



Minutes

EDUCATION, SKILLS AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE EDUCATION, SKILLS AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON TUESDAY 14 OCTOBER 2014, IN MEZZANINE ROOM 2, COUNTY HALL, AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT 12.30 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 1.58 PM.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Margaret Aston, John Chilver, Avril Davies, Dev Dhillon (Vice-Chairman), Phil Gomm, Paul Irwin, Valerie Letheren (Chairman), Wendy Mallen, Mark Shaw, Robin Stuchbury, David Watson and Katrina Wood

CO-OPTED MEMBERS PRESENT

None

GUESTS PRESENT

Angela Macpherson

OFFICERS PRESENT

Trevor Boyd, Michael Carr, David Johnston and David Moran

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from David Babb, Michael Moore and Monique Nowers.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

3 CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - INQUIRY MEMBERSHIP CO-OPTION OF ADDITIONAL MEMBER

The Chairman explained the format of the meeting and advised members that although the agenda papers included the Draft Children's Services Improvement Plan as a pink confidential report, this information was now able to be discussed in public, therefore the meeting would remain open.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



The Chairman also introduced Mrs Avril Davies who she proposed should join the Committee's Improving Children's Services Inquiry as a co-opted member. Mrs Davies was very experienced and had been an adviser for the Centre for Public Scrutiny, as well as chairing Task and Finish Groups for Buckinghamshire County Council.

RESOLVED

The Committee agreed that Mrs Avril Davies should join the Improving Children's Services Inquiry as a Co-opted member.

4 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

That the press and public be included for the following items

5 CHILDREN'S SERVICES DRAFT IMPROVEMENT PLAN - COMMITTEE ONLY DISCUSSION

The Chairman invited members to discuss their concerns and key areas for questioning in preparation for the arrival of the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and her senior officers.

The main points of the discussion can be summarised as follows:

- Concerns were raised about the vulnerability of young people when they leave care.
- A member expressed concern about the clarity of message and vision needed within the service in order to make improvements and resolve the current situation.
- They were questions about the leadership of the Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board and how that Board would drive improvements.
- A member expressed disappointment at the limited time the Committee had to review the Draft Improvement Plan prior to the meeting.
- Questions would be asked about the quality of social work practice and whether adequate record keeping could be achieved in order to ensure that decision makers could make well-informed decisions.
- Although it was very sad that Children's Services had been found to be inadequate, members were reminded that this represented an important opportunity for the Select Committee to be involved. It would be interesting to see the individual project plans once these had been developed, and for the Select Committee to ask questions about milestones and how progress would be tracked.
- The stability and quality of the workforce was another key area of concern. It was very hard to recruit social workers and foster carers at the moment and members were not sure this was adequately addressed in the Draft Improvement Plan.
- Reassurance would be sought around closed or unallocated cases.
- Partnership working was another key area identified by Ofsted. How can the local authority ensure that quality information is provided by Health and other partner agencies. A number of the recent high profile cases too often criticise failures of co-ordination between agencies.
- A member expressed concern about the fact that other agencies appeared to be referring to Social Care indiscriminately – would the new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) counter this practice?
- The importance of Early Help was also identified as a key area.
- Members were also interested to know how assessments were conducted and how risk and resilience were quantified?

- Budget would also be an area for questioning – did the £2.7million additional resources mentioned for this financial year include the £1million contingency that had already been released to support immediate post-Ofsted improvements? Had the Improvement Plan been fully costed? To what extent would the delivery of the Improvement Plan also rest on savings achieved through Early Help services and reducing the reliance on agency staff?
- A member wondered how the Future Shape programme to redesign the County Council, would impact on Children’s Service going forward.
- Questions about how the Improvement Board would work would be useful and whether members of the Select Committee would be able to be involved in that Board, as this was not clear from the Draft Improvement Plan.

