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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, 21 JULY 2014

Councillors Present: Brian Bedwell (Chairman), Jeff Brooks (Vice-Chairman), Sheila Ellison, Dave Goff, Roger Hunneman, Alan Macro, Garth Simpson, Virginia von Celsing, Quentin Webb, Emma Webster and Laszlo Zverko

Also Present: Nick Carter (Chief Executive), Mark Evans (Head of Children's Services) and Rachael Wardell (Corporate Director - Communities), David Lowe (Scrutiny & Partnerships Manager), Charlene Myers (Democratic Services Officer) and Councillor Irene Neill (Children and Young People, Youth Service, Education)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Mike Johnston

PART I

1. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

2. **Children's Services Recruitment and Retention Strategy**

The Commission considered the report (Agenda item 3) outlining the rationale for and outcomes required of the Children's Services Recruitment and Retention Strategy.

Rachael Wardell introduced the item by explaining that Children's Services was faced with an acute staffing crisis in its highest risk child protection teams. The problem was part of a wider national issue caused by a shortage of experienced child and family social workers, however, it was imperative that measures were implemented to address the problem in a local context.

The challenges related specifically to front line staff and particularly those who carried out statutory duties. The issue was already affecting the ability to provide safe and effective child protection services.

Measures had previously been introduced to address the problem, including the revised career progression arrangements implemented earlier in the year, but recently the situation had deteriorated significantly and therefore the urgent implementation of additional more focused measures was required. Rachael Wardell stressed that the situation was affecting the performance of front line teams and ultimately the effectiveness of the service.

The Commission heard that the problem of a higher than desirable proportion of roles covered by agency staff had existed for some time before but since certain key staff had left front line teams recently the service had become more vulnerable and turbulent.

Mark Evans explained that the covering report was presented in two sections. Section one detailed the recruitment and retention challenges and their impact, the second

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outlined the strategy that had been developed to address the issue and also included detailed costing associated with the its delivery.

In order to attract staff and create a stable team, the strategy outlined the introduction of a number of non-financial incentives designed to improve the working environment for social workers. The strategy also proposed financial incentives, which would be publicised through a marketing and advertising strategy for the recruitment of staff, and modifications to the terms and conditions associated with the roles which recognised the challenges specific to the area of work. Mark Evans advised that the strategy aimed to make the Council the employer of choice for Social Workers.

Councillor Irene Neill advised that the local challenges were consistent with those being experienced nationally and were a common problem amongst Local Authorities. The Commission was asked to agree the strategy in order that the process could move forward, recognising that elements within the strategy required further development before implementation.

Councillor Roger Hunneman recognised the challenges being faced by Social Workers. He referred the Commission to page 20 of the report which suggested that the issue had been in existence for 3 years previous. Councillor Hunneman questioned why the issue had not been addressed with the same degree of importance or urgency before now.

In response, Rachael Wardell stated that changes to the maintenance of staffing levels had been introduced previously and a paper outlining career pathways in Social Work had been considered by the Executive in January 2014. The current report aimed to address issues that were similar but which had now taken on new dimensions and presented greater risk. Rachael Wardell explained that the team most exposed by the current problem was the Referral and Assessment team which worked with highly vulnerable young people.

In light of the information contained within items 13.2 and 13.3 of the report, Councillor Hunneman asked Rachael Wardell to clarify how the funds would be obtained. The Commission heard that initially funds would be provided from reserves and that in subsequent years they would come from efficiency saving opportunities and budget reprofiling across the Communities Directorate.

Rachael Wardell explained that with the implementation of the strategy they expected to see a reduction in agency costs over time and that early prevention measures would reduce the number of Child Protection and looked after children cases, which would in turn deliver savings in the longer term. The report provided details of financial impacts based on a 'worse case' scenario, illustrating that the proposed strategy would cost less to deliver than the current dependency on agency staff.

The Commission heard that every effort would be made to avoid reducing the funding for early prevention services as it was clear that this aspect of the service provided longer term benefits and savings.

Councillor Quentin Webb stated that the report was informative and clearly identified the need to reposition the service. He was comforted to know that savings would be obtained from within the directorate.

Councillor Brain Bedwell highlighted the proposed developed of an academy to support, train and develop the Council's own skilled workers. He compared the function to

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apprenticeships and stated that the proposal should provide a stable work force. He therefore fully supported the idea.

Councillor Jeff Brooks stressed that without the extraordinary meeting the Commission would not have had the opportunity to view the proposal ahead of consideration at the Executive.

Councillor Brooks was disappointed to see that the issue had been known to the service some time prior to the action now being proposed. He questioned the previous reliance on agency staff, stating that it was an expensive resource and evidently less stable. The Commission heard that the Shadow Executive had not been aware of the issue until recently.

He was concerned about the profile of the proposed three year payments and questioned the financial implications in the longer term.

Councillor Brooks disputed the expectation that the service could recruit a new member of staff with the broad skill set as outlined on page 24, point 5.1.3 of the report (the recruitment officer). He suggested that the remuneration package could be amended so it was in line with similar roles within the recruitment industry, comprising a basic pay rate and, as an incentive, financial reward for securing the recruitment of new staff.

Councillor Brooks suggested that the role should be incorporated within the Human Resources team, therefore avoiding isolated working and encouraged a holistic view across the recruitment process.

Councillor Brooks was encouraged to see that the service had explored new ways to address the problem and believed that it was not appropriate to leave the situation in its current state. However, he felt that the current proposal was not yet fit for purpose.

Councillor Neill advised that the recruitment role would link into the HR team and welcomed the suggestion on the pay arrangements. She agreed that they could be explored.

In response to points raised, Mark Evans advised that the service expected to recruit someone with the majority of the skills as outlined on page 24, point 5.1.3, but realised that it was unlikely they would secure someone who possessed them all. Mark Evans explained that it was likely that further development would be required but they expected the individual to have the capability to begin recruitment activity promptly after appointment.

Councillor Alan Macro asked how the service proposed to manage the incentive payments and extra leave entitlement. Mark Evans stated that the bonus was a fixed sum of money and the policy regarding the profile of payments was not yet finalised.

Rachael Wardell invited the Commission to consider the costs and assumptions table on pages 15 and 16 of the report. The Commission heard that the allocation of bonus payments and retention leave allowance would be awarded across different years as the incentives would be made available to staff currently in post who would be able to draw on some of some of their existing service to receive the benefits sooner. Similarly, it was not expected that new members of staff would join the team at the same point in time. Rachael Wardell advised that fixed sum retention bonus was £15,000.

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Councillor Garth Simpson asked whether the service had quantified the difference in staff costs between the current arrangement and proposed changes. Mark Evans suggested that the amount was hard to quantify at this stage but the service was confident that cost reduction would be delivered, irrespective of the incentives and training associated with the proposal, as the service moved away from relying on expensive agency staff. Mark Evans suggested that modelling could be prepared to demonstrate the expected costs avoided.

Rachael Wardell felt it was important to remind the Commission that the financial impact was only one element of the problem. The primary challenge was to ensure that safe and effective services were in place for vulnerable children.

Councillor David Goff asked how the academy would be resourced. Mark Evans explained that a part of the cost associated with the strategy was the recruitment of a Team Leader dedicated to the academy., who would not additionally have to face the challenges of managing caseload. Mark Evans advised that similar models had been introduced in Local Authorities elsewhere and had proved to be successful.

Children's Services had a sponsored graduate trainee programme in place currently but the availability of resource limited the number of trainees to two per year. Mark Evans stated that the rate of training was not at a pace to keep up with demand and staff turnover and the academy aimed to address the challenge. Councillor Bedwell reinforced the benefits of such schemes which created localised, stable and skilled staff.

Councillor Hunneman asked whether a Children's Services Risk Register was in place and why the proposal was not in favour of staff 'hot desking'. Mark Evans advised that a risk register was in place and that fixed desks and team areas were preferred in order to provide a supportive working environment.

Councillor Hunneman asked why the proposal included the allocation of lease cars. He reminded the Commission that a decision had been made to stop providing lease cars some time ago, the Strategy therefore proposed a reversion to previous practice.

Rachael Wardell advised that the directorate had been expected to find efficiency saving some years ago and decisions had been taken to reduce or cut activity that would not directly impact the delivery of services. Nick Carter advised that lease cars had been removed in order to save money as a preferred option above cutting front line staff. It was accepted that although there was now a need for lease cars, it did not mean that any decision taken previously had been wrong.

Councillor Brooks advised that the Commission, through the Resource Management Working Group used to review the Risk Register, through which they may have been clearer about the position of Children's Services before now.

He stressed that page 3 of the report failed to provide a satisfactory explanation as to why the paper was not subject to Call-In. David Lowe advised that the report had been completed incorrectly and that the proper reason why the item should not be subject to Call-In was that :

- Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council
- Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's positions

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Councillor Macro asked whether the incentive scheme could be extended to other teams within Children's Services. The Commission heard that current resources were focused towards highly vulnerable teams and, although other teams were potentially at risk of experiencing similar issues, at this stage it was the core teams required immediate attention.

Councillor Emma Webster expressed that she was in favour of the proposed academy. She asked how the Executive would receive information and recommendations from the Commission at such late notice. David Lowe advised that the same report as received by the Commission had already been published as part of the papers for the Executive meeting of 24 July and that recommendations and comments arising from the Commission's debate would accompany the report as an addendum.

Councillor Webster proposed acceptance of the recommendations contained on page 5 of the report, points 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3. Councillor Webb seconded the proposal.

Councillor Brooks endorsed the report but suggested that the recommendations were incomplete. He felt they required more information, including why the topic had arrived at crisis point without any apparent warning. Councillor Brooks proposed the inclusion of work to look into the payment schedule for the recruitment role.

Councillor Webster accepted the suggestion by Councillor Brooks and amended her proposal accordingly. The proposal was seconded by Councillor Webb.

Resolved that:

- The recommendations would be accepted as detailed on point 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 of the report and an additional recommendation would be included to outline the need to review the recruitment role remuneration arrangements.

3. Homelessness - Young Families

The Commission considered the report (Agenda item 4) outlining the Task Groups findings into the reasons why West Berkshire appeared to have a disproportionate amount of young families facing homelessness.

Councillor Quentin Webb explained that the task group was formed following an agreement by the Commission to commence a review into Recommendation 12 of the Homelessness review conducted in November 2012:

"Further investigation should be undertaken into the reasons why West Berkshire seemed to have a very large proportion of young families facing homeless whose friends and extended family were unwilling or unable to provide them with temporary housing/accommodation"

The report outlined the format of meetings, witnesses invited to partake in the discussion and the information obtained. Councillor Webb explained that through the process of the review it became apparent that the situation was not as significant as first thought. The Commission heard that the actual number of young homeless families had reduced and there was little difference between the national and local proportions; however the long term impact on those families and their children, and the resulting societal cost remained significant.

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Councillor Webb explained that the way in which the Council’s Housing Service operated inflated the number of homelessness acceptances above that of other Local Authorities. The Task Group concluded that all agencies appeared to be functioning appropriately according to their remit and no pressing issues had been forthcoming; however the group agreed that there was scope for better interagency working.

Councillor Webb highlighted the recommendations issued on page 39 of the report and welcomed questions from the Commission.

Councillor Roger Hunneman asked whether the review consider the need to teach life skills within Schools. Councillor Webb advised that the Task Group recognised that more work was required to equip younger people with essential living skills, as detailed within the report and highlighted within recommendation (E).

The Commission discussed whether the recommendation appropriately addressed the apparent need to teach life skills (such as budgeting) which appeared to hinder a young persons’s ability to live independently.

David Lowe advised the Commission that, if they were minded to, then a recommendation could be added to address the issue specifically. Rachael Wardell reminded the Commission that the Communities Directorate had very limited influence upon the curriculum in Schools and Academies. Rachael Wardell suggested that the recommendation was realistic and within the ability of the Education Service to implement.

Councillor Webb proposed acceptance of the report inclusion of the additional recommendation as discussed. The proposal was seconded by Councillor Macro.

Resolved that

- An additional recommendation would be added to the report: *The Head of Education should explore with schools the scope for life skills, as might be required by a self-sufficient adult, to be taught as part of or alongside the existing curriculum.*

(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.00 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature