

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Wiltshire
COUNTY COUNCIL

website: www.wiltshire.gov.uk

MINUTES of a MEETING held at COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE, on
THURSDAY 13 MARCH 2008.

PRESENT:

Mr E Clark, Mr P Coleman (Vice Chairman), Mr A Davis, Mr T Deane, Dr J English, Mr J Hawkins, Ms R MacDonald, Ms J Miller, Mr S Oldrieve, Mr W Snow, Dr M Thompson, Mrs M White, and Mr C Winchcombe.

OTHERS PRESENT:

Mr J Noeken (Cabinet Member for ICT, Procurement & Partnerships)
Mr J Thomson (Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Community Services)
Mrs B Wayman (Cabinet Member for Children & Families).

14. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Colquhoun, Mrs Groom, Mrs Hannaford Dobson, Mrs Leonard, Mrs Rugg, Mrs Soden and Mrs Williamson.

15. **Chairman's Announcements**

The chairman made the following announcements:

- (a) to convey Mrs Soden's thanks to the committee for the flowers and get well wishes it had sent, and in particular to thank Mr Coleman for standing in as chairman during her absence
- (b) to welcome Mr Clark as a new member of the committee
- (c) to remind members that they had been invited, along with the Corporate Parenting Group, to attend a seminar following the committee meeting on the Joint Area Review

16. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

Resolved:

To confirm and sign the minutes of the meeting held on 31st January 2008.

17. **Members' Interests**

No interests were declared.

18. **Public Participation**

None.

19. **Member Requests**

None.

20. **Committee Representation on other Groups – Member Feedback**

The Chairman explained that this would feature as a standard item on future Children's Services Scrutiny Committee agendas, for the following reasons:

- (a) to make the most of committee member nominations to other groups
- (b) (on the basis that member feedback is brief), to keep up to date on as much of the activity concerning children's services as possible
- (c) to help identify whether projects/issues require a full update from officers

Members noted that Mrs Leonard had agreed to bring an update to the May meeting regarding the Children's Centres Project, as she was the committee's nominated representative on the Extended Services in and around Schools/Children's Centres Strategic Board.

21. **Schools Estate Maintenance Backlog**

The Head of School Buildings & Places presented a report from the Director of the Department for Children & Education (DCE), which provided an update on the schools estate maintenance backlog.

In doing so, he highlighted that the position and overall trend was improving in the reduction of the backlog, but gave a note of caution that, due to the county's mainly ageing school estate, an expensive maintenance need could arise at any time, especially in respect of mechanical and electrical works.

Members were asked to note that the DCSF had changed how it would allocate devolved formula capital over the next three years, with schools which had been modernised in the last 10 years receiving half that of unmodernised schools.

Key amongst the other points highlighted in the report, was the plan to devise an investment programme for 2008/09 and indicative programmes for the following two years for 50% of the £4.9m annual supported borrowing New Deal for Schools allocation, which was spent on maintenance. A copy of these investment plans would be made available to all members of the council.

During the ensuing discussion, members commented in particular on the:

- (a) extent to which the DCSF's capital investment impacted upon the maintenance backlog
- (b) need to carefully prioritise maintenance works to prevent the overall position from worsening
- (c) local authority's limited influence on schools and governing bodies to ensure they appropriately invested delegated funds to address maintenance issues, although ultimate power to withdraw local management responsibilities where a school's misuse of its resources was prejudicing the outcome of children
- (d) complexities of forecasting the future deterioration of the estate
- (e) way in which the council was in line with many other authorities, especially shire authorities – with schools' estate maintenance being a concerning issue nationally
- (f) need for greater clarity on how much was being spent annually on the backlog, in order that members could appreciate better the effectiveness of strategies to reduce it
- (g) the prospect of only being able to draw down £5.2m of the DCSF £12m Basic Need Allocations for DCE over the next three years, and the difficulties facing the council as a floor authority
- (h) "The Wellington Academy" DCSF capital grant continued to be negotiated to ensure that it covered not just the basic school building, but all the "abnormals", such as the combined cadet force, and such other features of the project
- (i) all schools' estate maintenance activity worked within the high standards being set by government for environmental sustainability

Resolved:

- (1) To thank officers for the report and verbal clarification.
- (2) To note the report.
- (3) In noting that an investment programme for 08/09 and indicative programmes for the following two years would be issued to all members, the committee requested that this clearly demonstrate how much was being spent annually on schools' estate maintenance, in order that members could fully appreciate the effectiveness of strategies to reduce the backlog.

22. **Strategic Direction of Primary Schools Including Small Schools**

The Director, DCE presented a report, which updated members on the success of amalgamating primary schools over the last few years, and - in view of the recent government advice on the removal of excessive surplus places – yet not closing rural small schools, which recommended a clear way forward.

During the ensuing discussion, members discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the different models being explored to ensure the future viability of small schools in Wiltshire, including federation, amalgamation, executive headships, and collaborative partnerships. Officers highlighted how increasingly more schools were understanding the need for, and wanting to explore, the different options available to ensure their future viability in working more collaboratively and not competitively with other schools.

Further clarification in respect of the executive headship model was offered, and members noted that this was being supported by the National Leaders of Education and Local Leaders of Education initiatives. Members expressed an interest in being issued with the names of such Leaders, as this information could assist them in proactively supporting schools in their wards.

The arguments for and against continuing to invest in small rural schools were explored, and resulted in the following clarifications being given:

- (a) there was no clear correlation between the size of a school and the quality of the education it delivered
- (b) whilst there was a financial cost in seeking to support small schools, resources were not the only important factor, as i.e. the resilience of local communities, and parent and pupil choice also needed to be prioritised

- (c) the government had asked local authorities to rationalise surplus school places, but not in rural areas. Instead local authorities needed to make better use of available space in those schools where pupil numbers were low, i.e. by co-locating other children's services.

The Head of School Buildings & Places explained that a number of the county's urban secondary schools currently had surplus places. However, in assessing whether rationalisation should be applied, officers also had to have regard for the objectives of the Regional Spatial Strategy, which indicated that there would be significant residential development in certain urban areas of Wiltshire in the next 20 years.

Members then commented on the work so far done to develop a vision for the county's primary schools, and noted that this would need to take account of the requirement to devise a Strategy for Change document to steer the allocation of Building Schools for the Future funding from 09/10. Also, members noted that the vision would be influenced by the National Children's Plan's objectives, i.e. to create primary schools that were equipped for 21st century learning, at the heart of the community and with a range of children's services in reach of every family. Finally, members noted that the vision would need to incorporate recommendations arising from the National Primary Review, which would conclude in October 2008.

However the vision was progressed, the committee felt strongly that all local members should be kept regularly informed and involved in any plans or decisions to affect the quality and delivery of primary education in their wards.

Finally, a discussion ensued on the county's plans to ensure that funding was focused in the areas of the highest deprivation and with the poorest standards. Members noted that officers were required to devise a formula for the allocating of funds to areas of deprivation, based on government criteria relating to performance at key stage 2.

Resolved:

- (1) To thank the department for the report.**
- (2) To request a report on the National Children's Plan, and information on how the department proposed to respond to the issues it raised.**
- (3) To request that the Primary Strategy for Change document should be supported by effective use of county-wide resources, and clearly demonstrate how those resources would be focused on the areas of the highest deprivation and with the poorest standards.**

- (4) To request that all local members should be kept regularly informed, involved and consulted on any plans or decisions to affect the quality and delivery of primary education in their wards.**
- (5) To endorse the following courses of action:**
 - (a) the Primary Strategy for Change document should be available for consultation from the end of March 2008, and wider consultation with schools should continue both before and after the Strategy was published**
 - (b) amalgamations should continue to be actively encouraged, together with successful headteachers and schools leading less successful ones through an Executive Headship model**
 - (c) following clarification with the DCSF on surplus places, reviews of schools in areas where they are the highest, should be conducted from September 2008 to determine the best educational provision in those areas**
 - (d) the recommendations from the National Primary Review being published in October 2008 should be incorporated into the vision and ways forward for primary education in Wiltshire.**
- (6) To request an update report on all the above courses of action taken, to the next appropriate meeting of the committee.**

23. Young People's Support Service (YPSS)

A report from the Director, DCE was presented by the Head of Area Services, giving information in respect of the budget relating to YPSS, with particular reference to a request to access rollover monies in 08/09, and giving information in respect of the management of the service.

During the ensuing discussion, members expressed thanks to the Parent Governor Representative (PGR) (Secondary) for bringing this matter to the attention of the committee, and noted that the Schools Forum had considered the same report (but supplemented with explanations from the Chairman of the YPSS Management Committee) on the 6th March 2008.

Clarification was given that the Schools Forum had agreed the requested rollover, having stressed the importance of behaviour support services, and that the Forum had gone further to request a report on primary behaviour support for the next meeting.

Members remarked upon the risk which the YPSS had fallen into previously, of only having the capacity to provide services for permanently excluded secondary school pupils, and therefore being unable to target effective preventative efforts, which in the long term were more beneficial for all concerned. It was however noted that scope to implement preventative measures was now emerging, and that there were examples of this work currently taking place in a number of areas in the county.

The Head of Area Services highlighted how confidence in the service was improving, assisted by the recruitment of an Operations Manager. The PGR (Secondary) agreed that this new post was adding value, but also stressed the importance of ensuring that staff in the four YPSS centres fully appreciated the funding position.

One member in particular then stressed the importance of the YPSS and of the need to ensure that it was adequately funded. In doing so, this member referred the committee to one of the priorities it had identified for its 2008/09 work programme – ‘early intervention / behaviour support’. He stressed that there was scope for the committee to explore how behaviour support initiatives and services, such as YPSS and SPEL centres could be further supported and developed, including through the agreement of an invest to save scheme.

Resolved:

- (1) To thank the department for the report.**
- (2) To ask the PGR (Secondary) to continue to monitor and represent the committee’s views on this issue at the Schools Forum, and to feedback further information as and when required.**

24. North Wiltshire Schools PPP / PFI Project

The Head of Procurement & Contract Management presented an interim update report on the service and key contract issues relating to this project. In doing so, he highlighted that positive progress was being made on the new 6th form schemes for Abbeyfield School and Wootton Bassett School, and on latent defects in regard to tiling at Abbeyfield School and the replacement of gas flues in all three of the schools.

The Head of Procurement & Contract Management also drew members' attention to a number of more contentious issues in regard to the management fee rise, the refinancing of the project, lack of progress in securing any further community use of the schools, and the ongoing drainage problems for the playing fields at Abbeyfield School. Members noted that matters relating to this project and contract, including the contentious issues highlighted here, would be discussed at a Director's meeting on the 14th March.

The committee was then referred to comments brought by Mr Thomson, as ward member for Malmesbury, to convey the concerns of the school's headteacher about the lack of a progress in securing improved community use of the schools, and who had also raised a concern about the White Horse Education Partnership's (WHEP) lack of enthusiasm in assisting the school to develop a cashless catering initiative.

In response, the Head of Procurement & Contract Management explained that these matters and others were the subject of progress meeting that morning, the outcome of which would be communicated to the committee in due course. In regard to the cashless catering initiative, he explained that this had not been an original core feature of the contract, and that WHEP had offered a solution to the school's needs previously, but this had not been acceptable, and therefore further negotiations on this matter would be needed.

The Chairman expressed concern that there appeared to be a lack of willingness from WHEP to achieve the fullest public use of the school buildings and to support innovation in the project. He referred to the example of another local authority's PFI schools' project where it had been able to negotiate a community use policy as part of the contract.

Other concerns discussed included:

- (a) the continuing problems of chewing gum on carpets at Abbeyfield and Malmesbury Schools, which WHEP regarded as deliberate damage
- (b) a number of fixtures and fittings which the council and school considered not to be fit for purpose, i.e. doors hanging off hinges, which WHEP claimed were the result of vandalism
- (c) WHEP's questioning of increased use of schools at lunch-time, which had not been negotiated into the contract.

In conclusion, members agreed to note the report, but raised concern that this significant partnership arrangement did not appear to be working well, and a request was made that should problems persist, these should be referred to the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive.

In response, the Cabinet Member for ICT, Procurement & Partnerships emphasised that maximum effort and resources were being applied to these matters. However he agreed that there remained a number of serious issues which still needed to be resolved.

Resolved:

- (1) To thank officers for the report.
- (2) To note the progress on resolving key issues outlined following the committee's 25th July 2007 meeting.
- (3) To request that the comments from the committee in considering this interim update, be forwarded to the Cabinet Member for ICT, Procurement and Partnerships, prior to receiving the annual report later this year.
- (4) To recommend to the Cabinet Member for ICT, Procurement and Partnerships that, should the issues mentioned in the account of the committee's consideration of this report, and comments from Mr Thomson, not be satisfactorily resolved between now and July 2008, these should be referred to the Leader and the Chief Executive for action.

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

Resolved:

To note the items listed in the cabinet's latest rolling forward plan for February 2008 to May 2008 relevant to this committee.

26. **Urgent Items**

None.

(Duration of meeting: 10.30 am – 1.10 pm)

The officer who produced these minutes is Karen Linaker, Democratic & Members' Services, direct line (01225) 713056 or email karenlinaker@wiltshire.gov.uk

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