



**CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

MINUTES of a MEETING held at COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE, on WEDNESDAY 14 JUNE 2006.

PRESENT: Mr P Coleman, Mr A Davis, Dr J English, Mrs M Groom, Mrs G Hill, Ms R MacDonald, Ms J Miller, Mr W Moss, Mrs P Rugg, Mrs C Soden (Chairman), Dr M Thompson and Mr C Winchcombe

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15. **Membership** The new membership of the Committee, as agreed by Council on the 16<sup>th</sup> May 2006 was noted.
  16. **Election of Chairman** Carole Soden was elected as Chairman of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee for the ensuing municipal year.
  17. **Election of Vice-chairman** Patrick Coleman was elected as Vice-chairman of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee for the ensuing municipal year.
  18. **Apologies** Apologies for absence were received from Mr S Oldrieve, Mr R Rogers and Mr W Snow.
  19. **Chairman's Announcements** The Chairman welcomed all to the meeting, in particular Mrs Rooke and Mrs Wayman, as the respective Chairmen of the Contracted Out Placements for Children & Young People Scrutiny Task Group and the School Catering Scrutiny Task Group.

The Chairman also expressed thanks to all those who had been able to attend the Committee's Development Day on the 12<sup>th</sup> June 2006.

20. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

**RESOLVED:** to confirm and sign the minutes of the meeting held on the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2006.

21. **Members' Interests** There were no declarations of interests.
22. **Public Participation** There were no members of the public present or previously submitted contributions from members of the public.
23. **Member Requests** There were no member requests.

24. **Report on the Contracted Out Placements for Children & Young People Scrutiny Task Group** Mrs Wayman presented the final report of the Contracted Out Placements for Children & Young People Scrutiny Task Group, inviting the Committee to endorse the findings and recommendations of the report, which would be considered by the Cabinet on the 20<sup>th</sup> June 2006 and the Schools Forum on the 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2006.

The Chairman thanked the Task Group on behalf of the Committee for its comprehensive report and for the thoroughness of its approach in carrying out the review.

Other members of the Task Group and the Director for the Department of Children & Education (DCE) voiced positive comments regarding the way in which the review had been conducted to facilitate a partnership approach to policy development between scrutiny and officers and members of the executive.

During the ensuing discussion, the following main comments were made and issues raised:

- (a) regrettably, the report had not listed the names of the Task Group members, but this would be rectified for future reports;
- (b) the DCE was involved in the new South West Children's Services Commissioning Project (paragraphs 18 and 116 of the report refer);
- (c) the DCE endorsed and supported the recommendations of the report, but maintained reservations as to how 2.2(a) and 3.1 would be implemented, due to their implications for the Department's resources and staffing arrangements;
- (d) the DCE was more confident than it had been in previous years that budgets had been sufficiently resourced and planned savings could be recovered in 2006/07, but was sure that the Government would not allocate it any further funding, partly due to its comparatively high expenditure on placements;
- (e) whilst there was scope for the Department to further pool budgets for foster care, special needs and children's home placements, this development was not made any easier by central Government's persistence in allocating separate funding streams for education and children's social services;
- (f) the new Cabinet Member for Children and Families will be reviewing how well councillors are supported and assisted in their role as the corporate parents of looked after children. Recalling how this had once been a more prominent role, at least for a particular set of councillors, the Committee agreed that it should receive a report on the matter at the next appropriate meeting;
- (g) the Adoption Service was considered to be effective in Wiltshire and not one of the contributing factors to the Department's placements budget deficits;
- (h) new and established foster carers were supported and treated with the due sensitivity that their role affords, but there was a need for the vetting and application procedures to be as rigorous as possible, as the prime responsibility of the Department was to safeguard children;
- (i) as listed in Table 8 (page 22), Children's Centres would be one of the ways in which the Department ensured a robust early intervention service, with the

intention of reducing the number of children needing Council care or special needs services in the future;

- (j) in addition to ensuring good relations with the independent Special Educational Needs Support Service (SENS), the Department has worked with SENS to set up a series of parent forums to improve service user satisfaction in the Council's SEN Service. These will commence in the autumn term;
- (k) there was a fine balance to tread in allocating sufficient resources to pay for special needs / disability tribunals and investing in SENS;
- (l) the Crisis Intervention Service was being effective in helping to control the demand for placements, rather than facilitating actual cashable savings;
- (m) significant interest had been shown by prospective providers of the Council's in-house children's residential services, and the DCE would continue to work closely with the Central Procurement Unit in assessing the feasibility of the proposal that Orchard House and Towpath Road children's homes be externally re-provisioned.

**RESOLVED: (1) that the findings and recommendations of the Contracted Out Placements for Children & Young People Scrutiny Task Group be endorsed; and**

**(2) that officers be requested to submit a report to the next appropriate Committee meeting on the subject of corporate parenting, with a view to evaluating how all members' understanding and appreciation of their responsibilities to looked after children could be improved.**

25. **Report of the School Catering Scrutiny Task Group** Mrs Rooke presented the report of the School Catering Scrutiny Task Group, inviting the Committee to endorse its findings and recommendations, which would be submitted to the Cabinet for consideration at its 25<sup>th</sup> July 2006 meeting. She updated members on the Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee's support for the report's recommendations, and of its request that the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee take responsibility for reviewing the implementation of the recommendations. Mrs Rooke publicly expressed thanks to all who had taken part in the review, in particular the Task Group members - Mrs Chettleburgh, Dr English, Mrs Groom, and Ms MacDonald, and the Scrutiny Support Officer.

A summary of the main points made by the Committee on the report follows:

- (a) whilst the report referred to the need for parents to be involved in helping to improve children's eating habits, and recommended that the School Meals Strategy be devised and implemented in partnership with parents, more could have been said about the role of parents and governing bodies being crucial to the success of any such strategy;
- (b) members welcomed the report's reference and recommendations in respect of Food Technology, recognising that schools' provision for the teaching of food nutrition and how to cook healthy food, was another way in which children's attitudes and habits could be changed;

- (c) the report could have said more about the social benefits of eating and enjoying good food together both at school and at home;
- (d) it would be important when progressing the procurement strategy for the future provision of school meals in Wiltshire, to facilitate the widest possible choice to schools, parents and children, in terms of how the service is obtained and implemented. In particular, there was a need to overcome a key constraint to providing nutritious food, caused by schools no longer maintaining an on site kitchen or dining facility;
- (e) a preferred procurement option had not been identified yet, as it was important not to prejudice stakeholder consultations. However, a procurement option which could allow for optimum contract flexibility was a Framework Agreement, which was an overarching contract, available to all premises, offering a minimum standard service, with a number of enhanced options;
- (f) the recommendation for lifting the ban on beef would soon be implemented by the Cabinet member for Education & Youth Development. One member suggested that a condition be attached to this decision that the Council's school meals service should only allow free range beef to be procured and cooked. However, this suggestion was not supported, but reassurance offered by the Cabinet member that current regulations on the rearing and farming of beef cattle meant that beef of an appropriate nutritional standard could be served in schools without it needing to be free range;
- (g) the new food and nutritional standards, agreed by Government after the Task Group had completed its work, were a key consideration for schools when choosing how to provide a school meals service;
- (h) whilst no clear direction had yet been given on the initial School Meals Review Panel recommendation to Government that schools re-introduce a universal hot meals service, the DCE was exploring with schools how hot meals might be provided in the future even in those premises without kitchen facilities, e.g. through the use of mobile kitchen technology.

**RESOLVED: that the findings and recommendations of the School Catering Scrutiny Task Group be endorsed, and reviewed in 12 months time by the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee.**

26. **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 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2006 meeting.

During the ensuing discussion, the Committee raised a number of issues, including the need to meet the April 2007 target date for the delegation to schools of further finance for pupils with SEN, and the altered approach to providing facilities for children with ASD as mainstream provision in all secondary schools, rather than developing four centres. Further information on the amount of funding per pupil that would be delegated to schools from April 2007 was requested and reassurance sought that the altered approach to educational provision for children with ASD would lead to fewer children being placed in independent special schools.

Members noted that a key risk to mainstreaming education for children with ASD, would be the reluctance of some parents to accept that their child will be able to get the same type and quality of education / care as s/he would receive at a special school/centre. Concern was also expressed regarding the additional costs that could be incurred by the Council by an increase in parents appealing to a tribunal for the LEA's decision to place a child in a mainstream school to be overturned.

Other comments were made on the clarity of the report, in regard to its omission to explain the different levels of SEN, certain abbreviations and technical terms. The Committee was referred to the "SEN: The Entitlement of Pupils in Mainstream Schools" document ([www.wiltshire.gov.uk/sen-entitlement.pdf](http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/sen-entitlement.pdf)), for a full explanation of SEN levels, associated abbreviations and technical terms.

**RESOLVED: that the report be noted.**

**27. Council's Budget 2006/07 – Corporate Recovery Plan**

**RESOLVED: to approve the establishment of the joint scrutiny task group to look at the Corporate Recovery Plan on the 2006/07 Council budget, noting that Mr Coleman, Brigadier Hall, Mr Osborn, Mrs Rooke and Mrs White had agreed to be the members of the task group.**

**28. Holding the Executive to Public Account**

**RESOLVED: that the items listed in the Cabinet's latest rolling Forward Plan for July 2006 to October 2006 relevant to this Committee be noted.**

**29. Work Programme** The Committee agreed an amended work programme, which had been revised to incorporate the priorities identified by members at the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee's Development Day on the 12<sup>th</sup> June 2006.

In doing so, it offered further clarification as to the information it would like to see included in reports on the priority issues, and agreed that one possible topic for a future task group review, was school bullying.

The Scrutiny Support Officer explained that she would carry out some research on each of the priorities and seek further clarification from members as needed, in order that officers could be sure of what to include in reports on these matters.

**RESOLVED: that the revised work programme be agreed.**

**30. Urgent Items** There were no matters of urgent business.

(Duration of meeting: 10.00 am – 12.20 pm)

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