

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At the meeting of the **Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held at Meeting Space - Block 1, Floor 2 - County Hall on Thursday, 7 October 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
D Ferguson
M Swinburn

L Dunn
G Stewart
T Thorne

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

A Hodgson
P Rickeard

D Lennox

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

L Houghton

J Sanderson

OFFICERS

C Angus
S Aviston
A Kingham
L Little
C McEvoy-Carr

Scrutiny Officer
Head of School Organisation and Resources
Service Director - Education and Skills
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Executive Director of Adults and Children's
Services
Service Director - Children's Social Care

G Reiter

ALSO PRESENT

G Renner-Thompson

Cabinet Member

16 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Scott and C Taylor.

17 MINUTES

Ch.'s Initials.....

The minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 2 September 2021, as circulated, were agreed and signed by the Chair.

18 **DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

Mr Rickeard advised a Church of England School was situated next to the former Richard Coates Church of England School.

19 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

The Scrutiny Officer highlighted that there were four items for pre-scrutiny at this Committee and they would be considered by Cabinet the following week.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions for October 2021 to January 2022 be noted.

20 **PROPOSAL TO AMALGAMATE SEATON SLUICE MIDDLE SCHOOL AND WHYTRIG MIDDLE SCHOOL**

S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources, provided an introduction to the Cabinet report. The report set out the request of the Governing Body of the Seaton Valley Federation to the Council to carry out informal consultation on a proposal to amalgamate Seaton Sluice Middle School and Whytrig Middle School on the current Whytrig and Astley Community High School site in Seaton Delaval or an alternative site, should one be identified as part of the site option appraisal. The proposal had arisen in the light of the capital project to re-provide new buildings for Astley and Whytrig Middle School on their current site, these two schools already being co-located on the high school's site in Seaton Delaval. Although the initial project was limited to the re-provision of new buildings for Astley and Whytrig, in the course of planning that project the federated Governing Body had identified a number of significant educational and financial benefits for all students within the Seaton Valley Federation to be co-located on one site in new buildings.

The proposal would also require the expansion of the capacity of the planned new buildings for Whytrig in order to accommodate students relocated from Seaton Sluice and this would also be included within the informal consultation.

If approved by Cabinet a six week period of informal consultation within term time would commence on 13 October 2021 and would conclude on 1 December 2021. As outlined in the report the capital building approval process would run parallel to the statutory process and alternative sites would be looked at in order to develop the proposals, but this information was not able to be shared at the current time due to commercial sensitivity.

Assurance was sought that the Federation were aware the amalgamation would result in the removal of a financial lump sum, and this had been factored into any financial modelling. The Committee were informed that this had been discussed with the Governing Body and they believed the benefits of amalgamation

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would counterbalance the financial adjustment.

The Chair outlined the recommendations as outlined in the report which were unanimously agreed by Members of the Committee.

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

21 PROPOSALS FOR ATKINSON HOUSE

S Aviston, Head of School Resources and Organisation introduced the Cabinet report which set out proposals for Atkinson House Special School in Seghill, a secondary provision for boys with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs to relocate to a new site at the former Richard Coates CE Primary School in Ponteland and to change to co-educational provision. The proposals would be with effect from 1 September 2022. The nature of the proposals required that a statutory process would need to be undertaken prior to any final decision being taken by Cabinet.

The Committee enquired as to how the needs for girls with SMEH were currently being met. They were informed that the needs were currently being met in existing schools, but these schools were at capacity and the increase in places would help meet a growing need for SMEH support. In response to a question about how Northumberland compared nationally, it was confirmed that Northumberland were below the national average in the number of children requiring SMEH support; however, the catchment area would be solely in Northumberland with only surplus places being offered outside the County.

Co-opted members of the committee received an explanation on how NCC were looking long term and on the new strategies being developed that would come to FACS in the future for comment.

Assurance was sought on a number of areas such as transport, sustainability and safeguarding. Members were advised that the relocation would give the school a more central location and give residents in the West of the County greater access to these provisions, although support would continue to be provided to assist mainstream schools to be more inclusive. The Committee were reminded that all school transport plans were examined from an environmental and efficiency point of view. With regards to safeguarding, there would always be measures in place and it was anticipated that a working group with head teachers would be set up to look at any safeguarding and site operation issues that might arise.

The Committee were keen to ensure that in addition to teachers, parents and other organisations, students were also included in the discussions. Once the Gilbert Ward Academy opened it would be a decision for parents if they chose to move their child to the new provision and any decision would need to be in the best interests of the child. It would also give an alternative option for a child to remain in education in Northumberland rather than having to go out of County if they did not settle at one school.

The Chair outlined the recommendations and upon being put to the vote it was

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unanimously:

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

22 **SCHOOL ORGANISATION PLAN 2021-2024**

S Aviston, provided an introduction to the report which asked Cabinet to note the second iteration of the School Organisation Plan 2021-2024 for Northumberland. The report also requested Cabinet to approve the circulation of the plan to schools and academies for information and feedback prior to its subsequent publication. The plan would also be subject to an annual update in order to capture changing information or circumstances related to schools and academies as appropriate. A typographical error was noted in paragraph 3 which should read “A new School Organisation Plan for 2021-24...”

Members praised the team involved in writing this comprehensive and valuable plan which the Committee felt all elected members would benefit from reading. They suggested that in addition to schools, other partners and the Council’s website in recommendation 3, the plan also be circulated to all elected members.

The Chair outlined the recommendations as outlined in the report and following a unanimous vote it was:

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that the Committee welcomed the plan and supported the recommendations as outlined in the report.

23 **UPDATE OF THE EDUCATION INFRASTRUCTURE CONTRIBUTION POLICY**

S Aviston provided an introduction to the report which asked Cabinet to approve an update to the Education Infrastructure Contribution Policy to increase the requested contribution towards SEND provision in the county to reflect the increased number of young people in the County requiring specialist provision.

Members welcomed reviews into developer contributions in education and infrastructure. After a discussion on S106 allocations and a reduction to the level of previously agreed contribution which had recently been approved, the Committee felt it would be beneficial for all members of the strategic planning committee to receive training on S106 funding and allocations.

The Chair highlighted a Task and Finish Working Group could be used to look at education contributions and how the funding was allocated if this was something Members wished to do.

The Chair outlined the recommendations and following a vote it was unanimously:

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

24 **CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SELF-ASSESSMENT - APRIL 2021**

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G Reiter, Service Director – Children’s Social Care provided an introduction to the report which would be used to inform the annual engagement meeting with Ofsted on 28 October and in advance of this would face challenge at the Regional Directors meeting. More detailed scrutiny of key areas within the self assessment are undertaken through both this Committee and the Corporate Parenting Group. The findings had shown progress however the service continually strived to improve and the document would assist in this and also outlined the key priorities for continuous improvement also taking into account national and regional developments and legislation. This also linked into Children’s social care case for change review being undertaken by Josh McAllister which the Council was feeding into. Detailed actions in the continuous improvement plan were monitored monthly by senior managers and the signs of safety framework would be used as a key driver for improvement.

Members welcomed the report and the way it had been presented and recognised that new ways of working developed through the pandemic would be embedded into the service to help drive improvements.

In relation to the progress on the building of the two children’s homes, the Committee was advised that one of the sites identified was not suitable and work was underway to identify an alternative site and planning permission had been granted in relation to the other. A bid had been made for DfE funding and the outcome was awaited to determine the next steps. There had been a reduction in the number of children who needed to become looked after and it was also expected the number of out of County placements would reduce in the coming months as a result of the young people’s ages and they would either return to the County or would be 18 and no longer need the placements. The biggest challenge was in relation to emergency placements. A report would be coming to this Committee in November on Children’s Home Placement Sufficiency.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

25 **FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME AND MONITORING REPORT 2021/22**

Members were reminded to contact the Chair or the Scrutiny Officer with any items that they would like to be added to the work programme. It was hoped to finalise proposals for new Task and Finish Groups within the next couple of weeks and the Chair reminded Members of the excellent work that could be undertaken such as that previously undertaken in respect of school exclusions and the impact this had.

Officers were currently looking at the impact of the rise in wholesale gas prices on schools and what the Government would do to support this and this would be reported once Officers were in a better position to do so.

In relation to green aspects of the new Astley school buildings four options would be put forward as part of the business case in relation to reducing carbon emissions as part of this development either embedded into the building or through reduced running costs. Three other schools had air source heat pumps installed through the summer holidays which had been 100 % funded by grants and would help with ongoing running costs for these schools.

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P Rickeard advised that the Church of England were also working with the Council to reduce carbon emissions in one of their schools however there was a requirement for 3 phase electricity to be able to run the equipment which was not available in some of the more rural areas and this may need to be more widely investigated to assist residents.

Councillor Daley advised that the Leader, Councillor Sanderson had written to the Chancellor and Education Secretary regarding heating and fuel costs for schools.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

Ch.'s Initials.....