

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 **Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF** on **Thursday 5 July 2018 at 10.00 am**

PRESENT

Councillor G Renner-Thompson
In the Chair

COUNCILLORS

Campbell D (Part)	Richards ME
Cessford T	Stewart G
Horncastle C	Stow K
Lang J	Wallace R (Part)

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Hodgson A	Lennox D (Part)
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TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Payne S (Part)	Woolhouse R
Sanderson J	

OFFICERS

Aviston S	Head of School Organisation and Resources
Hartwell A	Senior Manager, Performance: Education and Safeguarding
Jackson D	Service Director - Education and Skills
Johnson A	Project Director - Education and Skills
Little L	Democratic Services Officer
Richardson E	Senior Manager Specialist Services - Poverty Lead
Walker J	Head of Inclusion

ALSO PRESENT

Daley W	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Services
Rickeard P	Church of England Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle
Pidcock B	Councillor

Speakers/Press/Public: 12

10. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from K Nisbet.

11. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

During discussion of the Outcomes of Statutory Consultation on Proposals for Education in the West of Northumberland Councillor C Horncastle advised that as he had been appointed to the Interim Executive Board of Haydon Bridge High School then he would declare an interest and would not vote on the matter.

12. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 7 June 2018, as circulated, be signed by the Chair with the following amendment:

Apologies - Add A Hodgson.

13. FORWARD PLAN

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

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS TO BE CONSIDERED BY CABINET

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

14.1 Outcomes of Statutory Consultation on Proposals for Education in the West of Northumberland

The report (attached as **Appendix B** to the signed minutes) provided an analysis of the representations received during the four week statutory consultation period from interested parties related to the proposals to close Bellingham Middle School with effect from 31 August 2019 and to extend the age ranges of a number of first schools within the West of Northumberland from 1 September 2019. The report requested Cabinet to consider the outcomes and approve the implementation of the statutory proposals with a modification regarding West Woodburn First School; to consider and approve the non-statutory proposal to extend the age range of Wark Church of England First School from 1 September 2019 as it was linked to the other proposals; and to consider the outline business case for the provision of enhanced buildings for the Hadrian Learning Trust (HLT) and approve the allocation of funding for the project from the Medium Term Plan. A full and comprehensive introduction to the report was provided by Andrew Johnson, Project Director - Education and Skills in which he explained the background, reasons and outcomes of both the informal and statutory consultations and the resultant recommendations which were being made to Cabinet. Councillor W Daley, Cabinet Member for Children's Services was in attendance and advised that

he was there to listen to the views of both the Committee Members and those who were in attendance to speak on the subject prior to a final decision being made by Cabinet at their meeting on 10 July 2018.

Mr C Hamilton, a parent of a child at Bellingham Middle School (BMS) addressed the Committee speaking against the proposal to close BMS highlighting a number of issues including the following:-

- unacceptable travel time for some children;
- the inability for children to access activities outside of the school day;
- the uncertainty over the future and the quality of education at Haydon Bridge High School (HBHS);
- the benefits of three tier education with specialist teachers and resources from year 5;
- safeguarding issues with children travelling on a school bus at a younger age;
- the impact on rural communities;
- that the children/school were being treated unfairly and differently to those in the Hexham partnership;
- the consultation had been rushed and part of it had taken place through the school's half term holiday, with key stakeholder groups not consulted;
- the report failed to mention the 803 signature petition against the proposed closure;
- the DoE guidance regarding the presumption against the closure of rural schools had been ignored;
- BMS was demonstrating improvement but was being rewarded by closure.

Ms H Samuels, Acting Headteacher of BMS read out a statement taken from the submission of the Governing Body of the Bellingham Partnership of schools which included the following:-

- if Hexham Middle School could be kept open then BMS should also be kept open, the children were being discriminated against;
- the closure of BMS would affect the local economy with people moving out of the area;
- BMS had the second largest catchment area in England and merited special consideration owing to this geographical situation;
- together with the pre-school provision on the same site, Bellingham First School (BFS) and BMS offer co-ordinated care for children from 0-13 living in the whole of this deeply rural area;
- some children already travelled 20 miles to get to BMS and would have to travel a further 20 to get to Haydon Bridge or Hexham which meant that some children would spend up to nearly 4 hours a day travelling which would affect their mental health and educational attainment
- there were safeguarding issues with younger children travelling on school transport;
- there would be no opportunities to join after school activities as there was no public transport;
- BMS could offer a sustainable provision for children up to 13 and could

- offer specialist support to other schools;
- the three tier system should be retained in rural areas.

