

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 15 July 2014 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Val Morris-Cook (Chair), James Halden (Vice-Chair), Charles Curtis, Tunde Ojetola and Maggie O'Keeffe-Ray

Patricia Wilson, Roman Catholic Church Representative
Reverend Darren Barlow, Church of England Representative

Apologies: Councillors Martin Kerin

In attendance:

Carmel Littleton, Director of Children's Services
Nicky Pace, Interim Head of Service for Care and Targeted Outcomes
Teresa Goulding, Troubled Families Co-ordinator
Sue Green, Strategic Leader Early Years, Families & Communities
Mike Peters, Strategic Lead, School Improvement, Learning and Skills
Ashley Wilcox, Marketing Manager
Stephanie Cox, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Councillor Halden chaired the meeting in the absence of Councillor Morris-Cook, who had advised that she would arrive late for the meeting.

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

1. Minutes

The Minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on 18 March 2014, were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

3. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Curtis declared a non-pecuniary interest in the general business of the meeting as he had grandchildren attending Bulphan School and was a Governor at the Ockendon Academy.

Councillor Ojetola declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to the general business of the meeting as he had children attending the Gateway Academy,

Belmont Castle Academy and was a Governor at Palmer's College and Gateway Academy.

Reverend Barlow declared a non-pecuniary interest in the general business of the meeting as he had children attending St Thomas Primary School, Grays Convent and Palmer's College. He was also a trustee and corporation member at Palmer's College.

4. Budget Update and Savings Proposals

The Director of Children's Services introduced the report which set out the savings that the Council was required to make over the next three years. The Committee were advised of two key points:

- That a further £5.3 million of savings needed to be found during the 2015/16 financial year that went beyond the presented savings, as these were not yet the full set of savings.
- Officers had been working hard to put forward the proposed savings and include the appropriate level of detail for the Committee to scrutinise.

The Director of Children's Services drew the attention of the Committee to Appendix 1, which set out the totality of proposals, and explained that the first 3 savings proposals were those which Cabinet had requested be referred to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee for further consultation and scrutiny.

The Chair of the Committee proposed that officers explained in more detail the proposals set out in Appendices 2a, 2b and 2c for further comment and discussion, to which the Committee agreed.

Officers introduced the savings proposals outlined in appendix 2a in relation to School Effectiveness. It was reported that there had been a steady improvement in school performance over the past two years, as recognised by Ofsted, and that during this time there had been a gradual move in schools converting to academy status. As a result of these changes the school improvement strategy had also adjusted to a system of school to school support. It was explained that this meant that the Council was able to reduce the volume of resources which it commissioned directly, thereby saving on cost.

A Member questioned why the proposed savings were only being suggested now, one year on from the implementation of the school improvement plan and after a number of schools had successfully converted into academies. He felt that these savings could have been found and implemented earlier, noting the earlier February budget setting process.

In response officers explained that they had been working hard to support schools to become independent and that they worked with the whole community of Thurrock Schools, both maintained, free schools and

academies. The Director of Children's Services felt that sometimes better value for money could be achieved from smaller teams, which was the case with the School Improvement team, which had undertaken focussed work and witnessed school results in Thurrock go on an upward trajectory. It was reported that the team always worked hard to realise savings wisely and not resist them.

Officers further reported that the money had been used wisely and the number of primary schools in Thurrock that achieved a good or outstanding rating by Ofsted had increased from 32% to almost 70%.

The Committee were advised that the funding had been used to put Thurrock schools on a good footing, and that this meant that schools were now in a strong position to support each other.

A Member was concerned that money was being taken away from Children's Services and questioned where support would come from for Schools in the future. Officers acknowledged this concern but reassured the Committee that it was possible to scale back funding because Thurrock was in a strong position as a higher percentage of schools were now deemed to be 'Good' or better and therefore could offer support to other schools directly.

Concern was expressed by a Member regarding the proposed reduction of provision for Children's support services at Women's Aid refuge as this was a service that vulnerable families relied upon. The Chair clarified that this saving had been agreed by Cabinet and was for noting, but explained that there would be the opportunity to discuss this at the end of the item.

A Member echoed the sentiments outlined above, in that possibly these savings could have been found at an earlier date. However he commended the proposal and the fact that improvements had been made due to the work of the Education Commission. The Member particularly welcomed the move to a Commissioner model from a provider model and noted an example where a local school had commissioned work from another school which was both mutually beneficial and saved the Thurrock taxpayer money. The Director of Children's Services agreed that this was a helpful approach and one which had been put in place by the council over the last three years with the backing of schools.

It was further questioned what the effect would be on Special Educational Needs (SEN), the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and the schools ability to Commission specialist services such as psychological children's support.

The Committee were advised that schools already had the opportunity to commission specialist services such as the non- statutory elements of psychological support and that this was actively encouraged, however a small amount of Dedicated Schools Grant was retained centrally.

A Member expressed his disappointment that the Cabinet Member for Education was not in attendance to discuss the budget proposals.

Officers reiterated that the Council was committed to the vision of all Thurrock schools being judged as 'good' or 'outstanding'. Members were assured that despite cuts to centrally retained funds, schools would still have their own budgets. It was recognised that there were many good examples of school to school support, with head teachers sharing best practice, schools sharing School Governors and conducting joint reviews.

A Member echoed this good work and recognised that this was not a cut in the service but a change in the way the service was commissioned.

Officers introduced section 2b of the report, which was a piece of work that had been developed in partnership with the Cabinet Office, which outlined the realignment of Youth Provision and related services to a mutual or community interest company. Members were advised that:

- The proposal could attract more external funding and therefore was a way of protecting the service rather than necessarily reducing it.
- A research and benchmarking exercise had been undertaken with a local provider in another county, and that the new contract had income generation capabilities.
- The re-organisation of service would be a managed and staggered process.
- The proposal would be referred to Youth Cabinet for consultation, following which it would also go out for wider consultation with young people in Thurrock.
- The service was attempting to reduce the number of Council run buildings in order to maximise efficiency savings.

Members questioned whether the risks related to the reduction in front line services had been identified. In response, officers explained that this had not been detailed yet but further consultation would be undertaken with partners to evaluate take up in an attempt to mitigate the impact.

A Member sought for clarification regarding the 7.5 posts that had been identified for deletion, whether these related to a specific area and was at a manager or officer level. He was concerned that more could be done to offer reassurance and clarity to members of staff, who may have felt vulnerable as this information had been released into the public domain.

In response officers made the following key points:

- That although savings had to be made in this area, there was an element of flexibility on how many posts required to be cut. Staff may leave voluntarily, meaning redundancies may not have to be made, or if income was generated this may offset the costs of these posts.
- The 7.5 posts were evaluated at an average cost but this could be made up of a number of combinations at different management and officer levels.

- That job cuts would only be considered if absolutely necessary.

Youth Cabinet representatives asked whether the effects of the proposed service reduction had been measured and emphasised that the views of students were important as there may be services funded there were not popular with young people or underutilised. Officers stated that there would be a consultation with young people to consider their views and options going forward.

Some Members questioned why the service redesign was only just being considered and consulted upon, in Year 4 of the public account savings. Officers explained that they had been working on the proposals for some time with the Cabinet Office.

Members were keen that the results of the consultation should be reported back to the Committee, to which the Director of Children's Services agreed that this would be presented at a later date.

Officers then introduced appendix 2c of the report relating to the reduction in the cost of Community Library Provision. Key points to note were that:

- Closing some libraries or reducing library opening hours was a necessity if the required savings were to be found, however all options were being investigated to minimise the impact as far as possible on residents.
- The numbers of library staff had already been reduced to minimum levels due to previous budget cuts.
- It was intended that a number of options would be put forward for public consultation, based on focused research regarding footfall, numbers of books being loaned, profiles of library users.
- In areas where there was a lack of community resource, such as East Tilbury, provision would be examined closely.

A Member asked how these plans were influenced by community hubs, to which officers explained that residents would be involved in shaping their own services through the consultation and whether a library could save money by being located within a community hub. However Members were advised that this posed difficulties as community hubs did not have set budgets allocated to them.

Councillor Ojetola questioned how mobile libraries fit into the proposal, and asked what was being done to ensure residents did not become digitally excluded with the increasing number of council services being provided online.

Mrs Wilson left the meeting at 7.45pm.

The Committee were advised that a number of different options would be developed before this information would go out to public consultation.

Members were keen to see the full detail of the proposed options before the information was opened for public consultation, and the Director of Children's Services assured Members that this information would be referred back to the Committee for review.

A Member proposed that the Library Strategy should also come back to the Committee for review and comments, which was also agreed by the Director of Children's Services.

Some Members of the Committee expressed their disappointment that efficiency savings outlined in section 2 were only for noting, and that Cabinet had not provided the Committee with the opportunity to scrutinise and contribute before their decision had been taken.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the comments detailed above with regard to the savings proposals within Children's Services be noted.**
- 2. That the Director of Children's Services to refer back to the Committee a full options analysis of Community Library Provision prior to the information being released for public consultation.**
- 3. That the Committee agree to receive a report at a later date on the outcomes of the consultation on Youth Provision in Thurrock.**

5. Education Commission Update

Officers introduced the report which outlined the developments regarding the Education Commission and provided an update to the associated action plan. Key achievements to date included:

- The launch of the Thurrock Education Awards, the next was scheduled for November and nominations were already being received.
- Success in recruiting and retaining both Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT) and experienced Head teachers in Thurrock.
- Strong Governance was a significant feature in Education Commission reports.

A Member questioned what support was being offered to schools and academy partners if they experienced a change in circumstances. Officers assured the Committee that the Local Authority was responsible for safeguarding in Thurrock, even though academies were self governing, and offered support as and when required. It was felt that there was strong local intelligence in Thurrock to schools changing circumstances.

Councillor Morris-Cook arrived at 8.05pm.

A Member referenced the financial implications and welcomed the fact that the Council had committed £1 million of reserves to support the Education Commission, but asked for clarification regarding accountability and sign off as to how the money was spent.

The Committee were advised that the Thurrock Education Alliance and Thurrock Excellence Network held into account the spending of reserves that supported the work of the Education Commission.

A Member suggested that a regular back check should be undertaken to ensure value for money and evaluate the impact of the work. Officers welcomed the proposal and stated that a regular update would be provided to the Committee, particularly in relation to the spending of the funds and achievements. It was reported that the funding had already made significant progress to date, which included:

- The introduction of the Cultural Entitlement for Young People in Thurrock.
- The recruitment and retention of teachers.

A brief discussion was had on the recruitment and retention of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT's) and how this compared with other local authorities. Officers stated that there was an event held recently to celebrate the achievements of NQT's in Thurrock and that the vast majority were staying on in employment in the Borough. It was felt that the retention rate was very good and that NQT's had a positive impact to education in Thurrock.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the progress and achievements of Thurrock Schools and Partners be noted.**
- 2. That the Committee's comments on the content of the report be noted and that a further update to be provided on the statement of drawn down funds from the Education Commission reserves.**

Councillor Morris-Cook took the position of Chair for the remainder of the meeting.

6. Troubled Families Programme

Officers introduced the report which provided an update on the successes of the Troubled Families Programme.

A Member asked whether officers faced any difficulties, particularly in relation to data security, to which officers stated that they did not as applicants signed consent forms to release their personal information.

The Committee were informed that to date all cases that had been referred had been accepted into the Troubled Families Programme.

A brief discussion was had on the success of the payment by results scheme. Members were advised that it took time for the payment by results scheme to filter through, and that there was a 3 term timescale for education cases and 6 months for youth offending cases before claims can be made.

The Committee requested that a bi-monthly update be provided by briefing note as to the progress of the Troubled Families programme, the success of the payment by results scheme and any support that officers felt that was required in order to assist them in the ongoing development of the programme.

Members commended the work of officers on the excellent report and work that had been undertaken.

A Member acknowledged the good work of the Committee but asked if residents were discouraged from coming forward to receive support because of the name of Troubled Families scheme. Officers stated that in their experience this was not the case in Thurrock and that people had not been deterred in coming forward, noting that there had recently been 3 self referrals.

A Member requested that in future the financial implications should not be included within the main body of the report, to which officers agreed.

Rev Barlow left the meeting at 8.32pm.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be noted.

7. Work Programme

Members requested that the two parent governor representative vacancies on the Committee to be filled as soon as possible, to which officers confirmed that the Governor Services team were working to appoint to the roles.

There was a brief discussion on work placements and the pathway into work for young people in Thurrock, following which Members requested that an item be added to the work programme for October. Key points that were discussed included:

- Interview techniques and guidance for young people
- Pathway into employment in Thurrock
- Work placements scheme and the schools offer
- The business offer – what local companies were doing to assist young people in Thurrock.
- That with increased education attainment and regeneration schemes creating a wider jobs market in Thurrock, how these opportunities were being realised by young people.

Members also requested that in future budget items to include details of budget outturn for the previous financial year in order for comparisons to be made.

The Chair also requested that in future items 'to note' to be provided in the form of a briefing note to the Committee, rather than a formal report and agenda item.

RESOLVED:

1. That an additional item on work placements and the pathway into work for Young People be added to the work programme for October.
2. That the work programme be noted.

The meeting finished at 8.50 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk