

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 2013.

PRESENT:

Councillors Kathryn Field (Chair), Stephen Shing (Vice Chair), Peter Charlton, Claire Dowling, Michael Ensor, Kim Forward, Roy Galley, Alan Shuttleworth and Francis Whetstone.

Mr Simon Parr (Roman Catholic Diocese Representative)
Ms Catherine Platten (Parent Governor Representative).

Lead Members: Councillors Sylvia Tidy (Lead Member Children & Families / designated statutory Lead Member for Children's Services) and Nick Bennett (Lead Member Learning & School Effectiveness).

Scrutiny Manager Paul Dean

Also present Councillor Rosalyn St Pierre for item 5 (Local Safeguarding Children Board Annual Report (see minute 12)
Liz Rugg, Assistant Director Children's Services (Safeguarding, Looked After Children and Special Educational Needs); Fiona Wright, Assistant Director (Schools, Youth and Inclusion Support); Louise Carter, Assistant Director (Communication, Planning and Performance); Alison Jeffery, Assistant Director (Early Help and Commissioning); and, Douglas Sinclair, Head of Children's Safeguards and Quality Assurance

9. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

9.1 RESOLVED – to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the last Committee meeting held on 10 June 2013.

10. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

10.1 Apologies for absence were received from: Ms Nicola Boulter (Parent Governor Representative), Councillor Gill Mattock (District/Borough representative) and Ged Rowney, Interim Director of Children's Services.

10.2 The Church of England Diocesan representative, Ms Susan Thompson, has resigned from the committee since the last meeting due to changes in her circumstances. The Diocese has indicated that they will appoint a replacement in the near future.

11. DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

11.1 Councillor Ensor declared a non-prejudicial interest as his wife is employed by an organisation that has links with the LSCB (in respect of item 12, *Local Safeguarding Children Board* Annual report).

11.2 Cllr Field declared a non-prejudicial interest as a family member is a business manager at an SEN school which has East Sussex funded children.

12 LOCAL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD (LSCB) ANNUAL REPORT

12.1 The Chair of the LSCB, Ms Cathie Pattison, presented the draft Annual Report which outlined the latest inter-agency arrangements in place to safeguard children in East Sussex. The ensuing discussion highlighted the following points:

12.2 Scale of the issues:

- The number of children in East Sussex is approximately 110,000 of which just 550 (0.5%) are the subject of a child protection plan; this is very positive.
- Numbers of children at risk from physical or sexual abuse is small; neglectful parenting accounts for the greatest risk amongst the at-risk group.
- East Sussex is at the forefront of cross agency working to tackle child sexual exploitation using a variety of cross referencing and other information to identify those children potentially at most risk
- Missing children – East Sussex works more effectively than many areas in ensuring a return to home interview for example
- E-safety has been the subject of a recent joint conference with some positive outcomes.
- Identifying children who go hungry has not been specifically picked up by the LSCB to date. Being hungry may not necessarily be a sign of neglect (a primary focus for the LSCB) but could indicate wider underlying poverty. This will be flagged for potential future work: data from schools, free school meals data and other indicators will need to be correlated to identify those most at risk.

12.3 Quality assurance

- East Sussex has a good culture of self examination and learns well from 'near misses'
- Currently there are four serious case reviews underway which is unusually high.
- Improved training, better inter agency working and LSCB targeted file audits are all underway to address outstanding concerns.
- The continued reduction in numbers of children with a Child Protection Plan (CPP) is considered to be a good thing by officers and the LSCB rather than an indication that children are being overlooked; support for many children in need is now provided differently through early help plans for example. Nonetheless, schools, for example, are being actively encouraged to come forward to social work teams if they have specific concerns about a child.
- Continued success of the THRIVE programme will depend on the effectiveness of the key workers' network providing 1 to 1 help to families, and effective investment in early intervention; this is being evaluated and the outcomes will be reported to scrutiny.
- A new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) sets out the expectations of the everyone involved in delivering care from the Director of Children's Services and Lead Member to front line staff; details of this will be reported to scrutiny. Future Lead Member assurance visits to children's homes will be carried out, and reported, within this framework.

12.4 Inter agency challenges

- Health reconfigurations of the last year have created challenges in identifying the right leads in the new health service structures – communication links are still

being established. Paediatricians are proving hard to recruit in the area and the NHS is keeping the LSCB up to date with developments. There is a gap to be addressed in communication by Accident and Emergency settings and other locations where children might be sent for small injuries. The NHS needs to ensure that any signs of abuse are detected and information is passed on to other agencies.

- The Health and Wellbeing Board is still in its formative stages and complementary roles between it and the LSCB partners are still being worked through
- Work is being undertaken to try to ensure that the Church of England (Chichester Diocese) has effective accountability arrangements in place that match those of other agencies with responsibilities for children.

12.5 RESOLVED: (1) To welcome the draft LSCB Annual Report and the opportunity to comment on it; (2) To request the LSCB to note the comments and observations of the scrutiny committee as set out above; (3) To request that the following be reported to scrutiny in due course:

- Ongoing reports on the THRIVE programme – in particular the effectiveness of the early intervention strategy and the effects of reducing numbers of child protection plans that are now apparent
- The working of the new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) and the findings from the Lead Member (Children and Families) visits to children's homes which will in future be undertaken as part of this framework.

13 RECONCILING POLICY, PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES

13.1 The Committee considered a report by the Chief Executive which enabled the committee to begin its engagement in the Council's business and planning process known as Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources for 2014/14 and beyond. The committee made a number of comments and observations in response to the report and information provided.

Overall number of targets:

13.2 The committee questioned whether the relatively large number of targets for Children's Services was helpful, and whether any were creating undesirable incentives and outcomes. Officers clarified that many are government targets (which better enables us to compare our performance with that of other local authorities), whilst others are devised by the Council to assist the management of the service.

Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND)

13.3 Additional resources are likely to be required to implement the service redesign involved in managing the assessment and planning for children and young people with SEND up to the age of 25. There are a number of factors making the future budget position relatively difficult to determine accurately:

- the inherently complex nature of the redesign – which essentially combines the previous three separate planning processes for SEN, social care and health support for complex needs into a single streamlined process
- the need to provide a personalised response for each child/family, the number of variables rather than simply 'fit' the child into available services
- the potential for independent tribunal decisions to prescribe specific kinds of services for some young people, with their associated costs.

13.4 Officers undertook to provide additional budget and 'modelling' information on these factors.

Children's Social Care

13.5 Some elements of the plan were still being developed. The Committee raised questions about:

- Whether the anticipated reduced numbers of looked after children (LAC) would be realised as a consequence of the investment in early help services and locality social workers etc.
- Whether there would be a negative impact on the numbers of LAC going on to become NEET (not in education, employment or training) – a measure which is currently under performing.
- Whether the specific new measures being introduced in 2013/14 in response to the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) to ensure a minimum percentage of LAC participating in education and training at age 16 and 17 would be successful. Officers were confident that the actions being put in place in response to the RPA would enable the two new targets to be met.
- The savings proposal to reduce the Virtual School to only a full-time head plus one full-time administrative support (saving £212,000 in 2014/15) was 'mitigated' by Members for 2013/14.

13.6 Officers undertook to provide additional clarity about the plan for these elements of the budget in due course.

Learning and School Effectiveness

13.7 The Committee welcomed the fact that the latest GCSE results were available so quickly in comparison to previous years. Preliminary indications from the recent results are that there has been an increase in the percentage of pupils in East Sussex schools achieving five or more A*-C grades (including English and Maths) from 58.4% (last year) to 59.8%. Comparisons against national data are not yet available but it is envisaged that this percentage, and the increase since last year, are both likely to be below the national average. However, these global figures hide the fact that some county schools have improved their performance significantly whilst a number have unexpectedly underperformed.

13.8 A strategy for education improvement in East Sussex is being developed and will be provided to scrutiny for discussion in due course. The strategy encompasses key elements including: engaging with head teachers; leadership development; closing the performance gap for pupils in receipt of Free School Meals; improving the quality of teaching; the role of councillors and developing the school improvement 'offer' within the local authority (including the use of external school improvement providers). On the basis of the last three years' school improvement work, officers and Lead Member consider that the new approach needs:

- to take account of better knowledge and understanding as to what makes for good and poor performance in individual schools, and not be reliant solely on end of year data
- a review of the policy that previously focussed local authority support predominantly on the 'lowest 30%' of performing schools to recognise the fact that, for example, schools lying just outside this group are potentially vulnerable to reduced performance
- to place greater emphasis on promoting alliances between schools

- a review of the way resources are used to ensure that future support is carefully targeted to meet schools' needs
- an enhancement of the roles of bodies such as the Schools' Forum and the Standards Panel.

13.9 Officers highlighted a number of key factors:

- An increase in the floor standard for primary schools means that some 35 new schools will now require additional support; some 25 schools have interim leaders and it is proving hard to recruit good school leaders at this level
- Capacity in secondary schools is more resilient than in primaries and a pilot secondment scheme for head teachers is working well; the lessons may have applicability to primary schools.
- Some evidence that achievement levels are being artificially depressed by some schools at Key Stage 1 because some performance measures appear to be creating 'perverse incentives'.
- The emergence of a new Free School in Eastbourne has significantly reduced the cohort across a number of local secondary schools with consequent reduction in incomes for those schools.

13.10 The Committee welcomed the increased ambition for the service apparent in the Lead Members' and officers presentation. Officers undertook to respond in due course on progress in addressing the above factors.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)

13.11 Officers reported that the indicated savings (£402,000 over three years 2013 – 2016) arising from a reduced provision of targeted and specialist services including CAMHS have not so far been achieved due to budgetary pressures. A further update on this budget would be provided to scrutiny in November.

RESOLVED:-

(1) To note the process for scrutiny's involvement in the Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources process.

(2) To request further clarity on the indicated points above at the November 2013 meeting of the Committee (or as appropriate).

(3) To agree the membership of the RPPR Member Board at the next meeting of the Committee further to an explanatory notification to be sent to all Members of the Committee.

14. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

Improving educational attainment in East Sussex

14.1 During 2012/13 the scrutiny committee noted that Key Stage 4 (GCSE) attainment in East Sussex was disappointing compared with many other authorities. Schools in some areas of the County appear to be improving whereas there is a lack of improvement in others. Early indications show a similar situation in the recent GCSE results although that data has yet to be validated. (See paragraph 13.7 above).

14.2 Achieving a commonly accepted understanding of the underlying reasons for differences in attainment may provide the best chance of developing effective strategies to sustainably tackle underperforming schools or pupils.

14.3 The Committee established a five-member scrutiny review board comprising: Councillors Field, Forward, Shuttleworth, Whetstone and Ms Catherine Platten (Parent Governor Representative) to investigate and report back to the committee on this matter. The exact scope of the project is to be left to the discretion of the review board.

14.4 RESOLVED:- That the work programme additions from this meeting be agreed:

- THRIVE updates (paragraph 12.5 above)
- Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) and Lead Member visits (paragraph 12.5 above)
- Scrutiny review of improving school attainment in East Sussex (paragraph 14.3 above)

15. FORWARD PLAN

15.1. RESOLVED – to note the Forward Plan for the period 1 September 2013 to 31 December 2013.

The meeting ended at 12.40pm

COUNCILLOR KATHRYN FIELD
Chair