

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**
held on Monday, 20th June, 2011 at Congleton Town Hall, Congleton, CW12
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PRESENT

Councillor A Kolker (Chairman)
Councillor K Edwards (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors L Brown, J Clowes, S Gardiner, P Hoyland, D Mahon, D Neilson,
W Livesley, G Merry, B Silvester and John McCann and Jill Kelly.

Apologies

Councillors M Sherratt, R Bailey

In Attendance

Councillor Hilda Gaddum

Officers

Lorraine Butcher	Director of Children's Services
Fintan Bradley	Head of Strategy, Planning & Performance
Gill Betton	Policy and Strategy Manager
Chris Williams	Integrated Transport Manager
Dominic Oakeshott	People Finance Lead
Mark Grimshaw	Scrutiny Officer

60 DECLARATION OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

None noted.

61 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME/OPEN SESSION

A number of members of the public wished to make a statement to the Committee regarding the Home to School Transport item.

Jemma Ellison, Chair of Governors from St. Mary's RC Primary School made the point that the proposed changes would have a detrimental effect on children. She suggested that both going to a different school to siblings and a lack of continuity as a result of changing schools would lead to poor educational outcomes for those children affected. She added that the report had suggested that the people impacted by the proposed changes were from mainly affluent backgrounds. It was argued that this was inaccurate and that a large number of people from poorer backgrounds would be disadvantaged by the proposed changes too.

Margaret Charlton explained that she felt that the proposed changes would result in the erosion of Christian values in society. Furthermore, it was argued that the proposed changes to post 16 mainstream travel would have a negative impact on social mobility.

Edward McHugh, Headteacher at St. Thomas More Catholic High School, commented that the summary of the consultation did not provide an accurate picture. Indeed, he contended that the process was flawed in length, having not provided the full 28 day period to his respective school. He also noted that the relevant documents were not available in Polish until half way through the consultation process, disadvantaging a number of parents at St. Thomas More. Edward McHugh also asserted that there were alternatives available to the Council in terms of saving money that would not have the unintended consequences that the proposed changes would have. He requested that the Council should explore these possibilities further.

Rachel White, a parent with a child at St. Thomas More Catholic High School, made the point that faith schools saved money for Cheshire East by investing their own funds into areas such as the maintenance of buildings. It was suggested therefore that it could be a false economy to withdraw travel support as money would have to be spent elsewhere. Furthermore, she argued that parental choice in terms of educational setting was very important and that this should not be taken away.

Kieran Kelly, Headteacher at St. Nicholas Catholic High School, Northwich, stated that although his respective school was situated in Cheshire West and Chester, it had served Cheshire East Children for a number of years. With this in mind, he expressed his disappointment at not being contacted during the consultation process. He asserted that the proposed changes would have a significant impact on the volume of traffic in particular areas as an increasing number of parents would have to transport their children using a car. It was queried whether the Cheshire East had undertaken an independent survey to analyse the impact of this increase in traffic. As a final point, attention was drawn to the fact that Cheshire East policy acknowledged that the catchment areas for faith schools were not based on a zoned geographical area but rather around parishes. He queried whether this policy had changed and if so when did it change given that admission arrangements for 2012-13 were already published and had been accepted by the Council without any indication that transport would not be provided as it was at present.

Heidi Reid, attending as a representative of a number of Bollington parents, made the point that under the proposed changes 'cost' would become an increasing factor when making a choice in educational settings. She suggested that this should never be the case. Additionally, it was noted that there would be no subsidised safe route for Bollington to Tytherington if the bus route was taken away under the proposed changes. She suggested that Cheshire East should look at this issue in more detail.

62 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED – That subject to the following amendments the minutes of the meeting held on 31 May be approved as a correct record.

- a) That the names of Councillor Hilda Gaddum, Fintan Bradley, Cath Knowles, Tony Crane and Mark Grimshaw be shown as being in attendance.
- b) That on page 1, the words 'and would prove to be a false economy' be added at the end of paragraph 2 to the points made by Alex Scott.
- c) That the words 'in relation to school places modelling' be added after the words 'potential impacts...' in paragraph 3 on page 3 in relation to the Home to School Transport update.

63 REVIEW OF HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Lorraine Butcher, Director of Children's Services, attended to provide a presentation which outlined the main issues in the report on the review of Home to School Transport.

She explained why the proposed changes to transport had been put forward. Firstly attention was drawn to the tight fiscal situation that, in line with the national context, Cheshire East faced. It was made clear therefore that if the requisite savings were not found in discretionary services such as subsidised travel, they would have to be found in other services, potentially impacting vulnerable children and young people.

Lorraine Butcher continued to outline the consultation process, highlighting the significant and wide-ranging response that it had produced. Following the consultation process, the service had drafted a recommended proposal for each affected group. She explained that based directly on the feedback from the consultation, the impact of the original proposals stated in the consultation papers had been considerably reduced. For instance, following the consultation exercise, the amended proposals suggested no changes for transport arrangements for children and young people with specialised needs. Additionally, it was stated that the 'phasing in' of the proposed changes would help maintain continuity of educational setting. It was also noted that the amended proposals would mean that it would take longer to achieve the necessary savings and that this discrepancy would have to be found elsewhere in the budget.

Following the presentation, the Chairman invited visiting Councillors to speak on the item under consideration.

Councillor Sam Corcoran made the following points:

- Had the Council considered the impact on jobs as a result of the proposed changes as parents had to drive their children to school?
- St. Thomas More Catholic High School had not received the full 28 days consultation period.
- Did the figures take into consideration the loss of income for Cheshire East as children stopped using the service during the transition period?

In providing a summary, Councillor Corcoran stated that whilst he welcomed the concession to 'phase in' the proposed changes he was still concerned over the potential of siblings being on split educational sites. He also asserted that Cheshire East needed to address the fundamental issue as to whether the Council intended to continue to support faith schools. He suggested that the

Committee could consider recommending to Cabinet an inflation linked charge increase until a number of potential discrepancies were investigated.

Councillor Shirley Jones stated that faith schools were different in their offer to other schools and therefore it was important that parents had the choice available to them. Additionally, she stated that the proposed changes would have a large impact on young people in Cheshire East who wished to follow a vocational path in their education post 16 but would not be able to due to their local colleges not offering the relevant courses. Councillor Jones expressed her regarding withdrawing the subsidy for school transport and that other alternatives or compromises should be sought.

Councillor Frank Keegan drew attention to a number of faith schools that would be seriously affected in terms of pupil numbers if the proposed changes were made. He stated that ultimately, the proposal was striking at the viability of these schools and that it was vital that Cheshire East made a decision over whether they would continue to support faith schools. He asserted that it was fair for Cheshire East to continue to support faith schools considering the historical financial support they had provided to Cheshire East and previously Cheshire County Council. Councillor Keegan contended that there were a number of unintended consequences of the proposed changes that required further exploration before any recommendation could be endorsed.

In response, Lorraine Butcher answered to a number of the points made by the visiting Councillors.

In terms of the point made regarding the viability of various faith schools, she confirmed that in order to prevent an immediate impact, the proposed changes would be 'phased in' which would allow for school places to adjust.

Regarding the impact that the proposed changes would have on those young people entering post 16 education, she accepted that there would be some significant challenges but that these were not exclusive to Cheshire East but reflective of a wider national issue. She reported that the replacement for the Educational Maintenance Allowance would have provision for transport but that the details of this were not yet fully available.

Members of the Committee made the following points:

- Considering that the proposals appeared to disproportionately affect Faith Schools and that the rationale behind this was based on principal as well as financial reasons, it was suggested that this change of policy required further and wider debate as it was purporting a fundamental change in the relationship between the faith community and Cheshire East. It was asserted that whilst providing transport to faith schools was not statutory, national policy and legislation supported faith schools and parental choice, indicating a subtlety between 'discretionary' and 'statutory' not reflected in the report. It was also contended that faith schools made a significant contribution to subsidising the existing system and that this had not been fully considered in the proposals.
- That in light of the Bollington to Tytherington bus route being removed, the safe route to school plan should be reviewed.
- Whether or not the proposed changes would actually produce the desired savings required. It was suggested that the proposed changes would

result in a number of false economies as for instance, pupils could potentially move from being entitled to 'discretionary' to 'statutory' support as their choice of school changed.

- A number of concerns were expressed regarding the impact on those young people entering post 16 education. It was stated that Cheshire East had a responsibility to widen access to education rather than reduce it.
- The use of mosaic modelling was queried as it was stated that for a diverse area such as Cheshire East, it produced a number of unhelpful generalisations.
- It was suggested that areas with faith schools would see a gradual increase in population, further exacerbating traffic and pollution issues.
- It was queried that as Cheshire East provided educational settings for children and young people residing in neighbouring authorities and conversely that some Cheshire East children and young people received their education in neighbouring authorities, was enough being done to work with partner authorities to solve these issues.
- The point was made that parents who did not receive a subsidy were often confused as to why parents whose children went to faith school did. It was stated that in order to prevent ill feeling developing this needed to be communicated more clearly and effectively.
- A concern was raised over the fact that it was the same officers who wrote the consultation documents that subsequently analysed and collated the results. It was also stated that the results of the consultation were misleading on a number of points; in particular the contribution of the two respective dioceses had not been acknowledged.

The Committee then discussed a number of issues including the lack of information and alternatives presented in the report. It was stated that whilst it was understood that not making savings in this area would potentially mean that savings would have to be made elsewhere, it was queried whether these could be found in the wider Council budget or from central government grants that were possibly available rather than from only the Children and Families budget. Members suggested that discussions should be held with schools and colleges themselves over a compromised transport funding arrangement.

It was therefore suggested that it was recommended to Cabinet that the decision be deferred until the above points were satisfactorily resolved. The Chairman reported that there was a timing issue in deferring a decision due to the fact that the admissions booklet provided to all schools needed to be published well in advance of September 2011.

It was suggested therefore that it be recommended to Cabinet that the status quo remain, except for an inflationary 5% rise in parental contributions until 2015/16 academic year whilst simultaneously alternatives were sought for the requisite savings beyond that of the Children and Families Budget.

RESOLVED – That it be recommended to Cabinet:

- a) That the proposals to change the Home to School Transport Policy be not endorsed and that the status quo be maintained subject to annual increases in the parental contribution of 5% up to the 2015/16 academic year.

- b) That the Council's overall Budget be examined further to achieve elsewhere the potential savings identified in the report.

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and concluded at 5.00 pm

Councillor A Kolker (Chairman)