

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee for Children's Services held at County Hall, Lewes, on 12 November 2012.

PRESENT	Councillor Michael Ensor (Chairman) Councillors Kathryn Field (Vice Chairman), Terry Fawthrop, Stephen Shing, Rosalyn St Pierre, Meg Stroude, Trevor Webb and Francis Whetstone. Ms Susan Thompson (Church of England Diocese representative) Mrs Carole Shaves MBE (Police Authority representative) Mr Jeremy Alford (Health representative). Ms Nicola Boulter (Parent Governor Representative) Ms Catherine Platten (Parent Governor Representative)
Lead Members:	Councillors David Elkin, Nick Bennett and Colin Belsey.
Scrutiny Manager	Paul Dean
Also present	Matt Dunkley, Director of Children's Services; Fiona Wright, Assistant Director (Schools, Youth and Inclusion Support) Alison Jeffery, Assistant Director Early Help and Commissioning Liz Rugg, Assistant Director – Safeguarding, Looked After Children and Special Educational Needs Debbie Adams, Head of Children's Centres (for agenda item 5 – Children's Centres Strategy)

20. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

20.1 Mr Jeremy Alford (Health representative) report that there had been progress with resolving the concern highlighted in minute 16.2 (bullet 4) about the failure of the NHS to identify the location of its child safeguarding responsibilities.

20.1 RESOLVED – to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the last Committee meeting held on 10 September 2012.

21. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

21.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Gill Mattock (Eastbourne Borough Council) and Mr Simon Parr (Catholic Diocesan Representative).

21.2 The Chairman welcomed Ms Nicola Boulter and Ms Catherine Platten, the new parent governor representatives on the committee. Cllr Kenward paid tribute to Ms Kym Hearn who had enjoyed being a Parent Governor Representative for the last three years but, due to various unfortunate circumstances, had not been able to play as full a role as she would have liked.

21.3 This was to be the last meeting attended by Mrs Carole Shaves as the Police Authority representative on the Committee. Following elections for Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) on 15 November 2012, the Police Authority would cease to exist.

The Committee thanked Mrs Shaves for her enthusiastic support over many years and for the insights and expertise she had provided. This link with the police authority had proved extremely valuable and, after the PCC elections, we would try to secure some kind of similarly effective future partnership.

22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST: None.

23. URGENT BUSINESS

23.1 Within the last week, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education has written to local MPs criticising East Sussex County Council as being a barrier to the progress of the government's academy programme. The Committee agreed to discuss this matter as part of agenda item 7 (Securing educational excellence in East Sussex: tackling underperformance).

24. CHILDREN'S CENTRES STRATEGY

24.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services which outlined the performance of Children's Centres and set out proposals for changes following a recent service review. This issue was last considered by scrutiny at the Committee on 5 March 2102. The discussion focussed on the following points, and considered the responses provided:

Balance between a targeted and universal service

24.2 The service review recommends that the proportion of the budget for children's centres that is devoted to the most vulnerable families should be increased. The Committee expressed concern that:

- a greater focus on the 'most vulnerable' might make it more difficult to identify and support families not yet assessed as vulnerable, but who are at risk of becoming so, and
- too great a focus on vulnerable children might risk stigmatising service users, which may deter other families.

24.3 Officers consider that they are mindful of these risks and that identification of vulnerable families is very important, and is a shared responsibility with the NHS whose universal screening programme of young children is designed to reach all families. Investment by the County Council in open access, universal services has to decrease if support for vulnerable families is to be strengthened. The plan is to try to increase the number of volunteers from communities in running activities, which would also help with the issue of stigma.

Reaching the most vulnerable children and families

24.4 Records suggest that approximately 25% of children referred to social care services in recent years have not previously accessed the children's centre service. This group probably contains some of the most vulnerable children. Some chaotic families are adept at avoiding identification and successfully manage to resist contact with statutory agencies until a crisis point is reached. The Committee questioned how this problem might be resolved.

24.5 During a recent visit by the Chairman to the Sidley Children's Centre, health visitors expressed concerns about how best to share information with other agencies about children whom they had not been able to access for the important 24-month wellbeing and development check. The Service Review recommends that the pilot *Good Start* programme in Bexhill is rolled out across the county. The pilot has helped to

strengthen joint working with health visitors who have agreed to be more proactive in seeking out families whose children have not had the 'Healthy Child Programme' screening checks. Officers agreed to explore possible ways of recording and sharing information about failed attempts to undertake the 24-month checks.

24.6 For the last two years, the health visiting service has been jointly commissioned between the PCT and East Sussex County Council alongside children's centres. However, from April 2013, the national NHS Commissioning Board (NHSCB) will take responsibility for commissioning health visiting. This will create some uncertainty, but by working with joint commissioners for the Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), Council officers aim to persuade the NHSCB to allow locally developed joint working to continue and be improved. Whilst there are national plans to expand local health visiting services, it is unclear as to what work the additional staff will be expected to do. National plans for health visiting specify that services should be provided at three levels: universal, universal plus and universal partnership plus (for the most vulnerable).

Rolling out good practice

24.7 The Bexhill pilot scheme has successfully demonstrated the benefits of integrating a children's centre, Family Outreach Service (FOS) and health staff into a single team. Vulnerable families are more easily identified along with the right professional lead for each family.

24.8 Officers consider that it is not appropriate or cost effective to roll out exactly the same model across the county regardless of the level of local need. The aim will be to extend joint working on the same principles as the Bexhill pilot, but with the precise model reflecting local circumstances.

Effect on educational attainment

24.9 A hard correlation between support from children's centres and children's achievement at the Foundation Stage (age 5) assessment is difficult to demonstrate as there are so many factors involved and a myriad of providers for this age group. However, officers reported on recent findings that children accessing the Hastings East Centre achieved slightly better than those who did not. Support for the most vulnerable families will continue to include support for child development and school readiness.

24.10 While the resources available to children's centres for activities open to all families to focus on school preparedness will decrease, wherever possible volunteers will be sought to run activities that should help mitigate against the effects of this reduction.

24.11 RESOLVED – to welcome the report and recommendations of the Children's Centres review, especially its focus on early identification of children and families who need targeted early help, and a focus on developing an effective integrated service between children's centres, health and the Family Outreach Service.

25. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN EAST SUSSEX 2011/12

25.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services which provided an initial analysis of 2011/12 outcomes in East Sussex school, settings and colleges. The discussion focussed on the following points, and considered the responses provided.

25.2 Overall responsibility for school performance lies with schools. Academies have total accountability for performance whereas the County Council still has powers to

support maintained schools, albeit that support is increasingly reserved for underperforming schools.

25.3 The results for East Sussex in 2011/12 can, at best, be summarised as 'mixed'. Overall, performance has improved over recent years but at a slower rate compared to the national average. On most indicators, East Sussex remains at or below the national average and in some cases performance is particularly disappointing where the gap between East Sussex and national figures has worsened. The main reasons given for the mixed or disappointing performance were:

- increasingly limited resources for central support services;
- difficulties collecting some information; and
- a disproportionate impact of the changes to the English GCSE grade boundaries during 2012.

25.4 The data shows a higher rate of improvement in schools directly supported by the Standards & Learning Effectiveness Service (SLES) compared to both the East Sussex and national average rates of improvement. Future proposals include the need to:

- target leadership development support towards small schools which can be particularly prone to large performance swings from one year to the next;
- reinstate a revised SIP (school improvement partnership) approach for some schools;
- gain a better understanding and response to the apparent inconsistencies in the results; and
- address the weakness apparent in the results for 16-18 year olds by developing better influence with FE colleges which largely operate independently from the local authority.

25.6 The Committee:

- considered that a good performance measure would be the number/proportion of young people who went on to university (and specifying which universities); albeit this information is very difficult to a) acquire and b) relate to particular changes given the measurement timescales involved.
- requested the future separation of results between maintained schools and academies.

25.7 RESOLVED – to note the efforts being made to improve educational attainment in East Sussex and the disappointing results showing East Sussex lagging behind national averages at many key stages.

26. SECURING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN EAST SUSSEX: TACKLING UNDER-PERFORMANCE

26.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services which provided an analysis of outcomes against the ambitions identified in the Council's *Proposition for Partnership: Securing Educational Excellence in East Sussex*.

26.2 The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, had recently written to MPs in East Sussex asserting that East Sussex County Council is preventing improvement in academic standards by resisting the government's academies programme. The Director refuted this allegation on the basis that:

- schools that have become academies in East Sussex have been very positive in their complementary gratitude towards the support of Children's Services and have not experienced any reticence to facilitate the conversion;
- the *Proposition for Partnership* policy on academies is neutral; it supports schools that wish to convert but its primary aim is to promote good relationships for the

benefit of all schools;

- conversion to academy status requires good school leadership without which educational standards will not improve;
- it has proved exceptionally difficult to attract academy sponsors and good school leaders to East Sussex, especially for some small primary schools whose performance is of ongoing concern. Where the County has been able to do so, it has secured good quality sponsors for some converter academies; and
- a group of rural, Church of England, primary schools with poor OFSTED inspection results has emerged; recently the Diocese of Chichester has created an Academies Trust that opens up the academy route for these schools.

26.3 It is apparent that there is a difference of view between the authority and the government as to how to deal with school underperformance. ESCC prefers a 'mixed economy' approach of targeted support to underperforming (maintained) schools, the promotion of 'federations' of schools providing mutual support, and conversion to academies where good leadership can be identified. Conversely, the government considers the solution to be conversion to academies.

26.4 The Lead Members (Councillors Elkin and Bennett) are not proposing a significant shift of current policy arising from the Secretary of State's letter, albeit there will need to be further analysis of the implications of his comments. The overriding priority is to establish the best solution for each underperforming school.

26.5 The statistics show significant differences between the improvement of girls and boys in English and maths between various key stages. Whilst this reflects a national trend, it is not apparent in all East Sussex schools. OFSTED inspections are now more likely to pick up on this issue and brokering 'federations' of schools may assist with addressing this problem.

26.6 RESOLVED – to note the implications of the *Proposition for Partnership* thus far.

27. THRIVE TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME: PROGRESS

27.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services which provided an update on progress with the THRIVE Programme (a capital-funded fundamental reshaping of safeguarding systems for children).

27.2 RESOLVED – to note the positive outcomes of the THRIVE programme.

28. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

Scrutiny of Transition from children's to adult social care

28.1 The Committee established a review Board comprising Councillors Ensor, Field, St Pierre, Fawthrop, Webb, Whetstone and Mr Alford. (Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee has been invited to identify a Member for this review). The review will meet in January 2013 and report back to the committee in March 2013.

28.2 RESOLVED – to note the updated scrutiny work programme.

29. FORWARD PLAN

29. RESOLVED – to note the Forward Plan for the period 1 December 2012 to 31 January 2013.

The meeting ended at 13:05

COUNCILLOR MICHAEL ENSOR
Chairman