

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 22 APRIL 2014, IN MEZZANINE ROOM 2, COUNTY HALL, AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT 10.01 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.15 PM.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Chris Adams, Margaret Aston, Dev Dhillon (Vice-Chairman), Paul Irwin, Valerie Letheren (Chairman), Mark Shaw, Robin Stuchbury and Katrina Wood

CO-OPTED MEMBERS PRESENT

Michael Moore and Monique Nowers

GUESTS PRESENT

Bill Bendyshe-Brown and Avril Davies

OFFICERS PRESENT

Michael Carr, Nicola Cook, Sarah Holding, Amanda Hopkins, Raza Khan, Chris Munday, Laura Nankin, Joy Shakespeare, Yvette Thomas and Vivian Trundell

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from David Babb, John Chilver, Wendy Mallen and Mike Appleyard, the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Margaret Aston declared an interest as she was a member of the Corporate Parenting Panel and she sits on the Fostering Panel. Katrina Wood also declared an interest as a member of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

3 MINUTES





The minutes of the meeting held on 25th March 2014 were confirmed as a correct record subject to the following slight amendments:

Raza Khan and Amanda Hopkins to be included as present at the meeting at the start of the minutes and Chris Adams to be recorded as giving apologies.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

The Chairman explained that Mr Andy Hudson, who was a member of the Parent and Teachers Association for the High Wycombe Music Centre had asked to put a question to the meeting. As he was unable to attend, Mrs Ellen Southall and her daughter, Anne-Marie who is a student at the Music Centre came to the meeting in his place. The Chairman explained that Mrs Southall would have four minutes to put her question to the Committee. Usually the Cabinet Member would then be given four minutes in which to respond, but unfortunately as Mr Appleyard had given his apologies and would not be attending the meeting, on this occasion there would instead be a written response.

Mrs Southall explained that she wanted to raise concerns about the proposed restructuring of the Bucks Music Service and the implications of this for the High Wycombe Music Centre, which her daughter attends. Parents were concerned that the proposed new structure would not be viable, that key senior staff will be lost and this will affect the quality of the output of the centre. Currently High Wycombe Music Centre has an excellent reputation, often winning national awards. Parents were also concerned that if staff were made redundant, they may then choose to contract directly with schools to offer tuition, which would ultimately lead to a loss in revenue for the Bucks Learning Trust.

To date the consultation has been limited to staff only and Mrs Southall wished to request that the consultation should be widened in order to include users of the service, so that students and parents could contribute. There was also concern that no-one appeared to have visited the music centre ahead of the consultation.

The Chairman asked Mrs Southall's daughter, Anne-Marie if she wished to add anything further. She reported that she had attended a national competition with a choir from the High Wycombe Music Centre and they won the Choir of the Day. The judge commented that many countries around the world would be proud to have a national choir of that calibre and Anne-Marie attributed their success to the hard work of Tim Venvell, who is the conductor of the choir.

The Chairman thanked Mrs Southall and Anne-Marie for their contribution to the meeting. The issues they had raised would be passed on to Mr Appleyard, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills who would provide a written response.

5 CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The Chairman reported that there had been quite a lot of publicity surrounding the Committee's Narrowing the Gap report. Since the last meeting of the Committee, members had visited Waddesdon Church of England School to learn about how they help their students prepare for work, as part of the Committee's Inquiry into Young People, Ready for Work. Members commented that they had been impressed by the approach taken by Waddesdon Church of England School, where a dedicated member of staff works with children from Year 7 to identify what career options might suit them best. It had also been very useful to gain feedback from the young people themselves.

6 COMMITTEE MEMBER UPDATES

This item was covered under Item 5.

7 ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION AND SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM

The Chairman welcomed Mr Bill Bendyshe-Brown, Deputy Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, Mr Chris Munday, Service Director, Learning, Skills and Prevention, Mrs Vivian Trundell, Exclusions and Reintegration Manager, Mrs Joy Shakespeare, Head of Family Resilience and Mrs Laura Nankin, Head of Fair Access and Youth Provision to the meeting.

Mr Bendyshe-Brown advised the Committee that concerns around elective home education had been raised nationally. The Local Authority has no rights to go into the home to check on the standards of education being provided. Mrs Vivian Trundell, Exclusions and Reintegration Manager explained that the Local Authority employ two people (equating to one full time equivalent) to provide support and advice to parents in Bucks who choose to educate at home. However currently there is no requirement for parents to register the fact that they are educating their children at home so it is difficult to know exactly how many children are involved.

Members were concerned about this inability to track children. Every child deserves a good education and also there might be safeguarding issues if educating children at home was viewed as a way of avoiding scrutiny. The Chairman wondered how the progress of a child who has been registered in the county at birth could be lost by the time they are due to enter Reception at five years of age. Vivian Trundell explained that until children start at school they are not tracked by the Local Authority.

Vivian Trundell also commented that some home educated children achieve high standards. Some children are home educated on a temporary basis and perhaps some people choose to do it to avoid scrutiny. She gave an example where recently a Health Visitor advised the Local Authority (LA) that she knew of a child who had attended a local preschool but had not entered Reception. The LA asked the Police to do a welfare check and now the child is attending school.

Monique Nowers, a Parent Governor representative on the Committee, reported that she had previously home educated some of her children. She expressed the view that some home educated children get a great education and many parents are doing a good job. Monique Nowers explained that she had asked the LA for advice when she was home educating and found the consultant who advised her to be non-judgemental and very helpful. She felt it was important to take a balanced view on home education and although some people might choose this route in order to avoid scrutiny, this issue should not be blown out of proportion.

The Chairman asked if it would be useful for the Committee to write to the Minister to raise concerns about this issue of children 'flying under the radar' due to being educated at home. It was agreed that the Chairman would liaise with Vivian Trundell to compose a suitable letter.

ACTION: Chairman and Vivian Trundell

A member asked what would happen if a child who had been educated at home then wanted to return to mainstream school during the school year. Mr Chris Munday explained that if there was no place available at the child's nearest school, they would be offered a place at the nearest school with places. If this school was sufficient distance away to qualify for free home to school transport then this would be offered. Vivian Trundell explained that at Secondary level if a place could not be offered at the child's preferred school, then the case would be referred to the Fair Access Board to allocate a place.

The Chairman thanked all the contributors for the elective home education aspect of this item and invited Mrs Joy Shakespeare to take questions on school absenteeism, which falls under her Family Resilience remit.

A member asked what activities Family Resilience undertake in order to combat absenteeism. Joy Shakespeare explained that the team takes a whole family approach. School absenteeism is generally a symptom of other issues within the family, for example, recently two siblings had not attended school for over six months. When this was investigated further it turned out that the parent had mental health issues and the children would have been happy to attend school but were worried to leave her. By putting in additional support for the parent, the children have been able to return to school.

A member commented that he was very pleased to hear that the LA were working with parents in a positive way rather than relying on prosecutions to resolve absenteeism. Mrs Shakespeare explained that previously, over 90% of prosecutions did not lead to an increase in school attendance, so the whole family approach was much more productive.

Mrs Shakespeare was asked if there were any particular schools that had high levels of absenteeism and how this would be dealt with. In response Mrs Shakespeare explained that this would be an issue for the school to resolve. The LA can assist the school on a traded basis or can refer individuals on for family support if necessary.

The Chairman thanked Mrs Shakespeare for her contribution.

RESOLVED

That the oral evidence be noted.

8 THE BUCKS LEARNING TRUST

The Chairman welcomed Mr Raza Khan, Chief Executive of the Bucks Learning Trust and Mrs Amanda Hopkins, Director of Education, Bucks Learning Trust to the meeting. The Chairman explained that this would be a question and answer session on the progress of the Bucks Learning Trust (BLT) and invited Mr Chris Munday, Service Director, Learning, Skills and Prevention to introduce the item by reminding the Committee of how the BLT came into existence.

Mr Munday explained that Buckinghamshire County Council (BCC) decided over a year ago to investigate a new model to deliver school based services. Officers worked closely with members to devise a system which would allow expertise to be shared and develop a self-improving school system. The Trust was established in August 2013 and so far things are going well. The Local Authority (LA) have not handed over any of their statutory responsibilities to the BLT – school standards remain the responsibility of the LA but the delivery of services has been handed over to the BLT.

