

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF** on **Tuesday 31 October 2017** at **10.00 am**

PRESENT

Councillor R. Wallace
(in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Campbell D
Cessford T
Lang J

Nisbet K
Stewart G
Stow K

CHURCH REPRESENTATIVES

Hodgson A

Lennox D

TEACHER UNION REPRESENTATIVES

Lyst R
Payne S

Sanderson J

OFFICERS

Aviston S

Head of School Organisation and
Resources

Johnson A

Interim Director of Children's
Services

Little L

Democratic Services Officer

ALSO PRESENT

Councillor B Flux

S Bush (Parent)

N Rodgers (Executive Headteacher)

C Randall (Vice-Chair of Governors)

Press: 1

38. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

In the absence of Councillors Renner-Thompson and Swinburn it was proposed by Councillor Cessford that Councillor R Wallace be appointed as Chair for the meeting which was seconded by Councillor Nisbet and agreed.

RESOLVED that Councillor R Wallace be appointed Chair for the meeting.

39. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors G Renner-Thompson, M Swinburn, M Richards and J Warner.

40. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2017, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record.

41. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The published Forward Plan for November 2017 to February 2018 (attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix A**) was presented.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

REPORTS TO BE CONSIDERED CABINET

42. REPORT OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Proposed Closure of Acklington CE First School

The Chair advised of a response by the parents of Acklington Church of England First School which had not been included in the Committee papers. This had been uploaded to the Council's website and circulated to Members of the Committee prior to the meeting, however the Chair allowed time to ensure that all Members had the opportunity to read the information.

The report (attached as Appendix B) to the signed minutes outlined the results of the statutory consultation process undertaken by the Governing Body of the James Calvert Spence Federation in relation to their proposal to close Acklington CE First School. The report also provided an analysis of the responses received during the statutory period of consultation. The Interim Director of Children's Services introduced the report and advised of the scrutiny role of this Committee. Comments made by this Committee would be reported to Cabinet where the final decision would be made.

Mr Bush addressed the Committee speaking in objection to the proposed closure on behalf of the Parents of Acklington CE School as follows:-

- He expressed concern that the 13 page response to the statutory proposal from the "Parents of Acklington CE School" had not been included in the report and only circulated subsequently. He had been advised that the representation would only be summarised into the report for Cabinet if this Committee instructed the Interim Director of Children's Services to do so and he asked that this Committee agree to do this. They agreed this point.
- It was believed that the Governing Body had not taken the necessary time or action to investigate alternatives to closure of the school. A working party to investigate the school's viability existed for just a few weeks over Christmas 2016 with a vote taken for an informal consultation in mid-January 2017. The consultation did not commence until May 2017 with the delay blamed on the Local Authority's advice regarding Purdah. The report stated that the Governors had acted preemptively without proper understanding of the process. The parents had requested sight of any documents pertaining to the other options considered before consultation to close was chosen. A written response was provided which stated that the only other option to closure was that the school generated enough income to cover its costs. Parents considered that the Governing Body were content to allow the school to continue to accrue debt without actively seeking a solution and conversations between the Federation, parents and community could have begun nearly 6 months before the consultation started.
- Page 20 of the statutory guidance on opening and closing maintained schools stated that proposals related to the closure of a rural primary school must make a statement that the Governing Body considered section 15(4). There was no reference to Section 15(4) in the statutory proposal. Section 15(4) contained four subsections relating to local community, transport, motor vehicle use and alternatives to discontinuance. The first three were all covered directly or indirectly in the statutory proposal but there was no reference to alternatives or that alternatives had been considered. As such the proposal should be considered invalid and rejected in its current state. He questioned how the consultation be just if people were presented with partial information.
- The report was actually the first time parents had seen any discussion of alternatives to closure by the Governing Body. Once the parents had been informed of the decision that the Governors intended to continue with closure Mr Bush asked the Chair of the Governing Body to inform parents of the reasons their suggestions had been rejected and had been advised that the information was confidential in nature. This was the same response which had been received several times when requesting various pieces of information during the informal consultation. However these documents now appeared to be publicly available and in them the Governing Body made no attempt to develop the ideas provided during the information consultation and presented no evidence of any alternatives.

- The parents believed that the School's current situation provided Northumberland County Council with an opportunity to develop their education offering by conversion of the school to an alternative educational model such as Steiner. This would have benefits for the local area and the wider county. There was a significant number of children who were homeschooled as their parents were disillusioned with the current education provision. Parents of children with additional needs including those on the autistic spectrum often found their unique needs could not be met by mainstream education. Providing an educational environment that was monitored by the Local Authority and accountable to OFSTED would mean that those children would not slip through the net.
- Any serious attempt to save 160 years of village history would take time and closure of the school at the end of December had clearly not been proposed with the well-being of the students as the primary concern. The report stated allowing Acklington to remain open until the end of the academic year was a viable proposal from a financial perspective. The report also stated that Cabinet would need to consider whether educationally it would be better for children to continue in the school for another 7 months or to transfer to alternative local schools at the beginning of the spring term. All the current parents kept their children at the school even knowing the situation it was in because they valued the education it provided. Continuing the school to the end of the academic year would give children the continuity they deserved and allow all invested parties to thoroughly investigate the schools' options.

