

A T A M E E T I N G
- of the -
CHILDRENS SERVICES
AND LIFELONG LEARNING
SCRUTINY AND
PERFORMANCE PANEL
held at the Council House,
Walsall on **Thursday 16**
February 2006 at 6.00pm

PRESENT

Councillor Bird (Chairman)
Councillor E.E. Pitt
Councillor Arif
Councillor Cassidy
Councillor Martin
Councillor Walker
Councillor Creaney
Councillor Wilkes
Mr. M. Quinn (Archdiocese of Birmingham)
Mr. R.Grainger (NUT)

Councillor Hughes (Portfolio Holder)

OFFICERS

David Brown (Director of Children's Services)
David Roles, Director for Learning (Leadership,
Management and Secondary
Education – Education Walsall))
Diane Osborne (Teenage Pregnancy
Coordinator
Stuart Bentley (Scrutiny Officer)
Nikki Ehlen (Scrutiny Officer)

APOLOGIES

Apologies for non attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillors Khan and Mrs. E. Collins.

SUBSTITUTIONS

The chairman advised the panel of the following changes to the membership of the committee for the duration of the meeting: -

- Delete: Councillor Chambers
- Substitute: Councillor Creaney

DECLARATION OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest declared at this meeting.

MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS HELD 22 DECEMBER 2005 AND 1 FEBRUARY

(annexed)

30 Resolved:

That the minutes of previous meetings, held on 22 December 2005 and 1 February 2006, copies having been previously circulated to each member of the panel be approved and signed by the chairman as a correct record.

PROGRESS AND ATTAINMENT: EFFECT OF WALSALL ACADEMY

The Chairman asked the panel if they would agree to bring the item forward on the agenda in order that a member of the public could address the panel. The Panel agreed and the Chairman then invited a Mr. Peter Smith to speak.

Mr. Smith thanked the panel for giving him the opportunity to address them. He then referred to the report entitled "School Performance Update – The Walsall Academy", copies having been previously circulated to each member of the panel, and expressed his concerns over the figures relating to the home location of pupils – percentage by ward and the percentage of pupils in receipt of free school meals.

(annexed)

Mr. Smith asked what, if anything, the scrutiny panel could do to address this point.

Councillor Bird replied that the issue had been originally raised by Mr. Butterworth (Lichfield Diocesan Board of Education) and asked if David Roles could address the issue.

David Roles briefed the panel on the context. He stated that the catchment criteria for Walsall Academy had already been agreed and based on NFER non-verbal tests. This criterion was not controlled by Education Walsall and, therefore, there was a possibility that local children may not be able to attend.

Councillor Bird asked if the criteria had been set by the school governors or by the government.

David Roles replied that the governors had agreed the criteria in negotiation with the DfES.

David Brown stated that the forthcoming white paper indicated an admissions panel, but he was not sure, at this early stage, how this might work and what impact, if any, it would have on Walsall Academy.

Mr. Grainger stated that the governing body of Walsall Academy was largely selected by the sponsor organisations and, therefore, there was a lower level of local representation. The banding criteria applied by the Academy, designed to give a spread of ability intake, relied on national statistics and, therefore, were not an accurate reflection of the local context. He raised concerns that pupils who achieve well will go on to attend the academy and that this may cause other schools to statistically obtain worse results and to be labelled failing, resulting in parents moving more children. He further stated the white paper would raise serious issues and he felt that the panel needed to make its views known.

Councillor Bird replied that he understood the argument but that the authority also has a duty to look after the gifted and talented children.

Councillor Arif stated that the admissions criteria should have been clearly stated when academy status was applied for. He asked if this criterion had changed in the meantime.

Councillor Bird replied that the criteria had been clearly stated and it was likely that there had been a lack of understanding of the issues.

David Brown stated that Mr. Grainger had raised some pertinent issues with respect to the white paper.

Councillor Bird requested that a report on the white paper, its implications and possible effect on the Academy, be brought to a future meeting of this panel. He also asked that Mr. Smith be advised when the report was available.

Mr. Lee asked if the report could include more detail on the admissions trends for the Academy and TP Riley School. He then stated that many of the problems were due to government hype and that, although the Walsall Academy building was in an area of disadvantage, the school was not catering for the disadvantaged children in the area. He further stated that he would be interested to see if the new bill would toughen up the admissions criteria for independent schools.

Mr. Smith then asked if the panel were able to obtain as much data about the Academy as it could about other schools in the borough.

Councillor Bird replied that a spirit of communication is required in order to obtain data from the Academy.

David Roles assured the panel that there was a good working relationship with the Academy.

Councillor Pitt stated that the council had been given assurances that the Academy would provide for local children and she felt that these children had been let down. She agreed that gifted and talented should be catered for but this should not be at the expense of the less able.

Councillor Pitt then asked if it was possible to co-opt people onto the panel to address certain issues.

Councillor Bird replied that it was provision in the constitution to invite people to participate on the panel.

Councillor Pitt moved that Mr. Smith be invited to participate in a future meeting to address the issues raised by the white paper.

Councillor Bird seconded the motion and the panel agreed.

Councillor Arif asked if a parent governor from the Academy could also be invited to give his / her views on the issues.

31 Resolved:

That a report on the white paper "Higher Standards, Better Schools For All", its implications and possible effect on the Academy, be brought to a future meeting of the Children's Services and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

REPORT FROM SCHOOL BUILDINGS WORKING GROUP

Councillor Bird reported that the group were still receiving updates of the progress on priority one schemes. He then stated that he was aware of upcoming legislation around the disposal of assets such that any receipts gained from the disposal of playing fields would have to be used for sport and leisure. He asked how this would affect the council's policies and financial strategy.

David Brown replied that he would follow up on this and that the white paper also addressed assets.

Councillor Bird requested that Councillor Hughes also be briefed on the issues.

32 Resolved:

That a report on the new legislation on the disposal of assets be brought to a future meeting of the Children's Services and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

MINUTES OF THE SOCIAL INCLUSION WORKING GROUP 2 FEBRUARY 2006

(annexed)

Councillor Cassidy reported that the group had received reports on the attainment of Looked After Children and the work of the Multi-Agency LAC Strategy Group. She further stated that the group would be looking; at the health initiatives developed around the issues of social inclusion, the under-achievement of children of Pakistani / Bangladeshi heritage; the planning of the 'Fostering in the Black Country' event October 2006; and the development of Children's Trusts.

Councillor Wilkes expressed his concerns over the funding gap between foster parents and prospective adoptive parents and asked if anything could be done to address this issue.

Councillor Bird replied that he was aware that the process could be prolonged but he would rather than run the risk of not getting it right.

Councillor Creaney agreed in principle with Councillor Wilkes, but stated that there were some funds for prospective adoptive parents. However, the process could be expensive for the prospective adoptive parents with no guarantee of outcome.

Councillor Bird replied that he understood the issues and asked if the Social Inclusion working group could look into the matter.

Councillor Cassidy replied that she would raise the issue at the next meeting of the group.

Councillor Martin stated one of the biggest barriers for children of Pakistani / Bangladeshi heritage was that their parents don't speak English or that English is a second language and she stated that there were programmes making huge strides in teaching English to adults of Pakistani / Bangladeshi heritage.

Councillor Walker reported that she had attended the opening of Spindle Tree Rise and that it was an excellent facility for children in transition from care to independent living. She also welcomed the recommendation of the working group to write letters to all looked after children in year 11 encouraging them to do well in their forthcoming exams and she asked that she be involved in this.

33 Resolved:

That the minutes of the previous meeting, held on 2 February 2006, copies having been previously circulated to each member of the panel be approved and signed by the chairman as a correct record.

That the Social Inclusion Working Group look into funding issues around prospective adoptive parents.

TEENAGE PREGNANCY

Diane Osborne reported that the Partnership Board had been strengthened and had recently met to look at funding bids subject to robust criteria focused on hotspots and with regards to the every child matters agenda. Further, they were now planning for the next year and they had completed the action plan generated by the feedback from the Government Office.

Diane Osborne then reported that the promising prospect of a teenage pregnancy unit through Accord Housing had fallen through due to concerns over access to the proposed site.

Councillor Bird expressed his surprise over the this reason and asked for a copy of the correspondence.

Diane Osborne agreed to forward the relevant documents to Councillor Bird.

Councillor Bird then asked if the service had made a difference.

Diane Osborne replied that the results were due out shortly but that preliminary results had been very favourable.

Councillor Bird stated that he had been approached by a private sector provider offering facilities for teenage pregnancy and asked if the officers were aware of the offer.

Diane Osborne and David Brown replied that they were unaware of the offer but would gladly follow it up.

Councillor Arif asked why there was an emphasis on provision of family units.

Diane Osborne replied that Walsall has a high level of supportive partners and that this should be encouraged.

34 Resolved

That officers forward relevant documents regarding the provision of a teenage pregnancy unit by Accord Housing to Councillor Bird.

That officers follow up the offer of teenage pregnancy provision offered by a private sector provider.

CORPORATE PARENTING

David Brown reported that a report requesting Cabinet approve CRB checks for all Council members was being drafted and would be taken to Cabinet in due course.

Councillor Bird asked that any CRB checks be performed after the elections bearing in mind the possible changes in Council membership.

TRAINING OPORTUNITIES

(annexed)

The panel noted the enclosures previously circulated and the chair informed members that any expressions of interest should be raised with the relevant officers in Organisational Development.

FORWARD PLAN

Members noted the item set out on the agenda from the forward plan and identified no items for further consideration.

Private Session

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT, 1985:

It was agreed that the public be excluded from a private session. Exempt information under paragraph 8 Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING, FIBBERSLEY PARK PROJECT, 19 DECEMBER 2005

(annexed)

David Brown reported that tenders had been received and it was likely that the project would come in under the projected £6.2m.

Councillor Bird welcomed the news but stated that it was important to have a project manager for the remainder of the project and he requested a further report, to be taken in private session, at the conclusion of the project.

Councillor Pitt wished it to be minuted that she had taken no part in the discussion.

35 Resolved

That a report on the Fibbersley Park Project, to be taken in private session, be brought to the Children's Services and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny and Performance Panel at the conclusion of the project.

TERMINATION OF THE MEETING

There being no further business the meeting terminated at 7:10 pm

Signed

Date: