

MINUTES OF THE SCHOOL ORGANISATION COMMITTEE OF CABINET

**Held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND
on WEDNESDAY 17 JULY 2019 at 2.00pm**

Present: -

Councillor Farthing in the Chair

Councillors G Miller and Stewart.

In Attendance: -

Julienne Collinson (representing the Assistant Director of Law and Governance), Alan Rowan (Retained Education Functions Lead, Neighbourhoods) and Gillian Kelly (Governance Services).

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Kelly and G Walker.

Minutes

2. RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 May 2019 be agreed as a correct record.

Proposed Closure of Millfield Community Nursery School

The Executive Director of Neighbourhoods submitted a report presenting a proposal to discontinue Millfield Community Nursery School.

Millfield Community Nursery School is a 120 place local authority maintained nursery school in Millfield ward, currently offering places for two year olds as well as statutory nursery provision for three and four year olds. The nursery was graded Good by Ofsted in its most recent inspection.

The nursery had become increasingly financially vulnerable as a consequence of falling rolls, increased availability of alternative provision and the increased costs of delivering a maintained nursery offer. The staffing base at the nursery had been restructured three times since 2015 in an attempt to reduce costs and it had also sought to make other operational savings. Despite this, the nursery had continued to accumulate an increasing financial deficit.

Projections for future nursery cohorts show a further decline in pupil numbers and consequently an increase in the outturn deficit; the nursery would not generate sufficient funding to ensure that it remained financially viable as a setting.

The nursery was operating at 46% of its total capacity at the Spring Census and it was anticipated that this would be 66% by the end of the summer term. Demand for nursery places in the Millfield area had increased during 2017 – 2019 but this had not been reflected in the places being taken up at Millfield Community Nursery with demand falling by 15% against an 8% increase in the area as a whole.

Alternative provision in the area had been assessed as part of the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment in January 2019 and this had found that there were more than enough vacancies within one mile of Millfield Community Nursery School; extending the distance to two miles identified even more available provision. It was considered that there were sufficient good or outstanding local alternative nursery places to accommodate both the current cohort of children attending Millfield and any projected future cohorts. The Committee were advised that all but four children in the current cohort had received the offer of an alternative place.

In advance of taking a report to Cabinet in May 2019, a pre-publication consultation exercise had taken place between 10 April and 31 May with the following groups being consulted: -

- Parents of pupils attending Millfield Community Nursery
- Current staff
- Local schools and nurseries
- Trade Union Representatives
- The wider local community
- Sunderland's School Forum.

93% of respondents did not agree with the proposal to close the nursery, seeing it very much as part of the local community. On 4 June 2019, the Council published notification of statutory proposals to discontinue Millfield Community Nursery School. The statutory notice period ended on 3 July 2019 and the Council received one response to the notice. There had been two parents' events held at the nursery where the reasons for the proposals were outlined.

There was no planned alternative use for the premises at the present time but the building could be an educational or community resource. The majority of existing staff at the nursery had secured a job offer from September. It had been envisaged that £0.041m would need to be allocated from the Dedicated Schools Grant Redundancy Reserve to meet staff redundancy requirements but this figure was now

anticipated to be lower. The nursery deficit at the point of closure would be funded within the Council's overall budget position.

If the nursery was retained, by 2023/2024 it was projected that the outturn deficit would be £0.42m. Options had been considered to restructure and/or merge with another provision but these would not make sufficient savings to mitigate the projected increased deficit.

The Governing Body of the nursery had been fully briefed throughout the consultation process but had not made a formal representation in respect of the statutory notice.

The Chair asked if, in the analysis of consultation responses, grandparents were classed as 'Others' and the Retained Education Functions Lead confirmed that this was the case. She went on to ask if the local ward councillors had made any representations and was advised that they had been invited to have discussions and one elected Member had asked questions but there had been no formal response.

Councillor Miller expressed his disappointment at being in the position of having to close educational provision but this was the result of nine years of austerity and cuts to education budgets. He was given some comfort in the fact that children would be able to take up places in other good or outstanding nursery provision but it was unfortunate that financial pressures had led to this report being brought for consideration.

Councillor Stewart commented that it was significant that the Governing Body had not made a formal objection to the proposal and that they had recognised the position which the nursery was in. Parental choice had shown a clear trend and despite being a great believer in nursery education in a separate school, Councillor Stewart agreed that Millfield Nursery was not viable.

The Chair supported the benefits of separate nursery education and that facilities such as Millfield had provided something different, however it was positive news that places were available at other good or outstanding provision and that the majority of staff had secured new positions.

The Committee therefore: -

3. RESOLVED that Millfield Community Nursery School, Bell Street, Sunderland, SR4 6JR be discontinued with effect from 31 August 2019.

(Signed) L FARTHING
Chair

