

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Thursday, 17 May 2012 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 1.00 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Michael Waine – in the Chair
Councillor Carol Viney (In place of Councillor Ann Bonner)
Councillor Dave Sexon (Deputy Chairman)
Councillor Jean Fooks (In place of Councillor Janet Godden)
Councillor Neil Owen
Councillor M. Altaf-Khan
Councillor Marilyn Badcock
Councillor Mrs Anda Fitzgerald-O'Connor
Councillor Nicholas P. Turner
Councillor Lawrie Stratford (In place of Councillor Pete Handley)
Mr R. Martyn
Councillor Val Smith
Councillor Caroline Newton

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Louise Chapman
Councillor Melinda Tilley

Co-opted Members: Mr Chris Bevan
Mrs Sue Matthew

By Invitation: Carole Thomson
Robert Martyn (as a substitute for Brenda Williams)

Officers attending: Giacomo Esposito
Teresa Rogers
Deborah Parkhouse
Sarah Breton
Ben Threadgold

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting [, together with a schedule of addenda tabled at the meeting/the following additional documents:] and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports [agenda, reports and schedule/additional documents] are attached to the signed Minutes.

197/12 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Bob Martyn, substitute for Brenda Williams, sent apologies.

Cllr Peter Handley sent apologies and nominated Cllr Lawrie Stratford as a substitute.

Cllr Janet Godden sent apologies and nominated Cllr Jean Fooks as a substitute.

Cllr Ann Bonner sent apologies and nominated Cllr Carol Viney as a substitute.

Cllr Michael Waine noted that the committee had two vacant posts available for co-opted members. The committee agreed the Cllr Waine should pursue the issue and see what work was being done to fill the posts.

198/12 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST - SEE GUIDANCE NOTE ON THE BACK PAGE

(Agenda No. 2)

Cllr Anda Fitzgerald-O'Connor and Cllr Neil Owen declared an interest as members of the adoption and fostering panel.

199/12 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

No amendments.

The committee reiterated the importance of tracking the Troubled Families initiative. Cllr Waine said he would pursue the possibility of a working group to track and evaluate progress. The committee welcomed the recent appointment of Lorna Caldicott as joint project lead.

Cllr Waine informed the committee that he would be meeting with the Director of Children, Education and Families on the issue of Outdoor Centres as a matter of urgency, and that the outcome of this would be circulated to committee members via email.

200/12 SPEAKING TO OR PETITIONING THE COMMITTEE

(Agenda No. 4)

Cllr David Turner sent a message concerning agenda no.6 which Cllr Waine read out during that item.

201/12 ADOPTION AND FOSTERING PRESENTATION AND Q&A

(Agenda No. 5)

CH3

Teresa Rogers, Service Manager for Adoption and Fostering (TR), delivered a presentation on the adoption service. This included a summary of activities undertaken by the service in 2011/12, the outcomes of a recent inspection of the service, and an update on the implications of the new Adoption Action Plan.

Members asked whether additional pressure was also being placed on the courts to speed up the adoption process, given that expectations were rising for the service.

TR responded by saying that the service was working closely with courts through regular meetings to ensure expediency on both sides.

The committee agreed that Cllr Louise Chapman, Cabinet Member for Children and the Voluntary Sector, should be asked to write to central government asking whether expectations would rise for the courts as they had done for the service.

Members went on to express concern at the setting of aggressive targets for the service, emphasising that new measures should not be allowed to compromise the quality of placements.

TR recognised this danger, but said she was confident that Oxfordshire would score well against the proposed measures once they were introduced.

Members also asked how the service had been performing in terms of its recruitment of carers, knowing that in previous years numbers had been excellent.

TR responded by saying that the service had continued to perform well, with sufficient numbers of people coming forward to adopt.

TR then delivered a presentation on the fostering service, which provided the committee with a summary of activities undertaken by the service in 2011/12, the outcomes of a recent inspection, and objectives for the service in 2012/13.

The committee discussed the negative impact moving a child to a new foster placement often has on their educational attainment, particularly when the child experiences a string of unsuccessful placements. Members asked whether we could learn any lessons here from the national picture.

TR responded that Oxfordshire compares favourably in terms of placement stability when compared to other counties. She added that the service was committed to tackling this issue through the use of virtual schools, and that performance was being monitored closely.

The committee asked for comparative data, especially for statistical neighbours.

Further questions focused on how the service worked with the independent sector.

TR said that the service worked closely with the independent sector, with failed placements in the sector always returning to the service before moving on to another home.

The committee expressed concerns that considerations relating to a potential carers lifestyle should not prevent too many placements from being approved. Members emphasised that the primary aim is to meet a child's needs, and that policy on matters concerning lifestyle (e.g. smoking) ought to be applied sensibly.

TR responded by saying that such considerations are weighed up carefully by medical advisors, and that there have been very few cases where approval has not been given on these grounds.

The committee agreed that the corporate parenting panel be asked to explore the matter further.

The committee finished by praising the many achievements of both the adoption and fostering services. Members noted the positive results of both inspections, and said that whilst there was undoubtedly more work to be done, the reports were testament to the hard work undertaken by the officers and volunteers within each service.

202/12 YOUNG CARERS UPDATE

(Agenda No. 6)

Deborah Parkhouse, Young Carers Manager, spoke to a presentation which updated the committee on young carers in Oxfordshire.

Cllr Waine read out a message received from Cllr Turner, Co-author of the Young Carers 2008 report. The message congratulated officers on the progress made since 2008. It said that many young carers have missed out on a normal childhood and that they deserve all the help which the various agencies working together can give to them. The message stated that whilst there was more work to be done, the fact that Oxfordshire had become a model authority in its support to young carers was a great tribute to all concerned. The committee echoed these comments and thanked all the authors of the 2008 report for their hard work in putting the report together.

The committee then discussed the question of how the young carers service linked with schools. Members stated the importance of ensuring school governors were aware of the presence of any young carers in their school/s. Carole Thomson emphasised the need to employ the right communications channels when trying to reach governors, and said that a letter to the clerk to governors would be an effective means of raising the issue.

Further questions focused on how the service linked with the Early Intervention hubs.

DP said that whilst the hubs were still evolving, she believed they were already having a positive impact on young carers' lives.

The committee agreed to further review this area as part of a more comprehensive evaluation of the hubs at a future meeting.

Members went on to express their concern at the negative impact being a young carer can have on an individual's educational attainment.

DP acknowledged that this was an issue, stating that the reasons behind poor educational attainment amongst young carers were diverse and often complicated. However, she remained confident that as the service became more sophisticated, these underlying issues would be tackled more effectively.

203/12 UPDATE ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS REGARDING THE CHILDREN'S TRUST

(Agenda No. 7)

Sarah Breton, Lead Commissioner, Joint Commissioning (SB) and Robyn Noonan, Strategy & Performance Service Manager, Joint Commissioning (RN) updated the committee on the new Children and Young People's Partnership Board. Sara Livadeas sent apologies.

SB outlined the role of the new Board, and explained some of the key differences between the new Board and the former Children's Trust.

The committee expressed concerns that the introduction of the new Board would only complicate this area of work. Members stressed that the new Board needed to have a positive impact on results on the ground. To this end, members said that the Board should have a pooled budget that it collectively spends and to which it is jointly accountable.

SB said there were advantages to having a wide range of partners involved when tackling difficult issues, as evidenced by the recent fall in the rate of teenage conceptions in Oxfordshire. RN added that the new Board was not being set up to create lots of extra work but was intended to provide increased opportunities to resolve key issues together and monitor work already underway.

Cllr Val Smith added that as a member of the new Health Improvement Board, she believed that the Board workshops would be key to the new system's ultimate success.

Cllr Melinda Tilley, Cabinet Member for Education, then addressed the meeting. Cllr Tilley invited the committee to consider how the council could improve the educational attainment of those children who lack sufficient parental support, particularly for those primary aged school children who lack support when doing their homework.

Members discussed the importance of parental support to a child's education. Cllr Caroline Newton suggested the possibility of creating homework classes run by ex-teachers to help tackle the issue. Cllr Tilley responded that she thought this was a good idea, and that the possibility of such a scheme was already in fact being explored.

204/12 EQUALITY ACT 2010 AND PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTIES

(Agenda No. 8)

Ben Threadgold, Senior Policy and Performance Officer, Chief Executive's Office (BT) updated the committee on the Equality Act 2010 and the Equality Duty.

..... Cllr Waine stated the importance of remaining mindful of these duties when considering and making decisions.

Members praised the policy guidance issued by the council, particularly to schools, but said that guidance needed to be flagged in advance of its release.

There was a discussion about the impact that moving to academy status might have on a school's compliance with legislation. Members said that schools opting for academy status needed to be made aware of the importance of continuing to meet such obligations.

205/12 FORWARD PLAN

(Agenda No. 9)

The committee agreed that future meetings would have a reduced agenda focusing on one substantive item. The committee agreed that the next meeting should focus on the new Education Strategy.

The committee finished by thanking Cllr Bonner for her many services to the committee as Chairman over the last four years.

206/12 CLOSE OF MEETING

(Agenda No. 10)

The meeting finished at 13.00.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing