

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, 6 January 2022 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

W Daley (Chair) (in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

C Ball
R Dodd
T Thorne

D Carr
C Dunbar

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
Deputy Director of Education

G Reiter
D Street

ALSO PRESENT

A Dale

G Renner-Thompson

44 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors Dunn, Scott, Swinburn and Taylor.

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45 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committees held on Thursday 4th November 2021 and Thursday 2 December 2021, as circulated, were agreed as a true record and were signed by the Chair

46 **DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

Councillor Dodd advised that he was a Councillor on Ponteland Town Council who had responded on the proposals in respect of Atkinson House and whilst he had helped facilitate meetings, he had taken no part in any discussion related to the proposals.

47 **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

The Forward Plan of Cabinet decisions for January to April 2022 had been shared with Members for information.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

48 **OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION ON PROPOSAL TO AMALGAMATE SEATON SLUICE MIDDLE SCHOOL AND WHYTRIG MIDDLE SCHOOL**

The report to Cabinet set out the outcomes of the informal consultation on a proposal to amalgamate Seaton Sluice Middle and Whytrig Middle School. A detailed introduction was provided by S Aviston, Head of School Resources and Organisation and comments made by this Committee would be reported to Cabinet on 11 January when a decision would be taken. Councillor Renner-Thompson, Cabinet Member for Children's Service thanked all those who had responded to the consultation.

Having considered the response to the consultation, the Committee were happy with report and highlighted potential issues such as lack of infrastructure for such a large school. Members were keen to see the investment that was planned for the new schools be continued and that any needed repairs to Seaton Sluice Middle School were carried out in a timely manner. In response it was stated that funding had already been approved for the provision of a new mobile at Seaton Sluice and work would be undertaken as required, but the priority was replacement buildings for Astley High School and Whytrig Middle School due to their condition and ensuring completion of the business case in order to progress this.

One member expressed their disappointment at the outcome of the report but accepted the feedback from the public showed residents were not in favour of the proposal.

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

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OUTCOME OF CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS FOR ATKINSON HOUSE

The Cabinet report set out the outcomes of informal consultation on a proposal to relocate Atkinson House Special School to a former school site in Ponteland and to change the designation of the school to become co-educational. S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources provided a comprehensive introduction to the report advising that the consultation had arisen as a result of the need to provide additional places for young people, including girls, in Northumberland with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs (SEMH) in September 2022 as a result of the steady upward trend in the demand for special school places in the County. Councillor Renner-Thompson thanked those who had taken part in the consultation exercise advising that the County had an increasing need for SEMH places within the County. He referenced the inappropriate and offensive comments which had been received during the course of the consultation which had been removed from the register advising that these were of a highly offensive nature and were deplorable in the 21st century.

The Chair advised that a further letter had been received from the Church of England Diocese on 31 December following the publication of the report. Mr Rickeard, the Diocese representative, drew attention to the commentary on page 77 of the report which had raised concerns from the Newcastle Diocesan Board of Education (NDEB). The Committee was advised that the Board wished to make it clear that the two NDEB positions mentioned were filled by two nominated individuals, one of who was an officer who did not have a vote on such statements and the other was a Professor from the University of Sunderland who had declared an interest at the time of discussion of this report. He advised of the purpose of the NDEB and stated that whilst the NDEB always looked to consider the needs of the CoE schools, it was always done with consideration of the wider education and community interests in line with its charitable objectives. He advised that to suggest that the NDEB would be biased in supporting a Trust above its own charitable objectives was openly disparaging to both the Board and its Members who were skilled Trustees and had considered the proposals very carefully in light of the varying education, moral and safeguarding aspects involved. The Board had not had sight of the Pele Trust response and had not stated that it supported their objections, and had not itself objected to the proposals only made it clear that the safeguarding issues needed to be firmly addressed. The Chair of the NDEB had been personally offended by this section of the report and requested that this be removed and an apology be issued to the NDEB to avoid any further misrepresentation or suggestion of bias.

Mrs Aviston apologised to the Diocese for the interpretation of the comments originally made and advised that by the time the further response from the Diocese was received it was too late to retract the commentary that had been written, but this would be made clear when the report was considered at Cabinet. She advised that she had made it clear in her introduction to Members at this meeting that this was not an objection to the proposals but were concerns raised by the Diocese.

In response to concerns expressed by Members in relation to security, safeguarding, road safety, drop offs and the shared sporting areas the Chair advised that the purpose was to scrutinise the results of the informal consultation

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and make a recommendation to Cabinet for their decision on whether to move to the more formal consultation stage and that a lot of concerns would be picked up during the formal consultation if this was agreed. Mrs Aviston advised that it was hoped to bring together all users in order to provide a design solution which was suitable for and safeguarded all users on the co-located site. Cabinet were also being asked to agree at risk funding for feasibility and design work to be undertaken parallel to the consultation on the Statutory proposal should it be agreed that this should be published.

In relation to concerns regarding the distance to be travelled by pupils attending the relocated school, Members were advised that there was currently no provision in the west of the County and this more central location could result in shorter travelling times for some pupils. It was further clarified that no child would be required to move to the Gilbert Ward school in Blyth once opened unless they wished to do so.

Co-opted members questioned whether the timeframe of September 2022 was achievable and whether having a design solution in place before the formal consultation started would help reassure residents of the viability of the proposal. It was agreed that September 2022 was a challenging date; however, members were told that the team felt this date was achievable. There would be a delay of approximately 6 weeks should work on the design solution have to be undertaken prior to the commencement of a statutory consultation. Officers felt that the design work currently being undertaken demonstrated a commitment and would be sufficient to demonstrate how the building would function. It was also clarified that other locations had been explored for the relocation of Atkinson House, but this suggested site was the most suitable for a number of reasons.

Members had their attention drawn to a comment from parents who highlighted the change to co-education would create better provision for girls at the school and would be more representative of the world into which the pupils would enter and so help to prepare them to be good citizens. Members raised problems with the perception of Atkinson House and felt the proposal was a step in the right direction for the children of Northumberland with SEMH needs.

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

50 **NATIONAL FUNDING FORMULA AND 2022/23 SCHOOLS FUNDING**

The report provided information to update Cabinet on the National Funding Formula (NFF) and the implications for 2022/23 school funding within Northumberland. Comments made by this Committee would be reported to Cabinet when they considered the report on 11 January 2022. An introduction to the report was provided by S Aviston, Head of School Organisation and Resources.

The Committee welcomed this annual report and the increase in funding. They were pleased to see the involvement and recommendations of the Schools' Forum. Attention was drawn to the changes to the way in which sparsity funding was calculated which was of benefit to our more rural schools and on which this Council had lobbied Government.

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Assurance was sought and given that a falling roll fund was being investigated. Members were informed whilst it would only affect a small number of schools it would be a useful and welcomed fund for them.

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

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

The Scrutiny Officer advised that it had been agreed that the additional meeting proposed for Thursday 13 January 2022 was to be cancelled with the reports to be deferred to the scheduled meeting on Thursday 3 February 2022. As there would now be a large number of reports to be considered at this meeting a 9 am start time had been agreed with the Chair.

The work programme had been circulated for information and any issues which Members wished to bring to the Committee should be raised with the Chair or the Scrutiny Officer in the first instance.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

52 **URGENT BUSINESS**

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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