



EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee held on Monday 14 March 2011 at 7.00 pm at Town Hall, Peckham Road, London SE5 8UB

- PRESENT:** Councillor David Hubber (Chair)
Councillor the Right Revd Emmanuel Oyewole
Councillor Adele Morris
Councillor Rosie Shimell
Councillor Althea Smith
Councillor Cleo Soanes
Colin Elliott
Leticia Ojeda
Sharon Donno
- OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT:** Cllr Veronica Ward; cabinet member for Culture, Leisure, Sport and the Olympics
- PUBLIC AND PARTNERS:** Vince Brown; Southwark Save Adult Learning Campaign
Dorothy Love; Southwark Save Adult Learning Campaign
Dr Hans Meir; Skills Funding Agency (SFA).
- OFFICER SUPPORT:** Gill Davies; Strategic Director for Environment
Adrian Whittle; Head of Culture, Libraries, Learning and Leisure
Dolly Naeem; Head of Adult Learning
Harriet Duncan, Deputy Head of Adult Learning.
Julie Timbrell; Scrutiny Project Manager

1. APOLOGIES

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Lorraine Lauder.

2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

2.1 There were none.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

3.1 There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

4.1 The minutes of 12 January 2011 were approved as a correct record.

5. ADULT EDUCATION

5.1 The chair welcomed the lead cabinet member and officers from Southwark Council to contribute to the debate on Adult Education: Cllr Veronica Ward, cabinet member for Culture, Leisure, Sport and the Olympics; Gill Davies, Strategic Director for Environment, Adrian Whittle, Head of Culture, Libraries, Learning and Leisure; Dolly Naeem, Head of Adult Learning and Harriet Duncan, Deputy Head of Adult Learning.

5.2 Representatives from Southwark Save Adult Learning campaign; Vince Brown and Dorothy Love were welcomed along with Dr Hans Meir from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA).

5.3 The chair introduced the item by saying that the vice chair requested that Adult Education was scrutinised and the cabinet lead member, Cllr Ward, was keen to see this discussed. A deputation had also been taken to Council Assembly.

5.4 The Head of Culture, Libraries, Learning and Leisure presented the officers' reports circulated with the papers, and was supported by other officers. He emphasised that the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) had written to the council to say levels of fee income are lower than average, and reported that they had reiterated this with a follow up email. The amount of funding the SFA will give to the council is not yet known, but there is likely to be cuts. Officers noted that the submissions from adult learning users related to the 'Personal and Community Development Learning' (PCDL) courses; these are largely arts courses. Officers commented that Southwark is not the largest or most resourced provider in Southwark for this type of provision. Officers explained that Southwark College delivers a wide range of other courses such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and skills for life courses such as literacy and numeracy.

5.5 The chair noted one of the issues raised by the submissions was the new rule that each class needed 8 unique learners per term. He asked if there was any flexibility to change this criterion.

5.6 Officers responded that unless each class has 8 unique learners the cost of

the course will not be recovered. The service has shown some flexibility, however officers said they cannot do this on a wider level.

- 5.7 The chair invited Southwark Save Adult Learning campaign representatives to speak to the committee. Vince Brown started by noting that they are only making representations about one component of the provision; PCDL – this is commonly understood to be life long learning. He commented that he was a doctor of economics and his critique was particularly focused on the financial sustainability of the service.
- 5.8 He put forward the view that the fee structure being imposed was unlikely to increase revenue. He wondered why courses were designated as one term, rather than a year, when the guidance from the SFA talks about a year. He noted that the SFA funding allocation is quite generous, £375 per year. He commented that using the figures supplied by officers there should be sufficient income to cover course costs by getting 14 people to enrol for a year – with extra students raising additional income.
- 5.9 He reported that the figures appeared to indicate that full cost recovery was £9.50 per hour, however it was hard to identify where this comes from, moreover this figure has to be taken from a low average base of student attendance. He postulated that the problem is not enough students though the door, but argued that driving up fees will reduce numbers further. He also remarked that while increasing fees might look good in the short term it was not a sustainable economic strategy as fixed costs (such as overheads, administration and management) will not change.
- 5.10 Vince Brown noted that people who were more mobile with higher incomes will go to Morley or Lewisham Colleges where students can access a better product at a lower cost. He said he thought the result will be classes closing with poorer students being particularly disadvantaged.
- 5.11 He commented that better advertising could have turned around the situation as this would have generated more income. He argued that the papers produced by officers assumed a crowding out problem. However he contended that Adult Learning has a problem with too few participants to make classes viable - rather than a crowding out problem, and that any potential 'crowding out' problem could be solved by better marketing and a simple rule that unique learners take precedence.
- 5.12 Dorothy Love from Southwark Save Adult learning contributed by stating that her background was health, rather than economics. She remarked that the courses are often very important for sustaining participants welling. Pensioners, those with mental health problems, single parents and other vulnerable groups will become more at risk of isolation and ill health. She reported that many of the people on low incomes, like pensioners, have been forced to leave as they cannot afford the new fees as these have risen

fourfold – from under £40 to nearly £170.

