

Minutes of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 21st January, 2015 at 6 p.m.
In Committee Room 2, The Council House, Dudley

Present:

Councillor I Cooper (Vice-Chair) in the Chair.
Councillors M Attwood, N Barlow, C Billingham, P Bradley, L Jones, I Marrey, J Martin, R Scott – Dow and E Taylor; Reverend Wickens and Mr Qadus.

Invitees:

Mr M Lynch, Mr L Ridney and Ms J Sinden.

Officers:

R Sims (Assistant Director of Housing Strategy & Private Sector - Directorate of Adult, Community and Housing Services) – Interim Lead Officer, P Sharratt (Interim Director of Children's Services), I McGuff (Assistant Director Quality and Partnership); A Callear (Divisional Lead – Family Support);
– all Directorate of Children's Services and L Jury (Democratic Services Officer) (Directorate of Resources and Transformation).

Also in attendance

Councillor T Crumpton – Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning.

23 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors Z Islam and C Perks.

24 Substitution

It was reported that Councillor J Martin was serving in place of Councillor Z Islam and Councillor E Taylor was serving in place of Councillor C Perks, for this meeting of the Committee only.

25 Declarations of Interest

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, the following interests were declared:-

Declaration of non-pecuniary interest in agenda item number 7 – To answer
CSSC/27

questions submitted under Council Procedure Rule 11.8 - was made by the following Member for the reason indicated below:

Councillor I Marrey – The parent of a child who was in receipt of Direct payments.

Councillor I Marrey – Parent/Governor of Pens meadow Primary School.

26 **Minutes**

Resolved

That subject to the deletion of the words “ Conservative Group” from minute number 18, paragraph 7, page CSSC/20 and the insertion of the words “Conservative Party”, the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 19th November, 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed.

27 **Children’s Centres**

The Committee considered a report on the progress of the Children’s Centre remodelling.

In presenting the report submitted, the Interim Director Children’s Services highlighted the restructuring that had taken place since the consultation undertaken in 2013 and the impact of the remodelling on service delivery.

It was noted that twenty Children’s Centres had remained opened but were now based in 5 clusters ensuring the continuation of children’s centre services across the borough.

The main focus of services was to provide early interventions to families most in need, in partnership with both statutory and voluntary agencies, to prevent families requiring costly social care intervention in the future.

It was noted that Dudley had received 20 OFSTED inspections to date, all with pleasing outcomes. Referring to the two centres that required improvements, it was noted that the improvement was required on the childcare aspect and not on the centre itself.

Early indications from the remodelling exercise indicated that the numbers of families accessing children’s centres had been maintained and the changed arrangements had already enabled the Local Authority to deliver a more consistent service across the Borough.

Restructuring had been completed on budget and with savings made and noting that no more savings were required to date.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted, Members asked questions and Officers responded as follows:-

Referring to a recent press report in which it was stated that the Government were increasing the budget for troubled families, it was questioned how the Council would deploy the money. In reply, it was reported that all authorities had received money for troubled families in the 1st phase and funding would continue until 2020 which would enable authorities to reach more families. It was noted that Dudley was an early adopter for Phase 2 and had received an additional £58,000 to progress the programme.

Referring to paragraph 17 of the report in relation to the commissioning of health visiting services for 0-5 year olds transferring to the Local Authorities, it was questioned whether any other agencies had been offered the opportunities to deliver their services out of the children's centres. In reply, it was advised that the transfer would take place in October 2015 and talks were currently being undertaken with Public Health to discuss how the service would look in the future. The aim was to reduce the duplication of some services and ensure that the resources available had maximum impact for children and families in need of assistance. Some services delivered by health workers and midwifery were already utilising children centre bases.

Reference was made to an evidence based programme entitled 'Get Cooking' which was being rolled out of Children's Centres in conjunction with Public Health, looking to reduce childhood obesity by encouraging healthy eating within families. Children's Services and Public Health were also currently providing further PPP training to professionals across the Borough to increase the number of practitioners available to assess early behaviour difficulties.

It was noted that strong links were also being developed between Children's Centres and Adult and Family Learning to provide adult learning courses for parents. Other partnerships included the Citizens Advice Bureau and Job Centre Plus who provided services targeted to meet identified needs of families. The recruitment of volunteers was of significant importance to the work of the Children's Centres and the strongly committed thriving volunteer network was acknowledged and it was noted that work was being undertaken to develop the skills of volunteers and some parents to provide additional support to families.

