

FALKIRK COUNCIL

MINUTE of MEETING of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS, FALKIRK on THURSDAY 31 MARCH 2016 at 9.30 AM.

COUNCILLORS:

Stephen Bird
Allyson Black
Steven Carleschi
Colin Chalmers
Cecil Meiklejohn (convener)
Baillie Joan Paterson
Provost Pat Reid

OFFICERS:

Caroline Binnie, Communications and Participation Manager
Danny Cairney, Acting Depute Chief Finance Officer
Fiona Campbell, Head of Policy, Technology and Improvement
Jack Frawley, Committee Services Officer
Julie Hanlon, Head Teacher, St. Mary's RC Primary School
Kenny McNeill, Educational Resources Manager
Colin Moodie, Depute Chief Governance Officer
Robert Naylor, Director of Children's Services
Catherine Quinn, Curriculum Support Manager
Catriona Reid, Depute Head Teacher, Bo'ness Academy

S41. APOLOGY

An apology was received from Baillie Buchanan.

S42. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

S43. MINUTES

Decision

- (1) The minute of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 4 February 2016 was approved, and
- (2) The minute of the meeting of the Performance Panel held on 18 February 2016 was noted.

S44. EDUCATION SCOTLAND INSPECTION REPORTS AND ACTION PLANS

The committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services providing information on Education Scotland inspections at St Mary's RC Primary School and Bo'ness Academy which had identified at least one category in each case as 'weak'. The report provided, as appendices:-

- Inspection Letter: St Mary's RC Primary School and Nursery Class;
- Action Plan: St Mary's RC Primary School and Nursery Class;
- Inspection Letter: Bo'ness Academy, and
- Action Plan: Bo'ness Academy.

Robert Naylor provided an overview of the report and introduced Julie Hanlon, Head Teacher, St. Mary's RC Primary School and Catriona Reid, Depute Head Teacher, Bo'ness Academy.

The committee then heard from Julie Hanlon regarding progress made against the action plan at St Mary's RC Primary School. Members asked what support had been available to the school from the Service. Catherine Quinn stated that there had been a team around the school in place who had first worked through the positives noted in the inspection and then addressed the action points. The Head Teacher had identified areas which required extra support. Catherine Quinn and Tony Bragg had delivered sessions to the school's staff on leadership and use of data respectively. Support was given as needed.

Members asked about the impact on resources as a result of the number of children with English as a second language at the school. Julie Hanlon stated that the school had worked closely with the bi-lingual support team. The school's teachers were skilled in dealing with the challenges associated with this area and that parents with English as a second language were very engaged with the school. She commented that there was a disadvantage in standardised testing to children with English as a second language and that it was important to understand the story behind the figures.

The committee sought further information on the assessment by Education Scotland of the curricular offering. Robert Naylor stated that Education Scotland evaluated all aspects of the school under eight broad headings. Inspectors evaluated both the content balance and pace of curriculum delivery in school and considered how much time was spent on literacy and numeracy proportionately.

Members asked how adherence to timescales in the action plan was monitored. Catherine Quinn stated that the Service monitored these timescales carefully and Julie Hanlon advised that the school provided feedback to the team around the school frequently as progress occurred.

In response to comments on the integration of the nursery into the school, Julie Hanlon stated that the initiatives also applied to the nursery and that the Depute Head Teacher, who managed the nursery provision and the Senior Early Years Officer were involved in joint planning with the school. Further, the nursery used the school's computer suite, hall and library.

Following a question on continuous professional development, Catherine Quinn advised that all teachers were met with on an annual basis and plans for development were linked

to the needs of the individual and school. The Council had links with Glasgow University, a good leadership course locally and used the approach of personal action research.

The committee thanked Julie Hanlon for her attendance and contributions.

The committee then heard from Catriona Reid regarding progress made against the action plan at Bo'ness Academy.

Members asked what work had been undertaken to ensure that the curriculum was meeting the needs of all. Catriona Reid stated that there had been a review of the overall curriculum and that vocational routes had been considered as well as participation in the Schools College Opportunities to Succeed (SCOTS) programme.

In response to a question on the Children's University, Catriona Reid stated that this was a cluster project aimed at raising aspiration. The project targeted children at the upper stage of primary school. A pupil passport would be issued to children who would get their passport stamped when they visited places like libraries and upon completion of certain tasks. This would lead to participation in a graduation ceremony at Forth Valley College. The project also operated for young people in second year at high school, the graduation ceremony for this group was to be at Stirling University.

The committee discussed nurture classes and asked for information on the approach at Bo'ness Academy. Catriona Reid stated that there were nurture groups in place with different groups for the different year groups. There was a group who went to St Mary's RC Primary School, accompanied by staff, to do a gardening project and a similar project was in place at Blackness Primary School. Children were identified at the transition stage for inclusion in the nurture groups and the school worked with Community Learning & Development who provided other services in the school.

Members commented that attainment at Bo'ness Academy had fallen out of line with that of the authority's other high schools and asked about staff morale. Catriona Reid stated that there had been significant improvements at Bo'ness Academy over a long period and that there was a good atmosphere at the school, although she commented that there was an opportunity to instil an ethos of greater challenge. She stated that staff changes and new management had brought new ideas and fresh approaches which would drive the school forward. She advised that there would be a revised approach taken to course selection where the students would have a one to one meeting to consider their options which included individual prelim analysis and how they could best be supported.

The committee asked how the school would address the perception that parental and staff expectations were not very high. Catriona Reid advised that there had been a meet the Head Teacher evening which had engaged parents. Two careers events had been held with employers, colleges and universities and a UCAS evening had also been held. The turnout for these events was felt to be significant and had resulted in positive engagement with parents. The school had also been using its twitter feed to provide careers information.

The committee thanked Catriona Reid for her attendance and contributions.

Decision

The committee agreed to request that the Director of Children's Services:-

- (i) provide an update on the progress made on the agreed action plans to the committee on 17 November 2016, and**
- (ii) report back to committee following publication of Education Scotland's subsequent inspection letters.**

Provost Reid left the meeting during consideration of the previous item of business.

S45. USE OF DEVOLVED SCHOOL MANAGEMENT (DSM) RESERVE

The committee considered a report by the Director of Children's Services providing information on the background to the DSM scheme, and the purpose of the DSM reserve and how it operates. Kenny McNeill provided an overview of the report.

Members commented that in order to give full consideration to the topic it would be useful to get further information on what the DSM budget was spent on, why there are contractual time differences and why there were carry forwards.

In response to a question on the use of the DSM budget to cover costs between April and June, Robert Naylor stated that this was caused by the non-alignment of the financial and academic years. Members asked why this was not built into the Council's budget setting process. Robert Naylor stated that some costs to schools fluctuated throughout the year such as staffing levels, which are related to school roll size. Schools needed to be able to fund their teaching posts from August until the end of June, which crossed the end of the financial year. He also commented that in some cases schools built up a small carry forward in order to purchase resources they would not be able to afford from a single year's budget. However, he advised that there were agreed tolerances relating to carry forward and that anything beyond this level needed to have the Director's approval.

There was discussion on how much money was spent by all schools each year from their DSM budget and how carry forward was generated. Danny Cairney stated that the schools broadly tended to spend the entirety of the £2million per capita budgets they were allocated. In terms of the DSM Reserve he commented that this had decreased from approximately £7.5million in 2010/11 to a projected £3.5million for 2015/16.

In discussion on what DSM was used for, Robert Naylor stated that the majority is spent on staffing costs, which gave Head Teachers some flexibility to get the right structure for their school. The scheme was run in line with recent guidance from COSLA and that the fund was used to smooth variance between the financial year and academic year.

The committee requested that a further report is submitted to its next meeting providing information on: an outline of the issues that are devolved to school level and those retained by the Service; the extent of the budget devolved to schools compared with the wider Education budget; the extent to which the areas devolved allow for decision making by the head teacher (with examples); the proportion of the DSM Reserve which arises from the non-alignment of the school year and the financial year (with examples),

and in the event that the DSM Reserve is required for reasons other than the non-alignment of the school and financial years, an outline of those reasons.

Decision

The committee requested a further report providing information on:

- (i) an outline of the issues that are devolved to school level and those retained by the Service;**
- (ii) the extent of the budget devolved to schools compared with the wider Education budget;**
- (iii) the extent to which the areas devolved allow for decision making by the head teacher (with examples);**
- (iv) the proportion of the DSM Reserve which arises from the non-alignment of the school year and the financial year (with examples), and**
- (v) in the event that the DSM Reserve is required for reasons other than the non-alignment of the school and financial years, an outline of those reasons.**

S46. COUNCIL COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCEDURE

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services providing information on complaints handling within the Council. The report set out performance against the indicators set by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) during the financial year 2014/15 and included benchmarking information drawn from the Improvement Service and Audit Scotland. Information was also provided on how the Council learns from complaints. Caroline Binnie provided an overview of the report.

Members asked how many complaints had been considered by the SPSO relating to Falkirk Council. Caroline Binnie advised that there had been 26 complaints which the SPSO had investigated and that this had resulted in 6 being upheld or partially upheld. She stated that in a number of cases the SPSO would not investigate a complaint if it had been referred prematurely, before going through the full Council procedure, or if it did not fall within their remit.

The committee discussed how people can make suggestions to the Council without raising a formal complaint and raised that other organisations have comments and concerns sections on their websites. Caroline Binnie stated that learning of this type was currently carried out at Service level and that lessons learned from complaints were recorded in the system.

Members asked if there was a corporate definition of what constitutes a complaint. Caroline Binnie stated that the SPSO had provided a definition within their model complaints handling procedure which advises that a complaint is an: “expression of dissatisfaction by one or more members of the public about the local authority’s action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the local authority”.

Decision

The committee:-

- (i) noted the corporate position with complaints performance during the period April 2014 to March 2015;
- (ii) noted that the information in the report would be used as the basis for the Council’s Complaints Annual Report, which would be published on the Council’s website and submitted to the SPSO;
- (iii) noted the Council’s performance against the national average, as set out in the benchmarking report;
- (iv) agreed that SPSO indicators 3 and 5 will be used by all Services as the standard performance indicators for complaints reported to the Performance Panel; and
- (v) noted that a Scrutiny Panel will be established to look at the operation of the Complaints Procedure within the Council, in particular the extent to which complaints information is used to improve services, and that a scoping meeting will take place to establish a timetable and process for the review prior to the summer recess.

Councillor Chalmers left the meeting following consideration of the previous item.

S47. REVIEW OF INCOME AND CHARGING

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services providing information on fees and charges. The report provided information on recommendations from the Accounts Commission regarding budget setting; the Council’s approach to income from charges, and concessions. Appended to the report were: Questions for Councillors, an extract from the Accounts Commission publication – *Charging for Services: are you getting it right*; a summary of Falkirk Council Charges, and a summary of 2015/16 – 2017/18 Corporate Savings – Income. Danny Cairney provided an overview of the report.

The committee discussed that it would be useful to see comparator information from other councils to evaluate approach and practise against. Fiona Campbell highlighted the importance of considering the approach to charging together with that of a concessions policy and how this aligned with the Council’s poverty strategy. She commented that this contextual situation would need to be taken into account whenever comparing local practice to that of other areas. Members stated that the outcomes of equality and poverty

impact assessments should also be taken into account to identify if any particular group is disproportionately affected.

Decision

The committee agreed to request a further report to committee including benchmarking and comparator information from other authorities.