

At a meeting of the CHILDREN'S SERVICES REVIEW COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on THURSDAY, 11TH SEPTEMBER, 2008 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Stewart in the Chair

Councillors Ball, Bell, Oliver, Snowdon and L. Walton, together with Mrs. D. Butler, Ms. M. Carr, Mr. M. Frank, Mrs. M. Harrop, Professor G. Holmes, Mrs. C. Hutchinson, Mr. S. Laverick, Mr. A. Pearce and Mr. D. Snowdon.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors P. Dixon, Kelly, P. Maddison, Gofton, Morrissey and D. Wilson together with those from Mr. H. Brown, Mrs. P. Burn and Ms. A. Johnson.

Minutes of the Last Meeting of the Committee

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings held on 10th July, 2008 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor Stewart declared a personal interest in Item 10 – Ofsted Inspections as his son attended St. Aiden's RC VA Comprehensive School.

Councillor Bell also declared a personal interest in Item 10 – Ofsted Inspections as a Council appointed Governor of Hylton Red House Nursery.

Change in Order of Business

At this juncture the Chairman requested that Item 7 'Annual Report on Children's Social Care Complaints and Compliments – April 2007 to March 2008' be heard first on the agenda.

Annual Report on Children's Social Care Complaints and Compliments – April 2007 to March 2008

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) on complaints and compliments received on children's social care issues. The report provided the Committee with a review of the effectiveness of the complaints procedure; a description of the new regulations' and proposals for an integrated Social Care and Health complaints management framework.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Lynne Casey, HR and Workforce Development Manager was in attendance, accompanied by Brian Evans, Interim Complaints Manager.

Ms. Casey outlined the report, and advised the Committee that new regulations introduced in September 2006 clearly set out the parameters within which complaints regarding statutory social services functions could be made. These were different to other complaints, for which specific procedures existed.

The Committee was informed that a Complaints Manager had been appointed. In addition to the improvements that had already been made by Mr. Evans, work was ongoing with the Ombudsman to scrutinise and further improve policies and procedures around complaints about Social Care.

Ms. Casey then advised that under revised regulations and supplementary guidance the Council's Complaints Procedure must now follow a three-stage process for the resolution and investigation of complaints made by children and young people who use Children's Services. The first of the three stages was an informal approach, and the second was dealt with by an independent agency, whilst the third and final stage involved consideration by an Independent Review Panel.

The Council's work around complaints was now specifically linked to the relevant Corporate Improvement Objectives, namely:-

- Delivering Customer Focused Service;
- Being 'One Council'; and
- Improving Partnership Working to Deliver 'One City'.

A corporate database, which could be used to track complaints, was also being considered.

In response to a question from Mr. Laverick regarding promotion of advocacy support, Mr. Evans advised that leaflets were available to all children and young people in foster care, including a website address where direct contact could be made with advocates.

Mr. Snowdon enquired whether there was any benefit in trying to comply with Complaints Procedure Stage One deadline given that the figures contained in the first table on Appendix One stated that 45 out of 62 complaints were overdue after 20 days. In response, Ms. Casey advised that this required close examination,

given the high number of overdue unanswered complaints. Nevertheless, the response times were statutory and efforts were continuously made to ensure that complainants were kept up to date where there was a delay.

The Chairman suggested that it would be helpful if future reports identified the reasons why responses to complaints exceeded the Stage One deadline.

In response to a question from Mr. Laverick regarding how details of compliments could be obtained, Mr. Evans advised that he looked upon staff in the Children's Services Directorate to record any positive feedback. He added that there were plans to take direct action to pick-up on positive comments with staff. Mr. Laverick suggested that the involvement of partners from across the City could be of benefit to this exercise.

The Chairman then enquired whether complaints categorised as "Lack of Services/Resources" were in relation to a particular area within the Service. Mr. Evans advised that these complaints were mainly in relation to the lack of social work provision. A recruitment and retention programme was in place and work was underway to try to alleviate the situation and reduce complaints of this nature.

In response to a further enquiry from the Chairman regarding whether any practices or procedures were being revised in light of the numbers of complaints coming forward. Ms. Casey advised that the Service Improvement Section were picking up issues such as this. Work was underway to break down complaints to allow more time to concentrate on performance management issues. The Committee asked that future reports include this information.

Members having considered the report, it was:-

2. RESOLVED to accept the annual report

Public Referral Unit (PRU)

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which updated Members on the current position with regard to the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) following inspection.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Sandra Mitchell, Partnership and Planning (SEN & Behaviour) Manager was in attendance to present the report alongside Margaret Ferrie, Chief Inspector of Schools.

The Committee was informed of the current position in relation to:-

- the Ofsted report;
- management and staffing of the provision;
- programmes for young people in Key Stage 4; and

- Action Plan and options for consideration in responding to the judgement of "special measures".

Professor Holmes, in referring to page 19, commented that it displayed an overwhelming message on management and leadership in relation to not taking action sooner and the Unit should not have had to go into Special Measures for action to be taken. Ms Ferrie responded that although changes had been made over time they had not been radical enough. Lessons had indeed been learned and Children's Services recognised that the earlier children were guided on to the correct pathway the better.

The Chairman then enquired in relation to the Action Plan, asking how the Senior Management Team dealt with continuous monitoring, for example were they managing more, or involving school improvement partners. In response, Lynda Brown, Head of Standards, advised that strict quarterly monitoring was undertaken. Monitoring reports were also taken to the Children's Services Leadership Team on a monthly basis.

Mr. Laverick commented that opportunities for education were to be encouraged and that colleges could provide more services if some additional resources were awarded.

The Chairman queried next steps for actions that had not been implemented yet, and whether a Learning Pathway for each pupil had been put in place. In response, Ms. Ferrie advised that all actions not yet implemented were progressing at the correct pace, and that work was currently underway with managers to develop Action Plans for specific areas. Personalised learning had been looked into and that plans were in place to revise the entire curriculum.

Members having considered the report, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the report be received and noted;
- (ii) approval be given to the Action Plan; and
- (iii) a further report to be submitted to the Committee in January 2009 providing details of progress, and that the Committee hear from the Headteacher of the PRU.

Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) advising Members of the work undertaken to produce a Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) Annual Report 2007-2008 and Business Plan 2008-2009, and to request that the reports be presented to Review Committee at its meeting scheduled to take place on 6th November, 2008.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mick McCracken, Head of Safeguarding presented the report.

Mr. Snowdon enquired how many people would sit on the SSCB. Mr. McCracken advised that there would be approximately 23 Board Members, and that full details of its membership would be contained within the SSCB Business Plan 2008-2009. There would be a quorum of 8 officers representing 8 agencies.

The Chairman referred to the four Sub-Groups that had been established and enquired whether a potential Chairman would be required to meet any specific criteria. In response, Mr. McCracken advised that Children's Services were looking for volunteers from the following named organisations for the Sub-Groups listed:-

- Communications and Workforce Development – Sunderland College;
- Quality Assurance – Sunderland Teaching Primary Care Trust;
- Case Review – Northumbria Police; and the exception being
- Legal and Procedures – Mick McCracken.

The Chairman enquired further into the background of Jan Van Wagdendonk, the recently appointed Independent Chair for the SSCB. Mr. McCracken suggested Jan himself could brief Members on during his attendance at the November Review Committee meeting.

The Chairman expressed interest in the relationship between Children's Services Partnership Boards and the Review Committee, particularly in monitoring and accountability of those bodies. The Review Committee would seek to establish a relationship with the SSCB and Children's Trust to establish open accountability and a mutually beneficial relationship through future work programmes. Members having considered the reports, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the work undertaken to date be noted; and
- (ii) the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board Annual Report 2007-2008 and Business Plan 2008-2009 be submitted for consideration at the November meeting of the Children's Services Review Committee to be presented by the Independent Chairman

Performance Report and Value for Money Assessment 2007/2008

The Chief Executive (Acting), City Treasurer and Director of Children's Services submitted a joint report (copy circulated) which invited Members to consider the Value for Money Self Assessment for Children's Services and the end of 2007/2008 Performance Management Framework Outcomes.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Keith Moore, Deputy Director of Children's Services was in attendance to outline the report, accompanied by Mr. David May, Finance Manager for Children's Services.

Mrs. Hutchinson enquired about the role of the Virtual Headteacher. Mr. Moore confirmed that Mike Foster had been appointed as the Virtual Headteacher for Children Looked After. The role was not intended to take any responsibility away from the actual Headteacher, but to create a form of virtual schooling, whereby pupils could develop their own personalised learning packages and report any problems or issues they were facing informally.

Mr. Pearce in referring to the BVPI (PAF C69) relating to the 'Distance children newly looked after are placed from home' enquired why children are ever placed some distance away. Mr. Moore advised that on occasions circumstances require children to be placed a certain distance away from home, and that attempts were made to ensure choice was available in order that the child was placed in the correct area.

In response to an enquiry regarding the drive to recruit social workers and whether the Council was confident that sufficient appointments would be made, Mr. Moore responded advising that he was indeed confident, particularly since Mr. McCracken had taken the matter forward so quickly. Nonetheless, Children's Services did appreciate that challenges lay ahead. He added that some suggestions and recommendations would be submitted to Personnel Committee in the near future. In the meantime, the shortfall in staff was being covered by agency staff.

Ms. Carr referred to page 45, paragraph 1.2(ii) of the report and requested some additional information in relation to lower spending on SEN and particularly lower investment in external placements. Mr. May advised that the reason for low spend was due to the high delegation levels in schools. He then agreed to obtain some specific information for Ms. Carr on SEN funding.

The Chairman enquired how distinctions could be made between schools and external placements. In response, Mr. May advised that SEN simply delegated more, and maintaining pupils in a school setting was considered a priority, opposed to opting for external placements.

The Chairman asked how Children's Services intended to improve upon BVPI 43a regarding the 'Percentage of proposed statements of Special Educational Need prepared within 18 weeks including "exceptions" '. Mr. Moore agreed to provide a response to the Chairman.

Members having considered the report, it was:-

5. RESOLVED that the Performance Report and Value for Money Assessment 2007/2008 be received and noted.

Provisional Sunderland National Curriculum Results for 2008

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) updating Committee Members on the performance of pupils in statutory Key Stage assessments and Foundation State Profile in 2008.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Chairman commented that the gap was widening in terms of girls achieving greater results than boys. He then went on to enquire how the issue was being tackled. Ms. Margaret Ferrie, Chief Inspector of Schools, advised that Government had introduced an opportunity for schools to revise the teaching of Key Stage 3 and that motivation techniques to encourage pupils to learn were currently being introduced. Also, the answer lay in asking the pupils themselves what could be done to help.

Mr. Laverick added that the introduction of vocational orientated work could potentially help improve overall results. Ms. Ferrie responded advising that Government had plans to introduce personalised tuition in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 and that past results had shown this had proved to be very successful.

Andrew Baker, Performance & Information Team Leader explained that Children's Services collected a range of results for a variety of different projects. The Chairman concluded that it was important to gain a wider scope of results including vocational results and asked for future reports to include this information.

Councillor Oliver stated that he was delighted to learn that boys had achieved better results this year compared with last year in maths and science. He then enquired whether there had been any suggestions to alter the curriculum to assist those who were not achieving very good grades. Ms. Ferrie responded advising that teachers had adopted new and improved teaching methods in maths and science, and that in future children doing well would well be considered for early entry into the next level. Nevertheless, a change in the curriculum had to be trialled carefully.

The Chairman then congratulated the students, teachers and Children's Services for managing to achieve such outstanding results. He stated that significant progress had been made in Sunderland over the years, and that it was important this was recognised.

Members having considered the report, it was:-

6. RESOLVED that the report be noted.

School Place Planning for the Future

The Director of Children's Services tabled a report (copy circulated) informing the Committee of proposed changes to the timescales for Stages 3 and 4 consultation.

(For copy reported – see original minutes).

Val Thompson advised Members that a report would be submitted to Cabinet in October detailing the options, and that consultation did not end until November 2008.

The Chair then requested that a further report be presented to the next meeting of the Children's Services Review Committee in order to consider the worthiness of the proposals.

Members having considered the report, it was:-

7. RESOLVED to receive a further report.

Ofsted Inspections

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) inviting Members to consider the recently published Ofsted Inspection Reports for educational establishments in Sunderland:-

- Venerable Bede CE VA Secondary School;
- St. Aiden's RC VA Comprehensive School; and
- Hylton Red House Nursery.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Councillor Oliver in referring to page 73, Appendix 1 of the report enquired what type of positions the four new members of staff had taken up at Venerable Bede. Ms. Ferrie advised that the four new members of staff had been recruited into roles within the Secondary School's Senior Management Team.

Councillor Oliver enquired what was left to do to increase attainment. Ms. Ferrie responded advising that mathematics in particular was a subject that required tactical interventions pulling together. Students were to be encouraged to become more focused and observe better in lessons.

Councillor Oliver then queried whether mechanisms had been put in place to help improve the teaching of mathematics, and whether any alterations been made to the teaching structure. In response, Ms. Ferrie advised that leadership and teaching quality had been reviewed. That was not to say teaching was poor, it was mostly good and any issues were being addressed.

Members having considered the report, it was:-

8. RESOLVED that the Ofsted Inspection Reports be received and noted.

Consultations and Publications

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with a summary of live government consultations and publications as follows:-

- Safeguarding Children from Sexual Exploitation;
- Draft Apprenticeships Bill;
- Zero Carbon School Buildings;
- Delivering the Children's Plan – Strengthening Children's Trusts: Legislative Options;
- Proposals for Revisions to Legislation for Schools Causing Concern;
- School's Role in Promoting Pupil Well-being – Draft Guidance for Consultation;
- White Boys from Low-Income Backgrounds: Good Practice in Schools;
- Carbon Emissions from Schools: Where they arise and how to reduce them;
- Impact of Programme-led Apprenticeships; and
- Intensive Intervention Projects for Young People: Information and Bidding Guidance;

(For copy report – see original minutes).

9. RESOLVED that the consultations and publications be received and noted.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and closed the meeting.

(Signed) P. STEWART,
Chairman.