need preschool assessment and transport which is required by a court direction. The report described new initiatives designed to reduce expenditure on transport, which include independent travel training and the travel buddy scheme. Effective assessment and review of entitlement is reducing dependency on expensive taxi transport.

Updates on Pensnett Education Campus (November 2010, January 2011, and March 2011)

18. The Scrutiny Committee received reports on the progress made by year 10 and 11 students at Pensnett education campus. Students have made good progress during the year and are being supported by staff to achieve their potential. Parents have been appreciative of the arrangements that have been put in place for their children's education.

Partnership

Extended Services – Joint Working with Health (November 2010)

19. The report sets out the joint work taking place between the Extended Services Team with local NHS organisations. The Extended Services Team in the Council is responsible for the performance management of the borough's 20 Children's Centres. Clusters of schools including Children's Centres work together with partner agencies to deliver extended services in their local communities. Initiatives being undertaken jointly with the local NHS include services to promote breastfeeding, improvements in antenatal care, support to parents of premature babies, a drop-in facility to children under five close to the hospital, and healthy eating and exercise programmes.

Achieving Equity and Excellence for Children (January 2011)

20. The report referred to the implications for Children's Services of the consultation document "Achieving Equity and Excellence for Children " which followed from the NHS White Paper published in July 2010 and was issued alongside the report of Professor Sir Ian Kennedy. The implications include ensuring that the governance arrangements of the GP consortium facilitate effective involvement of children and young people in the commissioning of local health services; developing meaningful outcome measures for children; the importance of partnership working with the GP consortium on the commissioning of healthcare for children; and ensuring that robust arrangements for safeguarding children remain and are maintained in new NHS organisations and through the Health and Well-Being Board. Future scrutiny arrangements for health and children's services will be considered as part of a Council review of the role and remit of Scrutiny Committees.

Performance

Unannounced OFSTED inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements (September 2010)

21. An unannounced OFSTED inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements took place in June 2010. A letter from OFSTED summarising the

findings of the inspection was attached to the report to the Committee. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the effectiveness of front-line practice in managing potential risks to children. The inspection findings will inform future full inspections of safeguarding and looked after children in Dudley. The inspectors found that children and young people at risk of significant harm were identified promptly, prioritised and were subjected to child protection investigations. The main area of development referred to the timeliness of the allocation of cases and completion of initial assessment. Steps have been taken to increase capacity and manage referral systems to improve performance in this area.

OFSTED inspection of Local Authority Adoption Service (March 2011).

22. An inspection was carried out by OFSTED of Dudley's adoption service in October 2010. The inspection gave an overall rating of good, and reported considerable improvement since the previous inspection in 2007. Practice was seen to be child focused, and birth parents were involved in decision-making as far as possible. Activity has increased significantly in relation to family finding the children, with positive collaborative working with other adoption agencies in the Black Country. Effective systems are in place to monitor progress of cases and avoid delay or drift. The inspection found a few minor shortfalls, which related to the role of the panel advisor and recording issues, which are now being addressed.

School Performance (two reports - March 2011)

23. The first report presented the latest data on the performance of schools in relation to early years foundation stage, key stages 1 to 5 and looked after children for the year 2009/2010. The Scrutiny Committee was pleased to note that the GCSE results were the best ever achieved by Dudley schools. At key stage two it was reported that no results were available from the schools for tests in science owing to industrial action.
24. The second report set out the results of OFSTED inspections in Dudley during the year April 2010 – March 2011. 20 primary schools and five secondary schools were inspected during this period. Two primary schools and one secondary school were judged to be outstanding; six primary schools and two secondary schools were judged as good. Only two primary schools and no secondary schools were judged to be inadequate. One of the primary schools has since received an HMI monitoring visit, which found the school to be making satisfactory progress. The two special schools, which were inspected, achieved good and outstanding judgements.

Annual Report 2009 – 2010: Children's Social Care Complaints and Compliments (September 2010)

25. This report addressed the statutory requirement on the Council to produce an annual report on the children's social care complaints and representations procedure. 111 complaints had been received during 2009/2010, of which four had gone forward to a stage two formal complaint investigation. 69 of the 111

complaints had been made by parents or relatives and 32 by children or their advocates. The majority of stage one complaints were concluded within the statutory timescale. Comparisons with other Councils indicate that fewer complaints in Dudley progress to the subsequent stages of the complaints procedure.

Quarterly Corporate Performance Management Reports (September 2010, January 2011, March 2011).

26. The Scrutiny Committee is invited to scrutinise the quarterly corporate performance reports as they refer to the functions and responsibilities of the Council under the Children Act 2004. The three reports received by the Scrutiny Committee during the year highlighted the following areas of good performance:
- 100% of child protection cases were reviewed within the required timescales.
 - GCSE results for all children, as well as the looked after children, showed a significant improvement.
 - The unannounced OFSTED inspection of contact, referral and assessment services commended our prompt action to safeguard children at risk of significant harm.
 - Latest figures show a downward trend in the rate of school absence.
 - The annual validation of Dudley youth offending services self-assessment highlighted significant improvement in reducing reoffending and a reduction of first-time entrants to the criminal justice system.
 - Dudley successfully avoided the expected rise in the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training through effective partnership working and following up the right young people.
27. Areas for improvement which were identified in these reports included the percentage of initial assessments for children social care carried out in less than seven working days; the number of children and young people supported through the Common Assessment Framework; the percentage of looked after children with three or more placements during the year; percentage of core assessments to children social care that were carried out within 35 days; and looked after children cases which were reviewed within the required timescales.
28. A supplementary contextual report was provided by the Acting Director of Children's Services explaining the issues which impact on performance in these areas and the steps, which are being taken to improve future performance.

Equality and Diversity Action Plan 2010 to 2011 and Annual Report 2009 to 2010 (November 2010)

29. A key task of the Scrutiny Committee is to scrutinise the Directorate's Equality and Diversity Action Plan, together with an Annual Report setting out progress with delivering actions from the previous year's plan. These reports were received and noted by the Scrutiny Committee

Safeguarding

Dudley Safeguarding Children Board – update report (March 2011)

30. The report provided an update on the work of the Safeguarding Children Board during 2010/2011, together with a summary of recent national safeguarding developments, including the interim report of Professor Eileen Munro on her national review of child protection. Some of the Safeguarding Board's achievements over the past year include continued development of the Domestic Abuse Response Team and specialist training in response to issues such as forced marriage. The report also noted a 36% increase in the number of children subject to child protection plans, compared to a year ago.

Finance

31. There are no direct financial implications arising from this annual report at this stage.

Law

32. The requirement for the Scrutiny Committee to make an annual report to the Council is contained in Article 6 of the Constitution.
33. The relevant statutory provisions regarding the Council's Constitution are contained in Part II of the Local Government Act 2000, together with regulations or orders and guidance issued by the Secretary of State.

Equality Impact

34. The Scrutiny Committee has taken equality and diversity issues into account while scrutinising the areas of work described above, particularly in relation to the engagement of potentially disenfranchised groups with frontline services.
35. The Scrutiny Committee takes account of the views of children and young people in all its deliberations.

Recommendation

36. That the Annual Report for 2010/11 be noted.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Anne Quinn', is positioned above the title of the committee.

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Chairman of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee