

## **Minutes of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee**

Thursday, 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2014 at 6.00 p.m.  
In Committee Room 2, The Council House, Dudley

### **Present:**

Councillor M. Mottram (Chair)  
Councillor I. Cooper (Vice Chair)  
Councillors C. Billingham, P. Bradley, P. Harley, Z. Islam, C. Perks,  
R. Scott-Dow and G. Simms

### **Also in attendance:**

M. Lynch and J. Sinden; S. Taylor; L. Coulter and L. Ridney

### **Officers:**

B. Clifford (Interim Assistant Director for Adult Social Care - Lead Officer),  
I. McGuff (Assistant Director, Quality and Partnership), Directorate of  
Children's Services), J. Prashar (Divisional Lead - Looked After Children,  
Directorate of Children's Services) and R. Sanders (Assistant Principal Officer,  
Democratic Services)

#### **1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors  
Attwood and Marrey; Mr. Nesbitt and Mrs. Verdegem.

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#### **2. Substitute Members**

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

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#### **3. Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9<sup>th</sup> April, 2014 be approved  
as a correct record and signed.

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4. **Welcome and Introductions**

The Chair welcomed new Members of the Committee and paid tribute to the service of the Members from 2013/14, who had either retired as, or had ceased to be Councillors, or who remained Councillors but were no longer serving on this Committee.

In addressing the Committee, the Chair outlined the manner in which he proposed the Committee would operate in 2014/15 and stated his intention that consideration of the workload would be undertaken in an open-minded, involved and non-political way. He also was of the view that, given the workload prescribed, the number of scheduled meetings would not be sufficient and that, therefore, informal meetings of the whole Committee would be arranged.

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5. **Declarations of Interest**

A declaration of non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item No. 5 (Annual Scrutiny Programme 2014/15) was made by Councillor Harley in view of his governorship of the Brier School.

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6. **School Scrutiny Programme 2014/15**

The Committee considered a report of the Lead Officer and Director of Corporate Resources setting out the items suggested by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board for inclusion in the Annual Scrutiny Programme of the Committee for 2014/15, these being:

- Childhood Neglect;
- Early Help Offer;
- Special Educational Needs Reform.

In relation to the early part of the Committee cycle, with reference to the meeting scheduled for the 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2014 and an informal meeting to be arranged to precede it, the Chair indicated that an item would be submitted showing where Dudley stood in relation to the Special Educational Needs Reforms under the Children and Families Act, 2014. The paper would include suggestions for visits and recommend expert witnesses. Arrangements would be made for a report back in November in order to formalise matters.

In relation to witnesses, the Chair confirmed that teachers from Special Educational Needs schools would be invited to participate and a suggestion was made that the witnesses should include the Head of the Brier School. The Chair also confirmed that the provision of Special Educational Needs school places would be looked at.

The Chair then reported on the proposed timetabling of the matters scheduled for consideration in the November, January and March meetings of the Committee, these being as follows:-

**November, 2014**

- Feedback and recommendations with reference to Special Educational Needs Reforms;
- Budget for 2015/16;
- Early Help Offer

**January, 2015**

- Feedback and recommendations with reference to the Early Help Offer;
- Childhood neglect

**March, 2015**

- Feedback and recommendations in relation to Childhood Neglect;
- Education Performance Report;
- Feedback on the Award Ceremony;
- Agreement of Recommendations for the report of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved

That the issues suggested for scrutiny in 2014/15 as recommended by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, and as set out in the report now submitted and expanded upon as set out as above, be endorsed.

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7. **Summary of Work Undertaken by the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee in 2013/14**

The Committee considered the report of the Lead Officer summarising the work undertaken by the Committee in 2013/14, the approved Work Programme having been to scrutinise:-

- Safeguarding Standards within the Borough and Children's Services' contribution;
- Early Intervention Strategy for the Borough.

On the issues of safeguarding, child trafficking and sexual exploitation, particular reference was made to a video shown to Committee Members in 2013/14, as part of the scrutiny process, which had increased awareness of current problems in the Borough on these matters. The view was expressed that the Council's responsibilities on safeguarding should be included as part of the induction arrangements for new Members of the Council and also for Members of the Council who had not served on the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee. The Chair confirmed that a plan for comprehensive training in these areas was in the course of preparation.

Reference was also made to the video shown to Members of the Committee in the 2013/14 scrutiny process on sexual exploitation and child grooming and it was considered by the Members who had viewed the video that it should be shown to all Members of the Council, in view of their corporate responsibility on safeguarding.

In response to a question by a Member, it was agreed that a progress report on action being taken with regard to safeguarding and child trafficking, be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

Resolved

That the report be noted and that the actions referred to be pursued.

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8. **Overview of the Work Carried Out by the Directorate of Children's Services**

The Committee considered a report of the Interim Director of Children's Services outlining the range of work and responsibilities of the Directorate of Children's Services.

The report itemised the work undertaken by the different divisions in the Directorate and outlined the risks associated with service delivery, in the light of the Directorate working in the contexts of increased demand, higher and increased regulatory and statutory requirements and greater expectations on performance by regulators such as OFSTED, and the general public.

In the discussion that followed the presentation of the report by the Assistant Director (Quality and Partnership), a number of questions were asked and answered by the Assistant Director as follows:-

- Regarding a question by a Member on the percentage of the Children's Services budget in comparison with the overall Council budget, the Assistant Director indicated that he would arrange for a written reply to be sent to the questioner.

