

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 in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth on Thursday, 19 January 2017 at 10.00am.

PRESENT

Councillor B. Gallacher
(Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Burt, E.	Murray, A.H.
Cartie, E. (part)	Rickerby, L.J. (part)
Dale, P.A.M.	Smith, J.E.
Homer, C.	

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Cunningham, P.	Lennox, Rev. D
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TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Payne, S	Woolhouse, R
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CABINET MEMBER

Arckless, G.R.	Children's Services
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MEMBERS ALSO PRESENT

Dickinson, S.J.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Aviston, S	Schools Capital and Organisation Manager
Bird, M.	Senior Democratic Services Officer
Bracken, M	Democratic Services Assistant
Johnson, A.	Director of Education and Skills
Lally, D.	Deputy Chief Executive
Little, L	Democratic Services Officer
Malone, C	Communications Business Partner
Roll, J.	Democratic Services Manager
Robinson, J	Communications Assistant
Tulett, C.	Head of Skills and Employability

45. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J.D. Foster and L. Atkin (church representative).

46. MINUTES

(a) **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2016, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair subject to a minor deletion on page 7 to instead read “and was agreed by Councillor Smith”.

(b) **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 November 2017, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

At this point of the meeting reference was made to minute number 40.2 regarding whether any progress had been made with undertaking the organisation of further safeguarding training. It was noted that a second round of training would take place after the election to involve any new members.

47. DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor Homer declared an interest in relation to the ‘Haydon Bridge and Hexham Partnerships’ report as two of her children attended Hexham Middle School and one attended Hexham High School. She had received legal advice that her participation would depend on what matters arose during the discussion and she would leave the meeting if required.

48. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

Members received the latest Forward Plan of key decisions for January to April 2017. (Forward Plan attached to the official minutes as Appendix A.)

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY CABINET

49. REPORTS OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE/DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

49.1 Annual Report of the Director of Education and Skills

The committee received and welcomed the open, honest and comprehensive annual report (attached to the official minutes as Appendix B).

The report was presented for pre-scrutiny and any comments from this committee would be sent to Cabinet when they considered the report at 3pm on 19 January 2017.

Members were pleased to note that schools were beginning to improve compared to 2013/14 and that the local authority was having more impact on supporting that achievement. However, given historical underachievement, members recognised that there was still a long way to go, with a particular focus on improving secondary education for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

A member requested a breakdown of the figures displayed on page 21 of the report with regards to school roll numbers in Berwick. Following further discussion it was clarified that the information provided could include the numbers of pupils on the rolls at the schools for the current and previous two years to understand the schools' capacities. Other members agreed that this information would be very beneficial and therefore was agreed that a breakdown of information on schools in Morpeth, Berwick, Prudhoe and Hexham would be provided, including schools which also fed into the area. Information for specific schools/partnerships would be provided on request.

Comments were made that the tone of the report seemed less positive than on other occasions and the Director of Education and Skills responded that the report was factually accurate but the current education policies were extremely disparate and that there were aspects of national policy changes which could have a worrying impact on Northumberland. It was noted that it was important to take into account the impact of policy changes on current Northumberland children, recognising that two years was a long time for a young person not to receive the education they deserved but to also consider the implications over the next 20 to 30 years.

Reference was made to the service statement and the operational plans which supported it which set out priorities for the next two years. The Director explained that statistics in the annual report relied on evidence from Ofsted and often there was a time lapse before any improvements could only be evidenced robustly.

A comparison was made between the outstanding outcomes at Prudhoe High School before the policy changes regarding academisation and the current situation at Haydon Bridge. All members needed to recognise the monumental effect proposed changes in education policy would have on Northumberland, especially around responsibilities and governance, and the role of the Regional Academies Commissioner was outlined.

Notwithstanding, a great deal of progress had been made since 2013 which demonstrated a shared commitment to the welfare of Northumberland's young people in spite of the introduction of a more academically demanding curriculum, more rigorous assessment systems, acceleration of the academisation programme and the national funding formula, and the committee paid tribute to the clear leadership provided by the Deputy Chief Executive and her team and those who were working in the education system in Northumberland who had responded well to the changes. Members agreed the Director of Education and Skills had

demonstrated a proactive approach and focus on what education should be about. Members agreed that there had been high quality leadership and teaching in the face of challenges outside of the Council's role and good working now took place between the Council and schools. The next step was to aspire to improve further and show more improvements in the following year's report.

RESOLVED that comments from the committee be forwarded in a report to Cabinet.

49.2 Impact of the Proposed National Funding Formula on School Budgets

Members considered the report (attached to the official minutes as Appendix C) and noted the consultation timetable regarding the new National Funding Formula (NFF) for schools and the separate consultation to take place on proposals for the High Needs Block.

The report was presented for pre-scrutiny and any comments from this committee would be sent to Cabinet when they considered the report at 3pm on 19 January 2017.

The Director of Education and Skills outlined the main implications of the changes explaining some of the complexities surrounding the figures.

The committee were interested in the comparison between the current system of locally determined school budgets and the proposals for the new National Funding Formula (NFF) which identified the 'winners' and 'losers' under the new proposals compared with budget shares schools received in 2016/17. Although the proposed NFF for 2018/19 represented an increase of 1.2% compared to this 2016/17, the additional costs that schools and academies had to find for pay awards, pension contributions and the Apprenticeship Levy plus the fact that inflation had not been factored in, would have serious implications for many schools. The Director also referred to the proposed Education and Skills Bill requiring all schools to become academies had now been replaced by a new Grammar School initiative.

Members commented that although the NFF was designed to have a fairer approach nationally, there were unintended consequences for many Northumberland schools because the majority did not meet the large numbers on roll that this formula was based on. Also, the pupil premium additional funding for the most vulnerable schools again presumed a larger school population which meant that many schools would not be able to balance their budgets. Schools at all levels would be affected.

Northumberland had never been funded fairly and the committee were extremely frustrated that they had been misled by the Government in the belief that every child would benefit from a national funding formula. They expressed concerns about the disparity in funding provided, for example a higher provision in London and the significant effect the proposals would have on children and schools in Northumberland, given the smaller numbers in schools in Northumberland the funding per child rather than by school.

In response to a question it was noted that the cost of living in London was a factor when considering the budget due to the staff wages and the funding used to recruit. In addition to this it was outlined that this did not just apply to London; areas across the country received different budgets depending on area based finances. Members hoped that Northumberland would get a NFF settlement that would achieve a settlement in parity with the levels of other local authorities.

The committee asked that these views be made clear in any response made by officers to the consultation but emphasised that every member of the Council had an interest in and responsibility for ensuring the best outcomes for Northumberland children and should also make their views very clear to the Government that these proposals were not good enough.

RESOLVED that the committee's comments be forwarded in a report to Cabinet, the recommendations to Cabinet be supported, and it be noted that a further update will be received in due course.

49.3 Haydon Bridge and Hexham Partnerships

Following delays of over two years, the report circulated with the agenda (attached to the official minutes as Appendix D) explained the council's proposal to improve educational outcomes in schools and academies in the Haydon Bridge and Hexham Partnerships and the intention to seek Cabinet's permission to consult on a proposal to merge Haydon Bridge High School (HBHS) and Hexham Queen Elizabeth Academy and establish a newly built multi-million pound academy in the area. This proposal would have meant a consultation on the removal of the Academy orders from HBHS and the sponsor arrangements with the Bright Tribe Trust and the development of a long term solution to educational problems in the west of the county.

The report was presented for pre-scrutiny and any comments from this committee would be sent to Cabinet when they considered the report at 3pm on 19 January 2017.

However, this report was circulated prior to a letter from Lord Nash, Minister for Education which in effect made consultation on this proposal pointless and forced the academy solution, under Bright Tribe. No detailed explanation was given as to why consultation with the community could not go ahead and so it was assumed this decision had been taken by the Minister and Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) on the basis of the current ideological approach taken by central government to the academisation of schools.

In response to a question about the impact on parents of children at the school about the current situation, members were advised the Council had written many times to parents to keep them updated. Regarding what role members would play and options available, officers advised that the decision on the future lay with Lord Nash and the Regional Academies Commissioner; the Council could write and ask to meet with them but had no power to move this issue forward. Officers

commented that if Bright Tribe were the sponsor then they needed to proceed with the next steps as soon as possible otherwise there would be an impact on the young people's education.

Responding to queries about the impact on other local schools, members were advised that the Minister considered there was evidence of rapid progress at HBHS but the Council had no evidence of this. There had been a 28% fall in pupil numbers at HBHS from 2013-16 and around 120 children in the Haydon Bridge catchment area attended Hexham High School. Hexham, Haltwhistle and Prudhoe High Schools all had some additional capacity.

Members acknowledged the frustration expressed by officers at the misleading nature of the letter which unfairly criticised the Council. The Committee was advised that Ridley Hall was inspected in November and found to be inadequate. The Council then put in a team of their own officers and an inspection carried out on 18 January found the school had made good progress and the hall was rated good.

Given this development, the committee expressed concern about the future of Ridley Hall and its current boarding students, given that the lease was due to end in April, the Council had extended this until July. However the longer term future was uncertain. This had been identified two years ago to Bright Tribe who had stated very clearly that they did not wish to continue with Ridley Hall. Grave concern was also expressed as Bright Tribe were being allowed to 'cherry pick' and not take responsibility for Ridley Hall. The committee agreed that whilst Ridley Hall situation needed very careful consideration, it was part of the school site and that if and when the academy was put in place Bright Tribe needed to take responsibility for it.

It was explained that the Council had recruited an acting full time headteacher who had performed well and provided strong leadership over the past 18 months, however the temporary nature of the situation needed to be resolved.

Members were also concerned that once in control, changes could be made to the school's structure within whatever cluster of schools that was set up, with a risk of losing middle schools. They felt Bright Tribe and the Department for Education should make the community fully aware of the implications and their plans. Further, the growing £300,000 debt of the school due to its low number of pupils would need to be repaid by other Northumberland Schools from their grant funding or from Council core funding.

