

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee for Children's Services held at County Hall, Lewes, on 23 March 2006.

PRESENT	Councillor Gadd (Chairman) Councillors Elkin, Field (Vice-Chairman), Kramer, Maynard, Ost, St Pierre, Mrs Tidy and Whetstone Mr T Campbell (RC Diocese) Mrs S Maynard (Parent Governor) Councillor Silverson, District / Borough representative Marie Casey, Hastings and St Leonards PCT (Health) Mrs Carole Shaves MBE (Sussex Police Authority representative)
Chief Officer	Matt Dunkley, Director of Children's Services
Legal Adviser	Jonathan Ruddock-West, Assistant Director of Law and Performance Management
Scrutiny Officer	Gillian Rickels

39. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

39.1 Committee asked that the Director of Children's Services report on the impact of the savings made in this financial year to the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 26 September 2006.

39.2 RESOLVED – to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the last meeting held on 24 November 2005.

40. APOLOGIES

40.1 Apologies for absence were received from Mr J Taylor and Mr S Gregory

41. REPORTS

41.1 Copies of the reports referred to below are included in the minute book.

42. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

42.1 Councillor Field declared a personal, prejudicial interest in as her husband is a Business Manager at Frewen College, Northiam to which the Council sends some of its special educational needs agency placements. Councillor Field agreed to leave the meeting if the matter was discussed.

42.2 Councillor Ost declared a personal non-prejudicial interest in that he is a Director of the Newhaven Community Development Agency.

42.3 Mr T Campbell declared a personal non-prejudicial interest in that he is headmaster of a school where children receive support to travel to school as part of the current discretionary transport policy of the county council.

43. SCRUTINY REVIEW OF SCHOOL ADMISSIONS AND HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

43.1 The Committee considered a report by the Chairman of the Review Board.

43.2 The Committee agreed that the School Admissions Forum should consider how best to improve communication between the Children's Services Authority and schools over the mechanics of setting the Published Admissions Number (PAN) and admissions above it.

43.3 RESOLVED – to note the final report of the Project Board and recommend to the Cabinet for comment and County Council for approval.

44. SCRUTINY REVIEW OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SERVICE

44.1 The Committee considered a report by the Chairman of the Review Board.

44. RESOLVED – to note the final report of the Project Board and recommend to the Cabinet for comment and County Council for approval.

45. CALL-IN: PARENTAL CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS THE COSTS OF LOCAL AUTHORITY CARE FOR THEIR CHILDREN

45.1 Councillor St Pierre, with the support of three other committee members, had called-in a decision made by the Lead Member for Children and Families on parental contributions towards the costs of local authority care for their children.

45.2 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Law and Performance Management on the call in process. The Committee's Legal Adviser explained that this was not a matter related to the funding of Education therefore only the elected members of the Committee would have a vote. Mrs S Maynard registered an objection to not being able to vote on the matter.

45.3 Councillor St Pierre outlined the reasons for the call-in. She was concerned that the re-introduction of a policy seeking parental contributions may have an adverse effect on vulnerable children. She understood that when the policy was originally introduced, when the Children Act 1989 came into effect, the policy was only implemented for a year because the cost of administration far outweighed fee income generated. She had concerns that the contributions sought were a punitive charge against certain families. She also had concerns as to ethics and good practice. Councillor St Pierre questioned the County Council's position if it did not intervene following an approach from a parent for help who was not willing to pay the contribution to the costs of accommodating a child

45.4 The Director of Children's Services acknowledged that the original paper to the lead member could have been fuller, and he hoped that his response to the issues raised in the call-in addressed these. He explained that the policy was not about raising income but looked to manage the relationships with parents where a child is about to be taken into care. He explained that West Sussex County Council and Surrey County Council already applied a policy of seeking parental contributions in similar circumstances. He emphasised that the policy would not be used as a barrier to make a child safe or for the child to have a service. The threshold for charging is relatively high, and is based on net income. The policy also provided for a number of exemptions and is not about forcing parents into poverty. It would also only be applied in a small number of cases. The policy is needed in certain categories of cases, often involving teenagers. Social Workers have to manage a complicated set of relationships. Once an assessment is completed, the social worker will decide whether to

implement the requirement for a contribution; charging does not kick in automatically. Social workers have been asking for this tool to assist them.

45.5 The Committee considered whether the effect of this policy would be positive or negative and concerns were raised around a number of areas: there did not seem to be much evidence available of its likely effect; what would be the effect on social security and other benefits which a parent received when the child was taken into care and would the costs of seeking to enforce any parental contribution exceed any income received under the policy.

45.6 Further information was requested from the Director of Children's Services on whether or not parents continue to receive child benefit whilst their child is in county council care.

45.7 Initial votes on proceeding with the original decision, or referring the matter back to the Lead Member for Children and Families, were taken and lost.

45.8 RESOLVED – by a vote of 5 members for, and 4 members against, that the original decision taken be referred to full council to consider the Committee's concerns.

46. REVIEW OF BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE INDICATOR TARGETS

46.1 The Committee considered a report by the Chairman of the Review Board.

46.2 The Director of Children's Services advised the figures for BV163 'Adoptions of children looked after' did not include children in permanent fostering arrangements.

46. RESOLVED – to (1) note the report and support the targets set as shown in appendix one to the report; and

(2) recommend that further information is obtained for BVPIs 39, 41, 194 and 221 as detailed in the report.

47. COUNCIL PLAN MONITORING – QUARTER THREE

47.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Law and Performance Management.

47.2 RESOLVED – to note the achievements in paragraph 2 and each Key Objective and Public Service Agreement shown in Appendix 1 to the report.

48. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2005-2006 WORK PROGRAMME

48.1 The Committee considered the future work programme for Scrutiny Committee meetings. Suggestions were by members as to which items they would like the committee to consider at future meetings and what establishments they would like to visit.

48.2 RESOLVED – to amend the work programme as discussed.

49. FORWARD PLAN

49.1 The Committee considered the Forward Plan for the period March to July 2006 with regard to items relating to the Children's Services Committee.

49.2 RESOLVED – to note the Forward Plan without comment.