Mr P Sampson, the Headteacher of Haltwhistle Upper School also addressed the Committee speaking on the proposals and his comments included the following:-

- there were challenges in providing education in rural areas which were not present in a more urban location;
- the reasons for the consultation included the withdrawal of the Bright Tribe Trust from Haydon Bridge and the proposed changes in the Hadrian Learning Trust (HLT), however no mention was made of Haltwhistle;
- parents in Haltwhistle were not aware of possible changes in Haltwhistle as they had not been mentioned as part of these consultations as the schools were academies;
- there had been missed opportunities for Middle Schools to work together;
- these proposals would not address the financial challenges as schools which were struggling to remain open as first schools might not be able to survive as a primary school due to the very small numbers on their rolls and this would still not address the issue of children being educated with others of the same age;
- education in the West should either be two tier or three tier but it would not work as a mix of both.

In response to Members of the Committee questioning extensively the proposal in great detail including a focus on transport/transition arrangements, it was reported that children would remain at their local primary school for a longer period and therefore would not be required to travel until they were older unless their parents decided otherwise. In recognising the concerns raised regarding increased travel times, home to school transport would be reviewed extensively and journeys for all individual pupils who would be affected by the proposed changes would be considered on a case by case basis. If Cabinet agreed the proposals, Members requested a report be provided to this Committee on the proposals for home to school transport.

It was confirmed that a decision to close the boarding provision for HBHS had been taken by the previous governing body due to the dwindling numbers and the high cost of the provision to the school. Concern had also been expressed from Ofsted regarding the safeguarding of children.

It was clarified that schools in Haltwhistle had been academies for over 5 years and therefore beyond the control of the Local Authority. The Wise Trust would probably take over the running of the schools following the withdrawal of the Bright Tribe Trust from September 2018. All decisions regarding those schools in Haltwhistle would be taken by the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Secretary of State. Whilst concerns raised by Members of the Committee over the future of the schools would be noted, the council had no decision making authority. The issue would only be reported to this Committee if a Cabinet decision was required to provide a response to any future consultation,

however the Council could not pre-empt any future discussions.

In respect of the consultation, it was clarified that this consultation had been running for many months, a decision had been made regarding the timing of the statutory element to avoid any final decision being taken by Cabinet in the six week summer holiday period for schools.

Members questioned the proposed delay in the decision regarding West Woodburn School and the concerns this raised about the viability of the other schools which would become primaries. Officers advised of the proposed resilience programme whereby schools would be strongly encouraged to develop federations/MATs which could help to increase outcomes for pupils by providing a broader offer, allow more opportunities to employ specialist staff, allow better retention of staff and provide efficiencies for the schools. It was confirmed that West Woodburn at the current time was a stand alone school and was not part of any federation or MAT.

Councillor Horncastle stated that he understood the matter was a very emotive subject for the parents of pupils attending BMS who did not wish to see the school close. He continued by comparing the proposed closure of BMS to the closure of Allendale Middle School a number of years ago when it was felt that the village would be negatively affected. He advised that this had not been the case and the village was thriving with a primary school which was in a fit for purpose building and financially secure for at least the next 20 years. He advised that whilst he understood the concerns over transport, that in fact education within the area had previously been a two tier system with children then having to make the same journeys.

In respect of questions regarding the investment into HBHS and Queen Elizabeth High School in Hexham (QEHS) an academy run by HLT, Councillor Daley advised that the Council was committed to providing quality education for children across the County irrespective of which type of school they attended, which included securing the long term future of HBHS. Officers confirmed that the proposed capital investment into the QEHS was in respect of buildings which were local authority assets and leased to the HLT. The funding for both schools would come from the Council's General Fund.

Councillors questioned the rise in the level of migration from the Haydon Bridge partnership into the Hexham partnership which it was felt that in recent years to have been partly caused by the uncertainty surrounding the future of HBHS. It was hoped that with the investment and proposed changes to the education system within the Haydon Bridge partnership that this migration would reduce.

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

14.2 Proposed Closure of Netherton Northside First School

The report (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix C**) was introduced by S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources with Councillor W

Daley, Cabinet Member for Children's Services in attendance. The Committee was advised that this request had initially come from the staff at the school who did not consider that the children were being given the best education. No responses had been received to the statutory consultation and the parents of children at the school whilst disappointed, supported the closure. All three children currently at the school had secured places at other schools from September.

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

14.3 Elective Home Education

The report (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix D**) was introduced by J Walker, Head of Inclusion with Councillor W Daley, Cabinet Member for Children's Services in attendance. The Committee was advised that since publication of the report the number of pupils that the Local Authority were aware of being educated at home had risen to 233. Visits had been arranged, however there was no guarantee that access would be granted to the homes or if staff would be able to meet with the pupils themselves. Birth registers were now being viewed to try to identify children that have never been registered in formal education and therefore were not known to the Local Authority.

The Committee expressed concern regarding the increasing numbers especially in relation to the possibility of schools allegedly coercing the parents of children at risk of permanent exclusion to home educate these pupils and also those who removed their children due to unresolved bullying issues. It was confirmed that the local authority had limited powers to stop schools doing this however they now prevented schools from removing pupils from their school roll until they had received a copy of the letter from parents to the school advising they wished to withdraw their child. There was a comparative level of fixed term exclusions at one school to pupils being removed to be home educated. Ofsted had been notified of the Local Authority's concerns and Headteachers advised that decisions would be challenged if due process had not been followed. There was a lower level of pupils being removed to be home educated from the more successful schools in the County.

The Committee also expressed concern regarding the lack of safeguarding for pupils being home educated and the responsibility of the local authority to ensure children were being protected. The importance of recognising the resource implications of proposed changes to national policy were recognised. As it was not known how long the new legislation would take to move through Parliament, the Committee requested a report back in July 2019.

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

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

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

15.1 Supporting Families in Poverty

The report (attached as **Appendix E** to the signed minutes) provided the Committee with information regarding the development of a poverty strategy for Northumberland was presented by Emma Richardson, Senior Manager Specialist Services - Poverty Lead with Councillor W Daley, Cabinet Member for Children's Services in attendance. It was noted that Northumberland County Council was one of the most deprived local authorities in England with 13.2% of the population living in one of the top 10% most deprived wards. The poverty strategy starting point was in direct response to local need and opportunity and the importance of working with partners, voluntary and community sector organisations, communities and others was highlighted.

Work was being undertaken with the Literacy Trust to help encourage parents from low income families to talk/read to their children to help address speech and language difficulties. Various models of delivery were being used across the County depending on the area and facilities available.

There was a Community Asset Project underway which would map assets across the County in order to gain a better knowledge of what was in each area and how these assets could be utilised. Work was also being undertaken with the Data Team to ensure that the County was in a good place to help residents when the roll out of Universal Credit took effect. Partnerships were being developed with businesses to deliver events which provided opportunities to meet with role models who could inspire children to achieve.

The Committee welcomed the report.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

15.2 Safeguarding Benchmarking Trends - Annual Report 2017-18

The report (attached as **Appendix F** to the signed minutes) advised of how Northumberland was likely to compare with other areas in 2017/18 based on provisional data in the field of children in need and child protection. The report was introduced by Alan Hartwell, Senior Manager, Performance: Education and Safeguarding with Councillor W Daley, Cabinet Member for Children's Services in attendance. The Committee was advised that the report was in response to comparison data being requested at the previous meeting.

It was explained that for a child to be subject to a child protection plan (CPP) a multi agency decision would have been made which concluded that the child was at risk of significant and continuing harm. Between March 2017 and March 2018 the number of children subject to CPPs within Northumberland had increased from 40 per 10,000 to 67 per 10,000 which was a 70% increase in cases, however it was noted that the number of cases had also increased across the whole region. Members were advised that the figure of 40 per 10,000 was low and the natural cycle would be for numbers to increase.

There had been a significant increase in the percentage of second or subsequent CPPs and whilst in the majority of cases there was a time gap from the previous CPP, a thorough audit of these cases was being undertaken.

The Committee welcomed the information stating that it was important that Members were made aware of the actual reasons behind the increased figures rather than just viewing these in isolation.

In response to questions regarding whether the increased numbers had an impact on caseload levels for social workers, it was confirmed that it had increased the caseloads for some social workers, however caseload levels were monitored very closely on a regular basis and management action was taken wherever possible to provide appropriate support and avoid excessive caseloads. The need to recruit more experienced social workers in order to manage these type of cases was stressed in order to avoid excessive caseloads for individual staff and this was recognised and acknowledged as a concern by the Committee.

RESOLVED that the information be noted and it was recognised that the data was provisional and subject to change.

16. THEMED SCRUTINY

The Chair advised that this item would be deferred to the next meeting.

17. 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 G**.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

INFORMATION REPORTS

18. 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 _____