

AT A MEETING
- of the -
**CHILDRENS AND YOUNG
PEOPLES SCRUTINY AND
PERFORMANCE PANEL
(BUDGET)** held at the Council
House, Walsall on **26 January
2007** at 6.00pm

PRESENT

Councillor Arif (Chair)
Councillor Bird
Councillor Cassidy
Councillor Chambers
Councillor Micklewright
Bob Grainger (Secondary School)

Councillor Zahid Ali

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Louise Hughes	Assistant Director Children's Services - Education
Helen Denton	Managing Director of Education Walsall
Melanie Harmitt	Head of Finance Children's Services
Nikki Ehlen	Scrutiny Officer

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor Philips	
Sally-Anne Millard	Parent
Anne Gennard	Parent

APOLOGIES

Apologies were received on behalf of Mike Quinn and Councillors Creaney, E.E Pitt, and Martin.

40/07. SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for this meeting.

41/07. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

The members of the political groups represented on the panel indicated there were no whipping arrangements for any of the political parties in respect of items on the agenda. There were no declarations of interest.

42/07 CONSULTATION ON SCHOOL ORGANISATION MATTERS

Councillor Arif informed the panel that item 4 had been deferred from the last meeting of the panel, to ensure that Councillor Philips had the opportunity to attend the panel.

Helen Denton spoke to the report (annexed). The panel were advised that the DfES issued guidance relating to this matter, and that Education Walsall's activities were over and above this guidance.

Helen Denton explained that Education Walsall meet with parents and provided the opportunity for individual interviews with staff. Members were advised that timescales were prescribed as a requirement of the consultation. Helen Denton explained that this was a difficult and emotional subject and it was necessary to adapt and amend as the process moved along.

The panel were informed that if at the end of the formal consultation process, the decision was unopposed the proposal would be sent to Cabinet, but if at the end of the formal consultation process the decision was opposed the proposal would go to the School Organisation Committee (SOC) who would make the decision on the proposal. Helen Denton also informed the panel that elected members were informed and meetings were normally arranged at the formal stage.

The panel were advised that any decisions were made by Cabinet or the School Organisation Committee, and that Walsall goes beyond what was considered good practice.

Councillor Chambers stated that it was good to hear that good practice was taking place but that he was concerned that it was not happening in reality. He gave the example of King Charles Primary School, and explained that even though he was briefed as a member, he did not consider that he had been kept adequately informed of meetings with parents. Councillor Chambers stated that he felt that it was important that elected members were kept informed, as there were many misconceptions and the language used needed to be considered.

Helen Denton stated that she had written to parents and informed them when the report went public. Councillor Chambers requested that elected members were included into correspondence.

Councillor Bird stated that there was room for improvement in communications, highlighting that everybody did not have internet access, although he acknowledged that this was not the only way of accessing this information.

Councillor Bird stated that elected members had received first class support from Councillor Ali. Members stated that it was important that lessons had been learnt.

Helen Denton reassured members that on the day that the Cabinet report was published, a full set of Cabinet papers were sent to parents at the school, and that these were signed for by the school.

Councillor Arif invited Sally-Anne Millard to speak. Sally-Anne Millard told the panel that she considered the language in the letter detailing the plans for the closure of her son's school to be misleading and confusing for parents, and the plans were not explained well enough, leading parents to believe that they only had one option.

Bob Grainger stated that good planning was vital when the Council faced school closures, as information detailed in the press can be misleading and this can cause anxiety for people involved.

Councillor Cassidy asked parents how they felt after their children had been moved, emphasising that it was the children who mattered in this discussion. Sally-Anne Millard explained that the move had been distressing for her child. Anne Gennard informed the panel that she had not found this to be a smooth process because it had not been possible to place all of her children in the same school, which caused problems for her as a parent.

Councillor Cassidy stated that she would like the panel to consider the process as an ongoing item. Councillor Bird stated that the next stage of this process was to consider how children who had moved schools following a closure were progressing and if they had been accepted in their new schools.

Councillor Philips thanked officers and scrutiny for their time and consideration of the item. Councillor Arif thanked Helen Denton, Councillor Philips, Sally-Anne Millard, Anne Gennard for their contribution.

RESOLVED

The Children's and Young People Scrutiny, and Performance Panel resolve that;

- When a school is closed, the panel monitor the progress of the children where possible
- A report is to be sent to Cabinet requesting that in the future, the contents of any Cabinet report on schools closures, are discussed with parents and a report detailing how the closure has been handled is provided to the panel.
- Any elected members affected by this should be kept informed of all correspondence

43/07 2007/08 DRAFT BUDGET REPORT

Melanie Harmitt spoke to the presentation (annexed).

Councillor Bird asked officers why the youth service was underspent. Louise Hughes explained that difficulty recruiting was one of the factors when explaining

why the youth service was underspent. Louise informed the panel that the service was currently conducting a review young peoples services. Councillor Bird expressed concern about saving/investment proposal number 4. (Staffing restructure in children's social work services), he stated that this could pose a risk to children in the borough.

Louise Hughes explained that officers had met and made suggestions on those proposals that would carry the minimum risk and they were endeavouring to meet the requirements of Cabinet. Councillor Bird explained that he supported officers in this, but that he was concerned about the risk to the children of the borough.

Melanie Harmitt stated that this would require a remodel of the service and management could be restructured. Councillor Ali stated that he accepted Councillor Birds point and explained that he had expressed similar concerns. The panel were advised that Councillor Zahid had received reassurances from officers that any adverse impact on children would be minimised. Councillor Zahid stated that he could take this proposal back to officers and request a briefing note to reassure members of the panel that there would be minimum impact on children.

Melanie Harmitt informed members that the table presented in 2.3 should also include the proposed £32,000 saving on staffing within Youth Service as detailed on appendix 6a. Scrutiny had recommended this saving to Cabinet and the saving has been included in the draft revenue budget.

Councillor Ali stated that scrutiny had recommended that number 3. (Reduction in use of external placements) was not included, and Cabinet had considered this suggestion and the reduction had been included in the draft budget at 50% of the original proposal.

Councillor Chambers asked if there would be any redundancies, Officers explained that there would be no redundancies, vacancies existed and the service would be restructured.

Councillor Bird asked how ISS and legal charged children's services, and questioned whether charges were levied as a matter of course. Melanie Harmitt explained that these charges were in line with accounting standards, and that even if this figure was reduced the money would not be reallocated to the children's services budget.

Councillor Arif advised caution to the panel as ISS and Legal services came under the remit of the Corporate Scrutiny Panel. Councillor Bird accepted that it was not in the remit of the panel but as it was contained within the Children's services budget, he requested a briefing note containing further explanation.

Councillor Arif concluded that the panel's recommendations had been listened to and incorporated into Cabinets draft budget proposal where possible. He stated that subject to 2 briefing notes he considered it to be a good outcome for the panel.

The panel thanked Councillor Ali for attending the panel and contributing to the discussion.

RESOLVED

That the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel request that

- A briefing note is prepared and sent to members of the panel to reassure members of the panel that there would be minimum impact on children as a result of staffing restructure in children's social work services.
- A briefing note is prepared and sent to Councillor Bird detailing the formula and method for calculating charges for the ISS and Legal services

TERMINATION OF MEETING

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7:25 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....