The Chairman thanked members for their thoughts and reminded them that the role of the Select Committee was to ensure that the Improvement Plan was robust and thorough when submitted to Ofsted and then to continue to monitor the progress of the Plan on a regular basis. The Select Committee needed to act as a critical friend and in order to play this role effectively, it was vital that detailed information was made available to members in a timely manner.

6 CHILDREN’S SERVICES DRAFT IMPROVEMENT PLAN - QUESTIONING TO WITNESSES

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Angela Macpherson, Cabinet Member for Children’s Services, Trevor Boyd, Interim Strategic Director for Children and Young People, David Johnston, Service Director – Children and Family Service and David Moran, Interim Finance Director, Children’s Services to the meeting. The Chairman explained that the Committee wished to write a letter including recommendations in relation to the Draft Improvement Plan, which would be considered by Cabinet on Monday 20th October and it was agreed that this should be addressed to Mrs Macpherson and would ideally be circulated to Cabinet ahead of the meeting.

The Chairman invited members’ questions.

How does the Improvement Plan enshrine improvements in Children’s Services as a priority?

The Improvement Plan is divided into six workstreams and each has a series of actions which directly refer back to Ofsted recommendations. We wanted to establish very clear leadership roles in the workstreams to ensure that improvements are driven forward. I had a meeting with the Programme Leads this morning to discuss timescales and milestones and to ensure that all six workstreams will move forward together. Several of the Programme Leads have already asked how best to engage with members.

How will you ensure that all partners understand and agree on the multi-agency thresholds document, that it is implemented and monitored effectively and supported by clear guidance? I am concerned that partners have been referring into Social Care rather than dealing with issues themselves.

The Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB) has reviewed the Thresholds Document. This has four levels and has been approved by all partners involved in BSCB, who have issued it and committed to training their staff. Going forward the BSCB will monitor the implementation of the Thresholds Document.

There are three different workstreams which should all contribute to ensuring that more appropriate referrals come into Social Care – these are Leadership, Governance and Performance, whereby all agencies should scrutinise the relationships they have with one another, Improving Early Help whereby services should offer initial support and refer onto

Social Care if this does not resolve a family's issues and also Improving Tools, as improvements in data recording will help partners to refer on more appropriately.

How can we ensure that the leadership of the BSCB will be strong enough going forward?

I can announce today that there will be a change of Chairman for the Board, but I am unable to confirm who this will be just yet. On Monday the BSCB are holding an extraordinary meeting and this will be Donald McPhail's last meeting as Chairman. In addition to the appointment of a new Chairman, we will also be ensuring that the members of the BSCB are sufficiently senior within their own organisation to ensure effective and more efficient decision making at BSCB meetings.

Partnerships with Health and Thames Valley Police are particularly key – where in the Improvement Plan are you ensuring that quality of information from partners can be improved?

Some action has already been taken in this area, through the establishment of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) which will work with both children and vulnerable adults. We are also aware that Thames Valley Police (TVP) had installed some software to gather information and some of the data which was judged to be of insufficient quality by Ofsted, may have actually been due to teething problems with this software. For the future the MASH will enhance partnership working with TVP.

We are liaising with Health colleagues and also with Schools to ensure their input into the Improvement Plan. Within the six workstreams, I have discussed with colleagues the need to include Health, TVP, Schools and the voluntary sector. Mr David Martin, Deputy Cabinet Member for Children's Services will be working on the Improving the Strength and Capacity of the Workforce workstream.

How is the Improvement Plan going to address the issues of the accuracy of recordkeeping so that risks can be better analysed and understood? Also will you be introducing further training for staff in order to improve standards?

All of the six workstreams are essential, but Improving the Quality of Social Work practice is key as this is how we interact with the public. We need to stabilise the workforce and it is recognised that we do have some very good staff. We also need to look at the recording system and ensure social workers have manageable caseloads. Any IT system we commission needs to be able to produce meaningful reports based on the information which is put in by Social Workers. So a combination of training, support and stability will assist the drive to improve standards.

How will the Future Shape programme impact on the recruitment of new staff in Children's Services?

Future Shape is the background for all services of Buckinghamshire County Council. It is the need to achieve best value for any money being spent or raising income for the Council. Children's Services do not sell our service so we have to ensure value for money and this includes paying staff enough to recruit the best people. We are still committed to the principle of Munro and we can meet both agendas – Future Shape and Improving Children's Services.

In connection with Improving the Strength and Capacity of the Workforce, how confident are you that we can offer an improved package which will build in-house capacity? Where are we going to recruit new social workers from?

We will never achieve 100% permanent staff in Children's Services but we must drive agency costs down. I am pleased with the plans we are putting in place to attract new workers and retain existing staff. There is a national shortage of social workers but we participate in Frontline, a scheme for newly qualified social workers, so we can grow our own workforce and we are also considering recruiting social workers from the European Union, although we will emphasise the need for strong English language skills.

Can you reassure me that we have enough social workers and managers to make the necessary improvements? We have issues with staff turnover and sickness levels, so how are you tackling this?

We are tackling this in a positive way, working with people to understand why they are unwell, offering counselling and support to get them back to work. We have a significant proportion of agency staff which has contributed to the staff turnover. We need to treat our existing staff well and this means not just with salary and benefits but offering support, training and adequate supervision by managers.

I have seen other local authorities who have been reliant on agency staff at times of crisis, but have then been able to reduce their agency staff to just 15-20% of their workforce. We will always need some agency staff to allow flexibility but we do need to reduce costs. We also need to ensure that people have better notice periods.

I would like to ask about improvements in the Early Help offer and the Front Door. Can you help me match which actions in the Improvement Plan will match the recommendations made by Ofsted in this area?

If you look at Workstream 4 and Objective 4.1 this explains actions related to Early Help, one of which is to undertake a joint analysis of Early Help needs as part of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) to identify gaps and to inform joint commissioning plans.

The Ofsted report said that the local authority needed ‘to ensure that suitably qualified staff undertake assessments, that these focus on the needs and wishes of the child, provide a thorough assessment of parental attributes, consider historical factors, and analyse risk and resilience factors in detail.’ Again where is this addressed in the Improvement Plan?

Objective 4.6 explains how we propose to improve the Front Door by ensuring that there are qualified and experienced workers in that team and to increase the capacity of the team to cope with demand.

I believe that everything in the Ofsted report has been covered in the Improvement Plan, but who will be responsible for improving standards of social work practice and how will you manage the process to achieve the final desired outcomes – will there be clear stepping stones and timelines?

The Head of Quality, Standards and Performance is leading this workstream and will be responsible for quality assurance. The second part of this is that the BSCB will be scrutinising partner agencies to ensure that they are also contributing to improvements.

With regards to workstream planning and identifying ongoing progress, in certain areas we are already monitoring closely or setting more rigorous timelines and measures. The teams for each workstream will begin meeting next week and they will agree new measures and timelines. It will be important to assess timeliness, quantity and of course quality and this will be monitored and reported on.

The Ofsted report flagged up issues concerning support for our care leavers and I am not reassured by the Improvement Plan that we are responding in a robust way. Young People leaving care are very vulnerable and I am concerned about this.

This will be included in the Improving Services for Children on the Edge of Care, in Care and Permanence Planning workstream. We need to protect care leavers and provide them with opportunities when they leave care.

We understand that you have had a further meeting with the Department of Education, are you able to give us an update on the outcome of this meeting?

The Department of Education have spoken to the Minister and he is minded to issue a directive that BCC should have an Adviser to work with us but we do not know who this would

be, how long they would be involved and whether this would be on a full time or part time basis. Our Chief Executive would chair the Improvement Board and we would look to invite people from other local authorities to join us to give us the benefit of their experience. The Chief Executive is now intending to correspond with the Minister regarding the suggested appointment of an Adviser.

How are you progressing with recruiting additional staff for the First Response team?

We hope to be able to convert some agency staff to permanent employees but this has not begun yet. We hope to get more permanent staff into this team but it will take some time.

When will we see some improvements in the support for care leavers, this is so important?

We are implementing a 'Staying Put' policy which will allow foster carers to keep young people with them after they come of age. We have also had a significant number of young people go on to university which provides a great environment for them to develop further. We need to work closely with District Council colleagues around suitable housing placements and tenancy support services for care leavers. The success of care planning for care leavers is also hugely dependent on how well the young people engage with the aftercare team – sometimes individuals just want to strike out on their own once they get the chance.

Once the six workstreams have been further developed they will each have their own project plans with milestones, which could be presented to the Committee at a future meeting.

The Chairman asked for an explanation of the expenditure that was required to support the Improvement Plan, as the document provided to the Committee did not contain a full breakdown of costs.

There is likely to be further expenditure needed in this financial year 2014-15. So far we have been using the £1million contingency budget to kickstart post-Ofsted improvements and we will be asking Cabinet for a further £1.7million to support the Improvement Plan. Cabinet can then seek the approval of full Council in November to allow this additional expenditure. Any further expenditure required in 2015-16 would have to be considered as part of the usual Medium Term Planning (MTP) process.

What about the £4.8 million that Cabinet have already agreed to give to Children's Services?

This was to cover the anticipated overspend on the Children's Services budget due to the increased volume of Looked After Children (LAC) and spending on agency staff. This was entirely separate to Ofsted and had been identified prior to the inspection.

How confident are you that the Improvement Plan is deliverable?

Providing we can secure the additional funding then the Plan can be delivered.

What if you achieve savings through a reduction in agency staff and more effective early intervention services – will you then need the additional budget?

We have put a lot of effort into understanding the ongoing costs of Children's Services and ultimately the improvements should support savings. If there are efficiencies we of course want to realise them but we cannot guarantee what the savings might be at present.

The Chairman thanked all the contributors for answering members' questions. It was explained that the Committee would now consider what they had heard and agree some recommendations for consideration at the Cabinet meeting on 20th October.

7 CHILDREN'S SERVICES DRAFT IMPROVEMENT PLAN - COMMITTEE ONLY DISCUSSION

The Committee discussed the additional information they had obtained from questioning the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and her senior officers. The following main points were noted:

- There was still concern that the actions detailed for improving services to care leavers were not robust enough. Members were concerned for these vulnerable young people, especially in the light of recent child sexual exploitation cases.
- Members believed that it was important that the Committee should have sight of the project plans and milestones for each workstream. The Committee also welcomed the invitation to members to get involved in some of the workstreams.
- The Committee needed to have a role in ensuring that progress was made and to monitor the service to ensure that any improvements were then maintained.
- Members felt it would also be important to monitor the work of the BSCB more closely in future.
- A member welcomed the news that David Johnston was now a permanent member of staff as he believed he was doing a good job. Members were also pleased with the announcement that there would be a new Chairman of the BSCB.
- Officers had given the impression that they were confident in delivering the Improvement Plan. Members had some reservations over plans for recruitment and retention of staff – they hoped this would be successful but felt it should be monitored closely.
- It was suggested that the letter to Cabinet should outline the Committee's areas of concern, request the detailed project plans once they had been developed and explain how the Committee wished to be engaged with the process going forward.

8 INCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Press and Public were included for the whole meeting with the agreement of the Committee.

9 SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY CONCLUSIONS

It was agreed that the Chairman in conjunction with the Policy Officer – Scrutiny and the Team Leader, Overview and Scrutiny would compile a letter which would include the key points discussed. Members commended the Chairman and the officers who supported the Committee for their hard work in recent weeks.

RESOLVED

That the Select Committee would write to the Cabinet Member with recommendations for the Improvement Plan and would continue to maintain oversight of the Plan on a regular basis in the coming months and in 2015.

10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Education, Skills and Children's Services Select Committee will be held on 4 November 2014.

CHAIRMAN