

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CHILDREN, FAMILIES & LEARNING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held at Room 15, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Tuesday, 1 December 2009.

PRESENT

Cllr J Street (Chairman)
Cllr Mrs D B Gurney (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors: P A Blaine
D Bowater
N B Costin
Dr R Egan
P Hollick
K Janes
A Shadbolt

Parental Co-optees: D Landman

Church of England
Co-optee: J Reynolds

Apologies for Absence: Cllrs H Chapman
I Dalgarno
F Image
B Sear

Members in Attendance: Cllrs Mrs A M Lewis
S F Male
Mrs C Turner

Officers in Attendance: Mr B Carter
Mr D Crawford
Mrs S Hobbs
Mr M Pratt
Overview & Scrutiny Manager
Policy and Strategy Officer
Democratic Services Officer
Deputy Director Children Families
and Learning and Assistant Director
Specialist Services

CFL/09/47 **Minutes**

RESOLVED

that the Minutes of the meeting of the Children, Families and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 3 November 2009 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CFL/09/48 **Members' Interests**

(a) **Personal Interests:-**

None.

(b) **Personal and Prejudicial Interests:-**

None.

(c) **Any Political Whip in relation to items on the agenda:-**

None.

CFL/09/49 **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

None.

CFL/09/50 **Petitions**

The Chairman announced that no petitions had been referred to this meeting.

CFL/09/51 **Questions, Statements or Deputations**

There were no applications from members of the public to speak under the Public Participation Procedure allowed for under Part A4 of the Constitution.

CFL/09/52 **Call-In**

No matters were referred to the Committee for a decision in relation to call-in of a decision.

CFL/09/53 **Requested Items**

No items were referred to the Committee for consideration at the request of a Member under Procedure Rule 3.1 of Part D2 of the Constitution.

CFL/09/54 **Eligibility for Financial Support Policies**

Members considered the report of the Deputy Director of Children, Families and Learning and Assistant Director, Children's Specialist Services proposing the adoption of policies setting out the eligibility criteria for financial support for Adoption, Special Guardianship and Residence Orders. Central Bedfordshire Council financially supported families who sought one of these orders in line with regulations and best practice. Members were advised that the Adoption and Fostering Service was a shared service with Bedford Borough Council.

Members were advised that currently there were 163 children being looked after by Central Bedfordshire Council. This figure was in line with other local authorities across the country, as there had been an increase in children being looked after following the death of baby Peter. Due to the increase in looked after children the cost for looking after these children had increased. The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services stated that it was the Council's duty to keep children safe and funding would need to be provided within the budget.

Members were informed that since 1 April 2009 there had been a revision of the thresholds which Social Workers apply and every case had been reviewed. There was an issue of recruiting and retaining Social Workers and the use of agency staff.

Members agreed that the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services write to the Government, copying it to the local MPs and all members, explaining that costs had increased within Children's Services following the death of baby Peter. Members requested that this letter also include a section on the Home Office proposal to cap the amount of funding each local authority would receive as reimbursement for housing unaccompanied children seeking asylum especially as Central Bedfordshire Council had a problem with children seeking asylum being abandoned at Toddington Service Station on the M1. These children were then taken to Dunstable Police Station where they were assessed and if they were found to be under the age of 18 the Council had a duty to look after them.

Members discussed the security problems at Toddington Service Station and they were advised that a meeting was being organised through the Police Commissioner to discuss this issue.

The policies setting out the eligibility criteria for financial support for Adoption, and Residence Orders were based on the policies held by the former Bedfordshire County Council. Special Guardianship was a recently introduced legal status which provided an alternative option to adoption and gave legal permanence to children who might otherwise have remained within the care system. Members were advised that it would be practical to review these policies every two years.

Members were advised that the level of financial support offered would vary depending on the individual needs and circumstances of the family. Where a one off payment was offered to the family this would be for items such as providing a bed for the child.

RESOLVED

that the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services write to the Government, copied to the local MPs and Members:-

- (a) setting out the financial pressures placed on local authorities following the death of baby Peter; and***

- (b) the concerns with the Home Office proposal to cap the amount of funding each local authority would receive as reimbursement for housing unaccompanied children seeking asylum especially as Toddington Service Station was a well known 'hot spot'.**

RECOMMENDED

that the policies for Adoption Financial Support, Residence Order Support and Special Guardianship Financial Support be approved by the Executive.

CFL/09/55

The Future of Special Schooling in the East of Central Bedfordshire

Members considered the report of the Deputy Director of Children, Families and Learning and Assistant Director of Children's Specialist Services, which sought Members comments on the responses to the consultation of special schooling that was initiated by the Executive, with a view towards supporting the preferred option of merging Sunnyside and Hitchmead schools.

