

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 25th January, 2012 at 6.00 p.m.
in Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Mrs Dunn (Chairman)
Councillor Attwood (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Miss Arshad, Mrs Billingham, Crumpton, Hanif, J Jones, Miller, S Turner; Reverend Wickens; Mr Songole; Mr Bruton and Mrs Verdegem; Mr Taylor.

OFFICERS

Assistant Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (Policy, Performance and Resources) – Lead Officer to the Committee; Acting Director of Children's Services, Assistant Directors of Children's Services (Children and Families and Quality and Partnership), Divisional Manager and the Head of Assessment Services (both Children's Specialist Services, Directorate of Children's Services) and Mr Sanders – Directorate of Corporate Resources.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE

The Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services (Councillor Mrs Walker)

29. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence from the meeting will be received on behalf of Councillors Mrs Greenaway and P Woodall, Mr Duffield and Mrs Ward.

30. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

A declaration of personal interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, was made by Councillor Mrs Dunn in respect of Agenda Item No 5 (Fostering Service) in view of her step daughter being a foster carer.

31. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16th November, 2011 be approved as a correct record and signed.

32. FOSTERING SERVICE

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted setting out key information on the Fostering Service in Dudley, indicating developments in the service further to the previous OFSTED Inspection in 2009.

The outcome of the 2009 Inspection had been deemed as satisfactory, with five actions identified as being required and ten other recommendations made. The report now submitted confirmed that the five issues required to be made had all been actioned and completed and that all ten recommendations had been acted upon.

The Council's next inspection was believed to be imminent and would be carried out under the new National Minimum Standards and Regulations introduced in April, 2011. The report indicated that assessments against the standards was an ongoing activity and that those officers and agencies responsible for the Fostering Service were meeting regularly to prepare. A recent audit of the Fostering Service had been carried out under the new National Minimum Standards.

The report set out the range of fostering provision currently undertaken in Dudley, indicated the governance arrangements, and noted the numbers of fostering placements and carers.

The report referred to collaborative work in relation to fostering, which was being carried out across the four Black Country Boroughs, and the issues with regard to which collaboration was being effected. Reference was also made to Dudley's engagement in a Fostering Framework Agreement with six other regional authorities, through which a pricing structure for the commissioning of individual fostering placements had been achieved, thus enabling placements to be procured on a spot purchase basis.

In a question and answer session that followed the presentation of the report, in response to a question on the measures being taken to recruit foster carers, the Acting Director of Children's Services referred to the operation of the Fostering Panel Members List, which had been initiated in response to the new National Minimum Standards. One Member requested further details in respect of the collaborative working arrangements, with regard to which it was agreed that the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families) would circulate a briefing note to the Committee. The Assistant Director also confirmed that benchmarking data could be included in future reports on the Fostering Service.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

33. INSPECTION OF SAFEGUARDING AND LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN SERVICES

The Acting Director of Children's Services reported that the OFSTED report on Safeguarding and Looked After Children, conducted from 28th November to 9th December, 2011, had been received but that publication had been embargoed by OFSTED until this day. She therefore gave an oral summary of the main findings of the report and a record of the main findings was circulated, indicating the outcomes.

In expanding briefly on the conclusions of the report, the Acting Director advised of the measures carried out in accordance with the Action Plan formulated in consequence of the previous inspection and referred to other actions taken to improve services. She also confirmed that an Action Plan was being drawn up to address the issues identified in the new report and confirmed that a full report on the inspection would be made to the next meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED

That the oral report given by the Acting Director of Children's Services be noted and that it also be noted that a full report, together with the Action Plan, would be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.

34. REFERRALS TO LOCAL AUTHORITY CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE WHERE THERE ARE CONCERNS ABOUT A CHILD'S SAFETY OR WELFARE

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted containing an overview of the processes involved when a referral was made to Social Care, which raised concerns about a child's safety or welfare.

The report focused on situations where concerns had been raised that a child might be suffering or was likely to suffer significant harm but where the threshold for care proceedings had not been met and, through assessment, it had been judged that children could remain with their birth families but with the support of a Child Protection Plan.

The report set out the obligations of the local authority and its partner agencies under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 and the activities undertaken in connection therewith for children in this category. While acknowledging that for the majority of cases following a Section 47 enquiry, a child remained with its family under a Plan developed between the various agencies involved, in collaboration with the family, to ensure the child's future safety and welfare, this was not always the case and the report indicated the manner in which action was progressed when a Child Protection Conference had considered that the child should not remain with its family. The review process, in which consideration was given to whether or not a child should continue to be the subject of a Child Protection Plan, was also described in the report.

Information regarding the number of children currently subject to a Child Protection Plan was appended to the report now submitted. A tabulation in the appendix indicated data for the past 5 years, together with a five year average, and provided comparator figures.

In the question and answer session that followed the presentation of the report, the Head of Assessment Services confirmed that, in the last five years, there had been a significant increase in referrals of children about whom concerns about their safety or welfare had been raised, with a substantial number of cases in which neglect was alleged to have been received. A view was expressed that the emergence of Children's Centres had assisted in cases of neglect being identified at an early stage. The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families) commented that a significant number of referrals had arisen from families where there had been instances of domestic abuse or substance misuse and referred to the role of Surestart in helping to identify such cases. In response to a further question, the Head of Assessment Services confirmed that the incidence of actual risk identified through substance misuse was higher in areas of social deprivation.

In response to a question on whether any issues were emerging as a result of the current economic situation, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families) indicated that some difficulties were being experienced through structural, rather than financial issues, where contact points from partner agencies could be inconsistent through changes in staffing resources in those organisations.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted, together with the information given orally.

35. QUESTIONS UNDER COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 11.8 AND ON INFORMATION ITEMS

No questions had been submitted under Council Procedure Rule 11.8 and no questions were asked on the information items placed on the Committee Management Information Service (CMIS).

The meeting ended at 7.15 pm

CHAIRMAN