

## **Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee**

4 December 2019 – At a meeting of the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee held at 10.30 am at County Hall North, Horsham.

Present: Mr Barling (Chairman)

|             |            |                   |
|-------------|------------|-------------------|
| Mr Baldwin  | Mr Hillier | Mrs Roberts       |
| Mr Barnard  | Mrs Jones  | Mr Wickremaratchi |
| Mrs Burgess | Mr Lea     | Ms Sudan          |
| Ms Flynn    | Ms Lord    |                   |
| Mrs Hall    | Mr Lozzi   |                   |

Apologies were received from Mrs Bridges, Mr Cristin and Mrs Ryan

Absent:

Also in attendance: Mr Marshall, Mr Jupp and Mrs Russell

### **Part I**

#### **45. Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee**

45.1 The Committee received a tabled updated version of the minutes from 23 October 2019.

45.2 Resolved – that the minutes of the last meeting held on 23 October 2019 be approved as a correct record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

#### **46. Responses to Recommendations**

46.1 Resolved that the Committee note the response.

#### **47. Forward Plan of Key Decisions**

47.1 The Committee considered a tabled paper which was a new version of the Forward Plan dated 2 December 2019 (copy appended to the signed minutes). This version of the Forward Plan was not included in the Committee papers as it had been published following the statutory despatch of the agenda.

47.2 Resolved that the Committee notes the Forward Plan.

#### **48. Children First Improvement Update**

48.1 The Committee considered a report by the Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning. The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People advised that the statutory responsibility for the portfolio had now transferred to herself from the Leader.

48.2 The Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning provided the following update on the Children First Improvement plans:

- Ofsted were currently undertaking their first monitoring visit which focussed examination on Assessment and Intervention and the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), amongst the wider position of Children's Services since the inspection. The outcome of this visit should be reportable at the January meeting of the Committee.
- Stable progress had been made regarding the workforce, and the vacancy gap was at 2.3%.
- Agency staff made up 15% of the workforce, which was comparable with neighbouring authorities.
- Garath Symonds, Senior Improvement Lead, advised the Committee of a 'better use of technology' project to enable best practice within the service through Windows 10 rollout and systems improvement and integration.
- Ann Marie Dodds, Assistant Director Early Help advised that work was underway in the areas of private fostering and youth homelessness. This included appropriate training, awareness raising, work with districts and boroughs and ensuring children and young people understand their rights and entitlements.

The Committee considered the following points in discussion:

- Members asked for the current number of Children Looked After within the service. The Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning advised the figure was currently just over 700.
- The Committee considered how the service monitored independent children's homes. The Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning advised every independent agency was regulated by Ofsted, and that WSCC had a small commissioning contracts and placements team who monitored the quality of external placement providers.
- Members of the Committee noted the successes of the recruitment and retention offer but queried what the service were doing in terms of contingency planning when the 18 month commitment period to WSCC ended. The Assistant Director Early Help advised a root and branch review of the Early Help offer would take place which would likely impact the service requirements as a whole. The Senior Improvement Lead advised the business continuity plan was also being reviewed.
- Members noted that 22 children in a private fostering arrangement in September 2019 seemed very low. The Assistant Director Early Help agreed and that raising awareness was crucial. Awareness raising had been undertaken with partners such as health, schools and the Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership (LSCP).

48.3 Resolved that the Committee:

1. Requests a report to the March BPG on recruitment and retention of staff plans going forward.
2. Notes the Children First Improvement Update.

## **49. Woodlands Meed**

49.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Property and Assets and the Director of Education and Skills. The Chairman invited the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills to provide an opening statement to the Committee, who heard the following:

- Since becoming Cabinet Member, Woodlands Meed had been amongst the most important issues for the portfolio and acknowledged the long and difficult history.
- The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills had visited Woodlands Meed school and college on three occasions, met with the Headteacher, Chair of Governors and lead organiser for the Complete Woodlands Meed campaign. He also attended the Central and South Mid-Sussex County Local Committee in November where the topic was discussed.
- In anticipation of a decision being made in the new year, the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills was minded to recommend to Cabinet colleagues that WSCC honour the commitment made in February 2019 for investment in the Woodlands Meed site, subject to an independent report on the suitability of the building and its ability to meet the needs of pupils. IT was hoped this report would be ready by the end of January 2020.
- The Cabinet Member added that during the last six weeks he had visited the majority of the county council's special schools which cater for over 60% of SEND pupils. He had been struck by the commitment, skill and compassion of staff, parents, governors and leads in those schools.

49.2 The Chairman invited Paul Wagstaff, Director of Education and Skills to introduce the report. The Committee heard the following key points:

- The need to improve facilities at Woodlands Meed had been discussed over a long period of time, and it was recognised that the current site would not meet the needs required into the future.
- The SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2016 -19 noted the requirement for additional places in order to reduce the need to place children externally. Greater analysis has now shown that there was far more availability for post-16 students with SEND currently than there was previously, including the commissioning of 550 places into further education institutions, with an aim to continue to increase those places.
- The Director of Education and Skills recognised Woodlands Meed as a crucial provider of education for children with SEND, however, advised that there was no current requirement to either expand or reduce provision.
- The new SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2019-2024 focussed on providing additional specialist places closer to where children live.
- Extensive discussions over recent years between the governing body and officers had considered options to expand the current site at Woodlands Meed, to refurbish or re-build entirely.
- Jerry Dillon, Development and Capital Advisor, advised there were now four options for the site as laid out in the report:

- Option 1 – a 100 pupil place new build constructed on the playing field and the original building being demolished.
  - Option 2 – a 136 pupil place new build, existing site demolished.
  - Option 3 – a 136 pupil place new build, decanting pupils into temporary accommodation and building onto the existing site.
  - Option 4 – replacement of existing modular accommodation.
- The primary challenge for some of the options was the issue of access to the site during building works.
  - The Director of Education and Skills advised the proposal was to commission an independent specialist survey which would provide a baseline against which the four options could be considered for Cabinet decision.

49.3 The Chairman invited Marion Wilcock, Chair of Governor's at Woodlands Meed, and Karen George, Lead of the Complete Woodlands Meed campaign, to address the Committee who heard the following:

- The current building did not meet statutory requirements.
- The land and buildings were owned by the governing body, who have responsibility for the education of students, and for the suitability of the buildings.
- This issue had been ongoing for almost ten years.
- A further consultation or survey was not required, WSCC had all the information required; further delay was not justified.
- WSCC were not honouring their statutory duty and gave an undertaking in 2017 to the Department for Education (DfE) in 2017 that they would comply.
- £20m was committed in February 2019 to improve the school, option 1 identified in the report was within that budget.
- This was not about additional places, but for catering to the needs of existing children. It seemed WSCC had a blatant disregard for vulnerable children.
- The school was currently unable to accommodate some children which was in breach of the Equality Act. Access to classrooms was difficult for some children. There was one wheelchair accessible toilet. There were heating issues, which for children with sensory issues made the environment intolerable.
- The Chair of Governors and Complete Woodlands Meed Campaign Lead implored WSCC to deliver on the promise made ten years ago.
- The Committee heard from Jamie Fitzjohn, the County Council's disabled member champion, who stressed the importance of quality education in a positive community setting, and explained how the needs of children should be put first to enable them the best start in life.

49.4 The Committee considered the following points in discussion:

- The Chairman asked the Development and Capital Advisor what the structure of the school was made of. He advised it was a wood type structure and was building regulations compliant. The Chair of

Governor's advised laminate panelling was present at the school which presented as a particular risk.

- The Chairman asked if the associated cost for option 1 of £18,630,000 was inclusive of all costs or just the building work. The Development and Capital Advisor confirmed this was the total cost. The Chairman asked how long the process from planning application to completed building would take and heard it was likely to be in the region of 23 months from start to finish.
- Members familiar to the site agreed the fabric of the buildings and facilities were poor. They urged the service and Cabinet Member to cease delays and deliver the project.
- Members considered the report and noted it did not seem to be a wholly factual representation of the situation. They also sought clarification on whether this was an education or finance portfolio decision. Members also sought to understand what changed from the February 2019 £20m commitment and why now an independent review was required.
- The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills advised in February 2019 £20m was allocated to Woodlands Meed subject to an anticipated government grant of £6m, which had not been received. The Chairman asked if an option seeking expenditure over £14m was selected, would the Cabinet Member endeavour to bridge the funding gap. The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills he was attempting to do this.
- Members were unsure what more would be achieved by a further independent review. They also considered that whilst it was helpful to educate SEND children in Special Support Centre's (SSCs) in mainstream schools, that special schools were still important and required.
- The Leader advised the Committee that Woodlands Meed was a challenge and thanked the Chair of Governor's, Complete Woodlands Meed campaign and parents and carers. He added that this was a difficult narrative to understand but that it was frustrating and embarrassing not to have a clear steer after such lengthy dialogues over years about the site. The Leader agreed with members comments that the report was not of excellent quality and that the level of care and education SEND children receive should be better. He added that this would eventually be a collective Cabinet decision, and that therefore an independent specialist report was critical to inform such a decision.

#### 49.5 Resolved that the Committee:

1. Requests that there is a firm decision made by January 2020.
2. Felt that only options 1 and 2 should be considered, with a preference for option 2 (136 pupil place new build). Option 4 should not be considered.
3. Felt there was no need for a further independent specialist survey to be undertaken.
4. Requests that the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills use his best endeavours with Cabinet colleagues to bridge any funding gap if option 1 or option 2 is agreed upon.
5. Requests that any problem of access to the site for construction work is overcome.

## **50. Possible Items for Future Scrutiny**

50.1 The Committee requested Elective Home Education as an item for future scrutiny. Members were advised this was on the BPG agenda for March.

50.2 The Committee asked for a meeting on mental health. Rachel Allan, Senior Advisor Democratic Services, advised she was working with the youth cabinet to schedule this as a takeover day, and that further details would be provided when available. Members requested this also included how schools dealt with mental health.

50.3 Members of the Committee asked for information on support for families and parents who cared for children looked after. The Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning suggested he take this away and come back to the BPG with a proposal on how to tackle this. He added this could include transitions to adulthood.

## **51. Date of Next Meeting**

51.1 The Committee noted that the next scheduled meeting would be held on 9 January 2020 at 10.30am at County Hall, Chichester.

The meeting ended at 1.21 pm

Chairman