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CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Thursday, 12 July 2012 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at Time Not Specified

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Michael Waine – in the Chair
Councillor Marilyn Badcock (Deputy Chairman)
Councillor Janet Godden
Councillor Ann Bonner
Councillor Mrs Anda Fitzgerald-O'Connor
Councillor Pete Handley
Councillor Caroline Newton
Councillor Dave Sexon
Councillor Val Smith
Councillor Roz Smith

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Melinda Tilley

Co-opted Members: Mr Chris Bevan
Mrs Sue Matthew

By Invitation: Mrs Carole Thomson
Mr Robert Martyn

Officers: Lisa Michelson
Frances Craven
Roy Leach
Rachel Dunn

Whole of meeting

Part of meeting

Agenda Item Officer Attending

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.

207/12 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS
(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Mohammed Altaf-Khan who was replaced by Councillor Roz Smith. Apologies were also received from Cllr Neil Owen.

208/12 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST - SEE GUIDANCE NOTE ON THE BACK PAGE

(Agenda No. 2)

None

209/12 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

It was noted that Cllr Marilyn Badcock should be listed as the deputy chairman on the agenda.

Lisa Michelson, scrutiny officer, agreed to circulate the requested information about comparative data for the stability of long term placements.

210/12 SPEAKING TO OR PETITIONING THE COMMITTEE

(Agenda No. 4)

None

211/12 FORWARD PLAN

(Agenda No. 5)

None

212/12 EDUCATION STRATEGY DISCUSSION

(Agenda No. 6)

The committee took its substantial agenda item, an in depth discussion of the draft Education strategy and its major strands.

The committee was informed that the Cabinet had also included a discussion of the strategy as part of its meeting agenda for the following Tuesday. While this resulted in a delay in dispatching the papers, it provided an opportunity to provide input to the cabinet decision.

The committee expressed regret that the paperwork was late. It requested that the circulation list be reviewed and wished to be clear that if it were expected to do its job fully, it needs documents in proper time.

It was agreed that any outcomes from the discussion would be sent as an addenda to the cabinet papers on the following Monday, and the chairman would speak to them at the meeting.

Background

Frances Craven, Deputy Director – Education and Early Intervention (FC) gave an overview of the evolution of the strategy in the time since the committee had last discussed it in their February. The strategy has evolved over a number of months and will continue to evolve to reflect developing priorities.

It was noted that the strategy does not contain the full detail on governance, specifically, cabinet and scrutiny and it was suggested this be included.

A question was raised about the level of involvement of Oxford City Council. Steven Curran – Board Member, Young People, Education & Community Development at Oxford City Council was in the public gallery. He was invited to join the discussion and was present throughout. He commented that the City has put together a scheme and a budget to enable 10 schools in the city to have an intensive numeracy programme. He went on to say that the city has been collaborating closely with the county and it had thus far been very positive and productive, 'working in tandem'.

Strand 1 – Outstanding Leadership and Aspiration Networks

Cllr Anda Fitzgerald-O'Connor (A F-O) led the initial questioning. A F-O felt that overall, the strategy was very positive. She asked questions about how the partnerships would be monitored and evaluated.

Claudia Wade – School Support and Leadership Services Manager, commented that while the aspiration networks are in early days, a small board of people in the authority has already been identified to issue a monitoring report against tight targets to revisit several times a year. If self-evaluated reports cause concern, those would be escalated.

Additional questions were raised around how the county was working to develop teachers. It was noted that the strategy was lacking specific actions. Officers conceded the point and clarified that monitoring against the strategy would identify best practice which would be circulated to other county schools.

Concerns were raised about the early intervention component of the strategy, and how the recent funding reductions impact upon that service. A further opinion agreed that funding issues are an important consideration and are not sufficiently picked up in the strategy.

Officers agreed that Early Intervention is important. It may be that the transformation board needs to look at this as it overlaps with social care as well as many other far reaching areas.

Concerns were raised about the fact that targets in the strategy have reduced from previous drafts. Officers pointed out that these changes were made in response to recommendations from the committee as part of the discussion at the February meeting.

Cllr Janet Godden (JG) raised questions about the transformation board, the teaching schools and the continued focus on leadership. She commented that an annual report was insufficiently frequent to pick up fast moving issues.

FC responded that officers would consider the appropriateness of the reporting schedule for the transformation board.

Sue Matthew stressed the importance of the Early Years, noting that this strand has fallen out of the strategy and is not clear in the information on the funding. She also identified children's leadership as an important theme which was missing.

Cllr Melinda Tilley (MT) responded that the strategy would be considered at the schools parliament.

Strand 2 – Targeted Campaigns

Cllr Val Smith (VS) led the initial questioning. She commented that a major challenge to the success of targeted campaigns lies with engaging harder to reach parents. MT stated that parental engagement was one of the most single most important issues in raising attainment.

The committee requested a report back to the transformation board on this, and again had concerns that the regular reporting frequency was insufficient.

Questions were raised about schools' engagement and how to ensure that initiatives were 'owned' by the individual schools. Cllr Michael Waine (MW) stressed that it was essential that any campaign run jointly *with* schools and not be *done to* schools.

FC agreed that the strategy would only be successful if it were bottom up. She identified the communications component of the strategy as the common thread through all the initiatives.

FC went on to describe the three strands of the first campaign, which is focussed on improving reading. These are comprised of a whole school campaign, a volunteering program, and a community wide initiative to involve families, other residents and employees in the local business community.

MT described the positive response from the community to get involved including fire-fighters, disabled people, and many others.

Questions were raised about when schools would be informed of their status in the campaign. FC indicated that the list of schools would not be finalised until after the most recent attainment results were available. The launch would take place in September at an event with invited schools.

VS asked about how all schemes (with the county and the city and others) would be joined up. SC commented that it was important that schools had choices.

Brenda Williams (BW) emphasised that any initiative needed to allow time and space for teachers to support parents and learning.

MW agreed with this point and took the opportunity to thank Brenda Williams at her final meeting for her service to the committee. He appreciated her contribution and hoped she had a long, happy, fulfilling retirement.

Strand 3 – System Redesign for Education

Cllr Caroline Newton (CN) led on the initial questioning. She began by asking about the effectiveness of academies and their ability to improve attainment. Roy Leach – School Organisation and Planning Manager (RL), responded that for different schools in different circumstances the shift to academies may have a different impact.

He said, in general for most schools the benefits would be seen in the opportunity to restructure staff, the change in perception/ rebranding for the school, and an injection of new staff. There is evidence that this can work very well in some cases where the school has very low attainment and two of Oxfordshire's sponsored academies have delivered significant improvements.

In Oxfordshire, the new schools which are becoming academies tend to be those that are already 'good' or 'outstanding'. For those, the improvement is not yet known, but would be expected to be a more modest 'boost'.

Where the evidence is less clear and precedent is lacking, is around what impact if any, a shift to academy status might have on schools which are 'middle performers'.

MW commented that the earliest academies benefited from considerable contributions from sponsoring groups. He expressed concern that as the percentage of schools undertaking the switch to academies increased, there may be an emerging issue of sponsor capacity.

CN had a line of questioning about the approach the county council was taking to support schools to become academies.

MT clarified that the local authority is not in a position to force any decisions on schools. Rather, the county works with schools to communicate the expectations of the national agenda and provide support.

CN related that for her constituency, it was her experience that the schools were not aware of the advantages in making the shift.

Chris Bevan (CB) pointed out that this was also a considerable institutional change for officers and sufficient support needed to be put into place.

The committee thanked officers for their support in the discussion.

General Discussion

The committee discussed what outcomes they wanted to see reflected as addenda to the cabinet meeting scheduled for the following Tuesday. This included the following:

This includes the following:

- **Communication Strategy** – The communication component of the strategy was seen to be of the utmost importance. Especially as it relates to the following:

CH3

- Building effective 'buy-in' from schools for campaigns and other initiatives. Schools need to be fully engaged as active partners and not the recipients of mandates.
 - Campaigns need to be communicated in a timely way, giving all stakeholders as much information as possible in advance so as to best coordinate support and take-up, and build into their school development plans.
 - Great care needs to be taken to ensure that a data led exercise does not lead to presumptions about particular schools' current policies, practices, and interventions with regard to reading.
 - Further dialogue and engagement needs to take place around developing a better understanding of the national academy agenda and Oxfordshire's 'support' for it. This is particularly true for headteachers and school governors but extends to other stakeholders such as parents.
 - It is important that the Local Authority maintains a clear view of its role in leadership of, and support for the county-wide 'family of schools'.
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- **Academies** – As it relates to new academies, the local authority needs to take an active role in examining the capacity, suitability and track record of potential sponsors and partners.
 - **Education Transformation Board** – The committee raised questions about some aspects of the Education Transformation Board which were unspecified in the strategy, particularly around influence and implementation. Specifically, it was unclear how the board would be empowered to intervene and challenge on poor attainment or other issues, and their capacity to deliver. It was also thought that an annual report was insufficient to address emerging issues in a timely way.
 - **Targeted Campaigns** – Where the local authority is offering campaigns or other programmes to schools, it needs to ensure that those vulnerable schools under financial pressure are supported to participate.
 - **The Change Agenda** – An assurance was sought that the local authority has available to it officers with the appropriate 'skills set' to meet the needs of the change agenda.

213/12 COMMITTEE BUSINESS

(Agenda No. 7)

The committee felt that updates should be moved to the beginning of the next meeting's agenda to avoid a rush through at the end.

Rachel Dunn – Senior Democracy Officer (RD) gave an update on the co-opted member vacancies. At the last cycle of advertising, only one candidate came forward who was ultimately unselected as they relocated out of the county. RD let the committee know that the next round of adverts were coming up and any suggestions of candidates would be welcome.

Lisa Michelson – Scrutiny Officer (LM) made the committee aware of the recent cabinet decision that expanded the committee’s remit to include Adult Education.

CW invited all committee members to suggest items for future agendas.

214/12 MATTERS OF REPORT

(Agenda No. 8)

The ‘Preparing Young People for Employment’ seminar has been rescheduled for the 5th of September beginning at 10.00am in County Hall. All committee members are invited to attend.

MW let the committee know that Lorna Caldicott would attend the next meeting to provide an update on the Troubled Families Initiative, now called Thriving Families. He mentioned that there may be a forthcoming offer for committee members to join a working group with officers on this initiative.

MW also informed the committee that the situation regarding Outdoors Centres has clarified. The service has taken the recommendations provided by the committee on the appropriate legal status.

The focus topic for the next meeting will be a discussion on the implementation of the Early Intervention hubs.

215/12 CLOSE OF MEETING

(Agenda No. 9)

The meeting finished at 13.15.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing

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