

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**
held on Tuesday, 17th January, 2012 at Committee Suite 1,2 & 3, Westfields,
Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

Councillor A Kolker (Chairman)
Councillor K Edwards (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors L Brown, S Gardiner, P Hoyland, D Mahon, D Neilson, W Livesley,
G Merry, G Wait, B Silvester and S Hogben

Apologies

Councillors M Sherratt

In Attendance

Councillors H Gaddum, R Bailey, D Flude and S Corcoran.

Officers

Chris Williams – Integrated Transport Manager
Fintan Bradley – Head of Strategy, Planning and Performance
Cath Knowles – Head of Service – Social Care
Mark Grimshaw – Scrutiny Officer

128 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 December 2011 be approved as a correct record.

129 DECLARATION OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

With regard to Item 5: Home to School Transport, Councillors Gardiner and Mahon declared a personal interest on the virtue that they were members of the Roman Catholic Church.

130 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME/OPEN SESSION

Mr. McHugh, Headteacher at St. Thomas More RC High School, attended to comment on item 5: Home to School Transport. He asserted that he felt the Task and Finish Group had not fully understood a faith based education as there was no recognition in the report that faith schools were different. He stated that he didn't accept that attending a faith school was a choice, as it was more a way of life.

Mr. McHugh continued to argue that there was no compelling financial evidence in the report to justify removing the denominational subsidy as there were no

comparative costings to back up assumed savings. He welcomed the recommendation to devolve the transport budget to schools but suggested that this should be done through a pilot to test whether or not it would be successful. He also noted that schools would need help and assistance from the Council if such a scheme was to prove a success. As a final point, Mr. McHugh commended the Minority Report to the Committee.

Mr. Fagan a parent of a disabled boy who once was in receipt of services at Priors Hill, attended to comment on item 7: Disabled Respite Care. Mr. Fagan explained that he attended a meeting of the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee in the previous year about his concerns around the closure of the Langley Unit in Priors Hill. He wished to note that the alternative arrangements that had been made by the officers of the Council had been highly satisfactory and that he thanked them for this. He continued to draw attention to SEN transport which was referred to in item 5 in order to add a parental perspective. He explained that his child used to get a personal taxi but now had access to a shared mini bus which was difficult to use. He acknowledged therefore that whilst taxis were not always appropriate, the Council should be aware of going from one extreme to another.

Representatives from Ruby's Fund attended. They explained that the mission of Ruby's Fund was to open a multi-sensory studio for those with additional needs in Congleton. It was noted that the initiative had been highly successful but that they were impeded with opening the studio by the lack of a suitable premises. Congleton Business Centre had been identified as an ideal location but the fund had been disappointed to learn that it was to be sold by the Council. The Committee was asked therefore whether any help could be provided for their cause. Councillor Hilda Gaddum suggested that she met the representatives outside of the meeting to discuss the issue in more detail.

131 HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT TASK AND FINISH REVIEW

The Committee considered both the report of the Task and Finish Group and the Minority Report from Councillor Louise Brown. Arguments for and against each were put forward by the respective Members of the Committee and other Councillors.

The Chairman at the beginning of the item had noted that both reports would be put forward to Cabinet but suggested that the Committee should vote on which report would be endorsed. Seven Members voted in favour of the Minority Report, with five voting for the report of the Task and Finish Group. There was one abstention. As a result, it was decided that the Minority Report would be commended to Cabinet.

RESOLVED –

- a) That both the report of the Task and Finish Group and the Minority Report be put forward for consideration by Cabinet.
- b) That the Minority Report be endorsed by the Committee.

132 ACADEMIES THE IMPACT ON CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Fintan Bradley, Head of Strategy, Planning and Performance, attended to provide an update on the number of conversions of maintained schools within Cheshire East to Academy status. He also outlined the financial consequences of these conversions on the Council.

The Committee was asked to consider the information within the report and provide guidance on the approach to be taken in terms of the services provided to both maintained and Academy Schools at a differentiated cost.

Outlining the pattern of conversions, Fintan Bradley reported that to date, eight schools within Cheshire East had converted to Academy status (7 secondary's and 2 primaries) and one school had achieved Free School Status.

It was explained that these conversions were starting to have significant financial implications for the Council. Very simply, it was explained that local authorities received funding for central services provided to schools from two main funding streams – The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and the Formula Grant. Academies no longer were entitled to free of charge services from the local authority and were therefore compensated through the LACSEG (Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant). Central Government, recognising that there was an issue of double funding with this system sought to reduce the amount paid to local authorities through the DSG and Formula Grant. The Department for Education's (DfE) view was that it was reasonable to conclude that local authorities should be able to make savings which were commensurate with the reduction in responsibilities which a transfer of schools to Academy status entails, and which was commensurate with the cost to the DfE of providing LACSEG. Fintan Bradley explained that this was an overly simplistic analysis as Cheshire East still had a number of statutory responsibilities that related to Academies e.g. SEN which would have to be funded with an eroded budget.

With this funding pressure in mind, Fintan Bradley outlined an opportunity that Cheshire East had to start trading with Academies in the market place for providing central services. Advice was sought from the Committee as to how this relationship might function. For instance it was queried whether the Council should open itself up to the risk of trading and if so, whether it should trade at margin which provided a surplus.

A number of comments were made regarding the potential of the Council providing services to Academies. All Members agreed that the Council should trade for profit in order to cover risk. It was stated that the Council should make full advantage of its extensive knowledge and experience in providing such services. It was noted that the Council would need to make sure that if they chose to go down this route that supported schools received the same level of service as Academy schools who were buying it in. Fintan Bradley, acknowledged that this would be a challenge.

A number of concerns were also expressed with regard to the changing relationship between the Council and Academy status schools. In particular a number of comments were made about the performance monitoring arrangements. Fintan Bradley acknowledged that this was a valid concern but reassured the Committee that the Council had maintained close relationships with the Academies and that work was on-going to ensure effective data sharing. It was also noted that as high achieving Academies were no longer included in the school performance data for Cheshire East, there could be the false perception from the public that our schools' performance had worsened. It was asserted that

it was vital that the service considered Public Relations initiatives around this issue to rebuff such false perceptions.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the Committee support the department in providing services to Academies at competitive market rates.
- b) That the Committee have sight of the packages being offered to Academies prior to them being put on the market and that the Committee be involved in the monitoring of their efficacy.
- c) That it be recommended to the service that they consider Public Relations initiatives with regard to the possible false perception of Cheshire East school performance decreasing as a result of the loss of high performing Academies from the data set.

133 **DISABLED RESPITE CARE**

Cath Knowles, Head of Service – Social Care, attended to provide a verbal update on disabled respite care. She explained that since the closure of the Langley Unit at Priors Hill, a number of packages had been put in place for those children and young people who had been affected. She confirmed that these had been deemed satisfactory by parents.

Cath Knowles continued to note that the Council was exploring options around providing a stand alone respite facility in Cheshire East. Additionally the Council was also looking to improve transition arrangements between children's and adult's respite services. Cath Knowles reported that this process had already been aided by the joining of the respective Directorates and that the potential for natural synergies were still being discovered. It was suggested that a report could be brought to a future meeting outlining this work.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the update be noted.
- b) That a report outlining future respite care options and the improved transition between children's and adult's respite care be brought to a subsequent meeting.
- c) That thanks be extended to Cath Knowles and her team for all their hard work in achieving a positive outcome in challenging circumstances.

134 **WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE**

Members considered the work programme. It was suggested that it was necessary for the Committee to consider the 2012/13 budget proposals prior to the budget being agreed at Council on 23 February 2012. It was agreed therefore that a special meeting be arranged for this purpose. Attention was also drawn to the possibility of some early intervention funding moving from local authority control to the police. It was suggested that this issue be added to the work programme for future consideration.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the work programme be noted
- b) That a special meeting be arranged to consider the 2012/13 budget proposals prior to the 23 February 2012.
- c) That an item regarding the transfer of an element of the early intervention budget from local authority to police control be added to the work programme.

135 **FORWARD PLAN - EXTRACTS**

The Committee gave consideration to the extracts of the forward plan which fell within the remit of the Committee. It was suggested that Admission Arrangements item be considered by the Committee prior to the Cabinet decision scheduled for 2 April 2012.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the forward plan be noted
- b) That the item regarding Admission Arrangements be considered by the Committee prior to the 2 April 2012.

136 **CONSULTATIONS FROM CABINET**

There were no consultations from Cabinet.

The meeting commenced at 1.30 pm and concluded at 4.20 pm

Councillor A Kolker (Chairman)