

MINUTES of the meeting of the Education Scrutiny Committee held at the Council Chamber, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Wednesday 26th March, 2003 at 10.00 p.m.

Present: Councillor J.P. Thomas (Chairman)
Councillor J. Stone (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors: A.J. Allen, B.F. Ashton, Mrs. J.A. Carter, A.G. Morgan,
Mrs J.E. Pemberton, C.A. Tudge.

Church Representatives: Rev M. Smith.

Parent Governor Representatives: Mr M. Burgess.

Co-opted Teacher Representatives: Mr C Lewandowski, Mr J.D. Pritchard.

In Attendance: Councillors: P.E. Harling, R.J. Phillips, D.W. Rule (Cabinet Member – Education)

67. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Mr. J.D. Griffin.

68. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

There were no named substitutes.

69. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

70. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 7th February, 2003 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

71. NEW FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATION FROM APRIL 2003

The Committee considered the new financial framework for Education and the allocations made possible by the Formular Spending Share (FSS) identified in the government's announcements for 2003/04.

The Director of Education reported that in December 2002 the government had announced the result of its 2 year review of education funding and that the new Education Formula Spending Share (EFSS) had now replaced the Education Standard Spending Assessment (ESSA). Nationally, the new FSS was nearly 11% higher than the former SSA (13% in Herefordshire). However, the increase had to absorb a large number of substantial changes to the financial system.

He highlighted that a new feature of the funding system was that the education budget had been divided into a Schools Budget and a Local Education Authority (LEA) Budget. LEA targets for spending now focused on the level of FSS spending on Education and the proportion allocated in the Schools Budget. LEAs were also now required to provide 3-year budget forecasts for schools. LEAs could also claw back unallocated sums in school reserves above 5% should schools not provide

satisfactory explanations for the surpluses. He further reported that a new Schools Forum would represent school views about items within the Schools Block that would be best delegated to schools through the funding formula. The Forum would also consider changes to the formula and other financial issues.

Following consultation with schools and the Forum, the planned spending allocations in the Education Budget had been made and were indicated in table 1 of the report. The Director of Education highlighted that, while the Table was still subject to minor amendment, it showed that 83% (£68.1m out of £81.6m) had been allocated to the Schools Budget. The allocation was slightly below the target set by the DfES for the reasons outlined in paragraph 10 of the report.

On seeking clarification of the terms used in Table 1, the Director of Education reported that these closely related to the terms used by the DfES. In relation to not meeting the DfES budget allocation target he reported that the DfES had been advised of the position and he was reasonably confident that no action would be taken against the LEA by the DfES. In response to concern about the terms of any 'claw back' from school budgets he reported that the Schools Forum would be looking to establish a definition on this particular issue. However, he anticipated that this reserved power would be used only in exceptional circumstances.

The Committee noted that had the Local Government reorganisation costs attributed to the Education Directorate of £690,000 been included, the allocation target would have been met. While they appreciated the circumstances, concern was expressed regarding the high level of expenditure on home to school transport (£5.9m). It was expected that the improvement plan in response to the cross-service Best Value Review of Transport would highlight ways to reduce this major area of expenditure.

RESOLVED: That subject to the above comments or concerns the report be noted.

72. LMS CHANGES FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR 2003/04

The Committee considered the changes to the Herefordshire Local Management of Schools (LMS) Scheme agreed for the new financial year, including adjustments made in the details of the budget formula.

The Director of Education reported that, in accordance with the requirement to review its LMS arrangements and subsequent consultation, changes had been made to the arrangements and were broadly supported by the majority of schools. The changes were detailed in the agenda report and copies of a consultation document on the LMS Scheme 2003-2004, which provided further detail of the 'banded funding' mechanism, were distributed at the meeting.

The Committee noted the proposed changes and discussed in some detail proposed changes concerning Special Educational Needs. The Director commented that Pupil Statementing was time consuming and costly. However, he emphasised that it was a statutory function and would continue to be available. He reported that during the last two years primary schools had been taking part in a project, the aim of which was to develop a banded funding mechanism for pupils with significant special needs (children who would otherwise have been statemented) so that funding for their needs could be grouped into cash amounts which could be delegated to schools for them to decide on the appropriate provision through SEC or mainstream school. The project had been well received by schools and implementation of banded funding in primary schools would be introduced from September 2003.

The Committee expressed concern regarding the level of funding for existing schools with Special Education Centres (SEC) and the support/training required by teachers without specialist knowledge of SEN to manage SEN pupils in their classes.

The Director of Education reported that banding would reduce the time taken in getting financial assistance to a school to assist pupils. Funding would 'follow the pupil'. It would also create a permanent, variable SEN support team. Discussions had been held with primary schools that had SECs before delegation. Individual safeguarding or phasing arrangements would be discussed in those cases.

The Head of Children's & Student's Services acknowledged the wealth of experience in the County on this issue and reported that training would be provided to those schools affected.

The Director of Education suggested that, given the interest in this issue, the theme of SEN Banding and statements be the subject of a future occasional seminar for Members.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and SEN Banding, including examples of Best Practice in this subject, be the theme of a Member seminar later in the year.

73. DEVOLVED SCHOOLS BUDGETS – FINANCIAL INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS

The Committee considered the information provided to schools, to support the task of managing the budgets allocated to them.

The Director of Education outlined the key aspects of the School Budget Allocation and Planning System and indicated the information provided to schools to assist in their budget management. An example of the information provided to particular schools was provided at appendix 1 to the report.

The Committee discussed the level of information provided to schools. In reply to a question regarding the degree of assistance given to schools, it was noted that a great deal of background information was provided to support the information contained in appendix 1 and that workshops were also run to assist schools.

In response to concern that no provision had been made in relation to changes in workloads in schools through Work Force Reform, the Director of Education reported that so far no extra financial provision had been made by the government to support this initiative.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and the concern regarding provision for Work Force Reform be acknowledged.

74. PAYMENT OF INVOICES WITHIN 30 DAYS

The Committee considered performance against this performance indicator during the period 1st October 2002 to 31st January 2003.

The Committee noted the latest performance information shown at appendix 1 to the report and on questioning why the performance figures for undisputed invoices had not reached 100% were informed of a number of possible reasons. However, the Director of Education undertook to make further investigations and report back. The Committee also noted the intention to move to a central IT based 'Cedar' system

which it was hoped would speed up invoice payment and asked the County Treasurer to report to a future meeting on the actions to be taken.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and a further report detailing specific areas where invoices were being held up, and the programme for improvement based on Cedar development be presented to a future meeting.

75. EDUCATION OTHERWISE THAN AT SCHOOL

The Committee considered information about education of individual children at home.

In response to a request at the previous meeting, the Director of Education reported upon the latest information about the number of children and young people being educated at home.

The Committee debated the reasons for parents to elect to educate their children at home and noted that in cases where parents had had disagreements with the school the education service tried to mediate between parties. It was also noted that in some cases parents may have unrealistic expectations of a school. The Committee also discussed the limited powers the LEA had to undertake any educational assessment of such pupils.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

76. EDUCATION BUSINESS/PERFORMANCE PLAN 2003-2006

The Committee reviewed the aims and objectives for the Education Service, as set out in the Business Plan, and considered the key performance related targets for the period 2003/2006.

The Director of Education reported that the Education Business/Performance Plan for the new planning period 2003/2006 was nearing completion and invited the Committee to consider information appended to the report namely: basic facts about the Service; the service aims and objectives and the links between plans and the Service's relationship with Council objectives.

The Committee also considered Section 2 of the plan, which had been circulated separately, relating to Delivery and Service Aims – including targets for the coming 3-year period.

The Director emphasised that this was a working draft and that some targets would be made more precise. However, he acknowledged that targets needed to be realistic.

RESOLVED: That the Service Aims and Objectives contained in the Education Business/Performance Plan 2003/2006 be noted.

77. STAFF SICKNESS ABSENCE

The Committee considered the levels of staff sickness and absence in the Education Directorate.

In response to a question regarding the high levels of sickness in the school support staff sector the Director of Education commented that this may be due to the high number of part-time staff with children.

On questioning whether any comparison had been carried out against national or statistical neighbours the Director commented that he was unaware of any comparative figures. However, his perception was that the service sickness absence figures were lower than average.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and that subsequent monitoring reports should, if possible, include comparison with national or regional figures.

78. BEST VALUE REVIEWS STAGE 1 REPORT – INSPECTION, ADVICE AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SERVICE

The Committee considered the Stage 1 Report of the Best Value Review of Inspection, Advice and School Performance Service.

The Head of Inspection, Advice and School Performance Service (IASPS) reported that the review had now completed the initial analysis of the services. An action plan had been drawn up which detailed further research and consultation required in order to complete stages 2 and 3 of the review. It was anticipated that the review process would be completed by the end of 2003. A copy of the Stage One Report had been appended to the report.

In response to a question regarding ICT provision to schools, the Head of IASPS reported that discussions were ongoing regarding the level of ICT support to schools.

RESOLVED: That the stage one report on the Inspection, Advice and School Performance Service be accepted.

79. BEST VALUE REVIEWS STAGE 1 REPORT – SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

The Committee considered progress on the Stage 1 Best Value Review of Special Educational Needs and Educational Psychology.

The Head of Children's and Students' Services reported that, following practical difficulties in arranging the initial meeting, a date had now been arranged. While a great deal of work had been undertaken in preparation for the meeting, in order that the work could be accurately and fully reported, it was proposed to defer the presentation of the Stage 1 report until the next meeting.

RESOLVED: That the position regarding the Best Value Review of Special Educational Needs and Educational Psychology be noted.

80. SAFER ROUTES TO SCHOOLS

The Committee were informed of progress under the Safer Routes to School Initiative and the revised combined prioritisation method for Safer Routes to Schools and School 20mph zones.

The Head of Policy and Resources reported that, while good progress had been made in progressing the initiative, revisions had been made to both the process and the combined prioritisation method.

He reported that to date schools had been encouraged to develop a School Travel Plan in tandem with the ongoing Safer Routes to Schools study. While some schools had shown commitment to this approach this had not been universal. The procedure had therefore been revised to focus on a stronger partnership approach and he outlined a number of changes to the process to achieve this. Schools would still be selected on the basis of a prioritised list. A copy of the combined programme was attached to the report at appendix 1. An outline of the overall timetable to implement the process was attached at appendix 2. He also commented upon the need to group together adjacent schools so that work wasn't undertaken in isolation.

While the Committee noted the time taken in local consultation and undertaking the statutory processes they voiced concern about the overall time an individual scheme could take to implement. They were also concerned that individual elements (such as 20.mph zones) should be considered immediately for schools (such as Ashperton & Burley Gate C.E. primary schools) with lower priority under the Safer Routes approach on the basis of the potential for accidents rather than from recent accident records.

RESOLVED:

- That**
- (a) the report be noted and it be recommended that further effort be made to speed up the implementation process;**
 - (b) the suggestion that schools in the same area be grouped to ensure that work was undertaken as a whole scheme be supported; and**
 - (c) the re-formation of an officer working group to ensure elements (such as 20 mph limits) could be considered for schools which have lower priorities under Safe Routes.**

81. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered the range of business, listed at appendix 1 to the report, anticipated to be considered during the coming financial year and suggested that the following subjects be added to the list:

Review of Education Capital Budget – ongoing monitoring

Review of Education Revenue Budget – ongoing monitoring

Full Review of Education Business Plan (around July time)

Staffing of the Education Department

Review of the Education Development Plan (EDP) (possibly June meeting)

Teaching Assistants - a review of recruitment and work life balance.

IT support to schools - to comment upon the Strategy for IT Support to Schools.

RESOLVED: That the list at Appendix 1 be amended to include the items suggested above.

As the meeting concluded the Chairman thanked the Members and Co-opted Members for the way in which he considered the Committee had developed and improved its effectiveness over the past three years. The Vice-Chairman thanked the Members and staff for their support and advice. The Cabinet Member (Education) complimented the Chairman and Vice-Chairman on the way in which they had worked with the Executive. The Director of Education responded that it had been a pleasure working with the Committee and the Cabinet Member (Education) on the further improvement of education in the County.

The meeting ended at 12.53 p.m.

CHAIRMAN