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13th September 2012

Cllr Brigid Jones
Cabinet Member Children and Family Services

Dear Brigid,

Short Inquiry on Improvements in Children's Social Care

Can I thank you for your attendance at the recent evidence gathering session on 11 September 2012. Can I also note our appreciation of the patience of your senior offices in responding to our questioning, in spite of the timing of the inquiry in the light of the OFSTED visit.

We note that many areas have progressed since the 2009 scrutiny report by Len Clarke’s Committee. We also noted a number of areas where it was unclear whether adequate progress has been made and we refer to these below.

Vision

As noted we accept that significant progress has been made in many areas and are reassured that there are many examples of best practice in the city. The Committee expects to have regular feedback from you as Cabinet Member on how your vision for the service is developing further over the next five years and to have feedback on how you will deliver to this. We assume that full consideration is being given to Munro’s recommendations in developing this. As a committee we would wish to, and expect to, be engaged on the formulation of future policy and look forward to supporting you on this in our role as critical friend.

The Role of Members

- We note the growing expectations of OFSTED, the Government and the new administration that corporate parenting be given a higher profile. Members need to have further clarity and support about their corporate parenting role and details of how the district champions can be used to improve the service.

Recommendation 1:

- The necessary resources and support need to be in place to enable all elected members, (whether committee members or district champions or

other elected members) to carry out their corporate parenting responsibilities. We would suggest this is done in conjunction with the Scrutiny Chair for Governance and Member Development

- The equivalent guide to the “Children’s Services in Birmingham - Guide for Professionals” should be made available to all elected members with all relevant contacts and updated at least annually (and immediately if there is a reorganisation).

Structures

We are concerned about the sustainability of IFSTs and their ability to be able to progress and be of positive impact on families given their current reliance on annual funding from the Schools’ Forum.

Recommendation 2:

- That you examine future budget options to ensure that IFSTs can secure long-term funding whether from the Schools Forum, other partners, city council budget or some combination thereof.

Signposting

Elected members are concerned that there is too much emphasis on accessing the Council’s services and reporting issues through the internet. We felt that members of the public weren’t always aware of what mechanisms were available for them to report issues such as neglect, for example further opportunities to use council buildings and services across the city should be explored where appropriate. We also strongly feel that the lack of front facing access for the public should be investigated without delay.

Recommendation 3:

- We would like to see more information readily available locally on how to report and raise issues of concern regarding a child or young person by phone or face to face.
- We would like to see what work has been carried out and what further work could be carried out with all BCC front line staff and key partners – to ensure that they are aware of how both they and local residents can raise concerns.
- We would like you raise this at the Improvement Board in order to ensure that all partners at that table can help us to achieve that aim.

Staffing and Workforce Development

We were worried about the level of staff morale which appears to have shown little or no improvement. We feel it is important to show appreciation to our employees who go that extra mile. We would also be keen to hold further discussions about the roles elected members can play in raising morale.

Recommendation 4:

- We would like further details of work you are already carrying out or further steps you can take to recognise and reward best practice

The committee were pleased to hear about developments in the recruitment and retention of staff but we are still very concerned to hear of the issues relating to the levels of usage of agency staff. This obviously has an impact on budgets and may also affect morale. We are further concerned to hear of council employees who leave the employment of the council only to be re-engaged as staff members via agencies within a short period of time.

We understand there are links to the broader issues about the service and the perception of the Council as employer. However, the Committee is so concerned that it wishes to carry out a further inquiry about the use of agency staff.

Recommendation 5:

- We would expect the Directorate to continue looking at the challenge of agency staff and addressing it as a matter of concern. We would like to see further details on the recruitment and retention of Social worker staff.

The committee acknowledges that work around sickness and absence has been carried out, but note that this still places pressure on the service and that more needs to be done to address it.

Recommendation 6: We would like to receive your action plan on the further steps being taken to address sickness absence. As part of this we would wish to have:

- A breakdown of the relevant data (including lengths and frequency, reasons, types of groups / areas where this is a concern);
- Details of how interventions under the sickness are monitored and analysed;
- Reassurance about the financial impact of sickness within agency staff.

Social Work Practice

We note that there may be some inconsistencies in recording assessment data across the City and this is one of the areas still flagged as a challenge in the latest improvement plan.

Recommendation 7:

- Whilst we acknowledge that there are regular audits of case files, there must be further action taken to ensure consistency of recording across the board.

Adoption and Fostering

The Committee intends to carry out an inquiry of fostering and adoption later in the year and would welcome further discussions with the directorate in order to focus on the areas where we can have the most impact.

In the short term can you inform me of what is currently in place regarding fostering and adoption panels. Could you also provide us with any written amendment to the

improvement notice from the DFE. We would also be interested in any surveys or other feedback from foster carers or those going through / completing the adoption process.

Recommendation 8:

- At this point we would wish to highlight that we feel further work needs to be done urgently to increase number of foster carers and ensure retention. We would wish to see an action plan for the time the inquiry takes place and would like to see a draft action plan by the next committee on 31 Oct 2012.
- We would also like to see details of the training and support provided to our new and existing foster carers.

Partnership working

We still have some concerns that not all partners are on board with the challenge of safeguarding.

Recommendation 9:

- We request that you write to the Chair of the shadow Police and Crime Panel and the Police and Crime Commissioner when elected, to help ensure that the Police service plays its full role in safeguarding.
- We also suggest that further interventions be explored after Easter 2013 to reduce the end of term spike in referrals from schools, and following discussions with the governor support team to include a recommendation re governors' role in safeguarding.

Concluding remarks

Whilst we recognise the differing requirements of the different bodies overseeing improvement and development of excellent services there are fears of duplication of roles and wonder if there are opportunities for you to examine opportunities to streamline this oversight. In the light of this would like to work closely with you to avoid any further duplication regarding the role of scrutiny.

We note that OFSTED are currently consulting on "Looked after children and care leavers" and "multi-agency arrangements for the protection of children." We assume that the Directorate ensures that the Council's views are made known and would be pleased if you would share these with us and we discuss the role of scrutiny as further consultations come about.

We accept that had there been opportunity to discuss some of these issues further we may have been reassured that interventions are in hand. We would certainly urge you to let us have further details for any areas you feel we should not have concerns about in time for the next formal business meeting of the Committee on 31 October 2012.

We would otherwise wish a progress report or discussion on the recommendations at our meeting on 27 March 2013

Children's social care is a vital service within our city and as a committee we both recognise and acknowledge the hard working staffs within the directorate who are often working in very difficult and challenging circumstances. We hope the work of

this inquiry will lead to better outcomes not only for our staff but also for the children of Birmingham

Yours sincerely

Councillor Anita Ward
Chair Education and Vulnerable Children's O&S Committee

Cc: Peter Duxbury
Jacquie Jenson
Sir Albert Bore