

**At a meeting of the CHILDREN'S SERVICES REVIEW COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on THURSDAY, 12<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 2009 at 10.00 a.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor Stewart in the Chair

Councillors Ball, Bell, Kelly, Paul Maddison, Snowdon and D. Wilson together with Mrs. P. Burn, Prof. G. Holmes, Mrs. C. Hutchinson and Mr. D. Snowdon.

**Also Present:-**

Councillor Tate – Chairman of Policy and Co-ordination Review Committee.

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors P. Dixon, Gofton, Oliver and L. Walton together with those from Mrs. D. Butler, Mr. M. Frank and Mr. A. Pearce.

**Minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Committee held on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2009**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting held on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2009 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

**Declarations of Interest**

Item 4 – School Place Planning for the Future

Councillor Snowdon declared a personal interest in the item as she had chaired consultation meetings in respect of Gillas Lane and Hetton Primary Schools.

Councillor Stewart declared a personal interest in the item as a relative was employed at Hylton Red House School.

Councillor Bell declared a personal interest in the item as Chair of Governors of Hylton Red House School.

## School Place Planning for the Future

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated), which updated the Committee on a report taken to Cabinet in February 2009 in respect of School Place Planning and outlined the Stage 4 consultation process which was currently being undertaken.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Val Thompson, School Place Planning Manager, together with Lynda Brown, Head of Standards, presented the report highlighting the rationale behind the proposals for each cluster including a synopsis of the options appraised.

The Chairman then welcomed representatives from the community who were objecting to the proposals in respect of the Hetton and Houghton clusters and invited them to address the Committee in turn.

In respect of the Hetton cluster, objectors highlighted the following points:-

- Hetton was a proud community and was against the proposal, a petition to this end was currently being prepared for Cabinet.
- There was huge dissatisfaction with the consultation process, opinions expressed against the proposal had not been taken into consideration.
- The 4 to 5 year timescale was a concern. What would happen in the meantime? Teachers and valued staff would look elsewhere to achieve job security. As a result, the children's education and welfare would suffer given the likelihood of the appointment of a succession of supply teachers. The community had not received an adequate response to this concern.
- The need to address surplus places was recognised. The community were more than willing to work with the Council to address the issue but had not been given the chance.
- There was a belief that the Council's approach had been blinkered, motivated by money and a one size fits all approach.
- The site of the new school was unclear. Of the 3 sites proposed, site 1 was on a constantly flooded field, site 3 was contaminated by salt and site 3 was 2 miles away from the Moorsley community.
- No answers had been given as to why the Highfield model had been adopted.
- The community strongly objected to, and could not understand why Hetton Nursery had been included in a proposal which was supposedly driven by surplus place reduction.
- It was not felt that the quality of a stand alone nursery was being recognised. The community did not believe that the quality of education and facilities of a

nursery school would be replicated by a nursery class within a primary school. Hetton Nursery School's community room was only 6 months old, it provided child care, a Humpty Dumpty club, an art club and other community benefits.

- Parents felt they had not been listened to with regard to nursery provision. If the proposal went ahead half of Hetton would continue to receive a quality service (Hetton Lyons), the other half would not.
- The Committee needed to recognise that what was being proposed was the loss of 3 highly professional and successful primary schools. This success had been highlighted by Ofsted.
- Eppleton School was a good school in good condition and well maintained. It was on a good site which had potential for expansion. Its grounds were extensive (3.3 hectares) enabling the school to meet its every child matters responsibilities and to deal with obesity. If the site was lost to housing it could never be recovered.
- The area had been identified by the Council for regeneration and earmarked to receive 300-400 extra houses in addition to the 2 fairly large housing estates which already existed. Although the regeneration proposals were beyond the timescales of the current round of school place planning, the housing would be built eventually and Eppleton School should remain open as the centre of the expanded community.
- Concern was expressed over the timeliness and accuracy of the minutes from the consultation meetings.
- The Hetton area has the City's lowest car ownership, lowest income, poorest bus links and yet the proposals would force more children to travel further. This would place a greater burden on resources creating greater stress on families.
- The current 3 schools do an extremely good job in adding value to the community. Eppleton once had a pub, 3 shops, a church and a cricket pitch. The school now remained as the only centre of the community.
- The governing body of Eppleton School would welcome with open arms a visit from Cabinet to see the situation for themselves.

With regard to the Houghton cluster, objectors highlighted the following points:-

- Consultation was badly designed and carried out. It was not consistent with Council policies and in particular 'Every Child Matters'. Many people left the consultation meetings early through feelings of frustration that questions were not being answered and that they were just banging their heads against a brick wall.
- No effort had been made to ask pupils what they wanted.

- There were a lot of omissions in the options appraisals and a lack of consideration of the educational and emotional impact of the proposals on the pupils.
- There was confusion and a lack of clarity over exactly what was being proposed with regard to nursery provision between the 2 consultation meetings. Many people had responded to the consultation based on false impressions of what was being proposed.
- There had been a lack of a robust financial assessment of comparative costs.
- There had been a lack of consistency regarding the application of the options appraisals across clusters, for example, if the options for the Monkwearmouth cluster had been appraised logically then that school would close however this was not the case.
- The proposal seemed to conflict with statutory guidance regarding standards and surplus places. Option 3 was the only option which supported parental choice and yet it had been rejected.
- The proposed receiving school (Bernard Gilpin Primary) did not support the proposal.
- Concern that Cabinet will not receive the full picture and base its decision on one sheet of A4.
- Closure of Gillas Lane would see the loss of a first class ICT suite and library together with kitchen facilities which would need to be rebuilt at Bernard Gilpin.
- Classroom dimensions at the receiving school were smaller and yet class sizes were to be increased.
- Exception was taken to the statement that there would be no cross cluster issues. 134 children would probably face a longer journey to work increasing the amount of traffic on the road. Speed humps had already been installed in the area as a result of 'near misses'.
- 111 homes were to be built in the area, 83 of which already had planning permission.
- Costs had not been fully considered. Claims that savings of £250,000 per year would be made under the proposal were wrong. The Authority would ultimately make a loss if implemented.
- The most important factor related to education. Gillas Lane pupils came from one of the City's areas of highest deprivation and yet it was one of its top ten schools. Rather than be closed it should be held up as a shining example.

In drawing the representations to a close the Chairman granted a request to speak from Councillor Wakefield who was attending in his capacity as a Ward Councillor for Copt Hill. Councillor Wakefield explained that his ward covered areas within both the Hetton and Houghton clusters. He stated that the community clearly felt that consultation was not adequate and the options had not been considered fully. Elected Members had not been consulted in detail and he believed that the proposals for the Hetton and Houghton clusters needed to be reconsidered before submission to Cabinet.

The Chairman then invited questions and comments on the report from Members of the Committee.

Councillor Bell expressed concern that proposals would see pupils having to travel greater distances to school.

Councillor Kelly stated that he was alarmed, given the effort the Committee had put in, to hear the number of complaints being made about the quality of the consultation. He stated that he would like the opportunity to sit down and revisit the process.

In response to an enquiry from Mr. Snowdon, Ms. Thompson advised that the number of surplus places as a percentage was currently 16%. In response to a further enquiry from Mr. Snowdon, the Committee was informed from the public gallery that the number of people who had signed the petition against the Hetton cluster proposals was approximately 6,000.

In response to an enquiry from the Chairman regarding distance, Ms. Thompson advised that the same exercise was done in respect of each cluster. The situation was somewhat difficult in the Hetton area in that there was a 'swirl' effect, with children from different areas in Hetton crossing each other on their way to and from school.

Following an enquiry from the Chairman regarding options for the Hetton cluster, a representative from the public gallery advised that the community had proposed a further option. She stated that if the new single school option was to go ahead, then the feasibility of utilising the current Hetton Primary Site for a campus style provision of separate nursery, primary and secondary schools should be investigated. The site was large with good access and close to community facilities like Hetton Baths.

In response to an enquiry from the Chairman as to whether the option had been considered, Ms. Brown advised that if a decision was made to proceed it would be taken into consideration if that was what the community wanted.

Councillor Kelly stated that there was a difficult balance to reach. The three schools involved in the Hetton cluster were all committed to their own identity, ethos and history. There needed to be a broad view sought including those from the Elected Members for the area.

Councillor D. Wilson supported the view of the Eppleton Chair of Governors that Cabinet should undertake a site visit before making any decision.

In response to an enquiry from the Chairman regarding the impact of future regeneration, Ms. Thompson confirmed that Children's Services worked closely with the Development Control Section. When schools were planned they were designed to take further expansion. The future proofing of Southwick School was cited as an example.

With regard to the Houghton cluster, Councillor Bell suggested that option 3 should be reconsidered as a valid option.

Ms. C. Hutchinson stated it was clear that there were concerns regarding the extent of the consultation. She felt that the public gallery had been clear in their desire to strike a balance between the education of pupils and the need to reduce surplus places.

With regard to the Monkwearmouth cluster, Councillor Bell expressed the view that one school would be best for the area. He did not believe that 3 schools within a mile of each other in Fulwell was viable.

Mr. Snowdon stated that it was obvious from the representations made to the Committee that people were willing to work with the Local Authority on the issue. What was important was finding the right solution.

The Chairman stated that the matter centred on the need to maintain a level of surplus places that was viable, i.e. 10%. The issue that had arisen was what options should be used to achieve that aim. The consultation exercise should have identified the way forward. If it had failed to do so, the Local Authority would need to find a resolution to the problem.

During the course of the debate, the Chairman highlighted the following matters that he felt should be drawn to the attention of the Cabinet for their consideration.

- i) a full explanation of the Hetton cluster swirl regarding the distances travelled, including an explicit depiction of the winners and losers regarding distances to be travelled should the proposal be accepted;
- ii) full clarification of the Directorate's position regarding early years provision and the replacement of nursery schools with nursery classes within primary schools, was there any national evidence to support this course of action?
- iii) the lack of clarity and confusion during the consultation process over the nursery provision being proposed for the Houghton cluster;
- iv) the need for the Local Authority to work closely within the relevant governing bodies over proposals identified;

- v) the Directorate to work closely with the Development Control Section to seek clarity over the impact of regeneration proposals and housing development on options for school place planning.

In conclusion the Chairman thanked the members of the public for their attendance and contribution to the meeting. He advised that he would ensure that a copy of the minutes of this meeting outlining their concerns was submitted to Cabinet for their consideration.

In reply Councillor Tate thanked the Chairman for allowing the community the opportunity to address the meeting and hoped that the Committee understood that the representations made had come from the heart.

- 2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and that the representations made be submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

### **Cabinet Report – Councillor Call for Action Guidance**

The Chief Executive and City Solicitor submitted a joint report (copy circulated) appending a report presented to Cabinet on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2009 providing information and draft guidance on the new powers contained in the Councillor Call for Action (CCfA) and highlighting how improvements promoted through the emerging Community Leadership Programme will support the Council in approaching CCfA in the most constructive and effective manner.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

- 3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

### **Corporate Parenting Board**

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Review Committee with a statement about the establishment of the Corporate Parenting Board and its subsequent progress and business.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mick McCracken, Head of Safeguarding, presented the report providing Members with the background to the establishment of the Corporate Parenting Board, the current position and summary of activity to date together with steps for the future.

Councillor Paul Maddison described the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board which he had attended that Tuesday as excellent.

Councillor Kelly stated that he would like to see 'Change' (the Children in Care Council) given the opportunity to attend a future meeting of the Review Committee. In response to an enquiry from Mr. Snowdon, the Committee was advised that the age range of the 'Change' membership was 11 to 18.

With regard to paragraph 3.7 of the report, Councillors Ball, Bell, Kelly and Snowdon expressed an interest in undertaking Regulation 33 monitoring visits.

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

### **Initial Response Team – Annual Update**

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with information regarding the purpose and content of the visits made to the Initial Response Team by Senior Management and Elected Members since January 2008.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mrs. Hutchinson stated that she was aware of the complexity and diversity of the work undertaken and the tensions it caused. Nothing easy ever came into the Initial Response Team. She stated that what must be frustrating for the Social Workers was the amount of data collection that needed to be undertaken. She knew that recruitment and retention was incredibly difficult. In addition, Mrs. Hutchinson stated that the Initial Response Team was represented by an incredible group of officers. They were a wonderful team and Sunderland as a City should be very proud of them.

In reply Mr. McCracken advised that as well as producing his report into the Baby P case, Lord Laming had created a National Social Work Task Force to look at the social work profession nationally and to make recommendations regarding recruitment and retention. The Task Force had chosen to visit six local authorities, including Sunderland. Keith Moore, Deputy Director of Children's Services, advised that should the Committee wish to meet the Task Force he would be more than happy to facilitate this.

5. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

### **Children's and Young People's Plan 2009/10**

The Director of Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which presented for comment a consultation draft of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) 2009-10 and which advised Members about Government guidance and about the proposals of the Sunderland Children's Trust to produce a 15 year strategy (2010-25) for the commissioning of services for children and their families.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Kelly fully supported the view taken to provide a strategy which planned for a 15 year period.



Professor Holmes believed the plan was excellent, pulling together many different issues and making best use of National and Regional statistics. The challenge for the Committee was how it filtered out appropriate elements for scrutiny. He believed the CYPP provided a massive road map that had been beautifully researched.

With regard to Professor Holmes' comments on the scrutiny of the plan, the Chairman asked Karen Brown, Review Co-ordinator, to draw up a monitoring strategy for the CYPP to be considered by Members at a future meeting of the Committee.

Mrs. Burn believed the plan to an excellent vision and highlighted the need for a good counselling service to ensure any emotional problems did not develop into mental health ones.

6. RESOLVED that the report and the comments of the Committee thereon be received and noted.

### **Consultations and Publications**

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with a summary of current Government consultations and publications as follows:-

- Youth Conditional Caution Code of Practice for 16 and 17 Year Olds;
- Designated Teachers for Looked after Children: Draft Regulations and Statutory Guidance;
- Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Data Arrangements.

7. RESOLVED that the consultations and publications be received and noted.

### **Ofsted Inspections**

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) inviting Members to consider the following recently published Ofsted Inspection Reports for educational establishments in Sunderland:-

- Barmston Village Primary;
- Diamond Hall Infant and Nursery Unit;
- Grange Park Primary;
- St. Leonard's R.C. Primary;
- Houghton Kepier Sports College;
- Hetton School.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

8. RESOLVED that the Ofsted Inspection Reports be received and noted.

## **Ofsted inspections 12 Months Progress**

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which invited Members to consider progress in the following schools following Ofsted Inspection Reports carried out 12 months previously:-

- (i) St. Cuthbert's R.C. School;
- (ii) Southwick Primary.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

9. RESOLVED that the progress made be noted.

## **Work Programme 2008-09**

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which attached for Members' information a copy of the Committee's updated work programme for 2008-09.

10. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

The Chairman then closed the meeting having thanked everyone for their attendance.

(Signed) P. STEWART,  
Chairman.