



Minutes

EDUCATION, SKILLS AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE EDUCATION, SKILLS AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON TUESDAY 27 JANUARY 2015, IN MEZZANINE ROOM 2, COUNTY HALL, AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT 10.00 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.45 PM.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Margaret Aston, Dev Dhillon (Vice-Chairman), Phil Gomm, Paul Irwin, Valerie Letheren (Chairman), Wendy Mallen, Mark Shaw, Robin Stuchbury and David Watson

CO-OPTED MEMBERS PRESENT

David Babb

GUESTS PRESENT

Mike Appleyard, Frances Gosling-Thomas, Lin Hazell and Martin Tett

OFFICERS PRESENT

Simon Billenness, Michael Brent, Michael Carr, Carol Douch, Amanda Taylor Hopkins, David Johnston and Chris Munday

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Michael Moore, Monique Nowers and Katrina Wood.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Margaret Aston declared that she was a member of the Fostering Panel and a Trustee of Carers Bucks.

3 MINUTES



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



The minutes of the meetings held on 19th November 2014 and 9th December 2014 were confirmed as a correct record.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

The Chairman welcomed Margo Parfitt who represented YC2, a young carers group in North Bucks to the meeting. Margo Parfitt asked if Buckinghamshire County Council(BCC) would reconsider its decision to withdraw funding from her group which supports young carers living in North Bucks, especially in view of the implementation of the Children and Families Act in April 2015. Young Carers will then be entitled to an assessment of their own needs and Carers Bucks anticipate an avalanche of requests for assessments. Margo Parfitt explained that her group was established in 2005 and plays a complimentary role to Carers Bucks. They were contracted by BCC to deliver an activities programme for young carers which is something that Carers Bucks do not offer. They provide a monthly activity programme and fundraise separately for anything over and above this provision, for example trips or workshops with siblings. Currently the group supports 34 young carers and most of their referrals come from schools, the local nursing team or Carers Bucks.

The Chairman thanked Margo Parfitt for her question and invited members' questions. A member asked for examples of the successes the group have had over the years. Margo Parfitt reported that this year they have a young carer who is approaching 19 years of age who is studying at St Johns College, Oxford. When he first joined the group he was 11 years old and severely depressed as he was helping to care for a severely disabled sibling. The group managed to get him a place on a sponsored course for young carers at university which really helped to turn his life around and improve his confidence.

A member asked how the group's funding was organised, was it an annual grant? Margo Parfitt explained that in 2008, Councillor Freda Roberts MBE discovered that there were no activities being organised for young carers in North Bucks and David Polhill, local Councillor for Buckingham at the time donated £2100 from his Community Leaders Fund to get the activities off the ground. YC2 then won a three year contract with funding of £22,000 over the three years. In 2010, BCC asked them to increase their numbers from 20 to 30 and reduce the age of entry to eight years old instead of ten. The group quickly achieved this increase in numbers and were then awarded a two year contract.

A member reported that her Local Area Forum had agreed to fund an officer to visit local schools in order to identify young carers and offer them support. Margo Parfitt commented that it was wise to support young carers as without support they would often drop out of school and end up costing the state much more.

The Chairman invited Mr Chris Munday, Service Director, Learning, Skills and Prevention to the meeting and asked him to respond to Margo Parfitt's question on the funding cut to her group. Mr Munday explained that during the Medium Term Planning (MTP) process savings were offered up from a range of services and these were not easy decisions to make. However he was pleased to announce that a further £5000 had been agreed to fund the YC2 group and he hoped this would sustain their activities. BCC recognised that the work being done was important but with increased financial pressure on local government, BCC could not continue to fund it forever. Chris Munday had asked officers to meet with YC2 to discuss fundraising ideas and he believed that this project could work well with Crowd Funding. Chris Walkling was the officer leading on Crowdfunding and he suggested that Margo Parfitt should meet with him to discuss this further.

Margo Parfitt was grateful for this announcement but pointed out that although £5,000 had been found this still represented a 50% cut to their funding and demand was such that they could support 40-50 kids if funding and their volunteers could stretch to it. She raised concerns about 'selling' their young people online and was unsure if crowdfunding was really

appropriate. A member commented that he thought crowdfunding could work and he also suggested that the Local Area Forums in North Bucks might be able to contribute some funding to make up some of the shortfall. He suggested that Margo Parfitt should arrange a meeting with the Chairmen of the Buckingham, Winslow and Waddesdon LAFs to investigate this further. Another member commented that Mr Munday should analyse how much money this group was saving the Council overall, as it was staffed entirely by volunteers.

The Chairman thanked Margo Parfitt for attending the meeting and raising the profile of her group. Margo Parfitt thanked the Chairman for allowing her to put her question and thanked Robin Stuchbury for encouraging her to attend and helping her to prepare for the meeting.

5 CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The Chairman reported that she had met with a man, Howard Jones, who works for BT and engages with other internet providers on internet safety. He hoped to attend the meeting later when the Committee would discuss Internet Safety. The Chairman had also visited Corporate Parenting Panel and Foster Carers to ask for their views on Internet Safety.

6 COMMITTEE MEMBER UPDATES

There were no updates from members on this occasion.

7 THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Chairman welcomed Lin Hazell, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Mr David Johnston, Strategic Director, Children and Young People and Mrs Frances Gosling-Thomas, Chairman of the Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board to the meeting. Mr David Johnston provided an update to members and the following main points were noted:

- Mr Johnston would be presenting to Ofsted and the Department of Education this afternoon and would circulate his slides to the Committee on email after the meeting. Ofsted would be holding a workshop to provide BCC and partners with the evidence on which their judgements had been based. Unfortunately this had taken a while to organise due to juggling everyone's availability. Then BCC would present on progress so far in response to the inspection result.
- Engagement with partners was a focus and Mrs Gosling-Thomas would say more on this later. The Improvement Plan had been very action focussed and was now being made more outcome focussed. The Improvement Plan is being delivered via Inter-related project plans and progress monitoring meetings were being held once or twice a week.
- The pace of change was being monitored by Cabinet, the Select Committee and Regulatory and Audit Committee.
- Mr Johnston was pleased to report a number of improvements including: every child in care had an allocated social worker, risk is more recognised and owned than previously, Child Protection Assessments were happening more quickly and engagement with members and partners had been significantly enhanced. The Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children's Board had also been revamped and Mrs Gosling-Thomas would say more about this.
- Mr Johnston reported that the Department of Education had advised BCC to pick up the pace of change. They considered that the reaction in the Autumn had been too slow. The pace had now quickened and the Department of Education wanted reassurance that this could be sustained in the coming months. Children's Services needed the support of partners and members in order to achieve this. The Chairman reiterated that the Select Committee was very keen to contribute and hoped to be invited to Workstream meetings. Mr Johnston agreed to ask Workstream Leads to contact the Committee to facilitate this.

- In terms of Leadership and Governance, I have been appointed as the new Strategic Director and we have a new Chairman of the Safeguarding Board, there had been significant financial investment from BCC, the Local Government Association (LGA) had offered coaching and staff events, the Corporate Parenting Panel were working on a revised Pledge for looked after children and the Leader and Chief Executive were undertaking 'back to the floor' work with social work teams.
- With regards to Improving Social Work Practice, five Practice Improvement Managers had been introduced and Social Work Standards have been agreed, published and shared with all Social Workers. 'Getting to Good' workshops focussing on different aspects or practice were being run – yesterday one was held on Assessments. Supervisions had been reviewed and clarified the process for transferring children between teams in Children's Services to ensure this is as smooth as possible. Now no cases were closed without the child being seen, 97% of looked after children had their care plans reviewed within the required timescale (this had been 74%) and around 80% of children have assessments of need within the prescribed 45 day timescale, which meets national guidance.
- Timely case reviews and high levels of visiting by Social Workers would also help to support Foster Carers. A recruitment campaign for new Foster Carers had been launched and four evening information sessions were being held across the County in the coming weeks. Consultation with existing Foster Carers was also taking place.
- The Resources Panel has reviewed the placements for all children placed over 20 miles from their home to ensure they are receiving all services they require. Child Permanence Plans had now been moved to the Children in Care team who had the expertise in this area. The number of children put up for Adoption had increased, although timescales in finding the right matches for children were sometimes an issue. The Staying Put policy for over 18s to stay in foster care had been agreed and an e-PEP had been launched (an online version of a Personal Education Plan for children in care). The Participation team had also been conducting home visits to 79 Looked After Children to encourage them to join BCC's Children in Care Council known as We Do Care! Other ways of engaging with young people were also being investigated.

The Chairman thanked Mr Johnston for this brief update and invited members' questions as follows:

How fully costed is the Improvement Plan and how confident are you of the figures within the budget you have?

We have done a lot of work on the budget to ensure that we can recruit enough staff to deliver the service safely. We are purchasing a lot of care placements out of county which means we are at the mercy of the marketplace to some extent – the increase in the numbers of children in care across the UK means increased demand and pressure on placements. Neighbouring local authorities are offering very attractive packages to try and entice our Social Workers away so we are developing a response to this. We are considering options such as car allowances etc to try and compete but we are also looking at working environment and training and development to ensure we have the whole package. We are also looking into recruiting Social Workers from abroad.

To what extent have the risks now been fully assessed and is there a chance that targets will not be met on time or within the budget?

We are including risks in our presentation to Ofsted and the Department of Education this afternoon and the steps which we have taken to mitigate these risks. The most significant risk is around recruiting a skilled workforce but every effort is being made to stabilise the workforce and to recruit new staff. We are looking to appoint permanent Senior Managers too rather than relying on interims.

A member commented that they were hopeful that savings from a reduced reliance on agency staff would be realised. Mr Johnston reminded members that whilst he understood the pressures on the budget due to agency staff, the demand for the service had also increased.

Is it possible to consider training non-qualified people on the job, as there is a shortage of qualified Social Workers?

It is a tough job that requires a lot of training and experience. Even newly qualified Social Workers cannot be left on their own, they need mentoring and support. We do work closely with colleges and universities and we have Social Work Assistants already within the service, but you must appreciate that it is a very complex area of work.

7A CHILDREN'S SERVICES LEADERSHIP, GOVERNANCE AND PARTNERSHIPS WORKSTREAM

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Frances Gosling-Thomas, the newly appointed Chairman of the Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children's Board to the meeting and asked her to give members an overview of the work she had undertaken since being appointed at the end of 2014.

Mrs Gosling-Thomas explained that she had been appointed as the Independent Chairman in November 2014 and attended her first Board meeting within a couple of days. She took the unprecedented step of standing down the whole board at the end of the meeting, in order to draw a line under the past. She reduced the number of attendees at the Board from 35 to 22 and in some cases she had negotiated a more senior membership. There had been some issues with seniority of representation from Health and Police but these have now been resolved. It was vital that the right people attended every Board meeting and the Sub Committees and attendance would be monitored and reported as part of the Annual Report.

The budget of the Board was also in deficit and one of the priorities was to conduct a comparator exercise. This found that the Board's total budget was approximately 50% of the lowest of other comparator authorities. The other issue was that of contributions being made by partner agencies. Mrs Gosling-Thomas asked for an in principle agreement for increased partner agency contributions by the end of January and to date she had only received responses from the district councils, who were engaging more effectively in comparison with other areas of the country. *Addendum – very shortly after the meeting positive responses from other partners were received.*

Two weeks previously the new Board had held a whole day development workshop with an external facilitator and everyone had engaged well. Disappointingly afterwards there was a meeting to discuss the budget issues and immediately this commitment fell apart. The budget was a fundamental way of demonstrating commitment to the Safeguarding agenda locally, so the Chairman was really pushing all agencies to sign up.

Mrs Gosling-Thomas had received feedback from Ofsted recently that the Board's Improvement Plan needed to be sharper. In response she had reduced the Board's Business Plan to four key themes – Child Sexual Exploitation, Early Help, Neglect and Improving the effectiveness/impact of the Board – and had incorporated these themes and the Ofsted Improvement advice into one document. This had been circulated to partners for feedback and would include smarter outcome measures and more realistic timescales. The next meeting of the Board would be held in mid-March, but it was important to deliver work between the meetings also. The Chairman asked if the Select Committee could have sight of the revised plan once the Safeguarding Board had agreed it.

The Chairman welcomed Mr Martin Tett, Leader of the Council to the meeting. Mr Tett

wished to address the Committee on the subject of Leadership, Governance and Partnership Working. Mr Tett reported that this was a very challenging time for Children's Services and he was grateful to the Department of Education's advisers who have offered robust challenge, as it was clear that there was a steep hill to climb and it would take a long time to turn the service around. However Mr Tett was doing his best to demonstrate commitment from all areas of the County Council and partners. Initially Cabinet focussed on the budget and they had not denied any request for additional funding so far. This was not new money but was coming either from reserves or other services of the Council, so financial decisions could not be taken lightly. He had also been looking at partnership working as Ofsted had concerns about the depth and practicality of partnership working in Bucks and it was an ongoing challenge to encourage this without potentially alienating partners.

The Chairman thanked Mr Tett for attending the meeting and invited members' questions.

A member thanked all parties involved in the Improvement Plan and commented that the new appointments had put some rigour into the process. However he was concerned that BCC were not getting support from Health and the Police – it was important that they also take responsibility for Safeguarding and if they did not send Senior representation to a meeting then this indicated that they were not taking it seriously.

Lin Hazell commented that it was not the case that they do not want to engage but perhaps they do not fully understand the role that they need to be playing. Mr Martin Tett commented that following a meeting last week when key personnel were absent, he went straight into a Strategic Health Liaison Meeting and was very robust with the Chief Executives there about people not attending

I am very concerned about buy in from Senior Management in other agencies, what can we do?

Senior leaders from Thames Valley Police, Health and Schools all say absolutely, we are all in this together but culturally I believe they see this as the Council has failed rather than Safeguarding in Bucks has failed. Having said that after raising the absence of Health colleagues following the meeting last week I have received an apologetic voice mail from a Chief Executive today.

Is there evidence of better commitment from Thames Valley Police(TVP) elsewhere?

They have to fund 11 Safeguarding Boards across their area but they are funded accordingly. Mr Tett commented that TVP had not attended two Improvement Board meetings and he found it hard to believe that they could not field a senior enough representative.

How do you see the future of the Safeguarding Children's Board and who will be attending going forward?

I have no doubt that there is commitment from the local authority and top managers in other agencies but this needs to be translated down through the organisation. Workforce is key – legislation dictates that children must have a qualified social worker and the challenge for Bucks is who will want to come and work here while the authority is rated as inadequate. With regards to the future of the Board, we have some good and willing people from Police and parts of Health but we need more senior engagement.

What will you do if you do not receive budget commitments from partner agencies at the end of January as you have requested?

They will receive a prompt and strongly worded letter from me as Chair of the Board

reminding them of their statutory duties and I will lobby centrally to resolve this issue.

I am aware that some of our existing Foster Carers have made complaints about the service, including complaints about the Household Review process? How are you making improvements to this process?

If Foster Carers make a complaint we need to respond quickly and if we have done something wrong we must ensure that we record the other point of view. There should be no secrets between Foster Carers and Social Workers which are then revealed at the annual Household Reviews. The best people to ask about improvements to the service will be residential care home staff and Foster Carers. The Cabinet Member asked the member to advise her of any particular cases outside of the meeting if necessary.

The Chairman thanked Martin Tett, Lin Hazell, David Johnston and Frances Gosling-Thomas for attending the meeting.

7B IMPROVING QUALITY OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

This was considered under Item 7.

7C FOSTER CARE IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Carol Douch, Service Director, Children and Family Service and three Foster Carers who accompanied her – Mrs Rowton, Juliet Clifton and Anita to the meeting. Mrs Rowton explained that she fostered children from birth to five years old and had been a Foster Carer for 15 years. She had three children living with her currently and had also taken in a young mother and her baby. Juliet Clifton had been a Foster Carer for 31 years and was now a fostering co-ordinator. She specialised in looking after children with disabilities from babies up to the age of 18. Anita had been a Foster Carer for ten years and looked after children from birth to 18 years. She specialised in taking sibling groups or children with disabilities. She had looked after 35 children, had delivered a baby of a foster child and had adopted one of her foster children, a little girl who was now seven years old.

The Chairman invited members' questions as follows:

What are the key things that attracted you to become a Foster Carer and to remain in the role for so long?

It is the feeling of making a difference to a child. I still get excited seeing a child smile and making progress. For me, I loved being a Mum and loved working with children, I had been a child minder previously – it gives me great satisfaction. It is obviously hard to let go of children when they come to leave, but if you don't get attached then you shouldn't be a Foster Carer. I feel the children belong to us until the time they have to leave.

We started fostering 10 years ago. We had a six bedroom house and only two children, who had reached school age. We had relatives who had fostered and they recommended it to us. We were asked to take on a baby on a short term basis and we still had her after two years. We then had to fight to be able to adopt her – we went to the Adoption Panel twice because we were turned down at the first attempt because I was judged to be overweight. We couldn't believe that we were turned down having looked after her for two years. Anyone can be a parent, but not anyone can be a Foster Carer or adoptive parent. Once a year my daughter visits her 'Tummy Mummy' and she knows she is adopted.

I have friends who foster children and they make such a difference to the lives of

the children – I can see how rewarding it can be and what an impact Foster Carers can have on these children.

It is great to hear these positive stories but I think we should also hear from Foster Carers who have been in dispute with the Council to get both sides.

I have made complaints in the past when Social Workers have excluded us from meetings and moved children a long distance away with no reason given. I have also challenged the Council when they wanted to remove a child from my care and I resisted this because the child had been so traumatised when she arrived. I am not afraid to fight for these children.

Society does not reward selfless people like you. Not all people are capable of caring for these children and you do a great service. No mountain seems too high for you to climb and I am touched by your passion. How do you think the Council can motivate others to become Foster Carers? Is there too much 'red tape' which puts people off?

Some people do worry about what if something goes wrong and there can be a fear of a child making an allegation against you. Also the allowances in Bucks are not very generous. It is hard to fit in work and foster care – really you are asking someone to give up a wage and when you get £167 a week allowance for a three year old, it works out to £1 an hour. We are certainly not doing it for the money. If you could give £50 per child more it could make such a difference – Foster Carers might be able to consider taking children on holiday.

I think it is amazing what you have done for our children. What feedback have you had from children in your care?

I have an almost 18 year old who asked if they could come along to a Foster Carer recruitment evening to talk about the positives, which I think is great. I keep in touch with all of my children. Lots of mine have gone back to their parents ultimately.

I cannot fault the social workers I have worked with. Nor me, I have had two link workers in 31 years which is outstanding. I have had disagreements but people do listen to me. Private Fostering agencies are offering people £2,000 to transfer over and carers are struggling financially, they are only human. There is a lot involved in the running of a house and with the children with disabilities that I look after, they need to be taken to appointments and I do 350 miles per week in my car. Fortunately my husband helps me, but I am up at 5.30am every day and don't get to bed again until 10.30pm.

Are you entitled to Child Benefit for children in your care?

No we are not.

If you have a baby to look after, how do you feel about the length of time it takes for the baby to be adopted?

I had a child with a disability and the department found the perfect family. Yes it can take a long time but we want perfect adoptions – so far I have seen 70 and they have all been successful. We have a baby at the moment who came to us at 12 weeks old last January.

Why don't you take up the private fostering agencies offer of £2,000 to transfer over?

We are Bucks born and bred so we do not want to leave the local authority. My husband says that going private is making money from a child's suffering.

It seems that we should recommend that the allowances must be looked at. You know that money is tight but we would like to support you – is there anything else we can suggest?

We are given £50 when a child comes into our care, but then we do not receive any allowance for a two week period. This means we have to subsidise the child initially so I think this could be improved.

How is your health affected? Do you receive adequate support for dealing with difficult children?

It can be difficult as you experience the child's pain twice over but the Sue Nicholls Centre and Cherry Gregory, the Looked After Children's Nurse offer great support.

I am filled with admiration for you. We fostered a teenager who is now 53 years old with his own two children and it is so rewarding. Thanks for being honest about some of your difficulties – is your allowance taxed?

I have gone self-employed and I have not earned enough to go over the personal allowance, as the allowances are not that generous.

The Chairman thanked the Foster Carers for attending the meeting and sharing their experiences with the Committee. Members had gained a great insight and were very appreciative of the service given by the Foster Carers and their families.

The Chairman asked Carol Douch for her response to the Foster Carers comments. Mrs Douch commented that the Council would like to be able to clone these existing carers. A recent consultation exercise had been undertaken with existing Foster Carers and support from the Council was not flagged as an issue, which was very pleasing. Mrs Douch was not surprised by the comments about allowances, advising members that Bucks had a very complex system of allowances which included anomalies, for example, a child with disabilities receives an additional allowance up to the age of 11 but then this stops. There were other issues to consider as well, for example, Foster Carers own children may not leave home until much later now, which can affect their ability to foster, as well as the impact of the Staying Put initiative.

Mrs Douch was pleased to report that 85 people were about to start on the Foster Carer training programme and hopefully the current recruitment drive would swell the numbers further.

The Chairman thanked Mrs Douch and the Foster Carers for attending the meeting.

8 CHILDREN'S INTERNET SAFETY

The Chairman welcomed Mr Howard Jones from British Telecom (BT), Mr Mark Bailey, Adviser to the Select Committee and Mr Simon Billenness, Chairman of the Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children's Board e-safety Committee to the meeting. Mr Howard Jones introduced himself to members. Mr Jones worked for BT on a joint venture with Sky, Talk Talk and Virgin Media called Internet Matters. Internet Matters was a not for profit organisation which aimed to help parents safeguard their children online. He also worked with Unicef UK, helping to run parent/children workshops and Train the Teacher sessions.

The Chairman reported that members had been very passionate and had found internet safety to be a massive subject. They were very pleased with their report and the Chairman thanked Mr Michael Carr, Policy Officer Scrutiny for his work in producing the draft report for the Committee to consider. If nothing else, the Chairman hoped that the Committee would have raised the profile of Internet Safety.

Mr Mark Bailey commented that he liked the report but he would like to see the recommendations extended to children from as young as three years old. Howard Jones advised that there were so many messages for parents, they get confused. It was important to

get stakeholders involved but it was vital that they delivered one single coherent easy message – something similar to ‘buckle up’ before going online.

Mr Simon Billenness thanked the Committee for raising the profile of this issue. The e-safety Sub-Committee supported the report’s recommendations and would do all they could to support their implementation.

The Chairman proposed and the Committee agreed that the recommendations should be agreed in full subject to the suggested alteration to the age. Members agreed that any minor editing could be signed off by the Chairman.

RESOLVED

That the recommendations should be agreed in full, subject to the suggested alteration to the age. Members agreed that any further minor editing could be signed off by the Chairman

9 THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LEARNING TRUST PERFORMANCE REVIEW

The Chairman welcomed Mr Mike Appleyard, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, Mr Chris Munday, Service Director, Learning, Skills and Prevention, Mrs Amanda Taylor-Hopkins, Director of Education, Bucks Learning Trust (BLT) and Mr Michael Brent, Director of Finance and Resources at BLT. The Chairman reminded the Committee that they had posed lots of questions on the BLT’s performance at the December meeting and the purpose of today’s item was to concentrate on the BLT’s accounts. The Chairman invited members’ questions as follows:

Do you consider that BCC are receiving value for money from Bucks Learning Trust and are you happy with the governance arrangements for BLT? Members are aware that Mr Khan, the Chief Executive, left the Trust at the end of 2014.

