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CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a MEETING held at COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE, on WEDNESDAY, 30 NOVEMBER 2005.

PRESENT: Mr P Coleman, Mr A Davis, Mr T Deane, Dr J English, Mrs M Groom, Mr M Hewson, Mrs G Hill, Mr C Newbury, Mr J Noeken, Mr J Osborne, Mr S Oldrieve, Mrs P Rugg, Mr W Snow and Mrs C Soden (Chairman)

29. **Apologies** Apologies for absence were received from Miss S Content, Dr P Biggs, Mrs E Leonard, Ms R MacDonald, Dr M Thomson and Mr C Winchcombe.

30. **Chairman's Announcements** The Chairman welcomed William Snow as the new Church of England Diocesan co-opted member of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee, who replaced Simon Tong.

31. Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED: to confirm and sign the minutes of the meeting held on the 21st September 2005.

32. **Members' Interests** Mrs Hill declared a personal interest in Item 9 "A Secondary School for East Trowbridge", as a resident of one of the main roads that would be affected by the development of a travel plan for school pupils in Trowbridge.

33. **Public Participation** There were no members of the public present or previously submitted contributions from members of the public.

34. **Member Requests** There were no member requests.

35. **Special Educational Needs – Strategy Monitoring Board** A report from the Director of the Department for Children & Education (DCE) was presented by the Project Manager for Special Educational Needs (SEN), which updated the Committee on the discussions of the SEN Strategy Monitoring Board at its 17th October 2005 meeting.

In doing so, she highlighted the changes that had been made to the membership of the Board, the four development areas that had been considered on the 17th October, and the Board's intention to discuss the SEN Strategy for April 06 – 09 at its next meeting, and special needs relating to Specific Learning Difficulties and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

During the ensuing discussion, the main concern raised related to the Strategy's action on promoting the planning, set up and development of secondary Specialist Learning Centres for Autism, particularly due to the overall lack of enthusiasm on the part of schools to assist in the progressing of this action. One member in particular, stressed that, without some progress on this, there would be continuing reliance upon more

expensive out of county placement provision for children with ASD, which was one of the causes of the Department's current overspend. The Committee noted that the Department would be holding further talks with the Wiltshire Association of Secondary and Special Schools Head teachers in December on this issue.

Another member asked for an update on the success of the conference with young people, which the Strategy's Action Plan referred to on page 2, action 6. The Project Manager offered to update this member following the meeting.

In conclusion, the Committee agreed to note the report.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

36. **14 – 19 Strategy Development** A report from the Director, DCE was presented by the Head of Lifelong Learning on The Wiltshire Strategy for 14 – 19 Education & Training, the actions that had been progressed to develop this strategy and the challenges yet to be addressed to ensure its successful implementation.

During the ensuing discussion, the following points were made and clarification sought:

- (a) mindful of the uncertainty surrounding the sustainability of existing funding streams to support the strategy, officers were working with schools and local businesses to maximise other funding opportunities and efficiencies
- (b) with the disbanding of the 14 – 19 Curriculum Strategy Group, the new partnership structure that had been formed to ensure that all organisations involved in driving forward the strategy worked in a collaborative way, would perform the monitoring and scrutiny of the strategy's implementation
- (c) focus on the percentage of young people who would not normally take advantage of education, training or employment opportunities, was an important part of the strategy and would be achieved through the appropriate mix of qualification and curriculum offer
- (d) the Salisbury City 16+ prospectus had been received very positively and was viewed as a good model to follow in other parts of the County
- (e) the important role of local employers in the implementation of the strategy was recognised, and the partnership structure had made provision for representatives of the local business community to have an input into its implementation
- (f) officers were exploring a number of options to overcome transport challenges, and noted the Committee's suggestion that it also explore possible use of the Youth Service's new fleet of multi person vehicles
- (g) the Aim Higher programme was funded by the Higher Education Council with the overall aim of raising the aspirations of the most able young people
- (h) whilst recognising the risk that with the high number of organisations in existence to support the education, training and employment of young people, including the Youth Service, duplication and even conflicting objectives could arise, the Department was confident that partnership working between these organisations was strong and effective.