- 5.13 The chair invited officers to respond to the presentation. The Head of Culture, Libraries, Learning and Leisure commented that only 14 unique learners would make a course viable for a year, not repeat learners. He also said that 80% of benefit claimers would still be subsidised. Officers commented that some providers subsidise their provision; Lambeth Council do. Moreover when working out the cost of provision then funding for the subsidised crèche, CRB checks and advice on progression have to be calculated.
- 5.14 Officers noted that they also provide courses in the community for at risk groups, for example Cooltan Arts deliver courses funded by Southwark College and they work with people experiencing mental distress. Officers reported that partnerships are a real strength and this has led to an increase in numbers participating.
- 5.15 It was reported that there had been significant investment in Thomas Carlton centre which had resulted in an improved learning environment.
- 5.16 Officers agreed that promotion is not what it could be, and drew members' attention to the report which details the recent investment which has been made to promote this year's courses. Officers commented that they know the service can do better and more is needed.
- 5.17 Members asked if the £165 fee was upfront and officers responded that it was but that they considered the pricing fair, however they are looking into the possibility of pay as you go arrangements. The problem is that this could impact on retention and funding which is based on completion of a course.
- 5.18 Dr Hans Meir, from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) , was invited to comment. He said that there had been a 3% cut to one part of the grant, but there had been no cut to the Adult Safeguarding grant; this pays for the PCDL courses under discussion. The grant remains; there is no cut, but also no inflationary increase. He confirmed that his agency does urge that all agencies increase fees to make them viable; however he explained that the SFA do not impose charging onto the council. The SFA also want to increase participation. If there are repeat learners then these only count once in the SFA returns to central government.
- 5.19 He stated that the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) remains and there is no general threat of thought of removal. The funding is received direct from the Treasury.
- 5.20 A member asked Dr Han Mier if Southwark did not increase fees would you have a view. He responded that the agency would look at the council's performance in relationship with other councils. He suggested that the

committee may like to look at other councils arrangements.

- 5.21 A member asked officers if the council make a direct subsidy of the service and officers responded that they did not. It was noted that report indicated that the service has overspent by a considerable amount over the last two years and this was an indirect subsidy.
- 5.22 Members commented that the Thomas Calton centre in Peckham is a difficult venue to reach and voiced concern that a £1 million investment in a building that will be underused. Officers responded that everybody has the opportunity to do one course per year that is subsidised and the hourly charges imposed by other providers, such as City Lit and Dulwich Picture Gallery, are higher at £6.50 or £7.50 per hour.
- 5.23 Cllr Ward commented that the Adult Education service is very important in terms of ESOL and gaining skills to find employment. Most of the SFA subsidy is paying for these courses and these are still free.
- 5.24 A member commented that people are worried that the range of courses delivered at Thomas Calton will reduce and this issue has arisen because we are now in the second and third term, where as the first term was subsidised. Officers reported that we have certain targets and if we get more learners we will get no further benefit or further funding. The council is a provider under constraints delivering a national agenda under local constraints.
- 5.25 A member asked how targets are set and Dr Han Mier from SFA commented that these are set through local discussion. These are based on local population, recent targets and relationship with other providers. He also commented that there is now more flexibility and the college can more between funding streams.
- 5.26 There was a query on what constitutes a 'repeat' learner. Officers explained that learner numbers that count, or get funding, are 'unique' learners. A member asked for clarification on the big jump from £40 to £165? Officers explained that this was because in the second term they were no longer unique learners.
- 5.27 Representatives from Southwark Save Adult Learning commented that it was usually impossible to gain a skill in one term, a year is needed at a minimum and sometimes several years or a lifetime is needed to master or professionally practice an art. Officers pointed out that other providers offer more comprehensive and vocational courses. Learners can do taster courses at Southwark College and then learners can move onto other providers.
- 5.28 Members expressed disquiet at the prospect of an empty building. A

member commented that he understood that the council has to make the books balance, but can we review prices? Officers responded that there would be a risk, and the council might need to bail the service out and the council is under considerable financial pressure. A member asked if the books balanced in the past. Officers confirmed they did not balance.

- 5.29 Vince Brown commented that according to the figures supplied 14 learners would cover the costs of a course for year. He added that in his view the present high price strategy will lose learners, and he had received reports that many courses had indeed closed. He also wondered if the figure of 80% of benefit claimants was for the PCDL course or other courses.
- 5.30 Vince Brown asked officers to explain why they had chosen to designate classes as termly rather than yearly. Officer explained that this was because of a criterion which determines guided learning hours. Nationally recognised qualification might last a year, but other courses would often be for less time. Vince Brown argued that this should not, in itself, prevent a course being offered for a year. Officers reiterated that they needed 8 unique learners to make a course viable.
- 5.31 Officers offered to meet with Vince to explain the technicalities and also to clarify the costs of a course and he welcomed this offer.
- 5.32 Vince Brown suggested that the service is faced with a gamble on whether to market the programme better and revise the pricing strategy in anticipation of increased revenue through greater numbers, or to stick with the present pricing policy which, he argued, will see a reduction in participation and courses. He said the 8 unique learners per term is an unrealistic marketing target and asked if this could be reviewed.
- 5.33 Officers were asked if they have taken financial advice on their pricing and business plan. Officers responded they had used in house expertise. A member commented that we need to look at marketing the programme and how this can be improved. The member said he would welcome further options on prices and for this to be considered in conjunction with marketing the product. He further commented that generating more unique learners seems to be a key task.
- 5.34 Members enquired if increases to fees could be staged and voiced their concern at the large price increase at one time.
- 5.35 The chair summed up by urging officers and representatives from Southwark Save Adult learning to meet and for the committee to receive a follow up report.

RESOLVED

Southwark Save Adult Learning representatives and officers from Southwark Council with responsibility for Adult Education agreed to have a meeting to clarify the funding issues discussed, as proposed.

The committee requested a report back from this discussion and on a number of suggestions relating to the allocation of places and the recruitment/retention of more students.

6. REVIEW OF CHILDHOOD OBESITY AND SPORTS PROVISION PRIMARY AND SECONDARY CHILDREN

- 6.1 The chair drew attention to the review. He reported that next year this sub committee had been invited to scrutinise the roll out of the free school meals programme. He asked members if they would like to consider rolling this review on to the next administrative year so that the obesity component could be considered together.
- 6.2 A member commented that free school meal provision is about more than obesity and this is not the main focus; free school provision is about expected gains in educational attainment, increasing nutrition and other expected positive impacts. Another member commented that children often arrive in reception overweight or obese, and usually the patterns of behaviour that have triggered obesity have been developing for the 5 years before they start school. Free school meal provision can therefore only reduce the impact.
- 6.3 Another member recalled earlier discussion which took place last administrative year on the number of hours children spent playing sports and asked officers if this was 2 hours. Officers confirmed it was. The member responded that we need clarity on if this can includes playtime.
- 6.4 Members commented that some of the questions on diet on the circulated questionnaire might not yield the results hoped for. The Scrutiny Manager reported that the Assistant Director for Leadership & Learning Support had indicated that this questionnaire could inform the free school meal pilot and that this might be a more sensitive time to ask these questions and give more robust data. It was agreed that only the sports questions would be circulated.

RESOLVED

The sports questionnaire will be distributed via social media and other networks to get the views of parents and young people on sport provision.

An interim report on this will be reviewed at the next meeting, at which point the committee will decide if it wishes to roll the obesity part of the review on to the next administrative year.

7. REVIEW OF PARENTING SUPPORT - PART 1 : SCHOOL ADMISSIONS

7.1 The chair commented that the evidence received so far on School Admissions from the Admissions, Governors' and Parents' Forum had been very helpful.

RESOLVED

The committee will receive a report on School Admissions drawing on the evidence received so far.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

8.1 The committee revised the work programme for the rest of the administrative year and asked officers to present on the Children and Young Peoples Plan and requested that the cabinet member for Children's Services, Cllr Catherine McDonald, be invited to attend. Southwark Youth Council and Speakerbox representatives will also be invited to attend. It was agreed the next, and final meeting for this administrative year, will cover :

- Adult Education
- Review of parenting support – part 1: School admissions: review report
- Childhood obesity and sport provision : review report
- Children and Young Peoples Plan with Southwark Youth Council
- Rotherhithe secondary school

8.2 The committee reviewed the plans for the next administrative year. A member suggested that the committee consider new partnership arrangements between public health, children's services, education and the new GP consortiums. It was agreed this be considered alongside the below:

- Free school meal pilot

- Annual Safeguarding report – January 2012
- Children and Young Peoples Plan with Southwark Youth Council – quarterly
- Review of parenting support – part 2: support for parents

CHAIR:

DATED: