

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY EDUCATION BUSINESS PANEL

Tuesday, 22 June 2021 at 7 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Maslin (Chair) Councillors Bernards, Codd, Krupski Millbank, and John Muldoon

Monsignor N Rother - Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark Commission for Schools and Colleges

The following councillors were present via remote access: Councillors Holland, Sorba and Wise

Apologies Councillor Campbell and Clive Caseley

IN ATTENDANCE Councillor McGeevor and Adefiranye.

ALSO PRESENT:

Patricia Barber - Chair of Governors for St Mary Magdalen's Catholic Primary School.

Daniel Coleman - representing the arch diocese of Southwark

Presenting Officers

Ghoshal, Pinaki Director for Children and Young People

Fiona Gavin Estate & Contracts Manager

Matthew Henaughan Service Manager – School Place Planning

The meeting commenced at 7pm and adjourned at 7.01pm in order to consider business of the Overview and Scrutiny Business Panel.

The meeting resumed at 7.05pm.

1 Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the open meeting held on 16 February 2021 be confirmed as an accurate record.

2 Declarations of Interests

None was declared.

3 Decision Made by the Mayor on 9 June 2021

School Meals Contract Award

- 3.1 The Chair informed Panel Members that Councillor Sorba, had asked for this report to be submitted to this Panel for consideration.

- 3.2 Councillor Sorba outlined the background to the school meals contract award. In response to a question from Councillor Sorba, the Director for Children and Young People confirmed that the in house provisions as preferred by members had not proved popular amongst schools. Officers confirmed that many schools had not chosen the centralised approach because of cost. In the next few years, officers would re-engage with schools for a longer term solution in an effort to ensure that there was not a mixed approach across Lewisham schools with regard to the provision of school meals.
- 3.3 Members were advised that the contract put out to tender had strict quality indicators and there was a tighter contract arrangement than the previous contract. It had been disappointing to receive one contract bid because officers had hoped that by offering a longer contract period it would have been more attractive to contractors. The quality and cost of the bid was good. There would be a fixed cost throughout all the schools. This would ensure that smaller schools, who had been paying more for their meals, would not be dis-benefited.
- 3.4 The school packed lunches provided by the contractor had been of poor quality and reported as such in national newspapers; the contractor subsequently apologised at a national level. The Director for Children and Young People said that packed lunches would not form part of the new school meals contract.
- 3.5 In response to questions from Councillor Sorba regarding the differential between the options and quality and standards, the Estate and Contracts Manager said that cost was the main factor for schools turning down the insource model option B, Officers considered two insource models. One was fully insourcing everyone into the local authority and providing a service that way, and the other option was for schools to manage the staff and kitchen. There were about 500 employees at the time and option B required an extensive team structure to manage these staff. The difference in cost between options A and B was about £1½m per year, about £10,000 for each school. Schools may have thought that the difference in cost was too high. Officers could consider these costs over the next few years and whether they could be reduced. Another reason why option B was rejected could have been that school business managers considered that their jobs were pressurised and that they did not want to take on extra responsibility of providing a school meals service.
- 3.6 In response to a question from Councillor Sorba regarding the length of the contract period, the Estate and Contracts Manager said that the tender was out for 5 weeks, which was considered to be a reasonable amount of time and ample time to submit bids. She said that there could have been an issue with other local authorities putting out tenders at the same time and it may have been that more resources were put into contracts that were out a week before Lewisham.
- 3.7 The Estate and Contracts Manager said that with regard to standards and quality, there had been a lot of open consultation with governors and school leaders on the specification, and she was hopeful that there would be a better level of service in the future. There would be a three week rolling menu with a backup menu of approximately 50 meals. Any meals that were not popular in the school could be replaced with one of the backup meals. Tighter controls on quality had been

considered. Officers had been attending infrequent, extensive, one day visits to schools. In future there would be shorter, more frequent visits. Every school would be visited at least once a month. The contractor would also be required to provide a free school meal to at least one member of the leadership team in each school so that they could taste the food for themselves and ensure that it was of the standard required. Steps could then be taken to rectify any issues quickly.

- 3.8 The Estate and Contracts Manager said that schools that not necessarily opted out of in-house provision because of dissatisfaction. She said that for some, it may have been dissatisfaction with the suggestion that officers had pursued for an insource option which was not wanted.
- 3.9 In summary, Councillor Sorba said that for some children in Lewisham, their school meal is the most important meal of the day. The school contract is an important part of what this Council delivers through contractors. He said that he had noticed low levels of satisfaction in Chartwells, this was evidenced in the survey of 2019 and he was disappointed that there had not been any other bids. He was concerned that if there were no other bidders this could be reflected in the service provided by the contractor. However, Councillor Sorba was reassured that the contract would be monitored and would have sanctions to maintain a good standard that children in Lewisham deserve.
- 3.10 Monsignor Rother asked whether there was a robust complaints procedure in the contract. He said that it was important that schools do not have to wait for a visit from Lewisham officers, and that they know how to submit a complaint immediately. He also asked how this would be managed and whether there would be penalties against the contractor. The Director for Children and Young People said that the contract would be managed centrally. If a school had any concern about the provision of school meals, he would expect them to contact the Estate and Contracts Manager. Officers' role would be to act on behalf of the schools with the contractor to ensure that the children received the very best quality meals.
- 3.11 The Estates and Contracts Manager said that she has a passion for making sure that children in Lewisham receive the best meals possible. She intended to have good working relationships with school leaders and ensure that they know that her team are approachable. Meeting on Microsoft Teams had also helped and made her team more accessible to school leaders. There was a robust complaints procedure in the contract. There was a penalty system and performance management system which carries financial penalties. The system for reporting complaints had been simplified.

There were no referrals or comments for Mayor and Cabinet.
RESOLVED that the report be noted.

4. Decisions by the Executive Director for Children and Young People Making of Instruments of Government.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

The meeting ended at 7.40pm.

Chair