

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 21 July, 2006 at County Hall, Northallerton.

PRESENT:-

County Councillor Heather Garnett in the Chair. County Councillors Andrew Backhouse, John Blackburn, Mrs M A de Courcey-Bayley (as substitute for David Heather), Tony Hall, Brian Marshall (as substitute for Michelle Andrew), Leslie Parkes (as substitute for Stuart Parsons), Christopher Pearson, Caroline Seymour, Melva Steckles, Herbert Tindall (as substitute for Elizabeth Casling) and Greg White (as substitute for John Fletcher).

Members other than County Councillors:- Mrs Helen F Suckling (Parent Governor).

In attendance – County Councillors Bill Hoult, Carl Les, Caroline Patmore and John Watson.

Officers:- Stephanie Bratcher, Stephen Knight, Nick Postma, Mike Wall and Cynthia Welbourn.

COPIES OF ALL DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED ARE IN THE MINUTE BOOK

The Chairman welcomed the new Parent Governor representative, Mrs Helen F Suckling, to her first meeting.

54. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 30 June, 2006, having been printed and circulated be taken as read and be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

55. PUBLIC QUESTIONS OR STATEMENTS

The Committee was advised that no notice has been received of any public questions or statements to be made at the meeting.

56. CALL IN OF THE DECISION RELATING TO SCHOOL MEAL PRICES

CONSIDERED –

The report of the Head of Committee Services, together with a report of the Assistant Director – Finance and Management Support on the decision by the Corporate Director – Children and Young People's Service, in consultation with Executive Members for the service, to recommend an increase in the school meal price from £1.54 to £1.62.

The Corporate Director – Children and Young People's Service introduced the report which she had considered in coming to her decision, saying that the matter was a sensitive one, but essentially simple. The County Council was not seeking to make a profit in the provision of school meals, but was trying to recover its costs although, even at the level she had approved, the Council would not recover its full costs. The reason for the increase in costs being above the level of inflation was that there was

both a desire to and a need to improve the quality of school meals offered, but this necessarily had an impact on the level of food costs. The decision on school meal prices could have been to fix them at a higher level, in order to recover more fully the costs of provision but the decision on pricing had taken into account that a current DFES grant was used to support the additional cost of meals. She stressed that, even at the new price level, North Yorkshire would remain one of the lowest priced school meals authorities. She added that, in her view, the in house caterers were performing well and had largely recovered from a drop in school meals up take in the preceding period.

County Councillor Caroline Seymour acknowledged that the issue to be determined had been whether to seek an increase in price at the level of inflation or one which was well above that level. But, she stressed, the increase in school meal prices was in addition to a 4.9% increase in Council Tax and added that this increase could also affect Council Tax payers who were now also being asked to pay for Post 16 education transport. This decision, could, therefore, be hitting the same Council Tax payers with three above inflation rises. She welcomed the improved quality of meals being produced, but said that she believed the challenge faced by the service was to increase the number of meals taken up and she believed these price increases would dissuade people from taking up school meals. Whilst the school meals service had done well to bring take up back to 41%, take up had been at 43% in 2004 and at Rossett School there was an 83% take up of school meals. She said that she was convinced that an 8 pence per day increase would not encourage a further take up of school meals and also stressed the possible effects of falling school rolls. An increase of 5.2% was too much and allowing secondary schools to retain any profits made out of the provision of school meals necessarily had an effect on primary schools, where such money had previously been used to underpin costs.

County Councillor Bill Hoult referred to the increase in take up in school meals but asked how many of the school meals being taken were free meals and how was that entitlement calculated.

In response County Councillor John Watson said that about 6% of children in North Yorkshire had the right to free school meals and, of those, 86% took them up. The level of free school meals made it difficult for North Yorkshire to reach the national average in school meal take up as other authorities had free school meal entitlements of 50%. The reasons for the increased costs were not only the costs of ingredients but, because of the increased use of fresh foods, there was an increased cost in handling and preparing foods. In addition fresh food requires more cooking and there were increased training costs associated with its increased use. The additional costs to the County Council were probably of the order of 13 or 14 pence per meal, but it was seeking to recover 8 pence. Of comparator authorities, North Yorkshire was the third lowest. He said he believed that it was only right that the level of subsidy on school meals should be clear to Council Tax payers and stressed that, if school meal costs had to be subsidised, that money came from Dedicated Schools Grant and he questioned whether that was the most appropriate use for those funds.

County Councillor Brian Marshall said that the increase in school meal prices would adversely affect those families who were in receipt of benefits and the result would be to stop children having school meals.

In response County Councillor John Watson acknowledged that the increase in price was above the rate of inflation and he recognised that it would not be popular, amounting to some £15 per annum for each primary school child. He said that a certain amount of money was being received to subsidise this but the County Council was then doubling it.

County Councillor Caroline Seymour said she believed the most important issue was the effect the school meal price would have on the level of take up of school meals. She said that she believed that, in agreeing this increase, the view had been taken that it would not affect the level of take up, but she disagreed with that view.

County Councillor Margaret-Ann de Courcey-Bayley said that she agreed with the emphasis which was being put on the resistance to the increase in price and its effect on take up. She knew that the contract for the supply of school meals ingredients was very good but she felt that the high level of increase was due to an inappropriate haste to clear the level of subsidy. An increase in school meal prices at or just above the level of inflation would, she believed, have had less effect on levels of take up.

County Councillor John Watson said that school meal prices had been increased last year and it had been suggested that there would be very substantial falls in school meal take up. Although a fall had been experienced, the level of take up had now recovered to 41%. He asked Nick Postma to address the Committee on the contract and marketing approaches which were being adopted.

Nick Postma agreed that the increase in the take up of school meals was crucial and said that he thought this increase would be gradual, with the first priority being to improve the quality of the product on the plate. The majority of meat provided for school meals in the County would now be sourced from North Yorkshire, and the service had managed to achieve that despite EU Regulations which did not allow local suppliers to be specified. The sausages to be used in future school meals were better than those sold as "premium" quality in retail outlets. Considerable training had been undertaken for school cooks and primary schools had been inviting parents to try a school meal. He undertook to make new school meals menus available to Members.

County Councillor Les Parkes said the increase in schools meals was an issue of public perception, in the context of above inflation increases in Members allowances.

County Councillor Andrew Backhouse said that, although his daughter attended primary school, peer pressure led to her asking to have packed lunches. He asked to receive comparator information with the provision made by City of York Council and observed that the increase, per week, was about the cost of a confectionary bar.

In response County Councillor John Watson said the take up rate for school meals in York was approximately 35% to 36% and he expressed the view that £1.62 for a meal with a hot pudding was a very reasonable price.

County Councillor Herbert Tindall said he did not like the increase in school meals prices but, because of the increased quality, he believed it might be justified if it resulted in improvements in healthy eating. County Councillor Greg White said that his son would be starting school in September and expressed concerns that negative press releases about increases in school meal costs could result in reductions in take up of school meals.

County Councillor Caroline Seymour said that it was not the intention of those Members who had called in this decision to make fewer pupils have school meals, quite the contrary. But she expressed concerns about levels of take up and suggested that a good packed lunch could be provided for £1.62.

In summing up County Councillor John Watson said that he recognised that the increase in school meals was a real issue for parents in some households and said that it was right that the decision had been called in, to enable Members to ask searching questions on the justification for the increase. In respect of the effect of the increase in price on school meals take up, he said that only time would tell which view was correct on that issue.

RESOLVED –

That the Committee does not wish to refer back the decision relating to school meal prices to the decision maker or to refer the matter to full Council.

SJK/ALJ