

EDUCATION, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY PANEL

MINUTES OF A MEETING of the Education, Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel held on Thursday 9 September 2010 at 10.00 am in Conference Room L, 2nd Floor, the Civic Offices, Portsmouth.

(NB These minutes should be read in conjunction with the agenda for the meeting)

Present

Councillors James Williams (Chair)
Lynne Stagg
Andy Fraser
Peter Eddis
Margaret Adair

David Butcher (Parent Governor Representative)

Also present

Kay White, Head of Human Resources
Mike Fowler, Head of Transforming Education Services
Stephen Kitchman, Head of Children's Social Care & Safeguarding
Dave Adams, New Business & Improvement Manager (deputising for Head of Customer, Community & Democratic Services)
Susie Waller, Head of Health Improvement and Development Service

12 Declarations of Members' Interests (AI 1)

Councillor Williams declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest as he is a member of the Grandparents' Association.

13 Apologies for Absence (AI 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Cheryl Buggy, Councillor Malcolm Hey and Roger Bentote (Education Representative).

14 Minutes of Meeting held on 25 March 2010 (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Education, Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel held on 25 March 2010 be agreed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

15 Review into “The city council’s use of consultants” (AI 4)

The panel received written responses from:

- 1) Human Resources
- 2) Building Schools for the Future (BSF) Project
- 3) Children’s Social Care & Safeguarding
- 4) Customer, Community & Democratic Services
- 5) Health Improvement & Development Service

in respect of the 15 questions sent to all Heads of Service by the Scrutiny Management Panel in August. The panel heard from a representative of each service in turn, outlining their own individual service responses.

Human Resources

The Head of Human Resources presented the written response in relation to Human Resources and advised the panel that the responses were in the capacity as a head of service as opposed to Human Resources in general.

[TAKE IN RESPONSE]

The panel heard that the use of consultants and agency staff within the service was not common, predominantly as a result of there not being any scope within the service budget to procure these types of service. The panel were informed that as the Reward Partnership Consultants that worked on the Local Pay Review covered the entire authority, their costs were not included in this response.

In the event that temporary staff are engaged within the service, this is in accordance with PCC’s terms and conditions of employment. The occasions when staff would be used in this context would be to cover for vacant posts or specific projects, such as the Systems Thinking Intervention. It is standard practice in these instances to backfill the vacant post by acting-up at the appropriate grade and backfilling the lower graded post through the internal agency, or as a last resort, an external agency.

There has been cover previously to cover sickness/absence for a key secretarial post and currently there is cover for a specialist post that cannot be filled in-house.

In response to questions, the panel heard that;

- All the staff used in response to question 3 were temporary staff as opposed to consultants
- In response to question 7, all temporary staff would be brought in at the same salary range as substantive employees
- In response to question 10, the Managed Learning Environment (MLE) has conducted a qualifications audit across the authority which about 40% of staff responded to. The success of MLE is being reported

through the Employment Committee

- In response to question 12, Learning & Development have introduced a Managed Learning Environment (MLE) to provide a variety of training and development options for staff. The service spends about £25k per annum on professional training & development, which can range from officers undertaking the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) qualifications through to external trainers being brought in to provide bulk training to HR officers as this is more cost-effective than sending officers externally for training
- Use of the in-house internal register has slowed due to a lack of vacancies
- It would be problematic to maintain a register of skills of individual employees without a resource to keep the register up-to-date
- There is a need for certain services, such as Social Care, to record skills and qualifications to enable staff to continue working in their professional role
- The £0.25m over 2 years spent on cover for vacancies was all within actual vacancy budget limits
- There are no projects pending that would necessitate the engagement of consultants

Building Schools for the Future (BSF) Project

The Head of Transforming Education Services gave the panel a brief background introduction to the Building Schools for the Future Project, outlining the requirement for this project to be run by the Partnership for Schools (PfS) and being subject to compliance with standard legal documents and nationally agreed framework agreements. The project involved four major sets of advisers who were selected from a pool of prospective consultants that had been subject to a competitive tendering process prior to inclusion for consideration.

The consultants used, were in the main, selected due to their experience of working on BSF projects Nationally. The result of this was that the project benefited from a wide range of experienced professionals and ensured that the team were well equipped to deliver the project, enabling them to make well informed decisions and changes to personnel where the requirements of the project were not being fully met.

The panel heard that some useful lessons were learnt during the project which included;

- The scoping exercise which lasted 6-8 weeks proved to be invaluable and time well spent. Learn from others before commencing project
- The need for standard insurance indemnities to be significantly increased to reflect the true value of the project
- The downside to operating an “adviser led” project is the possibility of transferring the liability from the adviser to the Local Authority
- The benefits of elected members being advised of the cost controls on

- a monthly basis
- The need to ensure consistent procurement, legal, commercial advice from internal departments and external advisors was a challenge, however, this was much improved by PCC's appointment of a commercial legal contracts lawyer
- Developing knowledge of own staff involved in project will enable them gain the skills and experience to lead future projects

The panel wished to congratulate the BSF team for their thoroughness throughout the project.

In response to questions, the panel heard that;

- In response to question 11, fixed sums were paid to other PCC departments and no payments were made if staff were off work sick. The level of service continued in the absence of any member of staff and all PCC members of staff returned to their home department at the end of the project
- In response to question 15, any money already paid by Portsmouth City Council (circa £3.5m) is non-recoverable
- Whilst it can be considered that cheapest is not always best when engaging consultants, the lowest priced consultants were engaged on this project (from the agreed pool) as it was unclear what the more expensive companies were offering for the extra expense

Children's Social Care

The Head of Children's Social Care provided the panel with some context in respect of the local and national issues regarding recruitment and retention of social work staff. Within the service, there is a combination of qualified Social Workers (SW's) and Social Services Assistants (SSA's) and that staff must be suitably qualified and registered with the General Social Care Council.

[TAKE IN RESPONSE]

The panel heard that whilst there were no problems recruiting SSA's in the current job market, they are not permitted to carry out child protection work. The calibre of SSA's provides the service with the opportunity to develop them into qualified SW's. The service competes with neighbouring authorities in the recruitment and retention of staff with neighbouring authorities paying more than Portsmouth City Council. This is particularly problematic as there is no nationally agreed pay scale for SW's.

The panel were informed that Portsmouth City Council has a good reputation for professional development of their staff; however, the downside to this is the subsequent remuneration on offer, which can often be a catalyst for staff moving on. The service recognises the impact of this and is currently developing their recruitment and retention policy to put together an attractive offer to recruit staff and retain those already employed by the city council. It is felt that this will assist with the issues around turnover of SW's as this is a

main cost area.

In response to questions, the panel heard that;

- An 2009 Ofsted Inspection highlighted the need to focus on filling vacancies
- There are currently five agency SW's; however, four vacancies have been successfully recruited to, leaving one vacancy outstanding. The staff are awaiting final clearance prior to taking up their posts
- Despite the successful recruitment of SW's who have yet to take up post, since then, two members of staff have resigned, two are currently off sick and one is not in work at present
- The city council uses fewer agency SW's in comparison to other Local Authorities as they are more expensive than their own staff
- The difficulty in recruiting experienced SW's has led to the pro-active approach of developing and retaining our own staff and seeking to encourage experienced staff back into the profession within a strategy for which approval is being sought.
- SW posts (vacancies) must be covered due to legal requirements that any Child Protection Plan must have a qualified SW allocated to it
- Whilst sickness/absence and maternity are not covered within the service, statutory provisions prevail which may necessitate providing cover for a particular caseload
- Use of agency staff has proved to be a good source of recruitment with staff opting to join the city council on a permanent basis
- The city council's internal agency is used where possible to provide cover for non-qualified staff vacancies
- The city council works hard to ensure that staff have the appropriate support and training as well as having a manageable caseload
- There is a national shortage of frontline social workers to work in child protection posts
- The service aims to operate within budget and seeks to have the right people employed within the service
- There has been additional funding this year to assist with the increased workload
- The continuity of SW staff is beneficial to children and staff
- The service is working to achieve a systemic strategy to support families
- As an example, an internal foster carer costs circa £15k per annum as opposed to circa £40k per annum for an external foster carer
- Whilst the bulk of costs relate to temporary staff, residential services must comply with Ofsted standards and does utilise the casual pool as much as possible
- The strategy being developed by the service recognises the need to improve the support system for staff and managers, in particular in relation to well-being. The Children's Workforce Development Programme (externally funded) provides support within the first year of work for newly qualified SW's
- The caseload of SW's remains busy but manageable at present;

however, the service must retain the ability to respond to shifting priorities whilst complying with their legal requirements

- Cases that progress to court are taking longer to be resolved, rising from 37 to 57 weeks (Barnardo's Report) which increases the consultants' costs for amongst others: barristers, psychiatrists and psychologists

Customer, Community & Democratic Services

The panel received a presentation from the New Business & Improvement Manager, deputising for the Head of Customer, Community and Democratic Services.

[TAKE IN RESPONSE]

The panel heard that the service, which was formed in November 2009, was an amalgam of numerous corporate functions, from elections and the Lord Mayor's office through to Freedom of Information, City Helpdesk and Corporate Communications. The service comprises of numerous small teams that are vulnerable to the impact of reduced personnel. Despite this vulnerability, the flexible workforce approach (which is being created) will reduce the need for engaging temporary staff.

There will always be exceptions to the requirement to engage consultants and agency staff such as the requirement to run elections and the annual election canvas process. Equally, it is cost effective to ensure that certain areas maintain staffing levels, such as City Helpdesk staff taking council tax payments.

In response to questions, the panel heard that;

- Whilst staff turnover within the City Helpdesk had previously been high, this has significantly reduced in the current climate and whilst new posts are being recruited to, there is no intention of using temporary staff in the foreseeable future
- There was an urgent business need to engage an experienced election management consultant to cover the recent joint parliamentary and local elections due to staff resignations – the need to engage an elections consultant is not likely to arise in the future due to the resilience that is being built within the service
- There is currently a resilience building exercise taking place to cross-train staff to ensure the service can flexibly respond.

Health Improvement & Development Service

The Head of Health Improvement & Development Service presented the panel with the responses requested by Scrutiny Management Panel.

[TAKE IN RESPONSE]

The panel were advised that the service does not use temporary staff, other

than to cover for administration posts and have only used four over the past few years.

Where the service uses consultants, they are all externally funded and often it is a requirement of the funding agency that a particular type of consultant is used. Approximately 50% of the service is made up of temporary staff (1 to 3 years) funded from external sources. The service looks within its own staff where practical to provide cover.

In response to questions, the panel heard that;

- It is not anticipated that there will be a need for increased use of temporary or agency staff due to the aging population
- The charge of £5,362.50 for changing questionnaires, related to a Healthy Towns Funded project where active travel consultants were brought in to provide consultation work with local user groups
- Irrespective of being externally funded, the consultants used were engaged on an outcome based process and any who failed to provide the required standard had their contracts terminated
- There have been occasions when the service has turned down funding from external sources where it has been deemed that the project being considered would not represent value for money or fit with the long-term strategic objectives
- The funding previously made available has enabled the service to deliver more, therefore, removal of this funding would not mean the city council having to pick up the bill, although it would mean this work not being carried out
- The service is currently working on an exit strategy for a range of externally funded posts which will all end between March to July 2011 due to the proposed changes in the government and NHS
- The service operates a 10 year strategy framework for delivery and would turn down funding if it was not deemed appropriate
- The people of Portsmouth, especially in the deprived wards, will stand to lose the most if the work being done around obesity and smoking, for example, is taken away
- The possibility of using a social enterprise model for future sustainability is being looked into
- The work carried out by the service will be missed by local communities as well as colleagues and professionals from other organisations
- An increased number of those with mental health issues are likely to be adversely affected
- There are various models being looked at including; social enterprise, voluntary sector delivery as well as a programme of disinvestments at present, which requires the service to revisit priorities to identify what needs to be done

Targeted Services

The panel expressed their concern that the Head of Targeted Services had not attended the meeting, nor sent his apologies or submitted any responses to the questions raised by Scrutiny Management panel. The panel request that the Head of Targeted Services provides the responses to the questions as soon as possible and attends the SMP meeting being held on 15th September at 9 am.

RESOLVED that;

- 1. The responses from the Heads of Service or their representatives be forwarded to the Scrutiny Management Panel for consideration.**
- 2. The Head of Targeted Services provides response to the questions previously requested and attends the Scrutiny Management Panel meeting at 9 a.m. on 15 September 2010**

16 Date of Next Meeting (AI 6)

Tuesday 28th September at 10 am in the Executive Meeting Room, floor 3, The Guildhall.

Meeting closed at 11:55 hrs

Chairman