

# North Yorkshire Council

## Richmond (Yorks) Area Constituency Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Monday, 27 January 2025 commencing at 10.00 am at County Hall, Northallerton

Councillors Yvonne Peacock (Chair), Alyson Baker (non-voting), Caroline Dickinson, Kevin Foster, Bryn Griffiths, David Hugill, Tom Jones, Carl Les, Heather Moorhouse, Stuart Parsons, Karin Sedgewick, Angus Thompson, Steve Watson, John Weighell OBE and Annabel Wilkinson; together with co-opted Member Malcom Warne

Amanda Newbold – Assistant Director, Inclusion, Howard Emmett – Assistant Director, Resources and Steve Loach - Democratic Services

Other Attendees: 25 members of the public.

Apologies: Councillors David Webster and Peter Wilkinson;

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**Copies of all documents considered are in the Minute Book**

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### **129 Minutes of the Meeting held on Monday, 18 November 2024**

The Minutes of the meeting held on Monday, 18 November 2024 having been printed and circulated, be taken as read and confirmed and signed by the Chair as an accurate record.

### **130 Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Yvonne Peacock declared a registered interest in relation to the agenda item North Yorkshire Council's Petition Scheme - 'Rethink North Yorkshire School Transport Cuts' and issues raised in relation to that during the public participation section of the meeting.

A Member asked whether Councillor Peacock could be allowed to remain in the meeting to represent her Electoral Division from where the petition emanated. In response the Monitoring Officer stated that Councillor Peacock had a disclosable interest and, unless she had a dispensation from the Standards Committee, which she did not, it would not be legal for her to remain the meeting during the discussions on this matter.

Councillor Yvonne Peacock left the meeting.

Councillor Caroline Dickinson in the Chair.

### **131 Public Participation**

The following questions or statements, as detailed below, were submitted by members of the public:

## **Rob Macdonald**

As predicted, the new budget has just revealed that the claimed savings promised from this policy were pure fantasy. A meagre fraction of what you voted for and still no more believable.

Today I'll explain why this shortfall was totally inevitable and why the model on which you based your decision was a smokescreen. Imagine I am offering you a hot drink. Tea or coffee? My shout. Which would you like? Please take a moment and make a real choice. But wait. You can still have your choice, but now it's going to cost you £10. Or you can have the other choice which is still free. You're thirsty so you won't walk away. Which would you choose now? Now look around. I am sure there are people in this room for whom £10 matters. How many of them would stick with their original choice if it now cost £10 while the other option is still free? If you think that anything less than 100 percent would stick with their original choice, then you agree with me that the policy savings claim was always a fantasy. Because the savings you voted for require that 100 percent of parents who currently choose a school other than their nearest, would make the same choice even when it is no longer free.

To get the four-point-whatever million pound savings, every one of those parents has to make the same choice rather than switch to the free option. If any choose the remaining free option instead, North Yorkshire Council doesn't get the claimed savings. You don't have to believe me. It's all there in section 5.17 of the Executive Report. Or you can ask Cllr Wilkinson. She knows I'm right. Perhaps you're thinking it was not '£4 million' but 'up to £4 million', whatever that means. I listened to your Full Council debate. No-one said 'up to'. Cllr Wilkinson endorsed the full £4 million at that debate as does Stuart Carlton now. What's more, if any parents do choose the free option, the very real costs of providing it are not accounted for. You need to make savings. You absolutely do. But they need to be real savings. Not fantasy ones. And fantasy savings are all this policy has going for it. Our petition asks you to bring back catchment. Doing so could save more than just money. Our petition provides you with the opportunity to act now before reality bites. The budget confirms what we've always said. So please, send this back to the Executive and ask them to reconsider this policy in the light of all they now know.

## **Jane Parlour - Chair of Dalton on Tees Parish Council.**

My name is Jane Parlour and I am the Chair of Dalton on Tees Parish Council. I'm also the mum of four children who all attended their local primary, and catchment secondary, Richmond School.

Having discussed the changes to home to school transport policy recently introduced by North Yorkshire Council, our parish council has serious concerns about the impacts of these changes on not only the families and children living in our parish, but on all of those living in the area adjacent to the boundary with County Durham.

Using NYC's own calculator, families who for generations have had the certainty of being able to send their children to their 'catchment' secondary school, Richmond Comprehensive, free of charge, will now be expected to pay over £800 per child per year to do so. If they can't afford this they do of course have the 'choice' to send their children to their geographically nearest school across the county boundary in County Durham. Depending on precisely where they live, and whether the school has capacity to accommodate extra children, this could of course see a wide range of secondary schools in Darlington being designated as a pupils nearest available school. The result of this is that children transitioning from small village primaries will be far more likely to be split from the friendship groups that they will have built up over years. Anyone who has children will understand the upheaval and upset this would cause at an already difficult time for them. Because of this policy change families with children already attending Richmond School are facing the choice of whether to apply to send younger siblings to the same school with

the additional cost of transport, or to apply to an unfamiliar Darlington School where a space is far from certain but where home to school transport will be provided by NYC free of charge. It's worth pointing out to councillors that school term dates in Darlington are also different to those in North Yorkshire resulting in for example half term holidays falling on different weeks. I'm sure you can imagine the dilemmas that this could cause families, particularly those families already struggling financially.

Whilst I appreciate that North Yorkshire Council is facing significant budget pressures, and that the home to school transport budget needs to be scrutinised, these policy changes do not appear to be leading to definite and quantifiable savings for the council. Rather, this revised policy seems to be a case of "throwing the baby out with the bath water" .

This policy will see NYC having to provide buses, mini buses and taxis, free of charge, to ferry as yet unknown numbers of children backwards and forwards across the county boundary, to an unknown number of Darlington and Durham schools whilst simultaneously continuing to provide free home to school transport for an unknown number of children who still qualify for it..... heading in the opposite direction.

Given that this scenario will be replicated across every boundary between North Yorkshire and neighbouring local authorities it's hard to envisage this farcical and wholly illogical arrangement resulting in any financial savings being made at all, let alone the hundreds of thousands of pounds touted.

For these reasons, and for all the others put forward so eloquently by residents living in other parts of the county, I would ask councillors to show some common sense, reconsider this policy now, and revert back to the longstanding policy of free home to school transport for children attending their nearest CATCHMENT school within the county boundary.

### **Linda Rudkin**

In April 2024, it was revealed that an estimated 140 students could lose their access to free transport to Richmond School if the proposed transport policy is enforced. This change will profoundly affect the makeup and dynamics of the school.

Richmond School is well known in the community for offering an incredibly broad curriculum, particularly in the performing arts and sports, and for catering to the diverse needs of students in our area. The school is able to provide this wide-ranging curriculum largely due to its large student population, which allows smaller, niche, and less common subjects to attract enough interest to remain financially viable.

This, in turn, enables the school to hire specialist teachers to deliver these subjects rather than relying on staff teaching outside their areas of expertise or, worse, not offering the subjects at all.

Subjects are only viable at GCSE and A-Level when there are sufficiently large groups of students enrolling in them. Should the current policy go through the subjects at risk of being removed from the curriculum include a wide range of technology-related courses, including Design and Technology, Food Preparation, Engineering along with two computing courses: Computer Science and Vocational IT. Dance and Drama are on the list too.

Councillors, do you know what impact this policy will have on your own schools in your wards? What does the mayor for York and North Yorkshire have to say about this policy? What school impact data do you have that you are not releasing following our requests to the Freedom of Information team? What are you trying to hide?

This issue is further exacerbated when considering its impact on our Sixth Form. If students are not exposed to a broad curriculum at Key Stage 4, they are unlikely to pursue these subjects in the Sixth Form. Additionally, if we lack specialist staff to deliver high-quality education in these areas, these subjects will ultimately disappear.

The impact on local employment is significant. Over the next five years, Richmond School anticipates reducing teaching staff by approximately 10 positions as a result of these changes. Remember, a loss of 20 students in one year is a loss of £120,000 to the school. Councillors, please return this transport policy to the Executive today and ask them to rethink and to make that change. It is the only solution. And it is the only way to prove to us that at last, you are listening. Bring catchment back.

### **Brenda Price – Chair of Governors Reeth and Gunnerside Schools**

Our role as a governing body is to ensure the very best outcomes for our pupils. We provide a safe and enriching environment and as a small school, we nurture a very strong sense of community which extends beyond the school gates. This year we have a year 6 Cohort of 13 pupils. All the pupils live in Swaledale and Arkengarthdale with most qualifying for free transport to our schools through this Policy. Their catchment secondary school is Richmond School. The impact the policy changes have to our Year 6 cohort is severe. This year those 13 pupils would be split between 5 different schools. Richmond, Wensleydale, Risedale, Teesdale and Kirkby Stephen.

The community that we have nurtured for the previous 7 years shattered. Many of these children live in isolated locations so school and their transport to and from school is their social hub.

