

## MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 22 SEPTEMBER 2015 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.15 PM

### **Committee Members Present**

Councillors: Pauline Helliar-Symons (Chairman), Laura Blumenthal, Ken Miall, Bill Soane and Alison Swaddle

### **Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: Tim Holton

### **Officers Present**

Tricia Harcourt, Senior Democratic Services Officer  
Luciane Bowker, Democratic Services Officer  
Brian Grady, Head of Strategic Commissioning  
Judith Ramsden, Director of Children's Services  
Alan Stubbersfield, Interim Assistant Director Learning and Achievement

### **77. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors Chris Bowring, Lindsay Ferris and Shahid Younis.

### **78. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 21 July 2015 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the correction in the attendance list to reflect Laura Blumenthal's presence to the meeting.

The chairman, Pauline Helliar-Symons, announced that this was Tricia Harcourt's last meeting as she was due to retire. The chairman wished Tricia well on her retirement and thanked her for all her work over the years in the Council.

### **79. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **80. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

### **81. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

### **82. THE PROCESS OF SCHOOL BUDGET SETTING AND FUNDING ALLOCATION**

The Committee considered a verbal report by Alan Stubbersfield, Interim Assistant Director Learning and Achievement, outlining the process of school budget setting and funding allocation.

Members were advised that the schools' budget was set by Schools Forum, which was an advisory body composed by a proportional number of representatives including: primary headteachers; secondary headteachers; Academies and Free Schools headteachers; Special Schools headteachers; governors and non-schools representatives. Schools Forum would discuss and make decisions on the school's finances, culminating with the submission of the budget every year.

It was explained that KS4 pupils cost more than KS3 and KS2 pupils due to a number of reasons, including: higher number of teachers; bigger premises; extended school resources and exam related costs.

Currently there was considerable pressure on the budget due to having to fund the new secondary school. It was noted that there was a time lag issue in that the new school would only receive pupil funding once it was open and this was directly related to the number of pupils admitted in the school. However, the costs of setting up the school, for example employing the leadership team, would occur before the school had an income to cover it. This was causing controversy at the Schools Forum and headteachers were generally concerned about the effect on their budgets.

It was mentioned that the Council had a statutory obligation to meet the demand for school places for Wokingham children. It was recognised that to meet this demand it was necessary to have this new secondary school to ensure there were enough school places in the coming years. It was important to have transparency in the process for dealing with the deficit which was forecast for the next two years. The calculations were complex and it was imperative to have discussions in advance so that future shortfalls did not come as a surprise.

In discussing the item, the following points were made:

- It would be interesting to know what percentage of the deficit was directly related to the new school;
- It was envisaged that with the new secondary school, schools would be competing for pupils;
- Costs for the new school had to be met locally, however some of the costs would be absorbed by all schools;
- It was noted that the 30 hour increase in the Early Years provision had added pressure to the system but was not the main reason for the predicted deficit;
- There was concern that the schools' performance and improvement could be affected by cuts in funding. It was mentioned that Wokingham was the lowest funded Local Authority in the country and that Charlotte Haitham Taylor was lobbying with John Redwood to try and improve this situation;
- The scrutiny process was valued as it encouraged headteachers and governors to be transparent, efficient and to learn from one another. It was important to be conscious of the challenges ahead;
- In reply to a question about training, Officers stated that Headteachers or their representatives were invited to attend a finance conference twice a year which was helpful for their understanding of budgeting. It was noted that most schools had bursars;
- Schools Forum were modelling a five year strategy in which they were now regularly reviewing, planning and forecasting for the next five years;
- The Committee was reassured that the School Finance Officer reviewed and had to sign off when a school went into a deficit position. Although schools could make their own financial decisions within their budgets they were accountable to the Council. It was noted that the Council had limited powers to influence Academies and Free Schools;
- Once the new school started to receive funding for its pupils the situation would be alleviated;
- Members enquired about the possibility of borrowing money to support schools during this challenging period. It was suggested that Graham Ebers, Chief Finance Officer be

invited to attend the next meeting to discuss this idea with the Committee. The Committee asked that they receive a written report containing possible solutions and different ways of borrowing prior to the meeting;

- In previous years the school's budget had been set without major problems, so headteachers were not used to these sort of challenges, but had now accepted that all schools and academies were required to find savings;

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Graham Ebers be invited to attend the next meeting to discuss the possibility of borrowing money, rate options and his views on finding a solution to the deficit;
- 2) an update report be provided to the next meeting.

### **83. THE WORK OF THE CHILDREN'S PARTNERSHIP**

The Committee considered a report on the work of the Children's Partnership as set out on Agenda pages 17-28.

The Chairman asked that in the future, overview and scrutiny reports should be more specific in their recommendations, rather than just '*to note*'. It was suggested that it could include words such as: '*to recommend*' and '*to make further suggestions if appropriate*'.

Where the word '*welfare*' was used in the Outcome / Benefits to the Community it should say '*wellbeing*'.

Brian Grady, Head of Strategic Commissioning stated that progress had been made against all the identified priorities. However, it was noted that the Council had scored significantly worse than the national average for the National Indicator relating to the emotional health of children, however the data was very old. This was being monitored and there was a significant piece of work being undertaken with Healthwatch to improve this area.

It was noted that there was concern over the length of time CAHMS assessments were taking. Officers were aware of the issue and were putting pressure on health commissioners to improve the services offered to Wokingham as it was acknowledged that significant improvement was required in this area. Corporate Parenting Board had also identified issues with Wokingham Looked After Children (LAC) not receiving their health assessments in the prescribed time. Officers were engaging with health professionals to improve this situation.

Brian reported that there was better communication since the Head's steering group which was due to meet on a termly basis had been established.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the report be noted;
- 2) reports to include more specific recommendations as discussed at the meeting.

### **84. UPDATE ON THE DRAFT PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES STRATEGY**

The Committee received a verbal update on the Draft Primary School Places Strategy.

It was hoped that the outcome of the draft strategy would be considered by the Executive in November. Judith Ramsden, Children's Services Director reported that it had been a struggle in terms of capacity to set up task and finish groups for discussions on the strategy.

The Committee was advised that following the recent problems with shortage of school places, there had been no significant changes so far and there was continual support for parents in the Lower Earley area. The report would be discussed at the next meeting of the committee on 27 October. Charlotte Haitham Taylor stated that it was important to carry on with the discussions so not to lose momentum, on setting strategies and solving issues.

**RESOLVED:** That the Draft Primary School Places Strategy report be discussed at the next meeting of the Committee, on 27 October.

## **85. ANNUAL REPORT OF CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD**

The Committee received and considered the annual report of Corporate Parenting Board which was set out on pages 29-58.

Councillor Haitham Taylor stated that Corporate Parenting Board had met on 8 September and showed a high level of commitment. There had been a peer review at that meeting with positive findings and Charlotte was due to meet with Judith Ramsden to discuss the outcomes.

During the presentation of the report the following points were highlighted:

- There were more boys than girls in care in the older age group;
- The Council had adopted a Care Leavers' Charter and a Foster Carers' Charter in order to demonstrate commitment;
- There had been positive feedback from the Care Leavers' survey; Members asked for the exact numbers involved in the survey;
- An event had been held at Chessington Park for Foster Carers to share views and this experience had been positive;
- The CAHMS strategy had been discussed at the Health and Wellbeing Board who were looking to improve this service;
- Children In Care had taken part in setting up their IT strategy;
- Social Workers' retention was better and as a result there was less turnover;
- The new virtual school was positively influencing results;
- It had been agreed to give Care Leavers second or even third chances regarding tenancy arrangements;
- Some Foster Carers had decided to permanently commit to the children by means of adoption and special guardianship;
- It was recognised that there was an issue with the timing of LAC health assessments, CPB was challenging health partners to improve this service;
- The new Children Advocacy Officer had now started;
- It was important to make sure Members were aware of their responsibilities as corporate parents;
- It was challenging to keep all placements within the borough and there was ongoing work to improve this;
- Members were encouraged to attend the Care Leavers event on 30 October.

The Committee was pleased with the progress of the CPB, particularly the commitment shown by Foster Carers.

Members asked for clarification on the 'key' for the graphs on page 52 of the report and the 'next steps' relating to the points raised on page 57 to be circulated with the minutes.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the report be confirmed and noted;
- 2) the 'key' to the graph on page 52 and the 'next steps' relating to issues raised on page 57 be circulated with the minutes.

#### **86. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

The Committee received and considered a report, set on Agenda pages 59-68, which gave details of the Children's Services performance indicators, in the Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report.

Members were pleased the format of the report and commented that the font size used facilitated the reading of the report. The Committee congratulated Officers on the fact that all indicators were green.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted.

#### **87. SCHOOLS PERFORMANCE - OFSTED REPORTS**

The Committee was informed that no Ofsted inspections reports had been published since the last meeting.

#### **88. VIRTUAL SCHOOL REPORT**

The Committee received and considered the Virtual School report that was set out on Agenda pages 69-90.

Alan Stubbersfield, Interim Assistant Director of Learning and Achievement explained that the virtual school was set up to replicate the structure of real schools. Its objective was to seek improvement in LAC school's performance.

There was an aspiration that Looked After Children would attend outstanding schools. It was noted that three children were placed at schools that had been rated by Ofsted as 'Requires Improvement'. These placements were being monitored and if necessary a change of provision would be actioned.

It was mentioned that the key priority groups on the virtual school roll were: Children in Care; Looked After Children; Care Leavers; Special Guardianship Orders and Performance Adoption. Additional targeted group were: Children Missing Education; Elective Home Education; Free School Meals cohorts and Children on a Child Protection Plan.

Members noted the numbers around attendance listed on page 85 of the Agenda and questioned what specific actions were being taken by the Education Welfare Officer to improve CIC and LAC school attendance.

The Virtual School enabled a dialogue between professionals and a better link for Social Carers.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the report be noted;
- 2) more information on actions being taken by the Education Welfare Officer to improve Children In Care and Looked After Children school attendance be provided to the Committee.

## **89. SECONDARY SCHOOLS ACHIEVEMENT RESULTS 2015**

The Committee received a verbal update on the recently published secondary school achievement results for 2015.

The Committee requested to receive comparative information with Yately and Edgbarrow secondary schools.

It was reported that KS1 had had very good results and KS2 had consolidated last years' improvements. A particular area where there had been considerable improvement was writing and the next area to focus on was maths.

The results for KS3 showed a mixed picture with some schools showing good results but others faltering. The A Level results had gone up locally despite the fact that nationally they had gone down.

It was noted that it was important to narrow the gap in secondary schools. It was recognised that some schools had become complacent because parents were very proactive and that these schools should be challenged in order to achieve beyond their current levels of achievement.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the verbal report be noted;
- 2) benchmarking information in relation to the achievement of Edgbarrow and Yately Schools, while recognising that Wokingham Borough Council has no accountability for their results, be provided to the Committee with the minutes.

## **90. COMMITTEE'S FORWARD PROGRAMME**

The Committee received and considered its current work programme, set out on Agenda pages 91-98, and agreed to add the following items to the 27 October meeting:

- Primary School Places Strategy;
- Borrowing options for schools - Graham Ebers to be invited to discuss

**RESOLVED:** That the Committee's forward programme including the additional items put forward at the meeting be confirmed.