- Regarding the issue of traded services, the Director indicated that revenues were broadly in line with those for the previous four or five years, but with some services having seen an increase in demand and others a decrease. The main objective was to optimise trade with schools outside Dudley. A comment was made by a Member that, while accepting the picture was mixed, there were some areas where schools had little option but to engage in out-sourcing on grounds of cost. The same Member also made the point that in other areas of service, out-sourcing could be extremely expensive, particularly in relation to the engagement of private sector consultants.
- Regarding paragraph 11 of the report, concerning the cost of educating looked after children, the Assistant Director did not consider that significant savings could be achieved and made the point that most looked after children were already educated in maintained schools. The majority of costs concerning looked after children related to their care and the Directorate were giving close consideration to Early Help services with the result of mitigating the likelihood of children having to come into care. In addition, greater numbers of Child Protection Plans were providing for children to be educated at home with appropriate support and this had had some effect in reducing the costs of care placements.

The Divisional Lead - Looked After Children added that most foster carers were now locally based either within the Borough or in nearby authorities. There were, however, occasions on which there was no alternative but to place children further away, if the needs of the child required it.

- In response to a question on why there had been an increase in the number of children entering care, the Assistant Director referred to the increasing expectations of care agencies and the public on the role of Local Authorities and Social Workers on safeguarding in consequence of certain recent high profile cases and a greater awareness of child risk factors. The result had been that the threshold for bringing children into care had been lowered and it was now the case that some children who would not have been brought into care previously would now be protected in this way.
- A member suggested that the restructuring of Children's Centres into clusters and savings made in that regard might result in a lessening of service, thus adding to risk for children and families. The same Member expressed concerns about any possible further restructuring. The Assistant Director accepted that restructuring resulting in diminution of staff, as in the case referred to, presented challenges but that the Directorate was monitoring situations such as these closely. A particular case was referred to by a different Member, in respect of which the Divisional Lead - Looked After Children asked for details to be sent to her.

- In relation to statementing, a Member commented that in her experience, where different Local Authorities were involved, liaison between them could be improved.
- On the issue of child neglect, matters were discussed in relation to the family backgrounds of children, continuity of the Social Worker allocated to a particular child, diet, education of the child, home background and the funding that would be available should numbers of Looked After children continue to rise. The Divisional Lead - Looked After Children indicated that some of the matters raised were being attended to via Care Orders and that these were important and appropriate to maintain a child's good education and health. The Directorate was working towards these aims.
- A Member made the point that, in some cases, it was not the care agencies that instigated care proceedings but that parents sometimes requested their children to be placed into care. The Divisional Lead - Looked After Children acknowledged that there were various reasons for children to come into care.
- The issue of Special Guardianship Orders was raised and the view expressed that carers should be in receipt of allowances equivalent to those for adoption support. The legal powers in relation to Special Guardianship Orders were clarified and it was also indicated by the Divisional Lead - Looked After Children that support within the Directorate was given for children and guardians provided for under Special Guardianship Orders.

Resolved

That the report be noted, together with the comments made, as summarised above and that, should any Member have additional points they wish to have added to the considerations of the Committee, these be made at the informal meetings to be arranged.

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9. **Composition and Membership of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee**

The Committee considered a report of the Lead Officer and the Director of Corporate Resources on the composition and membership of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee, in which the decision of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board on this matter was reported.

On the issue of the non-elected membership of the Committee, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board had resolved to recommend the Council that statutory co-opted Members of the Committee be retained but that provision for the non-statutory co-optees be discontinued. Instead, the Management Board had recommended that the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee establish a pool of specialist/key contacts that could be invited to attend to advise the Committee or give evidence at specific meetings, depending on the topics under discussion. It was indicated in the report that the Management Board had in mind that context would include a wide range of educational/social care professionals/faith groups/disability groups/trade unions/people from other boroughs, etc. The Committee would have the discretion to invite people according to the topic under debate at the time.

The recommendation was to be considered at the meeting of the Council at its meeting to be held on 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2014.

In the discussion that ensued, points were made, including the following:-

- That, in the past year, the issues that the Committee had considered were not purely educational issues but had a wider context.
- That, should it be determined that the non-elected, non-voting membership be discontinued, and that their attendance at meetings be only accommodated as specialists, it would be a disservice to members of the public.
- That, should non-elected, non-voting membership be discontinued and replaced by persons with front-line experience on a meeting to meeting basis, there would be a loss in continuity and experts attending on a non-regular basis would find it more difficult to engage.
- That, given the wider remit of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee to consider issues broader than those relating to pure education issues, including child exploitation, child trafficking etc, the current membership provides a mechanism to ensure Members are fully conversant with the context of the children's issues under consideration.
- That, while acknowledging that it might not be appropriate for the status quo to remain, the experience of existing co-opted members was valuable.
- That the statutory non-elected, non-voting members should be obliged to attend on a regular basis. It was suggested in this regard that, should the statutory members be unable to attend, they should then appoint substitutes on their behalf if this was possible under the relevant legislation.

Resolved

That the report be noted, together with the comments made, and that the views expressed as set out above, be brought to the attention of the Cabinet Member before the Council meeting at which the recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board will be considered.

The meeting ended at 7.20 p.m.

CHAIR