Cost saving? Two linear routes or five routes starting at different locations and finishing at different locations. I'm not even going to go into the travel required for transport providers to get to pick up points. Currently at the end of the school day, as well as the school bus travelling back from Richmond at 3.30, we are fortunate to have the 5.30 Little White Bus, a community bus driven by volunteers, able to travel as far as Keld. This route enables many children to take part in the wide range of after school activities available at Richmond School. There are no direct buses at any time of day on any of the other routes, reducing access to those hugely enriching activities.

Consistently over the last six months the concerns raised have only been answered by County Council officers suggesting 'it's about parental choice'. In reality our parents have Hobson's Choice – although there appears to be free choice, practically only one thing is being offered - to apply to a school they know their child will and can be transported to safely. The result, the routes demonstrated by the digital tool will never be risk assessed by council officers as no parent would ever put them down as their first choice. The council will however continue to highlight those as the only qualifying schools for free school transport. DFE statutory guidelines state that: "Parents will need to easily understand how they can find out which school is their nearest suitable school for travel purposes". The evidence is that clearly, in this case, it is not easy to understand. Will we ever know if some of the "nearest schools" would be deemed unsuitable if risk assessed, or, if by using bridleways on the digital tool and a subsequent longer route to school using roads would alter a decision on a nearest school.

### **Charlotte Fowler and Carol Livingstone**

I'm sure you are getting fed up hearing from us and would rather we would go away, I don't want to spend any more of my time discussing school transport either, but these are our children and our communities, and we care. Please be inclusive for the 74% of us living in rural North Yorkshire, our children need transport to their catchment school for reasons you are already aware.

There are more and more stories coming in thick and fast to our group. There are still lots of parents who are unaware of the school transport policy change. Families that have moved address a few miles down the road from Gilling West to Fawcett can now not access free home to school transport to their existing school.

A 13-year-old whose family moved to North Cowton just weeks after the new policy was put in to force has just found out they now can't get on the bus to Richmond School that stops outside his house. Instead, a taxi will be paid for to take him to Darlington. What a waste of money.

Families that have been through the appeals process already and have been rejected are going to appeal again, this will continue. Families are worried how they are going to be able to afford to send their children to school or be forced to send them on transport to their nearest school – measured by footpath - that is a further journey away - by road - and in some cases it will be the same school bus that they previously got on, but now will have to attend a different school. Some families have been silenced because their concerns have not been taken seriously, they have said that nothing will make a difference because, and I quote 'we are just numbers on a piece of paper', show these people that you do care and that you are listening. These families are not just in the Dales, there are more stories from across this constituency and indeed across the whole of North Yorkshire. The longer you leave this the more damage it will do and the more time and money it will waste. Act now to avoid any more mess.

The policy in its current form is going to cause ripple effects across the county for years to come for no financial benefit, if you think that thousands of parents like us are going to sit quietly for two years whilst you experiment to see if there are any savings, causing disruption to our families and ruining schools, then I'm sorry, you are sorely mistaken. Please help to bring catchment back

### **132 North Yorkshire Council's Petition Scheme - 'Rethink North Yorkshire School Transport Cuts'**

Details of the petition and its aims were set out in the published report, together with a response from representatives of Children and Young Peoples Services.

The key features of the Council's arrangements for receiving and debating petitions, as published on the Council's website, are as follows:

Receipt of the petition is published on the Council's website (which has been done in the case of this petition).

If a petition contains 500 or more signatures (but less than 30,130 signatories), it will be scheduled for debate at a meeting of the appropriate Area Committee which is the case for this petition.

The petition organiser is offered the opportunity to speak for five minutes at the Area Committee meeting to present their petition. Subsequently, at the meeting, the petition will be discussed by Councillors for a maximum of 15 minutes and a decision will be made on how to respond to the petition.

The possible responses by the Council to petitions, as shown on the website, are:

- (a) to take the action requested by the petition;
- (b) not to take the action requested for reasons put forward in the debate;
- (c) to commission further investigation into the matter, for example by a relevant committee; or
- (d) where the issue is one on which the council Executive is required to make the final decision, the council will decide whether to make recommendations to inform that decision.

The petition organiser will receive written confirmation of this decision. This confirmation will also be published on the website.

In accordance with the arrangements described above, the petition organiser was invited to join the meeting to present their petition.

The statement by the petitioner, **Ian Dawson**, was as follows:-

In 2023, when this council was formed as a unitary authority, the concern was that local voices would not be heard. Critics claimed that we would end up with decision-making that was disconnected from the communities that you are here to serve. Those who championed the change, many of whom are in this room today, promised residents that this would not be the case. Now is your chance to prove it.

The roots of this petition come from the consultation that was held last Spring. 1299 responses and 147 pages of comments expressing concerns – almost all of them stemming from one single change – your decision as a Council to restrict free school transport to ‘nearest school only’.

The warnings of the negative impact that this would have on families, schools and communities were all there 10 months ago. As was the evidence that it would result in more vehicles covering more routes, so more costs. But nobody listened. The consultation changed nothing and made us wonder why you even bothered.

In the Executive and Full Council meetings that followed, questions went unanswered, and concerns fell on deaf ears. You ploughed on relentlessly and rushed it through. You weren't even listening to each other. Conservative Councillor David Ayrton who voted against this proposal, summed it up neatly when he said:

- ‘Any savings that exist will be undermined by the costs.’
- ‘The impact is too great on the communities we represent.’
- ‘Guidance is exactly that, guidance not the rule.’

He nailed it.

To be clear, there are no savings here. The £4.2m figure has been acknowledged as a pipe dream, that's why it's not in your budget. The extra costs involved are obvious. And that's before you factor in the waste of officer time and endless appeals. It took us just a few weeks to gather over 2000 signatures, such was the level of public concern. More people from across the county have come forward since then, many sharing firsthand stories of the damage your decision is already starting to do. Those voices are going to get louder. Our community action group is already 240 people strong and growing daily.

You have pledged to be ‘the most local, large council’. Well here, right now is a chance to prove you mean it. How you react to this petition today and your willingness to amend this policy in the light of what you now know, is the biggest single test that this council has faced yet. Do not let us down.

Changing eligibility to ‘catchment school or nearest in county’ mirrors what other rural areas with similar geographies as ours, such as Devon and the Conservative-led Cornwall Council have done. And reinstating catchment bring us in line with our strategic partners at York City Council. It puts children's education first and supports hardworking families. It protects our North Yorkshire schools and avoids this council spending another ten months wasting time and money on appeals, assessments and managing public protests.

This amendment is needed urgently. It is clear this cannot and should not wait. We have heard today the disruption to lives that is already happening and the risks that schools are facing. The longer this mess goes on the more children it will harm and the harder it will be to repair the damage done.

Return this policy back to the Executive today with a recommendation to make one single amendment - scrap 'nearest school only' and bring catchment back.  
It is the only workable solution for North Yorkshire. And the only way to prove to us that at last, you are listening.

Prior to the response by Officers, Members raised the following issues:-

- Concern was raised that appropriate information including requests through the Freedom of Information Act, that had been requested in advance of this meeting, had not been provided to allow Members to undertake an informed debate.
- A Member stated that he had requested that the following information be provided to the Committee prior to this meeting, but it had not been received:
  1. What is the expected financial impact on our each of our area's schools, due to the implementation of the new Home to School Policy?
  2. Has a Social Impact Assessment been undertaken on the consequences of the new policy on our local communities?
    - a. If so, what are the results of this assessment?
    - b. If not when will this assessment be undertaken?

In response it was stated that the financial details had been provided for the Councillor, however that had been no requirement for a Social Impact assessment, therefore, this had not been undertaken. Details were provided in relation to the financial aspect and it was stated that these had been provided to the Councillor. In response he stated that he had not received these details and he had asked for these to be provided to the whole Committee, not just him.

In view of the lack of information provided a Member proposed that the issue be deferred for consideration at a subsequent meeting to allow all the requested information to be provided. It was suggested that prior to voting on a deferral an opportunity should be provided to allow officers to explain the impact a deferral would have on the implementation of the policy.

#### **Resolved –**

That it be agreed that officers be provided with an opportunity to explain the impact a deferral would have on the implementation of the policy.

In response to this officers referred to the report provided for this meeting and highlighted sections 4.8 to 4.12 as containing the specific details on the effect of a deferral.

In noting this information Members still had concerns that there was insufficient information available for them to proceed on this matter. Clarification was provided as to the meaning of Statutory Guidance and how this should be interpreted in terms of the adoption of the policy.

#### **Resolved –**

That the item submitted under North Yorkshire Council's Petition Scheme, 'Rethink North Yorkshire School Transport Cuts', be deferred for consideration at a subsequent meeting of this Area Committee, enabling officers to provide the detailed information requested by Councillors, by the various Freedom of Information requests and details of the additional highways budget required, in a timely manner, so that it can be taken into account when determining the petition.

### **133 Date and Time of Next Meeting**

#### **Resolved –**

That it be noted that the next scheduled ordinary meeting of the Committee would be held on Monday 17<sup>th</sup> March 2025 at 10am.

The meeting concluded at 12.35pm