

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
HELD ON 17 JANUARY 2017 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.00 PM**

**Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Pauline Helliard-Symons (Chairman), Shahid Younis (Vice-Chairman), Laura Blumenthal, Richard Dolinski, Ken Miall, Beth Rowland and Alison Swaddle

**Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: Charlotte Haitham Taylor

**Officers Present**

Luciane Bowker, Senior Democratic Services Officer  
Lisa Humphreys, Head of Social Care and Intervention  
Judith Ramsden, Director of People Services  
Alan Stubbersfield, Interim Head of Learning and Achievement

**38. APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was submitted from Bill Soane.

**39. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 15 November 2016 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**40. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**41. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Members. In the absence of the public the Chairman read out the questions and answers. The Chairman explained that a written copy of the answers would be submitted to the questioners.

**41.1 Gill Purchase has asked the Chairman for Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee the following question.**

**Question**

Parents and the public have an absolute right to know the truth about what made the Coombes go from a world renowned 'Good' school to one that was classed as 'Inadequate' by Ofsted in less than two years and will now have to become an Academy.

Can the Chairman please confirm (the report that has been presented to this committee this evening) is the full (unchanged and not edited in any way by either officers or Member's) version of the investigation carried by Councillors, led by Cllr John Kaiser, following their investigation into the failure of the Coombes school and that there has been complete transparency in the way this was handled and in the presentation of the findings and recommendations.

**Answer**

It is normal practice for review reports to go through several iterations before they are finalised and agreed by the relevant Task and Finish Group. In accordance with this

practice the report contained in the agenda has been changed from the original version and this has been done in consultation with members of the Task and Finish Group.

There was an issue with earlier versions of the report in that they contained personal data of an uncorroborated nature which following advice from the Council's Legal Team was omitted from the final report.

I can however confirm that the report is a summary of the information provided at all the meetings of the Task and Finish Group and the conclusions drawn. The only amendments made to the report by Members were to add in some additional recommendations. All the members of the Tasks and Finish Group are confident that in the report contained in the agenda nothing of any substance or significance has been omitted and it is a fully honest reflection of what we heard. All the recommendations we have made also reflect that.

#### **41.2 Sue Glover has asked the Chairman for Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee the following question.**

##### **Question**

The Committee regularly monitors and discusses indicators around children's care proceedings and school performance, but there appears to be virtually no focus on adoption or post adoption support. This is a vital service that the Local Authority provides, albeit in a somewhat haphazard way currently. I wonder if the Committee could/should consider adding an additional indicator so that it can be fully inclusive of this area of Children's services and most importantly, understand how some of the authority's most vulnerable children are being supported and where improvements could be made.

For example, is the Committee aware of how many Wokingham families or children are in contact with Wokingham requesting post adoption support? Does the Committee have any feel for how many applications are being put forward to the Adoption Support Fund and how this may or may not be increasing since its inception? And therefore what the latent demand has been for the provision of support required in the borough and whether the current level of support on offer is appropriate? Our recent lengthy experience of waiting over two years for support must surely not be acceptable if Wokingham's adopted children, many suffering from varying degrees of early life trauma, are to be supported appropriately before reaching crisis point. Greater focus by the Committee of this area of children's services provision would be most welcomed.

##### **Answer**

Data and performance indicators for adoption and adoption support are statutory returns to the Department for Education via the Adoption Score Card and therefore the performance of Wokingham and all other Local Authorities and Adoption Agencies is available publicly on the DFE Website.

Adoption data is produced six monthly because the adoption process and indicators for the DFE take a three year cycle in order to ascertain what good adoption services look like. Therefore, to comment on adoption performance too frequently does not assist with understanding the quality of those adoption services.

Adoption data is scrutinised through the Corporate Parenting Board statutory function and by regular statutory returns to the regulatory body in Ofsted. But I will ensure that Children's Overview and Scrutiny committee receives this six monthly report on children's

permanency and indicators which include adoption as you suggest, as I agree this is a highly important piece of the Department's work.

Just for your information, Wokingham are part of the Adopt Berkshire Adoption Agency which has been rated as good by Ofsted in 2016. The service is not haphazard and there is comment from Ofsted about the high quality of work carried out by Wokingham. The data relating to the Adoption Score Card, adoption support and use of the Adoption Support Fund are scrutinised by Corporate Parenting.

I am sorry you feel you have had less than positive service and if you would like to make contact with the Service Manager in Children's Social Care they will be more than happy to discuss this individual case.

#### **42. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

#### **43. COOMBES SCHOOL TASK AND FINISH GROUP FINAL REPORT**

The Chairman explained that this report referred to the Coombes Primary School only, and that no mention of names would be made during the discussion. The Chairman pointed out that most schools in the Borough were good or outstanding and wished to recognise the good work being undertaken by Headteachers and other educators around the Borough.

Councillor John Kaiser, Chairman of the Coombes Task and Finish Group presented the report. He went through the report in detail, highlighting the following points:

- The Task and Finish Group had been set up as a request of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee in June 2016. The Group was composed of six cross party Members and had held six meetings;
- The Coombes School had been rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted that the Group wanted to understand the reasons for this unsatisfactory result in order to prevent the same from happening to other schools in the Borough;
- These were the purposes of the review:
  - To identify the reasons that led the Coombes School current situation;
  - To identify the Local Authority's level of involvement with the school and to find out what could have been done to avoid the current situation;
  - To identify what lessons could be learnt to prevent the same happening to other schools in the Borough;
  - To propose that a mechanism is developed to keep local ward Members informed if a school in their ward is in danger of falling standards.
- The Group concluded that the inability to recruit a permanent full time Headteacher had been the main cause of the Coombes School deterioration. The lack of secure leadership was also the main criticism in the Ofsted report;
- The Headteacher recruitment process could be strengthened and a set of guidelines should be drawn up by the Local Authority to help schools through the process;
- Governors should not rely solely on agencies to check candidates' references;
- The Group found that the Headteachers' nomenclature used (consultant, interim, executive, acting) caused confusion and uncertainty as to who was leading the school. It was important to have more clarity around the Headteachers' title;
- Pre-warning letters issued by the Local Authority should be circulated to the home addresses of:
  - All governors

- Headteacher
- Church representative
- Local ward Members
- The Group found that more clarity around the role of the School Improvement Officer was needed, and that an improvement plan should be drawn up for schools causing concern;
- The Group recommended that all meetings involving Headteachers, governors and Local Authority Officers should have minutes taken;

Councillor Kaiser read out the recommendations which were listed on pages 24 and 25 of the Agenda. The Chairman clarified that the recommendations contained in the report were aimed at schools that were underperforming.

Councillor Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Executive Member for Children's Services was invited to comment on the report. Councillor Haitham Taylor stated that she valued the professional service of the review; however she felt that the investigation was incomplete. Since 2015 most schools in Wokingham Borough had achieved good results, with 88% of primary and 89% of secondary schools judged good or better in inspections. Ofsted had commented positively on Wokingham Borough's schools' improvement.

Councillor Haitham Taylor stated that there was a clear strategy for school improvement, and the work of the school improvement officer was understood and valued.

Councillor Haitham Taylor stated that governors' training was already very strong in the Local Authority. She praised the work undertaken by all governors across the Borough.

Councillor Haitham Taylor regretted that the report had been made public before Children's Services Officers had an opportunity to comment on it.

The following points were made during the discussion of the report:

- Councillor Rowland stated that it was very difficult to recruit Headteachers. She stated that she was a governor at a school where it had taken a whole year to appoint a suitable Headteacher. There had not been many suitable candidates available;
- Councillor Miall stated that Wokingham Borough Council was responsible for schools' educational outcomes, therefore it was justified that the Local Authority should get involved in the Headteacher recruitment process, including undertaking checks to feed back to governors;
- The Chairman confirmed that one of the recommendations was that a telephone call should be made to follow up references of prospective candidates;
- Councillor Blumenthal asked what were the reasons for the initial pre-warning letter issued in 2014. Judith Ramsden, Director of People Services stated that she would not comment on those issues relating to the Coombes School as it was not appropriate to talk in relation to individuals, but was prepared to answer in more general terms. Judith stated that there were a number of data sources both formal and informal which were used to triangulate a view as to schools' performance and functioning which would be used to create conversations with schools' leaders and or as appropriate pre warning letters. Information such as pupils progress data, management of the budget, HR information and issues, complaints that may be routed through the Local Authority of Ofsted at the same time or parallel to the schools own complaints procedure. Judith emphasised that there were different ways to understand and appraise the quality of school leadership;

- Councillor Swaddle stated that in her experience as a governor, the guidance and training provided to governors by Children’s Services was very good. Judith confirmed that this was not an area of concern.

The Chairman stated that the Wokingham Borough Council’s Constitution did not require that reports and recommendations arising from task and finish group reviews be submitted to Officers before their publication. The Chairman proposed that the Coombes School Task and Finish Group meet once more to formulate an action plan to be submitted to the next Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee for final approval. The senior Officers and the Lead Member for Children’s Services would be invited to attend and put forward their comments.

Councillor Miall stated that he felt it refreshing to read a report before Officers were able to make amendments. Judith replied that Children’s Services had a history of being transparent and the idea that Officers would make defensive amendments did not correlate with the service’s approach. Judith felt that it would have been a better use of time if her team had been able to comment and make amendments. Judith believed an action plan could have been already drawn up and agreed at this meeting. Judith believed the report contained inaccuracies and was concerned that this had been made public. Judith referenced the Ofsted annual report published in December 2016, within which the national context is set out. The report illustrates the percentages of Wokingham’s schools that are good or better and the impact of school improvement services. Judith offered to make the report available to Members.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the Coombes School Task and Finish Group would meet with the Executive Lead Member for Children’s Services and senior Children’s Services Officers to agree an action plan;
- 2) the action plan would be brought back to the Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee for final approval.

**44. REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY**

Judith Ramsden stated that it would be beneficial for the children in the Borough to join the partnership with the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). The details of the proposal were described in the report and Judith was seeking the Committee’s support for the proposal to join it.

The following comments were made in relation to the RAA report:

- Councillor Rowland stated that the report was very easy to understand and she had enjoyed reading it. It seemed natural to expand the service;
- Councillor Miall asked if the partnership would prevent closeness with the people who were adopting. Lisa Humphreys, Head of Social Care and Intervention stated that this project was part of a government initiative and that Wokingham would have equal representation in the partnership. Lisa stated that this would bring more capacity to the service, making the process smoother;
- In response to a question, Lisa stated that she expected that the board would be composed of around 15 people; another more operational board would sit underneath the main board. More details would be further clarified in due time;

- Councillor Younis asked that when available, more information be provided with the details of the structure. Judith agreed to bring back more information to the Committee, including the service level agreement, structure and notice period;
- In response to a question Lisa stated that it would take time for the impact of this change to be measurable. It was expected that the project would go live in September 2017;
- The Chairman asked that adoption be included in key performance indicators.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee support the proposal and recommendations listed in the report;
- 2) Adoption services information would be included in the key performance indicators;
- 3) Details of the partnership structure and service level agreement would be provided to the Committee when available.

#### **45. SCHOOL PERFORMANCE AND OFSTED REPORTS**

The Chairman praised the Schools Ofsted Performance report, indicating that the summary of Ofsted judgements made over the year was a particularly useful tool to oversee the whole picture. Alan Stubbersfield, Interim Head of Learning and Achievement offered to include this summary in future reports.

In response to a question Judith confirmed that letters of congratulations were sent to schools achieving good results, and letters offering support to schools that underachieved were also sent.

The Chairman was particularly pleased with the Ambleside Centre report, this school continued to achieve outstanding results. Members noted that Ambleside currently had an acting Headteacher and pointed out that it was important to secure a permanent Headteacher.

Alan stated that three Ofsted inspections had taken place since the last meeting, but the reports had not been publicly available in time to be published with the agenda. Alan reported that Southfield School was now closed and a new school was formed, in partnership with the Northern House Trust. The new school was called Northern House Wokingham. Alan informed that an inspection had taken place in December and that there had been significant improvements achieved with the support of the Local Authority and the Trust.

Councillor Younis asked for an update relating to the Forest School. Alan was confident that improvements were being made and that the school was moving forward. Alan expected the Forest School may be inspected again in the summer.

Alan stated that he would be submitting a report to the next meeting which would have to be considered in a part 2 session about a school causing concern.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

#### **46. WOKINGHAM MULTI ACADEMY TRUST**

Councillor Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Executive Member for Children's Services led a presentation giving details of the work undertaken by the Wokingham Multi Academy Trust Task and Finish Group.

The following comments were made during the discussion of the item:

- Councillor Haitham Taylor explained that the loss of the Education Services Grant (ESG) meant in financial terms that £77 funding per pupil was being reduced to £15 per pupil. It was hoped that Schools Forum would agree to top slice the Early Years funding and the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), consistent with national policy, to contribute to Local Authority action to meet the funding gap created by the loss of ESG;
- In response to a question, Judith stated that she was confident that Schools Forum would agree to the proposal to top slice.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

#### **47. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

The Committee considered the Children's Services performance indicators report that was set out in agenda pages 71- 80. The Chairman was satisfied with the explanations provided to the indicators that were red and amber.

Councillor Blumenthal pointed out that on page 80, the indicator '*Number of schools causing concern*' should have had its target updated to '*zero*' as agreed at the previous meeting. Judith agreed and would update the report.

**RESOLVED** That the report on Children's Services key performance indicators be noted.

#### **48. CAREER CHOICE, GUIDANCE AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN IN THE BOROUGH**

Alan Stubbersfield presented the report Pathways to Learning: Advice and Guidance for Young People in Wokingham which was set out in agenda pages 81-84. Alan stated that the figures listed on page 83 had improved since the production of the report, Wokingham continued ahead of the national figure.

Members were interested to know if the figures included Wokingham children living or studying out of the Borough. Officers agreed to double check this information and report back to the Committee.

The following comments were made during the discussion of the item:

- The Chairman stated that it was important to inform parents about the career choices available to their children, as parents were very influential in their children's choices. However, often parents' view was narrow and only based in their own experience;
- Councillor Younis stated that guidance to parents would be helpful. But he felt that some of the advice given by teachers lacked real industry experience;
- Judith believed that there was strength in career advice in Wokingham. Judith gave as an example careers faires which were attended by a huge variety of employers from different industries;
- Councillor Dolinski had recently attended an event at a local secondary school and noted that there was a real appetite from the students to receive career guidance. He believed that there was more work that could be done, it may be possible to use volunteers to complement the work that professional were already undertaking;

- Councillor Haitham Taylor confirmed that careers faires events were well organised and offered an opportunity for young people to meet different types of employers. She also mentioned mock interviews that had taken place at a local secondary school, taken by local businesses;
- Councillor Haitham Taylor felt that more could be done to increase opportunities for Children In Care;
- Councillor Younis suggested that schools could seek 'sponsorship' or 'adoption' by big companies. Judith stated that she would explore this idea with schools and consider what types of partnerships could be created;
- The Chairman stated that it was important to encourage girls to take up STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects;
- Councillor Dolinski was interested to know more about opportunities for young people with disabilities. Judith stated that a lot of work for young people with disabilities was undertaken through Addington School in partnership with Elevate and had resulted in a number of young people being offered apprenticeships / work experience, a couple of which had led to full employment.

**RESOLVED** That the report be noted.

#### **49. SOCIAL WORKER RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND TRAINING STRATEGY**

The Committee considered the Social Worker recruitment, retention and training strategy report which was set out in agenda pages 85 – 90.

Lisa Humphreys explained that an analysis of the data showed a slightly improved picture from 2015; however it was important not to be complacent. Lisa stated that there would always be a need to use agency workers. This was because the benefits of working for the Local Authority did not outweigh the advantages of a flexible approach to work offered by agencies, even when taking into account benefits such as holiday pay.

During the discussion of the item the following points were made:

- Lisa stated that 16% of Social Workers had been at Wokingham Borough Council in excess of five years and this indicated that the staff were increasingly experienced in comparison to year 2015/16;
- The Chairman noted that retention levels were improving;
- In response to a question Lisa informed that due to personal issues the Social Workers that had been recruited from Australia had not been able to stay;
- In response to a question Judith stated that her team was currently analysing the implications of recent legal changes to work arrangements for agency staff;
- In response to a question, Lisa stated that careful investigation on the suitability of candidates took place before sponsorship for formal qualification courses was offered;
- In response to a question, Lisa stated that the social work service was a 24 hour service. Social Workers were salaried staff and were professional in their input; therefore on occasion could end up working more than the contracted hours as it was expected that once a piece of work was started, during an afternoon for example, it had to be finished. Emergency duty service which offered the out of core hours of social work was commissioned;
- Judith stated that Children In Care had asked for more consistency with Social Workers, this had been identified as a priority and her team was working to improve it.

**RESOLVED** That the report and action taken by Children's Social Care and HR to manage the workforce and recruit staff permanently are noted.

## **50. FORWARD PROGRAMME**

The following items were added to the forward programme:

21 March 2017

- Children being educated at home / children missing education
- Coombes Task and Finish Group action plan
- Schools causing concern – Part 2 report

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