

Children & Young People Select Committee

A meeting of Children & Young People Select Committee was held on Wednesday, 29th June, 2016.

Present: Cllr Carol Clark(Chairman), Cllr Tracey Stott(Vice-Chairman), Cllr Elsi Hampton, Cllr Di Hewitt, Cllr Ross Patterson, Cllr Lauriane Povey, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley, Cllr Sally Ann Watson

Officers: Lynda Brown (Transformation Team), Jane Wright (Partnership and Planning Manager), Martin Gray (Assistant Director - Early Help, Partnership and Planning),

Also in attendance: Brian Janes (Ian Ramsey CE Academy), Cesary Hopkins, Andrew Ramsey, Damien Kelly (St Michael's Catholic Academy), Mary Tate (St Joseph's RC Primary), Joe Hughes (Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle)

Apologies: Julie Nixon

Evacuation Procedure

The evacuation procedure was noted.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes for signature - 30th March 2016

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 March 2016 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

AGREED that the minutes were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

Draft Minutes - 20th April 2016

Consideration was given to the draft minutes of the meeting held on 20 April 2016.

AGREED that the minutes be approved.

Home to School Transport

The Committee received comments from Faith School representatives in attendance of the meeting.

Brian Janes from Ian Ramsey CE Academy raised the following points with regard to the proposed policy:

- Ian Ramsay was opposed to the revised policy
- Ian Ramsey wanted to protect the distinctiveness of the school and the wishes of the parents to send their children to a CE school; the school were very interested in hearing the views of parents
- Sedgefield Community College currently provided free transport to children within the villages served by William Cassidy. Concerns were raised around

children moving to other schools, it was noted that there would be a likelihood of summer transfers as a result of the change in policy and Stockton children would be moving to other areas from Stockton schools.

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

- The Diocese was concerned that there would be a lack of clear choice for parents to send their children to a school with Christian character
- The situation would arise where a child would have free transport but parents would be unable to pay for another sibling to attend the same school; this was fundamentally wrong and would result in inequality within families
- It was asked what would happen to families whose financial situation changed when placed just above the threshold for financial assistance. It was highlighted that this may result in them taking a child out of school. It was heard that the policy should provide a safeguard so that once a child receives free transport, they would continue to do so.
- The Diocese was very concerned about what the proposed policy would mean for children in Stockton

Mary Tate from St Joseph's RC Primary, Norton raised the following points with regard to the proposed policy:

- St Joseph's Norton was one of the largest communities affected by the proposals and the proposed cuts would have a massive impact on the well-established community of St Joseph's and the Catholic community
- Children from St Joseph's had transferred to St Michael's in Billingham for almost 40 years. There were 200 children attending St Michael's from Norton; typically 35 – 40 children every year chose to take their place at St Michael's following parents and grandparents before them who had done the same. It was highlighted that there was no recognition that this community/ relationship existed.
- It was noted that a suitable school for Catholic children was a Catholic school. In Norton the suitable school was beyond 3 miles. The only school within 3 miles was North Shore Academy and there was no provision for RC families at this school to support them in the continuation of their faith.
- St Joseph's was a feeder school for one school which was St Michael's. As a church school a feeder system not a zone system was operated
- Guidance from the Secretary of State talked about the discretionary powers of the Local Authority and encouraged the Local Authority to consider all possible options before disturbing long established arrangements. The Guidance recognised 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 included transport where their school was a considerable distance away
- The proposals represented a dismantling of the faith of the community of

Catholic children in Norton and the Local Authority had not exercised any of their discretionary power in considering these families

- There was not a safe walking route to St Michael's from St Joseph's school as this involved crossing the A19; adjustments would have had to be made to the infrastructure to make the walking route safe

- The costs would result in a 3 tier system:

1. The children qualifying for free school means would be transported to St Michael's free of charge

2. Affluent families would pay for the transport so that their children could attend

3. The "working poor" falling just above the free school meal threshold would have their choice taken away from them and would be forced to make the unsafe journey on foot or not make the journey at all

- Representatives asked whether it would be possible to see a dialogue and discussion around discretionary powers to support the families most affected

Andrew Ramsey from St Michael's Catholic Academy raised the following points with regard to the proposed policy:

- The proposal had religious, cultural, emotional and physical impact as well as a significant financial impact on those families affected. Concerns fell into three broad areas which included; the consultation process, statutory guidance and suitable school.

1. The consultation process

- The draft policy had only changed in one way from the previous policy which was to remove free transport to faith schools. This targeted one community only for financial savings across the entire Authority

- There had been no true consultation with students, parents, the faith community or the wider community

- Consultation had been solely via an on line survey which was believed to have been flawed. Until the afternoon of 29 June 2016 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 made the consultation void

- It was asked how the council would contact those people who had already responded. The Council was asked to abandon consultation and ensure proper consultation was carried out with students, parents, carers and families

2. Statutory Guidance

- The Local Authority was under duty to have regard to the Guidance when carrying out their duties. However, it was felt that aspects of the guidance had been cherry picked in framing the policy and that therefore the policy was highly

selective in interpretation

- The proposals did not recognise Catholic feeder school arrangements. The RC was a wide community not based on local demographic areas. The proposals were based on education zones not relationships or partnerships
- Part 2 of the guidance stated that the Local Authority needed 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 were unsure about the effect of their policies before publishing them
- It was asked whether the Local Authority had 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 outlined that wherever possible the LA should ensure that transport arrangements supported the religious or philosophical beliefs that the families had expressed; the proposal did not attach importance to this guidance
- Guidance made reference to sustainable travel and transport. 198 students traveled from Norton to Billingham. It was noted that should the policy have been adopted, the locality of the school would become congested and dangerous. It was difficult to estimate how many extra cars would drop off each day at St Michael's but there would be a significant environmental impact

3. Suitable School

- This was a misleading term to Catholic community. Students could not safely access St Michael's without transport being provided as the walking route was hazardous. Paragraph 16 of the Guidance stated that the LA must make transport arrangements for all children who could not reasonably be expected to walk to the nearest school because the nature of the route is unsafe
- The proposal was seen to be an attack on equality and justice and a clear example of discrimination. It rejected 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 systems
- The proposal directly affected St Joseph's which was a feeder into St Michael's. Any parent applying to the school would therefore secure their child a place
- Should the policy have been adopted, children of faith schools would have free transport removed but large numbers of children in Ingleby Barwick would still be transported to Eggescliffe and Conyers resulting in inequality

Joe Hughes, a Member of Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle raised the following points:

- Reference was made to the legislative framework governing the 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 incorporated into law, rights and freedom of education without discrimination on religious grounds
- Particular concerns were raised around those parents just over the threshold for financial assistance
- A reduction in the number of Catholic children attending St Michaels may also have had an impact on other schools. It was asked whether this had been taken into account
- The government had urged LAs to be wary of disturbing long established practices
- It was highlighted that the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle did not want anything to militate against the diversity of Stockton schools
- Concerns were raised around increased traffic congestion around schools
- The estimated savings were queried. It was asked whether a full analysis had been carried out taking into account the smaller number of eligible pupils, the numbers of buses and drivers required together with the range of vulnerable children who would still need to be transported?
- It was disingenuous that no mention had been made in the consultation or policy documents of the savings targets as a driver in reviewing the policy
- The Catholic community had saved Stockton Council millions of pounds of Capital investment over the years
- If the proposal was passed, children would still be transported free of charge past their nearest qualifying school in Ingleby Barwick which was against principles of fairness, justice and equality
- Stockton officials were unaware that for many decades RC primary schools had been operating feeder arrangements. This was another reason to take the proposal back to the “drawing board”
- Due to the change in the on-line consultation, the clock should have been re-set and consultees should have been afforded the opportunity of making a revised response. If the Council was still minded to consider revising the policy, the consultation should commence again in the autumn following the school summer holiday period
- The Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle strongly opposed to the proposal

AGREED that the information be noted and reported to relevant Officers.

Progress Updates on Previous Scrutiny Reviews

The Committee was presented with progress updates on previous Scrutiny Reviews which included:

- Transition from Primary to Secondary
- Child Sexual Exploitation
- Employment and Education

The following points were raised relating to the review of Transition from Primary to Secondary:

- With regard to recommendation 1, it was noted that the Transition Guarantee chronology had evolved during the year in consultation with schools and the changing national picture. KS2 moderation was currently underway to which secondary schools were invited. All Secondary English leaders were due to attend a cross-phase meeting in July with primary colleagues.
- The agreed system for assessment had been shared with all schools and academies. Frequent updates had been provided to schools and academies via education matters, network meetings and email.
- In relation to recommendation 3, Members heard that Transition Guarantee was part of the School Improvement Framework. It was noted that a review of Year 1 was to be conducted in September 2016.
- Current monitoring indicated that all schools were engaging with aspects of the Transition Guarantee.
- School visits would take place across all schools in the Borough WC 4th July 2016 as part of Transition Week.

Members commended the progress updates of the three scrutiny reviews and thanked Officers for their contribution.

AGREED that the progress report and discussion be noted.

Scrutiny Review of Youth Services

Members received a presentation relating to the Council's Youth Service

The presentation provided:

- an overview of what the service delivered
- key issues
- funding
- what any future approach might look like
- prevention work
- targeting provision
- case studies
- Youth offending

AGREED that the presentation be noted.

Feedback from Member Visits to Frontline Services

Members shared feedback from recent visits to frontline services.

AGREED that the information be noted.

Work Programme

Consideration was given to the work programme 2016/17.

AGREED that the work programme be noted.