

SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Thursday, 16th November, 2006, at 6.00 p.m.
in The Council Chamber at The Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Nottingham (Chairman)
Councillor Ms Boleyn (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Ahmed, Mrs Dunn, Islam, Johnston, Ms Partridge, Rogers, A
Turner and C Wilson; Mr Hatton, Reverend Wickens; Mr Smith; Mr
Lynch, Ms Verdegam; and Mr Taylor

OFFICERS

The Director of Finance (as Lead Officer to the Select Committee), the
Assistant Directors of Children's Services (Children and Families and
Policy, Performance and Information), and Mr Sanders (Directorate of
Law and Property)

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APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of
Councillors Mrs Coulter, Mrs Pearce and Simms (Councillor Simms as
substitute for Councillor Mrs Pearce), Ms Bradley and Mrs Simms.

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SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was reported that Councillor Islam was serving as a substitute member
of the Committee in place of Councillor Mrs Coulter for this meeting.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of
Conduct, were made in respect of any matter to be considered at this
meeting.

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MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 27th
September, 2006 be approved as a correct record and signed.

GREEN PAPER "CARE MATTERS"

A presentation on the Green Paper "Care Matters" was given by the Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families).

In introducing the Green Paper, which set out a radical package of proposals for change to improve outcomes for looked after children, the Director explained the rationale which had led to the formulation of the proposals. These related to concerns that intervention with families did not happen early enough; that children in care lacked a consistent adult; that looked after children moved between placements too frequently and that placement quality was often not high enough; that children in care were often placed in the lowest performing schools and received insufficient support in schools; that key services did not do enough to help looked after children to get their lives back on track; that children left care at too young an age and were often poorly equipped for adult life; and that the response to service and system failure was weak.

The proposals contained in the Green Paper aimed to enable earlier and more effective intervention with children on the edge of care and their families; strengthen the role of the corporate parent; improve the quality and stability of placements; ensure a first class education for children in care and improve their life outside school; ease the transition to adult life; and provide for robust accountability in making the system work. The Director then summarised the main points in each of the respective component provisions of the Green Paper. In welcoming the Green Paper the Director indicated that certain features proposed were already in place in Dudley and drew attention to significant cost factors that would arise from the implementation of particular aspects including the proposal that young people would stay in care until the age of 21.

The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families) then reported on the current situation in Dudley in relation to the actions proposed in the Green Paper.

A question and answer session followed, in which the following points were addressed:

- In relation to a question on placements, where the family was not resident in the Borough, the Director explained that all children were different and the aim of the Local Authority was to improve the outcomes for all children, irrespective of where they lived.
- In response to a question on whether culture or faith comprised part of the placement policy, the Assistant Director explained that these factors were taken into account in the appraisal process but that the most important factor was that the care met the need identified.

- In response to a question on what constituted a good school in terms of performance, in the context of corporate parenting, the Director indicated that the aim of the Green Paper was to address the current situation whereby a majority of looked after children were placed in low performing schools. This could not be right and the Green Paper aimed to rectify the matter. Locally, the admissions policy had been changed to give precedence to looked after children. Also, boarding places were available through Oldswinford Hospital, although the Director recognised that not all looked after children were suited to boarding education.
- In response to a question on whether there were sufficient numbers of foster carers in Dudley, the Assistant Director stated that there were currently some 120 in number. While this number catered for all looked after children for which the Council was responsible it was insufficient to allow looked after children to have a choice of foster parent and children had to be placed where there was a vacancy. The Local Authority did not generally have trouble in attracting applications for foster parents but the take up rate was low. The Assistant Director indicated the initiatives taken by the Council in recruiting foster carers.
- In relation to a point made that looked after children lacked consistent adults in their lives, the point was made that feedback from workers with individual children would be advantageous in order to confirm that linkages were appropriate. The Assistant Director referred to the role of the Independent Review Officer in this matter and the Director noted the reference in the Green Paper to the strengthening of the role of that Officer in monitoring consistency of placements. Looked after children also had the facility of the Children's Rights Service and Viewpoint.
- The manner in which pocket money was allocated to children was explained by the Assistant Director.
- Regarding facilities for looked after children leaving care to purchase equipment in order to prepare themselves for adult life, the Assistant Director referred to the Drop-In Centre at Stourbridge but stated that there were no others in the area.
- One Member referred to the need for the position of Special Educational Needs children to be referred to particularly in school OFSTED reports and the Director agreed that this point could be made in the Council's response to the Green Paper.

- In response to a question from the Lead Officer to the Committee, the Assistant Director indicated that a meeting was to be held in December with the aim of improving the effectiveness of the Corporate Parenting Committee. One of the main problems with the Committee currently was the reluctance of young people to come forward and participate.
- In reply to a question on whether looked after children were encouraged to apply to selective schools outside the Borough, the Director confirmed that it was not the policy of the Council to support selective education.
- In response to a question regarding funding for Out of Borough placements, the Director indicated that the Council and other agencies would be drawing attention to the additional costs involved in the consultation on the Green Paper.

Regarding consultation on the Green Paper, the Director confirmed that the Council's response would be reported to the Select Committee.

RESOLVED

That the presentation on the Green Paper be received and the responses to questions asked noted.

UPDATE OF THE COUNCIL'S CAPITAL STRATEGY

A report of the Director of Finance was submitted seeking consideration of the update of the Council's Capital Strategy.

In the discussion on this issue, reference was made to the proportion of current expenditure on education of the two existing Private Finance Initiative projects, in response to which the Director of Finance gave percentage figures and outlined the manner in which the contracts had been funded.

A question was asked on the incidence of asbestos in Dudley schools, in respect of which the Director of Children's Services confirmed that to the best of his knowledge, all high risk asbestos had been removed or encased. In response to a supplementary question the Director confirmed that new regulations requiring Local Authorities to undertake a full audit of where asbestos existed but indicated that to carry out a full survey had not yet been practicable currently in view of the large number of properties and the cost involved.

In relation to a question on the provision of resources for facilities for young people, the Director of Finance referred to the playing pitch strategy but commented on the difficulties involved in persuading young people to use the facilities. Reference was also made to the deterrent effect on would-be users of anti-social behaviour carried out at the facilities provided. The view was expressed that the Council ought to make a clear strategic statement regarding the needs of young people in order to enable young people to feel that consideration was being given to their needs.

RESOLVED

That the updated Capital Strategy be endorsed and that no issues be raised to be taken into account when the Strategy is considered by full Council.

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ORDER OF BUSINESS

RESOLVED

That, pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 13 (c), the order of business on the agenda for this meeting be amended to enable items 10 (Resolution to Exclude the Public) and 11 (Joint Area Review) to be considered at this juncture, with item 7 (the Priorities Meeting), being considered in conjunction with item 11 and that items 8 and 9 be considered thereafter, in that order.

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EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED

That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that:

- (a) They involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as detailed in paragraph 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local government Act, 1972 as indicated below, and
- (b) In all the circumstances the public interest in disclosing the information is outweighed by the public interest in maintaining the exemption from disclosure.

Description of Item

Relevant Paragraph of
Part 1 of Schedule 12A

JOINT AREA REVIEW AND THE PRIORITIES MEETING

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted setting out the key outcomes from the 2006 Joint Area Review of Children's Services in Dudley.

The report set out the background to the inspection, together with the key recommendations in the review report in relation to matters for action immediately, in the next six months and in the longer term. The Joint Area Review would be published in due course, together with the Action Plan.

A note on the Priorities Meeting held on 6th November, 2006 was circulated. The Priorities Meeting was seen as the main strategic level discussion between the Department for Education and Skills and central government departments with the Local Authority and their partners. At the meeting, the Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Policy, Performance and Information) summarised the issues discussed and indicated the positive response of the Government Office.

A question and answer session followed, in respect of which the following issues were discussed:

- In response to a comment on the breadth of use of the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) and to the deployment of its staff within schools, the Director of Children's Services indicated that he was not aware of any difficulties of staff from EMAS being accepted and that he would be surprised to find any resistance from schools in this regard. In response to a supplementary question on the issue, the Director confirmed that financial resourcing for Ethnic Minority Achievement was funded partly by schools, through their delegated budgets, and partly from central budgets.
- In response to a question regarding with which Authorities comparisons on spending had been made, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Policy, Performance and Information) indicated that the comparisons had been made with the Council's statistical neighbours.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the report on the Joint Area Review and that the presentation and note on the Priorities Meeting be received and noted.
- (2) That regular reports to the Committee be submitted on the Action Plan from the Joint Area Review.
- (3) That the Members and Officers concerned be thanked for their contribution to the outcome of the Joint Area Review.

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COMMITTEE IN PUBLIC SESSION

The Committee resumed in public session at this juncture.

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CHILDREN'S SERVICES ONE YEAR ON

A brief presentation was given by the Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Policy, Performance and Information) on the main issues within the Council following the local implementation of the Children Act, 2004, insofar as it related to Children's Services.

Particular reference was made to the structural changes within the Council which had led to the introduction of the Directorate of Children's Services, the appointment of the Director of Children's Services, the structural changes to the former Directorate of Education and Lifelong Learning in order to provide for Children's Services and issues relating to the Joint Area Review. The Assistant Director indicated that the next major step envisaged for 2007, would involve issues including the Children's Trust, and partnership arrangements between the Council and Health services. In reporting on this issue, the Director emphasised the challenges to professionals in meeting the new agenda.

In the discussion, reference was made to pilot schemes on good practice on certain issues relating to Children's Services, in respect of which the Director indicated his intention to report on them to Committee for discussion, where appropriate.

Reference was also made to a possible down grading of provision on certain activities where budget resources had been dispersed through delegation. In response, the Director of Children's Services emphasised the outcomes for children as being paramount and that he would not advocate any changes should this result in children being put at risk.

RESOLVED

That the oral report be received.

The meeting ended at 7.50 pm.

CHAIRMAN