

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee for Children's Services held at County Hall, Lewes, on 9 September 2008.

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| PRESENT | Councillor Maynard (Chairman) Councillors Field, Gadd, Kramer Ost, St Pierre, and Waite Councillor Paul Silverson (District and Borough representative) Jeremy Taylor (C of E Diocese) Tony Campbell (RC Diocese) |
| Chief Officer | Matt Dunkley, Director of Children's Services |
| Legal Adviser | Jonathan Ruddock-West, Assistant Director of Law and Personnel |
| Scrutiny Lead Officer | Gillian Mauger |
| Also present | Councillor Elkin, Lead Cabinet Member for Learning and School Effectiveness Councillor Glazier, Lead Cabinet Member for Children's Services Councillor Stroude, Lead Member for Children and Families Fiona Johnson, Head of Children's Safeguards & Quality Assurance for min no 14 Caryl Sequeira, Children's Services Complaints Manager for min no 16 John Hawkins, Head of Youth Offending Services for mins no 17 and 18 Hazel Cunningham, Assistant Director, Resources for min no 19 Michaela Frost, Democratic Services Officer |

Before the meeting the Scrutiny Committee received a briefing on SEN.

10. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

10.1 RESOLVED – to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the last Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 17 June 2008.

11. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

11.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dowling and Whetstone, Mrs Carole Shaves, Mrs Maynard and Sam Gregory.

12. REPORTS

12.1 Copies of the reports referred to below are included in the minute book.

13. RECONCILING POLICY AND RESOURCES

13.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Law and Personnel that enabled the Committee to consider and comment on the detailed planning for 2009/10 and beyond as outlined in the State of the County report.

13.2 The Director of Children's Services reported that the Council were aware of the CSA and schools budget for the forthcoming year, but were not yet sure of the additional grants allocation. The Director of Children's Services also highlighted key pressures upon the Department in the forthcoming financial year:-

- The Director reported that there were strong inflationary pressures on the Department's basic costs. This included massive price increases in commodities and utilities. The Council had a three year fixed deal on the price of utilities for the Council's schools which was drawing to an end and although the Council was negotiating a further deal, it was predicted that there would be a 50% jump in the increase of annual costs. This jump would affect other areas, including contracts with external suppliers. For example, school meals and taxis;
- Rising costs were impacting on Foster Carers which would put pressure on their allowances next year to ensure that these payments remained competitive, otherwise the Foster Carers may seek to work for local agencies;
- The cost of the implementation of Care Matters is estimated to exceed the grant given by the Government
- The cost of bringing proceedings in the family courts had also hugely increased. The Ministry of Justice had changed their charging procedures and there had been an increase in all kinds of assessments before applying to court for a care order;
- The training grant for social care staff was currently divided between Children's Services staff and Adult Social Care staff. This forthcoming year there was a government direction that 90% of the allocation should be directed at Adult Social Care staff and only 10% directed at Children's Services social care staff. This would result in a £550,000 reduction in the training grant for Children's Services. The Director of Children's Services and Director of Adult Social Care are liaising over this matter, but it is a possible added pressure on Children's Services.
- The funding of the various 14-19 initiatives and courses within secondary schools was also proving to exceed the budgets given by the Government.
- The falling rolls within primary schools was also a concern.

13.3 In response to questions from the Scrutiny Committee, the Director of Children's Services made the following observations and comments:-

- The Council's relative spend on foster care had decreased compared to statistical neighbours and, in comparison to national trends, our performance in this area had improved;
- The Council was in the process of drafting proposals in consultation for changing the budget formula in order to better target SEN Children;.
- The new court charges in family courts were being challenged and a group of local authorities had begun a judicial review proceedings in respect of the funding difficulties and the outcome was awaited.

13.4 The Committee noted the relevant policy steers in light of the national and local policy context and performance stories and agreed to (1) establish a scrutiny board comprised

of all committee members to provide input into the RPR process this year, and in particular to consider the proposed portfolio plan; and

(2) To set a date in December via email for this Scrutiny board to meet.

14. ANNUAL REPORT LOCAL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD

14.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services, which advised the Committee of the inter-agency arrangements in place to safeguard children in East Sussex.

14.2 The Committee welcomed the informative report and expressed their thanks for the opportunity of being able to attend the safeguarding briefing meetings which had proved to be useful. The Committee further noted that the Council was now in receipt of a grant to assist in funding a new administrative post, which would be supporting the Child Death review Panel. This Panel was being increased to include Brighton and Hove City Council. And Brighton and Hove City Council would be charged for this service.

14.3 RESOLVED – to note the annual report on Local Safeguarding Children Board Business Plan.

15. SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN – MEMBER AND SENIOR MANAGEMENT OVERSIGHT OF SERVICES

15.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services which advised the Committee of the findings of the monitoring systems in place for senior managers and Members to ensure that services to safeguard children are properly co-ordinated and managed effectively.

