



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND SCHOOLS SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: TUESDAY, 4 FEBRUARY 2014 at 5.30 pm

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Willmott (Chair)
Councillor Unsworth (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Cole	Councillor Potter
Councillor Dawood	Councillor Senior
Councillor Naylor	

Standing Invitees (Non-Voting):

Peter Flack – Teaching Unions
Anu Kapur – Leicester Secular Society

In Attendance:

Councillor Dempster – Assistant Mayor (Children, Young People and Schools)

Also present:

Councillor Chaplin
Councillor Kitterick

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177. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Rabiha Hannan (Faith Representative) and Bernard Monaghan (Roman Catholic Diocese).

178. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Senior declared an Other Disclosable interest in agenda item 6, "General Fund Budget 2014/15 to 2015/16", in that her partner was a Council employee in the Transport Strategy service.

Although not a member of the Commission, Peter Flack, a Standing Invitee to the meeting as a representative of teaching unions, declared an Other Disclosable interest in agenda item 6, "General Fund Budget 2014/15 to 2015/16", in that his partner worked in the Early Years Intervention service.

Councillors Dawood, Naylor, Senior and Unsworth each declared an Other Disclosable Interest in agenda item 10, "Adventure Playgrounds Task Group", as they each had an adventure playground in the Wards they represented.

Councillor Cole declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting, as his wife was a teacher.

Councillor Potter declared an Other Disclosable Interest in the general business of the meeting, as she was a former Looked After Child and was the Chair of the Safeguarding Children Panel.

Councillor Senior declared an Other Disclosable interest in the general business of the meeting as she was a member of Unison.

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, these interests were not considered so significant that they were likely to prejudice the Councillors' judgement of the public interest. They were not, therefore, required to withdraw from the meeting.

182. GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2014/15 TO 2015/16

The Strategic Director for Children's Services submitted a report setting out the draft budget proposals for 2014/15 to 2015/16 for the Education and Children's Services departmental portfolio. The Commission was asked to make comments to the Overview Select Committee. These comments would be considered by that Committee at its meeting on 13 February 2014 and its views reported views to the City Mayor prior to the City Mayor making his final proposals to the Council.

Councillor Dempster, Assistant Mayor with responsibility for Children, Young People and Schools, reminded the Commission that this was difficult budget, as the service was funded by various grants, as well as the General Fund. Substantial cuts to the service already had been made, but more would be needed.

At the invitation of the Chair, Peter Flack, representing the teaching unions, made the following comments:-

- The government had particularly targeted children's services for financial cuts. For example, the budget for Early Prevention had been reduced by approximately 30% and the budget for Moving Barriers had been reduced by approximately 10%. The children with the greatest need should be the top priority, so the Council should do whatever it could to maintain services;

- The reduction in the School Improvement Service was a great concern. This needed to develop an effective trading service outside of Leicester, and needed to be in a strong position to do this; and
- It was questioned whether children of pre-school age could be supported through Dedicated Schools' Grant (DSG) and therefore whether it was possible to fund Early Years teachers through this. Although there was a small element of grant left over from previous years, this would only provide funding for one or two years.

The following points were then made by the Commission during discussion on the draft budget proposals:-

- Residents should be made aware of the severity of the cuts that needed to be made;
- The proposal to combine teams where practical in localities and utilise buildings more efficiently was welcomed;
- More information was needed on the cuts proposed to the Special Educational Needs service and the miscellaneous budgets that were scheduled to cease;
- A discussion previously had been held on whether savings could be achieved by changing the policy on how often checks should be made through the Disclosing and Barring Service (DBS), (minute 174, "Proposed Changes to the Adventure Playgrounds Service", 6 January 2014 referred). Following this, it had been established that projected annual expenditure on re-checks was £101,000 over the coming year. As re-checks were not required by the government, a change in the policy could result in a financial saving to the Council;
- Was the number of Looked After Children declining? They needed to be offered the same opportunities as other children, so care should be taken to ensure that sufficient funding was available to enable this to happen; and
- Individual elements of the budget could not be considered in isolation. The whole budget for the portfolio needed to be considered, as reducing funding for any part of the children's services budget could put children at risk.

In reply, Councillor Dempster advised that:-

- It was recognised that duplication needed to be reduced and the best use possible made of Council buildings;
- The Schools Forum could be asked to endorse expenditure on Early Years teachers from the DSG, as it would come from the Higher Needs block;
- The cost to schools of making DBS checks was met from DSG funding, so reducing the number of checks made would not achieve the savings being

sought. In addition, there could be a deterrent effect of making regular DBS checks, as people could be encouraged to make disclosures themselves if they knew that regular checks were made;

- A lot of the funding for the Special Educational Needs Service was through the DSG, so further work was needed on how savings could be achieved. However, at present it was anticipated that a saving of approximately 10% of this year's budget would be sought;
- The Council considered that it was very important that the School Improvement service did not decline. A pro-active approach therefore was being taken to reconfigure the service and build on partnerships that already had been established. Discussions would be held with schools as soon as possible about what form the service should take in the future;
- Further details could be provided on the miscellaneous budgets that it was proposed should cease. For example, the government had changed the way that the Key Stage 4 Foundation Learning budget was distributed, so that it would go direct to schools, rather than the local authority;
- The number of Looked After Children in the city generally was stable, although there had been a slight drop recently. However, the number fluctuated over time. Nationally, there was an upward trend in their number, but the work undertaken by the authority meant that there was some confidence that the number locally would continue to decline; and
- The Council's corporate parenting responsibilities were taken very seriously and it was hoped that the work being done, (for example, through the Safeguarding Children Panel), would enable the downward movement to continue. It was recognised that funding had to be available to support this and that services across the Council needed to consider what the implications of their provision were for Looked After Children.

Peter Flack recognised the reasons for combining teams where practical in localities and use buildings more effectively. However, staff working in children's centres believed that locating social services staff in those centres would discourage parents from attending, as they would view the centres as having a very different purpose to their current one. Councillor Dempster acknowledged this and confirmed that a wide range of factors needed to be taken in to account to ensure that services located together complemented each other.

RESOLVED:

That the Overview Select Committee be requested to consider the points raised above and in particular to be advised that:-

- a) This Commission is dismayed at the level of cuts proposed for the Education and Children's Services departmental portfolio;
- b) This Commission requests that the Executive be asked to review the Council's current Disclosing and Barring Service

checking policy to see if savings can be achieved;

- c) This Commission supports the identification of genuine efficiency savings;
- d) This Commission requests that the Executive support this Commission in its concern that School Improvement services should not be reduced to the extent that they can no longer operate, especially in view of their successful work to date; and
- e) This Commission requests that the issues raised during its consideration of the findings of the Adventure Playgrounds Task Group be taken in to consideration during consideration of the budget proposals, (see minute 186, "Adventure Playgrounds Task Group", below).

186. ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS TASK GROUP

The Chair thanked everyone who had been involved in the review of Adventure Playgrounds for their work. He then gave a presentation on the findings of the review, a copy of which is attached at the end of these minutes for information.

During this presentation, the Chair drew particular attention to the following points:-

- The added value of volunteer time had been calculated as the volunteer hours given multiplied by the current minimum wage, (slide 3);
- Written evidence also had been considered when evaluating the impact of adventure playgrounds, (slide 4);
- The "Commissioning and Procurement" approach to funding organisations required very specific contract specifications and therefore established low trust relationships between the Council and the organisations concerned. However, funding organisations through "Funding Agreements" created high trust relationships between the Council and the organisations concerned, (slide 12);
- The Council expected to spend approximately £100,000 during the 2014/15 financial year on Disclosing and Barring Service (DBS) checks. Approximately £36,000 of this would be spent on checks for organisations outside of the Council. This suggested that changing the policy would not result in a large saving for adventure playgrounds (slide 16);
- Although it would be preferred that adventure playgrounds did not have to make any savings, if they had to it was suggested that this be limited to 10%, spread over two years, in order to give those associated with the playgrounds the chance to raise funding elsewhere. However, it was

recognised that not all of the playgrounds had the capacity to do this (slide 17); and

- The reports of visits made by Councillors to adventure playgrounds would be included in the final report of the review.

The Chair advised the Commission that he had been asked to present the findings of this review to the Executive on 13 February 2014. He would report back to the Commission after this.

Representatives of the adventure playgrounds thanked all concerned for their work on this review.

Members noted that, although some adventure playgrounds made successful bids for alternative funding, they did not all have the resources to prepare and submit such bids. It therefore was suggested that a recommendation could be included in the final report of the review that Council officers support adventure playgrounds through helping them to prepare funding bids.

The Commission recognised and welcomed the work that adventure playgrounds were able to do in engaging young people who could otherwise not get the chance to take part in the sort of activities offered at the playgrounds. This had been recognised through Pledge 33 of the City Mayor's 100 Days Programme, which sought to establish a programme of capital investment to support and improve Leicester's adventure playgrounds. However, this had to be considered in the context of the Council's overall budget and its current financial situation, but it was hoped that the effect on adventure playgrounds could be minimised.

At the invitation of the Chair, Councillor Kitterick addressed the Commission, making the following comments:-

- The Watershed was a very good building, but the Council did not have the resources to keep it open. It therefore could be let to an external organisation, which would then take on its running costs. This would be an alternative way of achieving savings while still providing more outward facing services;
- All of the staff currently based at the Collegiate House complex were peripatetic, so savings could be achieved if they were based elsewhere and the complex disposed of. For example, some children's centres currently were under-used; and
- It could be argued that funding for adventure playgrounds could be found from the Dedicated Schools' Grant.

At the invitation of the Chair, Peter Flack, representing the teaching unions, made the following comments:-

- One of the easiest ways of achieving savings would be to remove the requirement for repeat DBS checks to be made on staff;

- The Collegiate House complex was not suitable for its current use, so disposing of it was a sensible option. Relocating the displaced staff to one or more under-used children's centres would help make better use of existing facilities; and
- DSG was mainly delegated to schools and they needed to use it to meet statutory responsibilities, so it was not very likely that funding could be found from this source for adventure playgrounds.

In reply, Councillor Dempster, Assistant Mayor with responsibility for Children, Young People and Schools, thanked Members for the work that had been done on this review. She confirmed that the work done by adventure playgrounds was highly valued, but difficult choices had to be made in how children's services would be funded in the future. The level of saving and the future funding model therefore were the main issues that needed to be considered.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the presentation on the findings of the Adventure Playgrounds Task Group be received and welcomed;
- 2) That the Scrutiny Support Manager be asked to prepare a full report on the findings of the Adventure Playgrounds Task Group, this to include the comments recorded above, the reports of visits made by Councillors to adventure playgrounds and the following additional recommendations:-
 - a) That Council officers share expertise in obtaining funding from sources external to the Council through helping adventure playgrounds to prepare funding bids;
 - b) That the whole budget be considered, to see where cuts can be made that do not affect front line services;
 - c) That consideration be given to the future use or disposal of the Watershed and the Collegiate House complex; and
 - d) That consideration be given to whether savings can be made through removing the requirement for repeat Disclosing and Barring Service checks to be made on staff, (see also minute 182, "General fund Budget 2014/15 to 2015/16", above); and
- 3) That a report on the outcome of the presentation of the findings of the Adventure Playgrounds Task Group to the Executive be made to the Commission.