

Comments from Faith Schools attending Children and Young People Select Committee on 29 June 2016

Brian Janes – Ian Ramsay CE Academy

- Ian Ramsay is opposed to the revised policy
- Want to protect the distinctiveness of the school and the wishes of the parents to send their children to a CE school; the school are very interested in hearing the views of parents
- Currently Sedgefield Community College provide free transport to children within the villages served by William Cassidy. Concerned that children will be moving to other schools, that there will be a likelihood of summer transfers as a result of the change in policy and Stockton children will be moving to other areas from Stockton schools

Brian also read out a short statement from Paul Rickard from the Diocese which highlighted:

- The Diocese is concerned that there will be a lack of clear choice for parents to send their children to a school with Christian character
- The situation will arise where a child will have free transport but parents will be unable to pay for another sibling to attend the same school; this is fundamentally wrong and will result in inequality within families
- What will happen to families whose financial situation changes putting them just above the threshold for financial assistance? This may result in them taking a child out of school. The policy should provide a safeguard so that once a child receives free transport, they will continue to do so
- Very concerned about what this will mean for children in Stockton

Mary Tate – St Joseph's RC Primary, Norton

- St Joseph's Norton is one of the largest communities affected by the proposals and the proposed cuts will have a massive impact on the well-established community of St Joseph's and the Catholic community
- Children from St Joseph's have transferred to St Michael's in Billingham for almost 40 years. Currently there are 200 children attending St Michael's from Norton; typically 35 – 40 children every year choose to take their place at St Michael's following parents and grandparent before them who have done the same. There is no recognition that this community/ relationship exists
- A suitable school for Catholic children is a Catholic school. In Norton the suitable school is beyond 3 miles. The only school within 3 miles is North Shore Academy and there is no provision for RC families at this school to support them in the continuation of their faith
- St Joseph's are a feeder school for one school which is St Michael's. As a church school a feeder system not a zone system is operated
- Guidance from the Secretary of State talks about the discretionary powers of the Local Authority and encourages the Local Authority to consider all possible options before disturbing long established arrangements. The Guidance recognises that parents choosing a faith school for their children should have their rights respected by the Local Authority in providing for their children and this includes transport where their school is a considerable distance away
- The proposals represent a dismantling of the faith of the community of Catholic children in Norton and the Local Authority have not exercised any of their discretionary power in considering these families

- There is not a safe walking route to St Michael's from St Joseph's school as this involves crossing the A19; adjustments would have to be made to the infrastructure to make the walking route safe
- The costs will result in a three tier system:
 - The children qualifying for free school means will be transported to St Michael's free of charge
 - Affluent families will pay for the transport so that their children can attend
 - The "working poor" falling just above the free school meal threshold will have their choice taken away from them and will be forced to make the unsafe journey on foot or not make the journey at all
- Like to see a dialogue and discussion around discretionary powers to support the families most affected

Andrew Ramsey – St Michael's Catholic Academy

- The proposal has religious, cultural, emotional and physical impact as well as a significant financial impact on those families affected. Concerns fall into three broad areas:

1 The consultation process is felt to be unfit

- The draft policy has only changed in one way from previous policy – to remove free transport to faith schools. This targets one community only for financial savings across the entire Authority
- There has been no true consultation with students, parents, the faith community and the wider community
- Consultation has been solely via an on line survey which has been flawed. Until this afternoon when a change was made to the wording of the survey, it did not allow respondents to oppose the proposed policy. This inability to oppose the proposed policy or express a dissenting view therefore makes the consultation void
- How will Council contact those people who have already responded? The Council is asked to abandon consultation and ensure proper consultation is carried out with students, parents, carers, families

2 Statutory Guidance

- The Local Authority is under duty to have regard to the Guidance when carrying out their duties. However, it is felt that aspects of the guidance have been cherry picked in framing the policy and that therefore the policy is highly selective in interpretation
- The proposals do not recognise Catholic feeder school arrangements. The RC is a wide community not based on local demographic areas. The proposals are based on education zones not relationships or partnerships
- Part 2 of guidance states that the Local Authority need to respect parents' religious and philosophical convictions as to the education to be provided and to be careful not to discriminate and seek legal opinion if they are unsure about the effect of their policies before publishing them
- Has the LA sought legal opinion? – If not attendees assert their right to have the consultation dismissed for failure to adhere to paragraphs 14 and 38 of the Guidance; the Secretary of State outlines that wherever possible the LA should ensure that transport arrangements support the religious or philosophical beliefs that the families have expressed; the proposal does not attach importance to this guidance
- Guidance makes reference to sustainable travel and transport. 198 students travel from Norton to Billingham. Should the policy be adopted, the locality of the school will become congested and

dangerous. It is difficult to estimate how many extra cars will drop off each day at St Michael's but there will be a significant environmental impact

3 Suitable School

- This is a misleading term to Catholic community. Students cannot safely access St Michael's without transport being provided as the walking route is hazardous. Para 16 of Guidance states that the LA must make transport arrangements for all children who cannot reasonably be expected to walk to the nearest school because the nature of the route is unsafe
- The proposal is an attack on equality and justice and a clear example of discrimination. It rejects the traditions and reality of Catholic education, British values of tolerance and the democratic right to be represented.
- Officers were only aware recently that Catholic schools operated feeder system
- The proposal directly affects St Joseph's which is a feeder into St Michael's. Any parent applying to the school will therefore secure their child a place
- Should the policy be adopted, children of faith schools will have free transport removed but large numbers of children in Ingleby Barwick will still be transported to Egglecliffe and Conyers resulting in inequality

Joe Hughes – Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle

- Reference was made to the legislative framework governing this issue
- The 2006 Education and Inspections Bill specifically aimed to reduce the impact of transport as a barrier to parent exercising their educational preferences and added to and extended the offer of free transport originally set out in 1944 Act
- The European Convention on Human Rights incorporates into law, rights and freedom of education without discrimination on religious grounds
- Particular concerns are parents just over the threshold for financial assistance
- A reduction in the number of Catholic children attending St Michaels may also have an impact on other schools. Has this been taken into account?
- The government has urged LAs to be wary of disturbing long established practices
- Would not want anything to militate against the diversity of Stockton schools
- Concerned about increased traffic congestion around schools
- The estimated savings were queried. Has a full analysis been carried out taking into account the smaller number of eligible pupil, the numbers of buses and drivers required together with the range of vulnerable children who will still need to be transported?
- It is disingenuous that no mention has been made in the consultation or policy documents of the savings targets as a driver in reviewing the policy
- The Catholic community has saved Stockton Council millions of pounds of Capital investment over the years
- If the proposal is passed, children will still be transported free of charge past their nearest qualifying school in Ingleby Barwick which is against principles of fairness, justice and equality

- Stockton officials were unaware that for many decades RC primary schools have been operating feeder arrangements. This is another reason to take the proposal back to the “drawing board”
- Due to the change in the on-line consultation, the clock should be re-set and consultees should be afforded the opportunity of making a revised response. If the Council are still minded to consider revising the policy, the consultation should commence again in the autumn following the school summer holiday period
- Strongly opposed to the proposal