

Minutes of Meeting of Policy and Resources Committee of Mid Ulster District Council held on Thursday 6 June 2024 in the Council Offices, Burn Road, Cookstown

Members Present	Councillor Quinn, Chair Councillors F Burton, Cahoon, McAleer, McLernon, S McPeake, Wilson
Officers in Attendance	Mrs Canavan, Strategic Director of Organisation Development, Strategy and Performance (SD: ODSP) Ms Dyson, Head of Human Resources (HoHR) Mr McGuckin, Head of Strategic Services and Engagement (HoSS&E) Mrs McNally, Assistant Director of Corporate Services and Finance (AD: CS&F) Mr O'Hagan, Head of IT (HoIT) Mrs Grogan, Committee and Member Services Officer
Others in Attendance	Agenda Item 4 – Deputation: Armagh & Dungannon Early Years Ms Tanya Burke Ms Margaret Fitzgerald

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm.

The Chair, Councillor Quinn welcomed everyone to the meeting and those watching the meeting through the Live Broadcast. Councillor Quinn in introducing the meeting detailed the operational arrangements for transacting the business of the committee by referring to Annex A to this minute.

PR117/24 Notice of Recording

Members noted that the meeting would be webcast for live and subsequent broadcast on the Council's You Tube site.

PR118/24 Apologies

Councillors Gildernew, Johnston, Molloy, Totten, Brown, McLean, J Burton.

PR119/24 Declarations of Interest

The Chair, Councillor Quinn reminded Members of their responsibility with regard to declarations of interest.

PR120/24 Chairs Business

The Chair, Councillor Quinn advised that he looked forward to working with the committee for the incoming year.

PR121/24 Deputation – Armagh & Dungannon Early Years

The Chair, Councillor Quinn welcomed Ms Tanya Burke and Ms Margaret Fitzgerald to the meeting and invited them to address the committee.

Ms Fitzgerald advised that she was a representative from Brocagh Playgroup in Coalisland and Ms Burke was a representative from Panda Playgroup in Killeeshil. Ms Fitzgerald advised that on 20th May 2024, Armagh & Dungannon branch held their termly meeting and invited MLA's and members of Council to attend, with Councillors Kerr, McElvogue and Cuthbertson being in attendance and also MLAs Colm Gildernew and Deborah Erskine. Through that meeting it was agreed that the group would be invited to attend the meeting tonight to provide committee with an overview of Early Years.

Ms Burke stated the purpose of the presentation tonight was to provide Members with an overview on Early Years (appendix):

- Pre-School Educational Settings from Voluntary, Community and Private Sectors:
 - Provide early years education and care; Support and guide children's learning; Encourage learning through play; Provide opportunities to develop socially, emotionally, physically, intellectually and creatively; Lay foundation skills for early mathematical learning through problem solving and critical thinking; Support Language, developing critical skills such as writing, listening, communication and concentration; Build self-esteem and confidence promoting positive wellbeing; Have a highly skilled staff team; Ensure a well-planned environment meeting all areas of the preschool curriculum; Observe all children to ensure all individual needs are met and any additional needs identified; Provide a safe and secure environment for learning
- Challenges for the Voluntary and Community Early Years Sector:
 - Sustainability; Recruitment and Retention; Increase in Children with Additional Needs; Lack of Value; Inequality with Statutory Sector
- Sustainability:
 - Cost of living; Bills: rent, heating, electric, rates; Wages; Increase in minimum wage; Need for resources; No additional funding provided by EA; Funding is not increasing in line with inflation; Settings are struggling to cover costs and meet all the needs of the settings
- Recruitment and Retention:
 - Harder to find staff; Less entering the childcare path; Staff leaving to the statutory sector due to better rates of pay and less responsibility; Having to employ undertrained staff to keep settings open to meet adult child ratio's; Vetting and medical costs for the sector followed by trust checks and length of time not equal with statutory sector
- Increase in Children with Additional Needs:
 - Lack of funding; Lack of support; Staffing; Access to health professionals; Limited resources

- Lack of Value:
 - Seen as facilitating childcare as opposed to an early learning educational setting; Lack of avenues to further develop skills and career progression; Lack of status and reward for the role staff play in the early years
- Inequality With Statutory Sector:
 - Rates of pay and no set pay scales; Inspection from both social services and ETI; SEN referrals; Displacement on allocation of places; Funding per child in setting; Vetting process; The new 22.5 hour week for pre-school children pilot only completed in Nursery school settings

The Chair, Councillor Quinn thanked Ms Burke for her informative presentation and said that it was clear to hear the emotion in her voice when delivering the presentation which he could really understand. The Chair concurred with Ms Burke's comment about the provision being seen as a babysitting service which was totally disrespectful. He referred to Brocagh Playgroup and said he could not sing their praises strongly enough along with parents he had spoken too, there was nothing but high praise about the work in which the playgroup carries out. The Chair felt that there was a total disrespect for playgroups, there is nursery schools which carry out fantastic work, but they were doing nothing different to what playgroups were doing enhancing children's learning skills and improvement from when a child enters at the start of the year until they leave at the end of the year.

Ms Fitzgerald stated that within Brocagh playgroup, staff were working 3.5 hours per day but were only being funded for 2.5 hours the same way as other playgroups and are just seen as a subsidiary of nursery schools for children who didn't get into nursery schools even though the majority were all first preference. Ms Fitzgerald advised that the Education Authority see playgroups as a backup for nursery schools.

The Chair stated that there seemed to be a total disrespect from other statutory agencies towards playgroups when approaching them about other issues like road safety matters etc and their response was that it was not a school facility and no interest in the matter.

The Chair said that he came from a teaching background himself as both his parents were teachers and it was evident the disrespect classroom assistants get, but the fact of the matter was that teachers could not do their job without them and were just as qualified when it came to teaching and educating children.

Councillor McLernon thanked the group for their presentation and said that it was clear to see the very valuable and well-deserved service being delivered especially when it came to working with children with SEN Education. The member advised that her nephew attended Brocagh Primary School but was now an adult with special complex needs and agreed that there was not enough provision out there especially for those children with SEN and for other needs that needed to be addressed. The member said that Councillors would be more than happy to help and not to be afraid to reach out.

Councillor F Burton thanked the group for their presentation tonight. The member stated that she had recently worked with a family and through their playgroup it was identified that their child had extra needs and required support. The member referred to

access to expertise from health professionals and enquired what Council could do to try and help and change what playgroups were coming up against including a list of things that Council could lobby for or write to the Minister to ensure that these were on his desk. The member said that around the room tonight, each Councillor values preschools and wants the best for our children and were always told that the early years were the most important years of a child's life and was important to get behind this to allow children to get the right support. The member said that she had recently spoken to a local lady and was shocked to learn that she had taken on the role within a playgroup on a voluntary basis going out seeking funding for the playgroup which was a thankless job but was willing to go out to try and better the lives of children in a rural area.

Ms Burke agreed that there was a need for the management committee but that vetting puts volunteers off, some years the playgroup were very fortunate enough that some parents were able to give up their free time to help out. Ms Burke stated that the person who pays the wages was also carries out other roles: treasurer, payroll and signing out money etc and not something that they envisaged when they sent their child to preschool and agreed that this was tough. In the past she had been awarded a wellbeing grant, which was something very nice as she was able to reward the committee taking them out for a meal and felt that this was something to show how much volunteers were valued within the community. In response to query regarding signposting to other professionals, felt that this would be the remit of the educational sector and advised that a playgroup was the first point of contact as they were writing the first record of concern. Ms Burke referred to a recent news report of a young girl being diagnosed with a life limiting condition and advised that she was actually the playgroup leader that the young girl mentioned about bringing it to her attention and although she was going to lose her sight, ability to walk and deteriorate rapidly, she was the person to raise the concern initially. The mother of the young girl did not accept it in the beginning but later approached the playgroup to help sign it off, which was very challenging as the playgroup was handling very delicate information. She felt that this was a very difficult situation as there was very little help out there and people having to go on their own and seek support from health visitors and other health professionals. Ms Burke advised that there was one little girl within her setting desperately needing support and she had tried every avenue and has been turned down, with a principal phoning from a local school advising that there was no support in place and cannot accommodate the child. The child has no statement as Ms Burke was unable to get it for her for September and then people wonder why children were not in placements and why a good solicitor was fighting to get these children the placement they deserve and felt that there was a year in a child's life where they could be helped. She said that schools wished that they could do more also but were only permitted to make two referrals per year and if a school was sitting with 200 pupils, then this was a very small number of pupils they can help and would be confident that schools would also be in favour of this.

Ms Fitzgerald said that there were some children who do not have a place at all, with one place in Primate Dixon with 40 children, with each parent thinking that this was being allocated to their child.

Ms Burke advised that there was a continuous knock-on effect down the ladder, if a child does not get a place, then this can cause stress and mental health issues to parents as well which can impact the health service.

The Strategic Director of Organisation Development, Strategy and Performance (SD: ODSP) advised that she was responsible for Community Planning within Council which includes Education and Health including the Southern Trust, with everyone being at the table. The SD: ODSP felt that it would be worthwhile for the group to be invited to a future meeting of Community Planning to provide a presentation to all the bodies around the table so they can hear the story and challenges being faced on a daily basis. She stated that there could be an influence present who might be able to do something as she was aware of the value of what playgroups do and certainly knew the value of what Ms Fitzgerald did in Brocagh Playgroup. The SD: ODSP advised the committee that she would liaise with the group after the meeting to tie in with a future Community Planning meeting.

Councillor Cahoon thanked the group for their presentation and said that sometimes people do not know what Early Years entails until you know someone working in that sector. The member referred to the importance it plays in the fundamental years of a child's life and the skills they learn for life. The member hoped that the announcement from the Minister a few weeks ago shows that Early Years is valued and although there was an ambitious package of announcements which was correct, there were a few concerns raised through the presentation by the group tonight and advised that these would be brought back to the Minister by herself and Councillor Burton especially around the 22.5 hours and correct provision as this would transform children's lives for decades to come.

Ms Burke referred to 22.5 hours proposal and advised that the playgroup resided in an old Council building, former Killymaddy restaurant and if implemented would be hopeful for that next year. Ms Burke said that she runs a double session and would be beneficial to avail of two rooms together and asked if this was something that Council could consider i.e. implementing a modular building on site as there would be 39 children coming back next year and if she was only able to offer one session of 22.5 hours, there would be some children who would not avail of a place for the incoming year.

Ms Fitzpatrick stated that this was a problem for a lot of the playgroups and this would allow the facilities to run extra sessions.

Ms Burke agreed that this would allow the facilities to run the extra sessions and provide support as this has come in quite rapidly and if implemented would allow the extra places to be given out. There would be challenges otherwise as places have already been allocated and children losing out on a place. Ms Burke said that any help the Council could provide would be greatly appreciated.

The Assistant Director of Corporate Services and Finance (AD: CS&F) referred to comment regarding additional space and advised that this could be something that could be brought to the Capital Planning team to see if this could be progressed.

The Chair thanked Ms Burke and Ms Fitzgerald for attending the meeting tonight and hoped that something could be done by Council to help the group going forward.

The representatives from Armagh and Dungannon Early Years withdrew from the meeting at 7.32 pm.

PR122/24 Member Services

No issues.

Matters for Decision

PR123/24 Corporate Performance Improvement Plan (PIP Plan) 2024

The Head of Strategic Services and Engagement (HoSS&E) presented previously circulated report to consider Council's Corporate Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) for period 2024-2025.

Proposed by Councillor McAleer
Seconded by Councillor McLernon and

Resolved That it be recommended to Council to approve the Council's Corporate Performance Improvement (PIP Plan) Plan 2024-2025.

PR124/24 ICT Strategy

The Head of IT (HoIT) presented previously circulated report to seek approval for the adoption of the New ICT Strategy for Mid Ulster District Council.

Councillor F Burton referred to the cost of implementing the new ICT system for Magherafelt and possibly Dungannon at some stage and said that she had watched a programme on TV today regarding cyber security and enquired if Officers were happy that our security was robust enough due to the high level of hacking and spamming against people and businesses.

The HoIT agreed that cyber security was the biggest challenge and risk facing this organisation and one of the key aims and objectives within the strategy for Officers to enhance and reinforce cyber controls, awareness, technical issues and resources. The Council has committed to resourcing those cyber controls so far as reasonably possible but face the same challenges as the wider world given the regular high-profile compromises recently. The HoIT stated that it was one of the top priorities within Council's strategy and Council is working diligently, restructuring our services to adopt (including a new cyber lead post in position). Council has implemented a SOC and SIEM service which will monitor and look for indicators of compromise, we have reinforced our technical policies and security controls to combat ever changing cyber threats.

The Chair concurred with Councillor F Burton's comments and felt that this was very important. The member said that he receives a lot of messages from older constituents regarding unwarranted emails being received and usually he tells them to just ignore them and asked if it would be possible for Council to send a message to the general public about hacking emails. He referred to an email he had received a few weeks ago about a hacking email indicating that they had accessed his account by using a password and when he investigated the email, he realised that it was an old password that the hackers had accessed through an old website he had used years previously and personal details leaked. The Chair said that he was able to delete the message, but if this was someone elderly, they could pay out very easily as they could think it was

genuine. The Chair enquired if there was any way Council could put out a social media post warning the public against hacking.

Councillor McPeake advised that this was one of the key subjects that PCSP advise of when meeting key groups, the elderly in particular. He said that the Crime Prevention Officer does a specific workshop on the issue, for particularly the elderly and felt that it would be beneficial for Council to link in with PCSP as they have it well on their radar and do sterling work. The member advised that it was very important to make the public aware of hacking and scamming as it was in all facets and advised that he had attended a recent event with Councillor F Burton in the Valley Hotel, Fivemiletown, with the subject amongst the elderly about deadly concerns regarding cyber security.

Councillor Wilson advised that it was just not the elderly that was being targeted, it could be anyone as scamming was getting more sophisticated. He recalled receiving a text message last week "*Hi Dad, this is my new number*" and automatically thought it was from his daughter in Scotland but had the good sense to google the number and realise it was a scam. The member said that if a message was to be issued to the public by social media about email scamming, that text message scamming should also be included.

Proposed by Councillor McLernon
Seconded by Councillor S McPeake and

Resolved That it be recommended to Council to note the contents of the ICT Strategy and adopt the strategy for Council.

PR125/24 July Committee Schedule

The Head of Strategic Services and Engagement (HoSS&E) presented previously circulated report to seek approval to move the date of the Committee meetings in July to accommodate the General Election scheduled for 4th July 2024.

Proposed by Councillor F Burton
Seconded by Councillor McAleer and

Resolved That it be recommended to Council that approval be granted to move the date of the committee meetings in July to:

- Planning Committee: 2 July 2024 at 6.00pm, Chamber, Dungannon
- Environment Committee: 8 July 2024 at 7.00pm, Chamber, Cookstown
- Development Committee: 9 July 2024 at 7.00pm, Chamber, Cookstown
- Policy & Resources Committee: 10 July 2024 at 7.00pm, Chamber, Cookstown

PR126/24 Member Services

None.

Matters for Information

PR127/24 Minutes of Policy and Resources Committee held on 9 May 2024

Members noted Minutes of Policy & Resources Committee held on 9 May 2024.

PR128/24 Corporate Services & Finance Directorate Service Plan 2024-25

Members noted Corporate Services & Finance Directorate Service Plan for 2024-25.

PR129/24 Somme Association: 2024-2025 Membership Subscription

Members noted correspondence received from the Somme Association on annual contributions payable for period 2023-2024.

Live broadcast ended at 7.42 pm.

Local Government (NI) Act 2014 - Confidential Business

Proposed by Councillor McLernon
Seconded by Councillor McAleer and

Resolved In accordance with Section 42, Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (NI) 2014 that Members of the public be asked to withdraw from the meeting whilst Members consider items PR130/24 to PR135/24.

Matters for Decision

PR130/24 Magherafelt Chamber Upgrade
PR131/24 Staff Updates – Organisational Restructure and Other
PR132/24 Staffing Matters for Decision

Matters for Information

PR133/24 Confidential Minutes of Policy & Resources Committee held on 9 May 2024
PR134/24 Staff Matters for Information
PR135/24 Contracts and DAC

P136/24 Duration of Meeting

The meeting was called for 7.00 pm and ended at 7.52 pm.

Chair _____

Date _____

Annex A – Introductory Remarks from the Chairperson

Good evening and welcome to the Council's [Policy & Resources/Environment/Development] Committee in the Chamber, [Cookstown/Dungannon/Magherafelt].

I specifically welcome the public watching us through the Live Broadcast. The Live Broadcast as aforesaid, will run for the period of our Open Business but will end just before we move into Confidential Business. I will let you know before this happens.

I would remind the public and press that taking photographs of proceedings or using any means to enable anyone not present to see or hear proceedings, or making a simultaneous oral report of the proceedings are not permitted.

Thank you and we will now move to the agenda.



Armagh and Dungannon Early Years Branch

OUR EARLY YEARS CONCERNS

Pre School Educational Settings from Voluntary, Community and Private Sectors



- Provide early years education and care
- Support and guide children's learning
- Encourage learning through play
- Provide opportunities to develop socially, emotionally, physically, intellectually and creatively
- Lay foundation skills for early mathematical learning through problem solving and critical thinking
- Support Language, developing critical skills such as writing, listening, communication and concentration
- Build self-esteem and confidence promoting positive wellbeing
- Have a highly skilled staff team
- Ensure a well-planned environment meeting all areas of the preschool curriculum
- Observe all children to ensure all individual needs are met and any additional needs identified
- Provide a safe and secure environment for learning

Challenges for the voluntary and community Early Years Sector

- Sustainability
- Recruitment and retention
- Increase in children with Additional Needs
- Lack of Value
- Inequality with statutory sector



Sustainability

- Cost of living
- Bills : Rent, heating, electric, rates
- Wages
- Increase in minimum wage
- Need for resources
- No additional funding provided by EA
- Funding is not increasing in line with inflation
- Settings are struggling to cover costs and meet all the needs of the settings



Recruitment and retention

Harder to find staff

Less entering the childcare path

Staff leaving to the statutory sector due to better rates of pay and less responsibility

Having to employ undertrained staff to keep settings open to meet adult child ratio's

Vetting and medical costs for our sector followed by trust checks and length of time not equal with statutory sector

Increase in Children with Additional Needs



Lack of funding



Lack of support



Staffing



Access to health professionals



Limited resources

Lack of Value

1

Seen as facilitating childcare as opposed to an early learning educational setting

2

Lack of avenues to further develop our skills and career progression

3

Lack of status and reward for the role we play in the early years

Inequality with statutory sector

Rates of pay and no set pay scales

Inspection from both social services and ETI

SEN Referrals

Displacement on allocation of places

Funding per child in setting

Vetting process

The new 22.5 hour week for pre school children pilot was only completed in Nursery school settings