

To: City Executive Board

Date: 9 February 2017

Report of: Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Safeguarding of Language School Students under 18 years of age

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee on the safeguarding of language school students

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of Scrutiny

Executive lead member: Councillor Dee Sinclair, Board Member for Community Safety

Recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendation set out in the body of this report.

Background

1. The Scrutiny Committee scrutinised the annual Oxford City Council Safeguarding report for 2015-2016 in June 2016 and voiced concerns about the safeguarding arrangements for language school students living in private sector accommodation. The Committee made two recommendations to the City Executive Board about this issue; specifically about the need to make representations to Government for more rigorous safeguarding arrangements, and the need to discuss these issues with language schools, the police and other partner authorities. The Committee agreed that an item on language schools would be added to the scrutiny work plan for a possible future review.
2. The City Executive Board on 16 June 2016 responded positively to the recommendations and endorsed the Scrutiny Committee undertaking a review of the regulation of language schools with regard to safeguarding issues.

3. The Scrutiny Committee considered a report by the Community Safety and Resilience Manager on the safeguarding of language school students under 18 years of age at its meeting on 6 December 2016. The Committee would like to thank the Board Member for Community Safety, the Community Safety and Resilience Manager and the Antisocial Behaviour Prevention Project Co-ordinator for attending the meeting to present this report.

Summary and recommendation

4. The Board Member for Community Safety presented the report. She explained that the law only requires language schools to notify local authorities if a student is placed in homestay accommodation for longer than 28 days, but many language students only stay for one to three weeks. Thousands of language students visit Oxford every year and there's a growing concern that students are being put at risk without authorities knowing about it. The Committee heard that Thames Valley Police Crime Commissioner is worried about the issue but the government has indicated that in its view the current arrangements are adequate.
5. The ASB Prevention Project Co-ordinator highlighted the wide ranging work of the Oxford Language School Forum. The Forum works with language schools on monitoring their safeguarding responsibilities and promoting the welfare of the students while they are in Oxford. The forum has been running for 4 years and most of the larger language schools and the police attend. The main issue is with 'pop up' language schools that appear each summer in the city, some of which have no Oxford base, as it can be very difficult to identify and engage with these schools.
6. The Committee considered what a scrutiny review group could do to add value to the work already being done. The Board Member for Community Services said that it could be useful for a review group to be set up and suggested it could look at practices in other cities e.g. Brighton. However, she didn't want a review to result in extra work for council officers. Ideally she would like to have a certification scheme that required language schools to meet certain criteria before they could operate under the Oxford name. However such a scheme would require officer time to implement and enforce and may be limited by legislative constraints.
7. The Committee decided not to form a review group as they could see no areas where they could add value to the good work already underway.
8. The Committee felt there was scope for the Council (through CEB) to lobby for a strengthening of the legislation so that local authorities are informed when minors are staying temporarily in a private home for more than a few days.
9. Councillor Coulter offered to approach the District Councils' Network and the South East England Councils (SEEC) about forming a task and finish group to review these issues. SEEC has since flagged these issues in its response to the 'Schools that work for everyone' consultation.

10. The Committee suggested asking a local Member of Parliament, Nicola Blackwood MP or Andrew Smith MP, to convene a Westminster debate on the issue. They would have the resources to commission research into the best way forward. The Board Member for Community Services agreed to contact the MPs and ask if they will invest effort in this.

11. The Committee agreed that:

1. Cllr Sinclair would be asked to contact the local MP(s) regarding convening a Westminster debate on the issue.
2. Cllr Coulter would contact the District Councils' Network and SEEC about setting up a task and finish group to review the issue.
3. CEB would be asked to lobby for a strengthening of the legislation to require that local authorities are informed by language schools when minors are temporarily placed in a private home for more than a few days.

Recommendation – That the City Council lobbies for a strengthening of the legislation to require that local authorities are informed by language schools when minors are temporarily placed in a private home for more than a few days.

Name and contact details of author:-

Andrew Brown on behalf of the Scrutiny Committee
Scrutiny Officer
Law and Governance
Tel: 01865 252230 e-mail: abrown2@oxford.gov.uk

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