

EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Tuesday, 4 February 2014 commencing at 9.30 am and finishing at 12.20 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Mark Gray – in the Chair

Councillor David Bartholomew
Councillor Yvonne Constance
Councillor Simon Hoare
Councillor John Howson
Councillor Richard Langridge
Councillor Neil Owen
Councillor Gill Sanders
Councillor Lawrie Stratford
Councillor Liz Brighouse OBE (In place of Councillor Val Smith)
Councillor David Wilmshurst (In place of Councillor Michael Waine)

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Purse (for Agenda Item 4)

By Invitation:

Officers: Jim Leivers, Director For Children's Services; Roy Leach, School Organisation & Planning Manager; Neil Darlington, Service Manager (Children, Education & Families)

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports are attached to the signed Minutes.

1/14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS (Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillor Val Smith (Councillor Brighouse substituting) and Councillor Michael Waine (Councillor Wilmshurst substituting).

Following the resignation of Councillor Newton the Chairman welcomed Councillor Stratford to the meeting on his appointment to the Committee.

2/14 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda No. 3)

The following requests to address the meeting had been agreed:

Sue Moon - Oxfordshire School Bus Action Group (OSBAG)

Angus Wilkinson - OSBAG

Chris Fyfe - OSBAG

Councillor Anne Purse, local Councillor

John Cochrane, Member of the Public

Dr Annabel Kay, Head Teacher – The Warriner School

Mr James Pilgrim, Deputy Head Teacher– Burford School

Sue Moon, OSBAG, asked that the Committee when listening to the presentations today to consider whether you are convinced that the savings are genuine beyond any reasonable doubt. She asked this in view of the real damage she felt that the proposals could do if voted through. She also asked Members to consider why they became involved in local politics and if it was to serve the local community. She understood the financial challenges but asked Members to consider the broader picture and if in any doubt to pause and look at other options and pilots already in place elsewhere. Responding to questions she highlighted that partnerships had been identified as a powerful tool for raising attainment. Transition was vital and again evidence suggested it worked best when it worked simplest with one to one or long standing cluster relationships.

Mr Wilkinson, OSBAG, speaking as a parent and governor stated that the proposals had no educational advantage but did carry educational risks. There were a lot of unknowns with the risk of some schools being unable to deal with the capacity of children wishing to go there. Other schools would lose pupils with the effect this would have on their budgets. It would be hard for schools to plan with the unknowns. He added that he believed there were errors of fact in the financial proposal such as buses being cut in Kennington but no consequent additional cost where additional service might be required.

Responding to questions from Councillor Brighouse he explained that the educational disadvantage was around aspects of the particular partnerships schools had developed. In response to further questions from Members he acknowledged that he had no empirical evidence of the disadvantage caused. However he commented that the move away from current provision was very new and by few County Councils and queried how Members could equally be certain that there was no risk to education.

Chris Fyfe, OSBAG, referred to a sensitivity analysis he had carried out and presented his findings in chart form for members' information. He stated that a small change in parent's behaviour would have a large impact on the savings to be made. Chris Fyfe responded to a questions from members and indicated that the lower saving figure of the model did not represent the worst case in terms of savings to be made. He had not looked at the impact of safe routes and took no specific account of alternatives modes of transport. He had looked at demand and the effect on savings only.

Councillor Purse, speaking as a local Councillor, referred to the particular difficulties faced by the villages in her Division who currently sent children to Wheatley Park Secondary School. Alternative nearer schools are in Oxford and some of these schools are always oversubscribed. Parents would never know what places were likely to be available. Often the schools were nearer by fractions of a mile and yet the journey times would be far greater with the impact on travel costs. She recognised the need for savings and asked that the proposals only be enacted where there were real savings. She asked for a sensible application of the proposals and where it did not make financial sense not to do it. During questions Councillor Purse suggested that in practicable terms it was about looking at the cost when new contracts were let to see that it provided savings.

John Cochrane 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. It was the duty of the Committee to consider the validity and consequence of the savings. There was nothing on the effect of academies. His modified suggestions would reduce the risk of schools closing or having reduced budgets.

Dr Annabel Kay, Head Teacher, The Warriner School, accepted the need to make savings and acknowledged the time put into the deliberations but stated that parental choice would be affected for those who were unable to afford transport and unable to find alternative means of transport. The effect on the Warriner School would be disproportionate. The school had a large and spread out catchment and was close to Banbury. She asked that catchments be reviewed rather than going for the easy option of nearest school only. Responding to a question about the Schools relationship with feeder schools Dr Kay replied that they worked closely with feeder schools and would continue to do so.

Mr Pilgrim, Head Teacher, Burford School, referred to the additional staff to be appointed to deal with the appeals and queried whether the cost included on-costs. He assumed that this cost had been built into the expected savings.

3/14 HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY - CONSULTATION RESULTS (Agenda No. 4)

Jim Leivers, Director for Children's Services, Roy Leach, School Organisation and Planning Manager and Neil Darlington attended for this item. Jim Leivers set the proposals in the overall context of the Directorate's and the County Council's financial position. Incredibly tough decisions were needed. Savings had to be made here or elsewhere. The changes were the result of necessity not desire. He stressed that the current position was not sustainable with the rise in academies that set their own catchment areas. This would leave the Council exposed to financial risk in the future. Roy Leach in presenting the proposals emphasised that no-one currently receiving transport would be affected by the proposals. He explained the concept of split

villages and that such proposals had to be applied across the County. He gave examples of the level at which a split village could be defined ranging from 15 – 25%.

During detailed questioning and discussion the following points were raised:

1. Concern was raised over the potential of a blank cheque being made available to academies in terms of transport and the view was expressed that Option A1 removed this risk, although it was unclear whether Option A2 did the same.
2. Members felt it was important to go to nearest school and supported the extension of this to the nearest school in Oxfordshire
3. There was concern about the split villages, as the percentages in future years might change and this would make it complicated.
4. Members in supporting the proposal relating to split villages commented that it would enable children from the same village to attend the same school, but may make the issue unnecessarily complex.
5. Some Members commented that the case for Option A2 was emotional, and the issue was not one of splitting villages, but of providing free transport.
6. The statutory walking distance of 2 miles did not appear to be “rural-proof” and there may be difficulties in walking an 8-year-old 2 miles in winter across fields and bridle-ways.
7. It was emphasised that Option A2 may prove cheaper, as there was no need to transport in 2 directions
8. It was noted that split villages only spoke about the rural aspects and this had not been explored for the towns.
9. Some felt that for simplicity the policy should only use nearest school.
10. Would it be worthwhile to hold off until the new Department for Education guidance comes out.
11. There was concern about the links to the policy and the admissions team given the budgets will be in Environment & Economy.
12. Schools had a wide discretion for spending on improving education outcomes and transport would be no different.
13. There was concern about the amount parents would have to pay and the problem if parents had to pay this up front. It was noted that the payment is currently payable in three instalments, but officers were considering 12 monthly instalments.
14. There was some concern about the consultation not including extended transport options. It was suggested that the Council consider a more proactive role in the Big Society approach to school transport including alternative arrangements.
15. There was concern about the unknown risks, such as free schools, and housing growth but it was accepted that the policy could not be hostage to these.
16. Members generally felt that changes were fair, logical and reasonable to put forward and protections were proposed to support the split villages
17. Members welcomed that there was no change to children currently receiving transport to school
18. There was recognition that even if the exact figure was in dispute it was accepted that whatever the final figure is the Council would be making savings
19. Concern was expressed that nothing had changed since the last consultation and the new guidance was not available to guide us.
20. It was suggested that most savings could be made by looking at the taxi budget

21. It was noted that safe travel routes had not been explored.
22. The costs for educational rather than vocational may affect the choice of children staying on in education
23. There was a suggestion that the concessionary charges was an arbitrary figure; children choosing to use these seats should be charged what they cost
24. A Member disagreed with any increase in Post 16 since the educational age has been increased. It was suggested that Council lobby the government to fund this since they changed the rules
25. The committee supported further work to be undertaken, including safe routes, admissions policies, and the taxi budget. The study of alternative transport arrangements and the dissemination of best practice could be included in this work. There is an SEN pilot in place at the moment which should be incorporated.
26. The committee would also like to press the government to overhaul the principles of home to school transport in the light of the new Post 16 regulations.

Following questions and discussion the Committee took a series of votes by a show of hands in order to set down their views for Cabinet to consider.

The Committee supported

- (a) (by 9 votes to 1 with 2 abstentions) the provision of free transport to the nearest available school in Oxfordshire;
- (b) (by 5 votes to 4 with 3 abstentions a 'split village' entitlement;
- (c) where at least **20%** (By 5 votes to 0 with 7 abstentions) 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;
- (d) (by 8 votes to 0 with 4 abstentions) the introduction of 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;
- (e) (by 6 votes to 1 with 4 abstentions) 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;

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- (f) (by 9 votes to 0 with 3 abstentions) from September 2015, to increase concessionary and post-16 fares by 5% per year for the following five years;
- (g) from 2014 to remove all references to collaborative learning transport from the Home to School Transport Policy;
- (h) 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 2014