

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a MEETING held at COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE, on WEDNESDAY, 22 FEBRUARY 2006.

PRESENT: Mr A Davis, Mr T Deane, Dr J English, Mrs M Groom, Mr M Hewson, Mrs G Hill, Ms J Miller, Mr R Rogers, Mrs P Rugg, Mr W Snow, Mrs C Soden (Chairman), Dr M Thompson and Mr C Winchcombe

1. **Apologies** Apologies for absence were received from Ms R MacDonald, Mr J Noeken and Mr S Oldrieve.
2. **Chairman's Announcements** The Chairman welcomed Jacqueline Miller as the new Parent Governor Representative for the Secondary School sector, and explained that a letter of thanks had been sent to Dr Biggs on behalf of the Committee for his many years of helpful and insightful service.
3. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

RESOLVED: to confirm and sign the minutes of the meeting held on the 30th November 2005.

4. **Members' Interests** Mr Hewson declared a personal interest in agenda item 7, as an employee of BT, who would be assisting the public health sector in its IT infrastructure improvements.
5. **Public Participation** There were no members of the public present or previously submitted contributions from members of the public.
6. **Member Requests** There were no member requests.
7. **Progress on the Integration of Children's Services in Wiltshire** The Director of the Department for Children & Education (DCE) presented a report which provided a progress update on the development of integrated children's services in Wiltshire. In doing so, he also referred to the Members' Seminar that was due to take place immediately prior to the 24th February Cabinet meeting, on the Children & Young People's Plan, a strategic plan which includes an overview of the integration of children's services.

During the ensuing discussion, the Committee sought points of clarification regarding the developments detailed in the report, and further reassurance that important issues such as the following would not be overlooked as integration continued:

- a) to ensure not just co-location of service teams but also joint training of personnel, which would include the teaching of skills in financial management;

- b) to ensure optimum participation and support from local Primary Care Trusts (PCTs), and other health service personnel, including, where possible, the pooling of budgets and the compatibility of different ICT systems;
- c) to ensure that the benefits of integration were especially targeted to those in most need;
- d) the need to appoint a Lead Member for Children's Services as soon as possible;
- e) to establish the actual, as opposed to interim, Children's Trust Board, with appropriate representation from the Council, faith groups and others;
- f) to facilitate optimum participation from, and influence by, children themselves, in the development of integrated services. The Director was requested to include a paragraph about this participation in future update reports to the Committee;
- g) to ensure effective communication to the wider public, especially to children and families, of the aims and objectives, and services to be facilitated by integration; and
- h) the need to minimise the risks, and overcome the challenges, which could undermine the self-financing of Children's Centres, and therefore their medium-long term sustainability, mindful of the overall three year funding term for their set-up (beginning from 2005), and the Department's 2005/06 overspend.

A member asked the Scrutiny Committee to carry out further consideration of the feasibility of linking one type of government scheme, i.e. Children's Centres, with similar service integration models being developed by the health sector, in order to maximise the potential afforded by both and to minimise the risks of duplication. This member was advised to submit a formal Member Request to the Committee on this matter.

In conclusion, the Committee agreed to note the report and the further clarification from the Director, DCE, which included information on where the general public and children could currently source further information on the development of Children's Services in Wiltshire - <http://www.wiltshirepathways.org/> and <http://www.slipperyfish.org.uk/>.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) that the report and further points of clarification be noted; and**
 - (2) that the Director, DCE be requested to include in future update reports, information regarding the issue of children's participation in and influence on the development of integrated children's services.**

8. School Funding Task Group Update on Implementation of Recommendations

A report from the Director, DCE was presented by the Head of Finance & Schools Funding, updating the Committee on the progress made in implementing the recommendations of the School's Finance Task Group.

It was noted that the appointment of an additional member of staff (Schools Strategic Financial Management Adviser) to support the existing Accounting & Budget Support Team, as recommended, had been agreed in September 2005, and that this was helping to facilitate the other recommendations made.

