

## **Wiltshire Council**

### **Children's Select Committee**

**1 October 2013**

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### **Developing the Forward Work Programme**

#### **Purpose**

1. To report outcomes of the meeting between the Chairman, Vice-chairman and relevant Executive members held on 15 August. This was to discuss the Council's priorities for children's services and the potential future work priorities of this Committee.
2. To propose some Committee work priorities for discussion, prior to referral to the O&S Management Committee for endorsement.
3. To propose new ways of working with regards to Committee meetings.

#### **Background**

4. On 6 June the Committee received a report presenting its existing forward work programme plus suggestions for work priorities that were put forward by its predecessor committee. The Committee made a number of decisions regarding which agenda items and task groups it wished to retain and how it would approach developing its forward work programme further:
5. The Committee agreed that it would retain the following task groups:
  - Safeguarding Children and Young People Task Group
  - Further Education in the Salisbury Area Task Group  
(to be reconvened for one meeting only to conduct a 12-month review of progress with implementing the Task Group's recommendations.).
6. The Committee agreed that it would retain the following scheduled agenda items:
  - Education for excluded pupils (October)
  - School Organisation Plan and school governance arrangements (December)
  - Pupil Performance in Public Tests and Examinations (January)

7. To develop its forward work programme further, the Committee supported early discussion between the Chairman and Vice-Chairman with the relevant Cabinet members, portfolio-holders and service directors to gain a more informed understanding about Executive priorities. This meeting was held on 15 August. Attendees also discussed the topics suggested by members of the Committee by email following its meeting in June. It had been hoped that a second meeting could be arranged to discuss work priorities with the Executive further, but diaries have not permitted this before this Committee meeting.

### **Proposed work priorities**

8. Having considered the priorities of the Executive and the topics suggested by Committee members, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman would like to propose the work areas detailed below as Committee priorities during this council. Further work is needed to refine the topic scopes and decide how they will be approached. This list is intended as a 'starter for ten' to aid discussion in committee and develop the new forward work programme.
9. The Chairman and Vice-chairman have been mindful that overview and scrutiny has a finite capacity. Experience shows that greater value can be added by focusing on a few key areas than by attempting to cover everything. They have also referred to the criteria listed below when selecting the suggested topics:
  - Is the topic considered a priority by the Executive? Is it included within the Council's Business Plan 2013-17?
  - Is the topic a major area of Council spend?
  - Can the Council have a real impact on this issue? (i.e. is it a national issue or decision that is largely beyond the Council's control)?
  - Does the topic effect a large number of people, or a smaller number of people very significantly?
10. A degree of flex needs to be retained within the forward work programme so other issues can be considered as they arise. Work priorities may also change in line with changes to national legislation. Therefore the Committee will review its forward work programme at each meeting.

### **1. Safeguarding Children and Young People**

This will be covered in depth by the Safeguarding Children and Young People Task Group, which the Committee has already decided to retain. The Committee will perform its oversight role by receiving regular update reports

and considering any Task Group recommendations prior to referral to the Executive.

The Business Plan 2013-15 includes the following Key Deliverable:

*“5. [We will] Continue to improve our safeguarding services to protect the most vulnerable in our communities.”*

## **2. Family Placements**

This also comes under the terms of reference of the Safeguarding Children and Young People Task Group.

Family Placements encompasses both adoptions and fostering. There have been significant national policy changes in this area and the Council’s focus will increasingly be on placing children quickly whilst maintaining placement permanency. The Business Plan 2013-17 includes the following aspiration:

*“All children in care have stable, long-term placements and there is a good supply of well-trained and supported adopters and fewer children in care have criminal records.”*

Officers will soon be exploring the advantages of greater partnership working with other authorities. This work is currently being scoped and would benefit from the involvement of overview and scrutiny.

## **3. Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (LLDD)**

In June the Committee endorsed a recommendation from its Special Schools and Post-16 SEN Task Group to give “services for children and young people with SEN/LLDD continued attention and consider them a priority within the new Council’s overview and scrutiny work programme”. This topic was also proposed by several members of the Committee.

Between September 2011 and May 2013, this Special Schools and Post-16 SEN Task Group produced two reports, which focused on the following areas:

- Projecting and meeting future demand for SEN provision
- Healthcare in Wiltshire’s special schools
- The capacities and facilities of Wiltshire’s special schools
- Transitions for students with SEN/LLDD from special schools to college or employment

- Short breaks for children and young people with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD)

It is proposed that the Committee now places greater focus on **SEN provision in mainstream schools**, including how special educational needs are identified early and then supported within a mainstream setting – and how this is done effectively, consistently.

The Business Plan 2013-17 includes the following aspiration:

*“There is a much narrower achievement or aspiration ‘gap’ for children and young people from vulnerable groups (such as looked after children, children who receive free school meals or have disabilities, special education needs or mental health issues).”*

The Committee may also wish to retain a focus on the Council’s DCA Pathfinder project, the implementation of which is included in the Business Plan 2013-17. This follows the Government’s green paper, ‘Support and Aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability’, which sets out proposals that reform current systems for identifying, assessing and supporting children with SEN or LLDD and their families.

The Business Plan 2013-17 includes the following aspiration:

*“Young people with disabilities, learning difficulties or special educational needs find it easy to manage the transition into adulthood and access a wide range of supported, independent living and work opportunities.”*

#### **4. Further education in Wiltshire**

Some members have expressed concern at the quality of further education currently provided in Wiltshire. It is proposed that the following specific questions are addressed:

- What impact is the academies programme having on the ability of all students to access the courses and providers they want?
- Is further education provision in Wiltshire, particularly vocational courses, of sufficient quality and, if not, how can it be improved?
- Are the further education courses available in Wiltshire meeting the needs of students and equipping them for employment?
- What is the Council doing to support and develop further education, particularly in regards to its links to employment?

The Business Plan 2013-17 contains the following aspirations:

*“People in Wiltshire can access further and higher education courses through new university, college and university technical college provision.”*

*“More employers offer a wider range of apprenticeships and on the job training and greater numbers of people take up these opportunities. More young people are in education, employment or training. There are low levels of unemployment and worklessness and more people can live independently without benefits or state help.”*

*“All young people are supported to move into further and higher education, employment or training. The council works effectively with a range of education providers, including schools, colleges and academies.”*

## **5. Educational provision for gifted and talented young people**

A report on this, which was suggested by a number of members as requiring focus, is included elsewhere in the agenda.

The Business Plan 2013-17 includes the following Key Deliverable:

*“4. [We will] Provide opportunities for every child and young person to improve their attainment and skills so they can achieve their full potential.”*

## **6. Engaging young people in local decision-making and developing the leaders of the future**

This was seen as a priority by some Committee members when considering the draft Business Plan 2013-17. The Business Plan now includes the following Key Deliverable:

*“3. [We will] Further enhance the role of area boards and Youth Advisory Groups, developing innovative community-led approaches to designing and delivering services.”*

Responsibility for engaging young people in local decision making currently sits primarily with the Council’s Voice and Influence team. Further scoping is needed to establish current Council activity in this area.

## **6. Early intervention**

The Council’s Business Plan 2013-17 emphasises the importance of focusing on prevention and early intervention; finding ways of predicting and reducing demand for services before it happens. It includes the following aspirations:

*“Together public services focus on prevention and help vulnerable people and families with complex needs to manage their problems at an early stage before these escalate and further intervention is needed.”*

*“Children in vulnerable families with multiple social, economic and health issues are less likely to achieve their potential. Focusing on prevention and early intervention can narrow the gaps for children at risk of poorer outcomes by encouraging public services to work together more effectively.”*

*“[We will] continue investment in early intervention services for parents, children and young people and commission preventative services for complex families that do not meet the threshold for children’s social care – we will work with partners to reshape and redesign multi-agency services for families with complex needs.”*

This is a significant area of work and further scoping may be required to establish where the Committee might focus its activity. An Early Help Strategy is currently in draft and overview and scrutiny could contribute to its development.

## **Ways of working**

### Pre-committee information briefings

11. To help equip the Committee to undertake its important role over the next four years a programme of pre-meeting Committee briefings is proposed. These will be delivered by relevant service officers, will take place immediately before each Committee meeting and will cover key issues and services in the children and families arena.
12. In recent years there has been a huge number of legislative changes which have significantly altered local authorities’ responsibilities; for example in supporting schools or funding further education. This in turn has changed the structure and roles of teams within the Council. These briefings are intended to give the Committee a solid grounding in these matters and enhance the overview and scrutiny undertaken. The following are suggested as potentially suitable topics for such briefings:
  - Schools and the local authority (briefing held before this meeting)
  - Further education and the local authority
  - SEN provision in mainstream schools
  - Early intervention
  - Engaging young people in local decision-making and developing the leaders of the future

- Family Placements

### Committee agendas

13. Past experience has demonstrated that the most productive overview and scrutiny is often done by smaller groups of members, such as task groups, rapid scrutiny exercises or fact-finding meetings. Whilst recognising the Select Committee's important role in maintaining oversight of its work programme, considering key proposals and holding the executive to public account, smaller working groups tend to enable a more extended dialogue with witnesses and can be a more effective arena for looking at evidence in detail and therefore arriving at informed conclusions and recommendations. For this reason, it is suggested that the Committee places greater emphasis on using smaller working groups to look at topics before bringing their findings back to the full Committee. These groups do not necessarily need to undertake major reviews that take many months – often only one or two meetings will be appropriate.
14. Experience has also shown that overview and scrutiny committee meetings can be most productive when their agendas contain fewer items. Shorter agendas allow members greater opportunity to ask questions on and debate each item more fully, thereby enabling more considered resolutions. This approach does require difficult decisions regarding which items *not* to consider, but greater value can usually be added by focusing on fewer key topics than by attempting to cover everything.

### **Proposals**

1. To approve the topics proposed within the report as work priorities for the Committee and refer them to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee for endorsement.
2. To support further discussions between the Chairman and Vice-Chairman with Cabinet members, portfolio-holders and service directors to scope the agreed work priorities further, with an update coming to the Committee's next meeting.
3. To approve the programme of pre-meeting information briefings to enhance the Committee's ability to undertake effective overview and scrutiny.
4. To approve the proposed approach of making greater use of task groups, rapid scrutiny exercises and fact-finding meetings for looking at topics in detail before reporting back to the Committee.

5. To approve the proposed approach of limiting Committee agendas to a few key items whenever possible, in order to allow greater time and therefore add more value to each topic considered.

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**Cllr Jon Hubbard, Chairman, Children's Select Committee**  
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