

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD IN COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC OFFICES ANGEL STREET BRIDGEND CF31 4WB ON THURSDAY, 15 DECEMBER 2016 AT 2.00 PM

Present

Councillor EP Foley – Chairperson

DK Edwards
M Jones

N Farr
RL Thomas

CA Green
C Westwood

PN John

Registered Representatives

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Apologies for Absence

Officers:

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244. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

245. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting of Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 13 October 2016 be approved as a true and accurate record.

Cllr Green explained that she contacted the office to send apologies before the 13th October 2016 meeting but was unable to get a response because of a fire alarm.

246. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Corporate Director – Operational and Partnership Services submitted a report, the purpose of which was to present the items due to be considered at the Committee meeting scheduled to be held on 2 February 2017.

The Committee suggested that when the Health Review was considered, a representative from Health Matters should be invited to the meeting.

The Committee referred to a recent investigation by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales where maladministration was found. The complaint related to failings in how a looked after child's savings were monitored and scrutinised by the Council. Members were concerned about the issues raised and wanted to ensure that the same mistakes were not repeated. Members requested an additional meeting to consider this matter.

- RESOLVED:
- 1) That Members noted the topics due to be considered at the next Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
 - 2) That an additional meeting be arranged to consider the recent investigation by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.

247. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2017-18 TO 2020-21

The Committee considered a report on the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy 2017-18 to 2020-21 which set out the spending priorities of the Council. Key investment objectives and budget areas targeted for necessary savings. The strategy included a financial forecast for 2017-21 and a detailed draft revenue budget for 2017-18.

The Committee welcomed the Head of Education and Family Support and the Cabinet Member Education and Regeneration to the meeting.

The Committee raised the issue of the proposed increase of 10p for school meals. This could be an issue particularly for families with more than one child. One member had received complaints from a parent focal group regarding the quantity and quality of food, children being hungry and teachers purchasing sandwiches for children from their own money rather than letting them remain hungry. Members asked if there was a reduction in the number of children taking school meals following an increase in price. The Head of Education and Family Support explained that BCBC were just above average when it came to the price of school meals and that typically an increase in price would result in a reduction in the number of meals taken. She agreed to investigate the concerns raised as this was not the usual experience and this was an award winning service.

Concerns were also raised about "surreptitious" extras such as responsibility for paying for broadband and CRB checks which now fell to the schools and were an extra pressure on an already reduced budget.

The Head of Education and Family Support explained that difficult decisions had been taken and costs for various services had to be absorbed by the schools.

The Committee asked if the 1% cut was being made by top slicing the budget. The Head of Education and Family Support explained that that was correct and this year there would be an allowance for inflation so there would be a net increase to the budget. Pay increases to staff would have to be absorbed by the schools. Concerns were raised that in the primary sector, the budget for many schools consisted of 98% salary costs and the impact of the cuts on student ratios. The Head of Education and Family Support explained that smaller schools were likely to suffer more than others however it had been modelled in such a way that schools should not have to lose any staff but if it continued there would be an impact moving forward. Members were concerned that many schools operated a one form entry system and the loss of a member of staff could create a serious problem.

Members stated that in previous years non-statutory nursery provision had been discussed but it was not included for discussion this year.

N Clode, Vice Chair of the School Budget Forum explained that of the 22 local authorities in Wales, Bridgend were 21st when it came to the level of funding. In order to stand still, there had to be no further cuts and the authority had to meet inflationary costs. He explained that 35 of the 48 primary schools in BCBC had spent over budget

and survived on the goodwill of staff and grants. A 1% cut over 4 years would result in the loss of 40 teachers at primary school level alone. They were highly geared to employee costs and not in a position to sustain more cuts. The Head of Education and Family Support explained that BCBC had one of the lowest spends in Wales however it was very difficult to understand the funding formula in relation to other authorities.

- H Castle, Chair of the School Budget Forum added that the cuts were of grave concern and it was only the hard work, goodwill and hours invested that concealed the full extent of the cuts. They would not be able to provide the service without grants, they had a good reputation and it was imperative to keep it.
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- The Committee asked if there were any other authorities where the cuts had been imposed in a less brutal way. The Head of Education and Family Support explained that the funding formula was different and complicated so it was impossible to make comparisons with other authorities.
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- The Cabinet Member for Social Services and Early Help explained that schools had been protected but were now in a position where they had to find 1% savings and if Members were of the opinion that education was more important than any other service delivered, then he asked for suggestions where cuts could be made. Cut backs had been made across the board and efficiencies had to be made.

The Cabinet Member Education and Regeneration stated that BCBC had a good reputation, good schools and high standards. It was not reasonable to ask the officers to justify the 1% cut, a decision made by politicians. It was important to look at ways of working to find savings.

The Committee raised concerns about amalgamating the school psychology service and looked for assurances that this would not damage the service. Schools received a very limited service with only 4 visits per annum and schools were invoiced for any additional visits. There were long periods when the service was unavailable and no back up or support.

The Head of Education and Family Support explained that savings were predicated on sharing management across the region so there should be no change to the current service. She was not aware of any issues and generally the service was very effective and BCBC schools were better than most. There were early indications that collaboration was feasible.

The Committee raised concerns about the Trading Services Brochure which used particular service providers. Some schools had parents who were prepared to do jobs for the school and if this was restricted it would have a serious impact. The DLO had priced themselves out of the market eg an external tap could be installed for £15 compared to a quote received for £1600. The Head of Education and Family Support explained that the Trading Services Brochure was part of a complicated agreement with schools. The system had recently been reviewed and found to be functioning inefficiently and had since been restructured. Costs should be 30% lower next year partly helped by savings from using hand held devices. Schools did not have to use DLO providing any improvements or repairs were compliant with regulations.

Members raised concerns regarding Communities First and the risk to the authority, social services and the education directorate if the programme was phased out. The Head of Education and Family Support explained that there was a lot of value in what was happening already but it lacked clarity.

Members requested further information regarding the last increase in the price of school meals. The Head of Education and Family Support explained that the last increase was a few years ago.

The Committee asked if any non-statutory services were funded from the education budget and if we could move away from any of these. The Head of Education and Family Support explained that if early intervention and prevention services were removed, other areas would be swamped. Members explained that they were questioning the balance taking into account the fact that the authority was struggling to provide statutory services.

The Committee welcomed the Corporate Director- Social Services and Wellbeing and the Cabinet Member Social Services and Early Help to the meeting.

Members referred to the budget reduction identified for safeguarding LAC numbers and the related reduction in costs. Savings had been included in the MTFs since 2012 for this and concerns were raised that they were based on the cost of the service rather than the need. The Corporate Director- Social Services and Wellbeing explained that this was an area of serious concern. The reduction in numbers was slow but the priority was that it was done safely with the right decisions made. Financial packages were very high and the number of LAC in Bridgend was also high. Efforts were being made to develop more in house placements instead of out of county and independent places. The cases had more complex needs and behaviour issues and many had been directed by court. It was important to prevent the children going into care by early intervention and this could be achieved with a stable skilled workforce.

Members asked how many children were out of county and how did that compare with last year. The Corporate Director- Social Services and Wellbeing explained that in June, 9 children were out of county at a cost of £1.4 million and 205 children were looked after in house at a cost of £3.8 million.

The Cabinet Member Social Services and Early Help reassured members that child welfare was paramount and that when staff were notified that there was a child in care it was not concern about the cost but concern for the child. If the preventative services were taken away then staff would not be able to deliver the statutory services. They were looking for efficiencies but safety was paramount.

Members agreed that preventative services played an important part and raised concerns that prevention and early intervention might not be grant funded in the future.

The Committee raised concerns that Western Bay had asked for an additional £485,000 to run the adoption service. The Corporate Director- Social Services and Wellbeing explained that this was a good news story because the regional adoption service had exceeded projections and 42% were placed for adoption against the projection of 24%.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives from the School Budget Forum for their contribution.

The Cabinet Member Education and Regeneration congratulated the staff and Rev Canon Edward J Evans on the excellent results received at Bryntirion School following the Estyn Inspection.

Conclusions

Education and Family Support

1. In order to justify any proposed efficiency savings to school budgets, Members recommended that non-statutory services such as early years and nursery provision which the Authority is continuing to provide should be provided in the report to evidence that they are more beneficial long term at preventing a worsening situation for statutory services.
2. The Committee expressed concerns over the effects of cumulative small budget pressures that schools are experiencing such as pay awards and licenses which were once covered by the Local Authority but are now being delegated to schools.

In light of these pressures the Committee had strong concerns over the potential impact of the 1% efficiency savings proposed for school budgets, particularly for those schools already in deficit and for the primary sector, with evidence being heard that this would equate to losing 40 primary teachers across the 4 years.

In light of this the Committee recommend against the 1% efficiency saving for school budgets. It is recommended instead that the proposed Community Action Fund for Councillors not be progressed and the money be used to partially offset the 1% saving.

3. Furthermore the Committee recommend that the budget titled 'Other Corporate Budgets' for 2017-18 with a proposed £6,194,000 set against it, be considered to achieve the remainder of the saving set against schools under the 1% efficiency.
4. The Committee reiterated previous concerns and recommendations in relation to Learner Transport including those from last year's budget consultation process that proper project management be provided to carry out a review of Learner Transport and that this comes from outside of the two responsible areas in order to provide an objective oversight.

Further comments

- a) The Committee were pleased to receive assurances that the proposed collaboration and savings for the Educational Psychology Service would not be to the detriment of the service but would ensure that it was maintained at its current level.
- b) The Committee wished to congratulate Officers on the success of the School Modernisation Programme and its continued achievements for pupils within the County Borough.
- c) Members also commended schools on the improvement achieved within Bridgend even when we have such a high pupil teacher ratio.

Children's Social Services

1. The Committee expressed serious concerns regarding the proposal for further savings from the reduction of Looked After Children particularly given the recent Quarter 2 finance report which projected that the savings of 357,000 for LAC allocated for this year will not be made and the service is currently overspent. Members commented that they did not share the apparent confidence that the Directorate displayed over achieving the future savings in this area.

The Committee requested further detail as to how the service had calculated the £260,000 saving for 2017-18 for LAC.

The Committee further stated that in light of the historic overspends in respect of LAC and the current status of the projected savings in this area for 2016-17, the proposals for further savings for 2017-18 and 2018-19 are unrealistic and unachievable. The Committee therefore recommend that the Directorate look elsewhere for more realistic savings that are attainable.

2. The Committee echoed previous concerns of the Committee in relation to the cost of Out of County Foster Carers compared with those in house and the need for more Foster carers within the County Borough to keep LAC closer to home. The Committee reiterated previous recommendations that there be an increase in payments made to in-house Foster carers to try and grow their numbers and reduce the overall cost of sending children out of Authority, which is not always best for the Looked After Child.

Further information Requests

- a) The Committee requested clarification as to where the 1% efficiency savings proposed for schools had originated from.
- b) Members queried the Officer's response in relation to the funding formula in that it is difficult to know where Bridgend sits with funding per pupil as it has always been reported to the Committee that Bridgend was funded 20 out of 22 for Local Authorities in Wales. The Committee asked for clarification on this and also pointed out the Authority still has one of the highest pupil teacher ratios which is a further indicator of poorer funding.
- c) The Committee requested a breakdown of what Nursery Education costs the Authority each year.

The Committee requested that they receive the Catering Services outturn statement on school meals for clarification as to whether the proposal to increase school meals by 10p is revenue or simply to balance the budget.

248. NOMINATION TO THE COLLABORATIVE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

RESOLVED That Councillors Foley and Farr and Rev Canon Edwards be nominated onto the Collaborative Scrutiny Committee with Cllr Westwood as a reserve.

249. APPOINTMENT OF REGISTERED REPRESENTATIVE TO THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

RESOLVED 1) That the Committee recommends to Council the appointment of Mr Tim Thomas as the Primary School Parent Governor Representative to the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, for a term of four years.

That further information be provided on how nominations for the position are sought.

250. URGENT ITEMS

None

The meeting closed at 4.40 pm