

SCRUTINY FOR POLICIES, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE (VIRTUAL MEETINGS FROM MAY 2020 DUE TO CORONAVIRUS)

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee held virtually on Wednesday 3 March 2021 at 1.00 pm

Present: Cllr L Redman (Chair), Cllr R Williams (Vice-Chair), Cllr M Dimery, Cllr James Hunt, Cllr B Revans, Cllr L Vijeh (substitute for Cllr N Hewitt-Cooper), Cllr W Wallace and Cllr J Williams
Mr P Elliott, Mrs R Hobbs and Mrs E Tipper – co-opted members

Other Members present: Cllr M Chilcott, Cllr C Lawrence, Cllr F Nicholson, Cllr C Paul, Cllr F Purbrick, Cllr Mike Best, Cllr L Leyshon, Cllr J Lock, Cllr H Prior-Sankey and Cllr T Munt

Also present – Mr E Gregory, representing the Church of England Diocese

Apologies for absence: Cllr N Hewitt-Cooper

1 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

The following declarations of interest were made at the meeting: –

- (a) Mrs Ruth Hobbs (co-opted member) – agenda item relating to consultation on future school provision in Crewkerne & Ilminster area – governor at one of the schools which would be impacted by the proposals;
- (b) Mr Peter Elliott (co-opted member) - agenda item relating to consultation on future school provision in Crewkerne & Ilminster area – Chief Executive of The Bridgwater and Taunton College Trust, and Maiden Beech Academy, one of the schools in the Trust, which would be affected by the proposals;
- (c) Mr Ed Gregory – in attendance at the meeting only, representing the Church of England Diocese (co-opted member) - agenda item relating to consultation on future school provision in Crewkerne & Ilminster area - Diocesan Director of Education and work is primarily with church schools and this includes some of the schools included in the consultation area.

2 Minutes from the previous meeting held on 27 January 2021 - Agenda Item 3

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2021 were approved as a correct record.

3 **Public Question Time** - Agenda Item 4

The Chair advised that 2 public questions / statement had been received in respect of the agenda item relating to Elective Home Education and that these will be presented just prior to consideration of the agenda item.

The Chair also advised that 2 public questions / statement had been received in respect of the agenda item relating to the Future Schools Provision in Crewkerne and Ilminster area and that these, as well as a Petition, will be presented just prior to consideration of the agenda item.

4 **Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee Work Programme** - Agenda Item 5

The Committee considered the current work programme, the outcome tracker for the Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet Forward Plan. The following observations were made: -

- There will be a Joint Adults and Health and Children and Families Scrutiny Committee meeting on Tuesday 16 March 2021 – 10 – 12 noon.
- The possible joint workshop with the Adults and Health Scrutiny Committee in April will not now take place as the Adults and Health Scrutiny Committee has now agreed to hold a workshop focussing on recruitment and retention issues. .
- Update on the Task and Finish Group – following discussions at the meeting on 27 January 2021, there has been a good response to request for nominations and there will be 4 full members of the Task & Finish Group and the members are – the Chair, Vice Chair, Cllr Bill Revans and Eileen Tipper. Mr Peter Elliott and Cllr Tessa Munt also expressed an interest and have been reassured that their participation will be welcomed, and attendance or participation in the project is welcomed.
- Schools meals provision – this has been raised by Cllr Dimery at the meeting on 27 January 2021 – information has now been provided and consideration be given to include in the Committees' future work programme.

AGREED: - That the work programme and outcome tracker be updated as set out above.

5 **Overview of prevention work** - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received a presentation from the Council's Strategic Commissioner, children & young people, Ms L Palmer who provided an overview of the Council's approach to early help and prevention. The

Committee also heard from Mr C Allcock, Programme Director Safe Families and from Ms R Humphrey, Health Visitor on their early help offer.

The Chair thanked the presenters for the helpful presentation and invited questions / comments from the Committee, which were responded to as follows: -

- Questions asked as to whether the interpretation of prevention / early help across Children's Services is too narrow and how is the effectiveness of early help monitored – Ms Palmer said that the best way to understand the effectiveness is through the lived experience, which is triangulated with data, understanding of how people have got on after early help intervention and follow up conversations with families. There is a broad understanding of early help and prevention therefore. The Director of Children's Services, Mr Wooster said that early help is defined as providing individual support for children and prevention runs through all do.
- Role of partners in the work – Ms Palmer referred to the draft Early Help Strategy and that partners are involved in the co production. The early help fund also empowers organisations and upskills them and this is all part of the emerging picture of support.
- Query as to whether there is a tension between approaches (proactive / reactive) – Ms Palmer said it's about the right service at the right time. Early help and prevention are very broad and there is diverse and broad range of services. Number of schools do pick up on issues early on and refer early on. The Council's Assistant Director, Education, Partnership and Skills, Ms Walker confirmed that prevention and early help is very important to schools. There has been a spike in demand for early help services / work with families and referred to the work being done by different organisations across the county.
- In response to questions, the Council's Director of Children's Services, Mr Wooster said there is a whole list of investments underway in terms of interventions and early help arrangements; schools provide a range of early help services; the schools' sector itself has also invested a significant amount of money into the Parent and Family Support Advisors, which does not exist in other areas.

In conclusion, the Chair: -

- (a) asked Ms Palmer to share details of the Early Help Board meetings, so those members who are interested can dip into them, as observers;
- (b) said that it is important to note that early help is delivered by many partners and it can happen at any time;
- (c) that with regard to the 'Safer Families' programme, the Chair said that he would welcome a conversation outside the meeting around how get referrals, how refer in, volunteers involved and the reach across the county;

- (d) need to follow up on 'how measure success' and Ms Palmer was asked to provide a briefing note on early help, to be shared with all members, to include an explanation about how early help relates to prevention particularly in the sense of being reactive rather than proactive (context).

AGREED: -

That the presentation and the update be noted.

6 **Elective Home Education** - Agenda Item 7

The Chair invited the following members of the public to ask questions and make statement: -

- (1) Caroline Ellis (co Chair Taunton Home Education) read out a statement at the meeting. The Cabinet member for Children and Families responded at the meeting and agreed to provide a written response following the meeting.
- (2) Cassandra Davies (Somerset Parent Alliance) read out a statement and asked questions. The Cabinet member for Children and Families responded at the meeting and agreed to provide a written response following the meeting.

The questions asked and responses provided will be published in a supplementary pack.

The Committee considered a report from the Council's Strategic Manager Access and Additional Learning Needs, Mr P Curd, which provided an update on the local authority's work in relation to Elective Home Education (EHE). This follows previous presentations to the committee which has requested ongoing updates. EHE became a topic of interest to the Committee around 3 years ago when the Local Authority's approach to EHE was unclear, its policy was weak and numbers of EHE children within the county were disproportionately high when compared to similar authority areas. The Committee considered the current data relating to EHE in Somerset; an overview of EHE development work within the Education Safeguarding Service (ESS) and future developmental themes, as set out in section 4 of the report.

The Committee asked a number of questions, which were responded to as follows: -

- Geographical spread of cases in Somerset is of interest – is the Council now more aware of EHE cases. Mr Curd said that the systems are more robust in identifying them.
- Question about the recent survey of EHE parents and whether there are areas in county which might have a problem. Mr Curd responded that this survey did not capture parental reasons for EHE but that going

forward schools will be able to do so once the online notification platform is operational. Also, following the survey, a number of parents have indicated they would welcome a conversation with ESS about their experiences of EHE and from that group have been able to secure volunteers to work with the LA and help co-produce the new EHE policy.

