

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

18 July 2007

STATEMENT OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES PORTFOLIO HOLDER (Early Years education and all school related education issues and advisory services)

COUNTY COUNCILLOR JOHN WATSON OBE

SCHOOL PLACE PLANNING

Richmond Building Schools for the Future (BSF)

The main development is that following detailed analysis of tenders submitted, Shepherds have been appointed by the County Council as main contractor for this project.

It is anticipated that various accommodation works will be undertaken during the Summer holiday, with the continuation of the new buildings starting in the Autumn. The new buildings are expected to be completed by September 2009, with external works and refurbishment going on till Summer 2010.

High Bentham and Low Bentham

I wish to inform Members that there has been a delay in progressing the proposed amalgamation of High Bentham Community Primary School and Low Bentham Community Primary School from 1 September 2009. The proposal was approved by the School Organisation Committee on 29 March. Conditional approval was given provided the Council could purchase the land for the new school site and also achieve planning permission by the end of September 2008.

The land owner had agreed to sell the land to the Council in October 2006 but negotiations have come to stalemate. We are investigating whether there is a possibility of using other sites close by and then applying to the Schools Adjudicator for a modification to the proposal. The site investigation will take a few months and so this inevitably means that if we are able to progress the proposal it will be delayed till September 2009.

The governing bodies have been informed of the position and a letter has been sent to parents. I will keep Members informed about further news.

SCHOOL INTERNET FACILITIES

The major recent developments have been to improve E-mail facilities. During half term the schools' e-mail service was completely re-vamped. New servers were added under a completely re-designed system. Capacity was trebled and additional changes were made to improve throughput and reliability. The full cost of this work was borne by Bull Systems who accepted responsibility for the difficulties encountered up to that point. The basis of the specification is that Bull is required to provide the facilities and the capacity to meet our needs

The new E-mail service has performed without interruption after some minor teething difficulties in the first week. There have been no outages on either the E-mail system or the internet connections other than planned maintenance. There have been two outages at individual schools (Masham and Easingwold) but these have not been attributable to the Internet Service Provider.

There have been no complaints over the period as to the speed of the service, but our monitoring shows that communications lines out to the internet are running at or near capacity for significant periods during the school day. As such, the capacity of this line is being upgraded by a factor of 40% to ensure that the growth in usage does not cause difficulties in the Autumn Term

The fact that the service is now achieving an acceptable level of stability means that resources can now be concentrated on service development

Due to cost considerations some 15 schools cannot, at present, be connected to the County's network. These schools use ADSL and have received an unacceptable service (though not related to the Internet Service provision) because of errors by a contractor. All the schools concerned are now re-connected to the internet. Very useful discussions have been held with the schools concerned to explain both the difficulties encountered and the development programme for them.

The issues relating to the service have been the subject of detailed reports to both a joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Audit Committee.

SCHOOL MEAL PRICE INCREASE

School meals form part of a delegated responsibility for schools but the Local Authority continues to have responsibilities to, at a minimum, fix a "guide price" for school meals. Furthermore, it is a condition of participating in the contract, arranged by the County Council, for participating primary schools to adopt the North Yorkshire guide price, in practice, all primary schools use this tariff including those who have chosen to self operate.

The price currently charged is £1.62 per meal. This is lower than the average

charged by other Local Authorities. In September 2006 the charge was increased by 5% from £1.54 to £1.62.

Job Evaluation has given rise to significant increases in the pay for Cooks, but not other catering staff (range from 32% to 54%). This has added over £1.0M to the wage bill of North Yorkshire County Caterers and represents around a 10% increase in total costs. In relation to services provided to Secondary Schools and York we are seeking to recover the extra costs by negotiation. Secondary Schools and York do, however, have the option of withdrawing from the existing arrangements and making alternative provision.

In relation to the major part of the Catering Service's work with Primary Schools it was clearly not possible to immediately recover the extra costs by increasing charges to pupils. This would involve increasing the price in September 2007, from the current £1.62 to approaching £2.00 per meal. In its financial strategy for addressing the impact of job evaluation the Council has already acknowledged that the Catering Service should be given some assistance, but for one year only, to meet the extra costs involved. However support is on the basis that the Service does everything it can to minimise the impact. The action necessary is required, in any event, to address the situation in 2008/09 and beyond where the assistance from the County Council is no longer available.

Clearly a very careful judgement is required on the level of increase in school meal prices from September 2007 and the decision reached is to have an above inflation increase but one which only recovers in part the extra costs of job evaluation. This is achieved by increasing prices from £1.62 to £1.80 per meal or £9.00 per week.

It is recognised that an increase of 18p per week is very significant and every attempt will be made to minimise the loss in take up with the consequential loss in income. This will be achieved by promotional activity through press articles and material provided to schools for parents. We will also remind schools that as school meals expenditure and income is part of their delegated budget, it is their financial challenge too and that maximising take-up is essential. This is also entirely consistent with the healthy eating agenda.

Given the significant increase and the cost of providing Cooks the Service is to consider other options for the provision of school meals. Schools, the Catering Board and the Overview & Scrutiny Committee will all be involved in developing and reviewing the proposals. This includes investigating options such as:

- meeting minimal nutritional standards by a cold "sandwich plus" meal;
- greater use of transported meals rather than meals cooked in every school kitchen;
- the advantages and disadvantages of cook chill arrangements.

Each of these options has its pros and cons. Some involve one-off costs such as investment in equipment and possibly also redundancy costs.

SCHOOL FUNDING 2008/09 – 2011/12

The revisions to the School Block funding arrangements from 2008/09 are becoming clearer. There is to be no fundamental change in the existing arrangements involving a Schools Block which includes Delegated School Budgets and some non-delegated school related expenditure including SEN and Early Years. This will continue to be funded by Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) determined by Government. The remainder of Children & Young People's Service expenditure will continue to be part of overall local authority expenditure funded by a combination of Council Tax and Revenue Support Grant.

The most significant issue is the decision to continue a system of determining DSG known as "Cost Plus". This bases funding on the previous year's level of grant with increases to cover inflation and targeted extra funds for "ministerial priorities". For three years at least this protects the £14M the Authority used to spend, above Schools' FSS, and which is currently within the DSG "base". The Government are to commence, this Summer, with a major consultation on the implementation of a new formula from 2011/12.

There are some indications as to the likely level of funding for schools from 2008/09. The indications are that the guaranteed increase per pupil is likely to be at lower levels than in the previous 2 years. There will be additions for "ministerial priorities" but the Secretary of State has made it clear that the priority will be addressing deprivation in order to close the gap in attainment between the lowest and the highest performers. This is not helpful to North Yorkshire. However one helpful development is the distribution of some funds based upon "pockets of deprivation" rather than distributing all deprivation related funding on the average within an authority.

The Government is proposing relatively few changes to the arrangements for the various specific grants received by schools. One significant change is an extra specific grant, which helpfully will take account of sparsity, to support the roll-out of diplomas for vocational subjects as part of the 14-19 Agenda. There are also significant changes proposed for early years with the overall aim of adopting similar funding methodologies for 3 & 4 year olds whether in schools or private and voluntary settings.

County Councillor John Watson OBE
Executive Member for Education

9 July 2007