

MINUTES of the meeting of Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Friday, 6th October, 2006 at 10.00 a.m.

Present:	Councillor	B.F. Ashton (Chairman)
	Councillor	J.P. Thomas (Vice Chairman)
	Councillors	Mrs. P.A. Andrews, Brig. P. Jones CBE, G. Lucas, R.M. Manning, Mrs. J.E. Pemberton, Mrs. S.J. Robertson and D.C. Taylor
	Church Members	J.D. Griffin (Roman Catholic Church)
	Teacher Representatives	C. Lewandowski (Secondary School teachers)
	Headteacher Representatives	Mrs D. Strutt (Secondary School Headteacher)

In attendance: Councillors Mrs. A.E. Gray, T.M. James, D.W. Rule MBE (Cabinet Member - Children and Young People), J. Stone, W.J.S. Thomas and R.M. Wilson

19. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor N.J.J. Davies and Councillor Ms A.M. Toon.

The Chairman welcomed Mrs D Strutt as the new secondary Head Teacher representative.

20. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor Mrs P.A. Andrews substituted for Councillor Ms A.M. Toon and Councillor Brigadier P. Jones C.B.E. for Councillor N.J.J. Davies.

21. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

22. MINUTES

Councillor Mrs J.E. Pemberton asked about the arrangements for replacing Miss S. Peate the former Primary Sector Headteacher representative as someone had expressed to her an interest in becoming the representative. It was agreed that clarification would be provided to her.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 19th June, 2006 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

23. SUGGESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ON ISSUES FOR FUTURE SCRUTINY

There were no suggestions from members of the public.

24. REVISION OF THE 14-19 EDUCATION AND SKILLS STRATEGY AND STRUCTURE IN CHILDREN AND YOUNGE PEOPLE'S DIRECTORATE

The Committee considered a report on new arrangements for the 14-19 Education and Skills Strategy and the progress on this initiative in Herefordshire.

The Committee was informed that the development of a Strategy for 14-19 education was a focus of attention by the Department for Education and Skills. The report set out the national objectives of the DfES Programme, performance and progress to date and arrangements for implementing the Strategy within the County.

The Head of Commissioning and Improvement said that it was in many ways pleasing that only 6.1% of 16-19 year olds in the County (240 people) were not in education, employment or training. However, the greatest concern was that many young people were in low paid, low skilled jobs and had not taken up further training. The challenge for the County was to provide greater access to ongoing training and higher skilled jobs.

The Secondary School Improvement Manager reported on the importance of developing partnerships as it was impossible for any one school or institution to deliver all the national requirements. It would therefore be important to build more local networks within the County with schools and colleges working together.

He noted that there was a statutory duty on the Council to ensure county-wide access for every 14 year old to fourteen specialised, specified, diplomas (the first five to be available from 2008), the remainder by 2012. The diplomas were required to be designed by groups which were led by local providers and employers; designed to provide a good basis for progression to university; be both theoretical and practical and appeal to a different learning style to traditional subjects; and be available to all young people across the country at three levels (1, 2 and 3).

He said that in Herefordshire the majority of level 1 qualifications could be gained in existing school accommodation with some development. Many Level 2 qualifications could be gained on school sites with access to distance learning, mobile resources peripatetic staff and local specialist school and FE provision. Level 3 qualifications could be gained in partnership with HE institutions and specialist local and regional provision.

The Herefordshire area target was to have over 95% of 19 year olds in employment, education or training and to ensure the statutory entitlement to the 5 diplomas for every 14 year old by 2008.

Sarah Tulk of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) said that the Strategy represented an improvement. It addressed the traditional perception that vocational training was regarded as inferior to academic study. The focus was on preparing people for employment. The infrastructure (workforce, providers, facilities, local partnerships and arrangements) capable of delivering the curriculum and qualifications entitlement needed to be developed in the County to allow the initial requirements of the Strategy to be met and provide for implementation of the further stages.

In the course of discussion the following principal points were made.

- It was suggested that there appeared to be a great deal of theory but little practical information on what the Council was going to do and how it was going to do it. In reply it was stated that there was as yet no national guidance on what the diplomas would contain. The 14-19 Strategy Group was inviting expressions of interest in developing diplomas and what it would be feasible to deliver, including an analysis of supply and demand. A bid had to be submitted to the DfES by March 2007. The importance of employer engagement with the Strategy was emphasised.
- It was confirmed that there was no new money being made available by the Government for the Strategy and that resources may well be an issue, although it had to be borne in mind that the Council was providing for the same number of pupils, but offering different things. The Council and the Learning and Skills Council might need to consider providing some pump priming money once it was clear where this would be best spent.
- There were logistical issues to overcome, noting that 14-19 diplomas were provided on the basis that where possible and particularly for 14-16 year olds, the course and providers were to be brought to the student rather than the student travelling to the course and providers. Consideration would need to be given to where specialist teachers and facilities would be needed. The time and cost of travel would also be a factor.
- That whilst a lot of young people left the County for higher education and other reasons, the majority remained. Many young people in the County, particularly girls, had very low aspirations. The limited higher education facilities and low paid employment were factors in this and the challenge was to raise these aspirations.
- That whilst there were as yet no syllabuses for the diplomas work had to continue on expressions of interest required to be submitted by March 2007. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority would eventually determine the content of courses. It was a significant challenge.
- It was asked what could be done to encourage the 240 people not in employment, education and training, given that training was available now but not being taken up and what those 240 people were currently doing. In reply it was stated that the opportunities currently available had clearly not interested a number of people. This was a national issue and that was why the Government was trying to find ways to engage young people and encourage more to stay in education after the age of 16. It was stated that the Connexions service should know the current circumstances of these people.
- Concern was expressed about how the provision of the new courses would be managed. The numbers of children involved were relatively small and it was suggested that if institutions and schools competed with each other to deliver the courses the viability of both could be damaged.

In reply the Head of Commissioning and Improvement said that some concerns had been expressed by the colleges. Discussions were ongoing. His view was that because of the County's geography, as a principle, it was likely to be better if the teacher was brought to the pupils rather than the pupils from across the County travelling to the teacher. He envisaged a potential role for colleges as providers of courses within schools. The LSC had emphasised that it would expect full account to be taken of the role of the colleges. The Secondary

Schools Improvement Manager added that the colleges had acknowledged the need for local delivery of courses. He emphasised that it was in no-one's interest to damage existing provision. The aim was to work together to enhance provision.

On behalf of the LSC it was noted that colleges were part of the Strategy Group and the aim was to achieve a consensus on the Strategy.

- In relation to choice for pupils it was noted that because of the small numbers of students the need for flexibility was being emphasised. It could not be guaranteed that each cohort in each school would have the opportunity to study each diploma at each school.
- It was recognised that devising and implementing the Strategy was a complex task. The importance of monitoring the arrangements for its progression, implementation and delivery were therefore all the more important. The Director of Children's Services suggested in response to the Committee's concern on this point that it would be timely to provide a progress report to the Committee with an action plan in March, 2007, when the first expressions of interest in providing the diplomas would have been received.
- It was suggested that all Members of the Council needed to be briefed on the Strategy.
- The Cabinet Member (Children and Young People) noted that the Council was building on a successful record in Education with standards being achieved above the national average. This gave him confidence that the Council could succeed in delivering the Strategy. It remained difficult, however, to convince parents that a vocational qualification and an academic qualification were of equal standing.

RESOLVED: that a progress report be made to the Committee in March 2007 setting out firmer detail on the proposals under the 14-19 Education and Skills Strategy, including the financial implications and the practical actions required to implement the Strategy and how progress in delivering the Strategy may be monitored.

25. PROGRESS ON THE JOINT AREA REVIEW IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Committee was advised on progress on the recommendations in the Joint Area Review.

The Committee was presented with the Performance Indicators to be used to check outcomes from improvement activity as contained in the Children and Young People's Services Performance Management Report April-August 2006; the summary report to the Government Office – West Midlands Improvement Board on 26th September (summarising progress between 16th August 2006 and 18th September 2006) and the success criteria approved by the Board.

The report noted that the following three key issues required ongoing action: staffing capacity in relation to social workers, the development of short breaks for children with disabilities and their families and the wider workforce strategy.

The Director of Children's Services reminded the Committee that the report to its meeting in June had confirmed that the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) had accepted the revised Joint Area Review (JAR) Improvement Plan. The DfES

had confirmed that the Council had taken the right action on the systems for safeguarding children. It had identified the need for more work to be carried out on performance management arrangements.

There had been negotiations at national level with the DfES on the next steps forward. In summary it had been agreed to set up a Government Office for the West Midlands Improvement Board for Herefordshire. It was intended that the Board would oversee performance until the end of December 2007. It had taken some time to set up the Board and agree the criteria for success. There were two main areas of focus: performance against the JAR Action Plan and the programme for further improvement.

Three progress reports were required to be presented to the Minister for Children and Families. The first had been submitted and showed the Council to be on track to achieve its targets. The second was required in December and the final one in March 2007. The reports would have to demonstrate how the Council had improved performance management and the improvement outcomes for Children and Young People.

Cabinet had received a progress report in July together with the response to the DfES's review report. This had been forwarded to Ofsted and the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI). The feedback was that the Council's approach was a sound base on which to build. In terms of performance management it had been emphasised that once performance had been improved sustaining that improvement was key.

The information submitted to the GOWM Improvement Board had been provided to the Committee to help it to scrutinise the position.

Amy Weir, a consultant working as interim Improvement Manager, was invited to provide an independent perspective on progress. She informed the Committee of her experience in the field of Children's Services and that she was a current Joint Area Review Inspector for CSCI. She then outlined the work she had been doing for the Council.

She commented first on the commitment she had found within the Council to respond to the JAR inspection findings and resolve the issues. It was a complex process, made harder by the fact that there were 17 recommendations to address; the JAR process now usually envisaged no more than eight recommendations unless there are exceptional circumstances. Agreeing the actions and timescales had therefore been a lengthy process which had also involved negotiation with the DfES and, more recently, Government Office for the West Midlands. By the time the final agreed JAR improvement Plan had been produced many of the actions had already been achieved.

The second piece of work she had had to contribute to was the production of the Children and Young Peoples Plan with Council officers and also with partners. This had been delivered on time in April 2006. The associated Children and Young People's delivery plan had to incorporate the response to the JAR and to incorporate other performance requirements in children's services.

She is now working on performance management systems for children's services developing the structure and processes to ensure that children's services performance can be reported efficiently.

Her view, speaking as a "critical friend", was that there had been significant improvements, especially in the area of safeguarding children, where the

fundamental issues had been speedily addressed. She noted the efforts to recruit social workers and the development of the Local Children's Safeguarding Board and the burgeoning development of performance management systems.

She added that the development of the performance management system was essential to ensure there was clarity about what was happening and that action was being followed up. This involved many changes to working practices, new linkages and systems and would take time to develop and to be embedded.

She welcomed the fact that the Council was working with the Institute of Public Care, which had a very good reputation, to address the issues it faced.

In summary she considered that there had been enormous effort and commitment to improve and significant progress. Most of the performance indicators showed good performance though some still required further attention.

The issues which needed to continue to be addressed were: to make sure an effective performance system was in place, which in time should be improved by opportunities offered by the Herefordshire Connects Programme; to maintain the impetus for and pace of progress; and to maximise the benefits which could be gained from the external advice from the Institute of Public Care and others which would help to drive improvement and ensure the best possible outcomes. The improvements in performance to date had benefited from the commitment and enthusiasm of staff and managers in children's services and it would be crucial to continue to support them with strong leadership and direction.

In the ensuing discussion the following principal points were made:

- It was requested that consideration should be given to the format of future reports to ensure that they were more legible, for example the performance graphs, and that a glossary was provided.
- Regarding action 5 in relation to JAR recommendation 1 as set out on page 3 of the agenda papers it was noted that the increase in the number of referrals meant an increased workload for social workers.
- It was asked why the section in the performance management report on page 9 of the agenda papers, setting out issues to address identified by the JAR, did not include reference to the JAR's comment that the Committee was ineffective. The Director replied that the performance management report focused on service improvement issues and that improvements to the Council's governance arrangements were being dealt with as part of the Council's overall Improvement Plan.
- The input of an independent critical friend to the discussion was welcomed. It was suggested that continuing to engage such input in the future would be beneficial.
- A question was asked about the position on staffing and the proposal to consider recruiting staff from the United States of America, as referred to in the section in the performance management report on pages 9 and 10 of the agenda focusing on detailed action to address issues identified in the JAR.
- The Director commented that the aim was to achieve a staffing level for social workers in line with comparator authorities. On the face of it this would require an additional 15 social workers to be added to the establishment. However, she

viewed this apparent gap with some caution and considered that it would be important to test the indication that 15 additional staff were indeed required. The JAR had found that once people were in the system the service they received was good, the shortcoming had been in arrangements for people to gain entry into the system. A full analysis of staffing needs would be undertaken as part of the response to the JAR.

She added that there was currently insufficient funding for 15 additional social workers and whilst consideration was being given to the matter as part of the budget preparation process it had to be recognised that providing that level of funding resource – funding and people was not going to be feasible.

- The Head of Safeguarding commented that there was a national shortage of social workers. Consideration was being given to how to be creative in the Council's recruitment process, opportunities to recruit from other countries with comparable social work qualifications, retention measures, and the scope to encourage existing staff take up social work as a career and obtain social work qualifications.
- In relation to JAR recommendation 16, relating to improving housing provision, a question was asked about the reduction in the number of families being housed in bed and breakfast accommodation and what provision had been made for those families. In reply the Director referred to the report made to the Committee on the issue in June and commented on the work of the Homelessness Prevention Team in helping families to avoid becoming homeless, and the support and advice being provided to those who were homeless to help them secure accommodation.
- A Member noted that, whilst most welcome, the success of the Prevention Team in dealing with potentially homeless families was having an adverse knock on effect on other families seeking housing.

RESOLVED: That the report be accepted, whilst noting the ongoing consideration being given to the staffing position in particular.

26. CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered its work programme for the remainder of 2006/07 and the nomination of three Members to the Transition from Leaving Care to Adult Life Review Group.

The purpose of and proposed approach to the review of transition from leaving care to adult life was set out at paragraph 8 of the report.

It was acknowledged that as part of the process of seeking to bring a sharper focus to the Committee's work routine information reports on school exam results and Ofsted reports had not been prepared. The intention was that reports would be brought to the Committee on an exception basis. Reports could be circulated separately to Members as received and only brought formally to the Committee if some significant issues requiring remedial action were identified. It was noted that a report on current school issues, including performance, was included in the Work Programme for the Committee's scheduled meeting in March 2007.

A budget monitoring report was requested and it was agreed that one should be made to the next meeting.

It was also reported that a request had been received from the Alliance of Voluntary

Sector Organisations in Health and Social Care in Herefordshire (the Alliance) asking for a representative to be co-opted onto the Committee. The initial thinking had been that consideration of further co-option should await the likely review of co-options after May, 2007. However, the Alliance had requested that this position be reconsidered as this date was some way away and there were considerable developments in the Children's Services agenda. It was proposed that representation should be invited on the basis that it was understood that a formal review of co-option was likely to take place in May.

RESOLVED:

- That
- (a) **Councillors G Lucas and Mrs J. E. Pemberton and Mrs D. Strutt be appointed to serve on the Transition from Leaving Care to Adult Life Scrutiny Review Group as described in paragraph 8 of the report;**
 - (b) **the Committee's work programme be approved and reported to the Strategic Monitoring Committee;**
 - (c) **a budget monitoring report be submitted to the Committee's next meeting;**
- and**
- (d) **a representative from the Herefordshire Alliance be invited to attend and contribute to meetings of the Committee on the basis that it was understood that a formal review of co-option to the Committee would be expected to take place after May, 2007.**

The meeting ended at 11.40 a.m.

CHAIRMAN