

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

(Committee Rooms A/B - Neath Civic Centre)

Members Present:

12th February 2015

Chairman: Councillor A.R.Lockyer

Councillors: A.Carter, Mrs.J.Dudley, M.Ellis, P.Greenaway,
R.G.Jones, J.D.Morgan, Mrs.S.Paddison,
Mrs.K.Pearson, M.Protheroe, A.L.Thomas,
Mrs.L.G.Williams and Mrs.A.Wingrave

**Co-opted Non Voting
Members:** R.De Benedictis

Officers In Attendance: Ms.C.Gadd, N. Jarman, A.Jarrett, J.Hodges,
H.Roberts, M.Lazarus, Ms.L.Kinsey and
Ms.C.Brette

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors P.A.Rees and P.D.Richards

Observers: J.Morgan – Peer Review Team
R.Price – Welsh Audit Office

1. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

The following Members made declarations of interest at the commencement of the meeting:

Cllr.Mrs.K.Pearson - Report of the Children's Services Improvement Member Panel – Visits to Social Work Teams, as she rents accommodation through Housing Options, but currently not to any care leavers.

Cllr.Mrs.L.G.Williams - Report of the Children's Services Improvement Member Panel – Visits to Social Work Teams, as she rents accommodation through Housing Options, but currently not to any care leavers.

2. **MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 15TH JANUARY 2015**

Noted by the Committee.

Members asked if the additional recommendations for the Looked After Children Strategy had been implemented. Officers confirmed that the actions had been completed.

Members queried if the recommendation made by the Scrutiny Committee in relation to the Youth Service had been approved by the Cabinet Board and it was confirmed that it had been.

3. **SCRUTINY FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2014/15**

Noted by the Committee.

4. **CHILDREN'S SERVICES PEER REVIEW**

The Committee received the report of the Children's Services Peer Review. In partnership with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), the Council organised for a team of highly experienced Peer Reviewers to inspect the progress made in Children and Young People Services, as detailed within the circulated report.

Mr Jake Morgan, Director for Children and Schools in Pembrokeshire County Council, presented the report to the Committee on behalf of the Peer Review Team. The Committee were informed that it was the first Social Services Peer Review that had been undertaken. It was highlighted that the Review was not an inspection and the team were a critical friend to help assess current achievements, areas for development and capacity for change. The Review Team had been welcomed by the Council and it was noted that there was an absence of defensiveness and there was positive leadership and visible management. The Review Team recognised that in developing the Peer Review toolkit for the future different skills set would be required in reviewing case files and this was a learning point.

Members were informed of the positive headlines that were set in the context of the low base of where the Service had been. These included that there had been an absence of systems which had now been put back in place and the focus had been on back to basics. The next steps were to move from back to basics to aiming for good and the Review Team had seen evidence

of developing pockets of good practice and the national reputation of the Service had been raised. The Review tested the Council's self-evaluation and found that social workers were realistic about improvements and progress was steady and incremental. Performance Improvements demonstrated how the picture had transformed and it was felt that the Service was clearly moving in the right direction.

As the Committee was aware reducing the number of Looked After Children (LAC) was an important element to moving forward and previously there had been a lack of planning on how to move children out of the system. It was highlighted that the deprivation levels were not an explanation for the high rate of LAC as there were other areas with similar demographics that had a lower rate. It was recognised that the reduction of LAC would need to be steady and incremental. Early intervention and prevention work would help to prevent children becoming looked after and it was recognised that Neath Port Talbot had very successful schools, which was also a positive. Members queried if the Review Team had drilled down into other areas that had similar level of deprivation and what was done in these areas. It was highlighted that this would not be the role of the Team, but there had been work undertaken in this area and it was a suggestion for Council to consider. Officers highlighted that the number of children coming into care had slowed considerably. There was ongoing work in preventative services that offer rapid intermediate care as it was recognised that it was best for children to stay in their communities and with their families, where possible. It was noted that creative social work with families are the building blocks to this approach. It was outlined that managers had to be brave and lead and those now in place had the ability to do this, however, it would take time to work through the system and improvement work needed to continue.

Members queried how the Family Support Service was going to be rebooted and what suggestions the Review Team had in relation to this. It was explained that there was no template that suited all and the Council would have to find what suited it best. Officers reminded Members that a report had been brought to a previous meeting on the remodelling of the Family Support Service, which included rapid intervention for moments of crisis. The Service would be targeting specific areas to work more effectively rather than a generic approach.

Members asked what the Committee should focus on in relation to demonstrating quality and capturing the voice of the child. It was suggested that case studies may be a good tool for assessing quality and understanding the journey of a child in care. Members queried what would assist the Service with obtaining more feedback and what structures would work for a LAC Forum. It was noted that there were lots of different ways to set up such a forum and there were examples that had been successful, which could

be used. Officers noted that the Service did not always engage with the most vulnerable families as well as they could. It was noted that some Councils had adopted the United Nations Right of the Child philosophy which then filtered through to other work streams.

Members queried why early intervention and prevention had not been in scope of the review and the Review Team had highlighted that with hindsight it should have been included. It was explained that the Team would narrow the scope of the Review to enable better quality judgements to be made.

It was highlighted that the investment in Children's Services was unsustainable. There was a huge budget for LAC and it was recognised that the Service was not getting good value for money at the moment. This would be addressed by safely reducing the number of LAC.

Members noted that there was inconsistency within teams and queried whether the Committee should receive more detailed information. It was noted that caution had to be taken in receiving too much data and reducing the effectiveness of scrutiny. It was important to measure the right level of information in detail as performance information provides part of the picture for Members to drill down into issues to understand quality.

Officers highlighted that they had already started to address the areas for improvement since the Review and the Services was moving forward from back to basics and effectively managing risk. Members were informed that an addendum had also been produced for the Strategic Improvement Plan that looked at outcomes and the impact. The Service would continue to focus on quality of work through the Quality Assurance Framework and it was emphasised that the voice of the child would be a key part of this work. Officers highlighted that there was no quick fix to reducing the number of LAC and having effective permanence systems in place would assist this process. It had to be ensured that there would not be drift in the improvements already made to the Service.

Members thanked the Peer Review Team for their report and welcomed the findings.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

5. VISITS TO SOCIAL WORK TEAMS

The Committee received the report from the Improvement Member Panel following their recent visits to Children's Services Social Work Teams, as detailed within the circulated report.

It was noted that this was third set of visits undertaken by the Panel to the teams and they had found a significant improvement in morale and staff satisfaction. Overall all teams were said to be supportive, it was felt the reputation of the Service had improved and it was a more positive and safer place to work. It was highlighted that there had been no references to bullying or oppressive practice during any of the meetings. Business Support Staff were also mentioned by the teams for the important role they play. All staff seemed to have confidence in the Head of Children and Young People Services and the Director of Social Services, Health and Housing.

It was recognised that the Chair and the other Members of the Panel had spent a lot of time visiting the teams and time was taken to give all staff the opportunity to express their views. Staff were also informed that they could contact Members of the Panel on a one to one basis if they wished to talk to them privately. It was highlighted that the teams had a good relationship with the Panel and this relationship had taken time to build.

It was clear and evident that there had been big developments in the Service and some of the topics raised were consistent with the findings of the Peer Review Team. Examples were provided of staff feeling listened to and the recognition that the voice of the child needs to be heard. The Panel felt confident that the Service would continue to improve. Some Members felt that aspects of the report were not in the remit of the Committee to address, such as car parking and heating. However, other Members highlighted that it contributed to staff satisfaction and it was noted that the Panel had looked into such issues and small improvements helped to improve staff morale.

Members queried how many agency staff had become permanent members of staff as this information had been requested at the previous meeting. Officers informed Members that 12 qualified agency workers had become permanent members of staff over the last few years.

The Committee asked if there had been any progress with the shop selling legal highs in Neath and what was being done to address it. Members were informed that Trading Standards was aware of the shop and investigating what action could be taken. It was a difficult area to address and as they were not acting illegally. It was noted that Members had previously requested a seminar on legal highs.

Members highlighted that some teams had requested access to a child psychologist and asked for clarity on whether provision was in place. Officers informed them that there was a child psychologist service at Hillside and they were seeing if this could be built upon to be accessed by other teams. Members queried if teams had mentioned any reasons for visits not being made within statutory timescales. The Panel informed the Committee that this topic had not been raised by the teams. Members also asked if there was any scope in social workers having permits that allowed them to park in residential areas, as it had been raised by one team. Officers informed them that they did not think it was possible and it had not been mentioned by other teams.

The report noted that paying foster carers a retainer could be expensive if they did not have enough placements and Members felt that if there was demand for foster carers then there would not be many that would not be used. Officers informed Members that they had not ruled this option out and it would be considered as part of the development of the Service. It was noted that there were enough foster carers for the younger age range and there were more difficulties in finding placements for teenagers.

It was noted that the Panel had helped to dispel myths around what Members do and that it had been good vision from the Leader to put this Panel in place.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

6. **SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN NEATH PORT TALBOT**

The Committee received a presentation on Safeguarding Children and Families in Neath Port Talbot, which included reference to the Internal Audit Report – Professional Abuse Strategy Meetings and Welsh Audit Report – Local Authority Arrangements to Support Safeguarding of Children, as detailed within the circulated report.

The presentation was presented jointly by Children and Young People Services and Education. The Local Authority's duties under Section 28 of the Children Act 2004 were explained to the Committee and the structure of the Western Bay Safeguarding Children Board was outlined. The achievements were highlighted and it was noted that there was now a more confident workforce that were better at managing risk. In addition performance was being evaluated and challenged on a regular basis and the interface between different departments had been strengthened. For

example, safeguarding was now being included in a lot of policies. Safeguarding training was in progress and the Members of the Committee had received training on Child Sexual Exploitation. Another achievement highlighted was the improved timeliness of interventions.

The key findings of the audit reports were highlighted and Members were informed of what steps had been taken to address areas identified for improvement. These included considering children's histories more thoroughly in assessing safeguarding concerns and improved record keeping. It was highlighted that the next steps were to continue to audit performance on a regular basis and undertake peer reviews within teams. It was recognised that there needs to be more feedback from children and young people and it was noted that the process of appointing an Engagement and Participation Officer was already underway.

It was highlighted that Education had moved Safeguarding up the agenda and there was now a better structure in place. There was a Safeguarding Reference Group that reported to meetings of the Senior Management Team and to this Committee, where necessary links were also made to Children and Young People Services. Members were informed that the Reconstruct action plan had been put in place and this had resulted in better communication and joined up working. One of the key actions was to have a peer review system across schools, which was being implemented. In addition, all schools were receiving safeguarding training on a three year basis and safeguarding was a standing item on agendas for governing bodies.

A lot of work had also been undertaken around safer recruitment. It was noted that there were around 50 agencies offering supply staff and all of them had now been asked to meet safeguarding standards. The Education through Regional Working (ERW) Consortium was looking at what the Council was doing in regards to safeguarding, as there were examples of good practice.

Members queried if losing experienced staff through voluntary redundancy and early retirement scheme would impact on safeguarding. Officers assured Members that if the right processes were in place then there should not be an impact. Members asked if safeguarding training was given to taxi drivers as part of the licensing process. Officers confirmed that taxi drivers did receive safeguarding training.

Members queried if work had been undertaken with Health Visitors working more closely with the Service. It was highlighted that Health Visitors play an important role and the relationship was being built up through the Think Families Partnership. It was confirmed that the early intervention and prevention programme receives referrals from Health Visitors. Part of the

development of the Think Families Partnership was recognising the importance of engagement and there being openness and trust from all partners so that issues could be surfaced and discussed openly.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

7. **ACCESS TO MEETINGS**

RESOLVED: that pursuant to Section 100A (4) and (5) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded for the following items of business which involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 12 and 14 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A to the above Act.

8. **PRE-SCRUTINY**

8.1 **The Manager's Report on Hillside Secure Children's Home**

The Committee received the Manager's Report on Hillside Secure Children's Home for the period 1st August 2014 to 31st January 2015, as detailed within the circulated report.

The report provides information on young people, staff and service planning and development. Members were provided with admission information and it was noted that there had been an increase in the number of welfare places. It was highlighted that this resulted in more complex pressures for staff. It was also noted that the reduction in Youth Justice placements was a direct reflection of the reduction of young people in the criminal justice system. The majority of placements were from English Local Authorities. Members highlighted that the original purpose of Hillside was to accommodate young people from Wales in secure accommodation.

Members were informed that the service aims to maximise the time young people spend in Hillside. It was highlighted that it was difficult for there to be effective intervention with some young people due to the short length of their stay. It was a difficult area as legally Local Authorities have a duty not to detain young people longer than necessary and all avenues would be exhausted before secure accommodation was accessed. However, there were cases where Hillside should have been considered at an earlier stage rather than the young person experiencing multiple placement breakdowns. It was

highlighted that Hillside had excellent facilities to offer and there were ongoing discussions with the Youth Justice Board about how to utilise them.

It was noted that there had been an increase in sickness absence of staff, which resulted in one unit having to be temporarily closed. It was highlighted that staff had responded very well and ensured that the high standards were kept. Members queried what affect sickness absence had on the service. Officers informed them that sickness tracking was very good, however, the mechanisms in place to address the issues had not been. There had been a change to operational management and there was now more targeted support, which had resulted in a number of actions being put in place to address this issue. For example, a Human Resources Officer was in Hillside two days a week and there had been support from management in addressing sickness absence issues and the number of absences had been reduced. Members asked if staff were offered counselling services. They were informed that there were support mechanisms in place and further discussions would be undertaken with how to best support staff.

The Committee noted that there had been some excellent work undertaken with improving education provision. It was queried if sickness absence of care staff had a knock on effect to education staff. Officers informed them that staff had responded positively to address the issues caused by sickness absence. It was also noted that relevant training should be offered to education as well as care staff.

It was highlighted that Hillside had commenced the process of repurposing and repositioning the Centre and service delivery and an update would be provided at a future meeting.

CHAIRMAN