- Issue of 'off rolling' mentioned – this is unacceptable practice and if aware happens it is investigated.
- Question raised about van dwellers, their children and their home education status. Mr Curd said that when the LA becomes aware about travellers, in broadest sense, ask the traveller team in ESS service to visit the site and help determine the education they are receiving and support needed.
- Mrs Tipper raised concern about effects on mental health of parents / child especially if feel they don't have a choice about decision to EHE – Mr Curd said progress has been made but there is still work to be done and it aligns with the improvement journey for children and young people with SEND. As the notification platform develops, will have timely data on which children are coming out of which schools and reasons for home education. Already monitor the numbers of children leaving various schools via elective home education. Last year the Children's Commissioner produced a report which set a threshold at 1% - i.e. where that threshold of children comes out of a school in a single academic year, would be a cause for concern. This threshold has been built into the School Attendance Monitoring Protocol and monitor this data on a weekly basis and investigate further if needed, to understand what might be happening.
- In conclusion the Chair said that he was heartened by progress and seeing better relationships developed and thanked officers for the detailed report. Mr Curd also said that he was looking forward to working with Ms Ellis on the new EHE protocol.

AGREED: -

That the report be noted and the work undertaken welcomed.

7 **Future Schools Provision in the Crewkerne and Ilminster area** - Agenda Item 8

The Chair invited the following members of the public to present the petition, ask questions and make statements: -

- (1) Oliver Patrick presented the petition and additionally asked 3 questions at the meeting. The petition was noted and the Cabinet member for Education and Transformation agreed to provide a written response following the meeting.
- (2) Holly Phillips had submitted questions to the meeting but unfortunately did not indicate that she was in attendance at the meeting when invited

to speak. The Cabinet member for Education and Transformation said that the response would be provided following the meeting.

- (3) Kathrin Khan-Davis read out a statement at the meeting. The Cabinet member for Education and Transformation responded at the meeting and agreed to provide a written response following the meeting.

The questions asked and responses provided will be published in a supplementary pack.

The Committee received a report and update presentation from the Council's Assistant Director, Education, Partnerships and Skills, Ms A Walker, together with the Cabinet member for Education & Transformation, Cllr F Purbrick who provided an update on the consultation on the future school provision in the Crewkerne and Ilminster area.

On 21 October 2020, Cabinet approved a period of pre-publication consultation on a proposed two-tier model of education in Crewkerne and Ilminster. This consultation was held in November/December 2020. The Scrutiny Committee had considered the matter in detail at its meeting on 2 December 2020. On 18th January 2021 the Cabinet Member for Education and Transformation agreed to proceed to statutory consultation on a proposed two-tier model of education in Crewkerne and Ilminster. The consultation closed on 24 February 2021 and a final decision by Cabinet is scheduled to take place on 17 March 2021.

The Committee had been asked to review and comment on the statutory proposal documentation as this will form the basis for the Cabinet Key Decision scheduled for 17 March 2021.

The Assistant Director referred to the slides presented at the meeting and outlined the key issues / themes emerging during the consultation, and the current proposal and alternatives. The current proposal is that three-tier becomes a two-tier system - Wadham becomes a secondary school; Maiden Beech, Ashlands, St Bartholemew's, Merriott and Haselbury Plunknett become primary schools; Swanmead and Greenfylde amalgamate and become a single primary school; closure of Misterton school. Alternative options have been explored and there is no favourable option securing widespread support. The most commonly expressed views / themes emerging from consultation on statutory proposals were - some people prefer the three-tier system; consultation during Covid-19 is challenging; there should be a way to preserve specialist teaching in year 5 and 6; there should be a secondary school in Ilminster; there may be problems associated with admission numbers for new primaries during a transition period – and are reflecting on what modifications to the proposal might be appropriate to respond to these messages from the consultation.

The Committee listened to the update and asked questions, which were responded to as follows: -

- Questions on how the proposed changes will ensure the intended outcomes of - raising standards where schools are already deemed good or outstanding; addressing the financial deficit at Wadham and its cause; the anticipated financial recovery at Wadham; and the sustainability of the other schools where pupil numbers will be significantly affected – Ms Walker explained that a lot of information / details about the schools' financial situation had been shared at the start of the process. This can be shared again, at a broad level. There is a difference between secondary school structure and upper school structure in the national funding formula, where generally KS3 'subsidises' KS4 – financial stability is the key objective and will work with the school on this and deficit recovery plan is routine practice. Will retain the questions about the deficit in open consideration which will come back to in the transition period. The projected deficit of 1.8m is a projection, for September 2022.
- Question as to whether the post 16 provision at Wadham school was an issue – Ms Walker advised that the 6th form is affordable within money provided.
- The Gunning principles of consultation and giving 'conscientious consideration' was referred to.
- A number of questions and comments that the MAT solution is the best way forward and if it has been fully explored / exhausted– Ms Walker said that have discussed these avenues on a number of occasions and explored at length, including with MAT across the region and wider and there is no further way forward. This is within the remit of the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC).
- Only 29% of the responses to the consultation in the autumn are positive How confident listening / hearing – Ms Walker confirmed that all responses have been listened to throughout the process.
- There is some confusion over the plan to 'close' a school which needs to be clarified. Ms Walker said that this concerns Department for Education (DfE) requirements around the registration of schools.
- Question about SEND pupils and impact on them due to proposals and to ensure they are not disproportionately impacted by any decision taken - Ms Walker said that the Scrutiny Committee could ask that this is emphasised in the implementation of these plans.
- Questions about whether all staff will be treated equally in terms of every role – Ms Walker said that equitable treatment of staff by all stakeholders is expressed as high priority and had sought HR advice and that discussions have taken place with the Trade Unions. The principle of equity and giving everyone an open and transparent process across organisations has come across strongly from staff.

- Questions asked about Misterton pupils; how small schools become financially secure; financial modelling of small schools - Ms Walker mentioned that a small number of pupils had moved from Misterton and can find which schools they have moved to in local area. Also mentioned that the capital investment for Maiden Beech was a one-off arrangement between the local authority and the Trust for refurbishment works.
- Comment that the role of the Committee is to comment on proposal and ensuring the Cabinet decision is well considered; the current system is unsustainable but opinion is split on the solutions; Cabinet should decide on 17 March 2021 and needs to adopt the solution which can best be implemented.

The following Motion was then put before the Committee, proposed by Councillor B Revans and seconded by Councillor M Dimery: -

"To note the responses to the consultation and to recommend that the cabinet to pause the decision on the Crewkerne and Ilminster reorganisation to allow the Diocese of Bath and Wells, Bridgwater Taunton College Academy Trust, Regional Schools Commissioner, any other Multi Academy Trusts interested and the LA to investigate the feasibility of an alternative proposal of establishing a hybrid academy solution for the Crewkerne and Ilminster catchment area".

For the proposal – 3

Against the proposal - 6

The Motion NOT accepted, by majority.

The following comments were made on the Motion: -

- The Director of Children's Services clarified that the statutory role of the Council is to provide sufficient school places - Academy Trusts is a matter for the RSC, and not the local authority.
- The Diocese representative said that they are working with the RSC and other MATs & with schools themselves, and as Diocese, are open to continue the discussions.
- The Cabinet member said that with regard to the motion and another option being available, conversations have taken place and explored. Everything is on the table until a decision is made. Reiterated that do need to make a decision and is happy to revisit the advice received in respect of these matters prior to consideration at the Cabinet meeting.

The Committee AGREED that the following comments would be sent to Cabinet as part of its response: -

1. Clarity to be provided on the wording on pages 6 and 25 of the statutory consultation document, to ensure complete transparency in an attempt to minimise confusion around both schools closing and a new school being formed.

2. Clarity to be provided on the status of a hard federation in Ilminster, proposed as an interim solution as part of implementation plans, should the governing bodies choose not to pursue this option.
3. That specific reference be made to SEND in implementation plans.
4. Needs to be further investigation on the issue of whether a MAT solution is possible.

The Chair thanked the Committee for the debate and the members of the public for the questions, statements and the petition and advised that the comments which have been accepted will be forwarded to the Cabinet meeting on 17 March 2021. The Cabinet member also thanked the Committee for their consideration and engagement as well as the public and other stakeholders.

8 Any other urgent items of business - Agenda Item 9

There were no other items of business.

The next meeting of the Committee will be a Joint Scrutiny Committee meeting with the Adults and Health Committee on Tuesday 16 March 2021 beginning at 10.00 am.

(The meeting ended at 4.45 pm)

CHAIR