

SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Thursday, 16th September, 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, J Jones, Mrs Jordan,
J Martin, Mrs Rogers and P Woodall

OFFICERS

The Interim Director of Finance (Lead Officer to the Committee), the Acting Director of Children's Services, Assistant Directors of Children's Services (Children's Specialist Services), (Education Play and Learning), and (Quality and Partnership), Assistant Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (Learning Disability and Mental Health) and Mr Sanders (Directorate of Law, Property and Human Resources)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE

Councillors P Harley and Mrs Walker (Cabinet Members for Performance Management and Quality Assurance (Children's Services) and Integrated Children's Services, respectively); Councillors Burston and Tyler; the Children's Guardian (Ms. Burley), the Adoptions Manager (Ms. Maybee) and Principal Solicitor, Legal and Democratic Services (Mr Clark) – all in attendance at meeting and by invitation for item 13.

12 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillor Ms Harris, Mrs Lees and Mrs Roe.

13 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

14 **SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

It was reported that Councillor Mrs Jordan was serving in place of Councillor Ms Harris for this meeting of the Committee only.

15

MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 17th June, 2010 be approved as a correct record and signed.

16

ISSUE RAISED PREVIOUSLY - CLOSURE OF PENNETT SCHOOL OF TECHNOLOGY

Further to minute 5(b) of the previous meeting of the Committee, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Education, Play and Learning) reported orally on the current position in consequence of the closure of the Pensnett School.

The Assistant Director confirmed that all pupils who would have been placed at the former school were now in education, with 91% of first preferences of school having been accommodated. In relation to staffing, of the 73 staff previously employed at Pensnett, 41 had remained at the school in some capacity and 16 of those who had been made redundant had secured alternative employment. The majority of the staff remaining at Pensnett in the new academic year had negotiated temporary contracts.

Reporting on the GCSE results at Pensnett school in its final examination year, the Assistant Director expressed his appreciation of the work undertaken by the staff at the school towards facilitating the significant improvement in academic achievement levels that had been made, in the difficult circumstances pertaining to the school.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the current position regarding staffing and pupils, in consequence of the closure of the Pensnett School, as now reported orally by the Assistant Director, be noted.
 - (2). That the Committee place on record its appreciation of the work of the staff and others who had supported at the school in facilitating the significant rise in attainment levels in GCSE examination results in its final year.
 - (3) That progress reports on the former pupils in years 10 and 11 continue to be made to the Committee.
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COMPOSITION OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES: PARENT GOVERNOR REPRESENTATIVES

A report of the Director of Corporate Resources and the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted, indicating the current position regarding the appointment of Parent Governor Representatives to the Committee.

Arrangements for the election of representatives for each of the Primary, Secondary and Special phases of education had been made in June, 2010 but no nominations for any of the phases had been received. The report indicated that the most recent Primary Representative had served until May, 2010, until the representative had been ineligible to continue in that capacity, owing to his being elected as a Member of the Council; that the term of office of the Secondary Representative had expired in May 2009 and that no nominations had been received in the consequential election process; and that it had not been possible to attract a nomination from the Special Education phase since Parent Governor Representatives had first been elected in 2000. The report indicated further that arrangements to fill the vacancies would be re-started in early November.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the current position regarding the election of Parent Governor Representatives to the Committee be noted, together with the intention to undertake the electoral arrangements again in early November.
- (2) That all Members of the Committee be notified of the vacancies with a view to their seeking nominations to serve in each phase of education and that details regarding the election arrangements be sent to members at the time as those arrangements are made

WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE 2010/11 MUNICIPAL YEAR

A report of the Lead Officer to the Committee was submitted on issues raised by Members as items for consideration in the work programme for the Committee for 2010/11.

In response to a question, the definition of bullying was explained by the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Quality and Partnership). The Assistant Director confirmed that the issue of bullying would be included the report on Equality and Diversity to be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED

That the issues in paragraph 3 of the report now submitted be included in the work programme for the Committee for 2010/11.

CHILD POVERTY

(During consideration of this item, Councillor Crumpton declared a Personal Interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, in view of his employment by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs dealing with Tax Credits).

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted briefing the Committee on the implications of the Child Poverty Act, 2010 and setting out the actions that needed to be taken. The Act had come into force in March, 2010 and required local authorities to carry out a Child Poverty Needs Assessment for their areas and to produce a Joint Child Poverty Strategy to report on the progress of activity to mitigate and reduce the effects of child poverty. Local strategies would link into the national strategy with the aim of eradicating child poverty by 2020. The national strategy would include measures specified in legislation, many of which would require action and interpretation at local level and impose a duty of co-operation with the Local Authority for partner agencies.

Key points from the draft guidance on the Act were summarised in the report and reference was made to the target to have reduced the number of children living in relative poverty (as defined) to under 10% by 2020. The current position for Dudley was that approximately 22% of children (approximately 15,000 in number) were living in relative poverty. Key points included:

- the power of partners to pool budgets
- that no agency or provider should work alone
- that local authorities should identify organisations other than those referred to within the legislation which could contribute to delivering a reduction in child poverty.
- the establishment of a local Child Poverty Board
- the content of the needs assessment.

The report referred to child poverty as having been identified as a priority in the Children's Plan and it was confirmed that work was therefore in hand to deliver improvement in this field. However, the new legislation required a much broader focus than had been the case hitherto and placed increased emphasis on the need for wider partnership arrangements around delivery. In relation to governance, the Children's Trust had accepted ownership of the work and would ensure that delivery, where appropriate, sat with the Dudley Community Partnership.

The actions that needed to be taken by March, 2011 to meet the requirements of the Act were set out in paragraphs 7 to 11 of the report including those in relation to the preparation and publication of the local poverty needs assessment.

In the discussion on the issue, in response to a question, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Quality and Partnership) indicated that statistical information regarding the number and percentage of children in relative poverty was supplied by central government. Reference was also made to the number of families who did not take their full entitlement to benefits and the Assistant Director confirmed that this was an area that would be looked at in the Action Plan. On the issue of indicators relating to child poverty, in response to a further question, the Assistant Director confirmed that statistical information by township could be provided and could be submitted to Area Committees.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the Committee acknowledges that work is already in place to help deliver the legislative requirements of the Child Poverty Act, 2010.
- (2) That further updates be provided to the Committee towards the end of 2010 so that it may be satisfied that the legal requirements falling upon the Council are being appropriately met.
- (3) That, when statistical information by township is available, this be provided to Area Committees

UNANNOUNCED OFSTED INSPECTION OF CONTACT, REFERRAL AND ASSESSMENT ARRANGEMENTS

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted advising the Committee of the outcome of the unannounced OFSTED inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements which had taken place on the 15th and 16th June, 2010.

The report indicated the manner in which inspectors had carried out their activities and noted that, although Dudley had other public access points, they had visited only the Central Dudley Office and the Children with Disability Team, which was based in central Dudley. The report set out the issues evaluated in the overall inspection and explained the categories of findings.

The letter from OFSTED summarising the findings was appended to the report now submitted and identified the different features of the service in terms of strengths, satisfactory practice and areas for development. The Action Plan in response to the areas for development identified was also appended.

In relation to the quality of supervision of Social Workers, referred to as an area for development, in response to a question, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families) explained the practices currently in place aimed at enabling lesser experienced Social Workers to move on to the next stage in more difficult casework. In response to a suggestion that staff displaced from other posts within the Council might be re-deployed into social work, the Assistant Director explained the composition of the Social Work Team and the staff development and training and supervision policies applicable.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the findings of the OFSTED inspection on contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Children's Services be received and noted.
- (2) That the Action Plan in response to the findings be received and noted.
- (3) That a further report be submitted on progress against the Action Plan in March, 2011.

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ANNUAL REPORT 2009/10 - CHILDREN'S STATUTORY SOCIAL CARE COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted providing an annual report on the workings of the Children's Social Care Representations and Complaints Procedures, in accordance with the statutory requirement under the Local Authorities Social Services Complaints (England) Regulations, 2006. In this regard, the report indicated the performance of the Directorate of Children's Services Specialist Services in receiving, monitoring and responding to Children's Social Care complaints and compliments.

The full Annual Report had been circulated with the Agenda as a separate document and a summary of the complaints, comments and compliments contained in the Annual Report was attached to the report now submitted.

In response to a question regarding the 69 complaints from parents and/or other relatives, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families) referred to the complexity and emotive nature of some of the cases with which the Directorate had to deal before they went to Court and the inevitability that that parents would not always agree with the Council with on issues relating to levels of contact, family response times and support arrangements. In relation to complaints relating to timescales, the Assistant Director confirmed that, in cases which were not dealt with within prescribed timescales, contact with parents was maintained in order to keep them advised of progress.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the Annual Report on Children Social Care Complaints and Compliments for the period from 1st April, 2009 to 31st March, 2010, be noted.
- (2) That the report be made available as a public document as required by the Regulations and Guidance.

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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 Acting Director of Children’s Services on particular performance issues.

RESOLVED

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

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EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED

That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act, 1972, as specified below and, in all the circumstances, the public interest in disclosing the information is out-weighted by the public interest in maintaining the exemption from disclosure.

Description of Item	Relevant Paragraph of Part I of Schedule 12A
Adoptions of Children in Care	2

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ATTENDANCE BY MEMBERS

RESOLVED

That the Cabinet Members for Performance Management and Quality Assurance (Children’s Services) and Integrated Children’s Services, Councillors P Harley and Mrs Walker, respectively, and Councillors Burston and Tyler, all not being members of this Committee, be invited to attend the meeting for this item and speak and ask questions.

ADOPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN CARE

(During consideration of this item, Declarations of a Personal Interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, were made by Councillor Mrs Dunn since she had served as a Foster Carer for a member of her extended family and Councillor Mrs Walker in view of her membership of the Adoptions Panel for Dudley MBC)

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted advising the Committee of the practices, processes and legal framework for the adoption of children who were looked after by the Local Authority.

The report included details of the number of children adopted in Dudley over the last five years in terms of the number and percentage of such children.

Appendices to the report included the following: a fact sheet on frequently asked questions relating to care proceedings; the number of adoptions and throughput of looked after children annually from 2005/06; a flowcharts on permanence planning an adoption; and a summary of court procedures and processes. A hypothetical case-study was also included.

Following an introduction by the Acting Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Children and Families), the referral and assessment arrangements and care proceedings were fully explained and discussed. Questions asked by members were answered by the Acting Director of Children's Services, the Assistant Director, the Children's Guardian, Ms. Burley, the Adoptions Manager, Mrs. Maybee and the Principal Solicitor, Mr. Clark.

In response to a request for Social Workers to attend a future meeting to discuss their role, the Acting Director reminded the Committee that this had already taken place at the Social Care Working Group as had been requested originally.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the report and the attachments thereto be received and noted.
- (2) That further updates in relation to care and adoption be brought before the Committee.
- (3) That arrangements be made for members of the Committee to visit assessment centres across the borough and that Councillors Tyler and Burston be also invited to participate in the visits.

This being the last meeting of the Committee Mr. Baker would be attending prior to his impending retirement, the Chairman, on behalf of the Committee, paid tribute to Mr. Baker's outstanding service during his period as Lead Officer and wished him a long and happy retirement.

Mr. Baker, in turn, thanked the Chairman and the Committee for their support during his period as Lead Officer.

The meeting ended at 8.55 p.m.

CHAIRMAN