

**MINUTES of MEETING of the
EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S
SERVICES POLICY and
PERFORMANCE REVIEW PANEL
held at PRESTON LODGE HIGH
SCHOOL ON TUESDAY 12
DECEMBER 2006**

Councillors present:

Ms M Libberton (Chair)
Mr R McNeill
Mr D Berry
Mr N Rankin

Attending:

Mr A Blackie, Director of Education and Children's Services
Mr D Ledingham, Head of Education
Mr A Ross, Head of Children's Services
Mr J Lamond, Head of Policy & Business Management
Mr R Swift, Service Manager, Children & Families
Mr W Galbraith, Head Teacher, Preston Lodge High School
Ms J Leslie, Policy Officer
Ms S Birrell, Committees Assistant (Clerk)

Apologies: Mr B Shepherd and Mr J Lindsay.

Before the main business of the meeting, Ms Libberton welcomed Ms Jacqueline Leslie to the Panel, who had recently joined East Lothian Council's Policy Team. Ms Libberton also drew the attention of the Panel to a recent article in the Scotsman, which had placed East Lothian Council top in a survey relating to the quality of communication with parents.

1. MINUTES OF MEETING OF 26 SEPTEMBER 2006

The minutes of the meeting of 26 September 2006 were agreed to be a true record.

Mr Ledingham confirmed that the draft principles for a school uniform policy referred to in the last minute at item 3 had been forwarded to schools for consultation. In response to a question from Cllr Rankin, Mr Ledingham stated that economies of scale would also be investigated as part of the policy.

Cllr Rankin asked about the Transport Review referred to in the Matters Arising within the previous Minute. Cllr Libberton reported that she had hoped to speak with Cllr Innes soon regarding the review.

Cllr Berry asked if the figures for S4 pupils who had left school without any qualifications had been made available at this meeting. Mr Ledingham responded that the figures were available but had not been included as part of this agenda, and that they were tied in with the Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) Strategy. Mr Blackie advised that the strategy would be brought to Education Committee in January 2007, and outlined some of the detail relating to this group. He noted that it had been notoriously difficult to track these young adults once they had left school, highlighted that the issue had not been as pronounced as in other Local Authorities, adding that the NEET strategic aims were still a work in progress.

In response to a question from Cllr McNeill, Mr Ross confirmed that the current budget overspend in Children's Services should be discussed as part of the scorecard report. Mr Blackie commented that the matter had been reported to a recent Cabinet meeting and remedial action has been proposed.

2. HEALTHY EATING IN SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY

Cllr Libberton intimated that Cllr Rankin had asked that the Panel discuss the issues relating to Healthy Eating in Schools in East Lothian. Cllr Rankin explained that North Berwick High School Board had remarked that although the School had a Healthy Eating policy, the Council owned Sports Centre adjacent to the school premises served a wide variety of food, as they were expected to make a profit in their catering facilities.

The Panel discussed these issues at length. Mr Blackie recommended that Mr Axon should be invited to a future meeting to discuss the impact on Sportsplus and Elite Catering. He highlighted that although the subject was cross departmental, East Lothian Council should aim to work together in the best interests of the community. He indicated that the difficulties were less acute in Haddington and Dunbar, where the relevant Sports Centres were further from the school.

Cllr Rankin summarised that although competition from High Street shops was a more challenging problem, he had felt that as East Lothian Council owned Leisure Facilities, they should be encouraged to act responsibly with regard to Healthy Eating. He stated that recent research carried out in North Berwick had suggested that there would be no effect on profits if healthier options were served at their Sports Centre, as pupils normally visited for their convenience, not because of the choice of food.

The Panel discussed a recent newspaper report that had suggested that East Lothian had spent less per head on school meals than other Scottish Local Authorities. Mr Lamond confirmed that the evidence gathered for that particular article had not been subject to qualitative measures.

Cllr McNeill recommended that school catering facilities could learn from High Street "meal deals" targeted to school pupils and Cllr Berry recommended that services should aim to make their facilities more user friendly and welcoming for young people. Mr Blackie informed the Panel that progress on "Hungry for Success" which addressed issues of this nature had continued to be reported to the Education Committee on a regular basis, and added that a new Act would soon establish

minimum requirements for the quality of food served in school premises. The Panel discussed the implementation of the Smart Card scheme in schools.

Mr Galbraith reported that a gradual improvement in the uptake of school meals had been noted by staff at Preston Lodge High School over the last 12-18 months, and advised that the number of pupils leaving school premises at lunchtime had tended to peak in S2, and decrease from S3-S6. He pointed out that leaving school premises could also be related to other issues such as independence and would not necessarily be entirely based on the availability of food.

Cllr Libberton remarked that as the Healthy Eating agenda had been focussed on all age groups, perhaps children would make healthier food choices in the near future, because they had been educated in this manner from a young age. In response to comments from Cllr Berry, Mr Blackie reminded the Panel that schools with a nearby Leisure Centre had deliberately been built without large sport halls so that facilities could be shared at no cost to the school. Cllr McNeill remarked that the staff in Sports Centres should not be expected to take sole responsibility for children at lunchtimes.

Mr Lamond suggested that Ms Finlay should also be invited to the meeting to speak about Elite Catering's role in the uptake of school meals.

Decision

The Panel agreed to note the comments and invite Ms Finlay and Mr Axon to a future meeting.

3. INSPECTION OF RESIDENTIAL CHILDCARE BY THE CARE COMMISSION

Mr Swift spoke to the report, apologising for the late tabling of the papers, and explained that although the inspection had taken place in September, the report had taken some time to be forwarded to Children's Services. He remarked that he had been disappointed at the neutral tone of the inspection report, especially as the verbal feedback he had received had been more positive. The Care Commission had taken on the responsibility for inspections in 2002, and Mr Swift explained that a selection of the standards set by the service had been inspected. Mr Swift advised that the standards had been designed so that children who were service users were able to read and understand them easily. He reported that as the Commission were required to remain self-funding, the inspection service was provided at an annual cost of £2,500

Pathway

The inspection had been generally positive in all inspected areas, and recommendations had been made concerning record keeping and improvements to the physical environment of the centre.

Lothian Villas

Mr Swift reported that the inspection had recommended that staffing levels be reviewed but that he would be querying this with the Care Commission as he had felt that the staffing levels were adequate.

Mr Swift intimated that the nature of the inspections overall were disappointing in that they were not thorough or rigorous, and that he would welcome a more comprehensive assessment.

Cllr Rankin commented that the clearly written inspected standards were well designed. Mr Swift commented that the only difficulty with this had been that they were therefore open to a range of interpretations. Cllr McNeill asked about the financial implications of the recommended improvements, Mr Swift confirmed that the Scottish Executive would be forwarding funding in the near future specifically for physical improvements to facilities of this kind.

Mr Ross agreed that the inspections were less robust than previous arrangements, and reminded members that they were welcome to visit the establishments at any time. Cllr Berry agreed that the reports were non-specific and uninformative and wondered whether CoSLA could be asked to comment. Mr Blackie and Mr Lamond confirmed that East Lothian Council had submitted comments to a review of the inspections. Cllr McNeil also expressed concerns about the quality of the reporting. Mr Swift pointed out that the Care Commission had focussed on services that had been cause for concern and had closed some facilities in other areas.

Decision

The Panel agreed to note the reports.

4. SMOKING GUIDELINES IN RESIDENTIAL CHILDCARE AND FOSTER CARE SETTINGS

Mr Swift spoke to the report, advising that guidelines relating to smoking had been produced for staff in residential childcare and were planned for foster carers and those considering adoption. He was pleased to report that some staff had given up smoking and that the service had continued to work with those who wished to stop smoking. He reminded the Panel that children in a residential setting were challenging in a number of ways, and smoking cessation could not always be perceived as a priority in their particular circumstances.

Cllr Rankin commented that one of the issues of this debate had been that those who smoked would be outside the work environment for a significant amount of time over a week due to taking cigarette breaks. Mr Swift agreed, but added that this would need to be carefully managed, and weighed against the potential loss of goodwill amongst over worked teams. Cllr McNeill remarked that the stressful nature of the employment could explain why smokers found it difficult not to smoke whilst at work. In response to a question from Cllr Libberton, it was confirmed that in the future people hoping to adopt a child would need to be non smokers or smoke outside the house at all times.

Mr Blackie highlighted that the report had contained recommendations which the Panel could not endorse as they were not a decision making Committee. Mr Lamond intimated that the decisions could be made in conjunction with Cllr Ross, Mr Blackie and Mr Ross, as part of delegated powers, and the report should then be sent to the Member's Library.

Decision

The Panel agreed to note the report.

5. OUTCOMES IN RESIDENTIAL CHILDCARE

Mr Swift spoke to the report, explaining that it had arisen from a direct request from the Panel. He tabled some specific case studies which complemented the information presented to the Panel and highlighted some of the issues outlined in the report, including the small proportion of children in residential care, the generally positive outcomes for these children in East Lothian, and the significant financial output required for this service. He explained the working of the service's income requirement of £147,000 per annum, and remarked that a large proportion of the staff in residential childcare held professional qualifications.

The Panel discussed the implication of the service's income requirement, and the cost of service provision for children within and outwith East Lothian. In response to queries from Cllr McNeil, Mr Ross reminded the Panel that the number of looked after children was at its highest level since 1992. He emphasised that Education and Children's Services were keen to work together to address the implications of the increased demand on their facilities.

Decision

The Panel agreed to note the report.

*Sederunt: The Panel agreed that Item 7 would be taken at this point in the meeting, via a walk round and presentation of the ICT department of Preston Lodge High School.
Mr Swift left the meeting.*

6. PERFORMANCE BALANCED SCORECARD

Education

Ms Leslie confirmed that the red indicator under "An upward trend in the pupils in S2 achieving level E in Writing and Mathematics" had been the subject of problems with the formulas within the spreadsheet and this should be addressed for the next meeting. Mr Ledingham indicated that he was confident that the figures should continue to rise as various initiatives had been introduced to improve attainment levels.

The Panel discussed changes in the curriculum, including the possible cessation of assessments at the end of S4, which would be replaced by comprehensive testing in S2 and Higher Certification in S5. There was a particular focus on the situation in Ross High School, which had adopted this method independently from other schools in the area. Mr Ledingham confirmed that in the future, the emphasis would be on consistency across East Lothian, and added that he would be looking for member involvement in a working group which would be set up to look at enriching the curriculum.

In response to a question from Cllr Rankin as to the reported financial information, Mr Blackie indicated that the reported figures could have been unreliable.

Cllr Berry asked if the current format of scorecards would be retained as he had not found them to be a useful tool. Mr Lamond confirmed that a new IT system of reporting had been procured and it had been hoped that the scorecards could be produced from this system.

Children's Services

Mr Ross spoke to the scorecard, emphasising that the target for "Number of Referrals to the Child Protection Register" was essentially out of the control of the service. A similar increase in "Number of Children on the Child Protection Register" had also been a cause for concern but remained a priority focus for the team.

The "Percentage of Accommodated Children away from Home" had been higher than was desirable but Children's Services were obliged to comply with referrals from Children's Hearings.

An amber coloured result for "Percentage of Social Background Reports submitted within Target time" had been an anomaly as this was a cumulative annual target.

Mr Ross commented that he hoped to improve on Children's Service Sickness Absence record for the next Quarter and concluded by summarising that the current problems with financial outlay had again been based on decisions that were out of the control of the service.

In response to a question from Cllr Berry, Mr Ross suggested that the figures reported to a recent Cabinet meeting had been more up to date than those reported on the scorecard.

Decision

The Panel agreed to note the scorecards.

7. STATUTORY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Ms Leslie spoke to the report, informing the Panel that the relevant reporting period had been 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006 and therefore recent improvements to the services would not be shown in the data presented. Four Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs) had shown an improvement, and one had shown a decline. Ms Leslie outlined the indicators reported and commented that the department as a whole had performed well.

The Panel discussed the indicator that had shown mixed performance, which had related to gender equality of teachers and senior management in schools, and the wider implications of a gender imbalance amongst staff.

In response to a question from Cllr McNeil, Mr Blackie commented that the Department continuously addressed secondary school occupancy levels but the challenges in this area had remained inextricably linked with the persistent growth of the population in East Lothian.

Decision

The Panel agreed to note the report.

8. ACTION PLAN

Mr Blackie spoke to the plan, recommending that Alex Finlay should be asked to report on item 5 at the next meeting in March 2007. Item 6 could be marked as complete due to the range of reports brought to this meeting. He pointed out that as the Framework for Service Improvement would be brought to the meeting in March 2007 the agenda should be kept to a minimum to allow for adequate discussion on this topic.

Decision

The Panel agreed to note the plan.

9. DISSEMINATION LEVEL OF REPORTS AND MINUTES

Cllr Libberton asked if any of the reports brought to the meeting should remain private. Mr Ross requested that the case studies tabled as part of Item 5 should not be made public.