

MINUTES of the meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 8 November 2012 at 7.00pm

Present: Councillors Diana Hale (Chair), James Halden, Charles Curtis, Cathy Kent and Sue Little

Mr Alistair MacPherson and Mrs Pat Wilson

Apologies: Councillor Clare Baldwin

In attendance: S. Clark – Head of Finance
S. Abrahall – Finance Officer
J. Olsson – Director of People Services
J. Clark – Strategic Lead Operational, Resources and Libraries Unit
B. Foster – Head of Children's Social Care
M. Boulter- Democratic Services Officer

1. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 9 October 2012, were approved as a correct record.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

Councillor Diana Hale declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that she is a member of South Essex College Corporation

Councillor Cathy Kent declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that she has children attending St Thomas Primary School, Grays Convent School and Grays Media & Arts School. She is also Parent Governor at Grays Convent School.

Councillor Charles Curtis declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that he is a Governor at the Ockendon School and has grandchildren attending school in Bulphan.

Mrs Wilson declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that she is the Chair of Governors at St Thomas's Primary School.

Mr MacPherson declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue that he is a governor at Benyon School.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared

3. BUDGET 2013/14 – GROWTH AND SAVINGS PROPOSALS

The Committee was informed that the Council would still have a budget gap for 2013/14 and 2014/15 if all the growth and savings proposals were accepted. The Council was continuing to consider proposals to close this gap. It was the responsibility of every department to find savings and there were no areas that were not exempt from savings measures.

It was clarified during debate that no savings from partnership working with Barking and Dagenham had been included in the budget as yet, although if savings could be realised in 2013/14 through this partnership working, they could well be presented in the January round of meetings.

Councillor Halden expressed his concern that children's services were looking at disproportionately more growth than savings. Officers responded that there were no quotas set for individual departments on how much they should be looking to save or grow. It was added that the majority of the growth proposed was demand led and statutory in some cases.

The Committee discussed each proposal in term:

Through Care Service

This growth proposal was to employ an additional social worker to deal with the increased workload from looked after children. This post had previously been removed due to the reduction in the number of looked after children. Officers confirmed that there was a general trend for increased numbers of looked after children in the future. Officers felt their reduction in social workers the previous year had been the correct choice and represented response to demand for services.

It was confirmed that competency pay was a twice yearly pay made to social workers based on their performance.

The Committee supported this proposal.

Family Support

The Committee supported this proposal to add two social workers to this service to deal with increased demand.

Adoption and Special Guardianship

It was stated that special guardians were appointed by the courts and were eligible for a financial allowance. The Council was responsible for this allowance and therefore, the budget needed to be increased to meet demand. Special guardianship would work out cheaper for the Council but also better for the child as the alternative was a children's home.

It was clarified during debate that the Fostering allowance was the money paid to a carer to look after the basic needs a child.

The Committee supported this proposal.

Fostering

This growth was to ensure that the Council paid a competitive rate to foster carers. The Committee recognised that it was more cost effective to pay foster carers a higher amount than to arrange out of borough placements for children. Officers clarified that foster carers were developed and received different payments according to their skills. The old entry level payment (level 1) would be removed in the new proposal and the and level 2 would become the new entry level payment.

Officers stated that Thurrock's advertised for new carers in a focussed and effective way, using trained professionals. However, it was added that although people considering fostering attended Thurrock events, they sometimes went to other councils where the financial remuneration was higher. It was stressed that the increase in foster carer payments did not guarantee more foster carers for Thurrock but it would go some way in preventing current foster carers leaving the service.

The Committee supported this proposal.

Increase Demand in Children Social Care Placements

The Council needed to purchase placements for children with very complex needs. Each placement was a different contract but the choice of where to place the child was very limited due to the competition for places and the needs involved. The Council was asking for a growth of £3 million, which officers stated would be spent frugally. It was added that the partnership with Barking and Dagenham Council could help reduce costs as collective negotiation might take place.

The Committee was assured that officers reviewed the cost of all placements to ensure that the Council was covering the right costs and where applicable other partners, such as the NHS, were covering those costs due to them.

The Committee supported the proposal subject to officers providing detail on joint funded placements and allowing the Committee the opportunity to see if further savings could be made from these funding arrangements.

Senior Practitioner – Community Based Assessments

On occasion the Council was, on order of a court, obligated to undertake such assessments through an independent assessor. These assessments cost considerable amounts of money and costs last year were estimated at £660,000. By funding an independent post to undertake this work on behalf of the Council, officers expected to avoid these costly assessments. This was a spend to save proposal.

During debate it was clarified that the independent assessor would be managed by an organisation outside of the Council and this organisation could well be a charity or other third sector body. The post would also liaise with council employed social workers but would not line manage any Thurrock employee. The Courts were amenable to this arrangement for both Thurrock and Southend Councils and the model had worked well in Bath and North Somerset.

Some members of the Committee felt that the new post could be shared with Southend Council and officers agreed to investigate this proposal on the understanding that a shared post might not necessarily deliver all of the projected savings on the assessments for Thurrock.

The Committee supported this proposal on the understanding that detail on a shared post would return to the January meeting.

Home to School Transport

Officer outlined that the current proposals related to post-16 provision but that other areas of home to school transport was being investigated for future consideration.

Officers confirmed that the Ensign bus company was providing a four weekly bus pass for post 16 students that was valid seven days a week. Ensign had also provided more buses on the most popular routes. These arrangements had proved very popular with students.

Councillor Little outlined a number of operational challenges faced by students in rural areas and the timing of service buses with the ability of students to get to the bus stop in time after school. Officers stated that they were working with Ensign to solve these issues, as well as arranging suitable transport to all colleges and schools that might not currently be on their commercial routes.

A brief discussion was had on rail services and it was stated that only children in receipt of free transport provision received railcards at

present. The Council had limited capacity to develop initiatives with rail and bus companies for students.

The Committee discussed when best to introduce these new changes and some Members felt that a September introduction would be more helpful to students rather than introducing new arrangements mid-term. However, other Members felt an introduction in April 2013 would be safer because students would have lighter summer evenings to cope with the transition. Officers stated that they would have to abide by the policy set out in the Council's admissions booklet.

Mrs Wilson felt that the saving would discourage some students from attending further education. Officers acknowledged this challenge but stated that this saving proposal was one of the least worst options to consider. The proposal would actually bring the Council in line with other council policies across the country.

The Committee supported the proposal on the proviso that it did not contravene the current admissions policy and that issues relating to rural communities could be resolved.

RESOLVED that the Committee notes and reviews the proposals for budget growth and savings in 2013/14 and future years set out in the appendices to this report.

4. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee debated whether the budget books should be included in the reports for January's meeting. Officers stated that the budget books were open to all Members to scrutinise but if considered at Committee they could encourage micro-managing small amounts of money. This approach was to be avoided.

The Chair moved that the budget books not be included but that any Member was able to view them and raise subsequent issues at a meeting of the committee. The Committee voted in favour with this motion with the exception of Councillor Halden.

The Committee discussed whether a joint meeting should be arranged for the budget. Officers agreed to look further into this although one Member highlighted that all overview and scrutiny committees were open for Members to attend and contribute to.

RESOLVED that the Work Programme be noted.

The meeting finished at 9.31pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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or alternatively e-mail mboulter@thurrock.gov.uk**

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