

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Tuesday, 12 July 2011 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 12.45 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Ann Bonner – in the Chair

Councillor Dave Sexon (Deputy Chairman)
Councillor Janet Godden
Councillor Neil Owen
Councillor Marilyn Badcock
Councillor Mrs Anda Fitzgerald-O'Connor
Councillor Don Seale
Councillor Nicholas P. Turner
Councillor Michael Waine

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Hutchinson (for the entire meeting)

Co-opted Members: Mrs Sue Matthew

By Invitation: Brenda Williams

Officers:

Whole of meeting Meera Spillet, Director for Children, Education and Families
Lisa Michelson, Scrutiny Officer

Part of meeting Sandra Higgs, Business and Skills Manager CEF
Janet Johnson, Children with SEN Manager CEF
Netta Bucket, Area Service Manager - EY (Southern) CEF

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports are attached to the signed Minutes.

142/11 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS (Agenda No. 1)

Carole Thomson, Chris Bevan, Cllr Chapman (Cllr Tilley substituting) Cllr Hurchinson for Cllr Val Smith.

143/11 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST - SEE GUIDANCE NOTE ON THE BACK PAGE

(Agenda No. 2)

none

144/11 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

Cllr Waine was in attendance

p. 6 Should say that it is important for a Management Board to be put in place

145/11 SPEAKING TO OR PETITIONING THE COMMITTEE

(Agenda No. 4)

none

146/11 DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

(Agenda No. 5)

Meera Spillet provided her regular update on the latest issues affecting the Directorate.

At several points during the presentation, the committee had discussions on items.

The topic of commissioning was discussed amongst the committee. Cllr Seale stated that the term commissioning can be confusing as it means different things to different people in different contexts. The Director defined it as a map of services and matching those services to purchasing. She emphasised the benefit of data led decisions. She went on to say that in a climate of limited resources it became increasingly important to use research and evidence to focus resources on achieving results.

The Director relayed some themes that emerged from a recent national conference she attended with other children's services directors. She related that there were national themes around culture change that were relevant to Oxfordshire. That the discussion pertained to shifting officers' thinking towards:

Outcomes not Targets

Evidence not Ideology

Culture not Structure

Cllr Godden voiced concern that this 'culture change' was meant to have taken place with the splitting of services several years ago, and that this does not seem to have happened.

The Director consented and stated that a change in structure does not necessarily bring desired culture change.

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Cllr Waine stated that after 20 years of topdown directives from government, the shift is to local decisions. He asked about the interface between evidence based local decisions and funding decisions that are made nationally.

The Director acquiesced that this was a big question and that it was still unclear how this would play out nationally.

Sue Matthew commented that she had recently heard that Oxford University is partnering with the Children's Trust and that this was an exciting development.

Cllr Waine confirmed that it had taken place and that it had been in the works for a while.

Cllr Fitzgerald-O'Connor asked about the Sure Start Programme evaluation. Was it true that this evaluation did not have the expected outcomes?

The Director stated that the directorate was in the process of developing guidance on this evaluation. There are issues when trying to make a direct comparison as the levels of resource vary. Funding levels were scaled back in subsequent waves. She acknowledged that there was a need to better focus provision and the directorate is about to do a review for the county.

There was a discussion on the new provision of families approaching schools directly for admittance mid-year. There was a concern that families might not understand their rights if schools did not admit their child or understand the appeal process. There was also a concern regarding the ongoing consultation to increase the time allowed to file an appeal from 10 to 30 days. This could amount to a considerable amount of time for a child to be out of school. While the specific reason for this proposed increase was unknown, it was suggested by Cllr Fitzgerald-O'Connor that it could address some time pressures on parents to build an appeal.

The Director gave an update on the new Hub provision model. She confirmed to the chairman that the plan was on track for a timely delivery.

Cllr Godden voiced concerns that it was possible that confidence in the hub has not been high and that more outreach was necessary.

Cllr Waine commented that it was the ongoing involvement of councillors which was the crucial element.

Brenda Williams expressed anxiety that with only 7 hubs access could be difficult for some young people.

The director clarified that there will be 7 hubs and 6 satellites. She insisted that the directorate would ensure that young people would be made known of the activities and programmes and that it was designed to maximise access and utilisation in a restricted resource environment.

147/11 EDUCATION AND TRAINING: APPRENTICESHIPS, SCIENCE EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

(Agenda No. 6)

Sandra Higgs (SH), Business and Skills Manager for Oxfordshire County Council addressed the committee. She reported that while it was good news that apprenticeships were on the rise in Oxfordshire, there were other parts of the South East which were experiencing faster growth. She reviewed a few details on the data including the fact that hairdressing is the most popular apprenticeship, by far. As the manager, she indicated that she would like to see an increase in areas like engineering which currently ranks 8th for younger apprentices and not in the top 10 for older apprentices. Cllr Bonner asked about the number of apprentices who drop-off their scheme to which SH responded that it is less of an issue for OCC that, although we have fewer in number, our quality of those is actually higher.

Cllr Hutchinson remarked that it was important to draw the connection between the scheme and young people who are successful in being placed in a job.

SH responded that in many cases, the companies who utilise apprentices, have a tendency to keep the young people on in employment.

The committee discussed that some of the take up may have a gender component with fewer girls opting for engineering placements. It was mentioned that gender bias starts young and that there already exists a number of women in science events across the county to help address this.

Martin Dare-Edwards (MDE), the Chairman of the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (Oxon-LEP) joined SH at the table.

He spoke about his view that there was disconnect in what companies were looking for as far as qualifications are concerned, and what was being provided at Oxfordshire colleges. His read on what businesses are looking for goes beyond what can be a narrow skill set, as defined by the qualifications. Companies are more interested in an 'all-rounder'. He feels that colleges need to start to address a new sector and that they need to ensure students have 'combined skills'. A 'job-for-life' does not exist in today's job market in the same way that it once did. He spoke about the need for the country to feed the high tech sectors to keep the UK competitive and to ensure that high paying jobs continued to be created to support current standards of living.

Cllr Bonner commented that a primary component was essential.

Cllr Waine agreed adding that Science Oxford provides an excellent outreach to primary students.

Cllr Seale spoke about the importance of culture change in promoting apprenticeships. He felt that there needed to be better communication about the huge benefits of apprenticeships. Young people might not realise that some leaders and senior managers in companies such as BMW came in through the scheme and

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not through a university route. He felt that in some cases for some industries, an apprenticeship scheme is superior to a university education. He asked what the committee could do to support the work.

SH agreed that a culture change was very important and pointed out that educating teachers on those points is important. She said that in fact, the number of young people interested in the scheme exceeded the opportunities and that outreach was needed with employers.

She added that in some cases, apprenticeships can be a route into university. It has been the case that a student who entered into a company as part of the scheme was later further trained at a university level, though at company expense.

MDE suggested that the schools could have an apprenticeship 'score' similar to the figures they report on university placements.

Cllr Turner expressed concern that businesses do not have enough information about how to set apprentices up.

Cllr Godden felt that the issue revolves around a mismatch to the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) where NVQ's are single skill oriented and a variety of skills are what companies are looking for. There is an incentive for young people to focus on acquiring NVQ's, which might inadvertently limit their options.

MDE agreed that companies are not hiring on NVQ's as they currently exist, for that reason. He suggested that a new qualification, focused on a mix of skills, could be established.

Sue Matthew suggested that councillors could connect with colleges to develop a new qualification if colleges were reluctant to engage directly with businesses.

Meera Spillet added that employers need to be engaged with any changes we may be considering.

Cllr Fitzgerald-O'Connor commented that employers feel that bureaucracy around Health and Safety and other hurdles make apprenticeships feel like too much of a hassle.

SH agreed that a negative perception around bureaucratic hurdles was prevalent. She explained that part of the current outreach was around overcoming these barriers and helping employers navigate the 'red tape'.

Cllr Bonner suggested that as this is an important topic the committee would want to stay on top of it. She indicated that she would like this included as part of the discussion on the year's work programme for the committee at the next meeting. She asked that once the Business and Skills Team is formed and up and running, that they return to the Committee in 6 months. At that time, the committee can consider a working group for further investigation.

148/11 SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND ADMISSION AT NURSERY AGE

(Agenda No. 7)

The committee received a presentation from Sean O'Sullivan (SO) the Headteacher at Frank Wise School.

The Committee discussed the data around children under 5 on Roll in Special Schools from 2007-2011.

SO commented that the figures suggest that identifying and addressing issues with children early can lead to better outcomes for an individual child. Beyond that, this approach can be less costly in the long run.

Several barriers to taking this approach were discussed. It was stated that there are political considerations, that parents views may differ wildly on the preferred approach for their child, and that educational professionals views may also differ.

Janet Johnson (JJ), Children with SEN Manager, joined the discussion to add that the number of admissions for 2 and 3 years olds has increased. This would indicate that students are being identified earlier.

JJ commented that there are, however, families who would like their children to stay in mainstream schools as long as possible. Adding that in some cases, these are very strong preferences.

Cllr Bonner thanked SO for his presentation and acknowledged his views.

SO thought that work could be done to popularise this provision (special schools) and promote the support that special schools can offer. He continued that work needed to take place to address any existing stigma and convince parents of the merits. He felt that what was needed was a cultural shift as a whole.

Cllr Bonner asked for specifics on what could be done.

SO listed that more can be done to celebrate achievements, that further cross learning between schools could take place, and that better joined up working should happen between areas. He also mentioned that linking in with the Early Intervention Hubs was important.

Cllr Seale concurred that there was a stigma issue and felt that a large part of it was down to the views of other children.

Cllr Waine commented that it was down to perceptions. Were special schools 'schools of last resort', or was there a consideration about what the schools actually have to offer.

Cllr Turner thought that even the name 'Special School' stigmatises (or can). Adding that at the end of the day it is the outcomes that matter most.

JJ commented that the evidence suggests that teacher competency is the key factor in achieving good outcomes.

Brenda Williams (COTO) spoke about current teacher demands in that they are higher than they have ever been in the past. Her view was that the requirements placed on teachers at mainstream schools are not possible within the current resources. She felt that the debate about inclusion, which has benefits, does not fully take into account the impact on those providing services.

Cllr Turner requested that this item come back in 6-9 months time once the hubs were in place.

Cllr Bonner said that this item could be part of the discussion scheduled for the next committee meeting in September.

149/11 FORWARD PLAN

(Agenda No. 8)

Information Share

Cllr Bonner reported on the recent Select Committee style review held the previous week on KS1 results. It was her view that it was an excellent meeting and inspirational to hear directly from ‘the front line’ the work that is being carried out on behalf of the young people in the county.

She said that there would be a report to the September meeting on the outcomes from the review.

Sue Matthew informed the committee about the upcoming Children’s Parliament scheduled for Wednesday, the 9th of September from 9.00 to 15.00 in the council chamber.

150/11 CLOSE OF MEETING

(Agenda No. 9)

The meeting finished at 12.50.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing