

CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE

MINUTES AND DECISION RECORD

19 JANUARY 2016

The meeting commenced at 4.00 pm in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool

Present:

Councillor: Chris Simmons (In the Chair)

Councillors: Mary Fleet, Sheila Griffin, Ged Hall, John Lauderdale and Trisha Lawton.

Co-opted members:

Michael Lee (RC Diocesan Representative)
Mark Tilling (Secondary Head Representative)
David Turner (Primary Head Representative)

Young people's representatives: Emma Jenner and Lauren Howells.

Officers: Danielle Swainston, Assistant Director, Children's Services
Mark Patton, Assistant Director, Education, Learning and Skills 0-19
Karen Douglas-Weir, Head of Service for Looked After Children and Care Leavers
Sandra Shears, Head of Finance, Corporate and Schools
Helen White, Participation Manager
David Cosgrove, Democratic Services Officer

57. Apologies for Absence

Councillor Brenda Loynes, Coopted Member Julie Cordiner and Councillor Carl Richardson, Chair of Adult Services Committee.

58. Declarations of Interest

None.

59. Minutes of the meeting held on 1 December, 2015

Confirmed.

60. Children's Early Help Peer Review (*Director of Child and Adult Services*)

Type of decision

Non-key.

Purpose of report

To present to Children's Services Committee the findings of a Tees wide Early Help Peer Review undertaken in partnership with the Local Government Association (LGA).

Issue(s) for consideration

The Assistant Director, Children's Services reported that in early 2015 the Directors of Children's Services across the four Teesside authorities agreed to jointly participate in a peer review of the arrangement for early help. The Peer Review / Peer Challenge programme is a core element of the LGA's sector led improvement offer to local authorities. The work is coordinated through the LGA but is managed and delivered by the sector, for the sector.

The review was a two stage process; stage one was undertaken by a small team in May 2015 led by Colin Green, a retired Director of Children's Services. This phase involved in the four local authorities of Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland, Middlesbrough and Stockton to seek to understand the challenges faced and the local data around demand and need. Phase two again involved the local authorities but was much wider in scope and engaged with multi agency partner organisations and included audit and observations of practice. On this occasion the review team was much bigger with senior officers from local authorities, health and the police again led by Colin Green.

Feedback from the peer review has been through a high level multi agency presentation to the local authorities and partners on the findings and an individual letter to each individual authority reflecting the findings specific to the local area. The letter was attached as an appendix to the report.

The letter made recommendations for both local authorities and its partnerships. There were no individual recommendations for Hartlepool Borough Council. Many of the recommendations support the drive to more effective integrated and collaborative working between local authorities and with partners. The Tees Valley Directors of Children's Services would be considering these recommendations in detail at their next meeting and developing a plan for implementation.

The Chair commented that the comments in relation to the services in Hartlepool were encouraging and he extended the Committee's thanks

to the officers involved. There were issues in relation to the sharing of information that were consistent across the boroughs and partners which would need to be addressed as services moved forward.

Decision

That the findings of the LGA peer review be noted and the work of officers to learn from this review and deliver continuous improvement in services in line with the recommendations be endorsed.

61. School Balances (*Director of Child and Adult Services*)

Type of decision

For information.

Purpose of report

The purpose of the report was to provide an update on the surplus balances held by schools.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Assistant Director, Education, Learning and Skills 0-19 reported that every year schools were asked to complete two balances surveys: the first as at year ending 31 March and an update in the following December. The report to Committee referred to the survey carried out at year end 31 March 2015. The results from the surveys were then reported and discussed at Schools Forum. The most recent report presented to Schools Forum on 19 June 2015.

The report contained a detailed breakdown of the total school balances held by each school at 31 March 2015 and details of the planned use of these balances. Schools Forum agreed that a robust challenge would be made to ensure that schools were spending their balances effectively. The Forum also agreed to set up a Task and Finish Group to look at monitoring mechanisms for school balances.

All schools were invited to participate in the survey. All maintained schools had responded to the survey. One academy declined to complete the survey and eight academies did not respond, though one did respond to the second survey. Details of the balances were set out in a table appended to the report which had been anonymised.

The predicted schools balances as at 31 March 2015 was £3.277m (Academy conversions had been removed for comparative purposes). The forecast balances were revised as part of the 2015 spring term monitoring visits to £3.763m, compared to actual school balances of £3.976m, an increase of £0.212m (5.6%). Of the increase, £74,000 related to a late allocation from the DfE for Pupil Premium.

Current practice (in line with previously accepted DfE guidance) was that retained school revenue balances should not normally exceed 8% of the annual budget share for primary or special schools, and 5% for secondary schools. It was also acknowledged that, at a local level, schools were holding balances due to the uncertainty the current funding reform was creating. DfE guidance encouraged local authorities to consider their balances review mechanism in the context of:

- a. schools who have built up significant excessive uncommitted balances;
- b. situations where some level of redistribution would support improved provision across a local area.

Using the Department for Education (DfE) guidance on excessive balances (regardless of commitments) above 8% (primary) and 5% (secondary) then:

- 17 of the 24 primary schools exceed 8% of their annual budget share;
- 1 of the 2 secondary schools exceed 5% of their annual budget share;

The Assistant Director reported that Schools had plans to use £2.473m of the balances to support the 2015/16 budget. This reduced the school balances to £1.503m. After commitments five primary schools would still exceed the 8% threshold. In addition, a further £0.521m had been identified to support the 2016/17 budgets, which left uncommitted balances of £0.982m.

Following officers visits to schools to discuss forward planning, it had become apparent that some schools would need to use part of their uncommitted balance to fund pressures arising in 2016/17. These pressures related to the full year effect of the increased pension costs for teaching staff and the increase in the national insurance rate. A further £0.299m was carried forward in respect of "Other funds"; these include PE Grant Funding, Out of School Clubs and Community Facility balances.

The Schools Forum had asked local authority officers to draft a protocol for consideration. The purpose of this protocol was to be clear about how schools and academies with consistently high excessive balances will be challenged, and how unspent funds may be 'clawed back' to support local improvement priorities. The Assistant Director indicated that the aim would be to ensure funds were spent on the children within schools now; those to whom the funding had been allocated.

A member questioned if any link had been established between under-performing schools and school balances. The Assistant Director indicated that the schools under pressure on performance measures

tended to be the ones with the lowest budget balances. The intention from any claw-back and any redistribution was that the under-performing schools may benefit.

The response rate to the survey from schools was raised. The Head of Finance, Corporate and Schools commented that when the second survey request had been issued all the maintained schools had responded together with one academy. A Member commented that it was difficult to make comment when a significant number of schools had not submitted any information. There was concern expressed at the wide range of balances held by schools and particularly those that held relatively low percentages of balances and how they would cope with a significant unexpected cost. The Assistant Director indicated that there were additional funds to which schools could apply for in such exceptional situations.

A Member questioned if there were any discernible pattern in relation to balances held by schools. The Assistant Director indicated that the issues varied from school to school. The Head of Finance commented that work was currently underway with schools now to produce the schools budget pack for 2016/17.

The missing information from Academies was seen as an issue which would only increase as more schools transferred to Academy status and with the government aiming for the introduction of a national funding formula in 2017/18. The Chair commented that this was an issue he hoped Government were aware of. A member added that with the spirit of cooperation through the Education Commission that the sharing of information (including budgets) would be a key element. The Chair indicated that this was a comment that should be passed back to the Schools Forum.

A Member also expressed some concern in that should a school be potentially subject to 'claw-back' of funds, they may find 'new' reason(s) to spend its reserves in advance of the claw-back. The Assistant Director indicated that there would be a sub-group of the Schools Forum which would look to challenge schools' expenditure proposals and what they had previously achieved; it would be for the school to convince the sub-group.

The Chair indicated that this was a key issue that the Committee would return to in the future. This Committee's views would be communicated to the Schools Forum when it considered the protocol for claw-back of funds, which would be subsequently reported to this Committee.

Decision

That the report be noted and the Committee consider the protocol requested by Schools Forum at a future Committee meeting.

62. Adoption Service – 6 Month Interim Report May – October 2015 *(Director of Child and Adult Services)*

Type of decision

For information.

Purpose of report

The purpose of the report was to provide Children Services Committee with information relating to the work of the Adoption Service from 1 May to 30 October 2015. The adoption service is a regulated service and as such is required to provide the council with regular performance information.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Head of Service for Looked After Children and Care Leavers reported that in order to comply with the National Minimum Standards (2011) the Local Authority was required to produce progress reports on the adoption service which were considered by the Council every six months.

Hartlepool Adoption Service had been fully involved in the recent Expression of Interest of the five sub-regional local authorities in seeking funding to look at the feasibility and creation of a regional adoption agency. The department had recently been informed that this submission had been successful and was looking forward to the prospect of this merger. The unification of the five smaller authorities namely Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, Darlington and Stockton would see the regionalising of services from Advertising, Recruitment, Training and Assessment through to the provision of After Adoption Support services being delivered centrally. It was proposed that a Project Manager would be employed to carry the proposal forward. It was stressed by the Head of Service that the allocation of funding and the recruitment of a Project Manager did not mean the new agency would go ahead.

The report went on to provide the Committee with the regular update on the performance of the adoption service. It was highlighted that the Adoption Panel had between 1 May and 30 October 2015 recommended two adoptive couples and one single second time adopter and the matches of six children (including 1 sibling groups of three children) with adopters for the approval of the Agency Decision Maker.

The Assistant Director, Children's Services commented that in relation to the potential regional adoption agency, there would be a further report to Members in March. There were issues of what elements of the service should remain local and which could potentially be dealt with

regionally to consider. It was considered that matching of Hartlepool children with adopters should remain local. This view was supported by the Chair and Members.

Decision

That the Adoption Agency Interim Report and action plan update for May to October 2015 be noted.

63. Fostering Service Interim Report 1 July 2015 – 31 October 2015 *(Director of Child and Adult Services)*

Type of decision

For information.

Purpose of report

The purpose of the report was to provide Children Service's Committee with information relating to the activity of the Fostering Service for the second quarter of 2015/16. The Fostering Service is a regulated service and as such there is a requirement to provide the Council with performance information on a quarterly basis.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Head of Service for Looked After Children and Care Leavers reported details of the staffing arrangements in the service, training received by both staff and Foster Carers, the constitution of the Fostering and Adoption Panel, activity in relation to the recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective Foster Carers and progress in relation to the priorities set out in the Fostering Annual Report.

The Head of Service highlighted that there were currently 108 foster carers (including 13 of those approved as Connected Persons). These carers provided placements for 144 children. This represents a decrease of one fostering household since the previous quarter and an increase of 28 children placed from the previous quarter. The increase in numbers was reflective of the national picture. There was still pressure around placements for sibling groups and teenagers, though again these issues were similar to those in neighbouring areas.

The Chair queried the recruitment process and what success the service was having bringing in new foster carers. The Head of Service commented that recruitment levels were generally quite good with most potential carers coming forward through 'word of mouth' contact with existing carers. Hartlepool's approach was that when potential carers came forward a worker delivered the introduction pack to the family rather than simply posting it. This gave an initial face to face contact which seemed to go down very well with potential carers.

The Chair referred to the Foster Carer event on Friday 12 February at 7.30 pm in the Grand Hotel and encouraged Members to attend if possible.

Decision

That the report in relation to the work of the Fostering Service in the second quarter of 2015/16 be noted.

64. Safeguarding Children in Hartlepool *(Director of Child and Adult Services)*

Type of decision

For information.

Purpose of report

The purpose of the report was to provide Children Services Committee with information relating to safeguarding in Hartlepool to ensure they are fully informed.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Assistant Director, Children's Services reported on safeguarding activity from 1 April 2015 to 30 September 2015. There had been 557 referrals within the last six months which, if this continued at the same rate, was likely to be similar to previous years. The main reason for referral was recorded as neglect, however, work recently carried out for the Better Childhood Programme showed that this was, in the majority of cases, related to Domestic Abuse and / or Substance Misuse. This was being further explored within the Better Childhood Programme.

Work was currently underway to develop a Multi Agency Children's Hub which would include police, health and education representatives. Safeguarding referrals would be reviewed by all agencies within the Hub to ensure that all information was shared to ensure robust decision making takes place. A performance management framework was being developed for the MACH which will be shared with Committee once the Hub was implemented which was expected to be in June.

As of 31 October 2015 there were 138 children subject to a protection plan within Hartlepool. The Assistant Director indicated that this would be monitored as it was currently looking to be higher than the position in 2014 and may be indicating an increasing trend. The report also updated the Committee on

- The numbers of Common Assessments completed,
- The numbers of referrals by category of need,
- The numbers and details of child protection orders,
- Workforce details, and
- The development of the Better Childhood Programme.

The Assistant Director indicated that there would be an update report on the Better Childhood Programme to the March meeting.

The Vice-Chair queried the levels of workloads for social workers. The Assistant Director commented that workloads had increased recently and ranged between 24 and 30 cases per worker. The Assistant Director indicated that 30 cases were, in her opinion, too high but the numbers were not dissimilar to other local authorities. Interventions with families couldn't be effective if the workers did not have the time to spend with them. Work was underway with health colleagues to look at identifying key workers for children under 4 as there were health visitors and others going into those households.

The Vice-Chair questioned if in light of the current financial situation, the department had sufficient funding to staff effectively for the workload. The Assistant Director assured Members this was the case. There were pressures within the social worker workforce; there were around six workers absent on maternity leave at this time, but the social worker establishment was sufficient for the needs of the town. Recruitment was, however, becoming more difficult as some authorities, including Stockton, were offering 'golden hello' payments for newly recruited experienced social workers. This was an issue being discussed by the Tees Valley Directors group.

Decision

That the update report on children's safeguarding activity April 2015 – September 2015 be noted.

65. Hartlepool Education Commission – Update Report (*Director of Child and Adult Services*)

Type of decision

For information.

Purpose of report

To provide a summary of the actions taken and any impact since the previous report to Committee.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Assistant Director, Education, Learning and Skills 0-19 outlined the

first quarterly update report following the Education Commission's report in October 2015.

A governance structure had been drafted where the Education Improvement Board would oversee the strategic direction and impact of the work done as a result of implementing the Commission's recommendations. The Leadership Group would provide operational leadership to the workstreams, coordinated through a Project Officer. The workstream leads would be experienced Officers with a track record of getting things done. The Leadership Group held its first meeting on 4th January 2016.

Resources had been allocated to administrative and data analysis support. A science expert had been recruited to lead on the aspects of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) contained within the report's recommendations, and a secondary English expert has been recruited. Additionally, an audit of mainstream secondary mathematics provision in all of Hartlepool's secondary schools had been carried out by an independent expert. The outcomes of this audit will be reported to headteachers in January.

The Assistant Director indicated that there was some overlap with education and skills improvement work being carried out across the wider Tees Valley, under the Transforming Tees umbrella. Care was being taken to ensure there was no duplication of work being done across both of these projects, but rather to ensure that resources are maximised and that learning can be shared to the benefit of all children and young people across the Tees Valley.

To fund the implementation of the Commission's recommendations, an amount of £250,000 had been allocated to for 2015-16 and 2016-17. An interim budget was outlined in the report though the Assistant Director indicated that further details would be reported to a future meeting.

The Chair stated that it was necessary to ensure through the governance arrangements that the Commission's authority came through this Committee and elected Members. There needed to be clear reporting back through this Committee as these were public funds being spent. The Assistant Director assured members that this would be the case.

Decision

That the report be noted and that further summary reports be scheduled on a quarterly basis and that updates from the workstream leads be reported on a planned basis.

66. Any Other Items which the Chairman Considers are Urgent

The Chairman referred to the Holocaust Memorial Event being held at Hartlepool College of Further Education on Monday, 25 January, 2016 at 4.30 pm and encouraged Members of the Committee to attend.

The meeting concluded at 5.10 pm.

P J DEVLIN

CHIEF SOLICITOR

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