

## **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (LIFELONG LEARNING)**

MINUTES of an extraordinary meeting held at St. Cyres Comprehensive School on 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2005.

Present: Councillor C.P. Franks (Chairman); Councillor Ms. M. E. Alexander (Vice-Chairman); Councillors Mrs. M.E.J. Birch, Ms. R.M. Birch, Mrs. C.V.L. Clay, J. Clifford, S.C. Egan, E. Hacker, Mrs. V.M. Hartrey, F.T. Johnson, Mrs. M. Kelly Owen, C.L. Osborne and Mrs. S.I. Sharpe.

Also present: Councillor A.D. Hampton.

Non-voting Observer: Mr. G. Beaudette.

Also present for Agenda Item No. 4:

Ms. D. - former looked after child  
 Ms. A. Bridges - Sure Start  
 Ms. P. Tunley - Carer  
 Ms. J. Smith - Children First.

### 427 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE -

These were received from Councillor B.I. Shaw and Mr. T. Cox.

### 428 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST -

Councillor C.P. Franks declared an interest in Agenda Item No. 4, in that he was a member of the Local Health Board and reminded Members that the Standards Committee on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2005 had granted him dispensation to speak and vote on matters relating to the Vale of Glamorgan Local Health Board.

### 429 WELCOME -

Mr. B. Lightman, Headteacher of St. Cyres Comprehensive School, welcomed all present to the school and expressed pleasure at the opportunity to inform Members of what was happening at the school.

The school had just experienced its best ever exam results, and had just embarked on a new qualification - the school was a pilot centre for the Welsh Baccalaureate. 233 Welsh candidates had been successful with 85 of these students coming from St. Cyres School. Mr. Lightman expressed gratitude to the members of staff for achieving such impressive results.

Mr. Lightman further advised that no pupil had failed to achieve a qualification which represented a significant success for the school.

When the school was rebuilt, Mr. Lightman expressed his wish that the school be operated 7 days per week for the benefit of the community.

In addition, Mr. Lightman advised that:

- the school had recently won an 'understanding disability' award
- the school had won a prize for its 'Media for Schools' project.

The Chairman thanked Mr. Lightman for his welcome and it was suggested to Members that a future meeting of the Committee receive a presentation on the Welsh Baccalaureate.

RECOMMENDED - T H A T a future meeting of the Committee receive a presentation on the Welsh Baccalaureate.

#### 430 HOW THE COUNCIL CONTRIBUTES TO THE LIFE CHANCES OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN (CHAIRMAN) -

The Chairman presented his report and advised that the decision to scrutinise how the Council contributed to improving the life chances of looked after children had been taken following Member engagement that had highlighted this as a key priority for the Council.

Throughout the review, the Council's corporate policy 'to provide high quality, accessible learning opportunities which meet the needs of all ages and to develop and promote a culture of lifelong learning for all' and 'to make the Vale a safe, healthy and enjoyable place in which individuals, children and families can live their lives to the full' had been paramount.

The review considered the support currently in place to improve the life chances of children in care. This was principally provided through the Council's Learning and Development and Community Services Directorates and through the support the Council received from its partners in the Voluntary Sector. Existing notable practice implemented by other Councils were considered and informed the review and its recommendations.

The review reported that the Council performed well against performance indicators when compared to all-Wales. However, whilst the educational attainment of Vale Looked After Children (LAC) was above the all-Wales average, it was currently below the average attainment of all-Vale children at SATS and GCSE.

The number of LAC varied from week to week - at the beginning of September 2005, the Council was responsible for 192 LAC, a reduction from the peak of 215 in 2001/02 and below the all-Wales average of 196 at March 2004.

The compilation of the Personal Education Plan (PEP) was a crucial support to the educational attainment of LAC - it set out their needs and targets and provided a valuable progress monitoring mechanism. The review identified that compliance with PEP targets had been an area of poor performance. At March 2005, 11% of PEPs were in place within prescribed timescales. The introduction of designated teachers to fulfil the LAC co-ordinators role in every school complied with guidance, and co-ordinators were briefed and trained in LAC issues by the Children First Team. It was reported that some older LAC viewed PEPs as intrusive and conflicted with their desire to be treated the same as other pupils.

The Placement Strategy had helped to reduce the overall number of 'child weeks' spent in care. It supported improved educational attainment of LAC through more LAC placed within the Vale and through better-supported foster care, respite care and enhanced community based family support services to increase the prospect of children remaining with their families.

The Vale has increasing numbers of registered Foster Carers and has implemented recruitment initiatives to continue the expansion to support the requirements of the Placement Strategy. Foster carer basic task descriptions were in place for 4-levels of carer and were linked to the appraisal system and remuneration. The Foster Carers Forum (FCF) had promoted improvements in foster carer support and standards. The independent Foster Panel provided a quality assurance element to the provision of foster care through the carer annual appraisal system although targets for the completion of carer annual reviews had not been met over the past two years.

The Leaving Care Team provided support, clear information and guidance to young people about to leave care. 100% of LAC had a Pathway Plan in place on their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday and there were many examples of the team working with other agencies in the Vale to enhance accommodation options, literacy and numeracy levels and also with careers and job prospects.

Cymorth provided funding to improve the life chances of children and young people from disadvantaged families. It worked in partnership, integrating with and adding value to mainstream services. It was based on early preventative intervention and built on previous initiatives such as Sure Start. It was reported that many voluntary bodies provided important support to LAC in terms of accommodation, advocacy, careers and education both when in care and when leaving care. Much of the work was jointly funded and in partnership with the Council which added capacity, resilience and expertise to Council services.

The conclusions of the review were:

- The Council performs well against performance indicators when compared to all-Wales. However, while the educational attainment of Vale LAC is above the all-Wales average, it is currently well below the average attainment of all-Vale children at SATS and GCSE.

- The number of LAC varies from week to week but there is a downward trend since the implementation of the Placement Strategy. Whilst the majority of LAC are placed within the Vale a third are placed outside of the County. LAC represent a small proportion of the overall population of children 0 to 19 years of age. There are more male than female LAC.
- LAC attendance levels, fixed-term and permanent exclusions compares well against the levels for all children.
- LAC with a statement of SEN represents a small proportion of the Vale's stated population.
- Vale schools fully comply with the requirement to designate a teacher as responsible for LAC.
- The PEP is a crucial support to the educational attainment of LAC, it sets out their needs, targets and provides a valuable progress monitoring mechanism. The roles and responsibilities with regard to the completion of the PEP do not appear to be consistently understood or interpreted by all parties. Compliance with PEP targets has been an area of poor performance.
- Whilst Cabinet and the Community Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee receives relevant LAC specific performance information, the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee receives little LAC specific performance information
- The placement strategy has helped to reduce the overall number of 'child weeks' spent in care. The strategic intent of the placement strategy will also support improved educational attainment of LAC as the Council should place more LAC within the Vale. Wide research and evidence within the Vale supports the view that the home LEA and schools will better support placements. Provision that facilitates more and better-supported foster carers, respite care and enhanced community based family support services to increase the prospect of children remaining with their families. Further the concept of, and focus by, the Council on permanence typically through adoption will lead to improved stability and further enhance the educational opportunities.
- The First Contact team contributes to averting accommodation for children/young people.
- The Vale has increasing numbers of registered Foster Carers and has implemented recruitment initiatives to continue this expansion to support the requirements of the Placement Strategy. The Foster Carers Forum has promoted improvements in foster carer support and standards. Foster carers have four levels of skill categories each having a basic task description linked to the appraisal system and remuneration; all promote the educational attainment of LAC.
- The Foster Panel is independent and provides a quality assurance element to the provision of foster care through the carer annual appraisal system. Targets for the completion of carer annual reviews have not been met.
- The Leaving Care Team provides support, and clear information and guidance to young people about to leave care and 100% of LAC had a Pathway Plan in place on their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

- The Council and other agencies that provide LAC support services value the Children First advocacy, support and coordinating role that support the education and well being of LAC. The Children First team will lose its health focus as a result of funding issues.
- Catch-Up has contributed to an improvement in the reading age of LAC
- Cymorth is a NAFW initiative providing funding to provide a network of targeted support for children and young people within a framework of universal provision. It aims to improve the life chances of children and young people from disadvantaged families. It works in partnership integrating with and adding value to mainstream services, and is based on early preventative intervention. It builds on previous initiatives such as Sure Start.
- Voluntary bodies provide important support to LAC in terms of advocacy, education and when leaving care. Much of this work is jointly funded and in partnership with the Council, adding capacity resilience and expertise to Council services.

and the following recommendations were made:

#### Performance Information

#### **That the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee:**

Establish quarterly LAC performance measures that are reported quarterly to the Committee so that Members are better able to monitor issues that impact on the educational attainment of LAC and make appropriate recommendations for improvement.

