

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE PEOPLE AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNTY HALL, CHELMSFORD, ON TUESDAY 4
FEBRUARY 2014**

County Councillors:

* G Butland (Chairman)	* R Howard
* S Barker	* N Hume
D Blackwell	* R Lord
* R Boyce	* M McEwen
* J Chandler	* M McGeorge
* R Gadsby	* C Seagers
* T Higgins	* A Wood
* P Honeywood	

Non-Elected Voting Members:

* Mr R Carson	* Rev R Jordan
* Mr M Christmas	Ms M Uzzell

*present

The following Members were also present:

Councillor J Aldridge (<i>item 5</i>)	Councillor R Madden (<i>item 5</i>)
Councillor K Bobbin (<i>item 3</i>)	Councillor V Metcalfe
Councillor D Finch (<i>item 3</i>)	Councillor A Naylor
Councillor I Henderson (<i>item 3</i>)	Councillor J Young

The following officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Robert Fox	Governance Officer
Matthew Waldie	Committee Officer

The meeting opened at 2.00 pm.

1. Apologies and Substitutions

The Chairman reported the receipt of the following apologies:

Apologies	Substitutes
Cllr D Blackwell	
Cllr R Howard	Cllr S Barker

2. Declarations of Interest

Cllr T Higgins:

- formerly a teacher at Colne Community School 20 years ago (*item 3*)
- Part-time carer for an adult with complex needs (*item 5*)
- Trustee of St Mary Magdalene Almshouses, New Town, Colchester (*item 5*)
- Chairman of the Hard of Hearing Planning Group which received and commented on this consultation (*item 5*)

Cllr J Young:

- Current Governor of Colchester Academy (item 3).

3. Call-in on Decision on Home to School Transport Policy

Members received PAF/04/14, setting out the notification of the call in and the Paper on Home to School Transport Policy considered by Cabinet on 21 January 2014.

Before asking Councillor McGeorge, as Member calling in the decision, to speak, the Chairman invited comments from the public gallery.

A. Members of the Public address the Committee

Julie Durrell, a resident of Wivenhoe, with one child at Colne Community School, pointed out that:

- the changes suggested here would cost her about £2000 per annum in transport to Colne Community School
- In spite of being geographically further away than Colchester Academy, Wivenhoe was in the Colne catchment area and has traditionally been the school of choice for this community, through both good and bad times for the school
- At present, it has a much better Ofsted rating than Colchester Academy
- Implementation of this would divide the Wivenhoe community, into those who can afford to pay the extra travel costs and those who cannot
- It is unfair on family members who may be unable to attend the same school and have access to the same opportunities.

Angela Hall, Mayor of Wivenhoe, emphasised the historical community links with Colne Community School and referred to the divisive impact of the proposed changes. She raised three specific issues:

- How would cost savings be made in situations similar to this?
- What studies have Highways done?
- Is there a specific strategy on implementing the changes?

She pointed out that over 600 signatures had been gained for a petition and she cited comments made by a number of individuals who had children attending Colne School.

Karen Willis, a member of staff at the Colne School, suggested it would have a negative impact on both parents and children:

- The culture of the present feeder schools to the Colne School would be affected
- Some children would be faced with a long walk under poor or no lighting, as many will not qualify for free transport, being within the three-mile limit
- There will be an environmental impact
- This has not been dealt with at all sensitively by the County Council
- It is likely to have an impact in other areas, such as attendance, punctuality and the raising of academic standards

Catherine Hutley, Vice Principal, Colne Community School, pointed out that:

- The Colne School is a unique school, in its part in the local community. It has worked hard to raise its standards from an Ofsted rating of Satisfactory in 2011 to Outstanding in 2013. A large part of this has involved raising the aspirations of its pupils. The sense of community is very important – it does not think of itself as being part of just a single town, with many pupils coming in from local villages.

B. Member making a Call-in

Councillor Melissa McGeorge then addressed the meeting. She stated:

- The Scrutiny Committee was not given sufficient time to consider these proposals and there were issues of timing, with regard to the Committee's response
- The Council has a commitment to put residents at the heart of any decisions, but 72% of residents have opposed the withdrawal of catchment areas
- There has been no consultation on the cycling scheme included as part of these proposals
- There is also a commitment to reduce dependency, which translates as a reduction in parental choice and opportunity
- This administration has a commitment to support Essex residents in their aspirations to lifelong learning – how does this achieve that?

i) Councillor Julie Young, Member for Wivenhoe St Andrew, as first witness, addressed the meeting. She referred to a number of issues:

- The Scrutiny Committee's comments about these proposals at its December meeting: specifically that a local authority should not be doing anything to prevent children from attending the most appropriate school, and its concern over the situation when the nearest school had a poor Ofsted report. Despite the Committee's reservations, and the 72% objecting to the dropping of catchment areas, the Cabinet Member still decided to approve the proposal.
- The timing of the consultation, as the first letter went out in August, when the schools are all on holiday, and subsequent letters did not suggest contacting parents. Consequently some schools did and others did not
- The Council has commissioned some modelling – surely the Committee and the parents should have seen this
- Local people have historically demonstrated a long-term commitment to this school (It has certainly not always received good Ofsted Reports in the past.)
- Cabinet members have not shown a clear understanding of the consequences
- This will actually save little, as buses will still be provided for other schools
- This action falls short of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in respect of the child's wellbeing.

ii) Nardeep Sharma, Executive Principal of Colne Community School and College, as second witness, addressed the meeting. He drew attention to several issues:

- This has created concern among parents - several parents had contacted him with concerns about travel arrangements in future
 - The consultation has lacked both clarity and detail; and it has not been carried out on a full and open basis. He had spoken to Bernard Jenkin, MP for Harwich and North Essex, who had expressed surprise at these changes
 - This will impact on school rolls - the Colne Community School could lose up to 80 pupils
 - Congestion and CO² emissions may increase, as more parents drive their children to school
 - There were also issues around potential funding that the Colne School, with its feeder primary schools, may receive for school improvement work and Special Educational Needs development. This proposal goes against the national and local agenda for raising attainment opportunities for children in rural and coastal communities
 - Money must be saved, but penalising families is not a good way of achieving this. It will undermine parental choice, in that cost will become a determining factor
 - He hoped that Members would feel able to take a stand on this important issue.
- iii) Nicholas Murphy-Whymark, Parent of pupil at Colne Community School, as third witness, tabled a document giving information on the impact of the proposed changes on local traffic congestion and addressed the meeting. He indicated that:
- Although the distance from Wivenhoe to the Colne Community School was slightly longer, at 6 miles, compared to the 4 miles to Colchester Academy, the routes were quite dissimilar, as the route to the Academy followed the congested main road into Colchester; whereas travel to the Colne followed a non-congested route out of the town.
 - The existing route, the B1029 to Wivenhoe, is a dangerous road, and the safest way for children to travel along it would be on the bus. Rob Macdonald, a Highway Liaison Officer with the County Council, had indicated that there had been 10 collisions in the past 5 years on this road; the addition of a number of parents taking their children by car would add to the congestion and accident potential.
 - There is no obvious road for cycling or walking, or alternative.

C. Members' Questions to the Caller-in

The Chairman invited Members' questions.

Given that most of the case had been presented in relation to the Colne Community School situation, Councillor McGeorge was asked if she was seeking a special exemption for Wivenhoe. In response, she pointed out that a countywide decision was required; each area was different and so each should be considered.

Asked why she had not raised this issue before, she pointed out that she had been unable to attend the December Scrutiny meeting, when it was subjected to

scrutiny, and also that she believed she needed to have the full picture before she felt able to ask the most appropriate questions.

One Member asked if Councillor McGeorge was aware that, across the county, there are already groups who make their own travel arrangements to get to certain schools. Councillor McGeorge acknowledged this but believed that people should not have such decisions to make. Also, there are only two roads – one having a poor safety record and the other being very busy.

Mr Murphy-Whymark confirmed that his own family, like many of those living in Wivenhoe, made the positive choice to send their children to the Colne School. This was regarded as the school for their community, and many of their parents and other relatives had also gone there. For them to change schools would be a culture shock. Another impact would be the splitting up of families, with siblings attending different schools. This not only had a cultural impact on families, but economic.

Another Member asked if Councillor McGeorge might suggest how else this saving might be achieved.

Asked if he would put any geographical limit on which schools children could attend, Mr Sharma did think that there should be a “reasonable” restriction, but that generally people should not be told where to go. The situation here will lead to the choice of school being determined by money; and the impact would be greatest, not on those on the lowest income level, but those just above that, who may have to choose out of economic necessity.

D. Response of Cabinet Member

Councillor Ray Gooding, Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning, addressed the meeting.

He was surprised both by the content and the timing of the call-in. He had received no comments on the paper until just before it went to Cabinet.

He noted some salient points about the consultation process:

- Responses were received throughout the consultation period and there has been a reasonable response, numerically speaking
- The initial communication with schools was sent out on 13 August 2013, setting out the basis of the consultation
- On 11 September, an email was sent out, with a consultation link. This was followed by further material being sent out on 18 September, 8 and 22 October
- He believed the headteachers should have contacted parents
- He also believed that the consultation had been conducted robustly.

There were two parts to the proposals – one to save money but a second to introduce equity. The £3 million quoted is the total saving of a package, of which this is a part. There are inconsistencies, with over 100 secondary schools, and parents need to know that the same parameters apply across the county.

Academies can set their own “catchment areas”, but we need a policy to remain separate from this. Some will gain from the process and, regrettably, some will lose, but we do need equity.

- i) Emma Toublic, Head of Transport and Awards, Education and Lifelong Learning, as first witness, addressed the meeting, providing further information:
- The County council’s statutory duties with regard to the provision of transport are not affected by the consultation. The “nearest qualifying school” is used under the 1944 Act, but this is set by the LEA, and Essex has in the past used the catchment school. But now, with the changing position with academies and free schools, Essex (along with other local education authorities) believe the nearest school is more appropriate
 - At present, 10% of all pupils qualify for transport. At secondary level, 14% qualify (80,000 pupils). Some of those who do not qualify may still use services provided by the Council, by paying for spare accommodation on school buses. The Council encourage parents to think about how their children will get to school
 - Regarding the consultation process, the Council did rely on the schools to get the message to parents, and many of these did so very successfully. The September email was circulated the week before the consultation opened on 16 September, to give parents and schools more time to take in the information. The circulation list also included MPs and Essex County Councillors. And it was joined up with the consultation on bus services at the time, to get maximum coverage
 - The statutory duties in respect of low-income families have not changed; and the Council has withdrawn the original proposal to remove transport from low-income pupils attending the grammar schools
 - Modelling was carried out in several areas across the county, including the Wivenhoe area
 - The intention is to make changes to the overall structure of transportation across the county, to try to integrate the transport network better and provide better access to rural areas on the back of the school network
 - This change will phased in. It will not affect those with existing provision, only those who would be considered after 1 September 2015.
 - Some local authorities have already implemented a similar change and a number of others are currently out to consultation.

Councillor Gooding added that Essex is not very different to other authorities in looking into this; but it has been quite generous in the past. Even now, the intention is to retain certain features that exceed the requirements of statute. These proposals are more robust and bring an element of fairness that was missing.

E. Members’ Questions to the Cabinet Member

The Chairman invited questions from Members.

In response to a question on what will happen if Colchester Academy does not have sufficient spaces, Dr Coulson confirmed that transport will be provided to the nearest school with available space.

Dr Coulson responded to the suggestion that the timing of this consultation was poor, by pointing out that the initial contact was made at the time of the publication of exam results, in order to make schools aware of the imminent consultation; but the consultation itself was held squarely within term time.

Dr Coulson agreed with a further suggestion, that any documents should be in as plain English as possible; he pointed out that the quality of responses received suggested a very good understanding of what these changes would mean. Numerically speaking, 1500 responses was seen as a good response

Asked about the potential impact on families with several children, Dr Coulson confirmed the proposals did not make allowances for siblings. It would be difficult to implement a policy of extending future transport provision for siblings.

One Member queried the “fairness” of the proposals, citing the special provision currently applied in the Ongar/Brentwood areas. Councillor Gooding replied that the Ongar/Brentwood situation illustrated his point about unfairness - these proposals sought to restore equity for all.

Ms Toublic responded to a question on the impact of the new legislation on compulsory education of 16-18 year-olds. The statutory situation would remain the same: post-16 provision would remain discretionary. Essex had made some allowance for an increase in demand, but to date this had not materialised.

One Member asked how this policy of applying the same principles across the county squared with the statement at paragraph 3.33 of the paper, “it is unlawful to adopt a blanket policy”. Ms Toublic confirmed that this was to cater for unusual circumstances, eg the result of a house fire or a family having to move to a refuge.

Councillor Gooding confirmed that the £3 million saving represented a significant amount, but he also emphasised the importance of a common policy. Dr Coulson added that the Council has looked hard at ways of saving money in many areas of the Education budget, and has made considerable progress in working with operators and taxi firms to minimise costs. It retains considerable statutory responsibilities so has to reduce the levels of discretionary spend.

The Chairman noted that there is a cost related to transporting children to Colchester Academy, a cost to transporting them to the Colne, and, presumably, a difference in cost between the two. The Chairman asked if it might be possible for a discussion to be had with Wivenhoe Town Council which might put some money into a ‘pot’ as part of its general wellbeing function. This would enable the County Council to maintain its policy. And if the local community felt this was important to them, whether it would be possible for Councillor Gooding to have a conversation with them. There is until 2015 to consider this. Councillor Gooding confirmed that he was open to discussing such arrangements.

F. Members' Comments and Decision

The Chairman reminded Members that they had three options before them:

- i. Committee to accept the decision
- ii. Committee to refer it back to the Cabinet (as the decision-taker)
- iii. Committee to refer it back to the Council, with a view to the Council referring it back to Cabinet.

The Chairman reminded Members that they were judging the call-in on whether there has been sufficient scrutiny undertaken on the decision, without reference to the circumstances of any particular school or schools.

He also reminded them that neither the Committee nor the Council had the authority to make any final decision on this, only to refer it back to the decision-maker.

The suggestion concerning potential discussions on alternative funding for transport did not form part of the call-in. Members may express a desire to see this progressed, but must consider it separately.

There followed several comments from Members, most of which expressed support for the decision.

A motion, that there had been adequate scrutiny and so the decision could stand, and that no further action was required, was proposed and seconded. This motion was carried, with 12 votes for and 3 votes against.

A proposal that Councillor Gooding should meet local community groups to explore alternative funding options was supported unanimously by the Committee.

The meeting was adjourned at 3.45 pm and reconvened at 3.50 pm.

4. Call-in on Decision on Children's Centres

Members received PAF/05/14, setting out the notification of the call in and the Paper relating to Children's Centres, considered by Cabinet on 21 January 2014.

Before asking Councillor McGeorge, as Member calling in the decision, to speak, the Chairman invited comments from two County Council Members not on the Committee who had expressed the desire to address the meeting.

A. Non-Committee Members address the Committee

Councillor Ivan Henderson, Member for Harwich, gave a personal view, based on his own experience of Children's Centres in the Harwich and Clacton areas. He has found them to have a very positive impact on those who make use of them and he is concerned about the effect of these proposals on Children's Centre provision. His particular concern is how to understand what a 30 hour

reduction will actually mean to the people who use them. He wondered how he, as a Member, could make a judgment on this without a full understanding.

Councillor Keith Bobbin, Member for Pitsea, informed the meeting that two centres were due to close in Basildon. He wanted the Committee to be aware of the impact that this would have on those affected by the closure. They served as focal points for local communities, so not only would people wishing to use them have to travel further, but they would lose the element of being part of the local community.

B. Member making a Call-in

Councillor Melissa McGeorge then addressed the meeting. She stated:

- The reduction in service will have a major impact on local communities. These centres serve as places for people to meet, socialise, get help, and generally escape from the confines of their home. Consequently, they create social circles. When they are closed, most people will not travel very far to another centre.
 - Reducing opening hours makes the surviving centres less attractive and subject to less use than before. This can spiral to a very low level of use.
- i) Councillor Karen Clempner, Member for Harlow West, as first witness, addressed the meeting. She referred to three particular issues:
- The almost universal opposition to the proposals both in principle and in detail has not been taken into account. Opposition to the proposals has been strong. The consultation itself was not very clear or user-friendly.
 - The disproportionate effect on women as parents and carers. The majority of users said they would be less able to use the services or not at all. 92% of these user respondents were women and the majority of these were at work or of working age. So the closure of these centres not only affects the children parents from a social angle, but also has a significant impact on the economic position of many families
 - The disproportionate impact on Harlow. Harlow is bearing a higher proportion of the cuts, despite having a higher proportion of children under 10 than the County average. Educational attainment in Harlow is a significant concern and a joint initiative with Essex County has been set up to improve the situation. These cuts seem to undermine this initiative.
- ii) Councillor Emma Toal, Portfolio Holder for Youth and Citizenship with Harlow District Council, as second witness, addressed the meeting. She made several points:
- Essex County Council has had a policy of distributing funds and resources in accordance with needs. Harlow DC recognises the need for economies but it strongly feels that the policy of meeting need is not met by these proposals
 - In the light of Harlow's concerns over its attainment levels, a review was conducted in 2012, measuring "school readiness" - which takes a range of factors into account. Harlow scored 54% (lowest in Essex), in comparison with Essex 59% and England 63%. In response, Harlow made a pledge

to give all its children equal educational opportunities, and allocated £50,000 funding. Essex agreed to part match this funding – but it is reducing funding for the Centres

- Harlow's transport system is good for getting into and out of the town centre, but poor at travelling across neighbourhoods; this is another disincentive,. especially for young mothers with child buggies
 - Harlow residents feel disengaged by these proposals – the town is already suffering the worst deprivation, but are also taking the biggest hit
 - Distribution of the services does not match the needs
 - The consultation was not well understood by local people.
- iii) Councillor Christine O'Dell, Harlow District Council, as third witness, addressed the meeting. She drew Members' attention to several issues:
- When the family day centre groups started up, a number of problems became evident, ranging from major concerns like abuse and loneliness, to more everyday matters such as sterilising babies' bottles. These centres were ideally placed to help this sort of family, with low self-confidence and little money, and they provided a range of services
 - A lot of these families have very poor access to information, such as on computers, in the library, etc, so their awareness and understanding of what the proposals mean is very limited
 - Evidence based preventative services are more likely to produce results than reactive ones, and removing these facilities will leave us only with reactive ones. And although the impact may be particularly notable in Harlow, the same principle will be true across the county.

C. Members' Questions to the Caller-in

The Chairman invited Members' questions.

Councillor McGeorge acknowledged that there had been consultation on these proposals but believed that many people did not properly understand what they were answering. And a consultation can always be more extensive.

Councillor McGeorge clarified that in the Harlow situation not every Centre was being closed, but hours were being reduced. The principle, which applied across the county, was that the services were being made less accessible to people generally, or in effect no longer accessible. In response to this, one Member suggested that rural communities were worse off than urban ones, which were generally much better served. Councillor Clempner replied that actual access in such areas is not as easy as it might appear.

Councillor Toal confirmed that there is a strategic partnership for educational attainment in Harlow, with local representatives and from the District and County Councils. The views expressed here reflected the views of that Partnership, which also extended across-party.

D. Response of Cabinet Member

Councillor Dick Madden, Cabinet Member for Families and Children, addressed the meeting. He referred to the Reasons for the Call-in and began by indicating the timeline:

- The decision to consult was taken on 15 October 2013. Prior to publication, all Members, MPs and Chief Executives of district councils had been emailed. Members raised questions at the December Council meeting, and were emailed before the Cabinet meeting. Members have provided feedback on this throughout the process
- From March to June 2013, there was extensive stakeholder engagement on this issue, which predated the official consultation. Providers conducted a countywide consultation to receive feedback on existing services. And eight targeted, family focus groups sought the views of service users
- Their research revealed that some centres were used more than others, most users used more than one, many families would use a range of services and would travel no more than half an hour to access these services.
- Countywide outreach had been estimated at 45-50% before the new providers took over; now it was more in the region of 75-80%. The targeted outcome approach, based on need, was being adopted, as opposed to the "universal" approach
- Essex have sought constant feedback from providers and have been provided with data on key performance indicators that covered a range of activities and outcomes
- Regarding the official consultation itself, 1200 responses had been received, including 70 late ones. Some centres would be staying open in the light of comments received, and several would stay open to provide outreach services
- The intention was not to reduce services, but to maintain services on the basis of need. There was a continuing dialogue with communities and providers and regular analysis of local needs
- The consultation process had drawn criticism for its lack of user friendliness, but it had been widely broadcast, being both on various media sites, including Facebook, and the local press the web-based but also hard copies had been provided to all centres. Also, posters were produced.
- Criticism was received early on that individual comments could not be submitted, but this was rectified. It was not possible to provide individual responses to every comment, but all were acknowledged. In the latter stages, officers went out again, to more vulnerable groups. The original six-week period had been extended by a week and submissions were still received
- Regarding the contracts, the course taken has been legal, as the two-year quadrant contracts, which would expire on 31 March 2014 had a provision to extend the contract for a further three years, so consent required to extend the contracts a further two years was within the scope of this decision

- In summary, the service has been adapted to match the needs of local users. From 85 centres there are now 85 locations where a service is provided; the service is the important element, not the buildings. The latest all-party Government working party on children's centres encouraged accountability at central level as well as local authority, the creation of a national outcomes framework, and a stronger governance structure for the centres, more along the lines of schools.
- The new framework allows staff who may previously have had to remain in a centre with few visitors, to go out and make contact with the most vulnerable members of the community.

E. Members' Questions to the Cabinet Member

The Chairman invited Members' questions.

In response to a question, Councillor Madden confirmed that one of the centres to be closed was being amalgamated with another nearby; and another was being shut because of poor accessibility but replaced by an alternative premises. Carolyn Terry, Strategy Manager, Commissioning, confirmed the new arrangements, in that in future there will be 37 centres and 38 locations where a service will be provided. She emphasised that the service itself would not be reduced.

One Member, querying the extension of the existing contracts, pointed out that the Committee had not seen anything demonstrating how well the present providers are performing. Councillor Madden confirmed that all providers had to complete their own kpis; these were reviewed by committees that included Members and were freely available. The Chairman added that, in fairness, the Committee had not asked to see these figures.

Councillor Madden confirmed the savings as £2.3 million out of a budget of £12.5 million.

Noting that there were several references to outreach, a Member observed that there was no indication of the extent of it. In response, Mrs Terry pointed out that the nature of the outreach work made it fluid and responsive to need, so they would be likely to change according to the local situation. It was considered more realistic for the consultation to focus on the static, ie the delivery buildings.

Asked about the potential flexibility, Councillor Madden confirmed that the situation had to be seen as providing opportunities to engage even more vulnerable people. Work was being done in relation to domestic abuse. He expected to see this joining up with other services and believed it would grow.

Mrs Terry responded to a query on the likely accessibility of the services. Although the new arrangements may make the distances slightly longer, she confirmed that designated sites would continue to provide widespread services across the county. Providers were asked to provide access at a reasonable distance – within walking distance wherever practicable.

F. Members' Comments and Decision

The Chairman reminded Members that they had three options before them:

- i. Committee to accept the decision
- ii. Committee to refer it back to the Cabinet (as the decision-taker)
- iii. Committee to refer it back to the Council, with a view to the Council referring it back to Cabinet.

The Chairman reminded Members that they were judging the call-in on the reasons given, without reference to the circumstances of any particular location.

He reminded them that neither the Committee nor the Council had the authority to make any final decision on this, only to refer it back to the decision-maker. He also reminded the nominated Members that they were not able to vote on this decision.

A motion, that the decision could stand, and that no further action was required, was proposed and seconded. This motion was carried, with 9 votes for and 3 votes against.

Councillors Butland, Boyce, Gadsby and Wood left the meeting at this point. Councillor Hume took the chair.

5. Increasing Independence for Working Age Adults

Members received report PAF/06/14 on the CMA relating to the Increasing Independence for Working Age Adults Transformation Project. Councillor J Aldridge, Cabinet Member for Adults Social Care, addressed the meeting. Nick Presmeg, Director for Integrated Commissioning & Vulnerable People, was in attendance.

Councillor Aldridge informed Members that the outline business case had been approved in August 2013, but by October it was clear that the consultation should be conducted. It took place in November/December and the final business case is due to go to the Outcomes Board on 12 February. The funding authorised by the CMA is to meet the various costs associated with progressing this project.

The costs relating to the provision of care for those with disabilities is high – about £70,000 per individual per annum on average. It was seen as important to reappraise the situation to see if some of these could be taken out of residential care and lead independent lives. The important feature is not to reduce care, but to provide independent living.

Concerns have been expressed, mostly by the parents of children in care, who are particularly worried about the long-term prospects.

Regarding costs, the current budget is £209 million per annum; this project aims to save £23 million per annum.

Issues for Essex:

- Lack of suitable accommodation
- Whether we can get a response from providers
- Possible resistance of families – especially when the children are settled in their present situation. A sensitive approach will be necessary.

To this end, £6 million per annum has been set aside in Essex to seek out suitable accommodation.

Mr Presmeg confirmed that the availability of accommodation is the key issue. But it is important to get providers to begin thinking of costing in terms of a lifetime. If Essex can provide longer-term financing then providers will be more likely to engage.

The funding referred to here will require several people to commit their time to the project over the next few years – 12 members of staff at present.

The County Council will try to engage providers who have perhaps money but no land to build on. This will require liaison with the district councils, as the housing authorities, and Members are invited to speak to them on the County's behalf, if they can.

There has been an increase in demand in recent years and this project aims to offset that increase by reducing the number of those in residential care.

With regard to their location, not all residents are from Essex. If residents are moved to alternative accommodation, then their sponsoring authority will continue to pay; but if an individual becomes "independent" and chooses Essex, then Essex will have to pay for this.

Councillor Hume thanked Councillor Aldridge for the update and looked forward to his report at the March meeting.

6. Date of next meeting

The Committee noted the date of the next meeting: Thursday 13 March 2014, Committee Room 1, at 10.00 am.

The meeting closed at 5.25 pm.

Chairman