

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 15th September, 2011 at 6.00 p.m.
in Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Mrs Dunn (Chairman)
Councillor Attwood (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Ahmed, Miss Arshad, Mrs Billingham, Crumpton, Mrs Greenaway, Miller, S Turner and P Woodall; Revered Wickens; Mr Songole and Mr Tinsley; Mr Taylor; Mr Bruton and Mrs Verdegem; and Mr Duffield.

OFFICERS

The Assistant Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (Policy, Performance and Resources) – Lead Officer to the Committee, the Acting Director of Children's Services, the Assistant Directors of Children's Services (Quality and Partnership) and (Education, Play and Learning), the Extended Services Strategy Manager, Strategy Manager (Early Years, Youth and Education Services) and Childcare and Quality Manager – all Directorate of Children's Services and Mr Sanders (Directorate of Corporate Resources)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE

Ms Derham (Quarry Bank Children's Centre Manager), accompanied by the Site Manager of the Centre and two sets of parents – for Agenda item number 9.

8. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors Hanif and J Jones and Mrs Ward.

9. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No Member made a Declaration of Interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct in respect of any item to be considered at this meeting.

10. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23rd June, 2011 be approved as a correct record and signed.

11. SUBSTITUTE MEMBER

It was reported that Councillor Ahmed was serving in place of Councillor Hanif for this meeting of the Committee only.

12. QUARTERLY CORPORATE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT

A report of the Lead Officer of the Committee was submitted seeking consideration of the Quarterly Corporate Performance Management report on the activities relating to the terms of reference of this Committee for the fourth quarter of the 2010/11 municipal year.

RESOLVED

That the report be received and noted.

13. CHILD POVERTY

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted updating the Committee on progress relating to child poverty, including the Child Poverty Act 2010, the Child Poverty Needs Assessment and the Joint Child Poverty Strategy for the area.

The report summarised the key points from the guidance in the Child Poverty Act, 2010; indicated the key performance measure in respect of poverty for children, the national target on the subject and the current situation in Dudley; actions being taken by the Council to meet the target referred to; the key areas of focus of the Council and its partners aimed at mitigating poverty; the Council's involvement in issues of wealth and jobs creation, and other related matters.

In the question and answer session that followed the presentation of the report, in response to a question regarding the implications for quality child care when parents went back to work, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Education, Play and Learning) confirmed that this was regarded within the Directorate as an important area, and that it was a major part of the work of the Early Years Team to work with families to ensure high quality child care places were provided and that places were set in the most appropriate locations in the Borough. Reference was made, however, to a reduction in the availability of private and voluntary child care provision in consequence of the current economic situation, in relation to which it was indicated that currently the finance available was aimed at assisting children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The point was made that currently 98% of children in Dudley received free nursery entitlement provision at the age of 3.

In relation to appendix 1 to the Report, which showed the percentage of children in poverty in Dudley by Ward, a question was asked on whether funding was weighted in favour of children in the wards of greater deprivation. In response, it was indicated that part of the work of the Children's Partnership was to look at super output areas in which there were the more challenging circumstances in order that resources could be directed at children who needed additional support. While no particular additional provision was made to families with children in the wards where the percentage of children in poverty was higher, since it was recognised that even in the more prosperous wards, the current economic situation had caused families from all backgrounds financial difficulty, attention was being given to the delivery of funding to specific groups which required support. Consideration was being given to targeting funding to key areas in this regard.

Reference was made to the methodology for identifying child poverty, in relation to which the Acting Director of Children's Services referred to the role of schools with regard to the take up of free school meals. She emphasised that much of the finance from the government for child poverty was triggered by free school meals data but made the point that some parents preferred not to claim their entitlement. The role of Children's Centres in identifying levels of disadvantage in relation to child poverty was also reported on and acknowledged.

A question was asked on the strategies used to identify child poverty, in response to which the measurements referred to in appendix 1 to the report submitted to the meeting were clarified further.

With regard to paragraph 5 of the report submitted to the meeting, the manner of the wealth and jobs creation with which the Council was engaged was discussed. In this connection, a question on how many businesses the Council was working with was asked. The Poverty Strategy Manager agreed to provide a written response to the Member who raised the issue.

A number of questions were asked, in relation to which it was agreed that written responses would be sent in relation to the following issues:

- the ages of children in child poverty;
- the number of children supported by the food bank;
- the number of businesses with which the Council is working on the issue of Wealth and Job Creation and how soon positive responses are expected;
- the targeted work being undertaken on Wealth and Job creation.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted, together with the comments made.

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted updating the Committee on the work undertaken on behalf of gypsy, roma and traveller children.

The report summarised the composition of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Service situated within the Directorate of Children's Services, indicated the content of the database referred to; indicated educational attainment levels and attendance figures; and explained how the various agencies involved with gypsy, roma and traveller children inter-related. The report also referred to the training measures engaged in and discussed safeguarding issues.

The challenges facing the Directorate of Children's Services were set out in the report, these being identified as relating to capacity issues; relevant officers understanding and becoming aware of the needs and concerns of the gypsy, roma and traveller community across the authority; the potential for safeguarding risks to children; lone working policies; communications with other agencies and local authorities for continuity of information as and when children entered and left the Borough.

In response to a question, a particular problem identified by the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Education, Play and Learning) was that of persuading parents to educate their older children in school, since the traveller culture was to educate at home. In response to a further question on how often the Council's strategies and policies were revised, the Assistant Director indicated that this was ongoing through the Leadership Team. Regarding the work of the Team, the Assistant Director discussed the recording system for children who were static or on the road and confirmed that, through working with schools, different cultures were celebrated. In so doing, relations with the traveller community were improving and the traveller community was working more closely with the Council in ensuring that children came into education.

In response to a question on academic attainment levels, which the Member who raised the issue suggested were not improving, the Assistant Director replied that all cohorts were different and that the number of pupils with special educational needs was an important contributory factor. The Assistant Director then confirmed that progress of traveller children was monitored while they were in school. An important part of the work involved in school was to ensure that support was available to the particular travelling community concerned and the Assistant Director summarised the work in this regard.

On the issue of safeguarding, in response to a question, the Assistant Director confirmed that the Council held information on pupils, together with other Local Authorities and relevant agencies, in order to keep track of pupils but if a family disappeared overnight and did not register a pupil at another school, this could cause difficulty with continuity. The role of Family Support Officers in obtaining a co-ordinated approach to maintaining access to traveller children to education was described as challenging.

The position regarding access to free school meal entitlement for traveller children, and the implications regarding the Pupil Premium, in respect of traveller children who did not attend school was explained by the Assistant Director, in response to a further question.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

15. ORDER OF BUSINESS

RESOLVED

That pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 13(c), item 9 on the Agenda be considered as the next item of business and that the remaining items be considered in the following order:-

10, 11, 8, 12.

16. CHILDREN'S CENTRES IN DUDLEY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted on the purpose of Children's Centres service delivery, the legal framework under which they were delivered and the plans for their further development.

The report indicated that, in Dudley, there were 20 Children's Centres, all of which were commissioned by the Local Authority. Some Centres were situated on schools sites (one of them on the site of a maintained nursery school) and five on stand alone sites.

Children's Centres in Dudley had been developed over a six year period. Government expectation was that, by March 2010, every child under 5 and their families should have access to Children's Centre provision. Full coverage in Dudley had been achieved by September, 2009.

The report described how Children's Centres operated, each having a defined "reach area", made up of a cluster of "super output areas", each containing around 800 children aged under 5. Parents were able to access services at a location most appropriate to their needs, access being available at Centres not necessarily within the geographical reach area of the child and parent.

The report indicated the support provided under the nationally defined core offer for Children's Centres, which included holistic support for children and families from pre-birth to age 5, indicated the nature of the standard accommodation for each Centre and identified examples of the delivery of services and activities offered from the range of agencies involved. Data analysis regarding the specific locality was submitted and indicated the services each Children's Centre was delivering.

In relation to regulation, Children's Centres were obliged to evaluate the impact of the services they were providing and the report indicated how this was achieved, referring to the annual parental satisfaction survey which was undertaken. Reference was made to the staffing of Children's Centres, in relation to which the recruitment of volunteers was of significant importance; the means by which Centres were funded, this being through the Early Intervention Grant; and described the manner in which commissioned services were procured.

The appendices to the report included the following:-

- A list of Children's Centres in Dudley and contact details;
- Details of the Core Offer for Sure Start Children's Centres;
- The consultation document issued by the Department for Education, ending on 31st Augustt, 2011, on the core purpose of Sure Start Children's Centres;
- A sample summer timetable of events held at a Children's Centre;
- A sample parent satisfaction survey for 2011;
- A case study template regarding entry to a Children's Centre;
- A calendar of activities for quality performance management for Children's Centres in Dudley for 2011/12;
- The Ofsted Inspection Report for the Quarry Bank Children's Centre.

In relation to the Quarry Bank Children's Centre, the Centre Manager attended the meeting, explained her role and answered questions put by Members. She was assisted in doing so by the Site Manager, who had started at the Children's Centre as a volunteer. A set of parents, as patrons of the Centre, then addressed the Committee on how the Centre addressed their needs and requirements and answered questions on their experiences with the Centre.

In the question and answer session that followed, the Extended Services Strategy Manager explained the manner in which the areas of Children's Centres were targeted, which were on a geographical basis, and referred to the cross boundary working arrangements whereby different services were covered. The Extended Services Strategy Manager confirmed that all Children's Centres were accessible to children with disabilities within the Reach Area. The government's arrangements were then discussed, together with the manner in which satisfaction surveys were conducted. Reference was made by one Member to the future of the Little Hands Children's Centre, should the Colley Lane Primary School become an Academy. As this was a commissioned service the Local Authority would make a judgement on this once more information was available.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

17. TIME FOR TWO'S PROJECT

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted advising the Committee of the content of this Project, which had been supported and delivered by the Directorate of Children's Services from 2006. The origins and aims of the project were denoted in the report.

The pilot offer had involved the provision of support for parents, as well as early education, to ensure that disadvantaged two year olds could fully benefit from the programme. Through links with other initiatives (e.g. Children's Centres), the offer had given parents access to a range of support they needed in order to deal with challenging circumstances which might prevent them from providing the kind of home learning environment on which children needed to thrive and fully develop their potential. The issues could be wide ranging and include support with home learning and parenting skills, health advice, counselling, housing and benefit advice and employment support and access to training, as well as other matters.

Together with 31 other authorities, Dudley had piloted the scheme, which was delivered in the prescribed way to offer 7.5 hours of early education for 38 weeks to each eligible child. Dudley's target was to reach 1 to 2 year olds living in the 10% most disadvantaged areas of the Borough. The target had been exceeded by March, 2011 when over 200 children had been reached.

The report indicated the Government expectations regarding the quality of provision from the funding secured. The report indicated further that, in October 2010, the Government had announced as part of the Fairness Premium, a legal entitlement to 15 hours of free early education for every disadvantaged 2 year old from 2013. Under the proposed Education Act, a statutory duty would be placed on Local Authorities to provide free early education for disadvantaged 2 year olds. In Dudley, approximately 1,000 disadvantaged 2 year old children living in the 20% most disadvantaged areas of the Borough had been identified as being eligible.

In the question and answer session that followed the presentation of the report, in response to a question, it was indicated that extension of the project would be met through the Early Intervention Grant, however, the Acting Director of Children's Services indicated that it would be challenging to stretch the Grant to cover all aspects of Children's Centres provision. Since Children's Centres were a main aspect of the Government's education strategy, however, she was of the view that funding was likely to continue albeit that engagement by the voluntary sector would increase. In response to a further question, the manner in which the hours of operation of the project at each Children's Centre and the criteria for the allocation of hours, were explained.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

18. RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted advising the Committee of the written responses and documents circulated to Members in response to questions asked at the meeting of the Committee held on 23rd June 2011.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

19. FORMER PENSNETT SCHOOL OF TECHNOLOGY

An oral update was given on the progress of students at the Pensnett Education Campus. The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Early Years, Play and Learning) reported on the attainment levels of Key Stage 4 pupils, of whom 21% had achieved 5 or more GCSE passes in grades A* - C in English and Mathematics. A slightly higher pass rate had been anticipated but the cohort had comprised a disproportionate number of pupils with special educational needs. Mathematics appeared to be the subject in which pupils were having the greater difficulty. Another problem that had emerged, and was of some concern, was that of parents taking their children on holiday during the examination period between the first and second papers, thus causing the student to fail.

A member of the Committee requested figures on attendance, in response to which the Assistant Director agreed to provide them for the Member concerned.

In response to a further question, the Assistant Director indicated that a report on the attainment levels of pupils who had attended Pensnett before its closure and were now located at other schools would be submitted.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

20. QUESTIONS UNDER COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 11.8 AND ON INFORMATION ITEMS

No questions had been submitted under Council Procedure Rule 11.8 and no questions were asked on the information items placed on the Committee Management Information System (CMIS).

The meeting ended at 8.35 pm

CHAIRMAN

CSSC/15

