

Minutes of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 19th November, 2014 at 6 p.m.
In Committee Room 2, The Council House, Dudley

Present:

Councillor M Mottram (Chair)
Councillor I Cooper (Vice-Chair)
Councillors M Attwood, N Barlow, C Billingham, P Bradley, Z Islam, J Martin,
C Perks and R Scott – Dow; Mr Qadus.

Invitees:

J Sinden and Mrs Coulter.

Officers:

D Channings (Assistant Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services – Lead Officer), P Sharratt (Interim Director of Children's Services), J Prashar (Divisional Lead - Looked After Children), K Cocker (Children's Services Finance Manager), C Gordon (Fostering Service Manager), H Maybee (Adoptions Service Manager) – all Directorate of Children's Services and I Newman (Treasurer) and K Buckle (Democratic Services Officer) both (Directorate of Corporate Resources).

Also in attendance

Councillor C Crumpton – Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning;
Councillor S Turner – Cabinet Member for Finance;
R Sims (Assistant Director Housing Strategy and Private Sector) (Directorate of Adult, Community and Housing Services).

16 **Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors L Jones and I Marrey. The following Invitees also apologised; Mr Lynch, Mr Nesbitt and Mr Ridney.

17 **Substitution**

It was reported that Councillor J Martin was serving in place of Councillor I Marrey, for this meeting of the Committee only.

18 **Declarations of Interest**

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, the following interests were declared:-

Declarations of non-pecuniary interest in agenda item number 5 – Medium Term Financial Strategy were made by the following Members for the reasons indicated below:

Councillor Attwood – Member of the Management Committee for short stay schools within the Dudley Borough.

Mrs Coulter – The parent of a child who was in receipt of Direct Payments.

Councillor Mottram – Governor of Christchurch Primary School

Councillor C Perks – Governor of North Road Primary School.

Mr Qadus as a Governor of Wollescote Primary School, Chairman of Lye Community Centre, Member of the Patient Participation Group at Wychbury Medical Centre and Russells Hall Hospital and a full Member of the Conservative Group.

Mr Qadus declared a pecuniary interest in agenda item number 5 as his wife was employed by Wollescote Primary School.

19 **Minutes**

Resolved

That subject to the deletion of the words “there was a conspiracy against them in so far as child sexual grooming was concerned” from minute number 15, paragraph 3, page CSSC/17 and the insertion of the words “authorities were allowing cases to stack up and that action should be taken when cases arose” therefore the minutes of the meeting held on 25th September, 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed.

20 **Medium Term Financial Strategy**

A joint report of Officers was submitted on the Medium Term Financial Strategy to 2017/18.

In presenting the report submitted, the Treasurer referred to Appendix B of the report, outlining the proposed savings in line with the terms of reference of the Committee.

Arising from the presentation of the report and Appendices to the report submitted Members asked questions and Officers responded as follows:-

CSSC/20

In relation to the increase in savings year on year, these were necessary in order to provide the Directorate with more time to make the transformation in services, which would result in the efficiency savings required.

That in order for the Directorate to continue to provide services, work was continuing in relation to commissioning various services in order to embark on a restructure, that could deliver services in different ways including services to strengthen families.

In relation to home to school transport, that work was taking place in a number of areas in order to make children more independent at an earlier age and that included work on investigating different ways of providing transport to early years and specialist needs children, and that each individual case would be assessed separately.

That different arrangements could be investigated for those who were in possession of motorbily vehicles in conjunction with home to school transport.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning referred to the consultation that was taking place with all interested parties and advised of a travel training scheme which supports children to use public transport in order to encourage and promote independence.

In responding to a question in relation to pressures should the numbers of looked after children continue to increase, the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning referred to the increased number of contacts that had impacted upon referrals to children's social care. Meetings have taken place with health, police and other partners to accelerate an integrated model service of delivery to promote early support for children and families.

The Interim Director of Children's Services responded to a question in relation to the increase in looked after children, advising that following the original estimates there had been an increase during the preceding 12 months. The priority is to ensure that children are safeguarded but there are some opportunities to consider different ways of commissioning placements to meet children's needs and reduced costs.

Concerns were raised that those who could not access main stream education provision due to complex and special needs would be unable to access specialist provision without Local Authority transport.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning responded to those concerns and advised that there would be a consultation in relation to redesigning the service provision in order to deliver the efficiency savings.

The Interim Director of Children's Services added that children would not be denied access to services, however there should not be an automatic assumption that home to school and college transport would be available and it may be more cost effective to provide parents with their own sources of funding in order to procure their own transport provision. It may be that some parents would welcome the opportunity of travelling with their children to school. It was also necessary to examine areas of provision in order to reduce travelling distances throughout the Borough.

In responding to concerns relating to the restructure of youth service provision, the Interim Director of Children's Services advised that targeted youth services would be maintained in house but that the Directorate is currently exploring opportunities to commission universal provision from the voluntary/community sector.

The Interim Director of Children's Services reported that the Children's Centres restructure had been undertaken which had resulted in a revised model of delivery and no further cuts to the service were anticipated at the present time.

It was also noted that redesigning the early help and family support service would explore alternative methods of delivering the service.

The Interim Director of Children's Services advised that the Committee would be updated in relation to the new Children's Centres proposals and integrated Youth Services at the first two meetings in the new year.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning advised of the difficulties in relation to the Dudley Performing Arts Service in the context of traded services, and that discussions on how to continue to deliver the service through traded service income, grants, partner contributions and trust status would continue. It was noted that staffing costs had been particularly high in relation to the service as set against the budget.

Resolved

That the Cabinet's proposals for the Medium Term Financial Strategy to 2017/18, as set out in the report, and Appendices to the report, submitted be noted.

Following the introduction of the Heads of Service for the Fostering and Adoption Services, the Adoptions Service Manager presented the report submitted, referring to the 37 children placed for adoption prior to 1st April, advising of the six sibling pairs including sibling boys that had been successfully adopted.

It was reported that the Looked After Children Psychology Service was now in house and had proved to be a strength to the service with this providing specialist support to families, enabling young children to join their families on a timely basis and prior to them commencing their primary education.

The Adoptions Service Manager referred to the success of the historic work in continuing the search for places for children and that during the year additional capacity had been added to the Family Finding Team, including the appointment of a Family Finding Social Worker and the creation of one further new position in the Team.

The three successful Adoption Events in order to encourage recruitment of first time adopters and the more timely completion of the approved adoption process were referred to together with the new Black Country Media campaign.

It was reported that Adoption in the Black Country had been successful in order to create diversity, which had resulted in over representation of black ethnic parents.

The Adoptions Service Manager referred to the new initiative entitled “Never Forget Birth Parents”, the contact after adoption entitled “Letterbox” in order to help children understand their adoption and the work that was taking place in relation to Life Books.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted Members asked questions and the Divisional Lead for Looked After Children and the Adoptions Service Manager responded as follows:-

- That adoption extinguished birth parents parental responsibility whereas Special Guardianship would result in a small proportion of parental responsibility remaining with the birth parent(s) and that Special Guardianship was a method of placing a child with another member of the family.

- That between 32 and 35 adoptions were anticipated during 2014/15.
- That adoption resource grants enabled the Directorate to recruit additional staff in order to meet the demand for children to be appropriately adopted.
- It was noted that work was conducted with neighbouring Authorities in order to maximise resources to place children for adoption.
- That there remained careful consideration of children's heritage when considering adoptive parents in order to ensure that they had the capability of meeting those needs.
- That once an Adoption Order was made the Council retained no powers to ensure a child's heritage and religious needs were being met.
- That there were detailed assessments and matching processes in place prior to Adoption Panels assessing whether prospective adoptive parents would fulfil those needs and how those needs would be met.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning thanked the Divisional Lead for Looked After Children and her team for the valuable work undertaken in relation to adoption services and in particular ensuring that children were placed safely and securely in order to provide for their long term future.

The Chair thanked the Interim Director of Children's Services and her team for their work in relation to the provision of the adoption service.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report, and Appendix to the report, submitted on the Dudley Local Authority Adoption Service for 2013/14, be noted.

22 **Fostering Service Annual Report**

A report of the Interim Director of Children's Services was submitted on the Fostering Service in Dudley for 2013/14.

The Divisional Lead for Looked After Children introduced the report submitted, advising that there were 350 children placed in 348 Foster Care Homes, which highlighted the enormity of the service and the amount of children that the service was dealing with.

The Fostering Service Manager presented the report submitted, highlighting the current issues for the team advising that there were new time constraints on issuing Care Proceedings, which had impacted on the number of assessments that had been carried out.

The Fostering Service Manager advised that the team were actively promoting Child Arrangement and Special Guardianship Orders which would result in children being removed from the care system.

It was noted that there was a dedicated member of the team who dealt with assessments for Special Guardianship Orders in order to recruit additional carers.

It was reported that there was extensive collaborative working with neighbouring Black Country Authorities in order to provide accessible training courses to carers and that there had been good progress in Foster Carers final assessments being undertaken upon a timely basis.

The “Staying Put Arrangements” were outlined which assisted those who wished to remain with their current carers once they reached the age of 18.

It was noted that there had been extensive work undertaken in order to provide high rates of placement stability, with a high proportion of children remaining with their carers in excess of 12 months, which had impacted positively on their educational achievements.

The Fostering Service Manager reported on the out of hours service offered to foster carers, which provided a telephone contact advice service every day of the year upon a 24 hour basis.

It was noted that retention rates of Foster Carers in the Dudley Borough were high and the courses offered to family and friends who wished to become carers were outlined.

The Divisional Lead for Looked After Children advised of the initiative, that was to be publicised by the Council’s Communications Team in order to promote a campaign to encourage local people to become involved with providing services and care for the children of the Borough.

Arising from the presentation of the report submitted, Members asked questions and the Fostering Service Manager responded as follows:-

- That respite care for children with learning difficulties was a service that the Directorate provided;
- That children were placed with carers outside the Dudley Borough for varying reasons with one third of the Borough’s carers residing outside the Borough.
- Advertising would focus upon support to foster carers and fostering local children.

The Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and Lifelong Learning advised upon the reliance on outside agencies to provide instant places for children, who required urgent places of safety however, negotiations were continuing with outside agencies in order to provide more cost effective services.

In responding to a question from a Member, the Divisional Lead on Looked After Children advised that some of the Borough's foster carers resided within a 20 mile radius of the Borough.

In responding to concerns raised regarding supply and demand as far as foster carers were concerned, the Interim Director of Children's Services advised that this had resulted due to the sudden rise in looked after children, and this had impacted upon increasing costs due to reliance upon outside agencies to provide emergency care.

A Member suggested that recruitment exercises could take place at religious festivals, and the Divisional Lead for Looked After Children advised that the recruitment of versatile carers would form part of the Directorate's strategy and referred to a couple of mixed race who advertised recruitment on behalf of the Council on a local radio station.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report submitted on the Fostering Service in Dudley for 2013/14 and reported on at the meeting, be noted.

The meeting ended at 7.45 p.m.

CHAIR