

MINUTES of the meeting of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 5 November 2013 at 7:00pm

Present: Councillors Charles Curtis (Chair), James Halden, Sue Little, Susan Shinnick, Oliver Gerrish (substitute for Cathy Kent)

Mrs P Wilson – Roman Catholic Church Representative

Apologies:

Councillor Cathy Kent
Reverend D Barlow

In attendance:

C Littleton – Director of Children's Services
C Jones – Admissions Manager
K Goodacre – Interim Finance Manager
A Cotgrove – Children's Partnership & LSCB Business Manager
J Clark – Strategic Lead Operational, Resources and Libraries Unit
M Peters – Strategic Lead, School Improvement, Learning and Skills
S Young – Senior Democratic Services Officer

The Chair informed those present that the meeting was Audio Recorded

20. URGENT ITEMS

The Committee requested an update from officers on the Education Commission report. Officers provided an update on progress so far and that the report was being circulated and discussed with Educational Partners so that a deep and meaningful action plan could be created.

Officer's highlighted a number of recommendations from the report and provided a brief summary of initial thinking in response. Key points were:

The recommendation to build a compelling case for change and a powerful vision for education across the community in Thurrock that increases pride and ambition:

- Although officers were examining the report relatively quickly it was stressed that due consideration was required in order to establish an effective communication and engagement plan with schools and stakeholders so as to deliver the reports ambition.

- A range of community engagement techniques were identified which included holding a series of meetings with parents, governors and schools of all types within the Borough, individual meetings, meeting with groups of schools and head teachers, communication through newsletters and briefing sessions.
- Officers were still developing the in depth communication engagement plan and formulating what this would look like but it was recognised that it was important that the outcome of the vision and strategy would be owned by all schools and partners.
- Current strategy was to break the report down beyond headline / high level statements into very clear paths so that tangible aims could be identified in terms of what this would mean at a practical level for KS2 performance and at GCSE level.

In relation to the second recommendation to redefine the role of the local authority and agreeing with partners what this change would mean:

- There were a number of statutory services the local authority had and the ability to be clear with schools what the statutory responsibilities were and to look at the degree of what other functions may look like beyond that required deep discussion. For example, in relation to the drive for high educational standards.

Members recognised the need to work closely with schools and educational partners to ensure all were in agreement of the right direction for the recommendations outlined in the report.

Councillors questioned the timescales for delivery and asked for clarity on the length of time the consultation period with schools would take. In response Officers provided the following timescale:

- Education Commission report was circulated to every school both electronically and in hard copy accompanied by a letter from the Director of Children's Services (completed).
- Comments and responses were invited from schools by the end of the current school term
- The Schools Improvement Services would visit the schools during the course of the current school term
- Following this consultation it was hoped a clear mandate for an action plan would be achieved. A draft action plan was expected to be completed by January 2014.
- February/March 2014 – anticipated that actions would be implemented.

It was stressed that although the work was being undertaken at the pace with schools – as it was important not to race ahead and leave partners behind – officers had already begun working on some recommendations. A prototype recruitment pack was developed in preparation.

21. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

Councillor Curtis declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that he has grandchildren attending Bulphan School and is a Governor at Ockendon School.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

22. ADMISSIONS AND APPEALS

Officers introduced the report and stated that there was a particular focus on improving the ways Thurrock resident's navigated through the admissions and appeals system which was inherently complex. A number of statistics were highlighted in the report including the number of online applications which had increased year on year. Particular attention was drawn to the number of home applicants who had expressed one preference, two preferences or more. In the last return data 656 applicants had expressed 1 preference only and 341 stated 2 preferences. Officers explained that it was a poor strategy to express only 1 preference when trying to obtain a particular outcome. Overall 1477 applicants received their first preference of secondary school in the last return which was a good figure. Only 3 applicants received their 6th preference. Although 51 applicants received an offer which did not correspond to any of their preferences it was explained that this figure was deceiving as there were a significant number of applicants contained in this figure who only expressed 1 option. It was also noted that the figure for in year admissions was particularly high for last year – with 285 applicants wishing to move their children inside the school year – and that there was a particular effort in trying to reduce these figures going forward. It was felt that it was not in the child's best interest to move schools once a school year had begun as the child would be established at a school and as a result guidance for parents had been changed on the Council's website in an attempt to discourage this practice.

Members considered the statistics and noted that the data on school preferences was particularly interesting. It was questioned whether there was any data relating to primary level admissions which could be shared. Officers confirmed that there was not an equivalent data return for primary level admissions but this was something the Department for Education was examining. In terms of the percentage of applicants who received their first choice preference the figure was usually at 83% / 84% for both primary and secondary admissions. This figure was

slightly better than many of the London Borough's and slightly worse than Essex County Council, however this was deceptive as in some parts of Essex applicants only needed to include one preference as it was likely that they would get their first choice. This was especially the case in rural areas which distorted the picture and therefore was not appropriate to apply this to Thurrock which had a more urban landscape. Members asked for benchmarking statistics from other comparative local authorities. Officers confirmed they would investigate and report back to Committee.

