

SCRUTINY BOARD (CHILDREN'S SERVICES)

THURSDAY, 16TH NOVEMBER, 2006

PRESENT: Councillor J Bale in the Chair

Councillors J Chapman, B Cleasby, V Kendall,
L Mulherin, K Renshaw and B Selby

**CO-OPTED MEMBERS:
(VOTING)** Mr E A Britten - Church Representative (Catholic)
Prof P H J H Gosden - Church Representative (Church
of England)
Mrs S Knights - Parent Governor Representative
(Primary)

**CO-OPTED MEMBERS:
(NON-VOTING)** Ms C Foote - Teacher Representative
Mrs S Hutchinson - Early Years Development and
Childcare Partnership
Representative
Mr P Gathercole - NCH Representative
Ms T Kayani - Leeds Youth Work Partnership
Representative

60 Chair's Opening Remarks

The Chair welcomed all in attendance to the November meeting of the Scrutiny Board (Children's Services).

61 Late Items

In accordance with his powers under Section 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972, the Chair admitted to the agenda additional information relating to the work of CAF/CASS (The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) which was to be considered as part of agenda item 8, in addition to a write up of the Board's site visits to the Adoption Services at both Newcastle and Liverpool City Councils, which was to be considered as part of agenda item 9.

Both pieces of information were unavailable at the time of the agenda despatch and needed to be considered at the meeting as part of the third and fourth formal sessions of the Board's inquiry into Adoption in Leeds.

62 Declarations of Interest

The following Members declared personal interests in relation to agenda item 10, due to their respective positions as either school or college governors:-

Councillors Bale, Chapman, Cleasby, Kendall, Mulherin, Renshaw, Selby, Mr E A Britten and Mrs S Knights. (Minute No 68 refers).

Councillor Kendall declared personal interests in relation to agenda items 8 and 9 due to her position on the Skyrack Adoption Panel. (Minute Nos 66 and 67 refer).

Mrs S Knights declared personal interests in relation to agenda items 8 and 9 due to being a Foster Parent. (Minute Nos 66 and 67 refer).

Mr P Gathercole declared personal interests in relation to agenda items 8 and 9 due to being a representative of NCH which acted as an adoption agency and provided services to looked after children in Leeds. (Minute Nos 66 and 67 refer).

63 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors R D Feldman, Harrison, Murray, Mr C Macpherson and Mr T Hales.

64 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 12th October 2006 be approved as a correct record, subject to the inclusion of Councillor Chapman's declaration of personal interest in relation to agenda item 48, due to being a governor of Weetwood Primary School.

65 Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 9th October 2006 be noted.

66 Adoption In Leeds - Inquiry Session Three

The Board received a report from the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development which detailed the information to be considered as part of the third formal session of the Board's inquiry into Adoption in Leeds.

Appended to the report for Members' information was the agreed terms of reference for the inquiry, a legal briefing on the issue of adoption and reports outlining the work of the Adoption Panel, NCH and Barnardo's in this field. This was in addition to information relating to CAFCASS which had been submitted for the Board's consideration.

In attendance at the meeting to discuss the courts' role in the adoption process was Judge Hunt of the County Court, Stephen Boorman, Social Services (Legal), Martin Lee of the Magistrates Court and Stephanie Martin of CAFCASS. To advise Members on the work of the Adoption Panel were Jemima Sparks, former Chair of an Adoption Panel and Dr Alison Share, Medical Advisor to an Adoption Panel and to provide an insight into the work undertaken by external agencies in this field was Donal Mullally of NCH.

Rodger Walker, Resources Team Manager and Sarah Johal, Adoption Team Manager, were also in attendance to answer Members' questions.

Following a brief summary of the role of the courts within the adoption process, a question and answer session ensued. The main areas of debate were as follows:-

- The timescales generally needed to complete an individual adoption case, the number of court hearings required for such a case and whether the process could be further streamlined in order to minimise any disruption to the child and the adoptive family;
- The main causes of delay within the adoption process and any actions which could be taken to ensure that such delays were reduced;
- The criteria used to determine the judicial level at which an adoption case would be heard;
- The proportion of cases which were contested by the child's birth parents, the limited right of appeal open to them following a ruling and the judicial levels to which an appeal could be taken;
- The extent to which information concerning a child's health and social circumstances were relayed to prospective adopters;
- The role of CAF/CASS within the adoption process and the influence that CAF/CASS had upon shaping policies which related to adoption;
- The extent to which the recent legislative changes had impacted upon the adoption process in Leeds;
- How the procedures followed by CAF/CASS for adoption cases differed from those procedures used to deal with their involvement in cases of family break up;
- The role of contact centres and the number of such centres which were available in Leeds;
- The extent to which the administration of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks affected the adoption process;
- The existence of an appeals process for those prospective adopters whose application to adopt had been declined;
- The extent to which children over a certain age were not considered for adoption;
- The procedures in place to enable adopted children to have contact with their siblings;
- The proportion of adoption cases within Leeds which were completed within the national target of 40 weeks.

A brief summary of the work undertaken by external agencies and the Adoption Panel throughout the process was followed by a question and answer session. The main areas of debate were:-

- The lengthy procedures followed by the Panel's Medical Advisor to ensure that prospective adopters were fully briefed about a child's medical history;
- The medical assessment of prospective adopters;
- The support available to adoptive families to help them deal with the difficulties often experienced when caring for 'looked after' children;
- The extent to which an Adoption Panel could investigate the heritage of any of the parties involved in a particular case;
- The levels of advice and support available to birth parents following the adoption of their child;

- With regard to those cases where pre-birth assessments were required, Members questioned what procedures had been established to try and prevent such a situation recurring in the future;
- The actions which could be taken to minimise the levels of delay experienced in private law cases;
- The likelihood of a Medical Advisor being appointed to assist an additional Adoption Panel in Leeds;
- The experience and expertise brought to the adoption process by NCH;
- Issues relating to the shortage of adoptive families from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and the actions being taken to encourage a greater number of adoptive parents from such backgrounds;
- The sources of funding received by NCH for its programme of post adoptive support and the ways in which greater financial assistance could be obtained.

RESOLVED – That the report and information appended to the report be noted.

(Councillor Mulherin left the meeting at 10.30 a.m. during the consideration of this item and Mrs S Knights left the meeting at 11.10 a.m. at the conclusion of this item)

67 Adoption In Leeds - Inquiry Session Four

Members received a report from the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development which detailed the information to be considered as part of the fourth and final session of the Board's inquiry into Adoption in Leeds.

Appended to the report for Members' information was a report from the Chief Officer of Social Services which detailed issues surrounding the terms and conditions of employees joining the Fostering and Adoption Service from agencies which did not have equivalent conditions. The report also provided details of allowances available to those individuals who adopted through Leeds Social Services. A write up of the Board's visits to the Adoption Services at both Liverpool and Newcastle City Councils was also submitted for consideration.

Rodger Walker, Resources Team Manager and Sarah Johal, Adoption Team Manager, were in attendance to answer Members' questions.

Following a brief summary of the information detailed within the reports, a question and answer session ensued. The main areas of debate were as follows:-

- The methods being used to increase the levels of support available to adoptive parents as their role became increasingly more challenging, the ways in which adoptive parents were made aware of the services available to them and the proportion of adopters who currently used such support;
- Clarification of the extent to which the local authority had been consulted on the legislative changes affecting the adoption process. Members then proposed that the general issue of responding to such consultations could

be a matter for referral to Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration;

- The possible benefit of civil servants who were responsible for shaping the policies surrounding adoption having greater levels of interaction with professionals who dealt with such policies on a daily basis;
- The significant costs associated with the services provided by voluntary organisations, such as post adoption support, and the ways in which such organisations were funded;
- The actions being taken to publicise the issue of adoption in Leeds and the methods used to encourage a greater number of adults to consider it as an option;
- The role of both schools and teachers in supporting adoptive families.

RESOLVED –

- (a). That the report and information appended to the report be noted;
- (b). That the emerging conclusions from the Scrutiny Board's inquiry into Adoption in Leeds be reflected in the draft version of the Board's final report;
- (c). That clarification be sought on the extent to which the local authority had been consulted on the legislative changes affecting the adoption process, and that further consideration be given to referring the general issue to Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

68 Report on Recent Ofsted Inspections

A report was submitted by the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development which introduced a report from the Chief Executive of Education Leeds summarising the outcomes of recent Ofsted inspections. The report had been previously submitted to Executive Board on 18th October 2006.

Dirk Gilleard, Deputy Chief Executive of Education Leeds, was in attendance to answer Members' questions.

Following a brief summary of the main points detailed within the report, a question and answer session ensued. The main areas of discussion were as follows:-

- Congratulations were extended to schools which had achieved good inspection outcomes;
- With regard to the Ofsted school inspection framework, which now had a reduced number of grades, Members sought guidance on the ways in which any disadvantage arising from such a system could be minimised;
- The percentage of schools achieving each of the four Ofsted grades on a national level and whether the proportion of grades achieved differed between primary and secondary schools;
- Members requested that reports, which detailed recent Ofsted inspection results, were submitted to the Board on a periodic basis;
- Members emphasised the need for the Scrutiny Board to monitor those schools classed by Ofsted as 'inadequate' and proposed that updates on the progress made by such schools were submitted to the Board on a regular basis;

- The need to consider the negative effects and wider implications of previous school closures when proposing such action in the future;
- The differences in approach and focus which had been experienced during Ofsted inspections in Leeds and the appropriateness of the criteria used to assess schools;
- The continuing validity of national guidelines on space requirements in schools relating to surplus places, given the resources needed to administer the extended curriculum in Leeds;
- The resources being provided via the PFI programme and the extent to which such resource provision was consistent with current requirements;
- The methods used by Education Leeds to predict Ofsted inspection results and whether some of the recent results gained had been unexpected;
- The extent to which the grades achieved by secondary schools during Ofsted inspections were being restricted by problems experienced at Key Stage 3;
- Members emphasised the need to take into account the demographic shifts which were occurring in Leeds and the nature of new dwellings being erected when considering the issue of school provision in the future. In response, Members were reminded that the Board had resolved to support the Admissions Forum's request to Education Leeds to re-examine their demographic projection processes at the October meeting of the Scrutiny Board;
- Following Members' requests, the Deputy Chief Executive of Education Leeds undertook to provide Members with the Education Leeds School Improvement Policy for information;
- The significant gap which existed between the 'outstanding' and 'good' Ofsted inspection categories, and the implications that such a grading system had on those schools which fell between the two;
- In conclusion, Members proposed that consideration could be given to the Scrutiny Board formally commenting upon the revised Ofsted Inspection Framework in the future.

RESOLVED –

- (a). That the report and information appended to the report be noted;
- (b). That schools be congratulated on good inspection outcomes;
- (c). That the Chair and the Board's Adviser explore with the Deputy Chief Executive of Education Leeds the possibility of the Board making formal comment to Ofsted on the new inspection framework.

(Councillor Renshaw left the meeting at 12.00 p.m. during the consideration of this item)

69 Performance Management and Financial Health Monitoring

Members received a report from the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development which detailed the current thinking of Overview and Scrutiny Committee members in relation to performance management and scrutiny of the budget. The report had been submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6th November 2006.

A question and answer session relating to the issues detailed within the report then ensued. The main areas of debate were:-

- The availability of departmental performance data which was intended to be received by individual Scrutiny Boards on a quarterly basis and whether such information would take into consideration the issue of 'value for money';
- The ways in which financial procedures could be revised in order to ensure that departmental budgets were maximised.

RESOLVED –

- (a). That the report and information appended to the report be noted;
- (b). That the new arrangements which relate to monitoring the performance and financial health of the Council be noted.

70 Work Programme

A report was submitted by the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development which detailed the Scrutiny Board (Children's Services) Work Programme for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

Appended to the report for Members' information was the current version of the Board's Work Programme, an extract from the Forward Plan of Key Decisions for the period 1st November 2006 to 28th February 2007 which related to the Board's remit, together with the minutes from the Executive Board meeting held on 18th October 2006.

Members were advised that further to the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Board, the Youth Council was in the process of contacting all careers co-ordinators as part of an inquiry into the provision of work experience in Leeds. The Board welcomed this information and expressed an interest in seeing the results of the Youth Council's work.

Having noted that there was the capacity in the Scrutiny Board Work Programme to conduct a minor inquiry early in the new year, it was suggested that the relationship between further and secondary education, together with the impact of the revisions to the Learning and Skills Council's funding arrangements could be considered as a possible inquiry topic.

In conclusion, it was proposed that further information on the possibility of conducting a minor inquiry in the new year was submitted to the December meeting of the Scrutiny Board.

RESOLVED –

- (a). That the contents of the report and the Scrutiny Board's Work Programme, as appended to the report, be noted;
- (b). That the subject of a minor Scrutiny Board inquiry, proposed to be undertaken in the new year, be considered in more detail at the December meeting of the Scrutiny Board.

71 Date and Time of Next Meeting
Thursday, 14th December 2006 at 9.30 a.m.
(Pre-Meeting scheduled for 9.00 a.m.)

(Meeting concluded at 12.40 p.m.)