

At a meeting of the CHILDREN'S SERVICES REVIEW COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on THURSDAY, 6th NOVEMBER, 2008 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Stewart in the Chair

Councillors Bell, Gofton, Paul Maddison, Morrissey and Snowdon, together with Mr H. Brown, Mrs M. Harrop, Professor G. Holmes and Mr D. Snowdon

Also Present:-

Councillor Tate

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Ball, P. Dixon, Oliver, and L. Walton together with those from Mrs P. Burn, Mrs D. Butler, Ms M. Carr, Mr M. Frank, Mrs C. Hutchinson, Mr S. Laverick and Mr A. Pearce.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 9th October, 2008

Mrs M. Harrop advised that when supplementary reports were posted out late they sometimes did not arrive until after the meeting and that in future it would be better if an email was sent to the committee members advising that there was a report available for collection at the Civic Centre.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 9th October, 2008 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest

Item 4 – SSCB Annual Report and Business Plan

Mr D. Snowdon declared a personal interest in the item as a Director of Gentoo

Item 5 – School Place Planning for the Future – Progress Update

Councillor Stewart declared a personal interest in the item as a governor of Witherwack Primary School

Councillor Snowdon declared a personal interest in the item

Councillor Bell declared a personal interest in the item as a governor of Hylton Red House Nursery

Councillor Tate declared a personal interest in the item as a governor of Hetton Primary School

Item 6 – Empowering Young People Pilot/Lets Go Card

Mr D. Snowdon declared a personal interest in the item as a Director of the Washington Millennium Centre

Item 7 – Tellus3 Survey

Councillor Snowdon declared a personal interest in the item

Item 9 – Ofsted Inspections of the Sunderland City Council Adoption Service

Councillor Snowdon declared a personal interest in the item as a member of the Adoption and Permanency Panel

Item 10 – Ofsted Inspections

Councillor Snowdon declared a personal interest in the item as Chair of the Board of Governors of Wessington Primary School

Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board – Annual Report and Business Plan

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which advised Members of the work of the Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) and provided Members with the Annual Report and Business Plan.

(For copy report – see original Minutes)

Mr Jan Van Wagtendonk, Independent Chair of Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board, presented the business plan and annual report.

Mr H. Brown asked for a definition of 'Children' as used in Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board.

Mr Van Wagtendonk advised that it was under 18s.

In response to a further question from Mr H. Brown, Mr Van Wagtendonk advised that nationally it was unclear who the Safeguarding Children Boards

were accountable to and that they were not directly accountable to the Children's Trust and that the Director of Children's Services had some responsibility.

Mr D. Snowdon advised that there had been a £15000 overspend on the 2007/08 budget and asked to see the budget for 2008/09. Mr Van Wagtendonk advised that he would provide a copy of the budget and added that this year it was planned that there would be an under spend.

In response to a query from Mr D. Snowdon; Jane Hedley, Senior Solicitor, advised that the Board's Constitution identified Gentoo as being a member. The Chairman added that there was a need to examine the structure of the board.

Mr Van Wagtendonk; in response to Councillor Gofton; advised that the biggest challenges were ensuring the basic system of child protection remained and the development of quality systems. He also advised that there were plans for further integration on the safeguarding work.

Councillor Bell welcomed the new board and commented that previously there had been different organisations which were not communicating with each other. Mr Van Wagtendonk advised that the organisations were working closer together and that the communications were improved.

In response to questions from Mr H. Brown; Mr Van Wagtendonk advised that S47 was the investigations undertaken in respect of suspected child abuse and that the Child Protection Register had been replaced with Child Protection Plans.

The Chairman asked Mick McCracken, Head of Safeguarding, to explain the 'robust safeguarding self-assessment audit tool' used to monitor performance of establishments. Mr McCracken advised that there was a self assessment by schools to ensure that they have done all reasonable safeguarding and that the assessment would put the schools into a good position for Ofsted inspection. He also advised that not all authorities had safeguarding teams and agreed to provide further information to the Chairman.

In response to a question from the Chairman regarding Criminal Records Bureau checking Mr McCracken stated that there was a greater awareness of CRB checking and that everyone who came into contact with children would be checked. CRB checking also helped to protect employees. He also advised of the ISA which was intended to provide a register of people working with children and vulnerable adults which would remove the need for rechecking which currently exists and would cover all workforces.

Ms. Hedley added that 11 million people would be covered by the ISA register and advised that within the Council there were two groups which looked at safeguarding and that all directorates were represented. She also advised of the CRB working group which ensured that all posts were checked for whether there was CRB clearance required.

The Chairman then asked what measures were in place to ensure the safety of vulnerable young adults living in Bed and Breakfast accommodation and what assessments were done.

Ms. Hedley advised that the safeguarding board met to assess the risks and that there was coordination and information sharing.

The Chairman requested that more details be provided. He also advised that it would be useful for the committee to receive information on the future of outcome based assessments.

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

School Place Planning for the Future – Progress Update

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members of the progress made on the School Place Planning for the Future and gave details of the consultation meetings which took place.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Val Thompson, School Place Planning Manager, and Lynda Brown, Head of Standards, Children's Services Leadership Team, presented the report and advised that an information booklet had been produced and that an option appraisal would be carried out.

Professor G. Holmes commented that this was a difficult issue and raised concerns over the use of 'clusters' as he felt that it could be useful to look at a citywide view of the issues.

Ms. Brown advised that it would be possible for the clusters to be merged and that there was 3 in Sunderland North and 2 in Houghton and Hetton. In response to a further question from Prof. Holmes she advised that it could be possible to expand existing schools if this was the appropriate response to closures of other schools.

Prof. Holmes then commented that the financial costs attached to the options needed to become an issue.

Mr H. Brown commented that this was a large scale exercise and advised that there had been different answers to questions provided by different schools. He also advised that the information had been given wrong. The Chairman advised that he was aware of queries on the data and that this would need to be taken up with the relevant teams.

The Chairman commented that the report had stated that action needed to be taken if there was more than 25 percent surplus spaces however Seaburn Dene had a 50 percent surplus and was not going to be closed but have the

Permitted Admission Number (PAN) reduced instead which he did not think made for a fair system.

Ms. Thompson advised that the reducing of the PAN was taking action as it was reducing the capacity of the school and that it was an option for all of the schools. Ms. Brown stated that for some schools the only option was to reduce the PAN. Ms. Thompson added that this was the case for Seaburn Dene as it was located at the very north of the city and the nearest school would not have the capacity to take pupils from Seaburn Dene should it close.

Prof. Holmes advised that this underlined his earlier point and stated that numbers could be added to schools and that it could be an option to close Seaburn Dene if required.

In response to a query from the Chairman regarding the replacement of all schools Ms. Brown and Ms. Thompson advised that Fulwell Infants and Juniors were three form entry schools and that nursery provision for each area was planned to be provided on one site away from schools with existing nursery provision.

Councillor Snowdon advised that she thought there had been well over 100 people attended the consultation at Grange Park. Ms Thompson advised that there had probably been nearer to 200 people attended however it had been impossible to accurately keep track of the number of visitors to the consultation meeting.

Mrs M. Harrop advised that moving nursery children around was bad practice as people often did not have transport. Ms. Thompson advised that it was not planned for there to be any nursery closures.

Councillor Bell advised that it seemed the surplus spaces in the periphery schools were being targeted and that if schools were to close then parents without access to a car would not be able to get their children to school. He also commented that he felt that parental choice of school was unfair as it disadvantaged people who could not travel easily. He advised that there were children attending Fulwell School who should be attending others and that he felt this was wrong as it led to surplus spaces at other schools.

The Chairman advised that there was a requirement to ensure that the exercise was carried out properly otherwise in a few years time there will be a need to review the places again. He also suggested a continued examination of school places rather than doing nothing until the next review. Ms. Thompson advised that there would be ongoing examination of school places to ensure that surplus spaces are managed effectively.

Mrs M. Harrop commented that when schools had free rooms, how they were classified was important; it would be better to have an I.T. suite or library than an extra, occasionally used classroom.

Mr H. Brown stated that people wanted equality and that there was an inequality between Seaburn Dene and Grange Park as it had been decided that Seaburn Dene could not be moved while Grange Park could be. He also commented that the option to amalgamate Bexhill with Town End looked good although if there was a new name then there would be a requirement to have the school open to sponsorship which would remove the Local Authority's control.

The Chairman advised that the viability of all of the options would need to be looked at.

Ms. Brown advised that the new regulations demand that when there is an amalgamation of schools then there is a requirement to open the contract to sponsorship and that the Local Authority would need permission from any sponsor to be able to run the school.

Councillor Bell commented that in London the responsibility for the running of schools had been given to the Local Education Authorities and they had not been able to cope which had resulted in closures.

Mrs M. Harrop asked what the future life expectancy of Fulwell schools was as they were old buildings. Ms. Brown advised that the infants had recently been rebuilt and the juniors was very old. Where the juniors fitted with the new Infants would need to be examined before any potential rebuilding works.

In response to a query from Mr H. Brown regarding decision making the Chairman and Ms. Brown advised that the Officers analyse the information and make a set of recommendations, the Portfolio Holder would make representations to the Cabinet and then the Members would make a decision.