The provision of pre-school special needs support at Children's Centres was acknowledged and it was reported that this was an area that was under review.

In responding to questions relating to paragraph 19 regarding the timeframe to improve the Children's Centres judged by OFSTED to be requiring improvement and the consequences if improvements were not met, and referring to paragraph 25 relating to how the centres were meeting the needs of the black and minority ethnic (BME) community and the uptake of services by different communities, the Interim Director of Children's Services agreed to provide a written response directly to the member who had raised the questions.

In responding to a concern raised in relation to a previous decision to close primary schools in the Borough due to excess places being available at some schools in the light of the number of under 5s now increasing in the Borough year on year, the Interim Director of Children's Services agreed to send a detailed written response to the member who had raised the concern relating to the projections to be used for future school place planning and those that were used back in 2006 that resulted in the closure of some of the Borough's primary schools.

Responding to a question relating to the availability of the OFSTED reports referred to in this report, it was confirmed that they could be accessed via the Dudley website.

In response to a concern raised regarding the issue of falling numbers in secondary rolls in relation to the inevitable impact that the raising numbers of under 5's will have in the near future and the strategic support that was being given to secondary schools during this time, the Interim Director of Children's Services acknowledged the difficult strategic and financial challenges currently facing some secondary schools, especially those schools where rolls had fallen below 50%, and advised that schools were being encouraged to work closely together whilst the number of future school places required was being assessed.

Referring to the OFSTED inspections that had taken places at the Borough's Children's Centres, it was questioned whether the inspections had taken places before or after restructuring. In reply, it was advised that most inspections had been carried out in 2013/14 with at least two centres being inspected under the previous framework.

Referring to the restructuring that had taken place at the Children's Centres and the inevitable reduction in services now available, The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning questioned where the main focus of activities now rested. In reply, it was advised that the main focus was to work with vulnerable families either through volunteer groups or providing support in their homes. The restructuring had been challenging but the aim now was to offer a consistent approach across all 5 clusters, with 'good' or 'outstanding' children's centres throughout the borough providing families with good or outstanding services in whichever cluster they were in.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted on the progress of the Children's Centre remodelling, be noted.
- (2) That the Interim Director of Children's Services send a written response to Mr Qadus addressing his questions raised in relation to children's centres meeting the needs of the BME community and the uptake of these services by different communities.
- (3) That the Interim Director of Children's Services send a written response to Councillor Jones regarding school place planning.

Early Help and Support

The Committee considered a report of the Interim Director of Children's Services on Early Help and Support.

In presenting the report submitted, the Interim Director of Children's Services made reference to the early help and support available to children aged 0-18 years. Reference was made to the budget pressures upon the service, especially in relation to looked after children and the need to redress the balance and the aim of the service, working together and with partners, to provide vulnerable families with consistent responses to identified problems. To offer whole families early interventions and support to prevent problems escalating and thus mitigate the possibility of families having to engage in high cost public services.

An outline of the services available at Children's Centres was presented, including, early years, early education, early help assessment support and early intervention social workers. The OFSTED inspections of arrangements for services for children in need of help and protection was highlighted and it was advised that no inspection had taken place since 2011, therefore it was predicted that an inspection was imminent.

In conclusion, it was noted that from the 15,000 contacts received by children's social care in 2013/14, only 3,500 were judged to require social care assessments. The remainder of contacts required sign posting to other services to provide early help and therefore relieve pressure on the more targeted, specialist services.

Following the introduction of the report submitted, Members asked questions and Officers responded as follows:

Reference was made to previous proposals to increase budget spending to support more programmes relating to early interventions therefore reducing pressure on other services but present budgets were still showing escalating costs. A discussion ensued in which the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning advised of the difficulties relating to starting each financial year with a budget deficit and the challenges that this created. The increase in looked after children in the Borough, which had contributed towards the overspend, and the complexity of families now requiring a higher level of service provision was also discussed. It was acknowledged that the current economic climate was having devastating effects on some families resulting in more children coming into care.

A member made reference to a report that had been submitted at a recent Police and Crime Panel meeting relating to a Section 175 safeguarding audit that had been undertaken and concern was raised at the low level of returns submitted from this Borough in comparison to neighbouring authorities.

Responding to concerns in relation to this matter, the Interim Director of Children's Services advised that this was an audit that schools were required to undertake and a new tool was to be re-launched to assist schools and the service was working with schools to improve the rate of returns.

