

**MINUTES of the meeting of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny  
Committee held on 12 November 2009 at 7:00pm**

---

**Present:** Councillors Mrs Anne Cheale (Chair), Diane Revell (Substituting for Councillor Everett), Diana Hale, John Cowell (substituting for Councillor Harrison), Marion Canavon and Lynn Worrall.

Mrs Wilson and Mrs Woods.

**Apologies:** Councillor John Everett, Ian Harrison and Rev David Rollins.

**In attendance:** Councillor Sue MacPherson – Portfolio Holder for Children's Services  
S Clark – Head of Finance  
R Szadzweiski – Interim Corporate Director of Resources  
L Marks – Solicitor  
J Olsson – Corporate Director, Children, Education and Families  
J Imray - Head of Children's Health and Social Care  
C Stewart - Head of Business (Policy, Performance and Resources)  
C Tinkler – Head of Schools' Provision  
M Boulter - Principal Democratic Services Officer

---

**30. URGENT ITEMS**

A set of re-worded recommendations were distributed amongst the Committee.

**31. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

a) Interests

Councillor Worrall declared a personal interest by virtue that she works for the Prince's Trust and works with young people not in education, employment or training. Also, that her partner works with young people on behalf of Thurrock Council.

Councillor Hale declared a personal interest by virtue that she is a member of the corporation board for Thurrock and Basildon College Corporation.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

## 32. 2010/11 BUDGET PROPOSAL

The Head of Finance introduced the report explaining that there was a £7.2 million shortfall in the budget, although this gap was based on a number of assumptions concerning factors such as inflation and council tax increase. Members were informed that these particular factors could be discussed in January when the budget would return to Overview and Scrutiny. Councillor Hale asked whether the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) grant would impact upon the budget if it was not secured and it was explained that the BSF money had to be spent on a particular area. Therefore, if the money was not secured, it would only impact upon the BSF programme and not any other aspects of the Children's Services budget. It was also confirmed that should the Council be unsuccessful in its bid for BSF, the additional £500,000 built into the budget as growth would probably not be required.

Councillor Hale wished to pose another question but the Chair stated that the Head of Finance be allowed to finish his presentation before any further questions. It was clarified during the presentation that any further savings proposals could be scrutinised by the Committee at its January meetings.

The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services was asked whether the 7% savings were made across the whole council and whether the Children's Service had been exempted from such a savings target. Councillor MacPherson replied that the budget was under constant review and although she and officers were identifying a 7% saving, this did not mean the decision to make 7% savings in the service would be made. The Committee was reminded that despite the savings proposed, there was still a £1.1 million gap that needed to be filled and work was ongoing to identify savings to achieve this.

A brief discussion was had on budget planning for the long term future up to 2015 and it was confirmed that the medium term financial strategy was being developed and would be available for January's round of meetings. Councillor MacPherson added that the budget was being approached differently to ensure the base budget was secure and strong for the future.

The Committee went through each saving in turn:

### External Advisers and Consultants:

Audit functions were undertaken for the department by internal and external auditors. The saving here was to reduce the use of external auditors. It was added that the Council had built up expertise in-house so the loss would not have an adverse effect. The Committee welcomed this saving.

### Schools' Data Collection and Analysis:

The saving proposed would affect the funds that the Council held centrally to provide additional support to schools. The saving did not affect the money that the schools directly received from central Government via the Council. Following questions it was explained that the saving would not adversely

affect poorer schools or any schools budgets. It would, however, affect the flexibility of the Council in supporting any school in the borough.

#### Funding of Premature Retirement Costs

This item referred to the early retirement of teachers. Councillor Hale asked whether the increased cost of retirement was due to the Council outsourcing Human Resources functions. Officers explained this was not the case as the Council had the final say on whether a teacher could retire early or not.

It was explained to the Committee that savings numbered 4 to 6 had been removed before they had reached the final report stage as they were not considered viable savings. These items included a saving based on Section 17 duties and Vertex related savings. Councillor MacPherson stated that she was confident savings could be negotiated through the Vertex contract.

#### Education Psychology Provision:

Officers explained that frontline provision of this service would be maintained and that the saving would be made through removing a layer of management. Some Members felt the Psychology Service varied across the borough and wondered whether the removal of a management layer would improve the service. Officers explained that the variation in service had been caused by illnesses and a less than full compliment of staff. Frontline provision was now at full capacity and it was hoped the service would continue to improve. Councillor MacPherson added that this was a good opportunity to ensure the service was responsive to the needs across the borough.

The Committee asked that Officers factor in parents paying for psychological assessment privately when measuring performance of the service.

#### Special Educational Needs (SEN) Placements:

The Council had worked to provide support for SEN pupils within Thurrock and a new facility would soon be available for six pupils with behavioural difficulties. This development reduced costs for transporting pupils outside the borough and for paying for those external placements. In borough provision was also beneficial to the children and families because the service was closer to home and to social networks.

The Committee felt this was good news and asked whether parents had been consulted on the changes. It was replied that the families of the six children had been consulted and that the new facility would be in Dilkes Primary School. There was a debate about SEN provision in secondary schools and whether there was enough provision. It was explained that every SEN child was assessed for their needs and if a Thurrock school was not able to support a child that child would still be catered for outside the borough. It was also added that the percentage of SEN children applying to all schools across the borough was roughly the same although, if school preferences were not met, then schools with spare places would receive them.

#### Educational Welfare Service:

This was a vital service but the frontline service needed to be efficiently run. Officers could restructure work in this service to make savings, for example, data support. Upon questioning it was confirmed that the service was tackling absenteeism effectively.

#### Streamline 14-19 Provision:

The Committee was informed that school staff had been seconded on to the 14-19 project to help establish processes and procedures. The service had now shifted from development and design to delivery. As a result, the school staff could return to their substantive jobs in their school. The amount of saving was small and represented about 20% of a full time position so the impact on remaining staff would be minimal.

Councillor Hale asked whether this saving affected the roll out of new diplomas and officers replied that it did not because there was less diploma development work needed to provide extra diplomas in September and it did not require those staff to remain working for Thurrock Council.

#### Extended Services:

This area had been invested in previously to establish the services but like 14-19 provision the emphasis of the service was now delivery so savings could be made from the set up budgets. The saving referred to those staff that organised and developed capacity rather than delivered the services. A Member asked whether this saving affected the money set aside for a youth club in William Edwards' school and it was replied that it did not and that money went directly to the school for this purpose.

The Committee, upon hearing the explanation, felt that further savings could be made in this area.

#### Youth and Connexions Management Costs:

The savings in this area would not affect either service disproportionately and Councillor MacPherson stated that by bringing the Connexions Service in-house meant the Council could develop a well-rounded service. The savings affected one post in data management as well as training and development across both services. Resource management would be improved relating to advertisements, books and equipment, including reducing the use of minibuses down from three to two. Officers clarified that there was a possibility of users being affected over issues such as the reduction of minibuses but procedures would be put in place to ensure fair access for all users.

#### Learning Partnership/ 14-19 Strategic Partnership:

The aim of this saving was to rationalise partnership working so that partners were not doubling up on work. This saving would involve removing one of the organisations.

## Discretionary Transport

This savings proposal would focus on the discretionary elements of the Home to School Transport policy. The saving would focus on procurement efficiencies and would compare with other councils to learn best practice. Councillor Hale expressed her concern that the poorest residents would suffer from a change in the policy. Officers explained that the poorest children would be covered within the statutory elements of the policy and that the changes would more likely affect those that travelled to denominational schools and those over the age of sixteen.

A number of Members felt that a change in discretionary elements would discourage post sixteen education and the diploma system that the Council was working to introduce. Officers clarified that investment in home to school transport did not mean that there would be improved outcomes and that the success of post sixteen education relied on other factors as well. It was added that when compared to similar councils, Thurrock was spending four times the amount on school transport than the national average. In terms of denominational provision, Thurrock provided transport with no assessment, which no other council did.

Mrs Woods highlighted that families would be faced with lots of form filling but officers explained that the discretionary element of the policy would only come into force when a family appealed against a rejection on hardship criteria.

Officers highlighted that the policy had yet been revised so all discretionary elements discussed remained options, including placing the service with the Children, Education and Families Directorate and not the Transport Department. Councillor Worrall asked whether pupils travelling outside their local area because they were unable to get a place in their local school would have to pay, officers replied that if they qualified under statutory provision they would not have to pay.

Some Members stated that if some of the options did not become reality, the Council would be looking to fund an even bigger gap. Officers responded by saying that the savings printed were for the autumn and spring term for the next financial year and the policy itself would not take effect until September 2010.

The Chair congratulated officers on the detailed comparative work that they had undertaken and felt it had provided a solid foundation to progress the policy.

