

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF** on **Tuesday 6 February 2018 at 10.00 am**

PRESENT

Councillor G Renner-Thompson
In the Chair for Agenda Items 1-4 and 5(b)-10

Councillor C Horncastle
In the Chair for Agenda Item 5(a)

COUNCILLORS

Campbell D
Cessford T
Lang J

Stewart G
Wallace R

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Hodgson A

Lennox D

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Payne S
Sanderson J

Woolhouse R

OFFICERS

Aviston S
Hartwell A

Johnson A
Little L
McEvoy C
Walker J

Head of School Organisation and Resources
Senior Manager Performance: Education & Safeguarding
Project Director (Education & Skills)
Democratic Services Officer
Executive Director of Children's Services
Head of Inclusion

ALSO PRESENT

Members/Press/Public: 9

78. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors K Nisbet, M Richards, K Stow and W Daley.

79. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 18 January 2018, as circulated, be signed by the Chair with the following amendment noted:

Apologies were received from Councillors Campbell and Stow.

80. FORWARD PLAN

The published Forward Plan of key decisions for February to May 2018 (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix A**) was presented.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY CABINET

81. REPORTS OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

- (1) Education in the West of Northumberland**
- (2) National Funding Formula**

An extract of the minutes from the meeting of Cabinet on 19 December 2017 (attached as **Appendix B** to the signed minutes) in respect of the above reports which had previously been considered by this Committee was circulated for information. Members were advised that the first part of the consultation in respect of Education in the West of Northumberland had been extended by one week in order to provide more time for feedback from Schools but that the whole consultation period would still end on 9 April 2018.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

82. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chair advised that there would be a change to the order of the agenda with the Elective Home Education report taken next in order to allow the Officer to leave. He also advised that he would step down from the Chair for the item on Education in Belford as he had previously done and Councillor Horncastle, Vice Chair would Chair this part of the meeting.

REPORT TO BE CONSIDERED BY SCRUTINY

83. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Elective Home Education

The Project Director (Education and Skills) and Head of Inclusion introduced the report (attached as **Appendix F** to the signed minutes) to the Committee. They advised that the purpose was to inform Members and the community of the rise in parents choosing to home educate since September 2016 and the actions taken to ensure children were well educated and safeguarded. The possible reasons for the increase were outlined and Officers' concerns regarding lack of adequate powers to monitor the level of education and to allow adequate safeguarding were specifically highlighted.

The Committee was also advised of attempts to address some of the issues at national level with the introduction of the Home Education (Duties of Local Authorities) Bill which started its journey through Parliament in June 2017, this was welcomed by Officers. Members were advised that the infrastructure was already in place to allow the Local Authority to implement the proposed changes, but additional staffing resources would be required and it was unclear whether the Government would provide resources to support the duty.

Concern was expressed by Members of the Committee in relation to the numbers of home educated children and the poor quality of work which was sometimes at a level considerably lower than that of pupils in school. This was particularly concerning when children were at an age when they wished to progress to College or further education and they were prevented from doing so by a lack of recognised qualifications. Facilities could be provided by the Local Authority to enable children to sit their GCSEs, however no request for this had been made and no data was available in respect of other providers. It was hoped that the new powers would help to prevent schools encouraging parents to home educate pupils who were not wanted in the school. Officers advised that in the majority of cases children taken out of school to be home educated were already known to the service.

In respect of children with SEND who had Education and Health Care Plans (EHCP) the Local Authority could challenge parents who home educated to see how they met the requirements of the EHCP and resources could be provided by the Local Authority to assist with this.

Members expressed concern and surprise at the lack of powers available to the Local Authority to ensure the safeguarding of home-schooled children when parents denied officers access. It was noted that in some cases home education was the right choice for children and they did progress and thrive however this was generally when parents worked with the Local Authority.

The Committee requested that a further report be provided in the summer term or when the proposed legislation was passed whichever was first. The report should include information on the numbers of home educated children

returning to school, a breakdown of the ages of children and geographical areas.

RESOLVED that the Committee:-

- Noted the concern and potential impact on safeguarding and education outcomes for children; and
- A further report be provided in the summer term or when the Home Education (Duties of Local Authorities) Bill was passed whichever was the sooner.

REPORTS TO BE CONSIDERED BY CABINET

84. REPORTS OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

(1) Proposals for Education in Belford

Councillor Horncastle took the Chair for this item.

The Cabinet report (attached as **Appendix C** to the signed minutes) set out the results of the statutory consultation process undertaken in relation to the proposal to close St Mary's Church of England Middle School with effect from 31 August 2018 and to extend the age range of Belford First School with effect from 1 September 2019. The report requested Cabinet to decide if approval should be given to the proposals consulted upon. The Project Director (Education and Skills) introduced the report to the Committee highlighting the recommendations.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that this Committee supports the recommendations as outlined in the report.

(2) Proposal for Consultation on closure of Netherton Northside First School.

The Cabinet report (attached as **Appendix D** to the signed minutes) advised of a request from the Governing Body of Netherton Northside First School to carry out consultation on a proposal to close the school with effect from 31 August 2018. The report was introduced by the Project Director (Education and Skills).

The Committee noted that there were only three pupils on the roll at the school at the current time with this expected to reduce to two in September 2018; that there was also to be a change to the Senior Leadership of the school; and activities had been carried out over the last two years to attract additional pupils to the school with no success.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that this Committee supports the recommendations as outlined in the report.

85. JOINT REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND SERVICE DIRECTOR - LOCAL SERVICES

Consultation Exercise for Proposed Changes to Post 16 Transport Policy

Andrew Johnson, Project Director (Education and Skills) introduced the Cabinet report (attached as **Appendix E** to the signed minutes) to the Committee. The report had been written and informed by information received from the Local Services team. The report advised of proposals to consult on changes to the Post 16 Transport Policy seeking the reintroduction of free post 16 transport provision subject to defined eligibility criteria. Members were advised that costs had been built into the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and would not result in any funds being diverted from schools.

Members welcomed the proposals. It was clarified that the £50 administration fee was a one-off administration fee payable to see if the student was eligible for free post 16 transport and would be used to provide additional staffing resources for these checks to be undertaken and prevent unnecessary applications. All decisions would be based on the eligibility criteria as outlined in Annex 1 to the Policy.

It was noted that following an impact assessment undertaken when changing from the previous free transport arrangements to the current situation, the impact on schools and colleges had been marginal. If the new proposals were agreed the situation would be monitored.

Following discussion on subject choices and content of courses, it was requested that an additional recommendation should be included in the report as follows:-

"Cabinet agree that the final decision on the granting of school transport funding lies at the discretion of NCC".

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that this Committee supports the recommendations included in the report and would ask that a further recommendation be included as follows:-

"Cabinet agree that the final decision on the granting of school transport funding lies at the discretion of NCC".

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

86. REPORTS OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Finance and Performance - six monthly report

The report (attached as **Appendix G** to the signed minutes) was introduced by the Senior Manager Performance: Education & Safeguarding and Project Director (Education and Skills). The report allowed the Committee to consider the current performance and budgetary position for services within its terms of reference. It was noted that the format had changed and was now aligned

with the Corporate Resources OSC to allow more symmetry in the reporting of key performance indicators.

It was reported that since the report had been published the percentage of primary schools judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding had increased. In future the Project Director (Education & Skills) advised that the criteria for the completion of EHCP for SEND should not be solely based on timescales but should include data on quality to ensure that plans were well written, inclusive and had a focussed outcome.

In response to concern expressed regarding the Education and Skills budget Members were advised that the Local Authority was obliged to provide transport for pupils with SEND. There was a shortage of places within special schools in Northumberland and therefore some SEND pupils had to access services outside the area. £17m Had been included in the MTFP over the next three years to increase the capacity within Northumberland and it was expected this would greatly reduce the transport costs. The requirements of a EHCP for SEND pupils must be met and schools were provided with resources to allow them to do this. In respect of SEND pupils without a EHCP it was the school's responsibility to fund any additional needs. Previously the Local Authority had been able to allocate some funds for schools by top slicing the Government Grant and this year Service Level Agreements had been used. With the introduction of the National Funding Formula this would no longer be possible with schools having to manage their own budgets and it could be that SEND pupils could be negatively affected. The situation was extremely challenging and It was hoped that the SEND Consultation which had been undertaken by the Local Authority would provide ideas to overcome some of the problems.

In respect of concerns with the revenue position for the Children's Social Care budget the Committee was advised that a review was being undertaken in respect some historical Special Guardianship/Residential Order Allowance payments to identify if there were any potential reductions in costs . This was recognised as a ongoing challenge with the Local Authority seeking a way to to ensure that a fair financial package was provided in a consistent way for all Special Guardianship situations. If the Local Authority placed a removed child within the wider family network, this was only after they had been subjected to the fostering regime with relevant checks etc undertaken and an allowance was paid under the fostering regulations.

It was clarified that targets would be changed to reflect improvements in performance. In respect of the increased level of secondary school permanent exclusions reported Members were informed that measures were being taken to integrate pupils from alternative provision into schools by way of the Pupil Placement Panel. It was noted that as 75% of secondary schools within Northumberland were academies and therefore the Local Authority could only act in an advisory role. It was hoped that the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Services could raise concerns regarding the level of permanent exclusions from Academies with the Regional Schools Commissioner.

RESOLVED that:-

- the contents of the report be noted; and
- the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Services be requested to raise concerns regarding the level of permanent exclusions from Academies with the Regional Schools Commissioner.

87. WORK PROGRAMME AND MONITORING REPORT

The Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme and monitoring report was attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix H**. Information requested in request of reducing numbers of pupils in the Berwick partnership would be brought to a future meeting.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

INFORMATION REPORTS

88. POLICY DIGEST

This report, available on the Council's website, provided details of the latest policy briefings, government announcements and ministerial speeches which might be of interest to Members. Any Member who would like a printed copy should contact the Democratic Services Officer.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR_____

DATE_____