Referring to paragraph 10 of the report relating to the direct one-to-one family support provided to families either within their own homes or in Children's Centres by identified lead officers for Family Support and Parenting, it was questioned whether these roles were covered by existing staff or newly appointed officers. In reply, it was advised that the one-to-one family support was offered by existing officers.

Responding to a question raised relating to paragraphs 17 to 20 of the report submitted, regarding the provision of early education for two year olds, it was acknowledged that the take up rate of eligible places was not as high as in Dudley's statistical neighbouring authorities. Initiatives had been launched in August last year including a banner advert on Dudley's website advertising the Time for Two initiative, leaflets had been distributed to eligible parents, birthday cards had been sent to eligible children and Children's Centre staff

had worked with many families to try to engage them to take up the service provided. Other work undertaken had seen the change from a paper-based application form to an electronic application form which parents could complete to find out if they were eligible for the funded educational entitlement. However, it had to be recognised that some families simply did not want their two year olds to attend a nursery setting for whatever reason.

The challenges faced by the independent sector who provided early education was acknowledged as they strived to balance the provision of education offered to fee paying parents as well as those parents eligible for funded places to enable them to run viable businesses.

Local authorities had a duty to secure early education for eligible two year olds and as far as possible early learning for two year olds was delivered only by providers who had been judged by OFSTED as either 'good' or 'outstanding'. The five Children's Centres currently provided childcare however, to provide childcare for the under 2's would have a significant impact.

In response to a question relating to the number of Early Intervention Social Workers (EISW) as referred to in paragraph 28 of the report submitted, it was advised that there were five EISWs, one for each township with some positions currently vacant.

Referring to paragraph 21 of the report submitted regarding multi-cultural support services, the impact that newly arrived families from minority cultural groups was questioned. In response, it was advised that the service worked with all newly arrived families and once a school placement was identified, support was given to the child to help settle them into their new environment. Support was also given to teaching staff to ensure that students had access to the curriculum and improve their attainment. However, the increase in the number of families from Eastern European countries was proving challenging to some schools. Although there were not significantly high numbers of children within schools, problems could arise when schools were not familiar with a child's specific cultures and backgrounds, however this was now being developed.

In response to a question relating to early help intervention offered in Dudley in comparison to our neighbouring authorities, the Interim Director of Children's Services advised that all authorities had troubled families and were facing similar challenges. Most of the children's centres in Dudley were developing the service offered to the 0-5 age group to ensure that the resources available had the maximum impact for children and families and it was noted that the Youth Support service was currently under review.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report, submitted on the provision of Early Help and Support to Children, Young People and their families, be noted.

The following questions were submitted as indicated, under Council Procedure Rule, 11.8 and the answers below were given:

Ms Sinden

Q – Are the Council aware that children attending the Borough’s specialist nurseries do so for their nursery education (at least 3 terms, sometimes up to 5), not purely for the purposes of assessment as is stated in the travel consultation document? The health assessment mentioned in the consultation is for four weeks, many families can make a temporary arrangement for 4 weeks but not for a year or more.

A – Yes the Council is aware of this. The Council believes that it is the best interests of all children of nursery age to be transported and accompanied by their own parent or carer to specialist provision.

Q – Families who will need specialist nursery provision/Local Authority transport in the future will obviously not know what they are potentially about to lose, and the impact this would have upon them. What measures has the Council taken to canvas the opinions of the parents who have previously benefitted from these services who can testify to the differences that access to specialist provision has made to their children and their lives, to help inform decision-making.

A – The Council is undertaking a public consultation to enable as many individuals and groups as possible to express their views on this matter.

Q – The consultation regarding Local Authority transport talks about ‘many’ parents making use of the mobility components of benefits to help pay for transport. Has the Council made any attempts to gather actual figures of families who are entitled to who are receiving these benefits?

A – The Local Authority does not have access to this personal information.

Q- In the latest edition of the Halesowen News, Councillor Tim Crumpton was quoted as saying “ .. we are working hard behind the scenes at how we deliver the specialist nursery service across the borough to ensure every child who needs it has access to it”. And “ .we do not intend to remove a service from people who have become accustomed to receiving it.” And “if the plans went ahead, there would be children who may need some sort of continued support if required”. Can the Council issue clarification on this matter:

- Does this mean that parents who cannot transport their children in the future (eg. Do not have a car or do not drive, have a car which is used by the working parent for work, have another child in primary education who needs to be taken to school) will be accommodated in some way; if so, how?
- Or does this mean that the Council is intending to move away from the current model of specialist provision to placing these children in their local nursery provision with support?

A – If parents or carers believe that it is impossible to find a way of transporting their child to a specialist nursery provision, Local Authority personnel will work with them to identify an alternative arrangement.

We are considering the provision of a personal budget to meet the costs of transport in exceptional circumstances.

We are not intending to move away from the current model of specialist provision which in some cases does include working with parents to find a place in their local nursery provision with support. The Council does not believe that it is in the best interests of nursery aged children to be travelling long distances without their own parents or carers to geographically distant settings.

Q- Consultations are frequently paper exercises. Many service users of specialist provision (language Units and specialist nursery provision) would welcome the opportunity for a live dialogue/debate on the issue under consideration with parents, professionals and other parties around this?

A- Yes we are doing this.

Q- It is important for the Council to be aware that wherever possible children who have special educational needs are supported in their local mainstream nursery. Over 60 children are supported in this way by SEYS (Specialist Early Years Service). However, some children need a different environment and adapted curriculum with specialist teaching to learn, for a variety of reasons. The 43 children in our specialist nurseries do not learn and flourish in a mainstream setting even when individual support is provided. It is essential for Councillors to at least visit one of these nurseries to being to understand the work they do.

A – Councillors are willing to do this and some have already undertaken such visits.

Q – How many Councillors have visited a specialist nursery provision to see how they function, meet the children and talk to parents and staff?

A – We are working to ascertain this information.

Councillor Marrey

Q – How many days per week do children, on average, attend specialist provision?

A – The majority of children attend 4 to 5 days which amounts to between 12.5 and 15 hours per week.

Q – What are the costs to families if they have to pay for private transfer from home to the specialist nursery provision? Can this be broken down to take into account the different types of transport that may be required – eg. With support worker, wheelchair accessible, etc.

A – The costs to families will depend upon the individual circumstances and need. Travelling distance and time is obviously a factor, together with whether or not specialist support workers or equipment are needed to facilitate the journey. The Local Authority does not have access to personal information for individual families.

Q – What percentage of children who may attend specialist nursery provision are in receipt of or are eligible for a mobility component in their benefits?

A – The Local Authority does not have access to this personal information.

Q – How will families who do not have access to their own vehicle be supported to transport their children to a specialist nursery provision?

A – If parents or carers believe that it is impossible to find a way of transporting their child to a specialist nursery provision, Local Authority personnel will work with them to identify an alternative form of transport. We are considering the provision of a personal budget to meet the costs of transport in exceptional circumstances.

Q – What specific measures will be considered to mitigate the effect these proposals will have on families?

A – The provision of a personal budget to meet the costs of transport in exceptional circumstances.

The provision of places at a more local specialist setting that does not entail the need to transport nursery aged children to more distant venues across the Borough.

Information and advice about benefits.

Q - Can the Children's Scrutiny Committee look urgently at the proposals for Transport and the proposed redesign of Specialist Educational Provision for Pupils with Speech, Language and Communication Needs?

A – No definitive answer was given at the meeting and it was agreed that a response would be provided in these minutes.

The response is as follows:

Provision for items for inclusion on agendas for Scrutiny Committees is included in the Scrutiny Committee Procedure Rules in the Council's Constitution which provides that items will be considered in accordance with the annual scrutiny programme and otherwise in accordance with their approved terms of reference. Consideration of items additional to those in the annual scrutiny programme require the approval of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board. Any member of a Scrutiny Committee shall be entitled to give notice to the Strategic Director (Resources and Transformation) that he/she wishes an item relevant to the functions of the Committee to be included on the agenda for the next available meeting of the Committee. On receipt of such a request, the Strategic Director (Resources and Transformation) will ensure that it is included on the next available agenda. In addition, should an executive decision be made, the provisions in the Constitution regarding call-in apply.

Mr Lynch

Q – What steps have been or are being taken to seek to establish the proportion of parents and carers who will be able to get their children to specialist nursery provision if funding for transport is withdrawn.

A – This information will be gathered as part of the dialogue which takes place with parents in establishing the most appropriate placement for each child to attend. Until we are clear about every placement, it is not possible to be clear about the proportion of families who may need assistance.

The meeting ended at 7.20pm.

CHAIR