

SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Thursday 12th November, 2009 at 6.00 pm
in Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Vickers (Chairman)
Councillors Crumpton, Mrs Dunn, Mrs Greenaway, Hanif, J Martin,
Nottingham, Ms Partridge and Mrs Rogers; Mr Taylor, Mrs Verdegem and
Reverend Wickens.

OFFICERS

Interim Director of Finance (as Lead Officer to the Committee), Director of
Children's Services, Assistant Directors of Children's Services (Ms Porter and
Ms Sharratt), Head of Assessment Services, Children's Specialist Services
and the Head of the Youth Offending Team – both Directorate of Children's
Services and Mr Sanders (Directorate of Law, Property and Human
Resources).

25 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Ms
Boleyn, Mrs Coulter and Wright; Jones, Mrs Lees and Mrs Roe.

26 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of Interest, in accordance with Member's Code of Conduct,
were received at this juncture.

27 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 14th
September, 2009, be approved as a correct record and signed.

28 **SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

It was reported the Councillor J Martin was serving in place of Councillor Mrs
Coulter for this meeting of the Committee only.

UPDATE OF THE COUNCIL'S CAPITAL STRATEGY

A report of the Interim Director of Finance was submitted seeking consideration of the updated Capital Strategy for the Council, which invited the comments of the Committee on any issues on the draft it wished to have taken into account when the Strategy was considered by the full Council for approval.

RESOLVED

That the draft Capital Strategy be received and that no issues be referred for consideration when the Strategy is submitted to Council for approval.

REVIEW OF THE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

A report of the Chief Executive was submitted seeking observations on the draft Community Strategy prior to its referral to the Cabinet and Council for approval.

Following the presentation of the report the Head of Strategic Research and Intelligence explained the involvement of DOSTI in the preparation of the draft Strategy and the consultation arrangements with Community Groups and Members of the Council proposed.

In relation to Healthy Towns Scheme, reference to which was made under the heading of "Health and Well-being" in the consultation draft document, a Member of the Committee, representing the Norton ward expressed concerns at the sufficiency of the consultation arrangements made and the planning notices posted in relation to the proposal under the initiative for the extension of the pavilion and associated work at Mary Stevens Park, Stourbridge. She also contended that the consultation arrangements may have not complied with the terms of the trust deed or deed of covenant for Mary Stevens Park, and nor with by laws. The Head of Strategic Research and Intelligence agreed to arrange for the member's comments to be reflected in the substantive report.

A discussion then ensued on the content of the report in which concerns were expressed at the use of jargon and the lack of simplicity in the text. There then followed a discussion in relation to the scrutiny process as a whole, which a number of Members did not consider was working satisfactorily. The Chairman invited Members of the Committee to e-mail him with their observations on the scrutiny process, which he would then report to the Lead Officer to the Committee. The Chairman and the Opposition Spokesperson for the Committee also stated their intention to arrange for the operation of scrutiny to be considered by their respective political groups and for the outcome to be fed back to the Council.

RESOLVED

- (1.) That the report, and the consultation draft document be received and that the comments made by the Member for the Norton Ward regarding her concerns about consultation arrangements made and the planning notices posted in relation to the Healthy Towns Initiative proposal for Mary Stevens Park be included in the substantive submission to the Cabinet and Council.
- (2) That the reservations of the members of the Committee regarding the use of jargon and the lack of simplicity in the text of the report and draft Strategy be reported to the report author.
- (3) That the observations of the members who expressed dissatisfaction with the scrutiny process; the invitation of the Chairman for Members to e-mail him with their observations on the process, and his further intention to report back to the Lead Officer to the Committee; and the intention of the Chairman and the Opposition Spokesperson for the Committee to arrange for the operation of the scrutiny process within the Council to be considered by their respective political groups, and the outcome to be fed back to the Council, be noted.

RAISING ATTAINMENT AT KEY STAGE 4 – PROGRESS REPORT

(During consideration of this item, Reverend Wickens declared a Personal Interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, in the item in view of his trusteeship of Castle High School)

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted to the Committee on the work being undertaken to raise standards in Key Stage 4 (14-16 year olds).

