

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 23 May 2019 at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT:

Dr Richard Castle	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller
Cllr Chris Coleman	Cllr Loraine Patrick
Cllr Stephen Davies	Cllr Brian Robinson (Chairman)
Cllr Colin Hay	Cllr Lesley Williams MBE

Also in attendance: Mark Bone - Head of Over 11 Service
Tim Browne - Director of Education
Andy Dempsey - Director of Partnerships & Strategy
Jane Lloyd-Davies - Head of Education Outcomes and Intervention
Julie Rzezniczek - Director of Children's Safeguarding
Chris Spencer – Director of Children's Services
Cllr Richard Boyles – Cabinet Member Children's Safeguarding and Early Years

Apologies: Charlotte Blanch, Cllr Bernard Fisher, Cllr Patrick Molyneux, Ambassador for Vulnerable Children and Young People and Cllr Alan Preest

19. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Brian Robinson declared a personal interest as a Foster Carer.

Cllr Dr Andrew Miller declared a personal interest as he has been appointed as a Trustee to the Board of Gloucester United Schools.

20. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2019 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman subject to the following amendment: Cllr Richard Boyles, Cabinet Member Children and Young People was in attendance.

21. ACADEMY SCHOOLS IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE - THE ROLE OF THE REGIONAL SCHOOLS COMMISSIONER (RSC)

21.1 Members were pleased to welcome Hannah Woodhouse, Deputy Director for the Office of the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) for the South West, and Heather Campbell, Office of the Regional Schools Commissioner for the South West (Gloucestershire) to the committee. The committee congratulated Ms Woodhouse on her appointment to Director for the Office of the RSC for the South West which was effective from September 2019.

21.2 Ms Woodhouse gave a presentation outlining the Regional Schools Commissioner's (RSC) vision for all children in the south west; the schools picture in Gloucestershire; the challenges in Gloucestershire; the role of Multiple Academy Trusts (MAT) in school improvement; how the RSC supports Academies; and the issues that were currently being worked on in Gloucestershire. (For information the presentation slides from the meeting were uploaded to the council's website and included in the minute book.)

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- 21.3 Ms Woodhouse drew attention to the number of Single Academy Trusts (SAT) in Gloucestershire (46). This was the largest number of SATs within the south west region; with nearly a quarter of south west SATs were in Gloucestershire. She explained that being a SAT could leave an Academy financially vulnerable and isolated. She stated that being part of a MAT offered more support and could better deliver school improvement. However, she felt that there were not enough MATs in Gloucestershire. It was also important not to over burden a MAT. She thought it would be important to encourage the development of more MATs in the county; whilst academies could join an out of county MAT it was always better that the support remained local.
- 21.4 Ms Woodhouse recognised that more needed to be done to support school improvement in the Forest of Dean area, and acknowledged the challenges in Gloucester City.
- 21.5 It was emphasised that schools were responsible for driving improvement. The RSC would only step in when schools were placed in special measures. Ms Woodhouse explained that she was not able to comment on individual schools in an open forum. This was accepted.
- 21.16 In response to questions Ms Woodhouse informed the committee that there was clearly still a role for local councillors to continue to challenge and support schools in their area. It was the role of the Academy Trust Board to prevent the school being placed in special measures. It was for the RSC to respond where this had happened and identify the right support for the school.
- 21.17 Members did not feel that the process for identifying a MAT for the school to join was not sufficiently transparent, and took too long, causing delays and concerns for parents and pupils. It was explained that when a school was found to be inadequate and placed into special measures the RSC did want to move quickly. There were different options depending on the individual circumstances and consideration would be needed as to which MAT would offer the best support to the school. Where there was more than one potential sponsor expressions of interest would be submitted and evaluated; this could take time. It was important to make the right decision to ensure that improvement could be sustained. Transferring the land and TUPE matters would also take time. The RSC has a timeline of 9 months for this process.
- 21.18 It was explained that the government did not require schools to join a MAT, but they should not operate in isolation. The RSC stated that all SATs were encouraged to join a MAT. She informed members that she was aware that some schools felt that being part of a MAT would impact the individual school identity, but she felt that the wider support that a MAT could deliver outweighed concerns. The MAT approach was also evidence based, with research having shown that MATs did offer the best model in support of the Academy agenda.
- 21.19 With regard to the local member and schools in their division, members agreed that the Academy agenda meant that this relationship was no longer straightforward. There was no formal access to schools and relationships between schools and the local authority were variable. With the high level of school exclusions in the county and the detrimental impact that these could have on an individual's life chances this was a significant concern to committee members. Some members were also of the view that large MATs were essentially the (old) Local Education Authority (LEA) and questioned the validity and value of the Academy structure and process. Ms Woodhouse stated that it was a mistake to think that MATs were taking on the role of an LEA.
- 21.20 Ms Woodhouse acknowledged that it was important for Academy schools to have a relationship with the local authority. However the Director of Education informed the

committee that the local authority could not intervene in an Academy if the school did not wish it too. It was explained that the RSC could also offer support and only intervene in very limited circumstances i.e following an Ofsted inadequate judgement.

- 21.21 Given the challenges posed by the structure of the Academy model in that members found it difficult to access schools and/or understand how the school was supporting pupils. The change to the Ofsted Inspection Framework focusing on the quality of education was welcome.. Members were pleased to note that this change had been welcomed by school leaders across the country. However, members were concerned that due to the timeline of the Ofsted inspection framework this could potentially leave pupils in an unsatisfactory position for some time. Members were informed that the RSC and Ofsted met regularly and shared intelligence about schools; this could potentially influence the timing of an inspection.. The committee was reminded that the Director of Children's Services has rights of access with regard to safeguarding so if there were concerns then the local authority would not need to have recourse to the RSC.
- 21.22 Members remained concerned with the promotion of the MAT model given that MATs could fail; the Forest of Dean area had experienced the failure of two MATs, which had necessitated the identification of replacements. Members had also observed that MATs could be competitive rather than collaborative, and very protective of its resources, which could have a detrimental impact on other schools, the wider pupil base, and the community. In response it was stated that there were many examples of where MATs did work together; it was possible for schools to be run by different MATs and be collaborative.
- 21.23 The committee has been concerned with regard to the performance of schools in the Forest of Dean area and asked what the RSC was doing to support these schools. Ms Woodhouse informed members that she was working hard with the leaders of the MATs in the Forest of Dean to bring about greater collaborative working. A MAT Chief Executive Officer group had been established to support the aim of improved collaborative working. She had recently visited The Dean Academy and Dene Magna School and explained that both schools were keen to work with other schools in the area. The RSC had also spent a lot of time supporting Dene Magna with the development of the sixth form; this was part of wanting to drive forward aspirations for pupils and their families in the Forest of Dean area.
- 21.24 It was commented that in some parts of the county there were schools which were half empty, in particular in the Forest of Dean area, and questioned how to manage issues of overcapacity of school places. The committee was reminded that school place planning was the responsibility of the local authority not the RSC. With regard to individual SATs or MATs it was up to them to consider viability issues, and did form part of the RSC's conversations with schools with regard to school improvement. The committee was informed that school funding was a very 'live' issue.
- 21.25 Members acknowledged these points but remained concerned that this left schools in a position where they could not deliver as diverse a curriculum as they would like to as they would not be able to afford to do so. There was concern that more attention was being given to make sure that a school survives rather than focusing on the needs of children and young people. Ms Woodhouse appreciated that these were difficult decisions and that the RSC would support MAT and SAT leaders with these issues; the local authority, as the school place planning lead, would also be involved in these discussions.
- 21.26 The Director of Education clarified that although the responsibility for school place planning remained with the local authority, a local authority could not make the decision to close an academy. The committee was informed that the Gloucestershire School Places Strategy

2018-2023 had been approved by the council's Cabinet in December 2018, with 10 new schools in the pipeline.

- 21.27 A member stated that they remained opposed to the Academy agenda, and that the discussion today had confirmed that view. There were significant problems with the performance of Academy schools across Gloucester and the Forest of Dean, the number of school exclusions and off rolling of pupils were also of serious concern. Local Members felt very much removed from this process, and it essentially took 'local' out of education. It was difficult given the governance structure of Academy Schools for local members to be able to properly scrutinise Academy School performance. Given all the challenges highlighted in the presentation and discussion it was questioned whether the office of the RSC had sufficient resources (54 staff members for the whole of the South West) to be able to achieve expected outcomes.
- 21.28 Ms Woodhouse acknowledged that it was a complex picture. With regard to resources she stated that within a time of financial constraint it was important to get the balance right; and that if additional funding went to RSCs this was money that would not be available to schools. This was an ongoing issue for RSCs.
- 21.29 The Chairman thanked Ms Woodhouse and Ms Campbell for attending the meeting. The committee would need to continue this dialogue.

22. CARE LEAVERS

- 22.1 Mark Bone, Head of Service, presented the detail of the local offer to the committee. He informed members that the presentation of the local offer on the website was very much influenced by the voice of young people.
- 22.2 Work on the care leaver offer was ongoing; further discussions with the district councils were scheduled to see whether the offer could be improved, for example, with regard to access to sport and leisure facilities.
- 22.3 In response to a question it was explained that the cost of the council tax exemption was approximately £10k (across all the district councils); the exemption only applied to those young people not already covered by benefits.
- 22.4 Members were concerned that the right accommodation was not available to care leavers. A member shared his experience of a facility within his division that was not now hosting the young people it was designed for, and the impact that this has on both the local community and the young people. It was felt that there was a clear gap with regard to an appropriate housing offer. The Head of Service acknowledged this position and informed the committee that there had been a considerable growth in the care leaver population; housing provision had not kept pace. He clarified that there was an ongoing piece of work with regard to housing and that this was referenced within the committee report.
- 22.5 With regard to the development of the mentoring scheme, discussed in the committee report, there were financial implications as additional resources were required. The Care Leaver Team was working closely with Commissioning on this matter. It was possible that this might have to wait until the next budget round.
- 22.6 Members were disappointed that the discussions regarding access to leisure facilities remained ongoing; this had first been discussed some years ago. It was explained that this was a complex picture. District Councils did not all have the same relationship with the leisure providers, so it was difficult to get a standard offer. However, the committee was

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informed that Mike Dawson, Tewkesbury Borough Council (TBC) Chief Executive, had agreed to lead on this issue, and TBC was currently piloting an offer to care leavers.

- 22.7 Care leavers could be very vulnerable with regard to homelessness; they could lose their home, or if they had chosen to return to the family home could find that this does not work out. Officers worked hard to prevent homelessness. The Head of Service did indicate that he would like the district councils to have a more proactive approach in this regard. Committee members discussed the role of district councillors as corporate parents. It was noted that the district councils were represented on the corporate parenting group and felt that this was sufficient. It was however noted that legislation stated that in two authority areas the corporate parenting responsibility was shared with all the local authorities. Members agreed that they had a clear role to play in driving forward change and could raise these issues with their district cabinet colleagues.
- 22.8 Members were conscious that care leavers were adults and it was up to them if they wished to engage with the care leaver service, or not. The support offered to care leavers was discussed, particularly how those that were now living out of county were supported. This included identifying charitable trusts that may be able to support these young people back into education/training. The Head of Service stated that it was important to ensure that there was a stable base in place for these young people; it was about getting the basics in place to prepare them for the challenges ahead.
- 22.9 The committee noted the findings of the Audit report and the activity and actions to address the issues highlighted.

23. WORK PROGRAMME

The committee noted the work programme.

A work planning session was held on the rise of the committee meeting. The updated work programme would be included in the agenda pack for the committee meeting on 18 July 2019.

CHAIRMAN

Meeting concluded at 12:20