It was explained that the new post, combined with the new financial planning software that had been purchased and implemented within in all schools, was benefiting both schools and the Council, with regard to improved financial management and refined financial planning, putting schools in a much stronger position to meet the DfES timetable for the implementation of the new Financial Management Standard.

It was noted that progress in response to the recommendation that communication between schools be improved and that the expanding role of the finance officer be recognised was continuing, and that key personnel, including bursars and headteachers were actively engaged in this work.

In conclusion, the Committee noted the report and that the Children, Education & Libraries Advisory Panel would be monitoring whether or not actual improvements in performance were being realised as a result of the Task Group's recommendations, mindful of the Director's viewpoint that this performance should be measured by improvements in the education of children rather than the ability to break even in any one financial year.

RESOLVED: that the report and further points of clarification be noted.

9. **Special Educational Needs – Strategy Monitoring Board** A report from the Director, DCE was presented by the Head of Special Needs Services, which provided a summary of the discussions of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Strategy Monitoring Board at its 30th January 2006 meeting. In doing so, he corrected typographical errors on page 2 of the report, in the tables relating to permanent and fixed exclusion rates, that the figures related to performance in 2003/04 – 2004/05, and not 2004/05 – 2005/06.

During the ensuing discussion, the Committee raised a number of issues, including the parameters in which the Department had defined the meaning of SEN, the gender gap concerns for the special needs sector, the Board's rationale behind prioritising its workload, and the slow progress being made in meeting the needs of children with Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties.

Members in particular sought further information on the reasons for the rise in permanent and fixed term exclusions. In response, the Director, DCE and the Head of Special Needs Services explained that almost all secondary schools in Wiltshire had pupils who were on a fixed term exclusion and that approximately 50% of secondary schools had permanently excluded pupils. It was explained that, whilst exclusions were managed by individual schools, the Department provided a monitoring and support role, which included the promotion of preventative strategies, such as the teaching of Emotional Literacy. The pivotal role of the Young People's Support Service in addressing exclusion rates was also emphasised, and it was noted that this was proving to be effective in the North and West of the County, but not so effective in Salisbury. Additionally, the Committee was informed of the recent setting up of a Behaviour and Attendance Strategy Group, which was tasked with identifying more ways in which exclusion rates could be reduced, including evaluating formal exclusion processes.

RESOLVED: that the report and further points of clarification be noted.

10. **The Gender Gap** The Director, DCE presented a report which provided an update on the issue of the Gender Gap and how this was being addressed locally and nationally.

During the ensuing discussion, the Committee sought clarification on the difference between synthetic phonics and analytic phonics, and noted that, whereas a variety of

literacy teaching methods had been used in the past, the main focus now, as a result of the Rose Review, would be on synthetic phonics.

Other issues raised by the Committee in its consideration of this report, included the need to inform and involve parents in literacy teaching methods, whether or not boys' educational attainment was affected by the gender of the teacher, and the need to examine the other underlying causes of the Gender Gap.

In noting that the Committee would be receiving a further report in January 2007 on the Gender Gap, members requested that fuller information be presented on:

- the underlying causes;
- the example from Stockton on Tees, that was being recommended to schools in Wiltshire, of engaging dads, uncles and grandfathers in the teaching of Year 5 children to write, noting the suggestion that this also be modelled for older children; and
- global examples of attempts to address the gap, e.g. lessons from the USA and other non EU countries.

RESOLVED: that the report and further points of clarification be noted.

11. Holding the Cabinet to Public Account

RESOLVED: that the items listed in the Cabinet's latest rolling Forward Plan for February 2006 to May 2006 relevant to this Committee be noted, and that an explanation for the rescheduling of the update on the Schools' Building Maintenance Backlog from February to June 2006, be requested.

12. Work Programme

RESOLVED: that the updated work programme and plans for a Committee Development Day be noted.

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

ITEM RECEIVED FOR INFORMATION ONLY

14. Scrutiny Task Groups Update

(Duration of meeting: 10.30 am – 12.27 pm)

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