

EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Thursday, 19 September 2013 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 12.45 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Lynda Atkins – in the Chair

Councillor Michael Waine (Deputy Chairman)
Councillor David Bartholomew
Councillor Simon Hoare
Councillor John Howson
Councillor Caroline Newton
Councillor Lawrie Stratford (In place of Councillor Neil Owen)
Councillor Gill Sanders
Councillor John Christie (In place of Councillor Val Smith)
Mr I. Jones
Mr Chris Bevan
Mrs Sue Matthew

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Tilley, Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Families
Councillor Rose, Deputy Leader (Agenda Item 7)
Councillor Brighthouse, Chairman of Performance Scrutiny Committee (Agenda Item 8)

By Invitation: Mr Stan Terry

Whole of meeting Frances Craven, Deputy Director for Education & Early Intervention; James Kanimba and Andrea Newman (Chief Executive's Office)

Part of meeting

Agenda Item	Officer Attending
Urgent Business Item 7	Roy Leach, School Organisation & Planning Manager Graham Shaw, Deputy Director - OCS

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports are attached to the signed Minutes.

9/13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS
(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Councillors Langridge and Constance. Councillor Owen also sent apologies (Councillor Stratford substituting), as did Councillor Smith (Councillor Christie substituting) and Carole Thompson (Stan Terry substituting).

10/13 MINUTES
(Agenda No. 3)

The Minutes of the meeting held on the 4 July 2013, were approved and signed subject to amending:-

- the attendance list to show Carole Thompson as attending.

11/13 URGENT BUSINESS - HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY

The Chair agreed to hear a verbal report from Roy Leach, School Organisation & Planning Manager, arising from a report to Cabinet on the 17 September 2013 on the proposed Home to School Transport Policy 2014-15.

Committee heard that the Department of Education had now withdrawn its Guidance issued in March 2013, and some of the assumptions underpinning the Council's proposed Policy are therefore null and void. Cabinet have deferred consultation on the proposed Policy until further Guidance has been issued by the Department of Education, which is anticipated in September/October 2013.

During discussion Committee recognised the need for the Council to reduce expenditure and the need for change. The need for real consultation with everyone who will be affected was also identified, although it was also raised that everyone who pays Council Tax has an interest in the services provided by the Council, hence there was a need to consult not just those immediately affected. Councillor Stratford asked that School Governors be consulted directly.

It was noted that the process is now with Cabinet, and the timetable is with stakeholders.

12/13 PROVISIONAL REPORT ON GCSE & A-LEVEL RESULTS
(Agenda No. 5)

The Committee had before them a report on the Provisional GCSE & A-Level results in Oxfordshire maintained schools and academies.

Frances Craven, Deputy Director for Education & Early Intervention explained that 34 schools had provided feedback in respect of their GCSE results. The 60% point milestone achieved by schools is an important figure, and no secondary school had provided feedback to indicate that they were below the 40% floor standard for intervention. Of note was the improvement of 16% points by Oxford Spires Academy.

It was reported that 20 schools had improved on their GCSE results, 2 remained the same and of the 12 that had decreased their performance, 2 had asked for re-counts in English as the results were not reflective of their predicted grades. 13 of the secondary schools have been underpinned by a strategy which had resulted in pupils who might have achieved D grades, now getting C's and B-grade pupils achieving A's. There was also a noted increase in those pupils achieving A* grades.

Committee received a presentation highlighting the difference between girls and boys and the grades achieved in GCSE English and Maths. Frances Craven also confirmed that the Oxfordshire Secondary Schools Group had been looking at schools which do well, and then encouraging those schools to share with other schools the methods used to achieve their improvements.

Councillor Waine asked for the figures on Science results to be included with the validated figures. The Chair confirmed that a report should be received in January in order that Committee can see a full analysis.

The Committee expressed their thanks to the teachers, parents and grandparents of pupils throughout Oxfordshire, and noted their collective pride in schools partnerships and students, in achieving the progress made this year.

13/13 SCHOOL REVENUE RESERVE BALANCES

(Agenda No. 6)

The Committee received an amended report on the School Revenue Reserve Balances circulated immediately prior to the meeting.

Councillor Howson commented that school finances were moving away from Local Government and into the hands of the schools themselves. Committee heard that this was having a major impact on schools and ancillary services. It was noted that academies are now allowed to put money into funding for capital projects, meaning that monies for today's children is being used on spending for tomorrow's children.

It was queried how schools can have more than 10% of their budgets held in reserve, in an authority where over a number of years there had been complaint of underfunding from central government. It was suggested that a key question for Committee was whether they were satisfied that schools have sufficient processes in place to ensure that public money is used to provide the best education, and to ensure that swift action can be taken if this is not taking place. Concern was raised that by saving for tomorrow, schools may be depriving educational outcomes now. Councillor Waine questioned whether there may be a correlation between the figures of achievement and reserves.

Frances Craven, Deputy Director for Education & Early Intervention confirmed that this was a complex issue as shown by the paper. Challenge meetings were looking at budgets in terms of improvement; a deficit had been agreed with one school. With regards to collecting details of reserve balance from Academies, their co-operation would be needed, and this was not the responsibility for the Local Authority.

It appeared that the national picture had been reflected locally with regards to this issue, and there was no correlation of figures in relation to revenue balances and performance of the school. However, Committee heard that if the budget of the school was not being managed effectively, there was a possibility that neither was the school.

The Committee discussed the use of excessive balances for the improvement of education at the present time, in particular to be able to assist both less able, as well as more able children. The need to keep sensible balances was acknowledged, and it was discussed whether larger balances should be used. Encouraging governors to suggest, probe and inspect at grass-roots level was also discussed.

The Committee considered the changing relationship that needed to be adjusted to; local authorities were no longer in charge of schools, and the public needed to also realise that. The authority had limited responsibilities now, and did not appoint staff within schools, Head Teachers or inspect school buildings, yet it was recognised that children still needed to be educated, and that this was still a local authority responsibility.

14/13 REPORT ON SOFT MARKET TESTING (Agenda No. 7)

Frances Craven, Deputy Director for Education & Early Intervention, confirmed to Committee that discussions had been taking place between providers and local authorities and this process was part-way through. A report was due back to Cabinet on the 15th October 2013 in relation to points 1-4 of paragraph 3 of the report before Committee.

Graham Shaw, Deputy Director for Oxfordshire Customer Services highlighted the extent of the savings to be made. There were a number of key learning points to be taken from the process so far. Firstly that one size does not fit all; there won't be one provider and there were a range of possible models. Secondly there was a need to take schools and governors with the authority on this journey as they would shape the services to be provided. Committee heard that officers were engaging schools, listening to their comments and factoring these comments in. Councillor Rose added that the intention was to end up with a service that schools valued and used. The Music Service would be protected in whatever way possible.

During discussion the Committee questioned whether or not the Council would remain an interface between a provider and schools, having heard that there was an existing interface between providers and academies, and a confidence in known faces. The challenge in particular for small rural primary schools having to deal with several providers was raised. There was a feeling that Head Teachers should be able to focus on improving schools and education, rather than business management.

Concern was also raised as to the timescale involved in the decision making of Cabinet in this matter, and the importance of scrutiny in this and other forums. The need to have input from schools was vital.

There was some discussion on the need to ensure continuity of service particularly through any transition period. Schools and governors needed clear advice and options at an early stage.

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15/13 FORWARD PLAN AND COMMITTEE BUSINESS
(Agenda No. 8)

Committee discussed the recent case of Daniel Pelka, and whether advice or guidance need be issued to governors, teachers and support staff, in order the ensure that as an authority staff in schools are well-versed and up-to-date. However, this was felt to be beyond the remit of the Committee. In order that work was not duplicated it was suggested that Committee ask to receive a report for information from the Cabinet Advisory Group which had been set up to deal with these matters,.

The Chair noted that at the next meeting reports would be required in relation to a mock OFSTED Inspection, the revised Home to School Transport Policy, pupil premium as a measure of funding schools and externalisation of services, and that a Work Action Plan should be drawn up to reflect this.

Other areas to be considered for future meetings were suggested including the broader landscape for education and the ability of Committee to be provide a positive influence on this. The formation of working groups to cover performance and achievement, and the demands of Special Educational Needs and Gifted children was also discussed.

Committee was addressed by Councillor Brighthouse, who confirmed that there were issues about feeding into Performance Scrutiny Committee across the board. It is now envisaged that there will be briefings before budgets are set, and open sessions in terms of the proposals, in order that they may be fed into Performance Scrutiny Committee.

The Chair confirmed that she would like to see if a further meeting of this Committee could be convened after the relevant open meeting, in order that members of Committee can have the opportunity to meet and share views.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing 2013