

Scrutiny Board (Children's Services)



Councillor Bill Hyde
Chair of Scrutiny Board
(Children's Services)

Membership of the Board:

Councillor Bill Hyde (Chair)
Councillor Brian Cleasby
Councillor Debra Coupar
Councillor Geoff Driver
Councillor Ronnie Feldman
Councillor Bob Gettings JP
Councillor Graham Kirkland
Councillor Brenda Lancaster
Councillor Karen Renshaw
Councillor Brian Selby
Councillor Eileen Taylor

Co-opted Members:

Mr Tony Britten
Ms Natalie Cox (part)
Mr Ian Falkingham (part)
Ms Celia Foote
Prof Peter Gosden
Mrs Sandra Hutchinson
Ms Claire Johnson
Ms Taira Kayani
Mrs Sue Knights
Ms Jeannette Morris-Boam
Mr Ben Wanyonyi

The Chair's summary

It is my pleasure and privilege to introduce another annual report from the Children's Services Scrutiny Board. As anyone involved in the delivery of children's services in Leeds knows, this has been a momentous and at times traumatic year, particularly in relation to the findings of the Ofsted unannounced inspection of safeguarding services and the subsequent establishment of an independently chaired Improvement Board.

As a Scrutiny Board, we have continued to take an overview across the whole range of children's services through our regular quarterly performance monitoring programme, and our more detailed work has touched on a wide variety of topics from school attendance to youth services to the local impact of population growth. More details are included on the following pages.

The most significant piece of work we have undertaken this year - and probably the biggest piece of scrutiny inquiry work we have ever carried out - is our work on safeguarding. We started this inquiry at the end of last year, and since then members of the Board have taken part in over twenty meetings and visits with a wide range of stakeholders, focusing on two key aspects: resources for front-line social work; and multi-agency input to preventative work. I would like to pay special tribute to those Board members who have been part of the working groups for this important inquiry.

Finally, I would like to say a huge thank you on behalf of all Board members to Sue Knights, who is standing down after eight years as our primary school parent governor representative. Her steadfast commitment to championing the cause of children and parents will be sorely missed by the Board.

Cllr Bill Hyde, Chair of Scrutiny Board (Children's Services)

Inquiry on Safeguarding

Summary

This inquiry began in 2008/9, and has had two distinct strands. The resources working group has looked at the funding and staffing of the front-line child protection social work function, while the preventative duty working group has considered the wider multi-agency contribution to supporting children and families at an earlier stage.

We have met with a wide range of witnesses from senior managers to front-line staff and trade union representatives, and encompassing the range of partners who work alongside social care to safeguard our children and young people. We have also considered a wealth of written detail about the service in Leeds and many of the key national reports produced over the past year on the subject of safeguarding.

We took the unusual step of producing an interim report in January 2010. Although we had not quite completed our inquiry at this point, we felt that it was crucial that we submitted a recommendation for additional funding before the 2010/11 budget was set. We are pleased at the excellent reception our interim report received.

Anticipated service benefits

Our final report will contain additional recommendations about the training and development of children's social work staff; management, administrative and IT support; the need to ensure that children's cases are progressed through the system; and the contribution of multi-agency working, particularly through the Common Assessment Framework (CAF).

"Children's Services recognise and value the depth of the Scrutiny inquiry into Safeguarding and appreciate the timeliness of this interim report and its recommendation."

Sandie Keene, Interim Director of Children's Services

Our main recommendations

Interim report

We recommended that the Executive Board included an increased resource for children's social care staffing in the budget proposals to be put forward to Council in February 2010.

We recommended that the costings provided to us by the Chief Officer for Children and Young People's Social Care for a caseload of 20 cases be used as a minimum starting point for working towards a children's social work service with sufficient staff to ensure a reasonable caseload, and promoting quality outcomes for the children and families of Leeds.

(Further recommendations to be added following publication of final report.)

Inquiry on population growth

The council is currently feeling the impact of a steep rise in population in terms of needing to identify additional primary school places in some parts of the city. As a result of this the Scrutiny Board was asked to review the wider implications of anticipated population growth for children's services in the city.

Our inquiry focused on three key questions:

- how good is our information and how do we make it better?
- how well do we use the information, and how can we improve?
- what service changes do we need to make because of population growth?

In particular we were pleased to receive contributions to our work from national and local experts, from the Office for National Statistics, the Local Government Association (LGA) and Leeds University School of Geography, alongside the contributions from internal witnesses. We are pleased that the involvement of these external contributors has developed a useful link for our officers in improving local knowledge of population information. Our recommendations will focus on improvements to the sharing of information to help the future planning of services.

“High quality, accurate population statistics are a fundamental pre-requisite for the planning and allocation of funds for public services. However, estimating local population change has become more difficult with increasing rates of international and internal migration and this has highlighted shortcomings in the current system of national and official statistics.”

LGA evidence to population growth inquiry

Other work of the Board

School organisation consultations

We received a request for scrutiny from two local councillors and school governors, in relation to proposals for the future of City of Leeds High School. As a result we set up a working group to look at the general issue of the management of school organisation consultations by Education Leeds. We heard from a local parent as well as the local councillors and officers.

Our recommendations seek to ensure that more attention is paid to the less formal aspects of the consultation process, ensuring that all stakeholders are kept well informed at the appropriate stages as proposals are developed.

Attendance

We continued the work that we began last year looking at school attendance. We had identified this area of work as an area of under-performance over a number of years, and Leeds is a national target authority for improvement in the number of persistently absent pupils.

We were pleased to note that the Department for Children, Schools and Families considers that some of the work being undertaken locally is best practice, and we have recommended that such good practice needs to be routinely shared more widely to try and increase the benefits further. We have circulated our report to all councillors who are school governors to raise their awareness of the importance of this issue.

Call In

In October 2009, we also considered a call-in, in relation to the award of the contract for wedge based Connexions intensive support services.

After a lengthy debate, the Board unanimously resolved to refer the decision back to the original decision-maker for reconsideration. We had particular concerns about whether the specification process reflected local needs sufficiently. We were disappointed when the original decision was confirmed, particularly as there was a strong suggestion that it was effectively too late in the day for scrutiny to influence the decision.

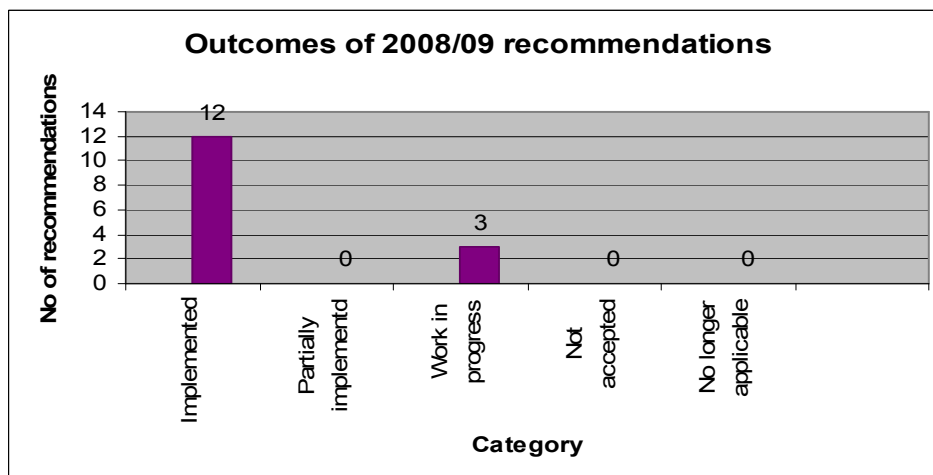
As a result of this particular call in experience, a number of follow-up actions have taken place:

- The call in process has been amended. In future, if an officer decision is referred back by the Scrutiny Board, the new decision must either comply with the Scrutiny Board's recommendations or, if the original decision is still to be pursued, that decision must be taken by the Executive Board.
- The Central and Corporate Functions Scrutiny Board reviewed the role of members within the procurement process, and a member workshop was held with procurement officers to look at improvements to the commissioning process.

Outcome of recommendations made in 2008/09

The Scrutiny Board (Children's Services) completed 2 inquiry reports in 2008/09, which resulted in 15 recommendations. In addition the Young People's Scrutiny Forum produced a report entitled 'Protecting our Environment', containing a further 11 recommendations. This section highlights some key examples of where our recommendations have resulted in service benefits, or otherwise added value.

- As part of our inquiry into the Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST) we recommended that proper procedures and protocols be put in place to prevent a repeat of the situation faced by the MAST team – that a unilateral decision to withdraw funding by one partner in a multi-agency team could result in its threatened closure, without wider consideration being given to the strategic value of the work done. We consider that this recommendation has now been achieved.
- We also recommended that clear lines of accountability were set out for the management of jointly funded teams, particularly in relation to the management of the staff involved.
- In response to our inquiry about children entering the education system, we are pleased that a review has taken place and proposals are being drawn up to create a single system of funding for children with special educational needs across all early years settings. We will continue to track progress with this recommendation.
- As a result of our recommendations, an agreed transition document has been produced and training will be rolled out over the next year, regarding the transfer from early years settings to school.
- It has recently been proposed that ongoing monitoring of the recommendations from the Young People's Scrutiny Forum inquiry on Protecting our Environment should be jointly monitored by the Environment and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board in conjunction with the School Councils sub-group of Leeds Youth Council. Young people have a good opportunity to influence the response of schools to a number of the recommendations through their school councils, and therefore have a direct active role to play in achieving the objectives set out in their original recommendations.



The Board's full work programme 2009/10

Requests for scrutiny

- City of Leeds High School/School Organisation Consultation
- Corporate Governance and Audit Committee – issues raised by the Audit Commission Annual Audit and Inspection Letter
- Executive Board – Request for comments on the City and Regional Partnerships Scrutiny Inquiry report on the role of the voluntary, community and faith sector in council led community engagement

Review of existing policy

- Safeguarding – Resources
- Safeguarding – Preventative Duty
- Attendance
- Youth Service user and non-user surveys
- Meadowfield Primary School
- School Balances

Development of new policy

- The impact of population growth on children's services in Leeds
- 14-19 Education Review

Monitoring scrutiny recommendations

- Adoption
- Services for 8-13 year olds
- Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST)
- Entering the Education System
- Catching the Bus (Young People's Scrutiny Forum)
- Protecting our Environment (Young People's Scrutiny Forum)

Performance management

- Quarterly performance management reports
- Quarterly overview of Children's Services and Children and Young People's Plan priorities
- Ofsted inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services in Leeds
- Annual standards report – primary
- Annual standards report - secondary

Briefings

- KPMG external audit review of scrutiny

Call Ins

- Award of contract for the delivery of Connexions Intensive Support Services – Wedge Based Services