

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Tuesday, 8 December 2009 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 1.00 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Ann Bonner – in the Chair

Councillor Neil Owen (Deputy Chairman)
Councillor Marilyn Badcock
Councillor Roger Belson
Councillor Mrs Anda Fitzgerald-O'Connor
Councillor Janet Godden
Councillor Pete Handley
Councillor Tony Harbour
Councillor Dave Sexon
Councillor Val Smith
Mr Chris Bevan
Mrs Sue Matthew
Mrs Galina Kildyushova
Councillor Jenny Hannaby (in place of Councillor Altaf-Khan)

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Louise Chapman, Councillor Waine and Councillor Keith Mitchell (for Agenda Item 5)

Co-opted Members: Mr Chris Bevan, Mrs Sue Matthew and Mrs Galina Kildyushova

By Invitation: Ms Carole Thomson (Oxfordshire Governors' Association).

Officers:

Whole of meeting L. Michelson and D. Miller (Corporate Core).

Part of meeting T. Leigh, J. Paine and P. Tansley (Children, Young People & Families) Tony Mealings (Social & Community Services).

Agenda Item Officer Attending

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting, together with the following additional documents:

- *Letter in relation to the Teenage Conception Review and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda, reports and additional documents are attached to the signed Minutes.*

45/09 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies for absence and temporary appointments were received as follows:

Apology from

Temporary Appointments

Councillor Altaf-Khan

Councillor Jenny Hannaby

46/09 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 5 November 2009 were approved and signed.

Matters Arising

Educational Attainment Scrutiny Review - Update

Ms Michelson updated the Committee on the progress made on the Educational Attainment Scrutiny Review. She reported that the working Group had now identified a number of schools to visit and that the visits would be carried out during January and February.

Teenage Conception Review - Update

Ms Michelson updated the Committee on progress made on the Teenage Conception Review. She reported that the Working Group had written to officers at Oxfordshire County Council and Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust with recommendations towards the development of the Strategy for reducing teenage conceptions in the County. She tabled the response from the Interim Director for Children, Young People & Families (a copy of which is attached to the signed copy of the minutes).

47/09 SPEAKING TO OR PETITIONING THE COMMITTEE

(Agenda No. 4)

The following requests to address the meeting had been agreed:-

Request From

Agenda Item

Cllr Zoe Patrick (Speaking as Local Member)

5 – Service & Resource Planning
2010/11

Ester Kincova, Alice Beck and Tom Myatt
on behalf of Sweatbox, Grove & Wantage

Cllr Charles Mathew on behalf of Eynsham Youth
Club

Councillor Zoe Patrick spoke on behalf of the Grove and Wantage community in support of the 'sweatbox' youth club. She urged the Committee to oppose cuts to youth work funding to ensure that youth clubs such as the sweatbox remained open on the basis that they provided a huge resource (often in rural areas) in terms of education, mentoring and advice especially to vulnerable young people.

She asked the Committee to look carefully at any proposals which would cut youth services such as the sweatbox and to listen carefully to the views of the young people using the services.

Councillor Mathew spoke on behalf of the users of Eynsham Youth Club in support of the Service. He urged the Committee to look at alternative ways of providing a service which was both appreciated and effective before making any cuts.

Ester Kincova, Tom Myatt and Alice Beck (users of the sweatbox) spoke in support of the sweatbox remaining open. They outlined the varied and essential work the service provided including:

- keeping youth off the street and therefore reducing the risk of anti-social behaviour;
- facilitating youth involvement in the Neighbourhood Action Group and Youth Action Committee;
- providing an opportunity for the young people of the area to talk to community leaders;
- teaching young people how to communicate with older people;
- qualifications in areas such as food hygiene, care in the Community and other training to prepare for the transition into adulthood;
- education and advice on sexual health issues;
- beatbox – a programme which helped both mentally and physically disabled youth into the community – making young people less judgemental;
- the provision of a place where all walks of society came together and social issues were put aside.

The Chairman of the Committee thanked all the speakers and in particular the Young People for such an eloquent address to the Committee. She gave the young people an assurance that there would be no closures in the following two financial years and that their comments would be taken on board when the Committee were debating the issue. She further asked officers to ensure that affected Young People were consulted throughout the process.

48/09 SERVICE AND RESOURCE PLANNING 2010/11 - 2014/15 (Agenda No. 5)

The report at CH5 set out the Business Improvement & Efficiency Strategies for the Children, Young People and Families Directorate. The report contained the identified pressures and proposed savings over the medium term from 2010/11 to 2014/15. The scrutiny committee was invited to consider and comment on the strategies and the pressures and savings contained therein.

The Committee were advised that comments from each scrutiny committee would be collated and fed back to the Cabinet by the Strategy and Partnerships Scrutiny Committee, at its meeting on 14 January 2010.

The Cabinet Members for Schools Improvement and Children, Young People & Families, together with Jan Paine, Paula Tansley and Tan Leigh made themselves available to respond to questions from the Committee. Also present were financial officers Lorna Baxter and John Hickson from Corporate Core and Shared Services respectively.

Councillor Bonner outlined the severity of the financial challenges facing the Authority over the coming years and whilst acknowledging that cuts would have to be made, stressed the importance of protecting frontline services wherever possible. She reminded members that the remit of the Committee was to scrutinise the services provided to the young people of the County by the Authority and that where changes to the proposed savings were made, sensible alternatives must be given at the same time.

Lorna Baxter then gave a brief presentation on the identified pressures and proposed savings for 2010/11 (A copy of which is attached to the signed minutes).

Paula Tansley, Interim Head of Commissioning, Performance and Quality Assurance then gave a brief overview of the pressures facing the Children's, Young People & Families Directorate. She reported that, out of the Gross Budget of £511m, £317m was dedicated School's Grant, £92m was grant for specific purposes, £22m area based grant and other ringfenced leaving only £98m base budget funding. Scope for efficiencies of £18m was consequently reduced.

She reported that in putting together the efficiency plan, officers had looked at the three directorate priorities as set out in the Children and Young People's Plan 2010-2013:

- Keeping all children and young people safe
- Raising achievement for all children and young people
- Narrowing the gap for our most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups

Further pressures identified were the increased numbers of asylum seekers and the provision of transport for children in care. However, officers had tried to achieve efficiencies without making cuts to frontline services and tried to avoid any efficiencies in social care and safeguarding. The Strategy for further service improvement and efficiency was focused around cutting bureaucracy and streamlining services; rationalisation and restructuring; reduction in subsidies and increased income generation and prioritisation of services – major rationalisation and reductions. The proposals would include a reduction of 270 posts over 5 years through natural wastage.

Councillor Chapman and Waine reminded members of the restricted parameters the Cabinet were working within and that the efficiency savings before the Committee today remained proposals and that the Cabinet Members present would be listening carefully to the Committee before any final decisions were made. Councillor Chapman reiterated that there would be no efficiencies for Children in Social Care

and thanked the Young People again for the contribution regarding the Youth Service.

Following the presentations, Members asked a number of questions, a selection of which is included below, together with the response received:

Q. Could we use Council reserves instead of making cuts? Do the Council receive payback for asylum seekers?

R. General Balances are decided on a risk management basis. Currently they stand at £11m – can't see that reducing in the near future.

R. The Government grant received for asylum seekers is backdated and does not cover costs paid out by local government.

Q. I find it very difficult to make decisions on the budget today when so much of it is presumed. Also, I find it difficult to propose cuts to this service when I am not able to see or make recommendations on other service areas.

R. (Cllr Mitchell) The estimate has been done as carefully as possible. I am in no doubt that we are in for a very hard time over the next few years. 2/3rds of our expenditure is from central government. It would not have been sensible to leave decisions until the outcome of the comprehensive spending review next year when we would only have a few weeks to make cuts. The figures are not the worst case scenario which is why we hold Council reserves.

No one wants to cut their own services. Strategy & Partnerships have looked across all the service areas to see if the percentages apportioned to each service were appropriate and would be meeting again to consider the advice from all the scrutiny committees and have a second opportunity to look across the board.

R. (Cllr Chapman) Politically, Groups would also have an opportunity to present their own budgets to Council in February.

Q. Was it true that there was a £2m Grant due from the Government for Youth Services?

R. (Cllr Chapman) I assume you are referring to the Capital Back on Track Funding we have received to enhance Youth Facilities. Unfortunately, this money is revenue and can only be used on buildings.

Q. Could Council Tax be increased to save cuts?

R. (Cllr Mitchell) The Council Tax has only been set for one year – we are expecting a 3.75% increase over the next three years. Many staff have had no salary rise or inflation rise for years – Council Tax also forms a large amount of monthly budgeting for families. Increasing Council Tax would have a detrimental effect on many people in Oxfordshire. I think we would also stand a chance of being capped by Government.

Q. Outdoor Centres – these should be closed and sold off to save Youth Services – children could be sent to other out of county outward bound centres at a cost to the parents.

R. (Cllr Waine) The Centres are used by a lot of pupils – primary, secondary and special. Closure would mean very high redundancy and the property may not sell in the current climate. We have asked the head of the Centre to provide a business plan. The proposals in the plan mean the centre would almost be funding neutral –

CH3

we are also looking at raising the income base by using centres when closed. If the business case fails the centre will close.

Q. Can you give an assurance that schools will be able to buy back services that will be lost – we also need to be certain about how much will shift from the centre to school and the consequent impact on schools?

R. We are in a situation where we have to find money - need to ask ourselves if these functions lie elsewhere.

Q. How much of £60m is being used to transport pupils out of County?

R. There has been a reduction in home to school transport – subsidies will be phased out of the next five years. We will only then be providing statutory provision apart from under 5's.

Q. We would welcome something in the policy that would allow children in the community to use empty seats on the bus at a charge to the parents.

R. The current policy does allow for that already.

Q. Prevention is always better than cure. It would be a great disservice to the County if it were to go – we need to do everything we can to keep service going.

Q. Youth clubs keeps youths off the street – there will be consequences if youth clubs close – we should scrap the music service as it only provides for a privileged few.

R. We are looking for the Music Service to pay for itself – the music service does bring in money – subsidy is provided where children cannot afford to pay – it is not just a service for middle class kids – it has real value and has proved to raise achievement across the board.

R. I stand by my decision not to touch front line services – placements are the most vulnerable section of our society.

Q. The Chill out fund is very popular and pound for pound great value – as soon as things get better financially I would like to see it reinstated – could you give an assurance that this will happen.

Q. OCVA – hope officers are being pro-active with vacancy management - should not be starting any new projects.

Q. Need to be very careful when considering respite services – there is a very fine line – to keep children at home – need respite – need to be very very careful – high expense if children have to go into care.

R. We have received additional funding for respite care.

Q. Will there be a less effective QUEST package.

R. These don't cover QUEST services.

Q. Income generation – 14-16 and 16-19 – will there be more income?

R. We will change for non statutory services – hope schools will buy into services – this is our best estimate.

Q. Is there any opportunity to offer services wider and therefore increase income and reduce cuts?

R. We are already offering services out.

Q. New Indicators – Is this budget likely to effect them? Deprived schools should receive higher funding

R. We are looking at the formula for deprivation – need a strategic view of formula and there needs to be a clear avenue in formula for deprivation.

Following debate the Committee received a brief presentation on the Music Service’s identified pressures and proposed savings for 2010/11. The Committee thanked officers for the presentation.

The Committee AGREED to advise Cabinet via the Strategy & Partnership Committee:

- (a) (i) that the Youth Service is a high risk, high priority area;
- (ii) that the Committee asks for an assurance that it be involved in any future remodelling of the Service;
- (iii) to ensure that young people who may be affected by any changes to the service are consulted;
- (b) that respite care remains a priority of the Committee and should be protected wherever possible;
- (c) that Frontline Services should be protected as much as possible;
- (d) the Committee recognises the good work carried out under the Chill Out Fund and would wish to see it reinstated as soon as possible when funding became available.

49/09 FORWARD PLAN

(Agenda No. 6)

The Committee was asked to suggest items from the current Forward Plan on which it may wish to have an opportunity to offer advice to the Cabinet before any decision was taken, together with details of what it thought could be achieved by looking at the item.

No items were identified.

50/09 CLOSE OF MEETING

(Agenda No. 7)

The Meeting Closed at 1.00 pm.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing 200