

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 18th September 2012 at 6.00 pm at Short Wood School, Limekiln Lane, Telford

PRESENT: Councillors M. Ion (Chair), S. Burrell, G. Green, J. Greenaway, A. Mackenzie, C. Turley and Co-optees A. Atkinson, R. Aveley, S. Harris, S. Rayner, M. Ward

Attending: K. Perry, Interim Assistant Director Children's Safeguarding; V. McKay, Group Manager Commissioning, Procurement & Brokerage (CYP); M. White, Service Delivery Manager Child Protection & Assessment; S. Jones, Scrutiny Officer.

The meeting opened with a tour of Short Wood school by Sue Harris, Head Teacher, and Reg Snell, Chair of the Board of Governors. They also briefed members on some of the challenges facing a Head Teacher and Governors in leading and managing a primary school, making the following points:

- Short Wood Primary and Wrekin View Primary schools were moving towards becoming a co-operative learning community which meant changing category from a community to a foundation school, and acquiring charitable status as a co-operative Trust. They were the first schools to move ahead as a co-operative learning community and other schools were now looking at the model.
- School results should not be taken at face value without looking at the story behind the figures. Cohorts can vary dramatically from one year to the next, and members need to be aware of the specific cohort reasons for results. There was high mobility within the school and 47% of the children were bi-lingual which presented challenges. 15 children with very limited or no English had joined the school last year, and this had had an impact on the results for that year. There was a diverse range of nationalities in the school, the largest being Mirpuri at 6%, and there were further challenges because of the different dialects within the language and the fact that some cultures did not have a reading culture which meant children started from a lower base line.
- A number of children with complex physical needs had joined the school so adaptations such as hoists and changing facilities had been made.
- Sue Harris emphasised the importance of break-out spaces for sessions with Learning Mentors, Inclusion Managers, volunteer readers or other learning support, and felt this was important for the design of BSF schools.

The Chairman thanked Sue Harris and Reg Snell for the tour and for hosting the meeting, and Mr. Snell extended an invitation to members to re-visit during school hours.

Before the official business of the meeting began, Cllr. Ion welcomed two new co-opteed members to the Committee. Steve Rayner had been nominated to represent the Anglican Diocese and Mr. Roger Aveley had been appointed as a Town & Parish Council representative.

CYPSC-1 MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting of the Children and Young People

Scrutiny Committee held on 22nd May 2012 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

CYPSC-2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs. J. Loveridge, M. Smith; Co-optee S. Ali.

CYPSC-3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

CYPSC-4 CHILDREN IN CARE PLACEMENT STRATEGY

The Chairman began by suggesting three key questions that the Committee should address during the review of the children in care placement strategy over a series of meetings:

- Do current policies, procedures and practices keep children and young people in the Council's care safe?
- Does the Council's strategy and processes for care placements offer the best value for money?
- What responsibility, if any, does the Council have for children placed in care in the borough by other authorities?

Reports had been circulated with the agenda on the children in care commissioning strategy and sufficiency duty; quality assurance processes for residential care providers and foster care agencies; arrangements for monitoring the safety and progress of children placed out of borough and a summary of costs and performance indicators relating to children in care. Additional papers were tabled at the meeting to show the placement procedure, and the distribution of children placed outside the borough.

Officers presented key points from the reports and members asked questions to probe the information in more detail. The following additional information was provided in response to questions:

- The placement procedure and factors affecting placement decisions was described. The need to place is usually identified by the social work team after initial assessment, or as a result of a placement breakdown. Permission to accommodate must be granted by the relevant Service Delivery Manager, unless it is a placement breakdown. Social workers assess the needs of the child and sibling groups against a range of criteria to determine the type of placement and location needed. Factors assessed include presenting and historic behaviour, placement history, ethnicity, disability, bail conditions, siblings, age, SEN, transport, physical and mental health needs, contact with family, gender, and locations preferred or to avoid. Requests are referred to the Brokerage team who match the requirements with available provision from the database. If foster care is required, the internal foster care register is always checked first, and external placements (agency foster care or residential care) are only made if an internal foster placement that matches the needs of the child cannot be found, or if foster care is not suitable for the child. All external placements must be approved by the

Interim Assistant Director, Children's Safeguarding. Searches are done via the West Midlands database through our framework contracts initially, and best options are given to the social worker for decision. The placement is made via a contractual arrangement which take account of quality and cost and the placement and contract is monitored through planning meetings, CIC reviews and quality monitoring review and visits and contract review.

- External (agency) foster care is purchased in the vast majority of cases through a West Midlands framework contract set up in April 2011 following a tender process. Telford & Wrekin contracts with 42 independent agencies through the framework. Where a suitable placement is not sources through the framework contract, then spot placements are purchased via a West Midlands spot contract. Residential care is purchased either through a block contract (4 beds at Jigsaw) or through a West Midlands residential framework contract set up in May 2012. There are 144 providers in the framework. The framework contracts have driven down the cost of external placements and also improved the validation and quality assurance of providers. Providers are tiered by quality and cost on the database, and the top tier is searched first. The number of providers in each tier was not available at the meeting but could be provided, but members were assured that there was a considerable number in the top tier.
- Members asked about foster care capacity, and whether children are ever placed in residential care because of a lack of foster carers. The Assistant Director replied that because of the high costs of external residential care, placement decisions are always challenged to see how else provision could be found, and the internal foster carers were used as flexibly as possible. For example, the foster care bedroom-sharing policy could be varied and exemptions made for a few days without going to panel, to avoid the need to use external care. In these cases, careful matching is critical if the foster carer has their own children. Sometimes, it is not possible to find a foster care placement suitable to the needs of the child and the child has to be placed in residential care that closely matches their needs.
- Members asked how placements with residential providers are negotiated and were informed that an initial minimum period is usually agreed depending on the circumstances of the child. The initial contract is usually a month but can extend to a much longer placement. Once a child is settled, consideration has to be given to the impact of disruption in moving the child on.
- Members wanted to know about arrangements for authorising external placements in the absence of the Assistant Director Children's Safeguarding, and it was explained that if she is away, the Assistant Directors for Family & Communities or Social Care, or the Director of Children's Services, approve the placement. External placements cannot be made without approval at AD level or above and all staff are aware of the authorisation process.
- There were questions about the coverage of services out of hours or at peak referral times. The process is that child protection concerns are referred to the safeguarding duty team. Social workers make an initial response to establish whether there is any immediate risk of harm to the child, for example if a child has

been injured. A full assessment is carried out which includes looking at the needs of the child, the family situation, contact etc. Even if serious concerns are substantiated then the result is still more likely to be a child protection plan, rather than the child being taken into care. If a placement is needed, the social worker passes all the assessment information and any concerns to the Brokerage team via a referral form to source a suitable placement. The speed with which a child is taken into care depends on the situation - ideally it is a planned process, but there are emergencies when the child needs to be taken into care the same day which can be challenging. There are patterns in referrals with slightly more during holidays, at the end of the week or late in the day. Once a referral is made, the team carries on working until a placement is made. There is an out-of-hours service for late or weekend emergency referrals.

- Officers gave some scenarios to demonstrate the specialised or highly complex care needs of some children or sibling groups. This showed that although referrals are matched with internal foster carers in the first instance (where the child is suitable for fostering), it is not always possible to source an internal placement and a wider search is necessary. It is especially challenging when sibling groups with different needs are involved, and efforts are made to keep siblings together unless there is a good reason for separation. Most placements remain stable, but breakdown can happen especially when a child exhibits previously unknown behaviour, such as sexually inappropriate behaviour, which may put the carers' own children at risk. Foster carers are required to give 28 days notice to terminate a placement, but this is difficult to apply if carers are concerned about their own children.
- Members wanted to know more about children placed out of the borough - where they are, the factors affecting placement location, how the quality of provision is checked and how the placements are monitored. Information was tabled which showed that as of 18th September 2012, 127 children were placed outside the Telford & Wrekin boundary, of which, 85.83% were within a 50 mile radius of their home address, 7.87% between 50-100 miles and 6.3% over 100 miles. Of the children outside Telford & Wrekin, there were 1-4 children placed in 17 other authority areas (32 in total), and five or more placed in Shropshire, Herefordshire, Staffordshire, Worcestershire and Thurrock, with the majority being in Shropshire. Overall, 61.7% of all looked after children were placed within the Shropshire county boundary. The types of out of borough placements included internal foster carers (where carers live outside the boundary or had moved and the children had moved with them), private foster care, residential homes, hostels, and a small number placed with friends/relatives, hospital, residential schools or a secure unit.
- The figures showed that most children are placed locally or where their education and family contact can be maintained - it is very important for the children to maintain on-going relationships. The policy is to place children as close to home as possible unless there is a safety issue and placement locations were always sought where the child's education would not be disrupted. Of the 65 children placed in the Shropshire authority area, most continued to go to school in Telford and Wrekin. Of the 85% within a 50 mile radius of home, some were still attending school in Telford and Wrekin. Travel or taxi costs for school were built into the cost of placements. Of the 6.3% placements over 100 miles radius, some were

deliberate for safety reasons, or were necessary because the children had very complex needs for which there is no local provision. There was a particular problem with finding Tier 4 (hospital provision) CAMHS provision.

- Members asked whether children be moved around the country. Children are only moved if a placement breaks down, if the provision is found not to be right or if circumstances change, for example when a child is ready to move from residential care to foster care. Moves need to be considered carefully because of the disruption to the child, siblings and education.
- Members asked questions about how residential homes were quality assured. The tender process for the West Midlands framework contract had been a big exercise and providers had been put through a comprehensive and rigorous quality assurance process which included financial/insurance validation, Ofsted reports and the Councils' own quality evaluation which had involved young people. All Ofsted reports are uploaded to the West Midlands database and providers must update the database with any new judgements. The latest judgements are checked by the brokerage team before a placement is made, and the social worker may visit a home prior to placement to check the unit is suitable for the child in terms of the other young people there. Providers must have an "Outstanding" or "Good" rating to be included within the framework contract. If a provider's rating is downgraded to "Unsatisfactory" or worse while a child is placed in the home, the Ofsted findings and the home's response to recommendations are considered to determine what course of action to take. If a home has failed an inspection, the home is visited to find out what happened and what actions have been put in place to address the issues, and progress against the action plan would continue to be monitored. Depending on the nature of the findings, the child would not be moved if this would create unnecessary disruption unless Ofsted had suspended the service or we considered the placement unsafe. No further placements would be made until standards had improved. In addition to statutory inspection reports, the West Midlands authorities share quality intelligence.
- Members wanted to know more about how the progress, experience and care setting of children outside the borough are monitored and whether there is a danger of "out of sight, out of mind". The statutory requirements for visiting children in care apply to all children regardless of location, and members were assured that these are carried out. The statutory minimum is to visit within one week of placement, then at 6 weekly intervals during the first year. Visits are likely to be more frequent in the early days of a placement or if needed by the child. There is clear guidance on the purpose of the visits and the social worker must write up a report for each statutory visit.
- In terms of monitoring the child's progress in school, the social worker is responsible for drawing up a care plan for each child and arranging regular care plan reviews. The review meetings are run by an independent reviewing officer and involve all parties involved in the care plan including the child (if they wish) and parents, and through the review process there are links to schools so the child's progress and any changes can be monitored.

- In terms of increasing local capacity, through the West Midlands commissioning framework, the Council was trying to develop the market by encouraging the Tier 1 (top quality/cost) residential providers to open facilities in the borough and one of the providers was looking at properties. The same approach was taken to foster care agencies.
- Officers were asked about accountability and whether there was one officer with an overview of all the children in care. Within the Child Protection & Assessment Service Delivery Area, there are 3 Team Managers managing social workers and each social worker has their own case load. The social workers have detailed knowledge of their caseload, the Team Managers have a good overview of the key issues for each child in the caseloads of the social workers in their team, and the responsible Service Delivery Manager has an overview of the children in care within their area as a whole. The most complex cases are discussed with the Interim Assistant Director.
- Members wanted to know whether there are any reciprocal arrangements with other local authorities where children are placed, for example, so a local social worker visits the child. This is where distance is more of an issue because of the practicalities of visits. There had been examples of arrangements with other authorities but this is a judgment call - a key issue for the safety and progress of the child is the strength of relationships with partners. Social workers in Telford & Wrekin have built strong teams around the child which they are looking to replicate around the country and this would be lost by using other authorities' social workers. Local placements are not necessarily safer for some children with particular behaviours and needs.

At the end of the discussion, the Chairman reminded members that the role of the Committee was not to look at the mechanics of the processes, but to ask whether the policies and processes that are in place kept children in care as safe as possible, particularly in the light of the Rochdale cases which had been in the media. The Chairman sought assurances from officers on the following points;

- That the statutory visits to all children in care happen regardless of location
- That there is as much continuity of social workers for each child as possible
- That the visits are documented
- That monitoring is robust and that the systems keep children and young people in the Council's care as safe as possible.

Officers assured members that the systems in place are adhered to, and that they keep children as safe as possible. It was not always possible to get things right first time and sometimes placements needed to be reassessed, but the monitoring that was in place meant that problems were picked up and could be resolved. For example it could be difficult to get CAMHS to recognise mental health problems and there had been commissioning issues with the service.

The Chairman thanked members for their positive responses to his recommendation circulated by e-mail that the Council should seek to hold regular - every year or every two years - briefings for all elected members on their responsibilities as corporate parents and that councillors' attendance or non-attendance at

these briefings are published on the Council's website on an annual basis. Having gained the support of the Committee, the Chairman would pursue the recommendation through the appropriate channels.

Due to the lateness of the hour, the Chairman deferred the discussion about value for money issues until the next meeting on 5th November, and invited members to put forward their questions in advance of the meeting.

CYPSC-5 EDUCATION PERFORMANCE UPDATE

A table showing the attainment of children in care at Key Stages 2 and 4 between 2007/08 to 2010/11 compared to Telford & Wrekin and national averages had been circulated with the agenda for the meeting. The Chairman explained that this had been circulated for information, and would come back to the next meeting with the full results for the borough for 2011/12.

CYPSC-6 WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the report of the Scrutiny Officer on the priorities for the work programme. The report set out the proposed priorities based on feedback from consultation and informal discussion with members. Members agreed the priorities set out in the report. The Chairman assured Cllr. Burrell that the Action Plan arising from the findings of the Ofsted inspection would be scrutinised by the Committee and informed Cllr. Greenaway that he intended to meet the Chairman of the Local Children's Safeguarding Board (LCSB) to discuss links with scrutiny. Steve Rayner said that the LCSB should be required to report at least annually to scrutiny.

RESOLVED

- **That the work programme set out in section 5.3-5.6 of the report be agreed**
- **That the decisions of the Scrutiny management Board on 4th July be noted.**

The meeting ended at 8.30 pm.

Chairman:

Date: