

Report to Council

Date of meeting: 27 March 2012

Subject: Overview and Scrutiny

Chairman: Councillor Richard Bassett



Recommendation:

That the report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chairman be noted.

Essex County Council and Children Services Presentation

1. At our meeting on Tuesday, 6 March 2012, we received two presentations. The first one was from County Councillor Ray Gooding, the Deputy Portfolio Holder for Children Services; Jenny Boyd, the Director of Local Delivery, West; and Lonica Vanclay, Head of Locality Commissioning. They were there to update the Committee on progress made by the County on the provision of children services and to respond to the recent EFDC's Task and Finish Panel's report on children services.

2. We noted the progress the County had made resulting in an improved Ofsted inspection (in September 2011) giving them an improved rating of "Adequate" from "Inadequate" in the previous years and that they had now moved into phase 2 of their improvement plan.

3. Members robustly cross questioned them about how they were to improve their services with less money in this age of budget cuts; how robust their systems were and if they were prepared to use local providers to provide local services. Whilst we received answers that they understood the issues, they agreed it was early stages and lots more needed to be done. Members also had several more specific questions on local delivery and local commissioning as well as issues of budget cuts on NEETs (Not in Employment Education or Training). With the time constraints they agreed to take further questions and provide written answers which will be published to members. They also agreed to return later in the year to give further updates on progress.

Upcoming Health Reforms - Presentation

4. The other presentation we received was on the upcoming health reforms and the role of the Health and Wellbeing Boards. Unfortunately, none of the speakers that we had lined up to speak on this topic could make it but we had a last minute stand-in (Lynn Seward, Harlow's Head of Community and Customer Services) to take us through this subject.

5. We noted the points where the Health and Wellbeing Boards overlapped with District Council's responsibilities, such as environmental health, community leadership, planning, licensing and benefits. They would be looking to the District Councils to take more of a lead in the prevention of ill health; an example given was using planning and licensing laws to tackle obesity by not allowing fast food outlets. These Wellbeing Boards are currently acting in a shadow format but once fully active will be the purse holders for many community projects to improve the health and wellbeing of residents and communities. We agreed that we needed further information once the board was fully operational.

Defra Consultation Report on Waste Related Penalties

6. We next considered the draft Defra consultation report on waste related penalties. This had been considered by the Safer Cleaner Greener Standing Panel who had agreed with the government's and officer's proposal that penalties should not be handled as criminal sanctions. However, officers emphasised that the proposed test for harm to local amenities was an inappropriate test and they were keen to keep certain sanctions under other legislations for persistent offenders. It was also pointed out that Business waste, Fly-tipping and harmful waste issues are dealt with under other legislation.

Other items Covered

7. We received a report from the Constitution and Member Services Standing Panel on officer delegation following a review of financial regulations, contract standing orders and officer delegation. We agreed the minor changes and have recommended it to Council and the Leader for their agreement.

8. Our next report was on the equality scheme and objectives for 2012/13 to 2015/16. Members agreed the report but wanted it made explicit in 'Equality Section 5', on procurement (still to be written) that it should be made clear that it was important to the Council that they made payments to local businesses within a certain time limit (20 days for a local supplier and 28 days for other suppliers). They also wanted it made clear that the council had various practical ways to help and communicate with people who needed alternative help such as the use of brail or sign language.

9. Our next three reports were referred to us from the Constitution and Member Services Standing Panel which we agreed. They were on the Review of Financial Regulations and the approval for virements; the management of Housing Appeals and Review Panels Terms of Reference; and finally the review on how the Appointments Panel operated to improve the process of agreeing nominations to committees at Annual Council meeting. All were discussed and their recommendations approved.