Committee members voiced concerns about Bright Tribe's track record regarding school improvement but agreed that as it seemed likely they would take over control of the school, the committee would support the Council in doing all in its power to work with them to bring about a more secure future for the school and the young people, despite the challenges they would face in terms of falling rolls, finance and resources.

The trade union representative reported that staff had been told that if Bright Tribe were not selected as the sponsor there would be no secondary education in Haydon Bridge. He had attempted but been unable to meet with the local MP and

had written to Bright Tribe asking them to justify their credentials.

In response to a query it was confirmed that a judicial review of the decision was possible but unlikely to succeed to prevent the school becoming an academy but might be useful to uncover precisely what basis the decision had been made. This was because there was no detail in Lord Nash's letter and Bright Tribe had not shared plans for the future with the council or community.

The current uncertainty was deemed unacceptable and disadvantaged young people and their families. The committee asked that the Council try yet again to seek urgent clarification from the Regional Academies Commissioner and Bright Tribe about their intentions for Ridley Hall, and what appeared to be its intention to remove the interim executive board and establish its own board. They would advise Bright Tribe and the Regional Academies Commissioner that it was essential they contact parents to keep them informed of their plans for the future and timescales involved, and to urgently resolve the current situation. It was also suggested that Cabinet might like to consider requesting for letters to also be sent to the local MP and Lord Nash.

The committee paid tribute to the staff at the school for their continued hard work and perseverance during this particularly difficult time and conveyed their best wishes to pupils at the school and their families who had had to endure this period of uncertainty.

RESOLVED that the committee's comments be included in a report to Cabinet.

5.4 School Admission Arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools for the 2018/19 Academic Year

The report (attached to the official minutes as Appendix E) informed Cabinet of the outcomes of the consultation on school admissions arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools for the 2018/19 academic year as required by the School Admissions Code 2014. Approval of these admission arrangements was sought by Cabinet.

The report was presented for pre-scrutiny and any comments from this committee would be forwarded to Cabinet, who would consider the report on 7 February 2017.

Members were advised of a minor change to the oversubscription criteria with reference to children's exceptional medical or social needs. Children would no longer be not automatically allocated a place if the parents failed to submit a written statement about their needs from a relevant professional, such as a doctor.

Discussion followed about the link between planning and school places with concern expressed that people buying new build properties in Morpeth would not be able to get local school places for their children. It was questioned how the guidance could realistically state that new five bedroom houses would not necessarily house families with children. It was noted that Morpeth's school capacity was full but many places were taken by people from outside of the

catchment area; the Council did not have the power to require places for local children in that schools partnership but many of the places currently going to people outside of Morpeth might instead go to more local children in future.

Reference was also made to the 750 new builds being developed in Amble, and members felt that further consideration was required about this in the planning process for large scale developments, perhaps with reference to possible Section 106 agreements about supporting community establishments.

It was then **RESOLVED** that Cabinet be advised that the committee supports the recommendations in the report.

REPORT FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

50. REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE/DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Adult Learning Service Self-Assessment Report for 2015-16

Caroline Tullet, Head of Skills and Employability outlined the purpose of the report (attached to the official minutes as Appendix F); in line with statutory guidance and regulation, all government funded skills providers had to provide a report regarding the outcomes of the provision to the funders and for the basis of Ofsted inspections. It was noted that there had been a few staff in the service who still had not received the full pay protection for their sessional teaching, which was a few pence per hour higher than the new rates of pay. It was explained that due to a software issue in Employee Services, the pay protection rates had not yet been paid to six members of staff but this was in the process of being resolved.

In response to a question about GCSE success rates, members were advised that GCSE outcomes for Science and Art for over 19s was below the national average, but for English and Mathematics it was 11% above the national rate for 16-18 year olds and 4% above for 19 year olds. Science and humanities had been a difficult area to recruit staff to, but permanent leadership and teaching posts for science and humanities support had been organised, which assisted both GCSE and access to higher education including topics such as nursing and occupational health.

Members expressed their support and thanks for Ms Tullet for the strong and positive report and identified the vast improvement and effort made towards employability services across the County and the achievement rates above the national average.

RESOLVED that the report and performance information in regarding to the period 1 August 2015 - 31 July 2016 be acknowledged.

51. THEMED SCRUTINY

The Vice-chair updated members on themed scrutiny review about responding to the new Special educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice. Two meetings had taken place and details of the figures were up to date. The last meeting had taken place at St Benet Biscop's High School, which had included parents of children with special needs. Members had also heard from the young people themselves and that the feedback was very interesting and informative. A final meeting for this themed scrutiny was due to take place in February.

RESOLVED that the update be noted.

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER

52. Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

Members considered the latest version of the committee's work programme (copy attached to the official minutes as Appendix G).

It was noted that an extra meeting of the committee had been arranged for 21 February 2017 due to the size of the committee's workload. The Chair added that the committee had considered 18 reports during the current council year, and was due to consider a total of 30 by the end of March.

The work programme listing for the 23 March meeting would be updated to record that the themed scrutiny contact officer should read Claire Brown.

RESOLVED that the update be noted.

INFORMATION REPORTS

53. 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.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

Ch.'s Initials.....

Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 19 January 2017