## Grangewaters:

The Council proposed to reduce its funding of Grangewaters as it was becoming increasingly more business-like and able to generate its own funds to support itself. Use of the facility had increased greatly and the savings would not impact upon the cost to schools. Councillor MacPherson confirmed Grangewaters would not be run as a trust and she was eager for it to become a profit making organisation.

The Committee congratulated officers on this item.

#### Family Group Conference:

The Committee asked what the £24,000 saving represented and officers stated that it represented the work of one co-ordinator, who worked to co-ordinate capacity, rather than deliver the service. The Council had options of working with other councils or a voluntary organisation to cover the co-ordination role. Councillor Worrall felt that the saving was small compared the vital work it undertook.

#### Oaktree for Looked After Children:

Councillor MacPherson explained that she had pulled this saving because although it was not a statutory service, there were moral issues that she felt prevented her from agreeing the saving. It was added that the £200,000 could well be saved in another directorate or in the Children's Services directorate.

#### Reduction in the Reliance on Agency Staff:

This saving did not compromise the safety of children in Thurrock, which was the Council's priority. The saving was based around a number of posts that did not require qualified personnel to undertake the role. Therefore, the roles could be changed so that unqualified staff could take up the post. Following questions it was clarified that protocols were already in place to identify which children required the help of a qualified social worker and those that did not.

The Council continued to train six people a year to become qualified social workers and this training was not threatened by the budgets. Councillor Worrall raised concerns that the Children, Education and Families directorate had overspent considerably on their non-permanent staff budget. Councillor MacPherson agreed and stated that the location of Thurrock near London meant that it faced particular staff retention issues, as did Essex and Kent. Officers added that spend on non-permanent staff was off-set by lower spends on the directorate's permanent staff salary budget. Councillor Revell highlighted that the Performance and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been investigating non-permanent staff for some time and had already noted these comments.

Councillor Canavon expressed her views that the human resources department in the Council may lack coherent policies and leadership, which meant that there was higher staff turnover and low morale. There was a suggestion that key worker housing could be used to encourage workers to move into the area.

#### Remodel Short Breaks Provision:

The saving would not reduce access to short breaks but a new development at the Buxton Road school meant that the Council could provide a wider range of short break that could be an alternative to residential stays for some children. The current provision was at the Sunshine Centre in Tilbury and

having consulted parents, they were happy to move to the Buxton Road location. It was confirmed that the Sunshine Centre would not close in advance of resources at Buxton Road opening.

#### Employee Development and Training:

This saving did not apply to long term or professional training but affected budgets set aside for one off conferences and seminars. The saving represented around 20% of the overall training budget.

#### Middle Management Review:

Frontline services would not be affected and the saving would be made through natural wastage of managers who had already left the council or who were due to leave in the next three months. Officers stated that these staff members were aware of the saving and it would not have an adverse impact upon them.

The Chair allowed members of the public in attendance to ask a question if they so wished. One Member of the public thanked the committee for allowing her to attend and reinforced the message that all savings would affect disabled children. She also stated that she was offended by a comment Councillor Cowell had made concerning SEN pupils. Councillor Cowell apologised and explained the background to his statement.

The second member of the public felt that the removal of middle management in the Education Psychology Service might have an adverse impact on the service. Officers noted the comments in relation to the budget and agreed to take them onboard when progressing the budget. The Head of Finance also stated that if members of the public wished to contact him directly with their further thoughts on the budget, he would be happy to receive them.

#### **RESOLVED: That**

- i) Members note the 2009/10 month 6 budget monitoring report to the 18 November 2009 Cabinet, which identifies the likely impact on 2010/11 of any additional budget pressures and includes action plans to manage the outturn.**
- ii) The Committee note the assumptions underpinning the financial forecast set out in section 3.**
- iii) Officers identify further and/ or additional savings to balance the budget and meet any further pressures identified in the 2009/10 month 6 budget monitoring report.**
- iv) The Committee note the work being carried out to identify efficiency savings and that this be reported back to Cabinet as part of the budgetary process.**
- v) The Committee note that negotiations are taking place with Vertex to identify contractual savings.**

- vi) **Officers and the Portfolio Holder investigate further potential savings within the Extended Services budget.**
- vii) **A six monthly review of all Children related items on the report be scheduled appropriately.**
- viii) **A briefing note be produced for Members' consideration on Autism issues to inform any further work on the subject.**

**The meeting finished at 9.26pm.**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIRMAN**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
Matthew Boulter, telephone (01375) 652082,  
or alternatively e-mail [mboulter@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:mboulter@thurrock.gov.uk)**