In conclusion, the Committee thanked the Department for the update on the strategy and requested a further update in 12 months time, particularly with regard to the Aim Higher project.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) that the report be noted; and**
 - (2) that officers be requested to provide a further update on the 14 – 19 Strategy in 12 months time, especially with regard to the Aim Higher project.**

37. A Secondary School for East Trowbridge A report from the Director of Environmental Services (ESD) was presented by the Principal Assistant, Transportation & Development, in response to the Committee's request made at the June 2005 meeting, that officers from the DCE liaise with the ESD in respect of a travelwise plan for secondary school children in east Trowbridge.

The Principal Assistant referred to the difficulty officers had found in understanding the original request of the Committee. He then attempted to explain why officers had been unable to conduct an evaluation of the precise degree to which a further increase in the population of secondary school children in east Trowbridge would affect the transport network, due to the complexity of such an exercise, as described in the report.

He also highlighted that, whilst Travel Plan Advisers had a major role to play in the promotion and development of school travel plans, it was essential that these plans were "owned" by the school, and that, as a result, it was through the review of individual school travel plans that sustainable and safe travel choices would be promoted in east and other parts of Trowbridge.

The Principal Assistant concluded that, central to the development of safe travel in and across all communities in the County was the Local Transport Plan (LTP) target to reduce the number of secondary school children travelling to school by car.

Before inviting the Committee to comment on the report, the Chairman asked the Head of School Buildings and Places to comment on the general request that had been made by members at the June 2005 meeting when considering this issue, i.e. that a progress report be brought to the Committee in early 2006 on the strategy and local priorities for "Building Schools for the Future" (BSF).

In doing so, he referred to the communication that had been issued to all members from the Cabinet Member for Education and Youth Development, regarding the £20m Government funded Pathfinder project to build a new secondary school in Wiltshire. He offered further clarification that one of the conditions of receiving the £20m, was that it should be spent on the rebuild/refurbishment of one secondary school, and listed the criteria the Council would follow in identifying the most suitable site:

- where the school has the most pressing suitability issues
- the school with the greatest backlog of condition works
- the school already identified as a candidate for a complete rebuild in the Council's previous BSF submission
- where new buildings are most likely to lead to a transformational change in education and hence the biggest increase in pupil attainment, and where the maximum number of pupils is likely to benefit

During the ensuing discussion, a number of members, in particular one of the local members for Trowbridge East expressed strong dissatisfaction in what they regarded to be a disappointing report and of a standard which the Committee should not accept. This local member then explained the main reasons for his dissatisfaction, which included:

- (a) whilst accepting that the initial request of the Committee may have appeared a little disjointed, officers had had the opportunity to seek clarification, and yet the report did not address or even appear to attempt to address the issues raised
- (b) if, as had been asserted, there was no current justification for a new secondary school in east Trowbridge, given that this would continue to mean that a significant and growing number of pupils would need to travel across the town to west Trowbridge, and mindful that existing secondary schools in west Trowbridge followed their own individual travel plans, why could these plans and the County's LTP not be better co-ordinated to jointly improve conditions for the safe travel of secondary school children across the town?

The local member then proposed that the Committee reject the report and refer it to the Cabinet Member for the Environment, Transport & Economic Development, with a request that she pursue the matter with the relevant departments to identify the most appropriate travel plan.

In response, the Principal Assistant explained that the ESD could not alone achieve improved joint working between schools in this regard, and reiterated that this was just one aspect of a broader issue regarding how to support the increased use of the town's road infrastructure as a result of developments throughout Trowbridge.

The issue of how the West Wiltshire District Plan did not include land allocation for a new secondary school in east Trowbridge was also discussed and a request made for more information about the methodology and findings (embodied in the Simulation and Assignment of Traffic to Urban Road Networks – SATURN model) of the analysis of the town's growing population and its impact upon the road infrastructure.

Views sympathetic to the conclusions of the report were then put, which supported the claim that the evaluation of need which officers had been requested to conduct was very complex, and that the local members' justifications did not appear to have regard for the aims and objectives of the Regional Spatial Strategy. Mention was also made of the part local bus companies had to play in assisting with this matter, and that the need for improved travel conditions to/from schools was not unique to Trowbridge.

A number of options were then discussed as to how the Committee should progress their initial request, which many maintained had not been addressed in this report. The options included:

- (a) that the report be referred to the Cabinet Member for the Environment, Transport & Economic Development, with a request that she pursue the matter with the relevant departments to identify the most appropriate travel plan – this option was proposed and seconded
- (b) as the currently uninformative report appeared to have been devised as the result of a lack of understanding of the original request and a lack of communication between the DCE and the ESD, the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Committee and the relevant officers should meet to discuss what was required for a further report. This further report should have regard to the original concerns of the local members, to

examples elsewhere in the County where schools and communities had worked together to improve conditions for children's travel to school, and to possible mitigating measures such as a new bus service

- (c) the local members for Trowbridge should work with the Principal Assistant and other officers to assist in the development of a strategic school travel plan covering the whole town.

The local member for Trowbridge East then re-put his final proposal, having regard to the Committee's discussion. This was, as had been seconded previously, that the report be rejected by the Committee and instead referred to the Cabinet Member for the Environment, Transport & Economic Development, with a request that she pursue the matter with the relevant departments to identify the most appropriate travel plan. He requested that the details of this strategy should then be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee.

In conclusion, following the agreement of an amendment to the local member's proposal, the Committee agreed to note, rather than reject, the report and requested that officers meet with the members for Trowbridge to discuss how a travel plan could be devised and therefore the concerns of the Committee addressed.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) that the report be noted;**
 - (2) that officers be requested to meet with members for Trowbridge with a view to devising a suitable travel plan that would improve conditions for children's travel to / from school across the whole of the town, but in particular from east to west Trowbridge; and**
 - (3) that a report be brought back to the next appropriate meeting of the Committee detailing the outcome of these discussions.**

- 38. Schools Building Maintenance Backlog** A joint report from the Directors, DCE and ESD was presented by the Strategic Property Services Manager, which asked the Committee to comment on the current maintenance backlog position on the schools' estate.

In doing so, he asked the Committee to have regard to the actions that were already being taken to manage this backlog and explained that the Cabinet had requested that Scrutiny members be given the opportunity to comment on this position.

The Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee then updated members on the concerns that had been expressed by the Management Committee when it had considered the position, and suggested why there was justification for this matter to also be referred to the Schools Forum. He suggested that these concerns were made more acute by the implications of the recent Education White Paper, specifically its proposal that schools acquire additional financial and management responsibilities.

During the ensuing discussion, Mr Noeken, as the nominated scrutiny member for property matters, thanked officers for the report, which he regarded as informative and as including constructive proposals for the further improved management of this backlog. He then suggested that officers should also consider the following as a means to improving the position:

- (a) that Building Condition Surveys be undertaken more frequently than every three years, at least until the backlog has been cleared
- (b) that more money for the maintenance of the schools' estate be retained centrally to assist with more strategic management of this funding

Other members expressed appreciation of the difficulties schools faced in ensuring adequate maintenance of their buildings and quoted a number of local examples. In doing so, the suggestion was made that inadequate maintenance of school buildings impinged upon schools' true potential for creating the right environment for pupil development.

One member recollected that there had been a backlog position on the schools' estate for many years and strongly urged the Council, but especially the Schools Forum, to take urgent action to remedy this position, implying that the £270,000 capital sum that had been approved in 2005-06 for repairs and maintenance of the whole of the Council's property portfolio was insufficient.

Other points raised and clarification sought included:

- (a) there was a need to await more detail on the Education White Paper's proposals regarding the increased authority of schools before officers could be clear as to how this would affect responsibilities regarding the future maintenance of school buildings. However, members' suggestion that the local authority retain more of the maintenance funding centrally to assist with more strategic spend, would appear to conflict with the overriding proposal of the White Paper, that schools be awarded greater autonomy
- (b) £49.5m of the backlog was derived from schools not using delegated funds to the best effect, whilst the Council was responsible for the remaining £15.3m maintenance backlog on the schools' estate. In addition to the measures outlined to reduce the £49.5m backlog, the strategies for reducing the County Council's overall maintenance backlog included:
 - disposal of high maintenance buildings
 - improved partnership working to achieve better value for money from maintenance budgets
 - exploration of further possibilities for other sources of funding
- (c) the allocation of funding for schools' estate maintenance and repairs and the rules governing its use sometimes hindered long term planning
- (d) due to the lack of available funds, the ratio of "planned" to "reactive" spend on maintenance, has seen an increase in the latter category, as detailed in paragraph 3 of Appendix 1
- (e) an updated report on the Council's Maintenance Backlog position would be presented to members in June 2006, following the completion of the current year's programme of building condition surveys.

In conclusion, the Committee requested that its concerns detailed above be conveyed to the Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee, the Schools Forum, the Children, Education and Libraries (CEL) Advisory Panel and Cabinet. Members noted that they

would receive an update on the schools' estate backlog position in June 2006, when further detail on the implications of the Education White Paper would also be available.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) to request that the Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee, the Schools Forum, the CEL Advisory Panel and Cabinet have regard for the concerns of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee when considering the position of the schools' estate maintenance backlog; and**
 - (2) to await an update report on the schools' estate backlog position in June 2006, including commentary on the implications for this position arising from the Education White Paper.**

39. Holding the Cabinet to Public Account

- RESOLVED: To note the 6 items listed in the Cabinet's latest rolling Forward Plan for December 2005 to March 2006 relevant to this Committee.**

40. **Work Programme** The Chairman presented the report of the Head of Legal & Democratic Services, referring to the discussions she had held with the Vice-Chairman and the Scrutiny Support Officer on revisions to the work programme, the outcome of which had been summarised in the report and were reflected in the programme at Appendix 1.

During the ensuing discussion, members noted the revisions that had been made and requested the following further additions:

- (a) a report on the latest annual performance assessment of the DCE
- (b) due to concerns regarding the high volume of issues on which schools were consulted - an opportunity for members to consider possible streamlining of this consultation
- (c) a discussion regarding the deployment and effectiveness of the interface of children's services teams and schools in serving "children at risk"

Members also requested that the report scheduled for the February 2006 meeting on Integrated Children's Services, include information regarding the sustainability of Children's Centres, mindful that the Government would only fund this scheme for its first three years, and the effect increased travel to / from new Centres would have on the county's road infrastructure. It was also requested that the work programme be revised to reflect the Committee's wish that scrutiny of Children's Centres be ongoing.

Due to the confusion that had arisen over agenda item 9, the Committee requested that the work programme be clear about when updates on the issues discussed at this item would come back to the Committee, and how they would be titled. It was stressed that there were essentially three issues associated with this item, (a) the need for a co-ordinated travel plan for secondary school children in Trowbridge, (b) the general progress of the BSF Strategy and (c) the £20m BSF Pathfinder project.

Finally, in noting the report, a member requested that the Committee receive further clarification and support with regard to the Chairman and Vice Chairman's suggestion that the Committee 'monitor the activities of the Council to identify where corporate

priorities either neglected or actually worked to the detriment of improving outcomes for children and young people’.

- RESOLVED:** (1) **that the report be noted; and**
(2) **that the additions requested and views expressed be discussed by the Chairman and Vice Chairman in conjunction with the Director, DCE, with a view to further revisions being made to the work programme for reporting to the next meeting.**

41. Urgent Items There were no matters of urgent business.

ITEMS RECEIVED FOR INFORMATION ONLY

- 42. Children’s Services Budget Monitoring**
- 43. Scrutiny Task Groups Update**
- 44. Education White Paper – “Higher standards, better schools for all – more choice for parents and pupils”**
- 45. Childcare Bill – “Implementing the 10 Year Strategy for Childcare”**

(Duration of meeting: 11.00 am – 1.05 pm)

The officer who produced these minutes is Karen Linaker, Corporate & Library Services, direct line: 01225 713056.