

CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

23 July 2009 at 6.00 p.m.

Panel Members present

E. Hughes (Chair)
E. Pitt (Vice-Chair)
M. Longhi
B. Cassidy
K. Chambers
R. Martin
M. Munir
A. Paul

Other Members present:

I. Shires
D. Shires
P. Hughes
J. Cook

Non-Elected Voting Members

Paul Williams Catholic Church Representative
Evelyn Chawira Parent Governor
Alan McDevitt Parent Governor

Non-Elected Non-Voting Members

Bob Grainger Secondary School Teacher Representative
D.J. Jones Primary School Representative

Portfolio Holder Present

Councillor R. Walker

Officers present

Pauline Pilkington Interim Director of Children's Services
Sue Wedgwood Assistant Managing Director – Improvement and Effectiveness - Serco
Louise Hughes Assistant Director – Children's Services
Kay Child Interim Assistant Director – Children's Services
Avril Walton Assistant Managing Director – Management and Development - Serco
Susan Lupton Head of Planning and Development Services Serco
Alison Butcher Building Schools for the Future (BSF) Project Director
Vicky Buckley Head of Corporate Finance
Carol Boughton Head of Early Years and Disability - Serco
Hilary Hastings Programme Manager – Sure Start Birchills & North Walsall - Serco
Craig Goodall Acting Principal Scrutiny Officer
Matthew Underhill Scrutiny Officer

11/09 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Khan and Beeley

12/09 SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Longhi replaced Councillor Beeley for the duration of the meeting.

13/09 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest and party whip for the duration of the meeting.

14/09 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 June 2009, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

(annexed)

15/09 URGENT ITEM: CALL- IN OF CABINET DECISION REGARDING SNEYD SCHOOL

Members considered a call in of the Cabinet decision 15 July by five Members of the Council. The Chair explained that he had determined the Call-in an urgent item as to ensure that it could be responded to in a timely manner and to ensure engagement with school pupils, governors, and staff before the commencement of the school summer holiday period. A copy of the call in notice, Cabinet decision and Cabinet Report from 15 July 2009 had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting. (annexed).

The Chair invited the Portfolio Holder to explain the reasons for the Cabinet decision on 15 July. Rachel Walker explained that it was Cabinet's decision that a 11-19 academy is not a viable proposal for the future of Sneyd. This position had been confirmed following various work that had been undertaken with the Office of the Schools Commissioner (OSC) which established that an 11-19 academy would not be an appropriate method for seeking to raise standards of attainment at the school. Cabinet's decision included a new that would be undertaken with parents on the closure of Sneyd and the pursuit of the introduction of a University Technical College following the closure of the school in the new academic year.

The Chair then invited the call in signatories to explain the reasons for their request which were given as follows:

- the decision to close Sneyd was based on performance. However, other poorly performing schools have not been closed;
- Serco state that Sneyd School is being closed as a result of surplus school places in the borough, in part as a consequence of the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme. Of a total of 1,600 surplus places closing Sneyd School reduces this figure b

768. However, 832 surplus places would still exist meaning another school would also have to be closed;

- As a consequence of the current economic climate large numbers of children previously educated privately will be moved to the state sector meaning more places will be required;
- The call-in signatories accept that the School can not continue in its current form. However there was still a case for 14-19 education at the School so consideration should also be given to an 11 – 19 academy.

The Chair invited Pauline Pilkington to respond to the reasons provided for the Call-in and other issues also raised by the signatories and Panel members:

- In respect of the viability of the school as an 11-19 academy, discussions had been undertaken between the OSC and the Headteacher and Chair of Governor's where it was explained that the capital and revenue support that would be required from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to transform the School into an 11 – 19 Academy would not be provided as this was not considered to be a realistic solution to achieving sustainable improvement in attainment. Particularly as attainment was not improving, pupil numbers were falling and the school was continuing to fall into a budget deficit. Creating an Academy to manage the school would require the agreement of three partners, the DCSF, the Council and a sponsor to run the school. However there would be nothing to gain from discussions with Orminston Trust (as a potential sponsor) in this regard as the DCSF were not willing to support this option. The DCSF are satisfied that all viable options have been considered in respect of the future of the school;
- In terms of the BSF programme it was necessary to remove surplus places. However, it was appropriate to remove surplus places from unpopular rather than popular schools. Sneyd was an unpopular school whose pupil numbers had been declining for the last 5 years.
- There are a total of 1,355 places at Sneyd School and following closure necessary places will be provided by other schools in the borough who have a corresponding surplus of places;
- A number of other schools within Walsall are recording 30% or fewer pupils achieving five good GCSEs. However, they are part of the Black Country Challenge which includes partnerships with successful schools. This includes the development of plans and monitoring of progress to improve attainment;
- Children from Sneyd will be transferred to other schools within the borough. Parents will be given the opportunity to select a school where, for example, and will be able to express a preference to remain with siblings and friendship groups;
- In respect of alternative local schools being fully or over subscribed consideration was being given to providing support for the transport costs for children commuting to other schools. Consideration would also be given to providing support for parents required to travel to school, for example, for out-of-hours activities including parent evenings.

The Panel debated the reasons for the call-in and the response to it. The following are the principle points of the ensuing discussion:

- Members were sympathetic to the situation at Sneyd and the current difficulties that were being experienced through falling pupil numbers and budgetary problems.
- After further exploring the reasons why the OSC was not prepared to consider an 11-19 Academy, Members felt that Cabinet should review the outcome of the discussions regarding an 11-19 Academy to ensure that all possible options of pursuing an 11-19 Academy had been addressed. If there was scope to explore this issue in further detail

Members requested that Officers undertake informal discussions with the Orminston Trust on creating an 11-19 Academy on the Sneyd site.

- The Panel were concerned about the impact the proposed closure would have on pupils who were required to transfer to alternative schools. Members discussed the possibility of financial support being provided to parents to assist them in the transitional costs that would be required in changing schools. Concern was also expressed about children travelling outside of their local area to go to school.

RESOLVED:

That:

- 1. Cabinet review the outcome of the 11-19 Academy discussions that took place with the Office for the Schools Commission, the Headteacher of Sneyd Community School, Council Officers and the Deputy Leader, and if appropriate ask that Officers have informal discussions with the Orminston Trust, with the view to progressing an 11-19 Academy at Sneyd Community School;**

and;

- 2. in the event that Cabinet decides to close Sneyd Community School financial assistance with the transitional costs of pupil transfers be provided to parents.**

Recommendation 1 was passed with a majority of 6 Members for and 1 against.

Councillor E. Pitt asked for it to be recorded that she voted against recommendation 1.

15/09 BUILDING SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE (BSF) PROGRESS UPDATE

Alison Butcher provided the Panel with an update on the BSF (annexed) including progress towards Walsall's entry to the national programme.

She informed the Panel that the Council would formally enter the BSF programme following a remit meeting in October, with the borough incorporated in to the national programme. As part of the next phase Strategy for Change Part 2 was now being produced. Responsibility for the management and delivery of all school building and refurbishment programmes, including the Primary Capital Programme (PCP), will be placed with the Partnership for Schools (PfS). In response to this, and PfS guidance that the processes for both BSF and PCP should be aligned with the Transforming Learning in Walsall agenda, a stakeholder group meeting was held earlier in July and was well attended. This group's purpose is to ensure that key plans, including the Sport and Leisure strategy, are fully aligned with the wider learning programme.

Following a Member query Alison Butcher explained that there were a number of different strands to the strategy as part of the approach to the changing environment in which learning takes place. As such, the BSF team would be helping three Wave 6a Schools deliver Learning Pilots. The transformation of local learning trialled through Learning Pilots will help those in the early years of their secondary education as they see full BSF proposals come to fruition. However to be awarded funding it is necessary for local schools to demonstrate clear proposals for how they will contribute to the wider learning programme.

RESOLVED:

That Members be provided with further information regarding those secondary schools who are participating in a pilot programme to demonstrate proposals for involvement in the Transforming Learning agenda.

16/09 LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT (LAA) PERFORMANCE MONITORING

RESOLVED:

That Item 6 be deferred to a future meeting of the Panel.

17/09 REVENUE OUTTURN 2008/09 – CHILDREN’S SERVICES

Vicky Buckley introduced the report (annexed) which summarised the outturn position for the year ended for Children’s Services, Print and Design and Procurement which would be subject to external audit.

She explained that the outturn position for the Children’s Services directorate, including education, print and design and procurement, in 2008/09 was an overspend of £2.033m. She explained that a number of one-off costs had contributed to this position, including a shortfall in print and design income and increased funding requirements for family law cases. In response to a Panel query Vicky Buckley explained that the overspend was in part a consequence of the change in the economy. However, it is hoped to mitigate some of the problems that have been suffered. For example, print and design will be reducing production costs and seeking to win contracts with other local authorities to generate additional income.

18/09 SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN

The Chair explained that as a consequence of the change to the agenda this item would be deferred until the next meeting.

RESOLVED:

That Item 8 be deferred to a future meeting of the Panel.

19/09 CHILDREN’S CENTRES

Carol Boughton introduced the report (annexed) which provided an overview of the current situation in relation to the development of Children’s Centres across Walsall identifying their location and associated costs and examples of achievements across the Centres.

She explained that Phase Three of the introduction of Children’s centres had been agreed by Cabinet. There are currently fifteen Children’s Centres and the final three centre areas are: Paddock/ Chuckery, Pelsall and Streetly. She explained that related services were becoming active and beginning to support local communities before the centre buildings had become operational. Children’s Centres are required to deliver a core set of services which are then monitored by the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) and Together for Children on behalf of the DCSF.

In response to a Panel question Hilary Hastings explained that while the core offer is pre-determined the details of how services are provided by a specific centre are shaped by the local community. However, in some areas it was difficult to engage with those families that do not normally engage with the community. Significant effort is committed in seeking to draw families in to local centres. The centres work closely with local people to understand key local issues and to help determine the most appropriate methods by which this can be achieved. The process of reaching out is supported by significant cross-service coordination including close working with officers from other areas of the Council and the PCT. There are also strong links with local schools through whom a number of services have been developed. In a number of instances it has proved successful to actually go out to those families who have thus far not attended their local centre as a way of creating a link and encouraging them to make use of the local facility. A major issue that has been identified as critical in improving local participation is the need to improve the aspirations of parents. This has proved a challenge in some areas as employment levels are low and yet it is important that parents recognise the key role they have in supporting and encouraging their children's learning and so help improve outcomes. Officers explained that they would like to further involve Job Centre Plus with Children's Centres, whereby parents can meet with Job Centre Plus staff to discuss opportunities while Children Centre staff cared for their children, there appeared to be limited resources to deliver this. For example, at present there is a single Manager across the Black Country for Job Centre Plus and limited staff availability to attend sessions in Children's Centres. However as each new initiative is developed and rolled out by Job Centre Plus all the Children's Centres actively engage.

20/09 WORKING GROUPS

The Membership and schedule for working groups were noted.

21/09 WORK PROGRAMME 2009/10

The work programme and forward plan were noted.

22/09 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair confirmed the date of the next meeting was 24 September 2009.

The meeting terminated at 8:35 pm

Chair:

Date: