

MINUTES of the meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 18 January 2010 at 7.00pm.

Present: Councillors Anne Cheale (Chair), Ian Harrison, John Everett, Marion Canavon and John Kent (substituting for Diana Hale).

Patricia Wilson and David Rollins

Apologies: Councillors Diana Hale and Lynn Worrall

In attendance: Councillor Sue MacPherson – Portfolio Holder for Children's Services
C. Stewart – Head of Business (Policy, Performance and Resources)
C. Tinkler – Head of School Improvement
J. Olsson- Corporate Director: Children, Education and Families
S. Clark – Head of Corporate Finance
L Marks - Solicitor
M. Boulter- Principal Democratic Services Officer

47. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

Councillor Kent declared a personal interest by virtue that he has three children in schools within Thurrock, as well as being a local authority governor for St. Thomas of Canterbury Primary School and a member of the interim executive board at Grays Media Arts College.

Mrs Wilson declared a personal interest by virtue that she sits on the governing body of St. Thomas of Canterbury School.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

48. BUDGET 2010/11

The Committee was informed that a £3.1 million budget gap was identified in the budget in December 2009 but this had now been closed by finding additional savings, including some from the Children's Services budget. It was added that in relation to the Capital Programme, the Council would be funding this set of works with third

party lending rather than funding from its own assets due to the current economic climate.

Through discussions with officers the Committee clarified that money had been specifically set aside to recruit permanent staff, especially for those in social care work. It was also clarified that an additional £500,000 had been added to the Children's Services budget due to the demand on the service from the community.

A discussion was had on discretionary transport and officers explained that the estimated £402,000 saving was arrived through research, comparative work with similar councils and investigating council and national policy. Therefore, it was an informed estimate of potential savings. It was added that the way in which this money would be saved was open to a number of options that might affect young people using transport to school. However, the Council was awaiting external legal advice before it made those options public as it needed to check whether certain changes to the home to school transport policy could be made mid-term. Officers stated that the majority of the saving would be made through procurement of services, rather than the reduction of service. Councillor Kent felt there was not enough detail in the report for the Committee to agree to the saving at this time. Mrs. Wilson highlighted that a change in policy could adversely affect poorer families.

Discussion clarified that the inclusion of a saving on the Oaktrees centre was a typographical error.

A question was asked on how income could be generated from data collection services and early retirement costs. It was explained that these two areas were currently funded by the direct schools grant, as well as council funds. It was now considered that because the services were for the benefit of schools, the services would be funded by the schools budget, which they received from the government. The moving of this cost onto the schools meant the Council freed up its budget which was shown in the report as income.

The savings on special educational needs (SEN) placements were achieved through building capacity within Thurrock, therefore reducing the need for more expensive external placements.

Councillor Kent asked for an explanation of the capital programme resources items and the following was given:

- Modernisation – This money was for ongoing improvement of schools as part of a national modernisation programme.
- Extended Schools – This money was used to fund schools in providing extended services outside the normal school day.

- Harnessing Technology – This item funded future IT development in schools. 75% of this funding went straight to the schools.
- Devolved Capital – This was funding for schools that the Council held on their behalf although the money was directly credited to the schools.
- Targeted Capital Grant – This funded either SEN or 14-19 projects.
- Primary Capital Programme – This fund was used to upgrade a small number of primary schools.
- Primary Classrooms – This was a one off grant to tackle accommodation issues within the borough.

It was highlighted that school asset management plans were completed on a three yearly basis and involved the Council, who checked each plan. With regards to the £2.5 million grant for primary classrooms, officers stated that the grant was sufficient to tackle the issues of places if the increased primary applications that were seen in 2007 and 2009 were anomalies and were not part of a general trend of growing demand for primary places.

There was a brief discussion on the savings proposed through the Vertex partnership and the Committee was informed that the savings in this area did affect Children's Services in terms of the overall organisation of administrative support and procurement of services.

Some Members of the Committee expressed their view that they could not agree the savings and proposals because there was not enough detail yet known on some of the proposals, namely discretionary transport. Officers stated there would be extensive consultation on how the £402,000 saving would be realised through policy change. No changes would be implemented before September 2010. It was added that the £402,000 estimate would be reviewed to see if it was still realistic before it went to Cabinet for final decision.

RESOLVED:

That the report and its proposed progress through Cabinet and Council be noted.

The meeting finished at 7.35pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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