

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 7 September 2010

Present:

Councillor Carmody – In the Chair
Councillors Chamberlain, Chowdhury, Cooper, Di Mauro, H. Fisher, Judge, M Murphy, Reeves, Reid, Shaw and Tavernor

Co-opted Voting Members:

Ms R Kennedy – Parent Governor Representative
Mrs L Lundy – Elected Teacher Representative
Mrs T Sheikh – Parent Governor Representative

Co-opted Non-Voting Members:

Mr S Marciniak – Elected Teacher Representative (Secondary)

Councillor S Newman – Executive Member for Children's Services

Eileen Farrell, Manchester Foster Carers Association
Ian Rush, Independent Chair of Manchester Safeguarding Children's Board

Apologies:

Councillors Akbar, Cox and Keller
Mr D Arnold – King David's Schools
Mr S Marciniak – Elected Teacher Representative

CYP/10/39 Subgroup Membership

The Committee changed the memberships of the Ofsted and Engagement Subgroups.

Decision

1. To remove Councillor Keller from the membership of the Ofsted Subgroup, and appoint Councillor Carmody.
2. To appoint Councillors M Murphy, Judge and Keller to the Engagement Subgroup.

CYP/10/40 Seymour Children's Home

The Chair informed the Committee that he had received a response to the letter of congratulations he had written on behalf of the Committee to Seymour Children's Home following their Ofsted inspection in which they had been rated as 'outstanding'. The manager of the home had emailed the Chair, thanking the Committee for the letter.

CYP/10/40 Minutes

The Committee considered the minutes of the meeting held on 22 July 2010. Under item CYP/10/38, the Committee had asked for an audit of all facilities available under the youth offer by ward. A member asked for this information to be provided as soon as possible.

The Committee also considered the minutes of the first meeting of the Special Educational Needs Subgroup, which had taken place on 16 July 2010. A member of the Subgroup had declared a personal interest which had been recorded incorrectly and asked for it to be amended to say that she was a “supporter of the ‘Save Ewing School’ Campaign”.

Decision

1. To approve the minutes of the meeting of the Committee on 20 July 2010.
2. To request that the audit of what is available for young people under the youth offer by ward be distributed to members as soon as possible.
3. To note the minutes of the meeting of the SEN Subgroup, subject to amending Councillor Di Mauro’s personal interest.

CYP/10/41 Information and Overview report

A report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit was submitted tracking the implementation of the Committee’s previous decisions and setting out their work programme.

A member asked whether the Committee would be looking at the Youth Parliament and the event taking place on the 23 September 2010. The Committee asked the Director of Children’s Services to provide further information on the event about the Young People’s Parliament.

The Director of Children’s Services drew the Committee’s attention to the key decision on Early Years Single Funding Formula, included in the extract from the Forward Plan. She explained that although the decision was expected to be taken in December 2010, because implementation of the formula had been postponed, it was now unclear when it would be.

The Committee discussed the changing role of the Sure Start programme. The Director of Children’s Services acknowledged that it faced some challenges, for example there were instances of parents using facilities where the child was left when they were not working or in education. The Committee was reassured that the new government was supportive of the programme. The Director of Children’s Services informed the Committee that the government’s plans for Sure Start would not be clear until after the comprehensive spending review in October and the Committee accepted her offer to bring a report detailing the impact of the review on Children’s Services to the Committee.

A member asked if the issues over the contract for Manchester Leaving Care Services had been resolved. The Director of Children's Services told the Committee that the contract had been renegotiated with Barnardo's, the existing provider, and that although there had been matters to resolve, renegotiating was preferable to finding a new provider.

Decision:

1. To request the Director of Children's Services provide the Committee with information on the role of the Young People's Parliament.
2. To request that the Director of Children's Service's update on legislation and policy for the November meeting of the Committee include detailed information on the impact the comprehensive spending review will have on services for children and young people.

CYP/10/42 Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service

This item was withdrawn from the agenda.

CYP/10/43 Update on Legislation and Policy

The Director of Children's Services provided a verbal update to the Committee on developments that had taken place in legislation and policy:

- It was now confirmed that Cheetham Hill Primary school was the only school in Manchester due to become a new style academy. The Director of Children's Services was unsure of exactly when the change would be official. There were also five new academies under the Manchester model opening this September.
- Guidance given by the new government appeared to be taking the form of delivering on outcomes, rather than targets.
- It was no longer a requirement to have a Children's Trust, however the Children's Trust Executive had agreed to retain their existing robust partnership.

A member told the Committee that the figures on school attendance for the previous academic year had been released and showed improvement in the city. She attributed this to the city wide Attendance Publicity Campaign and the measures that were simultaneously implemented by Children's Services to directly target children with low attendance levels. The Director of Children's Services informed the Committee that attainment had increased at key stage 4 (5 GCSE's A*-C) by 14% since 2007. This was the greatest increase in Greater Manchester and signalled a closing of the gap nationally from having 13 schools below the floor target 10 years ago, there were now just two.

The Committee agreed to request that future updates on policy and legislation are written.

A member asked how many schools had enquired about becoming academies under the new model, and how many had applied. The Director of Children's Services agreed to distribute a list to members of the Committee. A member asked if it was an option for those schools to become academies under the Manchester model instead. The Director of Children's Services replied that when schools became academies under the Manchester Model, the Council was involved in carefully choosing the sponsor and planning the transition to achieve the main features of the model. The Council was also a co-sponsor. If sponsors could be found this model could be extended but it was dependent on Government funding which would probably now only be forthcoming for the new model. A member was concerned that academies of all types were built with excessive security because of fears over child protection. She felt this created an atmosphere which excluded outsiders, including people from the local authority.

Regarding an incident in a Manchester school in which pupils had discovered indecent images of children on a substitute teacher's laptop, a member asked what the Council's policy on laptops was. The Director of Children's Service said it was inappropriate to discuss the case in question in this Committee, but informed the Committee that teaching assistants and substitute teachers are subject to the same CRB check process as permanent teachers. There is not a general policy on laptop use in schools and did not know the policy for the particular school in question, although there is a stringent policy for Council employees.

Decision

1. To request that for future updates on policy and legislation, the Director of Children's Services provide written reports.
2. To request the Director of Children's Services to distribute to members of the Committee the list of schools that enquired into being academies and those that applied.

CYP/10/44 Family Placement Service Improvement Update

The Committee welcomed Eileen Farrell from Manchester Foster Carers Association (MFCA) for this item. A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted to provide an update to the committee on the progress of the Family Placement Improvement Project since the last update in March 2010. The Director of Children's Services explained that the report covered developments in recruitment and retention of foster carers, the budgets and the central placement team which was being established.

The Chair invited Ms Farrell to give her views on the report. She told the Committee that the report gave a true picture of the situation and acknowledged that recruitment and retention of foster carers remained the biggest challenge for the Family Placement Service. MFCA recently carried out an exercise in which they spoke to foster carers about their fees. It transpired that although it appeared as if agencies were paying carers a lot more than the Council was, once the additional benefits the Council provided, such as clothing, were taken into account the difference was not that great. Ms Farrell also informed the Committee that some agencies paid for gas

and electric checks on homes, but the Council did not. The Committee asked the Director of Children's Services to look into the feasibility of the Council paying for these checks. The Committee asked if they could receive details on the differences between agency foster carers and Council foster carers. The Director of Children's Services said a report containing this had been provided to the Committee previously, and agreed to review the analysis. She pointed out that agencies may not make the information available.

Ms Farrell said there was a problem with accurately communicating the impact that becoming a foster carer would have. People who had expressed interest in becoming foster carers were often told that it would not have a big impact on their life financially or in terms of lifestyle, which is not true and needs to be communicated properly. A member expressed surprise that potential foster carers were being told this.

The Committee discussed the campaign that had taken place at the end of 2009 and the challenge of recruiting and retaining foster carers. The campaign attracted a large number of enquiries but only 3% were approved. The Director of Children's Services pointed out this figure was similar to other Greater Manchester authorities. The Head of Family Placement Service acknowledged it was disappointing but was hopeful more people would come forward because of the campaign in the future, given that the decision to become a foster carer was a big commitment. In response to a member asking how much the campaign had cost, the Director of Children's Services explained that because of changes in budgetary arrangements, the campaign had been paid for out of the Communications Directorate's budget.

A member was concerned that social workers were waiting too long before intervening in cases and that increased the risk of the children coming to harm, although she acknowledged that the Council would be at risk of criticism for intervening too early. The Director of Children's Services said that whilst they would never leave a child in a situation they should not be in, their aim was for children to be kept safely at home. Numbers of looked after children were unusually high in Manchester, and generally remained steady. There had been, however, an anomalous jump in the number in July which may lead to an overspend.

In reference to paragraph 2.1, a member asked exactly how many of the supervising social worker positions had been filled. The Head of Family Placement Services said that they hoped to fill all the positions within a fortnight. The seven remaining positions had been filled by agency staff so the work was not being neglected.

