

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CABINET SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee held in the Darent Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 27 June 2007.

PRESENT: Dr M R Eddy (Chairman), Mr D Smyth (Vice-Chairman), Mr A R Bassam, Mr J R Bullock, MBE, Mr C J Capon, Mr B R Cope, Mrs T Dean, Mr J B O Fullarton, Ms A Harrison (Substitute for Mrs M Newell), Mr C Hart, Mr C Hibberd (Substitute for Mr A H T Bowles), Mr P W A Lake, Mr C J Law, Mr J E Scholes, Mrs P A V Stockell, Mr R Truelove and Mr C T Wells

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr J Wale, Assistant to the Chief Executive, and Mr S Ballard, Head of Democratic Services.

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

6. Minutes - 23 May 2007
(Item. A2)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2007 are correctly recorded and that they be signed by the Chairman.

7. Informal Member Group on Budgetary Issues - 14 June 2007
(Item. A3)

RESOLVED that the notes of the meeting of the Informal Member Group on Budgetary Issues held on 14 June 2007 be noted.

8. Cabinet Scrutiny Committee - Standing Report to June 2007
(Item. A4)

RESOLVED that the report on the actions taken as a result of the Committee's decisions at previous meetings, and the updated report on progress with Select Committee Topic Reviews, be noted.

9. Decision in Forward Plan - Children's Centres - Round Two - Next Six Sites (particularly Mongeham, Deal) (Decision 07/00990)
(Item. D1)

Mrs Dean and Mr Hart declared personal interests in this Item as Members of Steering Groups on Children's Centres which had yet to be established.

(1) Mr J D Simmonds, Cabinet Member for Education and School Improvement; Dr I Craig, Director of Operations; Mrs A Gamby, County Early Education and Childcare Officer; and Ms J Smith, Children's Centre Project Manager, Children, Families and Education Directorate, attended the meeting to answer Members' questions on this item, which covered the following issues:-

Strategy for Provision of Children's Centres and Criteria for Site Selection

(2) In answer to questions from Mr Hart, Dr Eddy and Mr Smyth, Dr Craig and Mrs Gamby explained that the Government had adopted a 10-year National Childcare Strategy. As part of this, LEAs were required to establish Children's Centres to provide universal coverage of their areas by 2010. The DfES had issued prescriptive guidance on the facilities to be provided and criteria for site selection, including where a Children's Centre should be 'full-core' or 'partial-core'.

(3) In Round One, Children's Centres were required to cover the 20% most deprived wards (subsequently 'super output areas' replaced wards as the geographical unit for measuring deprivation). KCC had established 20 Children's Centres in Round 1.

(4) In Round Two, Children's Centres were required to cover at least the 30% most deprived super output areas. KCC had been given a target of 52 Round Two Children's Centres and was required to have them all designated by April 2008.

Three in order to fill in all the gaps in Children's Centre coverage. KCC expected to have to provide some 30-35 Round Three Children's Centres. There would then be approximately 105 Children's Centres in Kent providing coverage for the whole County.

(6) Dr Craig emphasised that, in all cases, KCC only proposed sites for Children's Centres. The actual decision on whether a site met the national criteria and should therefore be approved was for GOSE/DfES.

(7) In answer to a question from Mr Truelove, Mr Simmonds confirmed that, although it was a Government requirement to provide Children's Centres, KCC fully supported this policy.

Capital Funding

(8) In answer to questions from Dr Eddy, Mr Truelove and Mr Hart, Dr Craig explained that the DfES had made available a capital allocation for Round Two Children's Centres which worked out at approximately £200K per Centre. This was significantly less generous than the funding made available in Round One. Capital cost was therefore a consideration in site selection because any cost over £200K would have to be met from the County Council's own capital budget. This factor, and the short timescale, meant that school sites were often the preferred location for Children's Centres.

(9) In answer to questions from Mr Bullock and Mr Scholes, Dr Craig said that the capital allocation of £200K for each Children's Centre appeared to be standard throughout the country. LEAs had lobbied the DfES unsuccessfully for an increase in this allocation.

Revenue Funding and Services Provided

(10) In answers to questions from Mr Law and Mr Bullock, Dr Craig and Mrs Gamby confirmed that the DfES also provided revenue funding of an average of approximately £175K per annum for each Children's Centre through the general Sure Start grant. This funding was intended to cover management of the Centre

and included the appointment of at least 0.5 FTE of a qualified teacher. It was not intended to fund the actual services offered to children and families.