Keith Moore, Deputy Director of Children's Services, advised that the final report would be from the Director of Children's Services.

The Chairman advised that although the Review Committee meeting was after the Cabinet meeting there would still be the opportunity for the Review Committee to make comments.

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Change in the order of business

It was agreed that item 7 – Tellus3 Survey would be heard before Item 6 – Empowering Young People Pilot / LetsGo Card.

Tellus3 Survey

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided members with information on the survey, provided the Members with the outcomes of the exercise and sought Members views on how the information could be used.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Norma Hardy, Head of Performance Improvement and Policy, presented the report and welcomed comments from Members.

Councillor Paul Maddison asked what was meant by 'better school lessons' as referred to in question 6f of the survey, whether it was more relevant lessons, better teaching or something else. Ms. Hardy advised that she did not know however more engagement was important.

Councillor Bell commented that it was second guessing what children wanted out of lessons and that there was too much pressure on passing exams and pupils were not interested because of this.

Councillor Gofton advised that the survey had shown that Sunderland was performing better than the National Average more often than not.

Prof. Holmes advised that the survey gave a good account of young people's lives and asked Members to think about how they would have answered the questions at that age.

The Chairman advised that the number of people reporting being bullied was concerning as 16 percent is a high number. Ms. Hardy advised that there had been a preventative strategy identified.

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Empowering Young People Pilot / LetsGo Card

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which informed members of the success in the implementation of the Empowering Young People Pilot which was now known as LetsGo Card following consultation with young people in Sunderland.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Helen Hunter, Empowering Young People Pilot Project Manager, presented the report and demonstrated the LetsGo website.

Prof. Holmes congratulated Ms. Hunter on her presentation, he also asked where the targets of 95 percent of card holders using 60 percent of their subsidy came from and stated that the list of providers was good and that it

would be interesting to see where the subsidies were being spent. Ms. Hunter advised that the targets had been set in the delivery plan and that the spending was across all of the providers. She also advised that when the project had started there were 10 providers involved in the scheme and that now there were 51 activity providers involved.

Mr D. Snowdon commented that it was aimed at disadvantaged children however it would be better to base it on family income rather than Free School Meals eligibility as only people on benefits could claim for Free School Meals while people claiming Tax Credits could not. Ms. Hunter advised that the eligibility for the scheme had been set by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS) and that it would be looked at.

The Chairman commented that it would be good if parents could pay money onto the card as he felt that it would be better than giving pocket money as the money can only be spent on activities. Ms. Hunter advised that other people had also suggested this.

The Chairman then commented that he felt that 52 percent of people taking up the cards and £33 a month both seemed to be low and that there could be a stigma attached to the card.

Ms. Hunter replied that the cards were seen as the 'in thing' and registrations for free school meals had increased. She further advised that 52 percent was high considering it was a new technology and some people had registered in February when the scheme was still a prototype. 33 percent of new Year 9 pupils had used the cards within weeks of receiving them. She also commented that there would be measures taken to find why people were not using the cards.

Councillor Bell expressed concerns that when young people have money there was a risk of robbery and a possibility of them spending the money on alcohol. Ms. Hunter advised that the young people would not be able to access money using the card.

Keith Moore, Deputy Director of Children's Services, advised that there was potential for cashless catering using the cards as part of the Building Schools for the Future scheme and that the card could become universal.

Councillor Bell expressed his support for this and commented that children often went to the fish and chip takeaways at lunchtimes which resulted in litter and was not as healthy as school meals.

In response to a query from Mr D. Snowdon, Mr Moore advised that there were no plans in place regarding the introduction of biometric identification and that the card was supported by sponsors.

The Chairman asked what measures were in place to ensure the safeguarding of young people using the card and what assurances were in place for parents that the activities were on an approved list. Ms. Hunter

advised that there were risk assessments and CRB checks carried out and all participating venues needed to have public liability insurance.

5. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Ofsted Inspections – 12 Months Progress

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which allowed members to consider the progress in schools with Ofsted Inspections carried out approximately 12 months ago.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

6. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Ofsted Inspection of the Sunderland City Council Adoption Service

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with information relating to the Ofsted inspection of the Adoption Service as the service is registered with Ofsted as a local authority adoption agency and as such is required to be inspected every three years.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

7. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

Ofsted Inspections

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with the results of the Ofsted Inspections for the following schools:

Columbia Grange
Hetton Nursery
Hylton Castle Primary
Springwell Village Primary
Lambton Primary
Houghton Nursery
Wessington Primary
St Joseph's RC Primary

(For copy report – see original minutes)

8. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

Consultations and Publications

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which notified Members about the current government consultations and recent publications within the scope of the Review Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

9. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

(Signed) P. STEWART,
Chairman.