The report set out the core activity with Secondary Schools being undertaken with secondary schools for the age group; provided provisional data on the achievement of 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent, including English and Mathematics, in relation to which it was indicated that these were the best set of individual school results since 2001 and continued Dudley's trend of year on year improvement; noted a reduction in the number of schools where under 30% of pupils had achieved 5 A*-C grades at GCSE including English and Mathematics, and indicating that the number of schools below the floor target had fallen from 3 to 2 and that robust action plans were in place to support the two remaining schools. The report set out priorities for 2009/10, in relation to universal and targeted advice and support to schools, one to one tuition, assessment for learning and assessing pupils' progress, functional skills, the Ethnic Minority Achievement Programme and the Leading Teacher Programme.

In the discussion following the presentation of the report, one Member drew attention to the improvement of Pensnett School of Technology in relation to the achievement of 5 A*-C GCSE grades, including English and Mathematics, as reflected in paragraph 9 of the Report and requested that this be considered in the consultation now taking place on the future of the school. In relation to four schools referred to in the report, which had not been judged to be outstanding or good in terms of behaviour, the measures that were being undertaken in order to improve the situation were explained. The current strategy on the issue would expire in 2011 and would be reviewed thereafter.

In response to a question, it was indicated that only the Pensnett School of Technology of the schools referred to in the report had been inspected under the new OFSTED framework.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

32

VISION 2025 – A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR LEARNING INCLUDING BUILDING SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE – READINESS TO DELIVER SUPPORTING STATEMENT

A report of the Director of Children’s Services was submitted advising the Committee of the work being undertaken in the Directorate of Children’s Services in developing its provision for all children and young people under this initiative.

“Vision 2025” would comprise a strategic learning plan for Dudley which would support children, young people and their families and building on current successes, to enable a transformational step change that could take place in order that young people had outstanding opportunities in the future. The Council’s Directorates were working with other Agencies, including schools, colleges, the Children’s Trust and partners and other stakeholders to develop a long term strategic plan for learning provision which would run from 2010-2025 and which would encompass the key principles outlined in “Every School Matters” and the Children’s Plan. The Strategic Plan would translate the vision statement into a more detailed strategy for delivery.

The report now submitted indicated the work undertaken to date and stated the themes included in Vision 2025 and the manner in which these would be underpinned by workforce development, the Capital Funding Strategy and place planning and estate strategy. Particular reference was made to the “Readiness to Deliver” supporting statement sent to the Department for Children’s Schools and Families (DCSF) regarding Building Schools for the Future, which would be sent to the DCSF when the submission date was known.

In relation to the “Readiness to Deliver” supporting statement, as set out in Appendix 2 to the report, the Chairman invited Members of the Committee to contact the Director of Children’s Services should they have any views. In response to a question, the Assistant Director of Children’s Services (Ms Porter) indicated that detailed consultation on particular proposals would be undertaken at a later stage.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

33

REPORT ON THE PERFORMANCE ON FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS FOR THE DUDLEY YOUTH OFFENDING SERVICE

A report of the Director of Children’s Services was submitted indicating progress in respect of the discharge of the duties of the Youth Offending Service, as set out in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and advising the Committee of current and future developments in relation to legislative changes and central government guidance, which would impact on the delivery of the service.

The report indicated the three key responsibilities for Local Authorities and their partners under the Crime and Disorder Act, 1988, in relation to youth offending, and their impact on the Youth Offending Team. The report also summarised the content of the two crime prevention projects to which funding from the Youth Justice Board had been allocated.

The report included a summary sheet produced by the Youth Justice Board for the period from April 2008 to March 2009, summarising the Dudley Youth Offending Service’s performance against key national performance indicators. While reoffending rates were reducing, in relation to the use of custody, Dudley had struggled to improve its performance. Initiatives to address the situation were being explored but the point was made that the young persons in custody were generally those with the most challenging behaviour and with whom engagement with the community was the most difficult. Overall, the performance of the Youth Offending Service had been rated as Good by the Youth Justice Board, with little outside support from the Board being required.