It was asked how the impact of not obtaining the applicant's first preference was moderated and whether a child could be offered a school place at the other end of the Borough. Examples were also cited of where 2 siblings were offered places at schools located at opposite ends of the Borough and the difficulties this created for parents. This was of particular concern to Members who often received casework on this issue.

Officers explained the process in more detail, stating that a child would be offered a school place at the nearest school which had places available and that the distance was calculated by walking distance, rather than distance to the school in a straight line. Although no specific statistics were available the data on those applicants without an offer that corresponded to any preference was highlighted and this figure was low at 51. In relation to school places for siblings it was explained that it was possible for 2 siblings to be allocated places at different schools not near to one another as popularity of schools often changed. This resulted in oversubscribed intakes for particular year groups over others which may have previously been undersubscribed years before. Although officers could not comment on individual casework officers confirmed that they would be happy to follow up individual cases for Councillors outside of the meeting. This was not a unique issue to Thurrock as there was a national issue of popular schools not having sufficient school places to meet demand. Nevertheless Thurrock had worked hard in recent times to increase the number of places at oversubscribed schools through the building programme.

In relation to the Thurrock Fair Access Protocol Members raised the following points:

- For clarification on how many children in the Borough were homeless. Data was not available at the time of the meeting but Officers felt that the figure was very low as few cases had come through the panel.
- For figures on how many children for whom English was not their first language. This was not detailed in the report but officers confirmed that they could obtain this information.
- Questioned why there were no Councillors on the Membership of the Panel. It was resolved that the panel meetings were

managed by Council Officers and head teachers and that these routine meetings were productive and provoked healthy debate.

It was noted that Thurrock was one of the top performing local authorities in the Country for receiving online applications for school admissions and had improved from a low base point within a short space of time. For the forthcoming year it was expected that the authority could be achieving over 90% of online applications which was particularly impressive as it was thought only 84% of residents had access to a computer at home. With the increased drive to online functions a Councillor expressed the need for the Council to improve broadband access in rural communities.

Further information was requested on the number of children who came to school in Thurrock from outside of the Borough and conversely how many children resided in Thurrock but who were educated outside of the Borough boundary, for example in schools in Upminster and Brentwood. Officers confirmed that would investigate and report back this information.

Some Members asked for clarity surrounding fair access to schools and whether the local authority ensured that people from all demographics had fair access to good and outstanding schools in oversubscribed areas. The admissions system focus was to ensure access to school places in a timely and effective manner and to get parents engaged in the process in a positive way. It was emphasised that the admissions system should not attempt to make decisions based on which schools were perceived better than others as parents were encouraged to make up their own minds and visit the school to make an informed decision as to which school would be in the best interest of their own child. It was reiterated that the local authority always looked to increase spaces at 'good' or 'outstanding' schools first.

RESOLVED that

- a) **The contents of the report are noted.**

23. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PARTNERSHIP PROGRESS REPORT 2013-2014

Officers introduced the report which provided a snapshot summary of the progress achieved in the past 6 months of the 3 year plan. It was noted that some of the original timescales had changed, particular in relation to the Early Offer of Help because of the implementation of the new Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).

It was welcomed that there were no 'red' indicators but some Councillors expressed concern that these were internal indicators

which could be difficult to quantify, for example whether an amber indicator was borderline red than green and therefore closer to becoming a problem. It was suggested whether a peer review would be more beneficial to examine performance indicators which were subjective. It was explained that the current system indicated whether a process was on track but other reports circulated by Children's Services contained more statistical data and comparisons.

Members asked for clarification on the following areas:

- The provision of the Emergency Living Fund and how often this had come into effect. Officers were unsure and confirmed that they would seek further clarity for Members.
- The number of young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEETs) and Thurrock's comparison to the national average. It was confirmed that Thurrock was doing very well in this area and that although the report contained monthly data, the figures were collected on a three month rolling average and compared nationally. Thurrock had the best ever NEET figures at the time of the meeting and compared with national figures Thurrock's number of unknown returns was very low – Thurrock was top 5 in the Country in this area – which was of credit to the team.
- For clarification on the set criteria for eligibility of the Troubled Families Initiative and if not eligible where would families access help. The set criteria were based upon Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB), whether parents were in employment and the rate of school attendance. If not eligible for this programme then applicants were identified to be able to access the Early Offer of Help programme.
- It was clarified that the action staffing restructure item referred to additional training to get specialist skilled people into restructured jobs. For example, specialists were employed in Children's Social Care, Health and Education to support families and this was specialist work apart from general qualified staff.
- In response to how 'achieving the highest possible standards of Corporate Parenting' were measured officers confirmed that work had been undertaken through the Corporate Parenting Committee to provide training. This was identified as a challenge but the group was continuing to work on this. The LILAC framework was one way of measuring the success and at a recent LILAC inspection Thurrock deemed to be performing very well.

The Committee reiterated the importance of having an education presence at Planning Committee to link in education and housing priorities. Officers confirmed that they had been working with officers in Housing to ensure that a representative was on the Children Partnership Boards. It was recognised that it was important to link these services to improve outcomes and communication across departments.

RESOLVED that

- a) **The Committee note progress made on the children and young person's plan.**
- b) **The Committee provide comment on the report.**

24. SCHOOL FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

An update was provided on the dedicated schools grant and the fact that recently there was a significant change in the way schools were funded with the structure being split into three separate blocks 1) Schools Block, 2) High Needs Block and 3) Early Needs Block. The blocks of funding was calculated based on 2012/13 spend and there was concern that over time as the population increases there could be a shortfall in the available funding for additional support for high needs pupils.

Members were aware that the local authority produced a booklet to schools regarding all services that could be commissioned out but that there would be certain functions that schools would prefer the local authority to retain. The impact these changes and recommendation in the Education Commission report would have on the Council's commissioning relationship with schools was questioned. In response it was confirmed that the Local Authority had been working with schools to identify which services that they wanted to deliver and how this could be developed in an appropriate time span. Recently there had been the big Education Expo event which was an opportunity to discuss individual requirements with schools and ongoing support.

Assurances were made to Members that School Capital reports were being taken to the schools forum for open discussion and that a recent inspection by the Department for Education had observed and recommended this as good practice.

RESOLVED that

- a) **The contents of the report are noted.**

25. SCHOOL CAPITAL PROGRAMME

An update was provided by Officers on the Schools Capital Programme both past and future projects. All but one of the previous capital programmes had been delivered and all were well received by head

teachers and were both on time and on budget. The one outstanding Manor project was due for completion in February 2014. All schemes relating to the new programme were just commencing.

The Committee welcomed the recent influx of planning applications for permanent classroom provision.

Over the past 2 years there was a significant number of capital builds which had been of high quality, with excellent project management, achieved beyond their original specification and were good value for money.

A number of questions were raised in relation to the new school in Grays West which was an area that had seen massive pressures on pupil places as West Thurrock, West Grays and Purfleet shared a single catchment area. Members sought assurances that these new school places would be available to all children across the area. Officers confirmed that the new school being developed in partnership with the Harris Academy would meet demand for children across Chafford Hundred and Grays West.

In relation to the works at Manor Primary School Members questioned whether the new plan to demolish the junior timber building (with higher ongoing maintenance costs) and retain the brick built infant costs would be accomplished within the current budget constraints. Exact figures for the cost of demolition was not available as this had not been out to tender but the costs would be offset with the junior block and demolition was not taking place until the school had received academy status. This would bring in an extra source of funding that would not fall to the local authority.

Officers were asked whether the revised estimate costs for projects were often below or above their initial costs. Officers assured Members that costs were most often usually under budget and any projects over budget were offset against the under spend other projects often achieved.

The proposed location of the New School in Grays West had changed due to planning and highways considerations which highlighted the need for further options to be considered. Officers confirmed that this problem was identified early on before the report went to Cabinet but following further detailed consideration it was proposed that development at the initial site was unreasonable due to the affordability of transport schemes.

With the changing landscape of funding Members were concerned that this would pose a challenge to the local authority going forward and its ability to develop and deliver new school capital projects. The local authority had bid for additional monies which had helped to deliver all

the schemes and officers confirmed that this would be a challenge going forward which would need to be examined.

RESOLVED that

- a) **The Committee note the progress and current position with each of the schemes in the previous and new school capital programme, (Appendix A, B and C).**
- b) **The Committee note the temporary accommodation works that have been completed to ensure sufficient pupil places for September 2013.**
- c) **The Committee note the revisions made to schemes within the new school capital programme to ensure demand for additional pupil places is met.**

26. WORK PROGRAMME

A revised work programme was circulated to the Committee containing updates made following the 30 October extraordinary meeting. The following items were discussed and agreed by the Committee:

- Contract Monitoring (Funding) was removed from the work programme.
- The Raising the Participation Age Action Plan report was set for December.
- The School Cooperation report was set for December and the report author changed to Mike Peters.
- An update report of the Education Commission was agreed to come back to the Committee in January 2014.
- The YOS Annual Report was confirmed for March 2014
- The Troubled Families report was confirmed for March 2014
- The report of the Final School Budget was included as a new addition for March 2014.
- The Education Commission final report and update was included as a new addition for March 2014.

It was discussed that there could possibly be two Ofsted reports (Social Care and Education) that could be brought to the Committee by the end of the year but this was still to be confirmed.

RESOLVED:

- a) **That the draft work programme and the above items are noted**

The meeting finished at 8.40pm

Approved as a true and correct record.

CHAIRMAN

DATE

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