

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 23rd September, 2013 at 6.00 p.m.
in Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Marrey (Chair)
Councillor Boleyn (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Arshad, Bills, Casey, Hill, Islam, Perks, Mrs. Simms, Vickers and Mrs. Walker; Mr. Lynch, Mr. Ridley, Ms. Sinden, Mr. Taylor, Mrs. Verdegem and Mrs. Ward.

Councillor Crumpton (Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning) attended at the invitation of the Committee

OBSERVER

Councillor Harley

OFFICERS

Assistant Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (Housing Management) - Lead Officer to the Committee;
Director of Children's Services, Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families), Assistant Director of Children's Services (Quality and Partnership), Divisional Lead - Family Support (Directorate of Children's Services) and the Democratic Services Manager (Directorate of Corporate Resources)

7. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Mrs. Coulter, Mr Nesbitt and Reverend Wickens.

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Vickers declared a non-pecuniary interest as the Chair of the Management Committee in connection with Tenterfields Children's Centre.

Councillor Mrs Simms declared a non-pecuniary interest in view of her involvement with a looked after child attending Kates Hill and Sledmere Children's Centres.

9. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 13th June, 2013, be approved as a correct record and signed.

10. PUBLIC FORUM

As there were no items raised in the Public Forum, the Chair indicated that the Committee would take the opportunity later in the meeting to receive feedback on the Children's Centre visits undertaken by Members.

11. INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIR

The Chair welcomed the following witnesses in connection with the scrutiny of Children's Centres in Dudley and thanked them for their attendance and work in preparation for this meeting:

H Ruffles – Head Teacher and Children's Centre Lead – Netherton Park Children's Centre

J Tilly – Parent (now working) at Netherton Park Children's Centre

S Tuck – Woodside Children's Centre Leader

S Bloomer – Head Teacher – Woodside Primary School.

Members received a briefing note on the work of the Scrutiny Committee's Shaping Group, giving an update on Children's Centre visits, Sexual Exploitation training, the proposed attendance of members of the Sexual Exploitation Sub-Group at a future scrutiny meeting, safeguarding general awareness training for all Members of the Council and the attendance of Councillors Boleyn and Vickers as observers at a recent meeting of the Safeguarding Children's Board.

In advance of the discussion of the item referred to in Minute No. 12 below, Councillor Mrs Walker thanked the Director of Children's Services and all officers concerned for the presentation of the report in terms of its clarity and the level of information contained in the document presented for scrutiny.

12. CHILDREN'S CENTRES IN DUDLEY

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted advising the Scrutiny Committee of the purpose of Children's Centres service delivery, the legal framework under which they were delivered and the impact of the services provided.

In the detailed discussion of the report, reference was made to the impact on standards in schools and the need for measurable outcomes to demonstrate the effectiveness of early intervention through the services offered by children's centres. Officers referred to the impact of work in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the ongoing collection of information to monitor effectiveness in future years. It was noted that, amongst other available data, information was available from parental satisfaction surveys. The Director of Children's Services noted concerns expressed by Members regarding the length of the survey and noted that this would be reviewed to ensure that it was not off-putting for some parents.

Reference was made to the Common Assessment Framework, and the role of children's centres in developing and implementing early intervention strategies. It was noted that the 'core staff' associated with children's centres was currently being reviewed and it was now a requirement for all children's centres to have a designated social worker. Comments were made regarding the cost of foster carer placements.

Officers noted comments concerning the balance between universal and targeted support from children's centres and issues concerning the referrals process. Particular reference was made to 'Time for Twos', the two-year old childcare/free education pilot, in the context of future budget provision. In relation to the financial context, the Committee noted potential issues concerning the future service capacity taking account of increasing levels of demand. This placed further emphasis on the need for the Council to work closely with schools and health partners to manage the ongoing pressures placed on services.

The Committee commented on ongoing work with health providers and the Office of Public Health and the associated funding review being carried out by the Clinical Commissioning Group. The Cabinet Member for Children's Services recognised that there was limited funding within Children's Services for initiatives that addressed a wider health perspective. Funding issues would need to be viewed in the national context taking account of the increasing expectations and needs of service users.

13. WITNESSES FOR CHILDREN'S CENTRES

The Committee received submissions from the following witnesses:

- H Ruffles – Head Teacher and Children's Centre Lead – Netherton Park Children's Centre

Reference was made to the positive outcomes for children and parents associated with the 'Time for Twos' programme. In relation to the accountability of children's centres, it was noted that internal monitoring was undertaken in addition to the formal Ofsted inspections. Referrals for 'Time for Twos' were made through children's centres subject to eligibility criteria. In view of financial restrictions, it was unlikely that there was capacity to meet all of the demands placed on the service. The Director of Children's Services acknowledged the possibility of voluntary organisations offering support with the Council's assistance, however, this required further consideration. It was also noted that links had been strengthened with social care in terms of referrals made to children's centres.

- J Tilly – Parent at Netherton Park Children's Centre

Ms Tilly shared her own personal experiences as a parent attending the children's centre and more recently by working at the centre. Ms Tilly explained how she had accessed support and services and recognised the difference the work of the children's centre had made to individual families and the wider community.

- S Tuck – Woodside Children's Centre Leader

Ms Tuck explained work undertaken towards achieving an 'outstanding' Ofsted inspection, including a flexible approach to service provision and developing key partnerships with health visitors, schools, police and the voluntary sector. A significant proportion of the work of the centre was 'outreach' by engaging with the wider community and relevant groups. Considerable activity was undertaken to engage with families who did not access services and also working in partnership with schools and health colleagues.

- S Bloomer – Head Teacher – Woodside Primary School.

Ms Bloomer reported on her experience of working in a Primary School with a children's centre attached, with particular reference to the benefits for children starting school and the positive impact on parents in terms of accessing support and advice. Reference was made to the close working relationship between the school and the children's centre and the associated benefits of improved communication and sharing of information, with staff undertaking joint planning and target setting with a clear focus on improvement.

Concerns were expressed regarding children's centres that were not directly linked to a particular primary school, both in terms of the effectiveness of the services provided and the potential implications of services being withdrawn by other providers. However, it was acknowledged that all children's centres should be viewed as a community resource.

The Committee noted all the submissions made. The Chair again expressed his sincere thanks to the witnesses for their attendance and contributions to the work of the Committee.

14. CHILDREN'S CENTRE VISITS – FEEDBACK SHEETS

The Committee received and considered feedback sheets from visits undertaken by Members of the Committee to the following Children's Centres:

- Butterfly Children's Centre, Lye – 15th August, 2013 (Councillors Bills and Vickers)
- Gornal Children's Centre – 27th August, 2013 (Councillors Boleyn, Casey and Mrs Simms)
- Kates Hill and Sledmere Children's Centre – 29th August, 2013 (Councillors Marrey and Perks)

Reference was made to the financial and other benefits of adopting an approach based on 'early intervention' as opposed to dealing with long-term issues if early intervention services were not provided. Although it was acknowledged that this was difficult to measure, the Director of Children's Services indicated that data/case studies could be produced to assist the Committee in its future deliberations.

15. PREPARATION FOR NEXT COMMITTEE – NEXT STEPS

The Committee discussed the next steps towards developing recommendations to be submitted to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Director of Children's Services send an e-mail to all Members of the Committee asking for any further thoughts about the way forward taking account of the information and submissions received to date.
 - (2) That all the responses received be collated in a document for further consideration by Members to shape the Committee's draft conclusions and recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning.
 - (3) That the Chair arrange for correspondence to be sent to all Members, together with a copy of the associated report, encouraging all Councillors to visit children's centres in their wards.
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16. COMMENTS OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES
AND LIFELONG LEARNING

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning reported that Jane Porter, Director of Children's Services, would be retiring from the Council's service during December, 2013. He thanked the Director for her past and ongoing support.

Reference was also made to arrangements for the Himley bonfire and the attendance of children and families from Pens Meadow Special School.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chair thanked all attendees and indicated that a further meeting would be arranged on a date to be confirmed in November, 2013.

The meeting ended at 8.35 p.m.

CHAIR