

MINUTES of the meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 28 January 2010 at 7.00pm.

Present: Councillors Anne Cheale (Chair), Marion Canavon, Diana Hale and Lynn Worrall.

Patricia Wilson and David Rollins

Apologies: Councillors Ian Harrison, John Everett and Mrs Emma Woods.

In attendance: C. Stewart – Head of Business (Policy, Performance and Resources)

J. Olsson- Corporate Director: Children, Education and Families

A. Hogg – Service Manager, Quality Assurance

T. Hogan – Interim Democratic Services Officer

Y. Stupples-Whyley - Group Finance Manager

M. Boulter- Principal Democratic Services Officer

In the absence of the Chair, Rev. David Rollins was nominated as Chair by those Committee members present and chaired the meeting up to the declarations of interest. The Chair arrived at 7.07pm and resumed the meeting.

49. MINUTES

The minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 December 2009 were approved as a correct record.

50. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

Councillor Hale declared a personal interest in relation to Item 5 by virtue that she is a member of the Corporate Board for South Essex College.

Councillor Worrall declared a personal interest in relation to item 5 by virtue that she is a governor of Gateway Academy and that she has a step-daughter who uses home to school transport.

Mrs Wilson declared a personal interest in relation to Item 5 by virtue that she sits on the governing body of St. Thomas of Canterbury

School and in relation to Item 8 that her husband is a member of the interim executive board at Chadwell St. Mary School.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

51. HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

The Committee received a presentation that outlined the key issues involved in changing Thurrock's Home to School Transport policy. The key points highlighted were:

- Thurrock currently offered over the statutory minimum for home to school transport and where national policy stipulated a 3 mile distance from a named school, Thurrock applied its policy from 2 miles.
- Thurrock offered denominational services, which comparative councils did not provide.
- Thurrock's spending on this service was well above national average, including those of other unitary councils.
- For the 2009/10 year, estimated overspend was £400,000.
- Increasing the budget for the service had not resolved issues and had actually led to an increased overspend.

The Council had identified a number of options by which to make savings on the service but two were chosen to explore more fully with public consultation. These were altering denominational criteria and charging for concessionary seats. Post-16 and primary provision in general were not chosen for consultation. Primary services were not chosen because they were linked to denominational services.

In terms of denominational based places Thurrock compared its policy with neighbouring councils and found that Southend offered the statutory minimum and no more. Bedfordshire did provide extra services but after a recent consultation they were going to provide only the statutory minimum. Essex County Council and five other unitaries charged for services above the statutory requirement.

Thurrock had two options for savings. It could provide a statutory minimum, which would save the council £500,000 per year or it could introducing charges above this requirement based on £240 per student. This would save around £123,000 per year.

Councillor Hale asked whether comparisons with Barking and Dagenham and Havering had shown any other differences. It was replied that these councils were investigated and had a different system to Thurrock on the basis that they received additional central London money and also, a lot of their home to school transport policy was based on public transport and London's comprehensive transport

network. It was also clarified that the savings proposed would not come into effect until the 2010/2011 municipal year.

A discussion was had on the spare seats scheme and it was explained that the Council aimed to make the cost of the spare seat break even by charging a concessionary fare. However, it was recognised that Thurrock needed to improve the processing of these seats if it was to benefit from a full year's payment. As part of this discussion it was clarified that national policy dictated that distance to schools was measured via the safest walking route.

The Committee was informed that there were very few spare seats currently on the transport and most parents paid for the seat if their child did not get awarded the seat through the home to school transport scheme. It was added that if a child moved into the area and qualified for the seat, the concessionary fare would cease and that child paying the concessionary fare would have to find alternate means of transport.

One member posed the question of how would families with more than one child could be helped in meeting the additional costs. Officers reminded the Committee at this point that there were nationally defined criteria to assess whether a family was 'poor' and whether they qualified for home to school transport or not. If a large family did not qualify for the help, then there was an opportunity to offer reduced rates for a third or fourth child.

The Committee moved on to focus on working in partnership with public transport providers to offer a supportive service for the pupils. It was agreed this would help post-16 transport but the cost of annual train travel to Southend institutions, for example, was a similar cost to the Council providing its own transport. It was highlighted that to make public transport support the pupils they would have to agree to provide more comprehensive services at the beginning and end of the school day.

A debate was had on whether the proposed changes to policy would discriminate against denominational schools and people wanting to follow a particular religious belief. Some Members thought that it did but all recognised that secular people in other parts of the country had mounted successful cases against councils for providing additional support to denominational pupils over and above others by providing them with free transport.

The Committee was taken through the consultation timeline and it was stated that the final proposals would be ready for consultation by early February. A consultation would follow and then the findings would be presented to Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet in May and June respectively. Any changes in policy would not be published until the next admissions booklet after the decision.

Clarification was sought on whether pupils who had to travel a distance because they did not get their first choice of local school had to pay for the transport as a result. It was responded that this was at the discretion of the appeals committee that assessed the case.

A brief discussion on special educational needs pupils highlighted that they could receive free home to school transport on the basis of their disabilities if it was confirmed in their statement.

Councillor Hale stated that there was evidence to suggest there was a dip in income following a change in policy and that this could last a few years. Officers responded that they had not seen this in evidence in the councils they had compared with. However, they stressed that they had not surveyed all councils in Essex.

The Director for Children, education and Families summarised the item and made the Committee aware that if savings were not made in this area, they would have to be found somewhere else in the budget. She also recognised that officers needed to investigate the cost of administering the service, which they were currently doing.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee's comments be used to inform the progress of the consultation.

52. FEES AND CHARGES

The Committee was informed that £92,000 would be raised from fees and charges in the Children, Education and Families directorate. Most fees had risen by 3% in line with inflation although three charges had been frozen at the Grangewaters centre because officers felt it would attract more income from customers. Sailing and power boating would rise above 3% because a benchmarking exercise had shown that Grangewaters could significantly raise its fees whilst remaining the cheapest activity in the wider local area.

The Committee clarified that Grangewaters was due to generate £50,000 income and commented on school delegated budgets, which officers agreed to send a briefing note on.

RESOLVED: That

The Committees comments be noted and referred to Cabinet.

53. WORK PROGRAMME

A brief discussion was had on the progress of the federation between Chadwell St. Mary and Herringham schools. Officers stated they had conducted two meetings with the head teachers of the two schools and

were currently finalising financial and other plans. Members felt a communication was needed to inform residents about the progress of the project.

RESOLVED: That:

- i) A report on Chadwell St. Mary and other federated schools in Thurrock be scheduled into the Work Programme at an appropriate time.**
- ii) A briefing of ward members about the issues surrounding Chadwell St. Mary School be undertaken.**
- iii) The report on Autism and Transition Services be removed from March's meeting and replaced with the Children and Young People's Plan.**
- iv) Invite the head teachers from Palmer's College and South East Essex College to March's meeting in relation to Raising Attainment post-16.**
- v) Schedule a report on the Special Education Needs Strategy and its wider strategic importance.**

The meeting finished at 8.20pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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or alternatively e-mail mboulter@thurrock.gov.uk**