

SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Thursday, 17th June, 2010 at 6.00 p.m.
In Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Vickers (Chairman)
Councillor Attwood (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Crumpton, Mrs Dunn, Mrs Greenaway, Hanif, Ms Harris, J Jones, J Martin and Mrs Rogers; Mrs Roe, Mr Taylor, Mrs Verdegem and Reverend Wickens.

OFFICERS

The Interim Director of Finance (Lead Officer to the Committee), the Assistant Directors of Children's Services ((Children's Specialist Services), (Education Play and Learning), (Performance and Partnership) and (Strategy and Service Development)), The Divisional Manager, Children's Specialist Services, Directorate of Children's Services and Mr Sanders (Directorate of Law, Property and Human Resources)

1

INTRODUCTIONS

The Chairman introduced new Members of the Committee and welcomed them to the meeting.

2

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Mrs Lees and Mrs Simms.

3

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

4

MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 24th March, 2010 be approved as a correct record and signed.

ISSUES RAISED PREVIOUSLY(a) Special Educational Needs Performance

Further to minute 60 of the meeting of the Committee held on 24th March, 2010, statistical information requested regarding performance data for Dudley pupils on the Register of Special Educational Needs in Key Stages 1 to 4 was circulated and the contents discussed by the Director of Children's Services (Education, Play and Learning). The Assistant Director invited Members of the Committee to contact him should they have any questions on the information they wished to ask.

(b) Closure of Pensnett School of Technology

Further to Minute 64 of the meeting of the Committee held on 24th March, 2010, an oral update on the current position regarding the closure of the Pensnett School was given by the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Education, Play and Learning).

The Assistant Director confirmed that all pupils in years 7 and 8 had been offered alternative places at their preferred schools, with the vast majority of first preferences having been met. Agreement had now been reached with two sets of parents who had been dissatisfied with the placements offered initially for their children. Pupils in Years 7 and 8 were currently being invited to attend their new schools so that they could be introduced to teachers and prospective student colleagues.

With regard to the education of the year 9 and 10 pupils who would be remaining on site at Pensnett, the Assistant Director reported that staff recruitment was progressing well and would be completed within the next week or so.

With regard to the teaching establishment that would remain at the Pensnett site, the Assistant Director indicated that there would be a core staff of around 15 teachers who were being engaged to cover the core curriculum. The teachers were being recruited from the existing body of staff at the school. It was possible that a small number of teachers might have to be recruited in addition to teach minority subjects, in order to enable the learning needs of all pupils to be met.

In response to a question, the Assistant Director confirmed that, further to agreement with the professional associations, arrangements were being made to train the teaching staff in the teaching of subjects with which they had not been familiar hitherto.

RESOLVED

- (1) That, starting with the September meeting, regular monitoring reports on the position regarding the teaching of the children remaining on site at the premises of the Pensnett School, and on any other matters pertinent to the closure of the school, be made to the Committee.
- (2) That reports be submitted to the Committee regularly on the impact to the pupils in the feeder primary schools of the closure of the Pensnett school.

6

TERMS OF REFERENCE AND RULES OF PROCEDURE OF THE COMMITTEE AND ASSOCIATED MATTERS, INCLUDING THE WORK PROGRAMME AND WORKING GROUPS OF THE COMMITTEE FOR 2010/11

A report of the Lead Officer to the Committee setting out, for information, the Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedure applicable to the Committee and details of bodies with which the Council's Children's Services were closely associated, and which also sought consideration of the issues of the work programme and the appointment of Working Groups for 2010/11, was submitted.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the Terms of Reference, Rules of Procedure and Protocol relating to the Select Committee be received and noted, together with the information on the other bodies concerned with Children's Services, as set out in paragraph 6 of the Report.
- (2) That the Work Programme for 2010/11 set out in paragraph 7 of the Report now submitted be approved and that Members be invited to refer any additional issues they consider should be included in the programme to the Vice Chairman, for a report back to be made in September.
- (3) That the Director of Children's Services circulate a paper to the Committee defining in greater detail the nature of the issues included in the Work Programme.
- (4) That no Working Groups be established for 2010/11 and that, instead, any substantive issues that arise be brought to the full Select Committee.
- (5) That, further to discussion at the meeting, a Public Forum item on the Agenda for each Committee Meeting be not provided for routinely but that such an item be facilitated at particular meetings should the need arise.

7 DRAFT ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE REVIEW OF THE 2009/10 YEAR

A report of the Lead Officer to the Committee was submitted setting out the draft Annual Report to the Council for the review of the 2009/10 year.

RESOLVED

That the report be approved for submission to the Council at its meeting to be held on 19th July, 2010.

8 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DUDLEY LOCAL AUTHORITY ADOPTION SERVICE

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted, under cover of which was set out the Annual Report of the Dudley Local Authority Adoption Service for 2009/10.

In introducing the report, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children's Specialist Services) indicated that activity levels had increased over the year in all aspects of the work. She indicated further that the identification of children for adoption was usually taken before their third birthday, although this was not always the case. The Assistant Director emphasised that a highly skilled and experienced staff was necessary to facilitate the sensitive work involved and clarified the role of the Adoption Panel. In relation to training and marketing, she indicated that this was shared jointly between the Black Country authorities.

In the discussion that followed the presentation of the report, reference was made to the Council's staffing resources for Social Care provision, in comparison to those of neighbouring authorities, in terms of risk. The Council's Letterbox Scheme, through which an adopted child's wider birth family could remain in contact with the child, was explained by the Assistant Director, together with the challenges involved with the scheme. These often related to the complexities of modern family life. In reply to a further question, the Assistant Director explained briefly the measures taken to identify placements for children with a plan for adoption.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

9 DUDLEY SAFEGUARDING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted, under cover of which the Annual Report of the Dudley Safeguarding Children's Board for 2009/10 was set out.

The report of the Safeguarding Board included an Executive Summary in which achievements and progress against key priorities for 2009/10 were indicated and the six key priorities for the next three years set out. The key challenges and priorities for 2010/11 were itemised and expanded upon briefly in the Executive Summary.

Following the presentation of the report by the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children's Specialist Services), in which the Assistant Director confirmed that there had been a marked increase in demand for safeguarding services in consequence of the Peter Connolly case, the Assistant Director and the Divisional Manager from Children's Specialist Services, Safeguarding and Review Unit answered questions asked by Members of the Committee.

In response to a question on the pressures of the service from which the key challenges in the current year had emerged, the Divisional Manager (Children's Specialist Services/Safeguarding and Review Unit) confirmed the main reasons as being increased awareness amongst professionals and the public about safeguarding coupled with some degree of anxiety of the agencies and the public relating to the Peter Connolly case; a greater concentration on early intervention to avoid situations reaching crisis point; and a number of skills and resources issues, which impacted on the ability of the Council and its key partners to respond to the level of demand. In relation to the admission of children at risk to looked after care, the Divisional Manager indicated that, where there was an immediate need for protection, the admission of child into care was not necessarily progressed through the Child Protection Plan, confirmed that there was a constant need for the assessment of children entering care and emphasised that if a child was considered to meet the Child Protection Threshold, then the case was dealt with straightaway. The care necessary had to be provided effectively and appropriately in conjunction with other agencies. One of the challenges to the Directorate was to ensure that assessment and care management provision at the point of entry and through the system did not become so congested that it was not effective.

In response to a question regarding continued care for a child after he or she had left the care system, the Divisional Manager explained that a step down Child in Need plan would be applied and indicated the agencies from which support was given. The Divisional Manager referred to the balance that had to be addressed in returning children to families and to the intensive nature of the work involved in enabling a child to return home, and the key agencies involved.

In response to questions asked by the teacher representative for secondary schools, the Divisional Manager confirmed that an anti-bullying co-ordinator had been appointed. He also referred to the work undertaken with community groups in relation to the issue of Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checking. Regarding the latter issue, the Divisional Manager agreed to report further should the current requirements regarding CRB and the Vetting and Barring Scheme change.

In response to a question on measures being taken to meet the aims indicated in priority 2 in the Executive Summary, the Divisional Manager confirmed that there was a constant need for review of strategies concerning the identification and response to children suffering from neglect and indicated the nature of information sharing between the agencies responsible. There were difficulties in monitoring children who were not at school or within the social care system particularly those moving between local authority boundaries and indeed ContactPoint had already proved beneficial in identifying some of the young people on missing from education systems. For those children within the social care system, there was a regional child in care protocol which helped to outline how local authorities transferred cases when families moved cross-border. There was also a Children Missing Task Group addressing these issues, particularly for those who went missing from home or care. In terms of neglect, the Divisional Manager accepted that a long term solution was needed and expressed a need for particular models to be considered.

In reply to a further question on responsibility for ensuring a child had not disappeared should he not register at school, the Divisional Manager indicated that, in such circumstances, the school should inform the Local Authority and that, should this lead to concerns, a referral to social care could be appropriate. In response to a further enquiry as to the action that could be taken should a family disappear and the child not be on the "At Risk Register", the Divisional Manager explained that some children could be very difficult to track, but there were systems available that were being used to try to locate them.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted and that further reports on Safeguarding be submitted in the course of the year.

10

DUDLEY CHILDREN'S TRUST INCLUDING THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PLAN

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted summarising progress on the activities of the Children's Trust in Dudley, including on the development of the Children and Young People Plan.

In relation to the partners comprising the Board of the Trust, attention was drawn to the lack of a body representing ethnic minorities. The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Performance and Partnership) confirmed that, in setting up the Board, equality and diversity groups had not been expressly invited to be represented but that he would be happy to raise the matter with the Strategic Commissioning Board and report back.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the report be received.
- (2) That a report back be made on equality and diversity group representation on the Board of the Dudley Children's Trust.

11

THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLES PLAN AND DIRECTORATE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICE STRATEGIC PLAN 2010/11

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted advising the Committee of the priority objectives set out in the Children and Young People's Plan and the Strategic Plan of the Directorate of Children's Services for 2010/11.

In response to questions on the implications of the recent government announcements on education, in relation to Academies, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Strategy and Service Development) indicated that, to date, the Council had not received notification from any school that they proposed to become an academy. An updated position statement would be reported to the September meeting.

Regarding Vision 2025 and Building Schools for the Future, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Strategy and Service Development) indicated that only those projects for which funding had already been received or for which the funding had been assured would be proceeded with. In relation to particular schemes, Quarry Bank Primary School had been funded already and was progressing on schedule; Old Park had been funded from an amalgam of budgets and was therefore progressing; and the finance for the remodelling of Hawbush Primary School was already in the budget and would proceed. Other proposed projects were on hold.

RESOLVED

The report be noted, together with the current position on the issues raised.

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QUARTERLY CORPORATE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT

The Committee considered the Quarterly Corporate Performance Management Report for the matters within its terms of reference, together with a contextual report by the Director of Children's Services on particular performance issues.

Reference was made to the practice of some schools in requiring doctors' notes to be provided when a child was absent. The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Performance and Partnership) agreed to enquire and report back to the Member who raised the issue.

Reference was made by certain Members to the improvements in performance noted in the report relating to the incidence of teenage pregnancies and to one to one tuition for looked after children.

RESOLVED

That the Quarterly Corporate Management report and the contextual report be received and noted, and that the areas referred to in the contextual report be kept under review.

The meeting ended at 7.35 pm

CHAIRMAN