

MINUTES of the meeting of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 19 August 2010 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Angie Gaywood (Chair from 7.04pm), Amanda Wilton (Vice Chair), Lynn Carr, Sue Gray, James Halden (Substituting for Sue MacPherson) and Michael Stone (Substituting for Cathy Kent)

Rev. David Rollins and Patricia Wilson

Apologies: Councillors Cathy Kent and Sue MacPherson

In attendance: C Stewart – Head of Policy, Performance and Support Services
J Olsson – Corporate Director – Children, Education and Families
G Farrant – Chief Executive
B Clarke – Principal Democratic Services Officer

Councillor Wilton noted that Councillor Gaywood had been slightly delayed and with the agreement of Members present, assumed the Chair and opened the meeting at 7.00pm.

7 ADDITIONAL ITEMS

Councillor Wilton advised that she was not aware that the Chair had agreed to the consideration of any additional items of urgent business.

Following her arrival and at a convenient time during the procedure, Councillor Gaywood informed Members that she had requested that the Head of Policy, Performance and Support Services give an update on the Buxton Road Respite Care Centre. It was agreed that this would be received just prior to the close of the meeting.

8 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

Mrs Wilson declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 6 by virtue that she sits on the Admissions Forum as a representative of the Roman Catholic Diocese.

Rev. D Rollins declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 6 by virtue that he is a representative of the Church of England, who is also represented on the Admissions Forum.

Councillor Wilton informed the meeting that she would assume the Chair for Agenda Item 7 as Councillor Gaywood had a personal and prejudicial interest in relation to that item and would leave the meeting during the consideration thereof.

Following her arrival and at a convenient time during the procedure, Councillor Gaywood declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 3 as she was the parent of 4 children, 3 of whom attend Thurrock schools, she was the Chair of Governors at Arthur Bugler Infant School and a Special Educational Needs Governor at St Cleres School. She also declared a personal and prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 7 by virtue of the fact that one of her children had Special Educational Needs and had a Social Worker. Councillor Gaywood informed the Committee that she would leave the meeting for Item 7.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

9 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 17 June 2010, were approved as a correct record.

10 CHILDHOOD OBESITY

The Chair welcomed Dr Neel Bhaduri, Public Health Commissioning Manager and Mr Ian Wake, representatives of the NHS South West Essex PCT and invited Dr Bhaduri to make his presentation.

The presentation, which was accompanied by a handout was based on Tackling Childhood Obesity in Thurrock.

Councillor Gaywood arrived at the meeting at 7.04pm and took the Chair.

Following the presentation queries were raised by Members, particularly relating to any actions the Local Authority could take to assist with this issue of childhood obesity. The Committee was informed that an Action Plan setting out the actions the different partners involved could take, would be presented at the Children's Trust executive, chaired by the Director of CEF.

The Local Authority was advised to consider in building new housing estates, access to good, open amenity spaces, the 21st Century

playground scheme, the uptake of school meals, the stigma attached to free meals and the availability within a mile radius of schools, to takeaway outlets. The impact of the programme was partly dependent on improving physical activity but planning and other issues could be looked at by the Local Authority.

Members were informed that a research study would be reported at a conference on 6th October. Mr Wake informed the Committee that he could bring information in relation to that study to a future meeting.

RESOLVED:

- i That the presentation be noted .**
- ii A report from the PCT guests outlining evaluations and further data be brought back to a future meeting.**

11 ADMISSIONS POLICY AND ARRANGEMENTS

The Head of Policy, Performance and Support Services introduced his report which provided an overview of the current admission arrangements and an update on performance on admissions to schools across the borough.

It was noted that whilst there were some difficulties within the preference system, 97% of parents received an offer of one of their first three choices. Furthermore the matter of oversubscription and the number of appeals for given schools, was not necessarily a reflection of the arrangements, rather parents' desire that their children attend a particular school.

The matter of training of the independent appeals panel members involved in admission appeals was queried. Being an ex IAP member, Councillor Gaywood was in a position to report that training had been offered by Thurrock Council to its volunteers on an annual basis in recent years to reflect the changes to the Appeals Code of Conduct, noting that the training was mandatory.

On querying the reasons for the low up take of on-line applications, Members were informed that the Local Authority were currently engaged with the main supplier of the software used in relation to these applications, with a view to ensuring the forms were more user friendly and that promotion of on-line applications be stressed. A system linked to the Council Tax system was being researched in order that when applying on line, the requirement to also submit a Council Tax bill by the applicant, would be unnecessary.

In relation to a query relating to savings proposals, Members were informed that the Authority had looked at the extent to which

automation was used and the business processes, currently slow and cumbersome, could be streamlined. It had also been found that a large proportion of officers' time had been spent on responding to telephone enquiries which should be dealt with by the call centre.

In response to a query raised about parents who may have difficulty in either completing the forms or the fact that English was not their first language, it was explained that various translation/interpretation facilities were employed and schools offered support to parents.

Members were informed that in relation to the matter of late applications, this was being dealt with in the same manner for Y6 - 7 as employed by the early years' providers.

A query in relation to 4.19 of the report, the Fair Access Protocol, it was explained that this had not yet caused any difficulties but would be addressed if issues arose. Currently the Fair Access Protocol was found to be working with collegiate Head Teachers.

The matter of measuring points was raised and it was explained that this was based on the most reasonable and common access point to the school building, not necessarily the main entrance and because of this, the information relating to the measuring point was published within the school booklets as well as being available on-line.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

Councillor Gaywood left the meeting at 8.04 pm and Councillor Wilton assumed the Chair for the following item.

12 IMPACT ON SOCIAL CARE SERVICES OF REDUCTIONS IN EXPENDITURE – RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Corporate Director of Children, Education and Families introduced the report which appraised Members of the risks and opportunities entailed in reducing the expenditure on services for children in need, children in need of protection and children looked after.

In response to a query raised about the additional pressure on individuals as a result of the loss of 10 social workers and the assurance that safeguards would be put into place, the 4-tier system from universal to specialist, to evaluate needs, was explained in detail. Furthermore, Members were assured that the Common Assessment Framework and Multi Agency Groups (MAGS) embedded in Thurrock, ensured that tier 2/3 needs were met.

It was further explained that safeguarding was about adults taking the responsibility in ensuring that concerns were properly understood and

that the course of action being sought/agreed was right for the child. Adults should satisfy themselves that they had fully discharged their own responsibilities and that they had taken action if there was any uncertainty about the actions of another professional.

A concern was raised back-benchers had not had the opportunity to scrutinise the report before Cabinet and that more time had been needed to go through the report.

It was explained that the unprecedented schedule and timescale of 'in-year' savings, the like of which had never been experienced before, demanded that decisions be made urgently. Councillor MacPherson, the previous and very experienced Portfolio Holder for CEF had been consulted and had considered the proposals in detail. Councillor MacPherson was assured (on behalf of her party) that the risks involved had been understood. An urgently convened special meeting had been held between Councillors Gaywood, Hale and Wilton who had been able to explore the detail prior to the Cabinet meeting at which the decision had been taken. Furthermore, there had been a presentation made to Members of the administration and the same presentation had also been offered to the other Members of the Council.

The Corporate Director of Children, Education and Families assured the Committee that proposals would not have been made without looking at risk assessments and without proper officer and political scrutiny.

RESOLVED:

- i Members noted that the demand for children's social care services had increased considerably over the course of the last four years but that, overall, the performance of those services had been maintained or improved over that same period**
- ii Members noted that the consequence of the increased demand for services had seen an increase in expenditure over and above that formally allocated to the service during the period of time**
- iii That it be agreed that in order to reduce expenditure on this service area to that allocated by the Council in 2010/2011, it be necessary to focus services on the most vulnerable children (those assessed as being at risk of significant harm or looked after by the Council or disabled and that this be achieved by reducing the level of service provided for other "children in need"**

- iv **That it be agreed that in order that Care and Targeted Outcomes Services meet future spending targets, officers be authorised to explore further means by which access to services may be better targeted and to introduce charging for services where it is likely to produce a net income to offset against expenditure.**

Councillor Gaywood resumed the Chair at 8.30 pm and Councillor Stone offered his apologies and left the meeting at this time.

13 CAPITAL STRATEGY UPDATE

The Head of Policy, Performance and Support Services was invited to give Members a verbal update on the Capital Strategy.

Members were taken through a document outlining the consultation comments and Members were invited to take copies with them.

15 schools and various groups had responded to the consultation. The chair requested that hard and electronic copies of the outcome of the consultation be provided to Members.

Members were informed that some of the concerns raised had been in relation to the accuracy of data and the resulting outcomes if the BSF programme was not to be delivered.

It was noted that if Capital Funding were to become available it would be preferable that the Council had predetermined its priorities rather than commencing the process at the point of the availability.

Discussion centred around matters of timescales and enabling a wider audience to consider the strategy prior to a report going to Cabinet in October. It was noted that the October meeting of this O & S Committee was scheduled to be held during the half term week, however the Chair requested that Head Teachers be invited to attend. Furthermore the Chair requested that a full report be brought back to this Committee and then passed to the Corporate O & S Committee for an overarching view.

RESOLVED:

- i **That the verbal report be noted.**
- ii **That Headteachers of the School's Forum group be invited to attend the October meeting of Children's Services O & S Committee meeting.**

- iii **That a full report be brought to Children's Services O & S Committee in September, prior to being put before the Corporate O & S Committee for an overarching view.**

14 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee discussed the matter of visiting the Pupil Referral Unit to speak to management and staff, parents and pupils. A meeting was required to be scheduled for late September/early October on a Tuesday if possible. Those Councillors interested in joining a visiting group were Councillors Gaywood, Gray, Wilton (dependent on time), Carr and it was understood that Councillor MacPherson had expressed an interest.

The Committee had discussed the possibility of the inclusion of an item regarding faith schools onto the agenda of the SACRE meeting scheduled for November. The Clerk to that committee was to be contacted with a view to forwarding a request to the Chair of SACRE and make appropriate arrangements to hold the meeting in Committee Room 1 in order that Members of the O & S Committee may attend, should this be agreeable.

It was established that an update on the obesity strategy could probably be brought back to the February meeting.

RESOLVED:

- i **That a visit to the Pupil Referral Unit be arranged in accordance with the detail outlined above.**
- ii **That the Clerk be contacted with a view to arranging an Item to be placed on the November Agenda of the SACRE Committee.**
- iii **That the obesity strategy be brought back to the meeting scheduled for February 2011**

15 BUXTON ROAD RESPITE CENTRE

The Head of Policy, Performance and Support Services was invited to present a verbal update on the Buxton Road respite care centre.

Members were informed that:

- ◆ design works would commence at the earliest opportunity
- ◆ The potential usage, originally 3 – 17 age group had been amended to the 8 – 17 age group
- ◆ This project was being run concurrently with another at Treetops.

In response to a query as to whether the funding for three years had been ring-fenced, Members were assured that it had. Furthermore, with regard to timescales, Members were informed that this project was expected to commence during the Autumn Term. When asked whether the funding could be withdrawn, Members were informed that currently there was no indication that the funding was at risk.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal update be noted.

16 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

A Member of the public requested that she be permitted to ask a question at the meeting. The question related to Agenda Item 12.

The Corporate Director of Children, Education and Families offered to take the person's details and it was agreed that this matter would be dealt with outside of the meeting.

The meeting finished at 9.04 pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

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