

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES REVIEW COMMITTEE 2008/2009

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 To present a summary of the work of the Children's Services Review Committee during 2008-09.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 This is the seventh Annual Report of the Review Committee and the fourth with its remit as the Children's Services Review Committee.

3. Operation of the Committee

- 3.1 There have been 11 meetings of the Committee; one more than scheduled and 60 items of business were considered. In addition to the Review Committee meetings a significant amount of committee business was undertaken by working groups.
- 3.2 The Committee has continued to itemise business according to priority, distinguishing between those reports which are for scrutiny (limited in number to allow for detailed questioning) and those reports which can be taken without discussion (unless any Member requests discussion of the item). This has allowed the Committee to manage an increasing workload without extending the length of the meetings unreasonably.

4. Policy Review

Alcohol & Young People

- 4.1 A working group led this review and presented their final report to Committee in April. A previous investigation of youth disorder in 2007/08 showed that young people's access to alcohol was a key issue, not only in contributing to anti-social behaviour, but also impacting on their own health and well-being. Some interesting evidence emerged from the review. For example, cheap alcohol was not necessarily a factor in young people's drinking because of the ease with which some young people will get hold of substances. There were also some missed opportunities through school-based education and the recommendations are intended to address that.

Skills and Learning

- 4.2 A working group was set up to investigate the support for young people to match employer expectations in being 'work-ready'.
- 4.3 What was immediately apparent to the working group was the vast agenda and the group spent some time initially setting itself more a specific remit which tried to narrow this down to something deliverable. This involved starting to look to ensuring that education and training is effective and relevant, and this also involves asking employers what they think is relevant.
- 4.4 The working group has met three times taking evidence from the Council's lead officer for new Diplomas and from the Council's business support team. Since the working group agreed its scope, the economic downturn has worsened and with it the jobs market for young people. The working group still has evidence to take in the forthcoming year and may revise the scope of the work in light of the current challenges of the workforce as a whole.

Children's Emotional & Mental Health

- 4.5 The Committee was informed that 1 in 4 children and young people in Sunderland have some form of mental health problem, and decided this was an issue worth investigating further. A single evidence gathering session was held on 12 December 2008 to take evidence from the Head of Health Improvement. This included the evaluation of services and a review of Sunderland's Targeted Mental Health in Schools project.
- 4.6 Shortly before this evidence gathering session a National Review of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) published its final report with 20 recommendations for Government, setting out a clear vision for promoting children's psychological well-being and mental health.
- 4.7 The Committee concluded that it was apparent that there was the development of a clearer vision in Sunderland for promoting children's psychological well-being and mental health and a step change in the quality and consistency of services at all levels.

5. Review and Scrutiny

Portfolio Holder reports

- 5.1 For the first time this year the Review Committee regularised the attendance of the Children's Services Portfolio Holder at Committee by including in the work programme a series of reports from Councillor Pat Smith. This gives the Review Committee a chance to ask questions directly to the cabinet member about progress towards achieving the Council's objectives within the children's services portfolio.

- 5.2 Topics covered by the Portfolio Holder included:
- Consultation on the Integrated Youth Strategy
 - Establishing 6 locality teams for Targeted Youth Support
 - Improving the Child and Family Support Service
 - Equality, specifically around tackling racism in schools
 - School place planning
 - Children's Trust arrangements
 - Commissioning of services
 - Safeguarding
 - Risk and resilience strategies
 - Building Schools for the Future and academies

School Places

- 5.3 Consultation on surplus school places started at the beginning of the Council year and the Review Committee, aware that community views of changes to local schools was a highly emotive issue, asked that the options be reported to committee during the year. Scrutiny was applied to the process of consultation, questioning officers about the criteria for a school closure, other provisions in the neighbouring area, remodelling of schools and better use of facilities.
- 5.4 A working group met once to provide comment on the way action sheets would be used containing every option and guiding principles following on from the questions and issues that had arisen from the public consultation.
- 5.5 Towards the end of the consultation process the Review Committee received a delegation of interested parties from clusters in Hetton and Houghton and, taking into account the opinions expressed, made a report to Cabinet to draw attention to the common concerns and to provide full information as part of the decision making process. Issues highlighted included consideration of longer distances to be travelled, replacing nursery schools with nursery classes (and the potential reduction in availability of playing fields), and openness to engage in community level discussion about alternatives.

Safeguarding

- 5.6 The Committee prioritised safeguarding on its agenda following the death of Baby P (Haringey). Members were introduced to Sunderland's Independent Chair of the Safeguarding Children Board who is leading on this agenda which includes implementation of new government guidance regarding serious case reviews. It was clear to the Committee that agencies in Sunderland are already reviewing their safeguarding practice.

- 5.7 The Committee still has some questions around the accountability of Safeguarding Children Boards and the sustainability of funding arrangements and will continue to monitor the local arrangements following the Laming Report.

Children in Care

- 5.8 The Committee receives an annual report on the Council's performance in relation to children in care and this year also gave consideration to inspection reports of individual children's homes.
- 5.9 Studying these reports helps the Committee to appreciate to some extent the experience of children and young people who are living in the Council's care.

Pupil Attainment

- 5.10 The Committee monitored the performance of Sunderland's young people, noting that the percentage of pupils achieving 5 A to Cs in English and Maths were within the top 20 most improved local authorities of the past 20 years. Members congratulated pupils on their achievement.
- 5.11 In terms of analysing the performance the Committee felt that a fuller picture would require assessment of comparative information from other authorities and have requested this in future reports to assess the performance of pupils in Sunderland. It was also noted that for A level results, while the average points per entry had improved in 2008, it was still below the national average. The Committee sought a future report outlining what was being done to bring this up to the national average.

6. Performance Improvement

Children's Services Performance

- 6.1 The Committee was involved in the review of the Children & Young People's Plan and the self-assessment as part of the Annual Performance Assessment of Children's Services.
- 6.2 The annual Audit Commission School Survey revealed some issues that were not meeting teachers' requirements and it continued to be important that these come before the Committee as long as teachers' perceptions were taken in context of all other performance information. Some issues will of course be chosen to be investigated further.
- 6.3 For the first time this year the Committee took a summary of complaints submitted to Children's Services regarding statutory social services functions. The Committee asked in future that they are provided with details of whether practices or procedures were revised in response to a complaint.

School Performance

- 6.4 The Committee routinely receives all Ofsted school inspection reports. 49 inspection reports were submitted for review and where the Committee had concerns further scrutiny of the issues was carried out.
- 6.5 This was the case following inspection of Hylton Red House Primary School, a school in Special Measures. The Committee was concerned that follow up visits had identified little progress so they asked that regular reports were brought to committee to keep the matter under review. Members specifically asked for a report to include what action was being taken to get pupils back on track for their projected attainment.
- 6.6 The Pupil Referral Unit was also in Special Measures and the Committee invited the newly appointed Head Teacher to talk with them about action planning to improve the prospects for young people.
- 6.7 In many cases where schools are placed into this category the Committee has expressed concern that, although performance had been slipping for some time that intervention had apparently either not been taken early enough or was not sufficiently robust to reverse the trend.

7. Conclusion & Recommendation

- 7.1 Members are asked to consider the operation, achievements and impact of the Children's Services Review Committee during 2008-09.

8. Background Papers

Children's Services Review Committee Work Programme 2008-09
Children's Services Review Committee Agendas 2008-2009