

## **CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

### **Minutes of a meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2013, held at 6.00pm in Meeting Room 3, Darby House, Telford.**

**PRESENT:** Councillors M. Ion (Chair), G. Green, J. Greenaway, C. Turley and Co-optees A. Atkinson, R. Aveley, S. Rayner, M. Ward.

**Attending:** Stephanie Gaskell, Head Teacher St Lawrence CE Primary School; Lisa Howells, Chair of Board of Governors, St Lawrence CE Primary School; Mandie Haywood, Head Teacher Old Park Primary School; Stephanie Jones, Scrutiny Officer.

#### **CYPSC-1 MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** – that the minutes of the meeting of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee held on 18<sup>th</sup> April 2013 be confirmed and signed by the Chair subject to correction of Mr. Rayner's name on page 5.

The Scrutiny Officer informed members that the date of the Annual Foster Care Conference was 8<sup>th</sup> November.

#### **CYPSC-2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Cllrs. J. Loveridge, A. Mackenzie, J. Pinter and Co-optee S. Ali. The Chair informed members that Cllr. Pinter had been appointed to the Committee at Annual Council to replace Cllr. M. Smith.

#### **CYPSC-3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None

#### **CYPSC-4 PLANNING PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES IN TELFORD & WREKIN**

The Chair reminded members that the Committee had started to take evidence at the last meeting on the challenge for the borough in planning primary places. There were two ways of increasing capacity – by building new schools or expanding existing schools. The Committee had heard from officers and now wanted to hear from head teachers to get their views.

The Scrutiny Officer had attended a meeting of the Primary Heads Forum Executive Committee to discuss engaging the schools in the scrutiny review and the Executive members had raised a number of issues at the meeting. Workshops had been held at the Primary Heads' Forum (PHF) meeting on 23<sup>rd</sup> May for Heads in each cluster to identify issues to feed into scrutiny. Stephanie Gaskell, Mandie Haywood and Lisa Howells had been nominated or volunteered to attend the scrutiny meeting to

represent the wider views of head teachers in the borough and to bring their own experience as Heads of a small and large primary school to scrutiny. The Chair welcomed them to the meeting and invited them to introduce themselves and present the key issues.

Mandie Haywood was Head of Old Park Primary School in Malinslee with 500 children on roll. Stephanie Gaskell was head of St. Lawrence CE Primary School in Preston with 80 children on roll. Lisa Howells was Chair of the Board of Governors at St. Lawrence. They presented the issues identified by the PHF as follows:

### **1. Impact of the “bedroom tax”**

This was a challenge across the borough. The movement of families in social housing to smaller properties had caused sudden pupil movement between schools which created issues - one school had had 6 new admissions in a week and another had admitted children of families who had moved into the borough from Staffordshire. Over time, the distribution/location of 2 bed roomed properties across the borough would need to be factored into school place planning.

### **2. The determination of the Published Admission Number (PAN)**

This was a major issue for the PHF. The Heads felt that the PAN should be set in the context of the school and take account of the number of classes and class size limits for year 1 and upward and it was not a consultative process. For example:

- a) The Old Park PAN had been raised from 60 to 80 which was a difficult number to manage when the children moved from reception (three classes) to year one. Years 5 and 6 had the old PAN of 60 and years 4 downwards had 80. There was high mobility in the area and admissions could fluctuate – last year there were 85.
- b) St. Lawrence had a long standing issue with the PAN which was set at 12. This made it hard to accommodate children living just outside the boundary. Children moving into the village had to be admitted, but there were three children just outside on the waiting list who could not be admitted. The Head had consulted with the Heads of neighbouring schools about increasing the PAN to 15 who had said it would not impact on their schools. The Governors had tried to move the PAN but had not been able to. The PAN also constrained the school’s ability to improve the quality of learning. Increasing the PAN to 15 would allow the school to have another class and recruit another teacher, so a small adjustment would have a big impact. The school had started as a Victorian village school and had grown around one hall. PE was still provided in the hall which was not the best option. Years 3, 4 and 5 were all in one room. Children moving into the village and winning appeals had to be admitted which meant one year group had been split and had to use the hall which was not a good learning environment and it had been difficult to bring the groups back together.

### **3. Drawing boundary lines between catchment areas**

There were concerns and a lack of clarity about how and where boundary lines between catchment areas were drawn. People identify with their local community and want their children to attend a school in that community. Boundary lines are moved so families fall into catchment areas of schools that parents don’t want to

send their children to because they don't identify with that community, or the school is too far to walk to or involves crossing busy roads. In Hadley / Leegomery the boundary around HLC had been moved so more people feel into the Teagus Bridge catchment area but parents identified with HLC and other preferences were more likely to be Apley Wood or Millbrook. The Head of Old Park did not feel that Ironstone Primary would alleviate pressure on Old Park because parents want to walk their children to school it was too far.

#### **4. Lack of early involvement of practitioners in the design of buildings and lack of transfer of experience**

Heads were not involved in building design at an early enough stage so their expertise as practitioners was not used in terms of what would work well. The plans for Lightmoor had already been drawn up when a head had identified simple problems which meant the building would not work such as the fire escape leading to the boiler room. Overseeing a building project took an enormous amount of time for Heads and this was an issue when they were trying to maintain standards at the same time. The timing of the amalgamation at HLC meant there was some additional capacity, but this was not the norm. It did not always need to be the Head of the school involved – a number of Heads had already been through the BSF process and a lot had been learnt along the way, but no one asked what lessons had been learnt and previous experience had not been drawn on for subsequent projects. Chains of communication could be too long - the head would talk to the architect who would talk to the contractor and so on, and things could get lost along the way. It would be better to have joint project meetings. The overall message was that the local authority must involve practitioners in school building projects and at an earlier stage.

#### **5. Impact of academies and free schools**

Academies and free schools were free to set their own admission numbers and could increase without communicating with the other schools or the authority. This had not had a big impact on primary schools yet because there was only one primary academy but would start to impact as new schools were built or others converted.

#### **6. Representation at appeals hearings**

There had been a huge debate at the PHF meeting about Appeals Committee meetings and the fact that Heads were not able to attend to represent themselves at appeal hearings. It was not clear whether there were national guidelines in place, but the Heads had heard that Heads in Shropshire had been allowed to attend appeals meetings. The Heads were reliant on Telford & Wrekin admissions staff representing the school but it was not clear to the Heads how they did this and they were not given details about what was said at meetings. There was an issue about the clarity of appeals on the grounds of disability. The Appeals Committee can insist that a school admits a child even if the school is over the PAN. The Heads felt very strongly about this issue and wanted greater transparency.

Members explored some of these issues in more detail and asked a number of other questions:

- Members wanted clarification about how the PAN is decided. The Heads said that it is calculated by the local authority based on the size of the building and that number then goes to the Board of Governors to agree but there can be some pressure. There was a discussion about the role of the Local Admissions Forum (LAF). Mr. Rayner thought the process was that the governors agreed a number to recommend to the LAF to decide, but Ms. Ward who sits on the Forum explained that the constitution had changed and the LAF no longer had any decision making powers. In the past, the LAF had been a forum for lengthy debate and had sometime changed the numbers when the local authority might not. Ms. Ward felt it would still be a useful forum for debate and a conduit between schools and the authority even if it had no powers. Mr. Atkinson agreed the LAF could put issues to the authority on behalf of the schools. Ms. Ward said that secondary schools attended meetings and wanted to know whether the primary Heads heard about meetings which they said they did not, and Ms. Ward suggested the LAF should be reporting back to the Primary Heads Forum. The Chair asked the Heads whether in the light of the discussion it would be fair to say that there was a lack of clarity from schools about how the number is calculated, communicated and influenced and the Heads agreed that the process was opaque. Mr. Rayner also reminded members that there is a difference between the PAN and the net capacity used for planning and they do not need to be the same. Cllr. Greenaway said that there were schools where there were not enough local children to fill the PAN and had spare capacity but the school was not designed to be accessible to children from other communities.
- Members had questions about how projected numbers from housing developments are factored into place planning, including when numbers are built in. Cllr. Green said that developers may not build straight away and numbers factored in too soon would affect the overall projections and planning.
- There was a discussion about traffic problems. Although the majority of parents - about 86% - walk children to school, increasing places could still add to traffic problems and traffic safety issues for those who choose to drive. Issues were also raised about the lack or quality of pavements and poor street lighting on some routes.
- The Chair asked more about the challenges for schools as they expand and whether we should be alarmed if schools grow too big, for example over 500. St. Lawrence had thought about the number at which the school would not be big enough. Technically the school was big enough to manage for the next four years although the numbers were not the same every year. This was not necessarily the case for other schools where development growth – for example in Malinslee – could be a problem if the extra capacity is built in schools that parents don't want their children to go to (for example because they can't walk there). The head at Lightmoor had insisted that expansion should happen gradually and the school had grown into the new building and there had been a gradual increase in improvement but it could not happen overnight. The Heads thought HLC had capacity to increase to 4 classes per year group but they were uncertain as to whether a decision had been made in Telford & Wrekin to limit classes per year

group to three. Class size was important and big classes put immense pressure on teachers – how can they teach 37 or 38 children in one class? There were issues with funding for growing schools - there used to be funding if a school grew above 15% over capacity but this was no longer the case.

- The Chair asked about the link between planning capacity and quality. He painted a scenario of a thriving school with high standards and parents on the doorstep but the PAN could not be increased so children had to go to a less good school that had capacity. He wanted to know if this happened, and if so, how the problem could be solved. The Heads said it was possibly an issue in some areas more than others. Schools work closely with the School Improvement Team and Telford & Wrekin has a good team and a good advisory service and standards were on the rise. There could be historic perceptions about standards which were unfair when a school is improving. Mr. Atkinson commented that “popularity” was not necessarily a good criterion for expanding a school because it could change quite quickly.
- The Chair asked whether converting to academy status would hinder or help solve problems. The Heads insisted they wanted to remain maintained by Telford & Wrekin education authority. St. Lawrence felt converting was not in the best interests of the school and that it was not a viable option with all the bureaucracy that goes with being an academy. Old Park could not see how it would benefit the children and that there would be more work for no more money. The church schools had recently got together to debate the issue and had decided they wanted to work with partners but to retain their current status. Academies could decide to admit more children without consulting or communicating and these decisions would impact on other schools. The primaries had not been greatly affected yet because there was only one primary academy in the borough but this would change over time. Cllr. Turley wanted to know if the government could force schools to become academies and the Chair explained that all new schools must be academies or if a school is eligible for intervention the Secretary of State could enforce academy status. Ms. Haywood said Old Park had a “Good” Ofsted rating and the school had looked at this question now while the school had a choice.
- Members asked more about the impact of the “bedroom tax” - how it manifested itself and the evidence that the sudden admissions were due to the bedroom tax. The Heads said there was anecdotal information from forms that the schools receive and from meetings with the families transferring. It had not affected Old Hall as yet but there were parents who had said they were trying to move. One of the knock-on effects was that many of the children had additional needs which the new school had to meet but the transition was so fast there was not always time to put arrangements in place quickly enough. Sudden moves impact on all children but are especially difficult for children with special needs.

When there were no further questions, the Chair asked the Heads which of all the issues raised were the two priorities they would like scrutiny to make recommendations about and the Heads said priorities would be that the PAN and the appeals processes should be consultative processes - decisions were devolved from

the schools but they should be consulted. Ms. Howells emphasised again that a small increase in the PAN would make a huge difference to St. Lawrence.

The Chair thanked the visitors and they left the meeting.

Members then discussed the Terms of Reference for the scrutiny review in the light of the preceding discussion and it was agreed that they would be revised to take account of:

- The impact of increasing capacity on non-statutory services, such as nurseries, which had come to occupy space during years of under-capacity.
- The impact of expansion on the ethos of the school.
- Point 1 should be changed to take account of the process for planning places including how the PAN is set.
- To include the local admissions policy and the involvement of governing bodies.

The revised Terms of Reference would be circulated to members after the meeting.

Members discussed the next steps and the Chair suggested holding working group meetings between formal Committee meetings to gather evidence as there was a lot of work to do in a short space of time and this was agreed.

The next meeting would include:

- Meeting officers from Planning & Delivery to consider the Children & Families Population Profile 2013, circulated as Appendix C1, to look at how data is gathered, the projections and what it tells us.
- A more detailed meeting with the School Organisation Manager to explore how the population data feeds into place planning, statutory requirements and legislation for authorities in place planning and admissions.
- Members to decide who else to meet or what further information is needed.

## **CYPSC-5 WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair outlined the items for the next Committee meeting as:

1. A report back on the Cabinet response to the Committee's recommendations in the report on the Children in Care Placement Strategy which would be presented to Cabinet on 27<sup>th</sup> June, and progress on implementing recommendations agreed.
2. An update on the Ofsted action plan, 12 months on.
3. The report of the LGA Peer review of safeguarding.

The meeting ended at 7.25pm.

**Chairman:**.....

**Date:**.....