Narrowing the Gap was a key priority for the BLT and also ensuring that the number of children in schools rated as Good or Outstanding by Ofsted would increase. To date there has been good progress made in this area in the Primary sector, but the Secondary sector was not showing as much improvement. The LA would continue to work in partnership with the BLT in order to improve outcomes for all children and young people in Bucks.

The Chairman asked Mr Raza Khan for his appraisal of how the BLT was progressing to date. Mr Khan commented that BCC's decision to create the BLT was quite radical and this could mean that there were risks and uncertainty, but he was confident that the BLT had made a very strong start in its first nine months. Significant progress had been made and he believed that the BLT had a clear operational, moral and commercial mandate from the start. The operational mandate was laid out in a very detailed service level agreement to ensure that BCC's statutory responsibilities would be delivered. The key goal was trying to get schools into the Good or Outstanding Ofsted categories and to date many primary schools had improved to achieve Good.

There was still more work to do though whilst some schools remained as Satisfactory or Inadequate, and working towards these improvements was also part of the BLT's moral mandate. In addition work on Narrowing the Gap was also underway.

With regards to the BLT's commercial mandate, it was recognised that there was increased fiscal pressure on both the LA and Schools, so services which schools buy into must be value for money. The BLT was currently restructuring some of its services to ensure value for money and resilience for the long term.

Mrs Hopkins reported that the BLT have been engaging with school leaders to find out what schools want in terms of support. She believed that this consultation led approach made schools feel more secure. Prior to the BLT, some schools felt that strategies were one size fits all, whereas BLT wants to offer more bespoke support.

Mrs Hopkins also commented that to date the BLT had found it more difficult to engage with the Secondary sector than Primary. Traditionally Secondary Schools were more independent from the LA, but she was pleased to report that over the Easter holidays there had been more enquiries from Secondary schools, so she hoped this was a sign that the tide was turning.

The Chairman thanked Mr Khan and Mrs Hopkins for this overview of the BLT to date. The Committee then asked questions. The questions and answers are summarised below:

Is the BLT also connecting with governing bodies and parent teacher associations? The BLT is working with governing bodies of schools who are currently rated as Satisfactory or Inadequate. The BLT wants school improvement strategies to be jointly agreed with the head teacher and the governing body.

Will the BLT be publishing end of year accounts and when will these be available? As the BLT was established part way through the tax year their audited accounts will be published around July 2014.

How is the performance of the BLT monitored?

There is a continued emphasis on performance and increasing value for money. The measurable impacts of the initiatives introduced by the BLT so far should be seen as they move into their second year of operation. Key Performance Indicators are reported into Chris Munday each term and individual school's performance data is monitored by Amanda Hopkins on a weekly basis.

Amanda Hopkins reported that Ofsted had made positive comments on the impact of the BLT in some recent school inspection reports as follows: - 'Support from the Trust is regular and focussed on outcomes', 'The Trust is providing innovative cross sector support' and 'The support from the Trust is strong and effective.'

What are the key lessons you have learnt in the first nine months of the BLT?

It has been very interesting. Schools are ready for a more structured approach to school improvement and the BLT are trying to get in earlier. Previously school improvement worked on an entitlement basis depending on the category of the school but now BLT are offering a more bespoke approach. It was important to treat schools as individuals, particularly in the Secondary sector.

Mrs Hopkins commented that she had previously been a head teacher and she recognised that it was important that the Trust should offer quality support for schools delivered by credible people. With this in mind they had taken on Consultant Leaders who had relevant experience, sometimes having been head teachers in other authorities. Also value for money and delivering measurable outcomes were incredibly important for schools.

Another important lesson learnt was that there is a lot of untapped expertise within the county – Outstanding schools could support others and there should be more emphasis on sharing best practice. As a result of this the BLT are launching a Teaching Excellence programme to give great classroom teachers the opportunity to get involved in school improvement projects. This benefits schools and represents a development opportunity for the individual teacher involved.

How is your restructuring programme going and can you tell us how you are approaching this?

The BLT employs several hundred people and is likely to turnover £16million this year. More than half of the organisation is unaffected by the current restructuring, because BLT inherited an organisation which had already been through this process as BCC had been looking for efficiencies. The two departments particularly affected are School Improvement and the Music Service and the motivation for the restructuring of these two departments is quite different. Changes to School Improvement are being made in response to a sharper mandate from Ofsted and from BCC, in terms of driving up standards in schools and a different approach is needed in order to achieve this.

The Music Service was taken on by BLT in riskier circumstances. The Music Services is one of the largest and most successful in the country and the BLT want to protect this. Historically there has been a subsidy from the Arts Council which covers a proportion of the operating costs, but the terms of this subsidy are changing in the next year and the level of subsidy is also reducing significantly. Bucks has the highest cost per hour for music tuition than any other local authority in the South East and the BLT did not want to have to increase these costs further, therefore a restructure is necessary to make the service more efficient.

There has been a lot of noise and debate in response to the proposed changes to the Music Service but this is in the very early stages. Consultation with staff and the unions comes to an end on 2nd May and the Music Service will continue to operate as it does currently for the next year. A member commented that restructuring basically means job losses and he questioned why the BLT needed to restructure at such an early stage. Raza Khan reassured members that job losses would be minimal. The BLT had been consulting with staff and unions and had already altered their proposal as a result of these discussions. He believed that once the restructure had been completed, members would find that it will be one of the least costly restructures in terms of job losses. It was important to manage resources more efficiently and this did not necessarily mean that jobs would be lost.

Mr Chris Munday emphasised that this restructure was expected and BCC knew that the BLT would have to make efficiencies in a variety of ways. It was important that members know that this would not affect BCC's statutory duties in anyway and it would ensure that we are able to deliver a faster and more effective school improvement service.

The Chairman thanked Mr Khan, Mrs Hopkins and Mr Munday for their contributions.

RESOLVED

That the oral evidence be noted.

9 YOUNG PEOPLE, READY FOR WORK INQUIRY

The Chairman advised the Committee that she was hoping to present the Young People, Ready for Work Inquiry report to Cabinet on Monday 28th April. She invited the Committee to consider the draft final report and the recommendations.

Mr Bill Bendyshe-Brown, Deputy Cabinet Member for Education and Skills welcomed the report which he had received over the Bank Holiday Weekend. He advised that he wanted to

consider the recommendations further and would provide a response by Friday 25th April. He was attending a meeting with the Leader and Chief Executive regarding the Educated in Bucks Passport scheme, which was mentioned in the report. He believed this was a worthwhile scheme and partners had been working well together in order to develop it.

A member commented that he hoped the recommendations would be received positively. Members had enjoyed this inquiry, meeting young people who gave mixed reviews on the support they had received in preparing for work, but who had impressed the committee with their enthusiasm and commitment now they were in the work place.

Mr Chris Munday made a comment on a quote which had been included in the report at the top of page 21. He advised that whilst he felt the quote was very relevant to the topic as a whole, he was concerned that it was in the Connexions section of the report, because it was talking about careers advice in general and Connexions were not commissioned to provide universal advice. The Chairman thanked Mr Munday for this suggestion and agreed that the quote would be moved in the final report.

The Chairman took members through each of the recommendations in turn. Recommendation Three recommended that schools should strengthen their capacity for careers and work-readiness delivery through an independent specialist service such as the Connexions Service. Members advised that they felt the Connexions service could be improved. John Everson, Commissioning/Development Manager (Connexions) commented that it was important to establish clarity around what the Connexions service should provide in the future and ensure effective monitoring going forward.

In connection with Recommendation Eight, regarding local businesses forming links with schools and colleges in their local area, a member reported that one of her friends who lives in another county runs a business and wanted to go into schools with a view to recruiting apprentices. However the local schools were not very co-operative as they wanted young people to stay on into their Sixth Forms and therefore viewed the alternative options she wished to promote as competition. A member noted that she had been shocked to hear that pupils at Princes Risborough Upper School did not link in with the Ercol factory in the town regarding job opportunities.

Mrs Amanda Hopkins, Director of Education, Bucks Learning Trust advised that she would raise this issue with the Primary Executive Board and the Bucks Association of Secondary Heads (BASH) as it was important that schools could offer advice on a range of opportunities for school leavers. The Bucks Learning Trust would then discuss with schools how they could assist them in facilitating improved links with local businesses. If a governor was recruited from the business community this would help to raise the profile naturally.

Finally Recommendation Nine applauded the delivery of careers and skills development advice through Children's Centres and recommended that programmes specifically aimed at young parents be continued. Mr Chris Munday advised that these programmes were run in partnership with Connexions to help young parents get back into work. A member reported that he had recently attended a job club at the Waddesdon Children's Centre which had been very useful.

RESOLVED

To accept the recommendation that the report and recommendations of the Young People Ready for Work Inquiry be AGREED and referred to the Cabinet and other relevant decision makers for an Executive Response.

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Nicola Cook, Governor Services Manager, Bucks Learning Trust to the meeting and thanked her and her team for making her feel so welcome when she had recently visited their office. Mr Bill Bendyshe-Brown introduced the item by emphasising the importance of school governors especially in the area of improving standards in schools. He also reminded the Committee that school governors are all volunteers.

The Committee had received a written report from Mrs Cook in October 2013 so the Chairman invited member's questions. The questions and answers are summarised below:

Do we have feedback from school governing bodies on what they most like about governor support services and what they are least satisfied with?

The Governor Services team constantly ask for feedback. Evaluation sheets are collected at the end of each training session and a survey of the Chairman of governing bodies is undertaken every two years, which asks detailed questions around the quality of minutes and advice delivered by the clerks. The most recent survey showed that 99% of chairmen rated the service as good or excellent. If governing bodies have concerns at any time they can contact the team. Mrs Cook commented that her overall impression is that all elements of the service are well-received. The one area that might cause concern is if there is a change of clerk. Clerks build up loyalty and a wealth of knowledge about the governing bodies they support, so a change can be unsettling and governing bodies can find the transition difficult.

What percentage of school governing bodies currently buy governor support services? In October 2013 90% of governing bodies were buying some services and this has now increased to 96%. Most buy the clerking and advice service and a support service is also offered to clerks who are employed directly by schools.

Are there any areas of training that may be useful which are not currently offered?

The team try to provide training to cover a full range of issues and advice is sought from the Bucks Association of School Governors (BASG), the School Governance Consultative Board and Development Governors as to what other areas might be useful. The training for 2014-15 was currently being prepared and some new courses are being offered including – Being a member of an Appeal Committee; Engaging with Parents; Data Monitoring for Special Schools; Sports Premiums and Keeping One Step Ahead of Ofsted.

We would like to consult with school governors on key areas of how their governing bodies operate and the support and advice they get from governor support services. What key questions would you suggest?

Mrs Cook said that she had given it some thought and suggested asking if there is anything that a governing body does which it feels is especially effective, as it would be useful to share good practice.

How accessible do you think school governing body committee meetings are to allow people from all backgrounds to participate and be a working school governor?

This is an interesting question and perhaps one to pose to governing bodies themselves. Governing bodies were encouraged to consider when was best to hold their meetings. It was important to try and get a wide representation on school governing bodies, but currently they were not all truly representative of the communities which they serve. This could be down to the timings of meetings and possibly paying expense allowances for school governors might make the difference between someone choosing to participate or not.

Do school governing bodies publish minutes of their meetings online? How accessible do you think agendas and minutes are to parents and members of the public? Some are published online or are put up on school noticeboards.

The Chairman welcomed Mr Andrew Walker, Chairman of the Bucks Association of School Governors and asked him if he believed that the local authority provided enough support to

Chairmen of school governing bodies to ensure effective governance. Mr Walker expressed the view that the service from the Governor Services team was superb. The induction training was excellent and further training on more technical aspects such as Safeguarding or SEN were also invaluable. He particularly highlighted how useful it was to be able to share experiences with other governors in group work during training sessions.

The Chairman thanked Mrs Cook and Mr Walker for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED

That the oral evidence be noted.

11 LEARNING NEW WAYS

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Avril Davies, Chairman of the Learning New Ways Task and Finish Group and Mrs Sarah Holding, School and Academy Relationship Manager to the meeting. The Learning New Ways report had been presented to Cabinet in December 2012. Mrs Davies confirmed that she was very pleased with the progress that had been made in implementing the recommendations of her Task and Finish Group. She did comment that with regards to Recommendation 8, that whilst members did have an induction programme following the elections in May 2013, it would be useful for the local members' role in relation to schools in their area to be clearer, perhaps by developing a written outline. It is very useful for local members to be involved with schools in the division but sometimes headteachers could be suspicious of political motivation.

Mrs Holding noted Mrs Davies' comment and it was agreed that she would draft a protocol for members in consultation with the Member Development Working Group.

ACTION: Sarah Holding

Other members echoed Mrs Davies' sentiments about how important it is to be involved with local schools and many members were also on school governing bodies in their area.

Mr Chris Munday, Service Director, Learning, Skills and Prevention advised that this had been a very helpful report for the service, at a time when school arrangements had changed radically with the introduction of Academies and Free Schools. The Action Plan highlighted the responses to the report's recommendations and illustrated how the local authority had maintained a family of schools in Bucks and the commitment to good school standards for all children and young people.

The Chairman thanked Mrs Davies, Mrs Holding and Mr Munday for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED

That the progress on implementation of the agreed recommendations arising from the Learning New Ways inquiry be noted.

12 KEY ISSUES FOR SCRUTINY 2014-15

Mr Michael Carr, Scrutiny Policy Officer, introduced the item explaining that this was an opportunity to seek advice from the Service Director, Learning, Skills and Prevention and the Bucks Learning Trust on the key issues facing Buckinghamshire County Council in order to inform the Committee's Work Programme for the forthcoming year. The Chairman reported that meetings had also been booked with Mr Appleyard and Mrs Macpherson, the relevant Cabinet Members, to gain their views and if any members had any issues that they particularly wanted to raise they should inform Michael Carr.

Mr Chris Munday, Service Director, Learning, Skills and Prevention proposed the following topic for the Committee to consider for their future Work programme:

- Progress to Good and Outstanding how are schools progressing to achieve the higher Ofsted rankings, it was important to hear good news and bad.
- SEN The Children and Families Act has introduced changes to the approach to SEN including provision up to the age of 25. This is a very contentious issue for parents.
- School Place Planning This is a key challenge for BCC. An additional 2,500 places have been created over the past four years and it is important to consider how to manage demand and plan for the future. This is an issue which affects the whole of Bucks

Mr Raza Khan, Chief Executive of the Bucks Learning Trust agreed with Mr Munday's suggestions. He commented that it would be useful for the Committee to highlight the progress that schools were making, as if a school fails there is a lot of press coverage, but then they don't always receive positive press when the school's performance improves. Scrutiny of SEN would also be invaluable, as it was crucial to get the design of SEN provision right for the future.

Mr Munday highlighted the need for a reliable set of data to inform School Place Planning. Previously Child Benefit data was used to help project the level of need but as this was no longer a universal benefit, the data could not be used. A member asked if information was shared by colleagues in Health and nurseries and pre-schools. In response, Mr Munday explained that whilst some information is forthcoming this does not present the full picture, as some children go into Independent Schools and people move in and out of Bucks.

A member also suggested looking into Fostering and Adoption in more detail, as there had been major changes in these areas in response to the Government's drive to streamline the process for potential adopters and increase the number of children being adopted.

The Chairman thanked all the contributors for their suggestions.

RESOLVED

That the key issues identified to the Committee for consideration in the Committee's work programme be noted.

13 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee noted the revised work programme.

RESOLVED

That the updated Committee Work Programme be agreed.

14 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

To note the next meeting of the Education, Skills and Children's Services Select Committee on Tuesday 27th May 2014 in Mezzanine Room 2, County Hall, Aylesbury

CHAIRMAN