Since 1st December I have taken on the role of Operational Lead – I am continuing as Director of Education and am overseeing the strategic direction of the Trust. I am a Director on the Board of Trustees, which remains the same apart from the fact that the local authority have appointed Sue Imbriano as a Trustee. I am covering the role of Chief Executive as the Trustees’ priority was to provide stability but the Board will look at the structure again for September.

The Trust seems to be building large reserves – the accounts show £1.5million in reserves at the end of June and you are hoping to build these up to £2.2million – why so you need £2.2million in reserves?

We need reserves as BLT has to stand on its own two feet financially. These accounts go up to June and we know we have a large redundancy bill to meet in the August of our second year of operation. The trustees decided, on the advice of Auditors and the Charities Commission to build up six months of operation reserves. We have to be financially independent – unlike the County Council we don’t have the luxury of being able to move budgets between different service areas.

To what extent is the staffing and salary structure of BLT a devolved matter and are there any restrictions in the BCC contract around staffing?

We inherited 80% of our workforce from BCC and as the staff were taped over we are unable to break their terms and conditions of service. New staff we appoint are not subject to these restrictions. Our salaries are benchmarked by an external adviser and recommendations are put forward to the Trust’s Board to agree. Staffing is constantly being reviewed. The grant from BCC reduces year on year so we review staffing to ensure efficiency and value for money.

Is there an expectation to get new work from elsewhere?

You will see from our accounts that 50% of our revenue is from BCC and the other 50% is traded income. We are looking at ways to increase our traded income to ensure that we are not over reliant on our BCC contract.

Mr Mike Appleyard, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills commented that in its first year the BLT had delivered virtually all of what it was required to deliver, so he was pleased. Also the BLT had helped with his budget this year so it has been a positive relationship both ways. Mr Chris Munday advised members that there was a written agreement on the grant funding element of BLT and what BCC expect in return, including an requirement for BCC to be able to conduct audits. Regular contract management meetings were held which were minuted. Mr Munday would be happy to share the grant agreement with members if this would reassure them in terms of what BCC expect of BLT.

Mr Munday reiterated that the Trust's own revenue generated from traded income was nothing to do with BCC. BLT were only accountable to BCC for the grant we give to them. It had been a positive first year in terms of improved performance in schools and the savings delivered to BCC. BLT had won contracts elsewhere which were supporting them and there had been some particular challenges which the Trustees needed to address.

There followed a robust discussion about how the Trust was operating – members were concerned about the departure of the Chief Executive and rumours that had been circulating. It was noted that the Chief Executive's salary had been very high and the accounts included a sizeable amount for vehicle hire. Mr Brent explained that there were categorically no hire cars – the figure mentioned in the accounts was inherited from BCC, as a number of typed employees had lease cars. For clarity, Mr Brent also commented that the Chief Executive's salary and his own were not paid from the BCC grant and as such, these overheads needed to be covered by the Trust's traded income.

Members commented that whilst the accounts were useful in giving broad figures, it would be helpful in future to have a narrative alongside to show what money has been invested in a particular area to produce a certain outcome. This would help members to ask more informed questions. Mr Chris Munday advised that he would be happy for members to have details of the Annual Activity Plans and the corresponding level of funding given to BLT.

The Chairman thanked all the contributors and hoped that they recognised that the members were looking for reassurance after the departure of the Chief Executive. Mr Appleyard advised that he could not discuss the specifics of Mr Khan's departure at this time. However he reminded the Committee that BLT was not a wholly owned company of the County Council and he felt therefore that some of the questions being asked were inappropriate. The cost for BCC in delivering School Improvement services was now much less that it was and the BLT had delivered significantly improved outcomes for children. The grant arrangement would cease at the end of the second year and then it would become a payment for services arrangement.

The Chairman thanked Mr Appleyard, Mr Munday, Mrs Taylor-Hopkins and Mr Brent for attending the meeting.

10 THE EDUCATION, SKILLS AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME 2014-15

This item was deferred to the next meeting.

11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

To note the next meeting of the Education, Skills and Children's Services Select Committee on 10 March 2015 at 10am in Mezzanine Room 2, County Hall, Aylesbury.

CHAIRMAN