

EDUCATION, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY PANEL

MINUTES OF A MEETING of the Education, Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel held on Thursday 28 September 2010 at 10.00 am in the Executive Meeting Room, 3rd Floor, the Guildhall, Portsmouth.

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

Present

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

Roger Bentote (Teacher Liaison Panel)

Also present

Andy Hough, Head of Children & Young People's Wellbeing & Targeted Services
Julian Wooster, Director of Children's Services

17 Declarations of Members' Interests (AI 1)

Councillor Williams declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest as he is a member of the Grandparents' Association and has a child at Admiral Lord Nelson School. Councillor Stagg declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest as her daughter is a teacher at Devonshire Infant School.

18 Apologies for Absence (AI 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Peter Eddis and Malcolm Hey.

19 Minutes of Meeting held on 9 September 2010 (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Education, Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel held on 9 September 2010 be agreed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

20 Review into "The protection of vulnerable children" (AI 4)

Councillor Williams introduced the completed report of the review into "Protection of vulnerable children" by thanking all members and officers who were involved for their contributions and hard work. The topic of the review can be emotive and wide-ranging but much can be learnt from the review. The Panel received and noted the response report from the Director of Children's Services.

The Director of Children's Services said that the report was helpful, particularly in relation to other services, and that he welcomed attention being given to a difficult area, though some of the wording needed clarification.

[TAKE IN REPORT]

With regard to recommendation no.2 "That guidance on safeguarding children in education emphasise the need for prompt reporting of incidents and avoid automatically referring incidents to Social Care" it was clarified that this mainly referred to the need for prompt reporting of incidents which took place in schools. Action should be taken before incidents escalate.

The Director of Children's Services said that a considerable amount of work was being carried out in Portsmouth on early intervention. Many cases involving child neglect could be dealt with at an early stage, thus avoiding the need for intervention by Children's Social Care. Early intervention is a matter of educating the professional workforce in the city, not just those working in education but in other services like housing.

Regardless of the systems in place it is impossible to prevent child deaths. The Director of Children's Services is confident that effective systems are in place in Portsmouth and if one service area is less than robust the others will compensate for it. The case of Baby P was an example of inter-agency failure where several agencies could have intervened but did not. It is how the council works with agencies that are important. The key message is that Portsmouth has responded to the lessons learnt as a result of the Baby P case and that there are more robust systems in the city. However, improvements can still be made and learning is a continuous process.

One area for improvement is children and Emergency Departments. The Portsmouth Safeguarding Children's Board is currently discussing the matter with the PCT. The recent report by Sir Ian Kennedy, "Getting it right for children and young people: Overcoming cultural barriers in the NHS so as to meet their needs" (2010), shows that the NHS is not sufficiently focused on the needs of children and young people.

The Panel discussed the role of professionals who come into contact with children. For example, do they have a checklist to show that they have seen the child? It was noted that with very young children injuries can be difficult to detect. The role of health visitors, a frontline service for children, is currently being debated at national level in the light of the proposed reforms to the NHS.

The Panel noted the importance of support for families at the early years and pre-birth stages. The Director of Children's Services is confident that there will be a focus on very early intervention.

With regard to recommendation no.11 "That means of communication with schools is improved, for instance, the development and installation of a secure email system" the Panel suggested that a secure email system would

encourage staff to report concerns and incidents and asked if it was possible to resolve the problem in-house. The lack of secure email has been a problematic issue for several years. The Building Schools for the Future programme was intended to provide IT solutions but the new government has cancelled the programme. There are also issues around confidentiality and sharing information between services. A planned local replacement for Contact Point (a national database for all children aged under 18, abolished by the new government) will enable the Education Welfare Service's database to "talk to" and be compatible with Children's Social Care's database. The Panel noted that incompatibility between IT systems was a problem for other services such as between police and hospital IT systems.

With regard to missing children there are clear procedures and the children are recorded on the police's missing person database. It was noted that children who move between authorities are at particular risk of "slipping through the net" whereas a child who lives for some time in a particular area becomes known in the community. Children who move can also be at risk of trafficking.

With regard to recommendation no.6 "That the graduate trainee scheme for social workers has an annual core group of trainees" it was noted that due to a reduction in the area based grant Children's Social Care has offered to cut one of the places on the graduate trainee scheme and the scheme is currently suspended. It is not so much a shortage of recruits that is a problem but attracting staff to children's services. Retention is difficult as even with tie-in agreements for two or three years staff then move to other authorities. However, salary is not the most important factor for staff satisfaction. Other factors such as workload, relationship with managers, support, effective IT systems, accommodation and the local authority's reputation are just as important.

RESOLVED that the Panel formally sign off the review into "Protection of vulnerable children" and forward to the Cabinet for consideration.

21 Review into "The city council's use of consultants" (AI 5)

The Panel received the written response from the Head of Children & Young People's Wellbeing & Targeted Services in respect of the 15 questions sent to all Heads of Service by the Scrutiny Management Panel in August.

[TAKE IN RESPONSE]

The Head of Service defined a "consultant" as someone who provides advice, guidance and support which the Service does not possess whereas temporary and agency staff are used to fill staff vacancies.

The Service has used two consultants recently. A consultant was employed to work on a Special School Funding Formula for a number of days over a period of seven months; the appointment had been agreed with the schools as an appropriate way forward. The other consultant was employed for six

months to work on a strategy on improving attendance. The consultant had worked in another local authority for improving attendance where the approach was seen as successful. Furthermore, some of the expertise required, such as leadership and management, did not exist in the Service.

In response to questions, the Panel heard that:

- A lack of knowledge of existing staff skills can prevent current staff being used to fill gaps. Members noted the Managed Learning Environment (MLE) and the qualifications audit conducted across the council, which the Head of Human Resources had mentioned at the previous meeting.
- The Panel noted that there is a wide range of skills amongst council staff and asked how more use could be made of them. Members suggested that if a department needed a particular skill a request could be made using Intralink or other internal noticeboards. For example, knowledge of the Sylhet language could be helpful as Portsmouth has a large Bangladeshi community. The Head of Service advised that if this method was used requests would need to be specific about what was required. However, if a member of staff works in another area that could then create a need to backfill for them.
- With regard to training existing staff, the Service examines roles with a view to staff gaining external accreditation. For example, the statutory assessment team have the opportunity to gain a BTEC so that they can gain a qualification as well experience.
- Some areas such as educational psychology are very specialist. If a locum is used the daily rate would be high but the council has to fulfil its statutory commitments.
- Using the expertise of retired staff would depend on the individual's preferences. The Service is currently using phased retirement with a member of staff in order to retain their expertise.

22 Date of Next Meeting (AI 6)

The date of the next meeting will be confirmed.

Meeting closed at 11:10 am

Chairman