

BARNSELY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (CSSC)
13TH JANUARY 2015

17. Present:

Councillors Worton (Chair), Rusby, G. Carr, Duerden and C. Wraith together with co-opted members Mr W. A. Haigh and Ms K. Morritt.

18. Apologies for Absence - Parent Governor Representatives

No apologies for absence in accordance with Regulation 7 (6) of the Parent Governor Representatives (England) Regulations 2001 were received.

19. Declarations of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interest

There were no declarations of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interest.

20. Minutes of the meeting held on 11th November 2014

The minutes of the meeting held on 11th November 2014 were accepted as an accurate record.

21. BMBC's Annual Self Evaluation of Children's Services for the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)

Members considered a report of the Director of HR, Performance and Communications in respect of a report regarding BMBC's Annual Self Evaluation of Children's Services for the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

The Chair welcomed the following witnesses to the meeting and invited them to outline the report and the outcomes from the challenge event which took place on 9th January 2015:

Cllr Margaret Bruff, Cabinet Member, People (Safeguarding)

Rachel Dickinson, Executive Director, Children, Young People and Families Directorate

Mel John-Ross, Service Director, Social Care & Safeguarding.

Phil Lawson, Assistant Executive Director, Lifelong Learning, Achievement and Enterprise.

It was explained that within the Yorkshire and Humber Region, they are working to a 'sector-led improvement model' where services can learn from each other in order to improve outcomes. A common framework has been designed which uses a common dataset so that data is comparable. Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) used this self-assessment on their last visit which resulted in a good start to the inspection as we were able to demonstrate good knowledge of our services and performance.

Members proceeded to ask questions as follows:

- (i) With regards to areas of deprivation, we're 47th in the country. We used to use this as an excuse for poor attainment in Cudworth. However, since the new Head teacher has come into post it is now outstanding in everything. What are your thoughts on this?

It was explained that this underlines the importance of a sector led model; we need to use good practice in order to improve poorer performing areas. We need to focus on deprivation indicators as a starting point rather than an excuse.

It is about leadership and we need to recognise e.g. the London Challenge, Manchester Challenge etc.. There was significant resource put into these but there was no money put into the Barnsley Challenge however it has still made improvements as it was based on sector led challenge. National policy shows a clear direction with regards to education and schools and sector led improvement. It is noted however that local authorities still have lots of accountability but little input.

Shafton come in and meet with all other secondary heads fortnightly where they share good practice and their curriculums. Therefore, we've moved Barnsley Challenge Board to an Alliance Board where secondary schools meet up to challenge and improve each others' practices. Through this Alliance they'll commission work to investigate and measure what's being done that's good in order to replicate it.

- (ii) A Member praised the assistance Phil Lawson's department had provided earlier in the week regarding a query and went on to ask in terms of p8 in the report regarding Gypsies, Travellers and Migrant Families, are there enough placements in schools for these children?

It was explained to Members that certain schools within the borough are full therefore cannot accommodate new children. However, service users are still given a choice of available schools.

- (iii) How is priority given to those who want to obtain a place at a school?

It was highlighted that few priority statuses are given out, these may be for looked after children (LAC) and those from e.g. a dysfunctional family where there are safeguarding issues. However it does not matter which community a child comes from, they all get the same treatment with no preference e.g. if they are from a minority ethnic background.

It was noted that migrant families tend to settle in certain areas and we have resourced support workers in these schools, who are also used to help out other schools.

- (iv) Have you seen the enthusiasm of our school leaders change?

The leadership in our schools has changed as well as the enthusiasm of staff, teachers and thereby parents and pupils which has enabled improved performance. There has been a culture change which has shaken up the system and it is a combined effort of different people coming together including private agencies.

- (v) What plans are in place to ensure that teachers are taught how to recognise the signs of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)?

Members were informed that as part of the self-assessment the service identified CSE as an area for development. They are making progress but wanted to make this an area to focus on. A self-assessment has been undertaken regarding CSE and the department are currently refreshing the action plan which includes the requirement for staff training. This will include schools and we will be tracking the uptake.

- (vi) What plans are in place to recruit good Maths teachers?

It was explained that there is a national shortage of good Maths teachers; however we are using innovative approaches to resolve this. The Teaching School Alliance has funding for innovative programmes. Also, the Schools Direct Programme is funded by national government and allows you to train people on the job. For example Penistone School is working with the Teaching School Alliance and has got 40 people doing on the job training, 9 of these are Maths specialists. Through this approach we can grow our own staff and train them how to engage pupils and teach well. Through the Alliance Board, by working in partnership, we'll look at models to share the good practice and help poorer performing schools.

Due to the shortage of Maths teachers, there are a number of programmes which enable teachers to progress faster in this subject and obtain quicker promotion; therefore some teachers are swapping to this subject. The majority of our secondary schools have got Maths teachers but the practice needs to improve. It is also noted that often the best Maths teachers work with the top groups when actually they need to be working with those who struggle with the subject.

- (vii) What is in place to ensure we retain good Maths teachers?

It was advised that there are lots of ways this can be done including financial incentives such as rewards for joining as well as staying which schools can offer. In Barnsley we are the only area to have brand new school facilities across the Borough; therefore this is an incentive to work here.

It is also noted that these teachers want good schools for their own children to attend if they live in the area therefore we need to keep improving our educational standards and school performance. We often find that their children attend our primary schools but then attend secondary schools out of the area.

We also promote Barnsley as a nice place to live as the housing is cheaper than other areas and we have very attractive green spaces which are not available in other areas.

- (viii) Our performance is good in relation to LAC pupils attending school, however how are we following up other pupils?

Members were informed that the department are using a 'Think Family' approach as they recognise that there are often a number of issues occurring which impact on why a young person is not attending school. We therefore look to support the family holistically to get pupils back to school. At times we also have to use legislation to enforce actions.

It is also noted that the more we improve schools, the more pupils will want to be there. With particular consideration for safeguarding and CSE, if pupils don't arrive in school a phone call is made to home to follow up their whereabouts. We are aware that some young people come into school with the intention of being sent home so they can go and recruit others into grooming or they take part themselves. We are aware of this and are looking at patterns and working through the Think Family and Troubled Family agendas.

- (ix) What was the outcome of the peer review meeting?

It was explained that 15 local authorities attended, were split into groups, and were provided with data from each authority to challenge performance. We've got a list of some areas to look at; however they highlighted that there were some areas we weren't celebrating our good performance enough. Also they queried why we had picked CSE as an area for improvement when it had not been highlighted as an area by Ofsted; however we stated that we feel this is an important topic and would expect all authorities to have this as a priority for consideration.

The department advised that should they make any changes to the self-evaluation report following feedback, they would let the Scrutiny Committee know.

- (x) What has been done to reduce our reliance on independent fostering agencies?

It was advised that a number of actions have been taking including reviewing our fostering allowance payments to ensure we both retain existing and attract new foster carers. We also have a sufficiency strategy which outlines this as well as how we will invest in our foster carers to improve their skills.

- (xi) 29 children have been adopted in Barnsley over the last 12 months which is positive; have open evenings helped with this and how is our performance in terms of recruiting adopters and foster carers?

Members were advised that the number of children adopted was a success; however we need to improve the timeliness of decisions throughout the process. Our recruitment regarding adopters and foster carers is working well; however we are aware we still need to increase these numbers. We have met with some of our carers and they have given positive feedback regarding our services.

In terms of adoption our performance is good. In terms of fostering we're tracking our performance on a monthly basis which is moving in the right direction and we're looking to ensure we have sharp and efficient processes.

(xii) Our timescales are long in getting children placed with adopters, however there have been less breakdowns of placements, how will we ensure this continues?

It was highlighted the department are keen that we don't sacrifice good placement matching in reducing timescales, however we acknowledge there are some things we can do quicker. It was also noted that in terms of out of area placements we appreciate this is costly however it is necessary for some placements, particularly in terms of safeguarding.

(xiii) Does private fostering take away a lot of carers from us?

Members were informed that the fostering market is buoyant due to low property prices in the borough therefore we perform well in terms of children placed within 20 miles of the area. However we are aware we still need to do more to ensure we recruit and retain our carers.

(xiv) How many young people do we have without a family lined up for them?

It was advised that the department have done a piece of work to identify the number of children awaiting placements. We also have a monthly tracking meeting regarding every child awaiting adoption. We currently have 50 children waiting but only 13 of these are not yet matched or are placed with adopters but the family have not yet got the adoption order.

We acknowledge that we need to reduce timescales for placing children however it is vital that placements are right. Some children have complex needs, are in sibling groups or are a bit older, all of which take longer to place.

(xv) In terms of adoption, who covers the court costs?

Members were advised that it is the Council who covers the costs. When adopters sign up we are clear about what payments need to be made. There is a national problem with the quality and availability of adoption support which can put potential adopters off due to hidden costs that they are not made aware of by some agencies. In Barnsley we work closely with adopters, to ensure a smooth transition of children into placements and we have received good customer feedback regarding this. We also provide support after the placement which is not always done in other areas.

(xvi) Why do foster carers go to the private sector?

It was highlighted that this is personal choice. The rates we pay in Barnsley are competitive and we're trying to promote our services, particularly as some carers think you get more through a private agency but this has now levelled out. Foster carers have also said anecdotally that they prefer to foster through the local authority as they feel part of a team.

We also need to learn from the private sector and improve our service in line with their good practice, particularly in terms of marketing, as well as using our data effectively to target certain groups. Some private fostering agencies are better at getting specialist support but we have to consider the costs of this. When we have to use independent fostering agencies, they are able to use the money we pay them to invest in their own services. Within our own improvement work we have shown that we have got better at working with partners in terms of LAC, however we still need to get our CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) and health services working better.

(xvii) Why do we not publicise how good we are?

We have reviewed our payment scheme and we're aware we need to continue to market our services. Through the national adoption grant we've got funding for a marketing officer and we want to step this work up if we continue to get the grant.

(xviii) What is the data in relation to adoption based on?

It was explained that this is on a range of factors including our proportion of children adopted, which is good. It also includes the time taken from the court order to the adoption taking place which is an area we need to improve on, however we don't want to sacrifice the quality. Our performance is currently measured in days which the department will provide further detail to the committee on.

(xix) Are the IT systems performing as they should be?

Members were informed that the social care electronic records system is now working well. The department are getting the performance information they need and we can use this to drive progress. New employees coming into Barnsley have been impressed with the system particularly as it is designed around the needs of the service.

(xx) How are schools performing in terms of improving PEPs (Personal Education Plans)?

It was highlighted that this is the role of the virtual head which we have now made into a full time post; therefore each individual child's plan can be looked at, monitored and reviewed. Previously we have been good at looking at the health of our children but not their education.

- (xxi) What actions can our partners take to ensure that we achieve the best outcomes for our children and young people? Are there any key agencies which we have not yet engaged with?

The department advised that we are good at engaging with partners on the Children's TEG (Trust Executive Group) and Alliance Board. Our partners have also signed up to the children and young people's plan which has recently been refreshed. No single partner has not engaged with us as they should have and the relationship with our partners is strong. We need to use data to highlight any areas where we may need to influence our partnership work to enable better performance. We've also worked with our partners to address barriers for them being able to engage with us.

- (xxii) What impact will future council have in terms of the department making improvements to services?

Members were informed the department are currently in a transition period as the structure of the Council changes, but provides opportunity for a 'Think Family' approach. We want to use the opportunities that the new 'People' business unit creates and work with other directorates to make improvements to the borough e.g. to better our economy. We are confident we can maintain good services as well as make progress in the future.

It was noted that partnership and sector led improvement are important and it's not just down to council officers or schools to make improvements. There will be more austerity measures to come; therefore we need to be open to challenges and change.

The Chair thanked the witnesses for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

22. Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP) Annual Report 2013/14

The Chair presented the CPP Annual Report for information. As a number of the CSSC are members of the CPP, it has been agreed that this annual report will be an agenda item on the Council's next Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 10th February 2015, so that challenge can be provided by Members who are not directly involved with the CPP.

ACTIONS:

- a) Members to monitor performance in relation to the time taken for adoption placements, to ensure that the time taken is reduced but quality is not compromised.
- b) Members to consider the effectiveness of the Council's Placement Sufficiency Strategy regarding Fostering.
- c) Members to monitor implementation of work in relation to CSE as well as encourage schools within their area to take up CSE training when it's available.

- d) Children's Services to provide information regarding the timescales for adoption indicators to the committee.