

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2008 at County Hall, Northallerton.

PRESENT:-

County Councillor Heather Garnett in the Chair.

County Councillors:- Michelle Andrew, Peter Brown (as Substitute for County Councillor Elizabeth Casling), Tony Hall, David Heather, Michael Heseltine, Christopher Pearson, Caroline Seymour, Brian Simpson, Melva Steckles, and Herbert Tindall.

Members other than County Councillors:-

Jos Huddleston (Non Conformist Church) and Anne Swift (Primary Teacher Representative).

In attendance

Executive Member County Councillor John Watson.

Officers:- Stephanie Bratcher, George Bateman, Fiona Campbell, Brian Hamilton, June Taylor, Keith Tillbrook and Jane Wilkinson.

One Member of the public.

Apologies were received from County Councillors Andrew Backhouse, Elizabeth Casling and Jim Snowball, Michael Barrie and Helen Suckling (Parent Governor Representatives), Rosemary Readman (Secondary Teacher Representative) and Maggie Allen (Voluntary Sector).

COPIES OF ALL DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED ARE IN THE MINUTE BOOK

145. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

New Member

Following his recent appointment to the Committee the Chairman welcomed and introduced Jos Huddleston to the Committee and said that she looked forward to working with him in the future.

Parent Governor Representatives

The Chairman reported with regret the resignation with immediate effect of Helen Suckling following her appointment as Chair of Governors at Dishforth C of E Primary School. Members recorded their thanks to Helen Suckling for her valuable contribution to the work of the Committee.

The Committee administrator informed the Committee that the term of office of both Parent Governor Representative Members of the Committee was due to terminate at the end of March 2008. The Governor Support Unit had in hand arrangements to seek new nominations the closing date being 17th March 2008. If more than two nominations were received it would be necessary to hold an election and the announcement of successful candidates would be made on 12 May 2008.

146. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 30 November 2007 having been printed and circulated be taken as read and be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

147. PUBLIC QUESTIONS OR STATEMENTS

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

148. EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE

CONSIDERED –

The briefing report of County Councillor John Watson summarising the report he had given to County Council on 19 December 2007. The report also identified and highlighted those areas within his portfolio where key decisions and priorities would be made over the forthcoming months. In his introduction County Councillor John Watson referred to a meeting he had attended that morning with the Corporate Director – Children and Young People's Service. He said that the two main topics under discussion were:-

- The Directorate's plans to achieve 3% annual efficiency savings.
- Allocation of the £133m Capital Plan monies received from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) over the next two years.

Both of which would involve having to make very difficult decisions. The Capital Plans monies are divided as follows:-

- £61m – allocation at discretion of North Yorkshire County Council.
- £42m – directly delegated to schools.
- £30m – Children Centres and Special Education
Needs/Behaviour Emotional and Social Difficulty provision.

With regard to the allocation of primary school capital programme monies he said that the County Council had little discretion as unless targets and objectives set by the government were adhered to monies would not be forthcoming.

With regard to the 14-19 Strategy he informed Members that he was acutely aware that Heads were awaiting advice from the County Council on how to deliver all 17 Diplomas as stipulated by the Government by 2013. He said that Richard Geoghegan had produced a briefing note on the 14-19 Strategy which covered forthcoming changes and rurality issues. He suggested that the Committee may like to dedicate one of its future meetings to consideration of this important subject.

He observed that it was interesting to note the contrast between his workload as Executive Member and the topics that had been the focus of the Committee's attention over the last few months.

County Councillor John Watson stated that he was happy to expand upon any of the topics referred to or respond to questions from Members. In response to a variety of questions raised by Members the following points were made:-

- Capital Plan – it was confirmed that of the £42m devolved capital for schools the Government stipulated a fixed amount to be awarded to all schools apart from newly built schools who received only half of that fixed amount. This method took no account of need which was why the County Council retained a small sum of capital maintenance monies that was allocated by the Schools Forum in accordance with need. It was noted that a request to the County Council for funding for a school improvement project was likely to be rejected if the school itself did not allocate monies to the project from its own capital resources.
- Members noted the comments of the Executive Member on the variance between his and the Committee's Work Programme and the suggestion that adjustments were made. The Chairman said that arrangements to organise a triumvirate meeting were already in hand. At that meeting discussions between the Executive Member, Corporate Director – Children & Young People's Service, Group Spokespersons and herself on the Committee's future Work Programme would take place. The outcome of those discussions would be reported back to the Committee in due course. The Chairman pointed out that the Committee's examination of school meals and outdoor education was in response to requests made by the Executive Member and that discussions at the recently held Admissions Forum had included the Primary Capital Programme and falling rolls.

RESOLVED –

That the content of the report and the information provided at the meeting be noted.

149. MONITORING PUPIL NUMBERS

CONSIDERED –

The report of the Corporate Director – Children and Young People's Service detailing future trends in the numbers of pupils in North Yorkshire Schools and the implications this has for school funding.

During the course of the presentation of his report George Bateman emphasised that primary school rolls have been in decline for a number of years and that whilst many schools have faced difficulties these have largely, so far at least, been addressed and few financial deficits recorded. It was noted that deficit budgets were more likely to become an increasing problem for secondary schools where declining rolls were not yet a significant feature. Members were advised that whilst accurate projections and forecasts of pupil numbers were easier to do for secondary schools, those schools on the borders of North Yorkshire often attracted pupils from outside the County due to the quality of the education they provided. Whilst this compensated in part for falling rolls it did make accurate forecasting more difficult.

Members noted the funding arrangements for Schools outlined in the report and were advised that the amount of Dedicated School Grant monies awarded each year to individual schools was based on the number of pupils it had on the roll in January of the preceding year. The County Council recognised that this mechanism was

particularly problematic for service schools where pupil numbers could vary enormously year to year. To ensure fairness the County Council awarded lump sums to individual schools to compensate for diseconomies of scale.

It was acknowledged that in some instances however difficult decisions had to be made by schools the least popular being staff redundancies. Members were informed that the County Council offered support services to schools in this situation and encouraged such Schools not to postpone making difficult decisions. Falling pupil numbers had to be managed by both the County Council and schools working together.

In response to questions Members were informed that the County Council liaised closely with District Councils, National Parks and Planning Authorities with regard to forecasting future pupil numbers in North Yorkshire. The County Council was also routinely contacted as a consultee to all major housing development applications including social housing that were submitted in the County. Members were advised that development levels were monitored closely and forecasts of future pupil numbers adjusted accordingly. It was acknowledged that development was not spread evenly across the County and that in some instances it impacted upon local catchment areas. The Committee was advised that delivery of the County Council's impending Capital Programme could also impact on catchment areas but that at present no details were known.

In response to a question about numbers of immigrant families in North Yorkshire and their impact on faith schools the Committee was informed that whilst this had had a disproportionate effect on some specific schools it did not affect the overall figures significantly.

A Member commented that the funding mechanisms outlined at the meeting favoured small rural schools and suggested that the County Council should re-examine its small schools policy on the grounds of sustainability issues. The Committee was informed that schools with falling rolls and pupil numbers below 120/130 faced difficult decisions surrounding accommodation and staffing levels. An example was given of a school with 60 pupils that had two classes each with 30 pupils. If pupil numbers fell to 45 it would be unreasonable for the school to be expected to operate with one classroom and one teacher. It was acknowledged that the decisions on small schools were in part political as the viability of small schools was considered essential to the sustainability of village life.

Members thanked George Bateman and Fiona Campbell for the information they had provided to the Committee which had given them a useful insight into issues surrounding falling rolls.

RESOLVED –

The content of the report together with the information provided at the meeting regarding trends in pupil numbers and associated funding issues be noted.

150. SCRUTINY REVIEW – “SCHOOL MEALS”

CONSIDERED –

THE Report of the Head of Scrutiny and Corporate Performance asking the Committee to approve the final report and recommendations of the task group attached at Annex A reviewing the schools meals service in North Yorkshire.

The Chairman introduced the report by saying that the review had been a short focused piece of work completed at the request of the Executive Member. She thanked the Members of the Task Group and officers who had been involved for their support and hard work in compiling the final report. The school visits she said had been a particularly enlightening experience and had been enjoyed by all everyone involved. The schools meals service whilst highly regarded was subject more than it ever had been in the past to increasing demands for quality and customer satisfaction. The needs of the customer for a nutritious and healthy meal had to be balanced against the cost of providing the meal. In her opinion there had been a subtle shift with the service now moving towards a professional business approach as opposed to being purely service driven. She drew Members' attention to the three recommendations made by the Task Group and sought the comments of the Executive Member and George Bateman.

The Executive Member County Councillor John Watson thanked the Committee for producing the report which whilst only a snapshot presented a very clear picture. The report clearly demonstrated the value of making visits to individual schools and he thanked the members involved as without their assistance the County Council lacked the resources to do this work. He appreciated the constructive tone of the report and thought that the various options considered were realistic. He commented that the Task Group's preferred option of moving towards Service Level Agreements was interesting. He thought that this option could work in secondary schools but thought that there was more of a case for keeping the service whole in primary schools. This was because secondary schools were generally larger and offered more scope for the service to be devolved. The use of SLA's currently give secondary schools an incentive to improve take-up rates and this approach needed to be reflected in the proposed primary SLA's. He concluded by saying that he had not yet reached a final decision on the future of the service.

George Bateman said that the school meal service had seen a lot of changes in recent years however as the service was currently operating at a loss, following job evaluation, to "do nothing" was not an option. In the past some schools had not seen the curriculum importance of the service but now there was a different approach given the healthy eating/Every Child Matters agenda. He reminded the Committee that all schools had a choice about whether to receive the Service from the County Council, they could opt to provide it themselves or seek the support of a private contractor. It was noted that all schools had an overriding responsibility to provide a meal service.

George Bateman said that there were in effect three choices:-

- To reduce costs (provision of sandwiches)
- Increase the cost of a school meal (previous experience showed this led to a reduced take-up)
- The County Council to subsidise the service – this would lead to reduced monies being awarded to schools

He rejected all three options if introduced in isolation. The use of service level agreements was his favoured choice but with some element of each of the choices detailed above. Service Level Agreements must provide an incentive

for the catering service to increase take-up. The best solution would be if both the Catering Service and schools retained an equal degree of responsibility. He advised the Committee that the County Council was about to commence an extensive consultation exercise on the future of the Service as recommended by the report. The report was in respect of primary schools only but the consultation would include all schools parents and pupils in North Yorkshire. Due to the scale and complexity of the consultation he did not anticipate the results being available before April 2009. He added that it may well prove to be the case that the findings of the consultation exercise led to different recommendations being put forward than those proposed by the task group. He stressed that at this point in time his mind was open to all suggestions.

Keith Tillbrook said that what was needed was for the Service to have improved levels of engagement with schools. This was because there were various matters such as eligibility and take-up of free school meals which fell outside the scope of the Service.

Members agreed that recommendations about the future of the service must reflect the different needs of large and small schools and problems encountered with staff recruitment. The ability for schools to have flexible menus was also put forward by Members. Members suggested that the consultation exercise was used as a vehicle to promote the benefits of the Service as a lack of a marketing strategy was also identified in the report as an area of weakness.

The Chairman said that she considered the introduction of a marketing strategy and performance management arrangements to be crucial. She was keen that once in place the Committee received regular monitoring reports. The Committee was advised that a workshop to establish a marketing strategy had been arranged for the following week and that the use of performance indicators would be incorporated.

In response to a question from the Chairman the Executive Member indicated that his preference would be for the report to be considered by the Catering Board before being referred to the Executive. George Bateman agreed to circulate details of consultation events to Members. Following a request from a Member he agreed to include school governors in the consultation. He gave assurances that before any final decisions were made a further report would be presented to the Committee.

A copy of the revised conclusions of the Task Group made following their final meeting was circulated and a copy placed in the Minute Book.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the information contained in the report attached at Annex A is noted and that the recommendations set out on page 14 of that report be approved.
- (2) That the final report of the Task Group on the School Meals Service be referred to the Catering Board for comment before being considered by the Executive.

151. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

CONSIDERED –

Report of the Head of Scrutiny and Corporate Performance asking the Committee to note the information in the report and to confirm, amend or add to the list of matters shown on the Work Programme attached at Annex A.

The Scrutiny Support Officer referred to comments made earlier in the meeting and confirmed that she would organise as soon as possible a Triumvirate meeting between the Chairman, Group Spokespersons, Executive Member and Corporate Director – Children and Young Peoples Services to discuss the Committee's future Work Programme.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the content of the report be noted and agreed.

JW/ALJ