(11) Dr Craig emphasised that Children's Centres were not generally set up to provide new services. Their role was mainly to provide a local focus for the delivery of existing services by local authorities, NHS, voluntary organisations, etc, for children under five and their families. Each Children's Centre was expected to 'reach' 800 under-fives.

(12) Ms Smith said that every Children's Centre had an outreach facility to try to ensure that all eligible families in its area (particularly those who suffered from deprivation) were aware of its services and how to access them.

(13) In answer to a point from Mr Truelove, Dr Craig agreed that it would be helpful for local Members to act as 'champions' to promote their local Children's Centre.

Governance

(14) In answer to a point made by Mr Capon, Dr Craig said that the location of Children's Centres on school sites did raise governance issues. Because Children's Centres were a wider community resource, it was important that their management was separate from the host school or other facility. The intention was that Children's Centres should be managed by the local Children's Trusts. There would be a further briefing for all Members in July on these Trusts, which would include their role in managing Children's Centres.

Consultation on Site Selection

(15) In response to questions from Dr Eddy and a point from Ms Harrison, Dr Craig said that consultation on possible sites for the location of Children's Centres took place with provider stakeholders through the local Children's Consortium. This was because it was provider stakeholders which would have to reconfigure their services to make the Children's Centre the local focus. As a result of the Committee's previous consideration of this matter, local Members were also now consulted on possible sites in their area.

Selection of Mongeham as proposed site for Children's Centre

(16) In answer to questions from Dr Eddy, Mr Hart, Mr Law and Mrs Dean, Mr Simmonds and Dr Craig explained that it had been a fundamental principle of the Primary Strategy that capital receipts from the sale of the sites of schools that were closed should be ploughed back into improving educational facilities in the same area. Thus, with the amalgamation of South Deal and Mongeham Schools, the proceeds of the sale of the South Deal School site would be prioritised for improving the facilities at Mongeham. Locating the Children's Centre at the South Deal site would reduce the proceeds from the sale of the site and this was why Dr Craig had said that, for capital budget reasons, the South Deal site was not the preferred option. It had never been intended that the proceeds of the sale of the South Deal site would contribute towards the funding of the Children's Centre in that part of Deal.

(17) Mr Simmonds and Dr Craig pointed out that the consultation document about the merger of South Deal and Mongeham Schools said that KCC intended to explore the possibility of locating a Children's Centre on the Mongeham site.

(18) Mr Simmonds said that he had offered to meet Dr Eddy and Mr Birkett in Deal to discuss possible alternative sites for the location of the Children's Centre.

(19) Dr Craig added that he had now given a commitment that Brambles Nursery could continue to operate from the South Deal site until next April. After that, he hoped that Brambles would form the nursery provision based on the new Children's Centre.

Selection of Other Sites – Grove Park, Sittingbourne

(20) In answer to questions from Mr Truelove, Dr Craig and Ms Smith explained that Grove Park had been selected as a site for a Children's Centre following consultation with provider partners through the Swale Children's Consortium. While it was true that it did not serve one of the 30% most deprived super output areas, the 52 Children's Centres in Round Two would allow more than 40% of the most deprived super output areas to be covered, and Grove Park fell within this category.

Cliftonville West

(21) In answer to a question from Mr Wells, Ms Smith agreed that Cliftonville West included one of the most deprived super output areas in the County. It was exceptional in that it had been very difficult to provide a site for a Children's Centre there because it had so far proved impossible to identify a suitable location. However, two possible locations had now at last been identified.

Hythe

(22) In answer to questions from Mr Capon, Dr Craig explained that the Children's Centre at Hythe had originally been set up as an 'Excellence Centre' with a different remit from that subsequently adopted for Children's Centres. It was now becoming a Children's Centre and its remit was changing accordingly.

White Oak, Swanley

(23) In answer to questions from Mr Fittock, Dr Craig explained that it was proposed to locate the Children's Centre on The Willows (a Social Services site) because Social Services (a major partner in the Children's Centre programme) had offered space there.

Conclusion

(24) RESOLVED that Mr Simmonds, Dr Craig, Mrs Gamby and Ms Smith be thanked for attending the meeting, and the information they provided be noted.