



website: www.wiltshire.gov.uk

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a MEETING held at COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE, on
THURSDAY 8 MARCH 2007.

PRESENT: Mr P Batchelor, Mr P Coleman (Vice Chairman), Mr A Davis, Dr J English, Mrs J Goodall, Mrs M Groom, Mr J Hawkins, Ms R MacDonald, Ms J Miller, Mr S Oldrieve, Mr R Rogers, Mrs P Rugg, Mr W Snow, Mrs C Soden (Chairman), Dr M Thompson and Mrs C Williamson

-
1. **Apologies** Apologies for absence were received from Mr Deane, Mrs Hill, and Mr Winchcombe.
 2. **Chairman's Announcements** The Chairman made the following announcements:
 - (a) to thank those members of the committee who had been able to attend the Joint Scrutiny Meeting on the 6th February; and
 - (b) to welcome Carolyn Godfrey, as the new Director for Children & Education – a copy of the comments made by the new Director concerning her initial thoughts about her work and referring to her vision and strategic direction for the department is attached.
 3. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

RESOLVED: to confirm and sign the minutes of the meeting held on 29th November 2006.
 4. **Members' Interests** Dr Thompson declared a personal interest in item 8 (Proposal to Develop an Academy in the South East of the County), as the Chairman of the Board of Salisbury College which was seeking a merger with Cricklade College.

Mrs Groom declared a personal interest in item 12 (North Wiltshire Schools PFI Project Progress Report) as a governor of Wootton Bassett School.
 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. **Children's Services Annual Performance Assessment Action Plan**

The Director of the Department for Children & Education (DCE) presented an action plan which had been produced in response to the findings from the 2006 Annual Performance Assessment.

During the ensuing discussion, members commented on a number of issues arising from the action plan, including

- how the 'key areas for improvement' listed in the plan correlated with the priorities of the Children & Young People's Plan
- the need to progress an effective Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Strategy
- how officers were working with those primary schools classed as a category of concern.

Members also commented on the improvements required in children's social care services, including the need to recruit and retain a sufficient number of social workers and foster carers, and the need to invest a suitable amount of resources in adoption services.

With regard to the management of children's services, the Committee commented on an issue being progressed by the Customer First Task Group regarding the migration of front line business from the department to the Customer Care Unit (CCU). Members noted that there was a genuine difficulty with regard to calls from schools to the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Service about urgent issues, which the department believed should be directed straight to the back office professional. The committee agreed that this was a genuine case where the objectives of the CCU project did not match the needs of the service user and that the task group should be informed of this explanation.

NB: Following the meeting, the Director was able to confirm that changes would be proposed to arrangements regarding SEN calls within the CCU to enable speedier access to address this issue.

Finally, whilst noting the content of the report and action plan, members requested that future updates should include a key to explain the abbreviation of officers' names, target dates against the actions listed, and some reference to what the department considered to be the overall objective of the plan, i.e. if performance was as it should be - an indication as to what this would be.

RESOLVED: (1) to note the content of the Children's Services Annual Performance Assessment Action Plan

- (2) to communicate to the Customer First Task Group, the committee's support for the need for certain urgent calls relating to SEN to be routed to the back office; and**
- (3) to request a 6 month update report on the action plan, which should include explanation of the abbreviation of officers' names, target dates against the actions listed and reference to what the department considered to be the overall objective of the plan**

8. Proposal to Develop an Academy in the South East of the County

The Director for DCE presented a report detailing proposals for the first Rural Academy in England to replace Castledown Foundation School in Ludgershall. In doing so, she explained that the development proposals would be progressed through a process designed by the DFES, the first stage of which (Expression of Interest - EOI) had been approved by Cabinet on the 27th February 2007, and would hopefully be approved by Ministers at the end of March 2007. Following approval of the EOI, members noted that the DFES would release funds for the partners involved in the project to commence the feasibility phase. On inviting members to comment on the project, clarification was given that the ward member (also Chairman of Governors at Castledown School), and the school itself, were in full support of the DFES invitation to pursue Academy status.

In considering this project, members commented on the rationale behind selecting Castledown School for Academy status, the benefits and risks of pursuing this project as a separate model from the Building Schools for the Future initiative, the possible implications for school organisation planning in Wiltshire, in the South East and as a whole, and how the ethos of Wellington College, as sponsor, would impact on the Academy.

Other observations made by members and officers included:

- a) as also requested by the school, members would like further reassurance that the issues listed (a) to (f) in paragraph 21 of the covering report had been / would be addressed, especially (e) – that 'continued community use of the sports centre be maintained and greater community use of the school site be offered (Lifelong Learning)';
- b) the Academy could help to halt any flow of students from the South East of Wiltshire commuting to school provision in Andover (Hampshire County Council had been consulted on the proposal and had given the project its support);

- c) concerns about the impact of the Academy on nearby 6th form provision in the County, whilst noting that the Learning & Skills Council supported the development of additional 6th form provision;
- d) whilst noting that Castledown School already worked in a 14-19 Consortium with Salisbury College and other schools in Andover, members would like greater clarity regarding the curriculum offer of the Academy (both academic and vocational), how it would deliver the specialisms referred to in the EOI, and how it would tailor its offer to the needs of the local area;
- e) whilst accepting that Academies had gained a reputation for driving up educational standards, members commented on the considerable amount of sponsorship and resources directed to this Government initiative, and questioned whether this commitment might be better re-orientated to benefit a greater number of existing state schools; and
- f) concerns that Academy development projects had gained a reputation for overrunning, both in time and in money.

In conclusion, mindful of the many significant issues associated with this project, the committee debated how best to ensure the appropriate level of member involvement/comment during the project's feasibility phase.

A recommendation was proposed and seconded for the setting up of a scrutiny task group to evaluate the benefits and risks of the project, with a view to this informing the feasibility phase.

In discussing this recommendation, a vote was put and lost as an amendment which had suggested that scrutiny member involvement in the feasibility phase project group, rather than through a separate task group, would have been a more appropriate route to influencing this phase. The substantive recommendation to set up a scrutiny task group was agreed by 7 votes to 4.

RESOLVED that, whilst in support of Cabinet's approval of the Expression of Interest to build an Academy to replace Castledown Secondary School at Ludgershall, to:

- (a) commission a scrutiny task group to examine the risks and benefits of this project as it moves through its feasibility phase; and**
- (b) to seek further reassurance that the Academy will work with the local community and that it will facilitate and encourage community use of its premises**

9. **The Closure of Burton Hill School, Malmesbury**

A report from the Director of DCE was presented by the Special Educational Needs Manager, to update members on the progress made in securing appropriate and alternative education from September 2007 for those children currently attending Burton Hill School.

In considering this report, members noted that discussions were still ongoing with the parents and pupils and that consequently, final decisions about alternative educational provision had yet to be made.

In conclusion, the Committee noted that possibilities for this alternative provision might ensue as a consequence of a new school being developed by Bath and North East Somerset Council.

RESOLVED to note the report and verbal update, and to request that a report on the final outcome of discussions with parents and pupils be submitted to the Committee in due course.

10. **Progress Report Regarding the Commissioning of Residential Services for Looked After Children & Young People in Wiltshire**

A report from the Director of DCE was presented by the Assistant Director (Children & Families) updating members with regard to the external commissioning of residential services for looked after children and young people in Wiltshire. In doing so, he confirmed that Quarriers had been chosen as the preferred bidder and that the contract would become effective from July 2007.

In considering this report, the Committee clarified that Quarriers had won the contract following a rigorous tendering exercise based on its experience in providing care, and the financial terms of the transfer of service. The Assistant Director confirmed that this charitable organisation was keen to expand its services in the South West.

Members enquired about comments from staff, service users and stakeholders regarding the externalisation of the service, and noted that all were in favour of the transfer, subject to the terms and conditions for staff pay and pensions being satisfactory. It was confirmed that most of the current residents at Towpath Road were soon to benefit from the Council's Leaving Care services and would therefore not be affected by the externalisation project.

A key concern expressed was that members and officers would not have a legal right to visit and inspect the externalised children's home, as was previously held when managing the service in house.

The Assistant Director provided reassurance that, whilst not subject to the same regulations in terms of inspection from the local authority, Quarriers would be monitored and inspected by Ofsted, and its residents would continue to benefit from the Council's Children's Rights Service which ensured that children could comment on and influence the care they received. He also explained that the Corporate Parenting Group would be discussing how members could satisfy themselves that every child in the council's care, placed in any of the children's homes used by the council, received adequate support and monitoring.

In conclusion, members agreed to note the update report and suggested that the new children and young people's representative on the committee might be able to provide a link to looked after children and young people, in terms of meaningful representation back to the committee, whilst also noting the relevance of the work of the Corporate Parenting Group in this regard.

RESOLVED: (1) to continue to monitor the effectiveness of this external commissioning project as part of the committee's monitoring of the implementation of the Placements' Scrutiny Task Group recommendations; and

(2) to note that the Corporate Parenting Group would be discussing how members could satisfy themselves that every child in the council's care, placed in any of the children's homes used by the council, received adequate support and monitoring.

11. Implementing Recommendations 2.2a and 3.1 of the Contracted Out Placements for Children & Young People Scrutiny Task Group

A report from the Director of DCE was presented by the Assistant Director (Children & Families) which provided an update concerning the implementation of recommendations 2.2a and 3.1 from the Placements' Task Group's final report. In doing so, he confirmed that the structure of the Family Placement Service had been reviewed as a consequence of recommendation 2.2a, but that restructuring would not take place until the outcome of the recent Fostering Service Inspection was made known. With regard to recommendation 3.1, he confirmed that, whilst a post of Commissioning Manager had not been created, much had been done to strengthen the commissioning of children's placements and to improve the council's purchasing power in this regard. As a consequence the Assistant Director highlighted how the service was predicting an underspend on placement budgets for the end of 2006/07.

During the ensuing discussion, members noted the progress that had so far been made in progressing these recommendations, and commented on the scope to learn from the Department for Community Services (DCS) with regard to the commissioning of cost-effective care placements, and the need to work more closely with DCS in helping children to make the transition from leaving the council's care.

Members noted that the Corporate Parenting Group would be considering the final reports from the Fostering Service and Adoption Service Inspections.

RESOLVED to note the report and to continue to monitor progress in the overall context of the committee's monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations from the Placements Task Group Report.

12. North Wiltshire Schools PFI Project Progress Report

A report from the Director of the Department for Environmental Services was presented by the Head of Procurement & Partnerships as an interim performance update on the North Wiltshire Schools PFI Project.

This report responded to issues queried by members at the November 2006 committee meeting, when it had considered the full 2005 Annual Services Report from the White Horse Education Partnership (WHEP) Ltd.

In discussing this interim update, the committee was asked to note that a tour of the three schools would take place on Monday 18th June 2007, to prepare members for their consideration of the 2006 Annual Services Report from WHEP in July.

Issues debated by members, as highlighted in this interim update included the ownership changes within WHEP and the opportunity for future refinancing of the project, the funding of new build projects at Abbeyfield School and Wootton Bassett School, and progress made in resolving the problem of waterlogged sports pitches at Abbeyfield School.

RESOLVED: (1) to note the interim performance update; and
(2) to note that a tour of the three schools would take place on Monday 18th June 2007 to assist the committee in preparing to consider the 2006 Annual Services Report from WHEP.

13. **Trowbridge Secondary Schools Travel Planning**

A joint report from the Director of Environmental Services and Director for Children and Education was presented by to the committee, which provided an update on progress made in carrying forward recommendations agreed by the Committee on 20th September regarding travel planning for secondary schools in Trowbridge.

Members were informed of the grants and funding available to encourage sustainable school travel, which included school travel plans and the 'Travelwise Taking Action on School Journeys Challenge'.

The committee noted that progress towards the development and implementation of travel planning in Trowbridge secondary schools had not advanced as hoped. Members were advised that whilst there was a compulsion for the County Council to achieve a position where all schools have an approved travel plan by 2010, but no such compulsion existed for the schools themselves. It was however acknowledged that it had been beneficial to have the committee's support when approaching the Trowbridge secondary schools and that some progress had been made, with John of Gaunt School recently securing £45,000 to provide self contained lockable bike sheds.

Other observations from members included:

- (a) the potential impact which £10,000 of travel plan funding could have on resolving transport difficulties
- (b) the insurance implications when promoting activities such as lift sharing
- (c) the large number of other initiatives that schools were asked to implement.

Considering the speed of progress and the value of taking further updates, the committee agreed that it would not be beneficial at this stage to continue to include this topic on its current work programme.

- RESOLVED:**
- (1) to thank the Director of Environmental Services and Director for Children and Education for their report;**
 - (2) that the committee would not pursue this topic further in its immediate work programme**
 - (3) to congratulate officers for their efforts towards implementing the Trowbridge Travel Plan recommendations proposed by the Committee**

14. The Education and Inspections Act 2006: Impact on Passenger Transport

The committee received a report from the Director of Environmental Services which provided an update on new measures to be introduced in the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Introducing the paper, officers focussed on the new elements of the Act. This included the extended rights to free transport for low income families to a choice of 3 secondary schools, where they lived more than two but less than 6 miles away. This would become effective from September 2008 and phased in over five years.

Members noted that from September 2007 the Act would give extended rights to free transport for lower income families who lived above 2 miles distance from the school.

It was also noted that the Act placed a new duty on local authorities to promote the use of sustainable travel and transport in respect of all aspects of education-related transport. Officers stressed that, despite this new duty, there would be no additional resources to implement measures identified in this process, which would also impact on the work of the council's transport planning function.

The Government's intention to launch 20 Pathfinder schemes by 2009 was also highlighted, which would encourage authorities to devise proposals to extend the availability of transport to all groups of children in their area. Members noted that, at this stage, Wiltshire County Council was not proposing to bid for Pathfinder status.

In discussing this item, the key issues raised by members included:

- (a) the level of feedback the council had contributed during the government's consultation period
- (b) the impact on pupils who ceased to qualify for free transport on grounds of low income after having chosen to attend a non-designated school
- (c) the impact the Act could have on vulnerable schools that did not attract appropriate numbers of students
- (d) the financial implications of the Act.

RESOLVED: (1) to thank officers for the report; and
(2) to invite a further report later in 2007 as an update on the council's progress towards implementation of the Act

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

RESOLVED to note the item listed in the Cabinet's latest rolling Forward Plan for March 2007 to June 2007 relevant to this Committee.

16. **Work Programme**

RESOLVED to note the revised work programme.

17. **Urgent Items** There were no urgent items for consideration

(Duration of meeting: 10.15 am – 1.20 pm)

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

COMMENTS FROM THE NEW DIRECTOR OF THE DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN & EDUCATION

Wiltshire is

- Very welcoming!
- There is much to celebrate – a strong emphasis on supporting and improving the achievements of children and young people
- The involvement of children and young people is a strength
- There is a high commitment to making a positive difference to the lives of children and young people at all levels.
- Our strategic self-assessment has led to appropriate priorities
- There is an openness to change if it will make a positive difference.
- We do have some performance challenges – but we know what these are and we are doing something about them.
- We have very good strategies in place across a range of different areas – but we need to continually check that we communicate these clearly to all partners, parents and carers.
- We do have some challenges related to our capacity – we are ‘lean’ in some areas.
- We need to make sure that we continue to join up all of the performance data across branches and partners so that we have a good overview of outcomes of children and young people – and hence know where we need to target our actions.
- We have a good vision in place for what we are aiming for.

Vision and Strategic direction

The Children’s Trust Board set out a while ago a vision and strategic direction:

‘That all Children and Young People in Wiltshire achieve the five outcomes (being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and securing economic well-being)! The Trust has identified some ‘hows’ to support the achievement of this vision

- By valuing all children, young people and the role of families/carers
- By giving voice and influence to children and young people to help shape services
- By working together across services and engaging in joint developments
- By helping earlier – prevention and early intervention
- By investing in the areas of greatest need and supporting communities to help themselves

So by putting all this together our vision is about 'supporting all children and young people to achieve positive outcomes through timely, accessible, integrated and quality services which develop individual and community strengths'