

SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Wednesday, 26th January 2011 at 6.00 p.m.
in Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Vickers (Chairman)
Councillor Attwood (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Crumpton, Mrs Dunn, Mrs Greenaway, Hanif, Ms Harris, J Jones, J Martin, Mrs Rogers and P Woodall; Reverend Wickens; Mr Tinsley; Mrs Roe and Mrs Verdegem and Mr Taylor

OFFICERS

The Chief Executive (Lead Officer to the Committee for this meeting), The Director of Corporate Resources, The Treasurer, The Acting Director of Children's Services, The Assistant Directors of Children's Services (Children's Specialist Services) (Education Play and Learning) and (Quality and Partnership) and Mr Sanders (Directorate of Corporate Resources)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE BY INVITATION

Councillor Mrs Walker (Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services)

WELCOME

The Chairman introduced and welcomed the newly-elected parent governor representative for the Special Education phase, Mr D Tinsley, who was attending his first meeting of the Committee in that capacity.

37 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Ms Lees and Mrs Ward and from the Lead Officer to the Committee, Mr Carter.

The Chairman referred to the injury sustained by Mr Carter and, on behalf of the Committee, wished him a speedy recovery.

38 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Declarations of a Personal Interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, were made at this juncture by Councillor Vickers in respect of the agenda items numbered below, in view of the issues indicated:

Item 9 – Chairman of the Management Committee of the Short Stay School Service

Item 10 – Council’s Member Champion for Learning Disabilities

39

MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11th November 2010 be approved as a correct record and signed.

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REVENUE BUDGET STRATEGY 2011/12

A report of the Chief Executive, Treasurer and Acting Director of Children’s Services was submitted consulting the Committee on the proposed Revenue Budget Strategy for 2011/12 and Medium Term Financial Strategy for the period from 2011/12 to 2013/14, in accordance with the terms of the Council’s Constitution.

In the question and answer session that followed the presentation of the report, the Opposition Spokesperson for Children’s Services submitted that a considered response could not be given from his group at this stage owing to the lack of information from government regarding Children’s Services expenditure. The Acting Director of Children’s Services then gave an oral update on the position known to date, making particular reference to Support for Looked After Children, post 16 education, the area of Family Support, including Children’s Centres, voluntary sector involvement, integrated youth support, the position regarding the mainstreaming of the majority of grants, and certain human resource implications.

The Acting Director undertook to brief the political groups either separately or jointly, in accordance with their wishes, as and when the position became more clear. Documentation comprising a summary of the latest decisions and announcements by government impacting on Children’s Services, a Budget Fact Sheet and a summary of the main provisions of the “Importance of Teaching” White Paper were made available for collection by Members at the conclusion of the meeting.

In response to member questions, the Treasurer stated that agreement on usage of the £4.3m to be transferred to the Council from the National Health Service still had to be reached with the Primary Care Trust and that support for Children’s Health issues may be considered, subject to the agreement with the Primary Care Trust. Further to a question in relation to Family Support Services, the Acting Director of Children’s Services indicated that, currently, there were no proposals to discontinue any Children’s Centres. On the issue of Corporate Parenting, the Acting Director confirmed that work with the Virtual Head was being undertaken in relation to the budget implications.

In responding to a comment by the Opposition Spokesperson for Children's Services that the report had been drafted in broad terms and that it was therefore difficult to identify particular areas of service or specific facilities that were proposed to be discontinued, the Acting Director indicated that officers within the Directorate were working their way through the budget headings and that Members would be fully briefed. Reference was then made by the Chief Executive and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services to the role of the voluntary sector, in which it was indicated that the government reductions would reduce funding in all areas, including the voluntary sector. In this regard, the Chief Executive referred to the good working relationship between the Council and the Dudley Council for Voluntary Service. In the context of social workers for children, the Opposition Spokesperson expressed concerns about the proposed reduction in adult social worker posts and asked to be provided with the current position on the reorganisation of social workers.

In asking to be advised of the availability of any contingency funding, the Opposition Spokesperson referred to the difficulties in being able to conduct effective scrutiny of the impact savings might have in the absence of knowledge of how the strategic needs of the service were to be met, and asked for a mechanism to be put in place where members could be more fully appraised of the ramifications for Children's Services once the position from Government was clearer. The Acting Director of Children's Services agreed to write to all members of the Committee when further details were available and to include in the correspondence a return slip for members to ask questions, to which the Cabinet Member and herself would reply. The Acting Director indicated her intention to send out the letter in reasonable time before the meeting of the Council on 7th March, 2011.

RESOLVED

That the Cabinet's Revenue Budget Strategy proposals for 2011/12 and Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2011/12 – 2013/14 be received and that no observations regarding alternative proposals be referred to Cabinet.

41

QUARTERLY CORPORATE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT

A report of the Lead Officer of the Committee was submitted seeking consideration of the Quarterly Corporate Performance Management Report in relation to the review and scrutiny of the performance of the Council for the activities relating to the terms of reference of this Committee for the second quarter of 2010/11. An accompanying report by the Acting Director of Children's Services containing contextual information regarding performance in particular areas of service was also considered at this juncture.

RESOLVED

That both reports be noted.

HEAD OF THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL

(During consideration of this item, Councillor Mrs Dunn declared a personal interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, in view of her office as a governor with responsibility for Looked After Children at two schools).

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted on the role of the Head of the Virtual School, this being in support of Looked After Children in Dudley. The Virtual Head, Pat Finegan, was in attendance and expanded on the role and work of the post.

In the discussion, reference was made to the academic achievement of Looked After Children in Dudley in key stages 2 and 4, which was now substantially higher than the national average for Looked After Children. The report also indicated that attendance figures were in excess of 90%. The methodology involved in overseeing the progress of Looked After Children, which included the organisation and progressing of the Personal Education Plans for children coming into care and the allocation of a designated teacher and governor for Looked After Children at each school, was discussed. Particular reference was made in the report to initiatives in which Looked After Children were engaged locally and nationally.

In response to a question regarding the continuation of the post, given the current financial situation, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Education Play and Learning) specified the funding arrangements, following which the Acting Director emphasised that, having regard to the corporate duty of the Local Authority to ensure that Looked After Children reached their full potential, a dedicated officer to hold head teachers to account for those children was seen as vital and confirmed that the post was secure, notwithstanding current budget pressures.

RESOLVED

That the content of the report, and the presentation given by the Virtual Head, be noted, together with work undertaken in supporting Looked After Children to achieve their full potential.

UPDATE REPORT ON THE PENSNETT EDUCATION CAMPUS

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted on progress of the students at the Pensnett Education Campus.

On consideration of the report, a request was made by a member for feedback on children in the Pensnett community who had been placed at other schools, in consequence of the closure of Pensnett School of Technology. A brief summary was given orally and the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Education Play and Learning) agreed to report further to the next meeting.

RESOLVED

That the work undertaken at the Pensnett Education Campus be noted.

44 16-19 FUNDING AND COMMISSIONING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND THOSE AGED 16-25 – LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES OR_ DISABILITIES

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted on the transfer of responsibility to the local authority for the funding and commissioning of 16-19 learning provision and advising the Committee of the revised budget allocation devolved to the Local Authority in 2010/11 in this regard. The 16-19 Funding and Commissioning Officer, John Cunningham, who had transferred from the Learning and Skills Council, attended the meeting and expanded on the information in the report regarding the duties now the responsibility of the Local Authority and the processes in place to deal with them.

The Acting Director of Children's Services indicated that staff in the Directorate were working with College Principals with a view to ensuring that the necessary educational provision for pupils in the Borough was in place and that meetings with College Principals were being held with this objective. Particular reference was made in the report to the funding arrangements for support staff, in the light of the budget for that purpose no longer being ring fenced.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the details on the change of funding for 16-19 Learning Provision be noted.
 - (2) That it be noted that the budget for learners with learning difficulties or disabilities will be devolved from the Young People's Learning Agency.
 - (3) That the Acting Director report to the Committee regularly on progress on this issue.
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45 ACHIEVING EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN

A report of the Acting Director of Children's Services was submitted advising the Committee of the proposals contained in the consultation document 'Achieving Equity and Excellence for Children – How liberating the National Health Service will help to meet the needs of children and young people'.

The particular issues being consulted on were set out in paragraph 3 of the report and the implications locally should the changes take effect, were indicated in paragraph 6 onwards in the areas of service of Listening to Children and Young People and their families; Improving Outcomes for Children and Young People; the Local Commissioning and Local Partnerships Envisaged; and the position with Safeguarding and Vulnerable Groups.

On consideration of the report, it was considered that some areas had not yet been addressed, these including Mental Health services. The view was expressed that, internally within the Council, scrutiny arrangements for Health and Children's Services could be improved and that training on the methodology for such scrutiny needed to be provided.

In response, the Chief Executive indicated that it was proposed that the arrangements in the Constitution with the Select Committees would be reviewed against the context of the Localism Bill. The role and remit of Select Committees on a range of issues, including Health, would be looked at but the Chief Executive cautioned this was a very big agenda with complications. A review of the Select Committees was being organised in 2011.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the publication of the National Health Service White Paper be noted.
- (2) That a further report be submitted to the Committee following the outcome of the consultation on the National Health Service White Paper 'Equity and Excellence – Liberating the National Health Service and Achieving Equity and Excellence for Children'.

The meeting ended at 7.55 p.m.

CHAIRMAN