



Buckinghamshire County Council
Select Committee
Education, Skills and Children's Services

Minutes

EDUCATION, SKILLS AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE EDUCATION, SKILLS AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON TUESDAY 10 DECEMBER 2013, IN BOOKER PARK TRAINING ROOM, BOOKER PARK SCHOOL, STOKE LEYS CLOSE, KYNASTON AVENUE, AYLESBURY, BUCKS HP21 9ET, COMMENCING AT 10.00 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.30 PM.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Dev Dhillon (Vice-Chairman), Paul Irwin, Valerie Letheren (Chairman), Wendy Mallen, Mark Shaw, Robin Stuchbury and Katrina Wood

CO-OPTED MEMBERS PRESENT

David Babb and Rebecca Burchell

GUESTS PRESENT

Mike Appleyard, Avril Davies and Raza Khan

OFFICERS PRESENT

Michael Carr and Chris Munday

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies of absence were received from Margaret Aston, John Chilver, Michael Moore, Ruth Vigor-Hedderly, Chris Adams and Monique Nowers.

Members observed a 1 min silence in respect of Nelson Mandela.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 23 October 2013 were agreed as a correct record.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been received.

5 CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The Chairman said that the period since the last full Select Committee on 23 October had been very busy with both in-depth Scrutiny Inquiries receiving evidence from a wide range of stakeholders and building links with stakeholders forums within the education sector. These included the following:

- Site visit to ERCOL furniture company – 24th October 2013 - Young People Ready for Work Inquiry (YPRfW)
- Interview with Mr Alex Pratt – Chairman of the Local Enterprise Partnership, Paula Buck, Adam Johnson – 25th October 2013(YPRfW)
- Meeting with Imran Khan – young person – 29th October 2013 (Young People and Democracy)
- Interview with Cllr Mike Appleyard – Cabinet Member for Education and Skills and Sue Imbriano – Strategic Director Children and Young People – 31st October (YPRfW)
- Hilda Stearn, Interim General Secretary, Wycombe Youth Action, 7th November 2013 (YPRfW) & Narrowing the Gap Inquiry (NtG)
- Janice Saunders from Parents as First Teachers 7th November 2013 (NtG)
- Early Intervention Conference – 13th November 2013 – lots of material, some of which should help to inform the evidence base for scrutiny inquiries next year
- Primary Executive Board – 18th November 2013 (Narrowing the Gap)
- BASH – 20th November 2013 (Narrowing the Gap)
- Mike Sheridan HMI and Christine Raeside HMI , OFSTED – 21st November 2013 (Narrowing the Gap)
- Westminster Employment Forum Seminar - Young people's readiness for work – 26th November 2013 (YPRfW)
- The Academies Show – 27th November 2013
- Interviewing Lucy Pike and Emily Dover – Duke of Edinburgh Awards – 28th November (YPRfW)
- Schools Forum – 3rd November 2013
- Interview with Bob Harrison – Delivery Director, Connexions and John Everson – Commissioner, CYPS, BCC- 5th December 2013
- Bucks Association of School Governors – 7th December 2013 (School Governance)
- Meeting with Angela Macpherson – Cabinet Member for Children's Services – 9th December 2013 (yesterday) – update on key issues within the Children's Services Portfolio.
- This afternoon (10th December 2013) – Prof .Dylan Wiliam of the Education Endowment Foundation -Penny Todd – Head Teacher of the Virtual School.

She said that she had also attended conferences on the education and children's services sector with the Policy Officer.

The Chairman thanked the Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher and staff at Booker Park School for the tour of the schools facilities Members had received before the meeting.

The Chairman highlighted that the Budget papers had been released in the 9 December 2013 paperwork. She said that the Select Committee Chairmen would be involved in scrutinising the budgets relevant to their Select Committee and said that if Members had any views on the budget proposals to feed them to her.

6 COMMITTEE MEMBER UPDATES

There was nothing to update.

7 NARROWING THE GAP SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY

The Committee received oral evidence from Mr Mike Appleyard, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, Mr Chris Munday, Service Director, Learning, Skills and Prevention and Mr Raza Khan, Chief Executive of the Bucks Learning Trust.

Mr Appleyard asked the Chairman about the progress of the Select Committee Inquiry. The Chairman advised that Members had developed a good relationship with Mr Khan, Chief Executive of the Bucks Learning Trust, spoken to Headteachers, produced and distributed a questionnaire for completion by Headteachers and Governors and Members would be meeting with Mr Appleyard in the New Year.

The Chairman asked the Cabinet Member to provide a summary of his views and the current situation and approach for narrowing the gap in Buckinghamshire. Mr Appleyard said that in terms of narrowing the gap the Local Authority (LA) needs to understand what factors influence the gap in the first place. He said there is a strong message that children need to be school ready by the age of 5, which he said is part of a longer term plan to improve the outcomes for children in Buckinghamshire.

Mr Appleyard said that Buckinghamshire was different to other LAs as Buckinghamshire had retained its Children Centres whereas other LAs had closed them. Children Centres were part of the Council's long term plan in focusing on the children and parents who required the most support. He said that activities outside the classroom have a large impact on learning and closing the gap. Children should therefore be encouraged to take part in other activities outside of school.

Mr Appleyard discussed the Families First project, which he said was a targeted project, the aim of which was to have a longer term outcome for children and families and narrow the gap.

Mr Appleyard stressed the importance of early intervention and working with children in the Early Years. He said that if a child was behind early on, it was likely that they would get further behind as time went on and the gap would increase. It was therefore important that the gap be closed in the Early Years or Primary School stages.

Members then asked questions. The questions and answers are summarised below:

There is tremendous insecurity about the future of Children Centres. Do you have the budget going forward for Children Centres?

All services which the Council provides are reviewed and improved constantly. Children Centres were set up to engage and support parents to ensure the children are ready for school. It is important that the service becomes even more targeted to those parents who really need the support.

Will the location of the Children Centres change?

The time frame to implement Children Centres was short. Whilst they were originally set up in areas with the greatest need, this may need to be reviewed again.

Children Centres may identify children's needs; but they can also provide support to parents. Children Centres provide an opportunity to support parents to improve their basic skills. If parents do not have basic skills then it is unlikely their children will either.

It appears that affluent, educated parents attend some Children Centres. How can you target parents who attend Children Centres to ensure you attract the people who need to attend?

It is a statutory requirement that Children Centres are a universal service for all. You cannot say who can attend and who shouldn't - affluent parents can have issues as well. There does however need to be some more work carried out on effectively targeting groups to try and ensure time is spent with vulnerable families.

How important do you view outside activities?

There is research evidence which looks at the school holidays and suggests that the schools holidays are the biggest cause of the attainment gap. Some families attend a huge range of activities during the holidays, where others do not. There is a question whether the Council should support schools with summer schools.

Mr Munday said that he believed that school holidays and the early years offer were key issues. He said it was important not to focus on one indicator such as 'narrowing the gap'. He said if you looked at some of the worst performing schools they could have a low gap because they are low performing. Mr Munday said careful consideration of the data was needed when looking at narrowing the gap. Assumptions should not be made of particular schools as the highest performing schools could also have the biggest gap.

Mr Khan thanked the Committee for the work they had been undertaking on narrowing the gap and advised that the Bucks Learning Trust (BLT) were also undertaking work in this area. Mr Khan advised that the Oxford Trust had been commissioned to undertake a piece of work before the BLT had been set up. Mr Khan said he would be happy to share the report with the Committee when received.

Mr Khan advised that there were funds set aside to fund a project to determine the strategy to oversee the narrowing the gap agenda. A two year plan will be presented to the Commissioner (Mr Munday) early next term. The BLT will be held to account through the Commissioning process. Mr Khan said that it may not be possible to impact every child but that teaching and learning needs to be focussed. Work will be carried out with schools to make better use of Pupil Premium funding.

Members then asked additional questions. The questions and answers are summarised below:

How can you ensure that the parents who need interventions access them?

This is easier with the Children Centres as there is the ability to engage with parents in a variety of ways such as home visits. There may be a need to consider how we change our services. Services are often created in an environment that we ourselves would feel comfortable in, which may not be right for disaffected parents.

When do you expect to receive the report from Oxford University and what prompted you to ask Oxford University to undertake this piece of work?

Oxford University has been commissioned for the work as they have a huge range of experience. Professor Strand who is overseeing the research is an expert in this field. It is a quantitative piece of work and looking at data over the last 5 years for patterns. The final report is expected in the New Year which can be shared with the Committee.

Will the report be frank?

The report will be a factual report. The gap is not the same across Buckinghamshire and there are some particular dynamics which we want to understand.

Has any work been done to profile the work going on in schools and share best practice?

The BLT has been looking at best practice. We want to look at schools outperforming their peers.

Has any work been done to correlate educational attainment and relative deprivation and benchmarked nationally or is that what Professor Strand will pick up on?

We would need to know what you mean about relative deprivation. If this could be clarified a written response could be provided.

Of the schools with the highest cohort of Pupil Premium eligible pupils, do we know which have the narrowest attainment gap and how have they been able to achieve this?

There is a map of all Primary and Secondary schools and their gaps. The map doesn't correlate with things you would think. Some lowest achieving schools have the lowest gap, some schools have no gap at all. We are looking at the characteristic of those schools which are going against the trend.

What percentage of Pupil Premium pupils qualify for the 11 plus exam and get a grammar school place? How does this compare with non Pupil Premium eligible pupils? (what is the gap?)

A written response will be provided.

To what extend do you think that Pupil Premium eligible pupils raised to just 'average' attainment at primary school level, contributes to the gap of the number of Pupil Premium eligible pupils passing the 11 plus exam and entering grammar schools?

A written response will be provided.

Has any work been done to help higher achieving primary school pupils eligible for Pupil Premium to raise attainment to pass the 11 plus exam to get into grammar school?

A written response will be provided.

Is there information regarding pupil attendance? This must be one of the main factors to impact achievement. If a pupil is not at school they won't learn.

Even that information is variable. There are some affluent parents who take their children out of school for holidays and other activities. It is not as simple as just not attending.

What evidence is there that the attainment gap reflects the socio-economic gap?

A written response will be provided.

There are a number of pieces of work carried out by the Sutton Trust. The LA does not hold data on 11 plus as this is now carried out by the schools.

There is a focus on early intervention and getting to children earlier. Is there any work being carried out with pre-school children?

The Children Centres is the only contact with parents pre-birth, although Children Centres are more concerned with parenting. The pre-birth stage is crucial and it is a struggle for the LA to obtain information about who is having or who has had a baby in Buckinghamshire due to Data Protection legislation.

From pre-birth to age 5, childminders and pre-schools are the main points of contact with families and this is an area the Council is anxious to improve.

RESOLVED

That the oral evidence received be noted as evidence

8 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN)

The Committee received oral evidence from Mr Mike Appleyard, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, Mr Chris Munday, Service Director, Learning, Skills and Prevention and Mr Raza Khan, Chief Executive of the Bucks Learning Trust. Policy Briefings on the new draft SEN code of practice were also considered.

The Chairman invited Mr Munday to introduce the SEN item including the local and national context. He advised that the Portfolio had been reviewing SEN provision. He said that there were a high number of children with statements and particular needs which needed to be addressed. A review was commissioned in conjunction with the Schools Forum.

Mr Munday said that following the review and changes from government a range of changes had been undertaken in relation to SEN provision. He said that there was also less need for statements now as budgets were already with the schools. There had also been consideration of whether the needs to children could be met without the bureaucracy of a statement.

Mr Munday highlighted that the Local Authority (LA) has to provide services until the child reaches the 25 years of age. The LA is also required to publish a local offer and the LA needs to develop a Health and Care Programme. Mr Munday said that it was critical that parental confidence is maintained following any changes.

The Committee was informed that a new head of SEN had recently been appointed and that they would take up their post in January 2014. Ms Jenny Pearce had previously held the position and there had been a gap since she left.

Members then asked questions. The questions and answers are summarised below:

Will Kiteridge take over from Alfriston Special School?

Kiteridge is an alternative provision and is a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) rather than a school. The opening of Kiteridge will have no impact on Alfriston.

Children who attend a SEN school seem to have diverse needs from emotional difficulties to significant physical difficulties.

We have worked hard to ensure that all schools can accommodate children with wheelchairs etc. It is a difficult task to find the best place for children to achieve the best outcomes for them individually.

How will Tribunals and Mitigation work under the draft SEN Code of Practice in Bucks?

Parents are often advised to appeal to a tribunal, when it should be a partnership approach. This is a fundamental problem with the current system. Under the draft code there is a requirement to consider Mediation. Tribunals however will be given more powers to challenge the system. If people aren't confident that they will get what they want they are ready to go down the legal route.

Home to School Transport appears to be an issue for SEN children with some children travelling for longer than an hour. It is appreciated that home to school transport is a huge cost but will you be reviewing SEN transport?

Out of the £18m home to school transport budget, £6m is spent on home to school transport for SEN children. The £6m spend relates to approximately 1500 children at an average cost of £4000 per child. The rate of the cost has to be reviewed.

When would be a good time to speak to you again about the home to school transport issue?

The new Head of SEN starts in January 2014; perhaps she could be invited to the April Committee meeting.

RESOLVED

That the written and oral evidence received be noted as evidence

9 STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF COUNCILS AND COUNCILLORS IN THE LOCAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

The Committee received oral evidence from Ms Avril Davies, Chairman of the Learning New Ways (LNW), (Academies and the Local Authority) Scrutiny Review (2012) and Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) Advisor, Mr Mike Appleyard, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, Mr Chris Munday, Service Director, Learning, Skills and Prevention and Mr Raza Khan, Chief Executive of the Bucks Learning Trust. The Committee also considered a report from the Strategic Director for Children and Young People.

Members had also received a report on the Strengthening the Role of Councils and Councillors in the Local School System published by the CfPS.

Ms Davies advised that the LNW Scrutiny Review had considered how the County Council was meeting the challenge on the changes to the relationship between the Local Education Authority (LEA) and schools. The Scrutiny Review made recommendations to Cabinet such as ensuring a Select Committee be updated on the operation of the BLT, to keep a watching brief on the Fair Access Board and guidance be produced on the role of the Councillor.

It was suggested that all County Councillors should contact the Headteachers of schools in their division, although it was commented that some Headteachers may see this as a 'political' interference. In response it was highlighted that Councillors needed to build relationships of trust with Headteachers. Ms Davies suggested that the Member Development Working Group could look at supporting Members in relating to their local schools. Ms Davies said that it was important for the Local Member to build a good relationship with Headteachers within their division as residents often approach the Local Member with issues and the Local Member often acts as the conduit between the resident and the school.

Mr Appleyard commented that it would be helpful for each Councillor to have contact details of all public service organisations within their divisions such as libraries, care homes and schools. Mr Appleyard said that in relation to schools a weekly email to all Councillors was being introduced. He said that the email would identify all the schools which Ofsted had inspected in the last week. He highlighted that Ofsted do not notify the Council when they are publishing their reports but that it was usually 4-6 weeks after they had visited a school. Mr Appleyard suggested that if a Councillor had been notified that Ofsted had visited a school within their division they could check the Ofsted website regularly for the full Ofsted report.

Mr Appleyard said that he had received comments about whether Councillors should sit on an Interim Executive Board or be a Member of the BLT. He said he believed that Councillors should not be Members of these but should be able to call the Members of these into account.

Members then asked questions. The questions and answers are summarised below:

Now that the Local Authority commissions most services to schools from the BLT, and given that many schools opt for alternative provision, to what extent should the Local Authority offer an approved list of alternative suppliers?

It is not commercial practice for a company to offer a list of competitors to their suppliers. The BLT does however offer a brokerage service of 200-300 providers which schools can access.

Do we routinely receive – and analyse - customer feedback from schools and governors on services provided to schools by the Local Authority and BLT? What are the key strengths and weaknesses?

All services review their quality. However there are some services which are about challenges such as School Improvement. Schools may be being held to account when they do not necessarily want to be. Schools do have a statutory duty around standards and the Council will hold schools to account.

The LA has worked with governing bodies and this is an area where the Local Councillor does have a role. There is a template for the Headteacher report which governors are encouraged to use. The template covers the key measures that Ofsted and the LA look at when monitoring outcomes at the school. The Local Member needs to understand the template and ensure it is used. The template is challenging the Headteacher and they may not like this but it is the role of the Local Councillor.

Mr Appleyard said he acknowledged communication needed to be improved and that as of 1st January 2014 a weekly email would be sent to Councillors. Mr Appleyard said that if Members had any feedback in relation to information they wanted or suggestions for improvements to let him know. He commented that there would be some issues with schools which the Local Member should not be involved with but that these would be discussed on an individual basis with the Local Member should a situation arise.

RESOLVED

That the written and oral evidence received be noted as evidence and that the Member Development Working Group be asked to consider producing guidance on the role of the County Councillor and a list of contact details for each County Councillor of all public service organisations within their divisions such as libraries, care homes and schools.

10 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered a report from the Scrutiny Policy Officer on the detailed Annual Committee Work Programme 2013-2014.

The Chairman advised that Internet Safety (including 'Cyber Bullying') had been added to the Committee's work programme following the suggestion by the Cabinet Member for Children Services and agreed at the last meeting. The Chairman advised that the Cabinet Member for Children Services had been invited to the next meeting to answer questions from the Committee on the issue.

RESOLVED

That the agreed Education, Skills and Children's Services Committee Work Programme be noted.

11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Members noted the next meeting of the Education, Skills and Children's Services Select Committee on 18 February 2014, 10am, Mezz room 2, County Hall, Aylesbury.

CHAIRMAN