15.2 RESOLVED to note the outcomes of the monitoring visits and the file audits undertaken by the Lead Member and senior managers.

16. CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE ANNUAL REPORT

16.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services, which reported on the function and effectiveness of the complaints procedure within the department. The Committee also thanked the Director for the useful training they had received in this area which had helped them understand this report more fully.

16.2 The Children's Services Complaints Manager highlighted some of the key points from the report:

- There was now a more effective system in place for making and recording complaints, compliments and comments across the whole department, not just social care
- There had been an overall increase in the number of complaints received, because of the widened remit, but that there had not been an increase in the number of complaints going beyond stage three. There had been a decrease in the number of young people complaints, which was possibly due to the reorganisation within the departments and the fact that a young person was less likely to have a change of social worker;

- Young People were able to complain, compliment or make a comment through various channels, for example texting and emails, but the majority used the form supplied with the dvd supplied by the Department;
- The complaints regarding the family support team which included SEN and duty and support remained high. This had been investigated by the Department, but it was suggested that this was due to the nature of the work they undertook – the team played an integral part in supervised access during family breakdowns which meant they were often dealing with people in stressful situations;

16.3 The Children's Services Manager also outlined areas of future development:

- The Complaints Team would review the surveys sent out after a complaint has been dealt with in order to ensure that they were more user friendly and in order to receive more responses.
- There was a need to improve the data collated in relation to minority groups and over the next year the Team would be developing an advocacy letter for minority groups and training would be offered so that they it was clearer what the procedure entailed;
- Communication needed to be improved and there was a need to increase consistency across the department with a more customer-focused approach. The Complaints Team would be working individually with other teams within the department to discuss how they dealt with complaints in order to achieve this consistent and customer focused approach.

16.4 RESOLVED – to note the Children's Services Complaints Procedure Annual Report for 2007/2008.

17. SCRUTINY REVIEW OF YOUTH OFFENDING TEAM – FINAL UPDATE ON ACTION PLAN

17.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services, which updated the Committee on the action plan in relation to the Scrutiny Review of the Youth Offending Team.

17.2 The Head of the Youth Offending Services reported that in relation to recommendation nine about ensuring consistency in recording and collating information, a reference group had been formed, consisting of eight young people and one of its first pieces of work would be to comment on the evaluation system.

17.3 RESOLVED to (1) note the progress made against the recommendations; and
(2) sign off the action plan for the scrutiny review of the Youth Offending Team and agree that no further action was required.

18. PART TIME TIMETABLES

18.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services, which updated the Committee about recommendation 12 of the Action Plan from the Scrutiny Review of the Youth Offending Team to bring a report on part time timetables to the committee.

18.2 The Committee welcomed the report and noted that this was a complex issue, but agreed that the report needed to concentrate more on the central issues concerning the use of part time timetables within schools. It was clear what action was taken on behalf of the Youth Offending Team, but the Committee required a more detailed report, which included among other matters data about children on part time timetables who were not necessarily under the remit of the youth offending team.

18.3 The Committee requested that a report be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee in June 2009 concerning part time timetables and that it would be helpful if a youth justice worker also attended the meeting to assist the committee in their further understanding of this area.

19. SCHOOL'S SURPLUSES AND DEFICITS

19.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services which informed the Committee of the position on school balances as at 31 March 2008 and action taken in addressing excessive surpluses. The Assistant Director of Resources was in attendance and circulated a summary of surpluses and deficits.

19.2 In response to questions from Members of the Committee the following comments and observations were made:

- The Council remained concerned about the amount of surpluses some schools were carrying. Those schools who consistently had surpluses had to submit a plan on how they were going to spend the monies; otherwise the money was subject to clawback;
- Some schools found it difficult to make decisions regarding staffing and falling rolls. This impacted upon deficits. The Council offered support to schools with difficult financial decisions to make, but needed collaboration of governing bodies to achieve this;
- Each school must now have financial management standards accreditation to meet DCSF requirements;
- Where a school continues to fall below the standard required in their financial management processes, a notice of concern would be issued;
- An annual report in September would include data on those schools which were doing well with their financial management processes and would indicate the percentage of surpluses and deficits;
- Schools saving for a building project, would be considered an acceptable exception as long as the Governing body had agreed to it and it was included within their minutes;
- There were regular training sessions for schools and governors on financial management.

19.3 RESOLVED to note the report.

20. FORWARD PLAN

20.1 The Committee considered the Forward Plan for the period 1 September 2008 to 31 December 2008.

20.2 RESOLVED to note the Forward Plan.

21. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

21.1 The Committee noted the Scrutiny work programme.

The Chairman declared the meeting closed at 12.10pm