



Buckinghamshire County Council

Minutes

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

AGENDA ITEM: 3

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES HELD ON THURSDAY 15 SEPTEMBER 2005, IN MEZZANINE ROOMS 1 AND 2, COUNTY HALL, AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT 9.50AM AND CONCLUDING AT 1.32PM.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr D Anson MBE (for part), Mr D Carroll, Mr C Ditta, Mr P Hardy, Mr N Hussain, Mrs B Jennings (Chairman), Mr A Oxley, Mr D Polhill, Mr P Rogerson (Vice-Chairman), Mr P Smith, Mr F Sweatman, Mr D Watson and Mrs C Willetts.

CO-OPTED MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr D Ashburner, Mrs A Howe, Mr P Monk and Mr M Moore.

OFFICERS PRESENT

Mr S Bagnall, Mrs J Burke, Mr R Edwards, Mrs D Munday, Mr N Powley and Mrs C Street.

GUEST SPEAKER

Jacky Tiotto - Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies were received from Mrs M Baldwin and Mrs L Clarke. Mr A Oxley substituted for Mrs M Baldwin for the duration of the meeting.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members disclosed the following personal interests:

Mr M Moore as an independent appeal panel member and governor of St Bernards School.

Mrs A Howe as an independent appeal panel member and governor of Beaconsfield High School.

Mr D Polhill as a governor of East Claydon School.

Mr P Rogerson as a governor of Princes Risborough School and St John's School.

Mr D Ashburner as a governor of Maplewood School.

Mr C Ditta as a governor of Highcrest Community School.

Mr F Sweatman as a governor of Burford School and Sir William Borlase School.

Mrs B Jennings as a governor of Aylesbury Grammar School, Furzedown Special School, Cottlesloe School and Aylesbury College, and with a grandchild who would shortly be taking the 11+ test.

Mr D Anson MBE as of governor of Holy Trinity School.

3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Children's Services held on 14 July 2005, were agreed as a correct record, subject to the inclusion in the list of apologies of Mr P Hardy.

Volunteers were still required for membership of the Performance Management Working Group. Those interested were asked to contact the Chairman or the Policy Officer.

Members were introduced to Jane Burke who would be providing support to the OSC at future meetings, as Policy Officer. Jane was welcomed to the meeting.

4. DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S SERVICES - APPROACHES TO SCRUTINISING THE NEW CHILDREN'S SERVICES AGENDA

Jacky Tiotta from the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) was welcomed to the meeting. Jacky gave a presentation on ideas and approaches to scrutinising the new agenda. A copy of the presentation was distributed at the meeting and can be accessed via the following link:

http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/cabinet_papers/overview_childrens_services/ch_20_050915_agenda.htm

During the course of the presentation, members identified possible priorities for scrutinising children's services as follows:

- Ensure Buckinghamshire children are cared for and are given equal opportunities
- Ensure the well being of children and that they have a safe environment
- Ensure the 26 actions from the key outcomes in the Every Child Matters programme are being carried out (members noted the need for 'measurable objectives')
- Review the LEA system
- Implement a robust system of partnership with stakeholders
- Keep informed of Every Child Matters key legislation
- Monitor the School Admissions Policy
- Develop methods for acting on the needs of children
- Ensure all Buckinghamshire schools are serving children well
- Ensure that there is a good structure in the Children and Families Service
- Put in place measures to raise attainment levels in schools for low achievers.

In scrutinising the new agenda, Jacky stressed the importance of establishing how the OSC would go about examining evidence from the County that it was achieving its goals. The Annual Performance Assessment (APA) would be a crucial document for the OSC as it would contain the priorities for Buckinghamshire. The Authority would need a good Joint Assessment Review (JAR) and APA to score well in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).

A member raised the issue of problems caused to the Authority by having so many inspections imposed on it. Jacky replied that the inspections should help to maximise

services. The inspectors would want to know what *difference* services were making to a child, and if services were being based on community needs.

Members discussed the funding for the new children's services agenda. They were advised that the partner agencies would all need to contribute to a 'whole envelope' of funding to ensure the adequate provision of services.

A member referred to the need for more affordable housing for key workers. Jacky advised that this could be one of the areas that the OSC could examine. The same member also referred to the challenge of finding easily the information required by inspectors, and asked how the OSC would be able to view its performance against comparators. Jacky acknowledged the need to improve information flows, adding that this was likely to become more difficult once services were integrated. Regarding comparators, the Audit Commission had stated that there would be four tranches of inspection and they would publish results at the end of each if these.

During the course of her discussion with members, Jacky had referred to a pilot taking place in Hertfordshire regarding scrutiny of the new agenda. The Children, Schools and Families Scrutiny Committee in Hertfordshire was going to be re-constructed to include co-opted members from the statutory partners, and the work would be taken forward through topic groups who would undertake approximately three reviews during the course of a year. Members were keen to be kept informed of the progress with the pilot.

A member stressed his view that encompassing the nine partners would be crucial to the work of the OSC. It was noted that schools were not represented amongst the partners but it would be imperative to include them in the scrutiny process. Jacky suggested that the OSC could look at the governance and accountability of children's services with partners, and then discuss how to involve schools.

A member referred to the important role played by Health Visitors and School Nurses in the general well being of children, and of the importance of enlisting their support within the new agenda. Jacky advised that they could be involved by forming part of a multi-agency team or be represented in the new extended schools. The role of the OSC could be to examine what local manifestations there were in Bucks for the involvement of these types of agencies.

A member referred to the difficulty of establishing the outcomes for scrutiny work. Jacky advised that there had been concern at the time of modernization regarding the role of non-executive members in the new arrangements, but recent evidence suggested that OSCs were making a difference and in fact were becoming a critical resource. The OSC should ensure that its workload was manageable and relevant in order to produce the best outcomes.

Jacky concluded by emphasising the need to establish local needs, which should be reflected in the Children Plan. It would not be possible for the OSC to look at all of the new agenda, all of the time, but members should consider examining:

- Governance
- Strategy
- Processes
- The frontline
- The difference made to young people.

Jacky was thanked for her useful and informative presentation.

5. SCHOOL ADMISSIONS POLICY

The Chairman introduced this item by welcoming members of the public to the meeting. She explained the role of the Committee in scrutinising admissions throughout the county as a whole. The Chairman explained that the Cabinet Member and Strategic Director for Schools were unable to attend the meeting due to other commitments. Members expressed disappointment that they were not able to attend. One member in particular had been assured of their attendance following the submission of a petition to the Cabinet Member on this subject.

Members received a report and presentation by Nick Powley, Head of Policy, Planning and Performance (Schools), which updated members on how the revised admissions policy had worked.

Nick advised that extensive consultation had taken place with governing bodies and parents on secondary school admission arrangements in 2003 and this was reflected in the admission arrangements introduced for admissions in September 2005. A further change to secondary admission arrangements had been made for September 2006 through a Cabinet Member decision to add Burnham Grammar School as a third catchment school for children in area 11. The Cabinet Member report had recommended that this situation be reviewed after one year. Although the initial principle had been to limit the number of catchment areas available to parents, this decision had been taken to maximise the opportunities for children in that area to be offered a catchment area school, following representations about the impact of the admission arrangements in area 11. The changes made as a result of the Cabinet Member decision were considered for legal implications and conformed with the requirements of the Code of Practice for Admissions. Consultation had not taken regarding this change, as it arose out of representations that had been made and due to time constraints relating to the requirement to determine admission arrangements.

The officer advised that the possible changes to the admissions policy outlined in the paper might lead to changes in patterns of parental choice. Furthermore, impact of the possible changes would need to be modelled. This would need to be a paper exercise as the Council did not currently have the software to model these. The Officer advised that he could pursue this matter with the IT supplier, if the Committee favoured taking this option forward, and let members know the outcome. A member of the Committee agreed that rigorous modelling was required to help inform the process.

The same member raised objection to the way in which the process had been progressed, noting that although an enquiry had been called for, this had not taken place.

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Ingrid Gamble, Parent Representative, to the meeting. Mrs Gamble had been given permission to speak by the Chairman. Mrs Gamble gave a presentation to members, which contained various data, provided by the Council, concerning the numbers of places allocated to children in 2005 in the Gerrards Cross and Denham area. The key points of her presentation are summarised below:

- Parents supported the principle of keeping communities together, however assurances given to parents concerns regarding area 11 during the original consultation period had not been met.

- The Review process for Appeals had been discontinued and the Appeals process brought forward, which had led to a significant number of extra children looking for places at a particular time, creating pressure on the number of available places in area 11.
- A number of out of county children had qualified in the 11+ test and the application of the distance criteria was unfairly prejudicing children in the Gerrards Cross and Denham area, as they did not have a grammar school within a reasonable distance.
- Withdrawing free travel to Dr Challenor's School had caused further problems to parents who might now also have to go through a Transport Appeal.
- Parents had not received a formal acknowledgement in response to a petition submitted to the Cabinet Member for Schools on this subject.

Mrs Gamble concluded by stating that application of the distance criteria had proved devastating to some children and parents within the Gerrards Cross and Denham area. Parents in that area felt let down by the review, particularly as they had received assurances that their original fears that changes might prove detrimental to their choice of catchment school were unfounded. Mrs Gamble stated the importance of community leaders listening to the concerns of residents and admitting where processes had not worked well. Mrs Gamble expressed disappointment that she did not have more time to address members. The Chairman confirmed that she had been allowed to speak for fifteen minutes.

A member suggested that the Cabinet Member for Schools should provide a written response to matters raised in Mrs Gamble's presentation.

A member queried the use of the distance criteria instead of only using the highest 11+ scores. Nick Powley informed him that this was the process that had been endorsed unanimously by the County Council; members could have chosen to use the highest scores instead. Using the highest scores alone might also have implications for admissions. The main aim had been to put a process in place that was clear, fair and objective.

Regarding Appeals Panels, it was noted that members of the panels were independent, and were given appropriate training, which included an awareness of the admissions arrangements. It had been decided that there could be a number of reasons why children might not perform well on the day of the 11+ test and these reasons should be explored in an effort to be as fair to the child as possible. It was important that panel members were given as much pertinent information as possible in order that they could make good decisions on individual cases. Members noted that lists of suitability were going to be reintroduced for panel members next year.

Nick Powley informed members that reports had been received of some parents using false addresses to try and obtain places for their child at their preferred schools. In these circumstances offers of places were suspended until an investigation had been carried out. Following investigation a number of places had been reinstated.

Mrs Gamble asked the officer if he was confident that the situation within the Gerrards Cross and Denham area would not arise again. He responded that although the Authority was addressing the points raised, he could not guarantee that it would

not happen again. However, he stressed that adding the Burnham School to the catchment area should help to ensure places for children in that area. The officer added that it was not possible to guarantee that all children in Buckinghamshire would get their preferred choice. Mrs Gamble stated her interpretation that once children were turned down for their preferred choice, they had no protection from out of county children who might subsequently be offered places. Members felt that time allowing, there should be consultation regarding adding the Burnham School to the catchment areas for Gerrards Cross and Denham.

The Vice-Chairman thanked both Nick Powley and Mrs Gamble for their presentations. He reiterated the point that the OSC had to look at admissions for the County as a whole. He stated that the admissions arrangements were largely successful but that there did appear to be some anomalies that required further examination and that consultation was important to ensure that parents were furnished with the correct information prior to any decision being made on the allocation of catchment schools. Generally main issues appeared to be with capacity and flexibility. Regarding the matter of capacity, Nick Powley advised that the Admissions Authority had a duty to make the best use of resources. There was capacity for places overall, but not in certain schools, and therefore some people would always feel disadvantaged.

A member queried if the Cabinet Member report concerning the revised admissions arrangements had followed due process. Mrs Gamble felt that this had not been the case. It was agreed that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services would be requested to write a report on this subject.

The same member asked Nick Powley if he had examined another option raised by parents in the Denham area. He responded that he looked at this, but was not in a position to put it forward, since the outcome was not predictable. He had taken into account trend data and historical data when looking at how best to find places for children in their catchment schools. He expressed his view that he had tried to keep people informed and explain the changes. He agreed that it had not been a popular decision as far as some people in Denham and Gerrards Cross were concerned, but given the timing involved, had seemed to be a reasonable answer, at least in the short term, to concerns regarding securing places at the catchment schools.

A member made reference to the number of excellent upper schools that existed in Buckinghamshire.

The Chairman advised members of the OSC that this matter would need to be looked at again by the Committee. Members agreed the following:

- The subject should be brought back to the November meeting of the OSC for Children's Services.
- The draft minutes from the current meeting should be submitted to the next meeting of the Admissions Forum.
- A report from the Head of Legal and Democratic Services should be produced concerning due process for the Cabinet Member decision on admissions arrangements. This should be combined with the possibility of consultation with parents regarding adding the Burnham School to the catchment areas for Gerrards Cross and Denham.

- Any response to Mrs Gamble from the Cabinet Member should be circulated to members of the OSC.
- Members endorsed paragraphs 14 and 15 of the Head of Policy, Planning and Performance (Schools), which were as follows:

Paragraph 14

'For 2007 it would be possible to review catchment areas, where particular pressure was experienced this year and/or next year. This might include providing each Buckinghamshire resident with a single upper and grammar catchment area school to reduce the number of shared catchment areas. It would be important to model the impact of any changes.'

Paragraph 15

'For admissions in 2007/2008 it would be possible to prioritise admissions to the nearest catchment area school. This would, however, require public consultation within those areas currently being served by two schools' catchment areas. This will, however, require new software and this may not be available immediately.'

6. DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S SERVICES (EVERY CHILD MATTERS)

Members agreed to defer this item.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 13 October 2005, 10.00am, Mezzanine Room 1, County Hall, Aylesbury.

CHAIRMAN