

MINUTES of the meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 26 October 2010 at 6.00pm.

Present: Councillors Angie Gaywood (Chair), Sue MacPherson (arrived at 6.55pm), Cathy Kent (arrived at 6.40pm), Wendy Curtis (Substituting for Sue Gray), Amanda Prevost and Lynn Carr (arrived at 6.50pm).

Patricia Wilson, David Rollins, Steve Cray

Apologies: Councillor Sue Gray

In attendance: Councillor Diana Hale – Portfolio Holder for Children's Services
Mrs J. Harding – Thurrock Association of Governors
Father Stokes – Schools Forum
C. Littleton – Interim Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes
B. Foster- Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes
J. Clark- Directorate Finance Manager
M. Hone – Director of Finance and Corporate Governance

17. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 19 August 2010 were approved subject to an amendment at Item 13 to remove references linking the Capital Strategy to the budget setting process.

18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

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

Councillor Kent declared a personal interest by virtue that she has children who attend St. Thomas of Canterbury School, Grays Convent School and Grays Media Arts College. She is also a governor at Grays Convent School.

The Reverend Rollins declared a personal interest by virtue that he is a governor at Corringham Primary School.

Councillor Gaywood declared a personal interest by virtue that she has children at Arthur Bugler Junior and Infant School and St. Clere's School; that she is a governor at Arthur Bugler School; she has a daughter due to receive a concessionary place on school transport, which she will be paying for; she has a disabled son in receipt of social care.

Councillor Curtis declared a personal interest in relation to item 4 and 7 by virtue that she has grandchildren at Bulphan School.

Councillor Hale declared a personal interest in relation to item 7 by virtue that she is a member of the Corporation of South Essex College.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

19. ACHIEVING AND SUSTAINING EXCELLENCE: STANDARDS IN THE EARLY YEARS, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY PHASES IN 2010

The report contained three aspects for the Committee to note, namely to show standards set for key stages 1,2 and 4, highlight the main challenges schools were facing to make improvements and making Members aware of the changing role of the Council in school improvement.

Thurrock children were below the national average at most levels and particularly in reading and writing, although at age 7, reading showed good performance. Members were reminded that these were average scores and within the borough there were some schools that were performing well above the national average, although there were others performing below. Within secondary schools, attainment had vastly improved.

There was still a challenge in primary schools to retain head teachers and 16% of primary head teachers in Thurrock were temporary. The Council was making sure that it appointed the right temporary teachers to ensure progress.

Clarification was given on the actual testing of scores and it was stated that English skills were tested on handwriting ability as opposed to spelling in younger years. The key aim was to ensure teaching was of the highest quality. Councillor Curtis wondered whether voluntary helpers could be encouraged to visit the school and help children improve their reading. The portfolio Holder informed the Committee that the attitude of teachers had changed and there was a positive mind set to improve Thurrock's performance.

A brief discussion took place on nursery provision where officers stated that the Council had a full offer for parents to choose the right option for them. However, with regards to establishing nurseries in schools, officers were keen not to have surplus places, so the provision of nursery places was finely balanced across the borough. There were also issues of finance to consider.

Pupil progress from early years through the key stages was possible and school improvement officers visited schools on a termly basis to check figures and pick up on any cases of a child's performance. The Committee were encouraged to hear this. Officers agreed with the Chair's suggestion that the use of champions/ role models to improve performance was a good idea, although it would have to be part of a wider strategy to improve results.

The portfolio holder clarified, following a question, that teachers from the special schools helped teachers in the mainstream schools to teach children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) effectively.

In terms of diversity issues, the Committee heard that there was a drive to recruit community and council governors to schools. It was also stated that children from ethnic minority backgrounds tended to do better in school if they were bi-lingual as this ability gave them a distinct advantage.

The representative from Thurrock Association of Governors stated that the greatest issue facing their organisation was training governors in their role. She was concerned that training based in Southend or Essex would discourage governors from seeking training. She also felt that the Association could better fulfil its role through better clerking services and being allowed access to governors' contact details, which was currently held by the Council. Resolving these issues, she felt, would allow the Association to improve school performance through better governor engagement. The Portfolio Holder informed the Committee that governor training was currently being reviewed.

The representative from the Schools Forum stated that performance issues were intimately linked to how parents supported their children at school and work needed to be done to improve parental attitudes towards learning. He also felt that taking a harder stance against governors who did not undertake training or who did not retire after a lengthy period was difficult but necessary.

RESOLVED that the report and the committee's comments be noted.

20. PROPOSED FEES AND CHARGES 2011/12

Councillor MacPherson asked whether the retention of school meal price levels kept this budget in line. Officers responded that the school

meal prices were set in order that they did not incur additional costs for the Council.

RESOLVED that the fees and charges be noted.

21. BUDGET 2011/12 – PRIORITIES AND SAVINGS

The Chair informed the Committee that she felt the time allowed for the budget was inadequate and that there had been some confusion of the timetable, which had not helped Member deliberations.

The Committee was informed that the Council had to save an estimated £30 million over the next three years. The savings set out in the report were formed through officer suggestions and the Let's Talk public consultation. These options had then been ordered and processed by Directors Board, the Portfolio Holders and senior officers. It was clarified that the Council would not know the final savings it would have to make until early December and there was a possibility that more savings would need to be found, although these would apply to all Council services and not just those in Children, Education and Families.

Officers confirmed that redundancy costs had been factored into the figures, although the costs of making someone redundant would not take immediate effect but would be spread over a longer period agreed by central government. Affected staff had been sent 'at risk' letters although no redundancies would be made until Members had agreed the final budget. It was also confirmed that the Council picked up the redundancy costs of any Vertex staff.

CEF 1 – home to School Transport

The committee was informed that those families receiving income support were still given free places for transport. With regards to children with special educational needs, the Council was investing in car parking and access facilities around special schools to reduce the need for costly transport services.

The Chair felt the introduction of a £240 fee for transport for pupils living over three miles away from their school was overly large. The Portfolio Holder stated that if this fee was removed, the Council would have to find savings elsewhere and the Committee were welcome to make suggestions. The Committee agreed that schools and colleges could develop transport policies that encouraged car sharing.

CEF 2 – Asset Management Support to Schools Policy Changes

The Committee asked whether schools would be able to buy this support from other councils or companies, which officers stated they would investigate.

CEF 3 – Admission Service to Schools Policy Changes

This saving was already part of in year savings. Officers stated applicants' addresses could be checked through the council tax code that they provided on application. The Committee felt that the whole service could be outsourced and asked officers to investigate this.

CEF 4 – Oaktree

There would be no loss of service but simply a change of locations while the future of the building would be decided by the Council's asset management plan. Councillor MacPherson was concerned that provision would suffer, especially if the alternative venues, such as children's centres, would close due to budget savings. Officers assured the Committee that everything was being done to encourage and retain foster parents.

CEF 5 – Thurrock Access to Resources Panel

The council were changing the service and contracts so that there was not a need for those children in most need taking multiple journeys during the day.

CEF 6 – Integrated Local Delivery of Services

The Committee was informed that this was an in year saving.

CEF 7 – Efficiency Savings – Thurrock Adult and Community College

Officers confirmed that the Council provided budget monitoring services to the College. Councillor MacPherson felt that the Council needed a broader service level agreement with the College to encourage residents to use the College for a range of activities.

CEF 8 – Children's Centres Commissioning

No substantial comment from the Committee.

CEF 9 – Universal Information Advice and Guidance and its Support

The Chair requested that there be a clear monitoring of performance risk on this issue. Following a question, officers confirmed that there was a planned reduction in connexions staff and not for direct youth workers who dealt with young people not in education, employment or training.

CEF10 – Generating Increased Income

There was a brief discussion on whether schools should pay for CRB (criminal record) checks for voluntary staff in schools. The Committee

was informed that schools were given funds to pay for this cost but the Council was currently picking up the debt. This would change with the schools being expected to now pay for this service.

CEF11 – Consultancy

Members discussed the possibility of sharing consultants with neighbouring authorities in order to reduce costs.

The Committee agreed to raise standing orders at this juncture.

CEF12- Training

No substantial comment from the Committee.

CEF13 – Restructuring of School Improvement

No substantial comment from the Committee.

CEF14 – Restructuring 14-19 Development

No substantial comment from the Committee.

CEF15 – Rebasing Management Costs for Supporting Functions

No substantial comment from the Committee.

CEF16 – Restructure Programme Board Support Mechanisms

The Committee received confirmation that administrative support for the boards would remain at a good quality.

CEF17 – Rationalising Assets which House Central Staff and Service Provision

Officers informed the Committee that money would be saved by removing staff from Crown House and ceasing the running costs for that building. The Council did not own Crown House and did not have the power to sell it.

The Committee moved on to growth bids and noted them. In particular the Chair welcomed a growth in supporting primary school attainment and children's social care demands. The Committee expressed their disappointment that bonuses for social workers remained during a time when staff faced redundancy but they recognised this was a national practice that retained essential workers. With regards to adoption, special guardianship and residence orders, officers clarified that the growth bid would resolve the history of financial shortfall in this area.

The Committee heard some good news stories including Thurrock's therapeutic team being one of the top three in the country and that in the annual Children in Need Census, Thurrock's data quality was in the top 10% of the country.

The Chair asked for it to be noted that two senior officers were on holiday during the consideration of the budget and their attendance would have been welcomed.

RESOLVED: That:

- i) Cabinet consider the comments made above when deliberating the final budget proposals.**
- ii) Cabinet investigate the viability of outsourcing the Council's schools admission service.**
- iii) The Council, where possible, collaborate with neighbouring councils to jointly employ consultants in order to reduce costs.**
- iv) Staff be congratulated on the recent good news stories.**

22. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair updated the Committee on a recent visit to the Secondary Pupil Referral Unit and stated she was writing a report on the matter for the Committee's consideration.

RESOLVED that an additional meeting be arranged for January to consider the budget further.

The meeting finished at 9.18pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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