

Comments from Performance Scrutiny Committee meeting on 18th February to Cabinet regarding proposed future arrangements for children's services

Performance Scrutiny:

- Thanks officers for their work in developing the proposals and undertaking the extensive consultation, and to those who responded to the consultation with their views and ideas for maintaining services.
- Recognises the financial and demand imperatives for delivering the service in a different way, and supports the overall focus on our statutory responsibilities and services to the most vulnerable.
- Notes that Council has agreed both a temporary £1m of 'pump priming' funding for local groups who may wish to take on the running of current universal services, and £2m of additional core funding towards children's centres and early intervention hubs (i.e. a reduction in the long-term savings target from the previously proposed £8m to the originally agreed £6m).

Performance Scrutiny therefore:

- Asks Cabinet to ensure that the additional funding over and above what was anticipated in preparing officer recommendations should be used to retain as many services as possible in appropriate locations, with as much open access provision as possible.
- Requests that this is delivered through the undertaking of a "service and geography gap analysis" which identifies those areas and service users who would be most disadvantaged by the current proposed pattern of provision.
- Suggests that the deployment of the additional funding should be used in a way which reduces compulsory redundancies, both to reduce the cost to the authority and to retain the most skilled and experienced workers.
- Wishes to see all of Paragraph 72 of Annex 4, incorporated into the recommendations so that with the possible support of the £2m some universal services which could include health visiting services can be maintained in the childcare settings.
- Supports the ambition of any local areas, voluntary groups, district, town, and parish councils, and independent providers who wish to operate a children's centre which would otherwise close with no, or significantly reduced, council funding.

Performance Scrutiny would also welcome

- An emphasis on the full age range of children and young people being supported by the service, in order that 'early help' is delivered across the 0-19 age range and youth engagement is maintained.
- Written clarity around the costs of, and service provided, by the bus-based outreach service, whose work members support.
- A briefing on any legal or central government challenge which has been presented to other local authorities who have undertaken the closure of children's centres.

- Further information around how the process for engaging with organisations and groups exploring alternative models of provision will be structured.

In addition to a discussion focused around changes to the public-facing service Performance Scrutiny also discussed the council's role in education, and action on safeguarding. On these issues Performance Scrutiny:

- Affirmed the desire for Education Scrutiny to organise a member briefing on school attainment and the council's remaining role.
- Remained concerned that Oxfordshire may "lose out" as a result of a weakened relationship with schools, and asked that education-related policy form part of devolution discussions.
- Thanked officers involved, and praised the improvements to safeguarding provision including the opening of new local residential provision, and the authority's work with "NEET"s.