

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

CABINET

At a remote meeting of the **Cabinet** held on Tuesday 12 May 2020 at 2.00 pm.

PRESENT

Councillor P. Jackson
(Leader of the Council, in the Chair)

CABINET MEMBERS

Daley, W.
Homer, C.R.
Jones, V.

Oliver, N.
Sanderson, H.G.H.
Wearmouth, R.

OTHER MEMBERS

Dodd, R.
Dungworth, S.

Flux, B.
Reid, J.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Angus, K.

Aviston, S.
Bradley, N.

Hadfield, K.

Hand, C.
Lally, D.
Lancaster, H.
Little, L.
McEvoy-Carr, C.

McLoughlin, J.

O'Farrell, R.
Soderquest, P.

Executive Director of HR/OD and
Deputy Chief Executive
Head of School Organisation
Service Director – Strategic
Commissioning and Finance
Democratic and Electoral Services
Manager
Executive Director of Finance
Chief Executive
Principal Solicitor
Democratic Services Officer
Executive Director: Adult Social
Care and Children's Services
Executive Director: Regeneration,
Commercial and Economy
Interim Executive Director: Place
Head of Housing and Public
Protection

Ch.'s Initials.....

96. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held on 10 March 2020, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

97. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADULT SOCIAL CARE AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

(1) Outcomes of statutory consultation on a proposal to close West Woodburn First School

The report outlined the results of the statutory consultation process undertaken by the Council in relation to the proposed closure of West Woodburn First School with effect from 31 August 2020. This consultation had come about as the school currently had no pupils on roll and had received no applications for a place in Reception class in September 2020. In considering the outcomes of the formal consultation, Cabinet was asked to decide whether or not to approve the closure of the school (copy attached to the signed minutes as Appendix A along with the report of the FACS OSC circulated at the meeting).

Councillor Daley set out the background to the current position and reported that there were currently no pupils at the school and no applications to attend in September 2020. Cabinet had agreed in March to a formal consultation process and this had taken place between 12 March and 19 April. One representation had been received from a member of the public, who was not a member of staff or a parent of a child at the school, and the representation was detailed in the report.

The school had now been subject to four consultations since January 2018 and it was clear that local parents had had doubts about the viability of the school as no children were registered to attend reception in September 2018 despite there being five children in the catchment area. He reminded members that this was a rural school which meant that there were clear tests which had to be met when closure was being considered. If Cabinet were minded to support the recommendations, one of the implications was an investment of £26,000 for additional school transport to enable children from within the catchment area to attend other schools. All schools within the feeder area were rated as "Good" by Ofsted.

Finally, he expressed his thanks to the staff at the school, who had been exemplary during a difficult period.

Mrs Aviston confirmed that there were tests that the Authority needed to assure itself of when considering closure of a rural school as there was a presumption against closure. However, this did not mean that they could not

be closed. The case for closure had to be strong and the proposal clear and in the best interests of education provision in the area, and alternatives to closure fully considered. Transport implications, including availability and likely costs had to be considered. Consideration also had to be given to the size of the school and whether it put children at a disadvantage in terms of the breadth of the curriculum. The overall impact on the community had also to be considered, though the buildings were not currently used as a community facility. Alternative capacity in the area was also another factor to take into consideration.

Councillor Daley drew members' attention to pg 10 of the report which referred to a typo in the last paragraph of the original notice regarding extending the age range, rather than closure of West Woodburn. This had been raised at FACS OSC that morning and it was very clear, having been covered in the media for some months and in public documents, that it was closure which was being considered.

Councillor Oliver asked what would happen if closure was not agreed. Mrs McEvoy-Carr advised that it would remain as an empty school because there were no pupils, until such time as a parent decided to send their child there.

Councillor Riddle asked about future use of the playing fields and the feed in tariff for the solar panels should closure be approved. Mrs Aviston advised that the feed in tariff would still continue as the building would still be operational until August. Assuming the school did close, then officers would then look at the situation to see if there was an alternative use for the building. Regarding the playing fields, any change in use would have to be subject to a further consultation if the Council had no use for the playing fields themselves. Mrs McEvoy Carr commented that every opportunity would be provided to encourage community use of the building.

Councillor Daley reported that this matter had been considered by Family and Children's Services OSC that morning and he read to members the content of that report (copy attached to the signed minutes). He commended the report to Cabinet.

Councillor Riddle, as the local member, commented that the County Council had done everything possible to keep the school going, and there had initially been a lot of opposition to the reorganisation proposals. However, parents had voted with their feet and taken their children to other schools. The school had now been empty for a few months with no prospect of pupils in the near future. It was regrettable, but if there were no pupils then it could not remain open.

On being put to the vote there voted **FOR: 7; AGAINST: 0, ABSTENTIONS: 0**. It was therefore **RESOLVED** that Cabinet:-

- (a) approve the proposal to close West Woodburn First School as set out in the Statutory Proposal with effect from 31 August 2020;
- (b) note that West Woodburn First School is listed on the Designation of Rural Primary Schools (England) Order 2019 and therefore, in formulating its final decision, full consideration has been given to the points set out in paragraph 16 of the report;
- (c) the impact of the proposal as set out in the Statutory Proposal attached at Appendix 1 of the report be noted;
- (d) it be noted that there will be an additional cost of £26,600 to the Home to School Transport policy (see para. 18); this to be funded from the existing Home to School Transport budget for which there is provision;
- (e) taking into account the Department for Education's (DfE) 'Guidance for decision-makers: 'Opening and closing maintained schools; Statutory guidance for proposers and decision makers November 2019' linked to the report at Appendix 2 (see list of Ap), Cabinet approve the proposal without modification; and
- (f) the report of the Family and Children's Services OSC be noted.

The Chair advised that a written record of the decision and the reasons for it would be published to the Council's website.

(2) Approvals for School Organisation Capital Projects

Cabinet was asked to delegate approval for the award of several capital contracts in relation to school organisation capital projects (copy attached to the signed minutes as Appendix B).

Councillor Daley set out the background and purpose of the report. He stressed that the modular classrooms proposed for Hillcrest Special School were state of the art facilities, fully heated and insulated and linked to wi-fi.

Mrs Aviston reminded members that the decisions on these matters had previously been made by Cabinet, this report was just about awarding the contracts which would create additional school places, some of which were urgently needed.

The Leader fully supported this investment which was part of the overall programme of investing in the school estate and school capacity.

Councillor Daley echoed these comments, adding that this showed that it was still business as usual for the Council, even with the current challenges being faced, which sent a positive message out to communities.

On being put to the vote there voted **FOR: 7; AGAINST: 0, ABSTENTIONS:0**. It was therefore **RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) authority to award the contracts for capital works in relation to Haltwhistle Primary School and St Benet Biscop Catholic Academy previously approved by Cabinet be delegated to the Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services; and
- (b) Cabinet approve the allocation of £411,656 'Special Provision Capital Grant Fund for pupils with EHC Plans' to purchase a modular classroom and associated works for Hillcrest Special School and delegate the authority to award the contract for the works to the Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services.

98. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REGENERATION, COMMERCIAL AND ECONOMY

Update on the Current Resettlement Scheme for Refugees and the Resettlement Scheme Proposal for 2020-21

The report updated members on the progress of the current scheme, formerly known as the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and sought member assent that an agreement be made to support the settlement of a further 12 refugee families through the new 2020/21 transition programme (copy attached to the signed minutes as Appendix C).

Councillor Riddle introduced this report and advised that the scheme had been very successful, and that the Council had met its commitment to resettle 48 families into the community. The report sought member agreement to settle a further 12 families in 2020-21.

The Leader was very proud of the work which had been done on this initiative. Government support had been provided but Northumberland was a very welcoming County and whilst there was capacity to do this, he felt it should continue. The results of the refugee resettlement programme so far had been excellent and he thanked everyone involved in it.

On being put to the vote there voted **FOR: 7; AGAINST: 0, ABSTENTIONS:0**.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that the report be noted and the resettlement of an additional 12 Refugee families in Northumberland during 2020/2021 be agreed.

99. REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR - STRATEGIC COMMISSIONING AND FINANCE

Summary of New Capital Proposals Considered by Officer Capital Strategy Group

The report summarised proposed amendments to the Capital Programme considered by the officer Capital Strategy Group on 3 April 2020 (copy attached to the signed minutes as Appendix D).

99.1 Highways Maintenance Challenge Fund – Steel Bridges

Councillor Sanderson commented that the Council had a very good record of bidding into Challenge funds, and this third successful bid for £3.7m would benefit eight very important steel bridges across the County. The County Council would be contributing £1m to the scheme, and he thanked the officers for their work in putting together the successful bids.

99.2 Coastal Erosion Risk Management Programme 2020-21

Councillor Sanderson advised that the main part of the report was about the work which would commence on Lynemouth Bay. This had been a dumping ground for many years and had been considered too big and expensive a project to undertake. However, a decision had now been taken to clear the beach once and for all and the report covered the pre-construction activities so that work could begin as quickly as possible. It was a large project but would bring major benefits.

Councillor Oliver thanked Councillor Sanderson and the officers involved for taking the initiative to tackle this problem, which had been allowed to build for decades. The project was on the radar of the Regional Flood and Coastal Commission and the Authority would be working with them to try and find extra money for the project, as well as working with the Coal Board, the Environment Agency and Defra. This was a very important project for the County and there was an opportunity to blaze a trail for other Authorities which had similar problems.

99.3 Former Lindisfarne Middle School Site – Solar PV and Ground Source Heat Pump

The Leader commented this proposal formed part of the Council's climate change programme.

All of the report's recommendations were put to the vote together and the votes were cast as follows:-

FOR: 7; AGAINST: 0, ABSTENTIONS:0. It was therefore **RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) Cabinet note that the Council has been successful in their funding bid for the DfT Highway Maintenance Challenge Fund Tranche 2B and accept the grant award of £3.700 million; and approval be given to the re-profiling of spend from 2020-21 to 2021-22 of £2.400 million – as outlined in paragraph 6.10. 2.2;
- (b) Cabinet accept the new grant awards from the Environment Agency for Cramlington Sports Club, Loansdean and Spittal Quay, as outlined in paragraph 7.10; and, approve the commencement of pre-construction activities in 2020 for Lynemouth Bay Landfill up to the value of £0.500 million – to be met from the existing provision within the approved capital programme – plus note the revised anticipated expenditure profile for the project; and
- (c) Cabinet approve the capital budget requirements totalling £730,392 (£34,067 for Solar PV and £696,325 for GSHP) to be met from the Renewable Energy provision in the approved capital programme; and, approve the associated revenue implication of the of ground source heat pump project of around £6,000 per annum – to be met from existing Property Services budgets.

100. URGENT BUSINESS

Councillor Daley provided an update to members on the position regarding school openings during the current national situation. A directive had been issued on 23 March that all schools in the country should close and he now wanted to take the opportunity to offer his thanks to all those who had worked to keep establishments open for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. The previous day in Northumberland, 147 schools and alternative providers had been open, providing places for 1,376 children, made up of 865 children of key workers and 319 vulnerable children. The numbers had fluctuated over the weeks, but what had been consistent had been a relatively high number of children attending schools fitting into these categories and he wanted to take the opportunity to thank every school and member of staff who had contributed. Had they not done that, it would have impacted significantly on the ability of key workers, such as those working for the NHS, to do their jobs. He also wished to thank Children's Services, the Youth Service, the Council's social workers and those working in children's homes and the secure unit . Extraordinary leadership had been shown from the centre to coordinate a whole range of activities in a very professional way.

The Leader echoed these comments. A tremendous, co-ordinated effort had gone into providing these places, and when schools could fully reopen, then everything would be done to ensure that it was done safely.

Councillor Dungworth expressed her thanks from the Labour Group to all those staff who had kept services going. Some of this was not seen by the public, but their contribution enabled the rest of the service to be delivered and it was really important to recognise that. The schools had been outstanding in their response but she felt there was a need to think carefully about how things were taken forward in reopening, as some schools were in a better position than others. She was a little concerned about the blanket approach to Year 6 returns, which did not make sense in areas where there was a three tier system, and she cautioned on the need for flexibility.

Councillor Daley confirmed that he had flagged up very quickly that Northumberland had a mixed economy of two and three tier, and with Mrs McEvoy-Carr, had been talking to the DfE about the need for flexibility to support schools individually. He had also been in discussion with Anne Marie Trevelyan MP about this matter, and he reassured members that everything was being done that it possibly could. Most importantly, discussions would be held with the headteachers of the schools concerned about what they felt was part of the solution.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....