A member commented that the graphs in the report would be more helpful if they included more information beyond just the number of new placements and households. Another member asked where the data had come from, and if there was a reason behind the large changes of some other authorities. The Head of Family Placement Services explained that the data was new and they did not have qualitative information on the figures. The Committee requested that she provide further background information for its October meeting, including comparison with other core cities.

The Committee discussed the reasons why some young people went in and out of care. A member suggested that the young people who went back home from care

sometimes found that the relationship with their parents had deteriorated and the aim should also be to challenge parents to be better. The Head of District Delivery said that the reasons for children being taken into, and out of, care varied. Often, in fact, older adolescents do better at home after having been taken into care when younger.

A member asked whether it was feasible for young people currently or previously in care to be involved in the recruitment of foster carers and their training process. Barnardo's already did some work along these lines with care leavers. The Director of Children's Services said that children in care had been involved with the recruitment previously and they were currently discussing repeating this following discussion at the Care to Change Council. She agreed to discuss with Barnardo's the work they were doing and see if the Council recruitment and training process could benefit from a similar approach. Ms Farrell informed the Committee that the MFCA already worked with looked after children on the recruitment and assessment of foster carers.

The Head of District Provision informed the Committee there are approximately 44 disabled looked after children in the city, which is a stable figure. There is a dedicated team for safeguarding disabled children within the Fostering Service. The Director of Children Services said for disabled children there can be additional concerns over communication and ensuring that the child is understood correctly.

Decision

1. To request the Director of Children's Services provide an updated comparison of what is provided for Council foster carers and agency foster carers
2. To request the Director of Children's Services investigate the feasibility of the Council paying for the gas and electric checks to be carried out, which are currently paid for by foster carers.
3. To request the Head of Family Placement Services provide further information on the graphs included in the report. For the information to include:
 - The reasons behind significant changes in some authorities;
 - Whether Manchester can learn from the experience and practice in other authorities;
 - A comparison of Manchester with other core cities.
4. To request the Director of Children's Services discuss with Barnardo's their work involving young people currently or previously in care in the recruitment and training process of foster carers and to investigate the feasibility of the Council adopting similar practices.

[Councillor Carmody declared a personal interest in this item as a Trustee of Manchester Foster Carers' Association]

CYP/10/45

Safeguarding Vulnerable Children and Young People in Manchester

The Committee welcomed Ian Rush, the Independent Chair of Manchester Safeguarding Children's Board (MSCB). The Director of Children's Services submitted a report on Safeguarding Vulnerable Children and Young People in Manchester which updated the Committee on progress to strengthen the multi-agency arrangements to safeguard children.

These developments included:

- The rising profile of safeguarding meant the system has to cope with an increased workload.
- The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) has been implemented by an increasing number of agencies, including schools. Further progress is needed to ensure there are sufficient numbers of lead professionals in place.
- There have been some serious case reviews, and it is necessary for the Council to learn from them and ensure transparency over any failings.
- The unannounced inspection is due by the end of November, and the aim is for the service to be rated as "adequate".

The Committee discussed the recruitment and retention of good social workers, which remained a challenge for Children's Services. A member was concerned that the newly recruited social workers were suitable and informed the Committee that social work university courses were oversubscribed. The Director of Children's Services acknowledged that while many people were drawn to the course for the right reasons, it was correct to be cautious about the motivation of others. The Head of District Provision said it was positive that social work is increasingly seen as a good career choice. Attracting and retaining experienced social workers was a priority and it was their intention to avoid the "golden handcuff" approach of some other authorities to retaining experienced social workers.

A member reminded the Committee that the lead CAF professionals had been a concern for schools in the past, and asked whether this had been resolved. The Director of Children's Services explained that previously some people had been wary of being the lead CAF professional because of the assumption that there would be more responsibility for problems. There was now a district leadership team which the headteachers chair in order to increase the support to the lead professionals. Mr Rush told the committee that there are up to 34 000 people who work with children citywide and the more they are accustomed to using the CAF the more used to safeguarding they will be. The Executive Member for Children's Services said currently schools have a duty to safeguard through the Children's Trust Arrangements but the Secretary of State has said that this will be revised in the next education bill to allow for schools to concentrate more on standards. She said that ensuring children's wellbeing and raising standards were not separate, but it was encouraging that schools in Manchester seemed to want to stay in the partnership arrangement.

The Chair asked about the campaign "Great Social Workers are Made in Manchester", and whether it was still a priority to recruit from the city. The Head of District Provision confirmed that it was still a priority and they recruited six to eight social workers from the local area.

Decision

To note the report.