

DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY, 21 OCTOBER 2010

Councillors Present: Ellen Crumly, David Holtby, Mollie Lock, Alan Macro (Vice-Chairman), Irene Neill (Chairman), Ieuan Tuck

Also Present: David Hogg (Head of Youth Services and Commissioning), Ian Pearson (Head of Education Service), Stephen Chard (Policy Officer)

PART I

16. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 July 2010 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

17. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

18. Actions from previous Minutes

The Committee received an update on actions following the previous meeting (Agenda Item 4).

The first meeting of the Housing Register Task Group was held on 27 September 2010 and a further meeting scheduled for 5 November 2010.

Much of the discussion at the first meeting related to the contact made with people on the Common Housing Register (CHR) as part of reviews. A particular concern for the task group was the more vulnerable people on the CHR who could potentially be removed from the CHR as a result of this process. The next meeting had an item on the agenda to explore ways for Ward Members to assist with the process of making contact with residents, but there were data protection restrictions. It was hoped that a report could be presented to the Committee at its next meeting.

RESOLVED that the update would be noted.

19. Playbuilder Programme

The Committee considered a report providing progress with the Playbuilder Scheme (Agenda Item 5).

David Hogg presented his report and made the following points:

- West Berkshire was awarded a grant of £1.1m capital and £44k revenue in 2009 with the expectation of building new play facilities or refurbishing existing dilapidated play facilities.
- There was a requirement for at least 11 individual projects to be completed within 2009/10 and 2010/11.

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- 12 highly successful projects were completed in 2009/10 which brought significant improvements to play facilities. Positive feedback had been received from the local communities involved.
- Based on the tight timescales experienced in 2009/10, the process for 2010/11 commenced as early as possible and a further 12 projects were agreed.
- However, it was announced on 14 July 2010 by the Secretary of State that the funding was not guaranteed and local authorities were instructed to cease activity until a review of the funding had been completed.
- Information was provided to the Department for Education (DfE) to advise that ground work had started for two projects and that all 12 had binding agreements with West Berkshire Council to commence work.
- Some time passed before any feedback was received. This was a difficult situation for those with projects in hand and other sources of funding were being considered, but no feedback had been received on these to date.
- A letter received today (21 October 2010) was circulated to the Committee which advised that West Berkshire Council would be awarded the full capital amount requested of £585k. This was a higher figure than that stated in the report as it included an additional amount to cover a project that was already completed.
- It was hoped that this good news could be communicated to those with projects as soon as possible, but a decision had been taken to delay this until the full terms of reference had been received from the DfE. This would ensure that there was no reason why the funding could not be distributed, i.e. time restrictions to complete work. In addition, the ring fence attached to this grant had been removed and there was the potential to reconsider its spend, although it was hoped that commitments would be fully honoured. The Select Committee shared this view and felt it should be protected as capital money.
- No mention had been made as to whether revenue funding would be received. This was stopped at the same time as the capital funding and as a result the Project Manager's fixed term contract had to be ended. This member of staff was in a position to recommence work at short notice and discussions were ongoing to confirm if revenue funding was available and to seek a way to restart the post without significant delay.

RESOLVED that the update would be noted and David Hogg thanked for his efforts in ensuring this funding was received in full.

20. Supporting Small Schools

The Committee considered a report (Agenda Item 6) detailing the findings and recommendations of the Supporting Small Schools Review.

Ian Pearson introduced the item by making the following points:

- This extensive piece of work commenced in February 2010 when the Select Committee approved terms of reference for a review. The review membership included Councillors Irene Neill and Alan Macro as Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Select Committee. Its terms of reference were as follows:
 - To review the leadership, governance, funding and performance of small schools in West Berkshire, in partnership with schools and the Oxford Church of England (CE) Diocese.

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- Small schools in the scope of the review were those with a roll of one hundred pupils or less in 2008 and/or 2009 (January census). The review would consider demographics, value for money, asset issues and the contribution schools made to the communities they served.
- In addition, the review would look at successful and innovative ways other authorities support small schools in their areas.
- The review focussed on a number of key areas and the findings for each of these areas was detailed as follows:

Performance

Efforts were made to establish whether there was any correlation between school size and performance levels, but this was inconclusive.

It could be more challenging for smaller schools to achieve good results due to the need for mixed age classes. It was also true that due to the small numbers of pupils, performance when recorded as a percentage could be negatively skewed by one pupil. The high number of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in some small schools could also affect performance.

When considering the results of Ofsted inspections, it was found that all the small schools were rated as being satisfactory or higher. There were some cases where schools were considered satisfactory in many areas, whereas others were seen as having outstanding or good practices. Similar results were provided following Statutory Inspections of Anglican Schools, which were conducted for the small CE schools.

Attainment levels in English and Maths at KS2 showed a range of performance across small schools. Some achieved consistently above the West Berkshire average, some performed at a similar level and others below the average. This meant that it was not easy to consider small schools as single group in terms of performance levels.

Successful small schools remained very popular with parents with the result that they were often at capacity. This often included a number of pupils attending from outside the catchment area.

Catchment/Demography/School Organisation

Of the 16 schools reviewed five had a roll average of less than 50 over the last five years and one school an average of below forty. School popularity was changeable, but it took time for an unpopular school to recover and be viewed more favourably by parents.

The review group felt that viability was an issue if numbers dropped below a certain level. No view had been taken on a particular number, but it was a factor that could trigger an organisation review.

There was no recent national guidance to help identify a minimum number of pupils across a school and in a class.

Finance

Low pupil numbers did not mean that small schools became financially unviable as West Berkshire's Schools' Funding Formula ensured that fixed costs incurred by all schools, i.e. staffing, were met, in addition to funding received per pupil. This funding protection was also utilised by benchmark local authorities.

A decision on whether or not a small school continued to operate would not therefore be based solely on funding viability. However, low numbers could cause high unit costs. The average unit cost across West Berkshire in 2010 was £3.4k and all 16 schools considered in the review had a higher unit cost of varying degrees. The highest was

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Chaddleworth St Andrews (school with the smallest number on roll) with a unit cost of £10.4k. This was a factor when considering educational viability and a potential need for an organisational review.

With only one exception, small schools retained healthy revenue balances at the end of 2009/10. The one school outside of this was saving towards a significant capital project.

Since West Berkshire Council was formed in 1998 it had aimed to support and maintain small schools and none had closed. There had been some reconfiguration of schools but this was aimed at supporting small schools. An example of this was the federation that had formed between Shefford and Chaddleworth St Andrew's schools, the benefits of which enabled both schools to remain open. The effectiveness of this, and other federations, was monitored on an ongoing basis.

Ian Pearson made it clear that while the review was about supporting small schools, the focus was not just about keeping them all open. Of most importance was ensuring that children educated in small schools in West Berkshire received the best education possible. Although it was the Council's policy to support small schools, it might be necessary to make difficult decisions in future based on their viability.

Members noted with concern that the percentage of catchment children on roll was low at some schools and schools were therefore not seen to have full local support. It was questioned whether the catchment areas were a factor in this and Members were advised of forthcoming reviews of some catchment areas. Ian Pearson advised that it was the intention for all village schools to provide sufficient places for children living in the village.

The efforts made to encourage parents to send their children to catchment schools were then discussed. Ian Pearson explained that some schools were more proactive in this regard and suggested that this could be increased by including a section in admissions material on the benefits of choosing a local school. However, this would not be an option for some schools as places were not sufficient for all pupils living in the catchment. In addition, parents considered a range of factors when choosing a school including Ofsted reports and transport, and if a place was available they would send their child to a preferred school outside of their catchment.

Leadership and Governance

Strong and effective leadership was a key component in successful small schools.

Recruiting Headteachers to small schools had caused difficulties, as was the case in many other schools. Efforts had been made to make these posts more attractive by reducing the teaching commitment of Headteachers and by recruiting Business/Finance Managers to reduce the administrative burden (these posts were often shared between schools). Experienced Headteachers and Deputy Headteachers had been willing to cover vacancies, but only on a short term basis. Filling Governor vacancies could also present difficulties.

Accommodation

Due to the different ages, layout etc of small schools the building facilities varied. Many approaches had been taken to try and deliver solutions, but some schools remained accommodation deficient and not all were DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant. There was therefore a need to look at the potential for remedying some of these issues through the capital programme. An offer of project management assistance might need to be offered to support schools with building projects.

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Community Contributions

Headteachers involved in the review gave feedback on the ways in which schools contributed to its community and vice versa. Many of these initiatives supported Council Plan themes, including vibrant villages and stronger communities. Positive initiatives would be promoted to schools who were less engaged.

Other Authorities

It was found that similar approaches were undertaken in other local authorities to support small schools.

The CE Diocese maintained a position of wishing to keep open small church schools because of the value they added to local communities.

Recommendations

Eight recommendations for improvement were identified as a result of the review, aimed at strengthening the viability of small schools to deliver high quality education, with a focus on pupil entitlement and outcomes, and community contribution. These were discussed by the Select Committee with amendments requested/comments made as follows:

Recommendation one – Heads Funding Group/Schools Forum to review DSG (Dedicated Schools Grant) formula and small schools funding **to help support and strengthen small schools.**

Recommendation two - Encourage schools to explore the benefits of affiliations, creative partnerships and federations (structural and non-structural) where appropriate **with schools of all sizes.** It was felt that positive benefits from an affiliation with a larger school would include support to gifted/talented pupils and for involvement in sports activities.

Recommendation seven to review the feasibility of cooking meals on all sites was not specifically identified as part of the review, but the majority of schools were keen to explore this as an alternative to buying meals in.

In conclusion, the Select Committee felt this was a comprehensive piece of work and, subject to minor amendments, the recommendations of the small schools review were accepted in their entirety. Members added that they were pleased with the efforts being made to continue to support small schools.

Members made one additional request that the finalised report be circulated to all small schools as participants in the review.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) Subject to minor amendments the recommendations of the small schools review would be accepted in their entirety.
- (2) The amended report would be circulated to the Select Committee and to Ian Pearson for approval prior to its being presented at the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission (OSMC).
- (3) The finalised report would be circulated to all small schools as participants in the review.

21. Work Programme

The Committee considered the work programme for the remainder of 2010/11 (Agenda Item 7).

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Councillor Irene Neill advised of a seminar she attended recently on the Big Society and felt this was an initiative that could be explored by the Committee. This was supported by Members who felt it was opportune to look at enabling people and encouraging them to take responsibility in their own communities. The need to better share existing facilities was felt to be an important factor to consider, as was the potential to improve transportation links for those living in rural areas.

Stephen Chard agreed to discuss this piece of work with colleagues in Policy and Communication to help form a proposed way forward. This would be agreed with Committee Members before the proposal was taken to the OSMC for approval. It was then hoped that the topic could be added to the work programme and work commenced at January's meeting.

An item was on the work programme for January's meeting to monitor the changes being introduced to the Youth Service. However, it was agreed that the need for this item would be reviewed after the OSMC had conducted its wider review on activities for teenagers in December 2010.

The joint review conducted with the Greener Select Committee into the accessibility of public transport continued. It was hoped that an update would be provided on this work at the next OSMC.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) Stephen Chard would form a proposal for conducting a piece of work on the Big Society. This would be agreed with Committee Members before the proposal was taken to the OSMC for approval.
- (2) The need for the item regarding the changes being introduced to the Youth Service would be reviewed after the OSMC had conducted its wider review on activities for teenagers in December 2010.
- (3) The work programme would be noted.

(The meeting commenced at 6.35pm and closed at 8.25pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature