

**NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Minutes of the meeting held on 8 April 2008 at County Hall, Northallerton.

**PRESENT:-**

County Councillor Heather Garnett in the Chair.

County Councillors:- Michelle Andrew, Andrew Backhouse, Gareth Dadd (substitute for Herbert Tindall), David Heather, Michael Heseltine, Christopher Pearson, Caroline Seymour, Brian Simpson, Jim Snowball, Tim Swales (substitute for Tony Hall), Christopher Pearson, and Melva Steckles.

Members other than County Councillors:-  
Jos Huddleston (Non Conformist Church).

In attendance

Executive Members County Councillors Caroline Patmore and John Watson.  
County Councillors Bill Hoult, David Lloyd Williams and John Wren.

Officers:- Stephanie Bratcher, Andrew Terry, Angela Walls.

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors Elizabeth Casling, Tony Hall and Herbert Tindall and Rosemary Readman (Secondary Teacher Representative).

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**COPIES OF ALL DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED ARE IN THE MINUTE BOOK**

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**160. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED –**

That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 22 February 2008 having been printed and circulated be taken as read and be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

**161. PUBLIC QUESTIONS OR STATEMENTS**

None received.

**162. CALL IN OF THE DECISION OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR – CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICE RELATING TO SCHOOL CLOTHING ALLOWANCE**

**CONSIDERED –**

Report of the Head of Committee Services outlining the procedure for call-in in respect of the decision made by the Corporate Director – Children and Young People's Service, in consultation with Executive Members, recommending that the criteria for eligibility be revised to include those parents who are in receipt of the maximum level of working tax and that the rate at which Clothing Allowance is paid is retained at £60.00 for 2008/09 year.

The Chairman said that the reason given for the call-in was that the decision was inconsistent with the key theme of helping people in need as stated in North Yorkshire Strategic Partnership's Community Strategy. She then drew Members attention to the tabled order of meeting as recommended in the County Council's Scrutiny Protocols. She explained that as the Corporate Director – Children & Young People's Service was on annual leave Andrew Terry the Assistant Director would speak on her behalf. The Chairman then invited the Executive Member and Assistant Director to explain the reasoning that had led to the decision being made.

The Executive Member County Councillor John Watson said that the decision in accordance with the scheme of delegation had been taken by the Corporate Director during a meeting she had held with both of the Executive Members for Children's Services. He believed that the matter was essentially simple. Eligible families currently received a grant of £60 from the County Council to help towards the cost of providing their child with a school uniform. This figure was the same as had been awarded the previous year. It had not been increased in line with inflation had it done so then the amount of the grant would be £62.00. He said that overall the total amount of money involved was not a great deal, as only 700 claims had been received. If each of the affected families had received an additional £2.00 the cost to the County Council would be £1,400.00. It was however he believed the principal of the matter that was being scrutinised by the call-in especially when viewed against the background of the recent increases there had been to the cost of home to school transport.

Andrew Terry the Assistant Director stressed that the award of a school clothing allowance was discretionary. He said that if however a local authority chose to make payments then the Government recommended the criteria it had to use to determine eligibility. The decision made by the Corporate Director was in line with government advice that recommended financial assistance be awarded to those parents entitled to the maximum level of working tax credit. He pointed out that North Yorkshire County Council had no precise means of determining the number of additional claims that would be submitted in response to the revised criteria. He referred Members to Section 3 of the report which set out the number of claims that had been received over the past six years. He drew Members attention to the significant drop there had been in the number of applications received in 2003/04 which arose as a result of a change made to the eligibility criteria. This reduction he said had not however resulted in a corresponding cut being made to the overall budget. In fact recent years had seen the opposite with significant percentage increases of 16%, 28%, 10%, 11% and 9% being made to the overall budget. He reminded Members that the County Council had no way of knowing in advance the number of additional claims it might receive and that accordingly it would be financially imprudent to increase the amount of the grant at this point in time. Furthermore research of the retail price index had revealed that the price of clothing had increased by only 1.95%. The decision not to increase the amount of the school clothing grant had he said been taken against the background of the significant increases there had been in the past and the desire to keep future spending levels within budget.

On behalf of the signatories to the call-in County Councillor Caroline Seymour said that the decision had been called-in because when viewed against the recent increase in Council Tax of 4.75% and the 5% increase in home to school transport costs it was mean. It impacted on the lowest income families in the County. She welcomed the extension of the eligibility criteria and acknowledged that 700 families whilst a small number were the poorest. She said that recent increases in inflation, fuel costs, and food costs meant that low income families would find it very difficult to manage as they would have to cover these increases and were also faced with having less money to spend on school uniforms. The abolition of the 10p rate in income tax meant that those people with a low income would be hit hardest. Recent articles in the Yorkshire Post indicated that the gap between the rich and poor was

increasing and she said that it would be wrong if the County Council contributed to this in any way. She stressed the rurality of North Yorkshire which meant that a lot of low income families lived in the countryside where increases in fuel costs had been particularly large. County Councillor Seymour acknowledged the large increases there had been to the overall school clothing budget in recent years. She said that if the grant was to be increased in line with inflation whilst this would be only a small amount of money it would make a big difference to the affected families.

County Councillor Seymour referred to some research she had undertaken looking at the cost of school uniforms which revealed that the average cost of a school uniform (including equipment) was £274 (Secondary) and £92.00 (primary). She said that the award of a school clothing grant of £60 was modest when compared to the overall cost of a uniform and would lead to children being discriminated against. The decision not to award an inflationary increase in the Grant given the size of the County Council's total budget and the amount of money involved was penny pinching. Personally she would have liked to have seen the level of the grant increase by 5% to £70 as this would then provide real support to low income families and would be in line with inflation and recent increases in Council Tax.

County Councillor Lloyd Williams said that the decision not to increase the school clothing grant demonstrated a twin track approach. The increase in Council Tax had not been matched by a similar increase in the grant and affected the poorest people in the community.

County Councillor John Wren said that if children were not dressed the same it could lead to bullying and them being treated unequally. He was angry that the grant had not been increased in line with inflation which he considered penny pinching in the extreme.

County Councillor John Watson responded by saying that over the last 6 years the amount of the grant had doubled and had been increased in excess of inflation. He said that there was no formal link between the amount of the school clothing grant and home to school transport costs. He pointed out that in the previous year the amount of the school clothing grant had increased whilst home to school transport costs had been frozen and that as a result no formal protest had been received. He referred to the cost of the meeting that day which he said was likely to be far in excess of £1400 (the cost of an inflationary rise in the school clothing grant). Andrew Terry said that it was never intended that payment of the grant would cover the entire cost of a school uniform it was only a contribution. He conceded that research undertaken into uniform costs had not been extensive but quoted literature from Raincliffe School which said that the cost of a uniform was £79 (boy) and £64 (girl) this did not include equipment.

The Chairman then invited questions and comments.

It was noted that payment of the grant was discretionary and that revision of the eligibility criteria meant that more families would benefit from the scheme. It was suggested that an inflationary increase in the grant would result in families being awarded an additional £1.44 and that such a small amount was unlikely to make a real difference. It was pointed out that families on low incomes did receive other financial benefits which were outside the control of the County Council.

The views expressed above were challenged by some Members who believed that the award of an additional £1.44 would have a real and positive benefit to low income families. The same Members called upon the Executive to reflect upon the comments made during the meeting and wisdom of the decision in the light of the small amount of money involved when compared to the size of the County Council's total budget and the cost of the call-in meeting.

The Chairman then invited the Assistant Director and Executive Member, followed by the signatories to sum up their respective arguments.

In conclusion the Chairman thanked everyone for their contribution to what had been a contentious and sensitive debate.

Members of the Committee were then invited to vote on whether they wished to refer the decision.

**RESOLVED –**

That the Committee does not wish to refer back the decision relating to school clothing allowance to the decision maker or to refer the matter to full council.

JW/JD