

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 MONDAY, 7 FEBRUARY 2011

Councillors Present: Roger Hunneman (Substitute) (In place of Mollie Lock), Alan Macro (Vice-Chairman), Irene Neill (Chairman), Ieuan Tuck

Also Present: Councillor Barbara Alexander, Councillor Alan Law, Caroline Corcoran (Education Service Manager), Ian Pearson (Head of Education Service), Stephen Chard (Policy Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Ellen Crumly and Councillor Mollie Lock

Councillor Absent: Councillor David Holtby

PART I

22. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21 October 2010 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

23. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

24. Actions from previous Minutes

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

Councillor Barbara Alexander advised that work was proceeding with the Playbuilder Programme as discussed at the previous meeting, with the first project shortly due for completion. Councillor Irene Neill added that a Members Bid for signage for these projects had been approved.

RESOLVED that the update would be noted.

25. Demand for Primary School Places

The Committee received a briefing on the actions being taken in relation to primary school places in West Berkshire (Agenda Item 5).

Caroline Corcoran presented her report and highlighted the following points:

- 75% of West Berkshire resident applications were offered their first choice of place. 71% of the total number of applicants were offered their first choice. It was hoped that this could be improved upon in future years.
- There was an adequate number of places across the District for all West Berkshire pupils, but immediate action was required in Thatcham Park CE Primary School and three schools towards the east of the District to help meet a shortfall of places in those areas in the current year. It was expected that these pressures would

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continue and formal consultation would take place in relation to the pupil numbers in these schools in the longer term.

- The School Place Plan had been approved. This had been enhanced beyond the existing good model for school place planning and took into account best practice. The Plan identified six areas within West Berkshire which were based on geographical and secondary provision, these were Mortimer, Calcot, Newbury, Thatcham/North Newbury, West and Downs. An area review had been conducted of Thatcham/North Newbury which had led to changes being made, the next review was scheduled for Newbury. These reviews helped to forecast numbers for the next seven years.
- Changes to catchment areas were being planned in time for the 2012 admissions round. The changes to school numbers and catchment areas were necessary to help further meet parental preference. Initially, efforts were being made to increase the number of places in some schools while avoiding additional costs.
- A prediction model was used for individual schools to help understand demand. This took into account historical number on roll for seven years, a popularity index (which included parental preference, performance data, waiting lists, local school factors), birth data and information on housing developments and building programmes. This work produced very accurate forecasting which would continue, but there was a need to publicise the value of this work beyond the Admissions Team.

Members queried the point at which a decision was made to look at longer term solutions to school places, i.e. building work, beyond the modest increases described. Caroline Corcoran advised that this was considered, but it depended on the site layout of individual schools and, as already described, the first option was to consider increasing numbers within the existing layout. This was not an option for schools located in and around Newbury Town Centre because of the nature of the area and this was a reason why an area review of Newbury had been scheduled, along with the annual pressure for places.

It was added that any capacity in Newbury schools was likely to be affected by the Newbury Racecourse development.

The impact of a school taking Academy status on school admissions was then discussed. It was advised that an Academy would act as their own admission authority, but they would need set criteria for admissions. All admission authorities currently had a catchment area of some form, but an Academy could establish a separate criteria. However, no indication had been given to date that this was likely.

Applications for a place at an Academy would still be processed through the Local Education Authority as with all schools and a request to attend an Academy would be considered as one of the three preferences available to parents/carers.

There was a wider need for responsibilities to be made clear between the LEA and schools seeking/taking Academy status.

Members felt it would be useful to receive a further report once the current round of admissions had completed as an update.

RESOLVED that a further report would be received once the current round of admissions had come to a close.

26. School Academies

The Committee received Terms of Reference and scope for a review into the effect of schools becoming Academies on the capacity of the Local Education Authority (LEA) (Agenda Item 6). These had been approved by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission.

Ian Pearson had requested a minor amendment to point three of the Terms of Reference. This made reference to the wider Council impact of schools becoming Academies beyond the Education Service, which would encourage discussion on how services would be exchanged with schools across the Council, and gave consideration to the responsibility for land/building assets. An aspect of the discussion on assets would be a need to understand whether community use of school buildings would continue. This would not be guaranteed as buildings would be in the ownership of an Academy Trust. Schools' use of, for example, a Leisure Centre was another factor to consider as part of taking Academy status.

Members agreed that an additional point would be added to the Terms of Reference to incorporate the detailed discussions required on assets. Stephen Chard would amend the Terms of Reference and send them for approval to the Committee.

It was agreed that the review would be conducted by the Committee over two meetings. The first to receive detailed information from Ian Pearson on the viewpoint of the LEA. Shiraz Sheikh would also be invited to discuss any legal implications. It was suggested that Paul Dick, Headteacher of Kennet School, (currently applying for Academy status) be invited to attend the second meeting along with Ian Pearson to discuss, among other issues, a service exchange with the Council.

Councillor Barbara Alexander felt this was a timely review as it would link with ongoing work within the Children and Young People Directorate.

RESOLVED that Stephen Chard would amend the Terms of Reference and send them to the Committee for approval, along with potential meeting dates.

27. Scrutiny review into the Council's Common Housing Register

The Committee considered the draft recommendations arising from the task group review into the Council's Common Housing Register (CHR) (Agenda Item 7).

Recommendation three was queried. This was for all elected Members to be registered with the Information Commissioner in order to process data as the Council's registration did not cover Members in their constituency role. Councillor Alan Law supported this recommendation, but advised that the Council's current registration would need to be changed. This would help resolve any data protection concerns.

Councillor Irene Neill referred to a finding of the review which stated that data could be accessed by Ward Members if it was in a constituent's interest to do so. Councillor Law acknowledged this view, but referred to another finding which stated that data protection did restrict the use of personal information collected for one purpose being used for another within the Council.

It was suggested that recommendation three could be amended to reflect whether a change of the Council's registration would be necessary and Stephen Chard agreed to discuss this with the relevant officer and circulate an amendment if it was felt to be needed.

Councillor Law then circulated a written submission to the Committee, this requested that recommendations five and six were not forwarded to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission (OSMC) or the Executive. He also asked that the submission

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be presented to the OSMC if needed. Discussion then followed on some of the points made.

Members raised a concern that approximately 50% of those identified as vulnerable were not submitting bids for housing. Residents might believe they were on the list without being aware of a need to actively bid for a home. This was the way the Choice Based Letting system operated.

Councillor Law advised that many of the people identified as vulnerable on the CHR were elderly and would be unable to bid should they be in hospital. If residents were unaware of the requirement to bid, then this related to a different failing within the system to adequately inform members of the public and consideration could be given to conducting a communications exercise to promote this need.

The letter sent to residents on the CHR advised them that failure to respond within 28 days meant they would automatically be placed on a removal list. This list made allowance for a check to be run to assess whether an individual was vulnerable, in which case further work would be done on their application. Safeguards were in place, but any further efforts to make contact were limited by resources. This approach was in line with a recommendation of the audit undertaken in March 2010. If a resident was actively bidding then they would not be sent a letter. Councillor Neill added that it was likely that a person identified as vulnerable would be accessing some form of support from the Council. A further view was given that there could be a number of reasons why someone was not bidding and reliance on a single letter was not adequate.

Councillor Neill went on to say that the resource implications of recommendations five and six were discussed at the meetings and officers were tasked with identifying the impact on financial and human resources. If this proved to be an issue, then it was suggested that the recommendations could be considered at a convenient time, i.e. to coincide with an upgrade of the Locata system, as recommendations needed to be realistic. Councillor Law raised the importance of conducting a cost benefit analysis if it was felt that the recommendations were worth pursuing. Locata held detailed data but it was not identified by Ward, therefore a budget pressure would arise should the recommendations be approved.

Members went on to discuss whether they wished to amend the recommendations. A view was expressed that it would be preferable to empower Ward Members to assist residents and the Council, and therefore the recommendations should be retained.

Councillor Law questioned the value of these recommendations and added that people were only removed from the CHR if they were inactive. If this was the case then it might be that their situation was not serious and their removal would not cause an issue. People were advised of their removal and would be reinstated at their request without the loss of any points, assuming their circumstances were unchanged. This included any points that might have accrued in the meantime. Councillor Neill added that she was fairly confident that those in the most need and at most risk were actively involved.

Councillor Neill felt that if data could be made accessible to Ward Members relatively easily, then they could offer some basic assistance. However, additional clarity was needed to assess what the software requirements were and the subsequent resource implications to help inform a decision. Councillor Law advised that he would be more willing to accept the recommendations if data was easily accessible, but he did not believe this to be the case.

A view was given that the report should not be subject to significant changes at this stage of the review and Members agreed that the report and its recommendations should be presented to the OSMC for approval without significant amendment. However, an

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amendment was agreed to recommendation six to remove the option to conduct a manual data matching exercise as this was felt to be too time consuming.

An additional sentence was also requested to ensure that the proposed initiatives were accurately investigated and costed, and the impact on resources assessed to help inform a decision.

RESOLVED that Stephen Chard would investigate whether an amendment was required to recommendation three, would amend recommendation six and add the sentence requested in relation to the implications of the recommendations. Amended paragraphs would be circulated to the Committee for approval before the report was taken to the OSMC.

28. Work Programme

The Committee considered the outstanding items on the work programme for the remainder of 2010/11 (Agenda Item 8).

Big Society – it was noted that work on the Big Society was being undertaken by the West Berkshire Partnership Management Board and it was therefore suggested that feedback should be provided to the Committee or the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission at an appropriate time, rather than duplicate work.

Partnership activity in response to the recession – it was again agreed that an update should be provided by the Partnership to the Committee or the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission at an appropriate time.

Accessibility of public transport – this review had been conducted by a joint task group formed between this Committee and the Greener Select Committee. It was believed that a report was being drafted.

Work on School Academies would commence as described earlier.

RESOLVED that the work programme would be noted.

29. Exclusion of Press and Public

RESOLVED that members of the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the under-mentioned item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as contained in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended by the [Local Government \(Access to Information\)\(Variation\) Order 2006](#). [Rule 4.2 of the Constitution](#) also refers.

30. Standards and Effectiveness Panel

The Committee received an exempt report detailing the work of the Standards and Effectiveness Panel (Agenda Item 10).

Receipt of this information was in response to a recommendation of the Committee following its review into the performance of schools in West Berkshire.

It was noted that Ward Members were invited to attend school visits, but it was also requested that a copy of the school report be forwarded to them so they became aware of any concerns.

Members highlighted a common thread within the reports of concerns raised regarding the work of Property Services and its contractors. This had been the subject of a detailed review conducted by the Resource Management Select Committee. The reports were shared with Nick Carter so he was made aware of any concerns. Members requested

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that the concerns raised in relation to Property would be forwarded to the Portfolio Holder.

A further concern raised in relation to this point was the risk incurred by those schools who arranged work independently.

Reports were also forwarded to the School Improvement Team to progress issues and contact was made with other Council services if a trend was identified. It was agreed that the appropriate Select Committee and Portfolio Holder should also be informed of any concerning trends highlighted within the reports.

RESOLVED that:

- (1) Councillor Irene Neill would ensure that school reports were forwarded to Ward Members.
- (2) Councillor Irene Neill would ensure that the concerns raised in relation to Property would be forwarded to the Portfolio Holder.
- (3) The appropriate Select Committee and Portfolio Holder would be informed of any concerning trends highlighted within the reports.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and closed at 8.05pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature