

SCRUTINY BOARD (CHILDREN'S SERVICES)

THURSDAY, 7TH SEPTEMBER, 2006

PRESENT: Councillor J Bale in the Chair

Councillors B Cleasby, R D Feldman, A Harrison,
V Kendall, L Mulherin, T Murray, K Renshaw and B Selby

CO-OPTED MEMBERS: (VOTING)	Mr E A Britten	- Church Representative (Catholic)
	Prof PHJH Gosden	- Church Representative (Church of England)
	Mr C Macpherson	- Parent Governor Representative (Special)
	Mrs S Knights	- Parent Governor Representative (Primary)
CO-OPTED MEMBERS: (NON-VOTING)	Mr T Hales	- Teacher Representative
	Ms C Foote	- Teacher Representative
	Mrs S Hutchinson	- Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership
	Mr P Gathercole	- NCH Representative
	Ms T Kayani	- Youth Work Partnership Representative

27 Chair's Opening Remarks

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

28 Declarations of Interest

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

Councillors Bale, Cleasby, R D Feldman, Harrison, Kendall, Mulherin, Murray, Selby, Mr E A Britten, Mrs S Knights and Mr C Macpherson.

Councillor Kendall declared a personal interest in agenda items 8 and 9, due to being a member of the Adoption Panel. (Minute Nos 32 and 33 refer).

Mr C Macpherson declared a personal interest in agenda items 8 and 9, having been approved as an adopter. (Minute Nos 32 and 33 refer).

Councillor Murray declared a personal interest in agenda item 10, due to being the Chief Executive of a charity with links to the Youth Service. (Minute No 34 refers).

Mrs S Knights declared a personal interest in agenda items 8 and 9, due to being a foster parent. (Minute Nos 32 and 33 refer).

Councillor Cleasby and Professor PHJH Gosden declared personal interests due to being members of the School Organisation Committee.

A further declaration of personal interest was made at a later point in the meeting with regard to agenda items 8 and 9. (Minute No 32 refers).

29 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillor Chapman and Mr R Greaves.

30 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Scrutiny Board (Children’s Services) meeting held on 13th July 2006 be confirmed as a correct record.

(Mr P Gathercole joined the meeting at 9.40 a.m. during the consideration of this item)

31 Members' Questions

As prior notice of questions had been received from Members, the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development submitted a report which afforded Scrutiny Board Members the opportunity to put questions to the relevant service Directors.

Chris Edwards, Chief Executive of Education Leeds and Rosemary Archer, Director of Children’s Services were in attendance to answer Members’ questions.

(a) The Director of Children’s Services fielded a range of questions relating to the introduction of a trial policy which enabled the library service to charge for the late or non return of items borrowed by young people. Members questioned how the introduction of such a policy would assist in achieving the relevant Every Child Matters outcomes in Leeds, help to close the gap, tackle social exclusion and how it would encourage children and their families to use the public library service and develop a love of reading. In summary, the response submitted to the Board addressed the following issues:-

- The reasons why the policy, which was being trialled for one year, had been introduced and what it intended to achieve;
- The proportion of the library stock that was available to borrow at any one point in time;
- The need for the library service to continually invest in new stock despite budgetary constraints and the impact that the performance of the library service could have on future CPA results;
- The methods which had been used to encourage an increase in the return rate of items by young people, prior to the trial being introduced;
- The initial reaction of service users to the introduction of the initiative;
- The measures being taken to monitor the effectiveness of the trial.

A question and answer session arising from the response then ensued. The main points raised were as follows:-

- The role which could be played by the Scrutiny Board in monitoring the effectiveness of the trial;
- The extent to which the initiative had been publicised and how effective the publicity campaign had been;
- The implications that the introduction of the trial could have on the library service budget and how such implications could be monitored;
- The considerable number of items that could be borrowed on a child's ticket at any one time;
- The possibility of extending library opening hours to give service users a greater opportunity to return or renew items.

RESOLVED – That an update on the impact of the trial policy be submitted to the Scrutiny Board later in the Municipal Year.

(b) Members questioned what impact the new Ofsted school inspection framework has had on both schools in Leeds and the LEA.

In response, the following issues were addressed by the Chief Executive of Education Leeds:-

- The procedures in place to advise Elected Members of recent school inspection results;
- Members were advised of the ways in which the Ofsted inspection framework had changed, with particular reference being made to the clarity of the framework and the emphasis that was being placed upon the self assessment and the 'value added' elements;
- The focus that was also being placed upon leadership and management;
- The impact that more frequent inspections and a reduced period of notice was having on both schools and staff;
- The considerable success rate of those schools which had been inspected since the introduction of the new framework and the ways in which certain processes in Leeds could be developed to sustain and improve on such results;
- Concerns were raised over the methods being used by Ofsted to communicate with pupils of those schools being inspected;
- The reduced number of grades within the new Ofsted inspection framework, and the effects that such a revision to the assessment procedure was having.

Following the discussion, Members acknowledged the considerable number of positive results that schools in Leeds had received following recent Ofsted inspections.

RESOLVED - That the issue of Ofsted inspections in Leeds be considered further by the Board at a later point in the Municipal Year.

32 Adoption in Leeds - Session One

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

In attendance at the meeting to answer Members' queries and questions were Val Hales and Sarah Johal, both Fostering and Adoption Team Managers, in addition to Debbie Church of the Yorkshire Adoption Consortium.

Appended to the report for Members' information was a copy of the inquiry's agreed terms of reference, together with a report from the Chief Officer of Social Services which introduced the documents to be considered as part of the first formal session of the inquiry.

A question and answer session ensued. The main areas of discussion were as follows:-

- Members welcomed the introduction and growth of the post adoption support service in Leeds;
- The ways in which the recent regulatory and legislative changes to the adoption process had affected the rights of birth parents, how the changes impacted upon single parents and same sex couples as potential adopters and whether the new legislation took marital status into account when considering prospective adopters;
- Issues relating to the introduction of various care orders with differing degrees of permanency, and the impact that such orders were having in Leeds;
- The ways in which the adoption process took the Every Child Matters criteria into account;
- Whether the legislative changes had allowed local authorities to maintain any flexibility within their respective adoption procedures, whether it ensured all local authorities were now working consistently and the ways in which the attitudes towards adoption in local authorities varied throughout the country;
- The methods which could be used to encourage a greater level of co-operation between local authorities in terms of adoption, including the role of the Regional Consortium, and the barriers which hindered an increase in such co-operation levels;
- The actions being taken to address the shortage of Black and Minority Ethnic adopters in Leeds;
- Issues relating to the varying financial support received by carers and adopters, the methods used to determine such support, with specific reference being made to the issues of means tested benefits and tax;
- The low incidence of adoptions breaking down in Leeds and the procedures established to deal with such an occurrence.

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

(Mr P Gathercole declared a personal interest in this item and the following item due to being a representative of NCH, which provided adoption services across the country)

33 Adoption in Leeds - Session Two

A report was received from the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development which detailed the information to be considered as part of the second formal 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 introduced the documents to be considered as part of the second formal session of the Board's inquiry, together with some background information on the work of the regional adoption consortium. A sample of anonymous examples of both children currently on referral for adoption and adults from the list of approved adopters in Leeds was tabled at the meeting for Members' information.

In attendance at the meeting to answer Members' queries and questions were Val Hales and Sarah Johal, both Fostering and Adoption Team Managers, in addition to Debbie Church of the Yorkshire Adoption Consortium.

Following a brief introduction by the Chair of the issues to be considered during the second session of the inquiry, a discussion ensued. The main areas of debate were as follows:-

- The reasons why certain approved adopters in Leeds had waited so long to be matched with a child;
- Issues concerning the targets set in relation to the number of approved adopters in Leeds, and the constraints which prevented the pool of approved adopters expanding further;
- The current situation relating to staffing levels within the adoption service in Leeds, the existence of any initiatives which encouraged an increase in employee recruitment and the reasons why there were difficulties in attracting experienced workers from voluntary organisations, with particular reference being made to the matching of employees' terms and conditions and how such an issue could be addressed;
- Following the legislative changes which had occurred, Members questioned how prospective adopters were being informed of such changes in a bid to increase numbers in Leeds;
- The ways in which the average length of time taken to complete the adoption process for an individual child could be speeded up and the reasons why there were more babies currently on referral for adoption than there were approved adopters awaiting a child of that age;
- The number of instances where a pre-birth assessment is carried out with a view to a child being taken into care, and the circumstances when such a course of action would be taken;
- The number of Special Guardianship Orders which had been granted in Leeds and whether the introduction of the order had affected the number of foster carers available;

- Concerns were raised with regard to the resources available to the adoption service in Leeds and the assistance received from other agencies, especially when considering the legislative and regulatory changes to the adoption process and the proposed introduction of a third adoption panel in Leeds;
- The number of children over the age of 7 who had been referred for adoption in Leeds and the levels of support given to the adoptive parents of such older children;
- The methods being used to attract potential adopters and foster parents in Leeds, and how such methods could be developed in order to increase their numbers;
- The extent to which the current trends and issues within the adoption service in Leeds were comparable to other local authorities in the region;
- The procedures in place to deal with the adoption of siblings in Leeds.

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

(Professor PHJH Gosden and Councillor Cleasby left the meeting at 11.05 a.m. and 12.00 p.m. respectively during the consideration of this item and Councillors Murray and Renshaw and Mr C Macpherson left the meeting at 12.05 p.m. at the conclusion of this item)

34 Youth Services

Members received a report from the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development which sought the Board's approval of draft terms of reference for the inquiry into Youth Services. The report also invited Members to consider scheduling an additional meeting of the Board, in order to incorporate the first two sessions of the Youth Services inquiry into the Board's Work Programme without delay.

Following a discussion which related to the comments of the Support Executive Member – Children's Services regarding the draft terms of reference, the Board agreed that the question in paragraph 5.5 should be amended to read, 'What should Leeds City Council include in the youth offer that it will have to publish next year?', in order to be consistent throughout the document.

RESOLVED –

- (a). That the report and information appended to the report be noted;
- (b). That subject to the above amendment, the draft terms of reference for the Scrutiny Board's inquiry into Youth Services be approved;
- (c). That an additional meeting of the Scrutiny Board be scheduled for 2nd November 2006, at 10.00 a.m., in order to incorporate the first two sessions of the Youth Services inquiry into the Board's Work Programme without delay.

35 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 August 2006 to 30th November 2006 which related to the Board's remit, together with the minutes from the Executive Board meetings held on 5th July and 16th August 2006.

Further to Minute No 31, Members proposed that the issue of the new Ofsted school inspection framework could be discussed in more detail at the Scrutiny Board meeting in October. Members also discussed the attendance of the relevant service Directors and Executive Members at Board meetings on a regular basis.

RESOLVED –

- (a). That the report and the Scrutiny Board's Work Programme, as appended to the report be noted, subject to the inclusion of the additional meeting of the Board scheduled for 2nd November 2006;
- (b). That the Chair be requested to discuss attendance at future Board meetings on a regular basis with the Director of Children's Services and the Executive Members for Children's Services;
- (c). That the issue of the new Ofsted school inspection framework be incorporated into the Work Programme for the October 2006 meeting of the Board.

(Ms T Kayani left the meeting at 12.15 p.m. during the consideration of this item)

36 Date and Time of Next Meeting

Thursday, 12th October 2006 at 9.30 a.m.
(Pre-Meeting scheduled for 9.00 a.m.)

(The meeting concluded at 12.20 p.m.)