

CABINET

MINUTES of the meeting held on Tuesday, 4 February 2014 commencing at 1.00 pm and finishing at 2.55 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Ian Hudspeth – in the Chair
Councillor Rodney Rose
Councillor Mrs Judith Heathcoat
Councillor Nick Carter
Councillor Melinda Tilley
Councillor Lorraine Lindsay-Gale
Councillor David Nimmo Smith
Councillor Arash Fatemian

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor George Reynolds (Agenda Item 5)
Councillor Anne Purse (Agenda Item 5)
Councillor Lynda Atkins (Agenda Item 5)
Councillor Neil Owen (Agenda Item 5)

Officers:

Whole of meeting Chief Executive and J. Dean (Chief Executive's Office);
Director for Children's Services, R. Leach and N. Darlington (Children, Education & Families).

The Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting, together with a schedule of addenda tabled at the meeting, and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda, reports and schedule, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.

9/14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

(Agenda Item. 1)

Apologies were received from Councillors Hilary Hibbert - Biles and Louise Chapman.

10/14 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda Item. 4)

Councillor George Reynolds – Local Member

Cllr Reynolds, local member representing his division (Wroxton and Hook Norton), expressed the view that there was a general deficit of information contained within the proposals and consultation, particularly in relation to costs to schools and to parents. For example, an outcome of the proposals would result in some schools situated in his division becoming full quickly, given that some 1300 new homes were due to be built in his division, whilst other schools would lose pupils, leading to a loss of teaching staff. A further example he gave was that one primary school in his division would lose 2 out of 3 of their catchment villages, which could lead to the poorest of village communities being disadvantaged, particularly those without their own transport.

Councillor Anne Purse – Local Member

Councillor Purse, local member representing her division (Wheatley) expressed concern that once Wheatley Park School was full, the nearest schools were situated in the city, the travel time to which in the morning would be considerable. This would be detrimental to the children's wellbeing. She urged Cabinet members to consider whether the savings proposed were of a practical nature before enacting them. She commented that the proposals would serve to disrupt schools and would not lead to savings.

Mrs K. Haig – Headteacher – Burford School

Mrs Haig urged Cabinet not to agree to the proposals because a decision of this kind would adversely affect Burford School's forward planning over the next five years. She explained that in her view effective primary/secondary partnerships were best delivered where all children from a primary school were to attend the same secondary school. If this practice were to change as a result of the proposals the outcome would be a loss to the school of up to 500 students over five years, at a cost of £201m to the school budget. The need to manage a falling budget would in turn make it more difficult to focus on better achievement, which was a part of Oxfordshire's agenda for raising achievement.

Richard Martin – Governor and Chairman of Finance Committee – Burford School

Mr Martin urged Members of Cabinet to leave the situation as it currently was and to allow individual schools to put together something that was far better than the proposals currently on the table. He added that schools, particularly rural schools, had developed crucial relationships with their current catchment area schools in respect of their bus transport systems. He asked whether the County Council was running a big risk undoing so much good for so little gain, warning that savings could amount to far less than was thought.

Andrew Pitman – Chair of Governors – Burford School

Mr Pitman urged members of the Cabinet to vote against the proposals which had provoked such a large public reaction. He pointed out that Burford School was at the most disadvantage from the proposals, proposals which might not glean the savings required if parents were not to take up what the Council was offering. He added his view that the Council had chosen to put £10m into a new rail network, yet, in comparison, required only a small saving from home to school transport.

Councillor John White, Mayor of Burford

Councillor White stated his view that whilst some of the proposals were sensible and reasonable, he had concerns that Burford town was inextricably linked to Burford School and that its budget would be damaged if the proposals were to be approved. Moreover that children might have to go to a school they did not wish to attend. He therefore asked members of the Cabinet not to ignore the views of the Burford constituents and to review the proposals for a second time.

Councillor Lynda Atkins – Local Member

Councillor Atkins agreed that although the proposals were clear and generally fair, there was a need for a reformed policy to be drawn up which would address some anomalies in the way that the Policy would be applied, as it could disadvantage the education of those affected. She highlighted some disadvantages to families living on RAF Benson in relation to Wallingford School and also the possible separation of siblings in families living in Wittenham to single sex education.

Helen Forey – Parent Governor – St. Swithun's Primary School

Helen Forey addressed the Cabinet in her role as a parent of children living in Kennington and attending Matthew Arnold School. She urged members to take a further wholesale look at the proposals for the reason that in her view, the Council could not be confident of their predicted uptake statistics. She

also highlighted the advantages of the 3 school partnerships which, she stated, Matthew Arnold School currently enjoyed and also expressed concern in relation to the safety of the walking routes to the Oxford Academy. Helen Forey concluded by delivering a petition signed by parents attending Kennington School.

Niall Williams and Graham Speke – Headteacher and Community Director respectively for Carterton Community College

Both urged Cabinet members to agree the proposals and principles inherent in the Policy which were the only fair way for local schools to achieve the very best for their locality. Moreover, the proposals would serve to give Carterton Community College stakeholders a parity of status with other schools and a buoyancy which it deserved in light of the 'good' Ofsted inspection it had received in 2013, and the best chance to create a successful academy in the future.

Sue Moon – Oxfordshire School Bus Action Group (OSBAG)

Sue Moon thanked all the people who had closely followed the campaign over the last months on Facebook, stating that all were potential voters and asking that they continue to be motivated to hold to account the elected representatives at election time. She commented that in her view mistakes had been made and misleading financial information given, adding also that a senior cabinet member had criticised their campaign.

Councillor Neil Owen – Local Member

Councillor Owen spoke of his loyalty and support for the people of Burford and Carterton as their elected representative in their quest for equity and fairness, as outlined by the appropriate speakers above. As a result he stated that, although he recognise the need to make savings, he was unable to support the proposals as they were and expressed his hope that a solution could be found for those schools who felt that they were at a disadvantage.

Dr Annabel Kay – Headteacher – The Warriner School

Dr Kay stated that the proposals would result in parents in the Warriner School area being disproportionately affected in that there would be a risk to the School's long term viability. A further outcome would be an instability in pupil numbers and staff reductions. She urged the Cabinet to consider reviewing catchment areas to offer more opportunity for disadvantaged schools to become viable. She asked also that the Council work closely with feeder primary schools – it having taken years to establish the current partnerships with primary schools.

John Cochrane – A Member of the Public

John Cochrane urged the Cabinet to give urgent consideration modifying the proposals according to how the level of charge was calculated for families opting to send their children to a school which was not their nearest, and where the Council was prepared to assist their transport. He stated that given the Council had a legal duty to provide free home to school transport, in part supported by specific government grants, the charge levied should only be the marginal extra cost of the transport ie. the full cost of providing the transport less the full cost of transport per pupil for those provided with free transport to all Oxfordshire schools. He added that to charge the full cost was unfair and inequitable. He continued that where the County was not willing or able to provide free transport then the school should be provided with the funds saved so that they could arrange a service and charge the families who were able to afford it with the balance of the cost. Moreover, he advocated that consideration should be given to the establishment of pick up points where pupils could gather to reduce or even eliminate the charge by being collected from a place where the school was their nearest. He also suggested that the Council should publish the actual costs of hiring buses and the terms of hire so that families and schools could judge if cheaper alternatives could be acquired. He questioned also the severance costs for teachers should staffing have to reduce as an outcome of the current proposals and the possible reduction of the school's curriculum as a consequence.

Chris Fyfe – Parent and Financial Adviser to OSBAG

Chris Fyfe, an accountant, advised rejection of the proposals or at least deferral to gain a better understanding of the risks involved. He gave two examples of the risks as he saw it. The first was that two buses could be required and half the savings would be lost if a small number of parents chose to go to the nearest school. Secondly, that no assumptions could be made on safe walking routes because if any proved not to be safe, then savings would again amount to zero.

Angus Wilkinson – a Member of OSBAG

Angus Wilkinson highlighted the risks associated with catchment areas moving out of the local authority's hands. He cited the unknown area of the DFE's statutory guidelines and the potential of no real control over whether routes were safe or unsafe. He added that in his view, on balance, the risks involved could be far worse if the new policy was to be adopted . He thus urged the Cabinet to find out the facts before making any decisions.

Louise Sumner – a Member of the Public

Louise Sumner asked the Cabinet to find other ways of finding alternative, innovative, realistic and cost effective solutions to the problem, instead of the rather bureaucratic nature of the proposals on the table. For example, she suggested that the Council's procurement specialists look into how the school buses could be used during the day with a view to gaining alternative revenue.

11/14 THE PROPOSED HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY

(Agenda Item. 5)

The Council has undertaken a consultation with the public, headteachers and other interested parties upon a number of proposed changes to the Home to School Transport Policy.

The proposed changes have been made in the light of the current difficult financial situation in the UK, the continuing impact this will have on local government finances, and the need to ensure that the Home to School Transport Policy is equitable.

The report contained an analysis of the responses to the consultation.

The Cabinet was asked to consider the consultation responses and then to decide which, if any, of the proposed changes were to be implemented.

The Chairman introduced the item, thanking all the members of the public, Members and the officers who had attended the public meetings.

At its meetings on 4 July 2013, 14 November 2013 and the morning of the 4 February 2014, the Education Scrutiny Committee had considered the proposed Home to School Transport Policy. Following the original proposal, a revised proposal had been issued and considered at the 14 November Committee. On 4 February 2014 the Committee had considered in turn each of the proposals and the likely impact on families, villages and the proposed savings.

The Chairman invited Councillor Mark Gray to the table and he presented the Scrutiny Committee's comments in order that they could be taken into account when the Cabinet were making their decisions. These were contained in a tabled Addenda.

Jim Leivers, Roy Leach and Neil Darlington then came to the table to respond to questions. With regard to the issues relating to RAF Benson as highlighted by Councillor Atkins, Mr Leivers agreed to look at whether it would be possible to alleviate any problems service personnel were currently facing.

The Leader asked if there was any ability within the law to differentiate on discrepancies about whether a route was a safe walking route or not. Mr Darlington explained that a statutory walking route was determined on a legal basis. If the route was above the statutory distances then free school transport would be awarded.

Councillor Heathcoat asked whether savings could be made by looking at taxi budgets. Roy Leach responded that the budget amounted to £7m per annum, the majority of which was used for children with special educational needs. A dedicated programme working individually with pupils on developing their travel skills had met with a positive response. This could lead to savings although taxis were still required. The Council's fleet of buses and their start/finish times was also being reviewed as part of the Supported Transport Programme.

In response to a question asking if it would be possible to make £250,000 savings from the Children's Services budget, Mr Leivers stated that there was no extra money available, difficult choices would have to be made between revisiting the Children's Centres budgets or the Home Care budget,

Councillor Fatemian asked if there was a procedure for parents to follow if their nearest school was oversubscribed. Mr Leach advised that although there was no automatic right to home to school transport to another school, parents would still need to proceed through the process to apply for their nearest school, as the over-subscription criteria would then need to be applied.

With reference to the point made by Cllr Purse, Cllr Carter asked why journey times to schools were not taken into account. Officers responded that this area had been looked at with Cllr Tilley and, whilst there was no wish for children's journey times to be longer than necessary, a simple, consistent methodology of measurement was necessary which was legally defensible. The more complex it was, the more difficult it was to manage.

Cllr Carter asked if the points made by Mr Cochrane with regard to looking at marginal costs when charging for bus journeys had been looked into. Mr Leach responded that this would not provide an increased revenue stream. Furthermore it would reduce income for a limited period of time but would not provide a long term solution.

Councillor Tilley informed the meeting that Louise Sumner had found her invitation to a meeting at County Hall to discuss the proposals very helpful. She had offered Mrs Moon of the Oxfordshire School Bus Action Group(OSBAG) the same opportunity, this had been refused and she had found herself the subject of personal criticism.

Councillor Fatemian reiterated the point that a £250,000 saving was not insignificant and represented 10 hours per week of home care support for 13,000 people. He made reference to the Council's responsibility to the electorate to ensure that they were protected from future implications, for example, to provide an equitable level of service for all residents given the ability of academies to set their own catchment areas.

Following a full debate and full consideration of the consultation responses, the Cabinet voted on the recommendations in turn as set out in the report CA5, taking all the recommendations and comments from Education Scrutiny Committee into account. During the discussion they also endorsed the Education Scrutiny Committee's support for further work to be undertaken in respect of Home to School Transport, including safe routes, admissions policies and the taxi budget; and the incorporation of alternative transport arrangements and the dissemination of best practice and the SEN pilot. They further endorsed the Scrutiny Committee's wish to press the Government to overhaul the principles of home to school transport in the light of the new Post 16 Regulations.

RESOLVED (all nem con) to:

- (a) (adopted as amended – amendment in bold) provide free transport to the nearest available school in Oxfordshire on a 'split village' entitlement where at least **20%** of addresses, but not all, are nearest to the catchment school and the rest are nearest to another school; in such cases free transport to be provided to the catchment school for all addresses;
- (b) to introduce the new policy from September 2015 for children starting primary school or transferring to secondary school, and to phase the policy change in year by year as children start schools or transfer between phases of education. Those in receipt of free travel under the current policy in September 2014 would continue to receive it on the same terms until they leave that phase of education or move to an alternative school;
- (c) to increase the charges for concessionary travel and post 16 travel by 10% in September 2014. This would involve increasing concessionary fares in 2014/15 to £290.40 (£96.80 per two terms of the 6 term year) for those who live under 3 miles from the school attended, and £541.20 per annum (£180.40 per two terms of the 6 term year) for those who live over 3 miles from the school attended;
- (d) from September 2015, to increase concessionary and post-16 fares by 5% per year for the following five years;
- (e) from 2014 to remove all references to collaborative learning transport from the Home to School Transport Policy;

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- (f) in order to administer the changes, particularly the determination of the “nearest available school” and the need to process an anticipated increase in the number of Home to School Transport appeals, the Admissions Team to be increased, for two years, by an additional 1 Full Time Equivalent (at a cost of £34,923 per annum).

..... in the Chair

Date of signing