The report also indicated future developments and methods proposed resulting from the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act, 2008, which would require Youth Offending Teams to implement some major changes in the next few months, the most significant of which being the introduction of the Youth Rehabilitation Order. This would replace all current community orders in future, with Magistrates being able to select from a menu of 18 requirements which could be inserted into a Youth Rehabilitation Order. The report also specified the work being undertaken under the Government’s Youth Crime Action Plan on crime and anti-social behaviour and set out the eight key methods of working identified to achieve the aims of the Plan.

In the discussion that followed the presentation of the report, further consideration was given to the issue of young persons in custody. In response to a question, the Head of the Youth Offending Team reported that, since 2002, a reduction in the number of young people in custody from 72 in 2002 to 38 in 2008 had been achieved. In expressing the consideration that the work being undertaken with those young persons was making a difference, the Head of the Youth Offending Team emphasised that custody was the final resort.

In response to a further question, the Head of the Youth Offending Team explained the nature and background of the "Stay Safe" operation. This was a partnership between Local Authority services and the Police which concentrated on the local anti-social behaviour main areas and removed children who were at risk from the street at night to places of safety and which then required the parent to attend and collect their children. Advice and support was then offered to both child and parent with the aim of discouraging a repeat of the behaviour.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the report be noted and that further updates on the work of the Youth Offending Service be submitted in due course.
- (2) That a report on Operation Stay Safe be submitted to the Committee in due course.

BEHAVIOUR AND ATTENDANCE

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted setting out data, trends and developments relating to attendance and exclusions in Dudley Schools for the 2008/09 academic year.

The report indicated that the majority of exclusions had taken place in the secondary sector and had fallen to 57 in number; this being a 10.5% reduction over the year from 2008. Primary School exclusions had fallen from 6 to 3, representing a reduction of 50%. Exclusions from special schools had fallen by 33% and exclusions of children in public care by 50% from the previous year. The primary reason for permanent exclusion had been for persistent disruptive behaviour. The analysis by ethnic origin showed that Pakistani and Black Caribbean pupils were over represented in the exclusion statistics in relation to the proportion of those pupils to the school population as a whole.

Regarding attendance, this had shown a marked improvement on previous years for both the secondary and primary sectors and it was indicated in the report that the preliminary data for 2008/09 indicated a further improvement in the overall absence figures.

The report referred to the work of the Education Welfare Service in supporting schools on absence issues and the setting by schools of their own absence targets, and the means of achieving them. Support to schools was delivered in direct proportion to need with those schools with absence rates higher than the median for all Dudley schools receiving high level support and those that had performed well in terms of absence receiving lesser support.

In relation to the category of persistent absence, Dudley had been identified in 2009 as one of the three Black Country Local Authorities requiring intensive support from the National Strategies Team, however, the Council had fallen only marginally into this category, the Department for Children, Schools and Families had defined Persistent Absence Schools and Local Authorities with assistance required as those having more than 6.1% persistent absence, Dudley's figure being 6.3%. Dudley's target of 6.5% had been improved upon by 0.2%.

The report indicated the measures taken to re-train Education Welfare Officers to implement the requirements of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, 1984 and further legislation aimed at improving the professionalism of criminal investigations undertaken. The report also indicated the nature of truancy sweeps that had been instituted from 2000. It was commented in the report that individual schools still benefited from individually targeted truancy sweeps.

The report also referred to the secondment of an Education Welfare and Liaison Officer to the Educational Support Service for Children in Care in the previous academic year which had assisted the Council in reducing levels of absence of children looked after by the Local Authority.

Reference was made to the following initiatives as contributors producing a solution for absence figures: the introduction of Township Fair Access Panels; the appointment of a secondary Behaviour and Attendance Consultant; the implementation of the "Preventing Exclusions Strategy"; the imposition of fixed penalty notices for non-attendance; truancy suites; a "Parenting Contract/Order Policy" that was now in operation; and a growing confidence by schools in the robust nature of Local Authority Services to schools in respect of attendance and behaviour related issues.

In the discussion that followed the presentation of the report, the practise of some parents in removing children from school for a limited period during term time was discussed. There was an acknowledgement by schools that, with the cost of holidays out of term time, there was an inevitability that parents would take children on holiday in term time from on occasions. The time allowed off school without the removal of the pupil from the school roll was indicated.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT CHANGES 16 – 19 FUNDING TRANSFER

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted on the arrangements to manage 16 – 19 commissioning, following the responsibility for the funding of 16 – 18 year olds education transferring from the Learning and Skills Council to Local Authorities with effect from 1 April 2010, and reflected the guidance provided by the Department of Children, Schools and Families on the matter.

The report referred to Local Authorities' responsibilities for this age group following transfer and indicated the governance and decision making processes proposed under the model advocated by the four Black Country Authorities. Other associated issues, including staffing needs, were discussed in the report

Following the presentation of the report, the Lead Officer to the Committee, as Interim Director of Finance, stressed the difficulties with which the Council would be faced in assuming responsibility for this age group should funding from the Learning and Skills Council not transfer in full.

RESOLVED

That the report, together with the comments of the Lead Officer to the Committee, as Interim Director of Finance, be noted.

UNANNOUNCED INSPECTIONS OF CONTACT, REFERRAL AND ASSESSMENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR CHILDREN IN NEED AND CHILDREN WHO MAY BE IN NEED OF PROTECTION

A report of the Chairman of the Social Care Working Group of the Committee was submitted on concerns expressed by the Working Group on the arrangements proposed for unannounced inspections by OFSTED of Children's Social Care Services. The report also contained information on current performance and workload pressures in social care fieldwork services.

Under new inspection arrangements commencing on 1 April 2009, OFSTED would inspect Local Authorities in relation to the social care issues referred to above on an annual basis and without notice. The arrangements would focus on front line practice and on the Local Authorities as the lead agency for child protection, and evaluate the contribution of partners. The findings would be utilised to help determine the timing and wider inspection of safeguarding and looked after children.

The report now submitted indicated performance in relation to children with a Child Protection Plan; the current position of the Council with regard to completion rates for assessment; workload pressures in identifying any delays in the allocation of new referrals requiring initial assessment and any cases awaiting transfer out of the Assessment Services; and the current position on work on referrals that did not proceed to an initial assessment. The report drew attention to staffing pressures, particularly those relating to Social Workers.

The report contained the conclusions of an assessment and risk audit into management practices and summarised the programme of support for staff to ensure that children were seen alone routinely; that a consistent focus on the child was maintained; that children's views were recorded; that there was always an audit trail on management oversight; and that the quality of child protection plans was improved. It was indicated that the audit arrangements were currently being updated and the measures being taken to respond to improvements identified as being required were set out in paragraph 8 of the report.

Further to the presentation of the report by Councillor Mrs Dunn in the absence of the Chairman of the Working Group, a discussion ensued on the concerns of the Working Group on the issue of unannounced inspections, in the light of the change in attitude of the Inspectorate agencies in consequence of the Baby Peter case. The Working Group had also been concerned about the impact on the local authority since the Baby Peter case, which had led to a very significant increase in possible child abuse cases being referred to the Local Authority, with a 40% increase in referrals from schools, a 22% increase from Health and a 26% increase from Housing Agencies.

In expanding on the impact on Children's Specialist Services, the Head of the Assessment Services in Children's Specialist Services emphasised that there was now far greater pressure on an already stretched service and indicated measures being taken to remove some of the ancillary work from Social Workers, in order to enable them to concentrate further on their case loads. The Head of the Assessment Service then discussed the case loads of individual Social Workers, which had increased significantly since the Baby Peter case, together with the support mechanisms within the section which aimed to protect newly qualified Social Workers from having particularly heavy caseloads. This policy, however, had a corresponding impact on the more senior staff. Co-working was encouraged wherever possible.

RESOLVED

That the report, together with the concerns of the Working Group and the problems currently faced by Children's Specialist Services in terms of significantly increased workloads, together with the measures being taken, be noted.

**EDUCATION PROVISION FOR PUPILS (3YEARS TO 19 YEARS)
WORKING GROUP – TERMS OF REFERENCE**

A report of the Interim Director of Law Property and Human Resources was submitted seeking consideration of detailed terms of reference of this Working Group, recommended by the Working Group at its initial meeting.

RESOLVED

That the terms of reference of the Education Provision for Pupils (3 years to 19 years) Working Group, as set out as Appendix 1 to the report now submitted, be adopted.

The meeting ended at 7.55 pm

CHAIRMAN