Forward the LAC report to the Community Wellbeing and Safety Scrutiny Committee for information.

#### **That Cabinet request that the Directors of Learning and Development and of Community Services to:**

Ensure prompt dissemination of performance information in relation to LAC, to all relevant services, officers and committees.

#### **Care Plans**

#### **That Cabinet:**

Clarify with all PEP stakeholders their individual roles and responsibilities in relation to the PEPs timely completion and review.

Establish a mechanism for ensuring the effective monitoring of the Councils performance in relation to PEPS that provides regular summary reports to relevant Scrutiny Committees of LAC progress against PEP targets.

Appoint an administrator to improve co-ordination of administration (as occurs in Newport) to communicate and co-ordinate all placements with all agencies.

## **Corporate Parenting**

### **That Cabinet:**

Continue to review and implement a programme of Corporate Parenting awareness raising so that all services, officers and elected Members understand and establish their roles and responsibilities in full.

Promote the role of the LAC champion amongst elected members who are School Governors.

Include in the Governors Handbook a section on LAC and the requirements of Governors as Corporate Parents.

Recognise the importance of the Council's Corporate Parenting role in developing further work experience opportunities within the Council for local young people about to leave care.

Establish improved LAC access to Council services through free passport to leisure passes and free entry to appropriate Council activities.

## **Foster Carers**

### **That Cabinet:**

Initiate a Fostering Service review of the training and support programme for foster carers to ensure that carers are fully aware and equipped to support the educational attainment of LAC.

## **Leaving Care**

### **That Cabinet:**

Ensure that clearer links are established between leaving care services and the Council's Lifelong Learning Youth and Post-16 Service to develop further support and opportunities for young people leaving care.

Identify funding options with partnership members to ensure Sure Start is secured post 2008.

Identify funding options to continue the Gladstone College project post 2006.

Assess the costs and benefits of extending the Sure Start service outside of Barry.

Continue with partners, to explore the options available for ensuring the long-term provision of the services currently provided by the Children First Team.

## **Schools**

### **That Cabinet:**

Prioritise LAC admission to their local school.

Establish with schools baseline test results of LAC on entry to a new school, or on entering care, to enable Children First to be more proactive with support.

Explore opportunities for funding to access tuition for LAC prior to GCSE to further support and improve their educational achievement.

Following the presentation, a question and answer session ensued.

Ms. D. Was asked to recount her views on the process and said that she had wanted to be treated the same as other children. Except for her closest friend, she preferred not to let people know where she lived. As teachers became aware of her situation, she felt that she was treated differently to the other pupils in her school. If teachers had been more supportive, MS. D. felt that she would have acquired more qualification.

Upon reaching 18, Ms. D. stated that she received no help from the Council but did receive help from Barnados whom she found easier to speak to than Social Services.

Antonia Bridges recounted examples of Sure Start helping to prevent children from becoming looked after and informed of the prevention work that contributes to preventing children from going into care.

Questions were asked about the training and support provided to the LAC teacher liaison and foster parents.

Jenny Smith advised that social workers had been invited to training sessions on basic guidance and PEP training. In addition, a conference had been held last year with national speakers in attendance. Twilight sessions were also provided.

Mrs. Tunley, speaking about support services for carers, advised that matters had improved, but not enough. There are support groups, but carers do not receive training in how to support LAC in educational matters.

Mrs. Tunley expressed the view that the monthly meetings with social workers was not frequent enough (although the social workers are always available on the phone). A Foster Carers Forum had been established but was on the wane as attendance by key managers had fallen away.

In addition, Mrs. Tunley advised that carers take an NVQ, part of which related to 'education' and which is optional. Mrs. Tunley expressed the view that this element of the NVQ should be compulsory.

Following the question and answer session, members considered the most appropriate way forward. It was noted that the contents of the review had been prepared prior to the Committee hearing the views of the expert witnesses. The view was expressed that there was now a need for the contents of the review to be reconsidered in the light of the discussion that had taken place and that the review then be reconsidered at a future meeting of the Committee at which the expert witnesses would again be presented with an opportunity to express their views.

RECOMMENDED - T H A T the above course of action be pursued.

The Chairman thanked all present, especially the invited guests for a most useful meeting.