Members of the Committee debated the matter at length and also heard from a number of witnesses (via correspondence and in person) regarding concerns over the proposed merger. The concerns raised and the issues discussed are summarised below:-

- there was some concern regarding the validity of the survey and whether it contained an element of bias;
- the lack of sufficient financial analysis to make an informed decision, particularly regarding the cost of the adaptation works required at Hitchmead school to accommodate the merger;
- the lack of any detail regarding how the best features of both schools would be retained in any merger and what the vision, values, leadership and governance would look like in any new school created; and
- the Council's position regarding the provision of a new build school to replace both Sunnyside and Hitchmead.

In response to the concerns raised, the Deputy Director of Children, Families and Learning explained that the survey had been based upon a model used by other authorities and there was absolutely no intention of bias. He also confirmed that officers could only prepare detailed financial and school organisation information, and an implementation plan, should the Executive be minded to approve the merger on 8 December and should this happen, the Council would then enter into a further 6 week consultation period regarding the approved option.

In conclusion, whilst the Committee supported Option A of the report i.e. the proposed merger of Sunnyside and Hitchmead schools, it did so subject to a number of conditions and these are outlined in the resolutions below.

RESOLVED

- 1) that whilst the Committee wholeheartedly supports the merger of Sunnyside and Hitchmead schools, it calls upon the Executive to consider seriously the urgent and pressing need for a new build facility to replace both, such consideration to include the urgent investigation and identification of sufficient capital resources to do so**
- 2) that notwithstanding resolution (1) above, the Committee calls upon the Deputy Director of Children, Families and Learning to submit a written response to the Executive addressing the questions raised by both witnesses (Tim Walker, Head Teacher, Hitchmead School and Stephen Court, member of the public), so that Members of the Executive can make an informed decision regarding the proposals**
- 3) that, should the Executive approve the merger, the Committee receives a further report following the 6 week consultation period, which will provide Members with the financial implications of the initiative and an outline implementation plan.**

CFL/09/56 **Performance Report: Quarter Two**

Members considered the report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Children, Families and Learning that set out the quarter two performance information for the Children, Families and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Members commented on performance indicator 115 'Substance misuse by young people' as the 2009/10 target had been increased to 82.9% when the outturn figure for 2008/09 was 13.3%. The Deputy Director of Children, Families and Learning and Assistant Director of Children's Specialist Services confirmed that he would seek clarification on this figure.

Members queried performance indicator 64 'The percentage of children who ceased to be the subject of a child protection plan' and 65 'The percentage of children who became the subject of a child protection plan during the year, who had previously been the subject of a child protection plan' as the performance judgement was off track. Members were informed that Officers were monitoring NI 64 on a weekly basis and it was expected that this would be in line with the 2009/10 target by the end of the year. Officers were also monitoring NI 65 and it was hoped that this indicator would reduce.

RESOLVED

that future quarterly monitoring reports include an extra column with national data to enable Members to compare Central Bedfordshire's performance with the national average.

CFL/09/57 **Quarter 2 Budget Management Report**

Members considered the report of the Portfolio Holder for Children, Families and Learning that set out the budget management position as at September 2009 where the net revenue position was £2.9m overspent. Members were advised that work was continuing on the Directorate Action Plans to address the overspend. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the Committee would be able to consider the capital programme and include it on their work programme as this was an area of concern.

Members were advised that a stock condition survey was being carried out on all the schools in Central Bedfordshire and once the results of this were known, Officers would be able to prioritise school improvements. This survey was due to be completed by the end of January 2010. Members requested that the results from this survey be included on the work programme for the 2 March 2010.

The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the money set aside for improvements to Tithe Farm Lower School, Houghton Regis and Roecroft Lower School, Stotfold was still allocated for in the capital programme.

RESOLVED

that the results of the stock condition survey of schools be submitted to the Children, Families and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2 March 2010 and a report on the capital programme also be included on the work programme.

CFL/09/58 **Work Programme 2009-2010**

Members considered the report of the Overview and Scrutiny Officer setting out the Children, Families and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme for 2009-2010. Members were advised that the Task Force looking at provision of facilities for youth was due to meet on 2 December 2009.

A request was made for a report on the quality of service and performance of Mouchel and the procedures and timetable relating to contract renewal be included on the work programme.

The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services thanked the Committee for their valuable help.

RESOLVED

to include an item on the Children, Families and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme for a report on the quality of service and performance of Mouchel (including details of the procedure and timetable for contact renewal).

(Note: The meeting commenced at 10.15 a.m. and concluded at 1.15 p.m.)