

PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, Lewes on 16 March 2023.

PRESENT Councillors Johanna Howell (Chair) Councillors
Miss Nicola Boulter, John Hayling, Sam Adeniji,
Penny di Cara, Chris Dowling, Nuala Geary, Wendy Maples,
Stephen Shing and John Ungar (Vice Chair), Stephen Murphy

LEAD MEMBERS Councillors Bob Bowdler and Bob Standley

IN REMOTE ATTENDANCE Councillor Roy Galley Chair of East Sussex Standing
Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE)
Mr Trevor Cristin (Diocese of Chichester Representative)

ALSO PRESENT Alison Jeffery, Director of Children's Services
Claire Lee, Head of Policy
Claire Roberts, Senior Manager: Improvement and
Intervention
Rachel Sweeney, Senior Policy and Scrutiny Adviser
Samantha Williams, Assistant Director, Strategy,
Commissioning and Supply Management

32. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

32.1 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 16 December 2022 as a correct record.

33. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

33.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Charles Clark, Kathryn Field (Councillor Murphy substituting) and Maria Cowler (Roman Catholic Diocese Representative).

34. DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

34.1 There were no disclosures of interests.

35. URGENT ITEMS

35.1 There were no urgent items.

36. STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (SACRE) ANNUAL REPORT

36.1 The report was introduced by the Chair of East Sussex SACRE. The Chair noted that SACRE was obliged to have an agreed syllabus for maintained schools which is revised every 5 years. A new syllabus had been developed in the last 12 months with training offered to teachers in primary and secondary schools on the content. The Chair noted that take up of training had been good and that most schools were adopting the syllabus, including academies who were doing so voluntarily.

36.2 There was ongoing work with schools, including special schools, and visits would be resuming in the Spring.

36.3 The Chair of East Sussex SACRE noted that the SACRE budget, which was historically increased in years when the development of a new syllabus was required, was set to return to its original budget next year and that he would like to seek a continued increase in the budget to fund activities including a teacher and student conference.

36.4 The Committee welcomed the update and discussed the report. This covered:

- **Collective Worship** – the Committee asked if the review of determination procedures had taken place yet. The Chair of East Sussex SACRE confirmed that it had and confirmed that collective worship should be applied in all schools and should be of a broadly Christian nature. In areas where there were large populations of other religions, schools could ask for determination for collective workshop to have a different focus. The Chair confirmed that there had been no applications for this in East Sussex, but there was a policy in place for future potential requests.

The Committee asked about a parent's right to withdraw their children from collective worship in schools and to what degree this was being exercised. The Senior Manager for Support and Intervention Standards and Learning Effectiveness Service noted that this was a local issue which head teachers of individual schools would consult on with parents and that therefore the County Council did not hold any data on this.

- **Diversity of SACRE membership** – the Committee asked for an update on the work of SACRE to support diverse representation in its membership in order to reflect the wide range of beliefs across the county, including humanist groups. The Committee heard that

SACRE members included councillors, the Church of England, other faiths and teachers offering different views. SACRE had previously included humanist, Muslim and Buddhist representatives, but these representatives had stepped down. Maintaining representation across the religious spectrum was challenging and was an ongoing activity. The Chair of SACRE noted that there was not currently a large local Sikh or Hindu community in East Sussex, but SACRE would welcome any involvement from these communities.

- **Future funding of SACRE** – The Committee asked what steps SACRE was taking to increase funding. The Chair of SACRE responded that additional funding had been previously generated before the pandemic through a paid conference and that other options for funding were being explored. The Committee agreed that religious education in schools was very important, especially with the inclusion of a broader narrative around world religions and humanism. Officers from Children’s Services clarified that increased funding was provided to SACRE every five years to develop a revised syllabus, but otherwise the budget remained stable. The Director of Children’s Services agreed to look at the implications of holding the annual SACRE budget at £7,000 with current inflation pressures, and the potential impact on the running of SCARE, as part of the RPPR process, and to provide an update to the Committee on this during the RPPR process throughout the year. The department would also support SACRE with seeking external funding.

36.5 The Committee RESOLVED to note the work of SACRE in the implementation of the Local Agreed Syllabus, raising the profile and importance of religious education, and supporting East Sussex Schools with the delivering of high-quality teaching of Religious Education post Covid.

37. ARMED FORCES COVENANT

37.1 The Director of Children’s Services introduced the report which highlighted the work undertaken by the Council, including its recent application for Gold Accreditation under the Defence Employment Recognition Scheme.

37.2 The County Council’s Armed Forces Champion, Cllr Bowdler, stated that he was pleased, as a veteran, to champion this work. He noted the enthusiasm of ESCC officers and members, although he recognised that there was still work to do, especially in supporting families of Armed Forces personnel. He also noted the varying level of engagement across the District and Borough Councils (D&Bs) and that this engagement was a work in progress. The Armed Forces Champion reminded the Committee about the training on offer to officers and members and that he hoped to see a continuation of training and an increase in attendance.

37.3 The Committee welcomed the update and discussed the report. This covered:

- **Engagement with the Armed Forces Covenant in local areas** – The Committee noted the large number of events which had taken place and questioned whether this had included the Rother area, given the large number of veterans in the area. The Committee heard that partnership work in that area was still in progress.

The Committee noted the good work taking place across the county but recognised there was still work to do. The Committee asked if there were areas showing good

practice and what the council could do to learn from this. The Armed Forces Champion stated the importance of support from both members and officers in supporting engagement with D&Bs.

The Committee asked if there was more ESCC could do to support Parish and Town Councils, including working with champions in the local authorities, recognising that although they do not have a statutory role to play, many areas were very passionate about supporting this work. The work of local British Legions in identifying veterans that need support was also noted by the Committee. The Armed Forces Champion responded to say he would investigate increased collaboration with Parish and Town Councils and informed the Committee that there was good support available to veterans and families but that it needed to be communicated through champions and officers so that people were aware of the support available.

- **Families of Armed Forces personnel or veterans** – The Committee welcomed the recognition of families in the Armed Forces Covenant, including the impact that moving on a regular basis had on children’s education. The Committee asked for further information on how schools supported children with parents or grandparents in the Armed Forces given the significant number of children affected in East Sussex. The department stated that schools did offer support to children and families and were sensitive to needs, and that capacity to increase support would need to be considered alongside other Children’s Services priorities.
- **South East Reserve Forces and Cadets** – The Armed Forces Champion noted that there were local reserve forces that attended barracks in Brighton and Eastbourne as well as cadets across the county and advocated the role they play in supporting this work.
- **Employment support for veterans** – The Committee enquired about any additional support given to veterans to apply for jobs within the Council. The department informed the committee that where an applicant meets the essential criteria, if they are a veteran, they are guaranteed an interview, but under employment law they do not receive any preferential treatment in the interview for appointment.

37.4 The Committee congratulated the department and the Armed Forces Champion on the work being done, including the application for the Gold Award, and noted the contribution of veterans, families and cadets to the community during remembrance services and events.

37.5 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

38. WORK PROGRAMME

38.1 The Chair introduced the report which outlined the Committee’s latest work programme.

38.2 The Director of Children’s Services was asked to comment on the recent Government budget announcement around provision of childcare. The Committee heard that the department awaited more detail on this but anticipated providing additional support to the Early Years sector in order to deliver the national commitments over the coming years.

38.3 The Committee asked about what communication was in place between schools and extra-curricular activity providers, including after school clubs, to ensure concerns and achievements are highlighted. The Committee heard that if an after-school club had a safeguarding concern, there was clear guidance on how to proceed. It would be at the

discretion of the provider and the school to share other updates and information, however there were many examples where achievements were celebrated in school.

Prevention in Children's Services

- 38.4 The committee noted that the Review Board for Prevention in Children's Services had recommended that, as work on key projects and programmes was clearly under development and progressing at pace, the issue would be better considered by the committee through a Reference Group which could provide regular and timely scrutiny input.
- 38.5 The Director of Children's Services presented a Quality Demand Reduction Diagram outlining the link between cost and quality issues, and the department's ambitions to become both financially resilient and to improve outcomes for children needing the most intensive levels of care. The department's approach was to prioritise reunifying children with their family where possible and increased focus on supporting birth families, so they are able to parent in the future, enabling children to avoid becoming looked after.
- 38.6 Councillor Geary, referring to her role on the East Sussex Fostering Panel, highlighted the need for more foster carers within the county. The Director of Children's Services responded to say that the department could provide information for the Committee to disseminate to support the ongoing work to recruit foster carers.
- 38.7 The Committee RESOLVED to convert the Prevention in Children's Services Scrutiny Review to a Reference Group.

School Exclusions

- 38.8 The Chair asked the committee to review the proposed Terms of Reference for the Scrutiny Review of School Exclusions.
- 38.9 The Committee discussed the following:
- **Exclusions and elective home education** – The Committee asked for clarification about the distinction between exclusions and elective home education, citing that some parents view there to be an overlap between the two. The Committee heard that no parent should experience any pressure to make the decision to educate their child at home and there was no current evidence of this happening. The department was piloting attending some meetings with schools and parents around decisions to home educate. Work was also ongoing to support schools with issues around attendance and absence, including part-time timetables. The Lead Member for Education and ISEND informed the Committee that he had received a reply to his letter to Government regarding home education and that he would circulate this to the Committee.
 - **Review Witnesses** – The Committee asked if it was possible for the Board to hear from children who had been excluded, to share their understanding and experiences of the issues as part of the review. The Director of Children's Services suggested that the department could support with participation work to give young people a voice in this review.
- 38.10 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the Terms of Reference for the Scrutiny Review of School Exclusions and to appoint Councillor Adeniji as Chair, and Councillors Field, Howell, Maples and Nicola Boulter and John Hayling, Parent Governor Representatives, to the Review Board.

Educational Attainment and Performance Reference Group

- 38.11 The Committee RESOLVED that an update on this work would be received by circulating the minutes of the last meeting.

Forward plan

38.12 The Committee reviewed the Council's Forward Plan of executive decisions.

Work Programme

38.13 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the updated work programme.

39. RECONCILING POLICY, PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES (RPPR)

39.1 The Chair introduced the report which reviewed the Committee's input into the RPPR cycle for the 2023-24 financial year.

39.2 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

The meeting ended at 11.56 am.

Councillor Johanna Howell (Chair)