

EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Thursday, 17 July 2014 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 12.55 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Mark Gray – in the Chair

Councillor Michael Waine (Deputy Chairman)
Councillor Kevin Bulmer
Councillor Yvonne Constance
Councillor Steve Harrod
Councillor Pete Handley
Councillor John Howson
Councillor Gill Sanders
Councillor Val Smith
Councillor Lawrie Stratford

By Invitation: Mr Frank Newhofer

Officers:

Whole of meeting Andreea Anastasiu, Sue Whitehead (Chief Executive's Office)

Part of meeting

Agenda Item

Officer Attending

8	Gillian McKee, Finance Business Partner
9	John Courouble, Research and Intelligence Manager
10	Sue Bainbridge, Schools and Learning Manager; Margaret Dennison, Interim Deputy Director, Education & Early Intervention
11	John Mitchell, Assistant to the Director and Gail Witchell, FM Technical Officer

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

18/14 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN (Agenda No. 1)

Councillor Waine proposed, Councillor Constance seconded that Councillor Gray be appointed as Chairman.

Councillor Val Smith proposed, Councillor Howson seconded that Councillor Gill Sanders be appointed as Chairman.

Following a vote by a show of hands it was:

RESOLVED: that Councillor Mark Gray be appointed as Chairman for the 2015/16 Municipal Year until the first meeting in 2015/16.

19/14 ELECTION OF DEPUTY CHAIRMAN

(Agenda No. 2)

Councillor Stratford proposed, Councillor Handley seconded that Councillor Waine be appointed as Deputy Chairman.

Councillor Gill Sanders proposed, Councillor Val Smith seconded that Councillor Howson be appointed as Chairman.

Following a vote by a show of hands it was:

RESOLVED: that Councillor Michael Waine be appointed as Chairman for the 2015/16 Municipal Year until the first meeting in 2015/16.

20/14 INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

(Agenda No. 3)

Councillor Gray welcomed new Councillors to the Committee.

21/14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 4)

Apologies were submitted on behalf of Councillor Lovatt, Sue Mathew and Mrs Carole Thomson. Mr Frank Newhofer attended to represent the Oxfordshire Governors Association*.

Apologies were also received from Councillor Tilley, Cabinet member for Children, Education & Families.

The Committee was advised that Mr Chris Bevan had resigned as a co-opted member.

* Amended at meeting on 16 October 2014.

22/14 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 6)

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 April 2014 were approved and signed by the Chairman subject to the following amendments and corrections:

Mrs Carole Thomson to be added to the list of those present.

On page 4 add an invitation to the Regional Ofsted Inspector to attend a meeting of the Education Scrutiny Committee.

23/14 SCHOOL BALANCES

(Agenda No. 8)

Gillian McKee, Finance Business Partner, attended to present information on school balances as at end of March 2014 commenting that the Council was clear that money provided is money for the current cohort of children. Balances had not moved significantly and schools would be invited to discuss where necessary. It was possible to claw money back but that discussion was needed before any action was considered. Referring to the significant financial reforms in the last two years and that a new funding formula was expected she added that last year discussions had been held with the Schools Forum about how to use the DSG unspent balance. Gillian McKee highlighted paragraph 21 onward of the report noting that work in the past looking at whether there were links between unspent school balances and attainment had found no link. The significant number of academy conversions made it difficult to draw statistically significant conclusions.

During questions the following points were made:

- (1) Councillor Howson referred to information he had following a question at Cabinet that showed that 32 of the primary schools had a revenue balance over 8% for 4 years or more, and that 52% of schools had this balance for 3 years. He did not support its conversion into capital receipt except in exceptional circumstances. He questioned the data concerning the link between attainment and reserves and suggested that the link being measured was wrong. Instead we should be asking whether every child was able to make progress and if not why money was sitting in reserves. Gilliam McKee felt that this would be difficult but undertook to speak with Councillor Howson outside the meeting to discover what could be done to change the focus. She further agreed that the information be provided to all members of the Committee.
- (2) There was support for the points raised by Councillor Howson with support for the principle of today's funding for today's children. Councillor Waine referred to the reasons for surplus balances as set out in paragraph 12 and noted that these had remained the same for many years. He queried the robustness of the figures given the notional figure for academy schools and whether the formula met the needs of all the County's schools, particularly the needs of challenging schools. He highlighted the difficulties of Bicester Community College. Gillian McKee provided information on the significant funding reforms in recent years and noted there had been a review of SEN funding.
- (3) It was noted that schools buying into the reading scheme have out performed on reading.
- (4) Responding to a question on academy balances Gillian McKee confirmed that when schools converted voluntarily they had the right to retain balances. When forced to convert any deficit remained with the local authority. Members expressed concern at the amount of money going out of oversight by the local authority.

- (5) Members were pleased to see that there would be a challenge to schools and queried how many would be involved and whether the claw back could be used to support schools. Gilliam McKee replied that the challenge would be during the Autumn and the outcome of those discussions would determine whether action was appropriate. Claw back had happened in the past but did not happen last year. Responding to further questions Gilliam McKee indicated that in the past they had clawed back the interest eligible to schools and that this had been used to support the funding review and other projects. She outlined the rules for spending reserves and noted that generally spending on capital projects was not allowed. It was suggested that there was a suspicion that schools were stockpiling funds for capital projects and that it would be helpful if there was a proper allocation process for capital funding.
- (6) Referring to the discussions in the Autumn, Gilliam McKee noted that members had been involved in the past and she would discuss with the Director and cabinet member about what was sensible to ensure a robust challenge.
- (7) There was discussion of the particular difficulties for the Oxfordshire Hospital School where the fluctuation in numbers could cause problems. It was expected that the balance there would be spent.
- (8) In response to a question the Committee was advised that there was work ongoing around allocation to nursery schools but a number of factors were in play.
- (9) A member questioned what help schools with a minus balance received and was advised that the School Support Section would work closely with those schools.

In conclusion the Chairman stated that there was a clear feeling from the Committee that the money in reserves should be spent for the education of today's children. Based on the discussion he proposed and it was AGREED:

- (a) to encourage Cabinet to support a robust approach to the discussions with schools with an eye to claw back with the outcome of the discussions to be reported to this Committee; and
- (b) to invite the new Commissioner for Schools to a future meeting to ask about academies in Oxfordshire.

24/14 OXFORDSHIRE CHILDREN'S NEEDS ANALYSIS

(Agenda No. 9)

John Courouble, Research and Intelligence Manager, presented the contents of the Children's Needs Analysis which followed on from the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and focussed on Children & Young People.

The Chairman commended the excellent and concise document.

There was discussion of the figures highlighted in the report and presentation. A member referred to the impact on attainment of other deprivation factors such as housing and queried whether such information was available. John Courouble replied that although it was more challenging to draw conclusions from the information it was possible to use the information on the web site to compare one deprivation factor with

another. It produced a scatter diagram which showed any correlation and possibly would provide a useful starting point in asking questions about the outliers. He undertook to look to produce a scatter diagram of housing against educational attainment and to circulate what it was possible to produce.

Asked about the possibility of sharing detailed information to identify children eligible for pupil premium the Committee was advised that there were difficulties around data sharing. However the data would show the overall expected numbers in an area and would show up unexplained gaps if the actual figures were less.

During discussion the Committee welcomed the report and the information provided. A member noted that the Committee's role was to drill down to pick up schools bucking the trend and producing results for groups of children such as those on free school meals, and minority groups in order to promote best practice. It was suggested that information on military garrison towns would be useful as it was suggested that attainment in these areas was poor. Other areas highlighted included the position with regard to the traveller community, and how to transfer best practice from the Young Offenders Services where results were good to Looked After Children and children on free school meals who were doing less well. A Member also pointed to the need for clarity as to whether service children in academies received the service children premium. A member highlighting the figures for obesity in 4-5 year olds (page 31 of the report) noted that something significant had occurred in South Oxfordshire and that this needed investigating.

In conclusion the Committee felt that there were interesting points raised by the report that would bear further investigation by this Committee. It was a report that needed to be used and should be further considered by the Scrutiny Committee Chairmen and also referred to the Attainment Working Group for use in their work particularly around children in care.

25/14 EXTERNALISATION (Agenda No. 10)

Sue Bainbridge, Schools and Learning Manager and Margaret Dennison, Interim Deputy Director, Education & Early Intervention, gave a presentation that updated the committee on the externalisation programme, detailing the current approach and next steps. Retaining the confidence of schools was seen as critical to wider success. It was important to be clear about those aspects of the service in scope or not and to be clear about retaining an Oxfordshire base.

Responding to questions the Committee was advised that transferring staff rather than sharing was a pre-condition of the Hampshire model. Asked about the issue of a traded service Sue Bainbridge replied that it was about building capacity. The Team was a reducing service but demand had not reduced and they were unable to meet the needs of all schools with core staffing.

During discussion members pointed out that unless schools bought in, there would be no service and that to that end performance monitoring needed to involve schools and governors. Concern was expressed over the level of local control to be retained and where the process may end up. A local element to the service was seen as vital.

In recognising that the branding would belong to Hampshire and that the shape of the LEA function in Oxfordshire would change Sue Bainbridge and Margaret Denning understood the concerns of members and stressed that the core education functions could not be carried out at the end of the phone. These had to be based in Oxfordshire to retain that local knowledge and relationship.

Asked about the future role of this Committee, in relation to the externalisation process, Margaret Dennison indicated that it was early days and proposals would emerge during the process. The Chairman confirmed that governance and policy remained with Oxfordshire.

Following discussion the Committee supported a member's suggestion that it would be advisable if the final decision on a second partnership with Hampshire concerning a range of school improvement and support services was taken by Council rather than Cabinet. Members also supported the need for fuller briefings for councillors.

It was AGREED that Cabinet be requested to consider referring the final decision to full Council.

26/14 KS1 FREE SCHOOL MEALS (Agenda No. 11)

John Mitchell, Assistant to the Director and Gail Witchell, FM Technical Officer presented an update including funding gap and proposed provision in respect of Key Stage 1 free school meals requirements. In response to questions it was noted that only 2 schools would have to have a cold option because the hot option could not be provided. Three other schools had chosen to have the cold option. Responding to a question Gail Witchell gave details of the pilot projects held in Newham, Durham and Wolverhampton.

Asked whether it was possible to monitor the nutritional standards in academies and free schools it was confirmed that the Council had no responsibility for academy and free schools and no monitoring function. Gail Witchell confirmed that this was correct but that the Task Group had contacted all schools.

During discussion there was some debate about the sense of providing school meals free to those that can afford them. There was also a sense that it was a distraction from the core tasks for Head Teachers. A member asked if it would be possible to provide a paper on the hidden costs to schools and to the County Council of providing the free school meals. John Mitchell undertook to investigate if it was possible to produce a paper.

A member raised the question of how the new provision would affect the current definition of need related to free school meals. It was noted that the careful use of language would be needed as that definition continued with regard to the pupil premium.

Members generally commended the report and the efforts taken so far to prepare for September.

27/14 FORWARD PLAN AND COMMITTEE BUSINESS
(Agenda No. 12)

The Committee had before them the schedule for future meetings.

The Chairman referred to the vacancy for the parent governor and asked that members be advised when the letter had gone seeking nominations.

The Committee noted that a number of issues had been added during the meeting including the invitations to the Ofsted Regional Inspector and the new Commissioner of Schools. Councillor Handley requested that the information on military towns referred to under the item on Children's Needs Analysis also include information on the impact on teachers of pupil mobility.

Councillor Stratford asked that an alternative term be used to refer to those pupils referred to as working class boys as he found it a derogatory term.

In relation to the Children's Needs Analysis report, Councillor Waine asked that the further report not just be about the data but should focus on schools bucking the trend. Councillor Gray undertook to work with officers to schedule items in the work programme to make most effective use of resources and Committee time.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing 2014