Mr Rodgers, Executive Headteacher of James Calvert Spence College (JSCS) advised:

- That he understood the views of the parents and respected the strong voice they have had. The risk of closure of the school had been a theme for a number of years and the school was federated in 2015 when it was again at risk of closure.
- The federation of the school was an attempt to give the school a chance to flourish. The Federation had worked with the school and community to try to increase the number of children on the roll and had invested a lot in terms of staffing, ICT, and leadership to try to make the school viable. Unfortunately there had been no significant increase in the roll.
- In November 2016 the indicative budget showed that JCSC would need to contribute significantly to keep the first school open. It was considered that the balance had tipped too far and money would need to be taken from pupils at JCSC to fund the then 13 pupils at the first school.
- He advised that most pupils attending the school were out of the catchment area of that school, and travelled past their closest schools to attend and that the school was not the choice for the majority of the

catchment pupils. It was difficult to deliver the full curriculum across the year groups at the school and whilst parents were very supportive the school was just not sustainable.

- The buildings were not fit for purpose with repair costs prohibitive and it was felt there were better places for the children to be educated. It was with reluctance and regret that closure was the only option at this time.

A statement had been provided by Councillor J Watson, the Ward Councillor which was read out by the Chair and included the following:-

- He had read the reports, closely followed and been involved with discussions which had taken place about the proposal. It was very sad when a small closely knit community had its first school under threat of closure and there was no doubt it would have an effect on the village as a whole. Whatever decision was reached he was sure that the education of the children of Acklington would be of the Council's highest concern and would not suffer in the long term.
- There was no doubt that the Parents and others involved in the school felt let down by the events that took place when JCSC took over the school. They felt that promises made by the Chair of Governors and the Executive Head had not been kept. These issues were outlined in the submissions enclosed with the report.
- The number of pupils this year was undoubtedly affected by the knowledge that this review was taking place and that the recommendation was for closure. Some parents felt it advisable to remove their children at that point, that is not to say the numbers would have been at a level that the Governors felt were sustainable.
- The figures presented made it hard to argue a case but he felt that the closure at this time was hard for both the children and the parents and that the delay until Summer which was being requested was something that should be duly considered by the Committee. This would allow more time for alternatives to be considered and seemed to him the time when children would find it easier to move to a new school if that was the outcome.
- Please consider that at no time had the actual quality of the education of the children been criticised and that the school's last Ofsted was good. Whatever the decision today he had every confidence that it would be in the interests of the children and not just financial reasons.

Concern was expressed regarding the lack of an official response from the Church of England to the statutory proposal. The Interim Director of Children's Services advised that the Church of England would be asked to provide a formal response to the statutory proposal for the Cabinet meeting which would be reported verbally. He further advised that the proposal to close the school in September could be something that the Committee should consider if they felt this was a more appropriate date. In respect of the delay

in the undertaking of the consultation on the proposed closure it was confirmed that the Local Authority would defer any consultation which would be impacted by Purdah. All statutory proposals only included one option.

The following information was noted in response to questions from Members of the Committee:-

- The number of children attending the school had always been very low, less than 20 for the last five years but had declined with the majority of children within the catchment area for this school choosing to attend other local schools. The school was a faith school and not all parents wished their children to attend such a school.
- A number of new homes were proposed for the surrounding area however it was not expected that the school roll would increase significantly as there were a number of alternative schools.
- No major investment had been made in the school for a number of years. The current buildings were beyond repair and would need to be completely replaced if the school remained open. The additional maintenance and staffing costs would impact on JCSC if the school were to remain open until the end of the summer term and JCSC had to prioritise their funds to ensure they received the best value for money for all pupils.

A short discussion took place regarding home-schooling with the Director of Children's Services advising of his concerns regarding the increase in the numbers across Northumberland along with the lack of inspection and quality assurance.

Some Members expressed concerns regarding the timescale for the proposed closure of the school and the effect of moving the children in the middle of the school year would have on their education and felt this might not be in the best interests of the children. The Committee was advised of good relationships between schools within the Coquet Partnership and it was hoped, although could not be guaranteed, that children would be accepted at their first choice of alternative school and that transition would be very carefully managed.

Councillor Campbell proposed that Cabinet be advised that this Committee whilst supporting the recommendation to approve the proposal from the Governing Body of the James Calvert Spence Federation to close Acklington CE First School the date of closure should be 31 August 2018. This was seconded by Councillor Nisbet. A vote on the proposal was held and the majority view was that delaying the proposed closure until 31 August 2018 would allow a better transition for the children involved.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that this Committee whilst supporting the recommendation to approve the proposal from the Governing Body of the James Calvert Spence Federation to close Acklington CE First School the date of closure should be 31 August 2018.

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

43. REPORT OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

School Closure Process

The report attached as Appendix C to the signed minutes outlined the process to be carried out by Governing Bodies of Voluntary, Foundation and Foundation Special Schools and Local Authorities when proposing the closure of schools as set down in regulations. The report was requested as a guide for Members of the Committee.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

44. WORK PROGRAMME

The Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme was attached to the signed minutes as Appendix D. Members were advised that it had been agreed due to the workload of the Committee that monthly meetings would be held with dates and a revised work programme to be circulated in due course.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

INFORMATION REPORTS

45. 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. Any Member who would like a printed copy should contact the Democratic Services Officer.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____