

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

FINANCE & PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the special meeting of the Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee held at the County Borough Council Offices, The Pavilions, Cambrian Park, Clydach Vale, on Tuesday, 30th June 2015 at 5.00 pm.

Present:

County Borough Councillor (Mrs) J S Ward – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors:

(Mrs) J Bonetto
P Griffiths
(Mrs) S Rees
R A Yeo

S Bradwick
(Mrs) S Jones
C J Williams

G R Davies
(Mrs) C Leyshon
C J Willis

Officers:

Mr C Lee – Group Director, Corporate and Frontline Services
Mr C Bradshaw – Director of Education and Lifelong Learning
Mr R Waters – Service Director, Highways & Streetcare
Mr P J Lucas – Director of Legal & Democratic Services
Ms Ann Edwards – Scrutiny Support Officer

Members in Attendance:

County Borough Councillors:
M Adams and J Watts

(Chair & Vice Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee respectively)

Education Co-opted Members in attendance

Mr J Fish – Elected Parent/Governor Representative
Mr J Horton – Elected Parent/Governor Representative
Mrs S Jones – Elected Parent/Governor Representative
Mr M Cleverley – Representing NASUWT and Teachers' Panel

6. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from the Chairman, County Borough Councillor M A Norris and County Borough Councillors S Evans, R W Smith and E Webster. Apologies for absence were also received from Mr R Hull, Chairman of the Audit Committee and Mrs C Jones, Education Co-opted Member.

7. CHAIRMAN

In the absence of the Chairman, the vice chair, County Borough Councillor (Mrs) J S Ward took the Chair.

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, the following declarations of interest were made at the meeting in respect of Agenda Item 2 – Home to School Transport: - Consultation on a Proposed New Policy.

- Cllr J Bonetto – “I am a School Governor on a Primary School, a High School and a co-opted Governor on Coleg Cymoedd.”
- Cllr S A Bradwick – “I am Chair of Governors”
- Cllr G Davies – “School Governor YGG Ynyswen”;
- Mr J Fish – “I am the Governor of a school likely to be affected by the proposed change – Bryncelynnog”.
- Cllr P Griffiths – “Member of Governors of Ysgol Llanhari, Member of Governors of Ysgol y Pant”.
- Mr J Horton – “Daughter attends Faith School”.
- Cllr (Mrs) S J Jones – “Governor Llwynypia Primary, Governors' Vice Chair Ynyscynnon Early Years”.
- Cllr (Mrs) C Leyshon – “I am a governor of a primary school but the school is not being discussed”.
- Cllr (Mrs) S Rees – “I am a governor of YGG Aberdar and Oaklands schools.
- Cllr (Mrs) J S Ward – “Member of Miskin Primary School and Perthcelyn Primary School”.
- Cllr C Williams – I am governor of Cymmer Infants School and Vice Chair of Governors at Hafod Primary, Trehafod.

REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, CORPORATE & FRONTLINE SERVICES

9. HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT – CONSULTATION ON A PROPOSED NEW POLICY

The Director of Legal & Democratic Services provided the Committee with an overview of the process explaining that it was not the purpose of the meeting to scrutinise the proposals but act as a consultee. He explained that all Members' views would be noted and that the aim was to be as inclusive as possible.

The Group Director, Corporate and Frontline Services drew Members' attention to the consultation document which had been attached to the agenda and which provided an overview of the current service provision and the proposed changes along with a summary of how these proposals would affect pupils. He pointed out that the consultation document also referred to a number of alternative options which had been considered and views on these were also welcomed. He reported that in undertaking the consultation a number of channels are being used including social media, press and a number of public engagement events. He explained that all feedback would be recorded and following the conclusion of the consultation period an Equality Impact Assessment would be undertaken and the results of this

along with key issues drawn from the consultation would be considered by Cabinet before any changes to policy are agreed.

In response to a query the Director of Legal and Democratic Services confirmed that any decision in relation to the Home to School Policy came within the function of the Cabinet and not Council.

A Member pointed out that the Council had a legal duty to promote the Welsh Language but as there were fewer Welsh medium schools across the County Borough it was likely that they would be disproportionately affected by the proposals.

The Service Director, felt that it was unlikely that the Council would be judged as unfair. He pointed out that the proposal was to maintain enhanced transport provision but seek to introduce a contribution toward these discretionary costs. He pointed that the English medium pupils would also be affected but agreed that the level of impact could vary between English and Welsh Medium depending on location and whether considering primary or secondary pupils.

The Director of Legal & Democratic Services pointed out that it was for the Equality Impact Assessment to consider all the issues of concern raised.

A Member asked whether some children would be affected as a result of changes made by the Council through school reorganisation.

The Director of Education and Lifelong Learning agreed that this was possible given that a number of schools had been closed. Some children were having to travel further and amongst these some would fall into the discretionary travel ranges. However, he pointed out that school reorganisation was based on improving the quality of education rather than the distance a child has to travel.

One Member reported that he had a number of concerns. Firstly, he pointed out that the proposals would have a greater impact on Welsh Language and Faith schools and explained that parents did not make such choices for their children's education based on distance. He felt that those in the Rhondda Valleys would be particularly disadvantaged due to the topography. He had calculated that for primary schools 414 Welsh medium pupils would fall within the 1.5 – 2 mile radius and 32 English medium pupils would be affected. He explained that he did not have any figures for those attending Faith schools. Secondly, he referred to the Council's aim of increasing the number of pupils in Welsh Medium schools and suggested that the proposed policy would have an adverse affect on this. Thirdly, he explained that the report to Cabinet made no mention of the impact on child poverty. He pointed out that a parent on low income but whose children are not entitled to Free School Meals will have to pay £1.75 per day and yet the policy of both central government and the Welsh Government is to reduce child poverty. The Member also voiced his concern in relation to the impact on traffic around schools suggesting that

there could be an increase in smaller vehicles transporting children in already congested areas.

The Group Director, Corporate and Frontline Services commented that these were the issues that would need to be addressed by the Equality Impact Assessment.

A Member felt that in some areas those attending English Medium Schools would be equally affected. He expressed his concern regarding the proposed introduction of the contribution charge which he felt would be a significant amount of money for those struggling on a low income. He realised that there was a need to bridge the budget deficit but felt that for those families in or around the poverty line the children could be forced to walk considerable distances to school along busy roads. He added that his main concern was the level of charge rather than the concept. He felt that £1.75 a day was too high and that perhaps £1 for all would be more acceptable.

A co-opted Member commented that unfortunately, the budget shortfall was such that difficult decisions had to be made. He commended the Council for the amount of work which had been undertaken in attempting to find a balanced solution. Given the large number of consultations which have been undertaken he questioned whether a better approach would be to provide the public with a better idea of where potential cuts are likely to be and therefore provide them with the 'bigger picture' upon which to consult.

The Group Director, Corporate and Frontline Services accepted the point being made but explained that the difficulty facing local government is that there is no clear picture of the level of budget cuts from one year to the next. A budget reduction of 3% for the next year will leave a £23m budget gap but depending on decisions taken by the Westminster Government this could change and if for example there is a 5% reduction this will add another £7m to that figure. He pointed out that the Leader of the Council was keen to utilise RCT Together and engage with groups at an earlier stage. He also explained that for some service areas legislation requires the Council to undertake specific consultation before changes can be made.

The co-opted Member asked whether the Council was at a stage where perhaps it needed to fulfil its statutory obligations and only then consider the provision of additional services. He suggested that it might be an easier option than taking services away.

The Director of Legal and Democratic Services highlighted the example of the recent change to nursery provision. He explained that whilst there was a cost to the detailed consultation process that had been undertaken it was a cost that needed to be borne in order to ensure that any legal challenge could be defended.

A Member voiced his concern that the proposals could add to the stigma which some pupils receiving free school meals might feel.

The Director of Education and Lifelong Learning assured the Member that all children would receive the same pass and that no-one would know who had or had not paid the full amount.

A co-opted Member pointed out that in his opinion, those parents struggling to make ends meet would choose to spend their money on food before sending them to school. He pointed out that only those receiving Child Tax Credits were eligible to claim free school meals for their children, those in receipt of Working Tax Credits could not. He reported that a family with 2 children not eligible for free school meals could be paying approximately £200 per term to access free education. He suggested that this was not a small amount of money and he explained that feedback he had received as a parent governor and from what he had observed on social media was that parents were questioning the fairness of having to pay the proposed charges in advance and were asking would they receive a refund if their child became ill during the term and missed several weeks of school. He suggested that there is a perception that Education is taking the lion's share of the hit in relation to bridging the budget deficit. The co-opted Member pointed out that the calculations put forward in the proposal had been based on anticipated take-up but he questioned what would happen if the take-up was poor. He also pointed to the potential impact on attendance and suggested that this would need to be kept under review. He also questioned the position with regard to Safer Walking Routes.

The Director of Education and Lifelong Learning reported that the Council was faced with difficult choices. The Council had protected the Schools' budgets with a focus on improving the quality of teaching and the quality of leadership and there are signs of improvement in relation to attainment and school attendance levels as a result. However, he pointed out that the service had to 'cut its cloth' accordingly. He pointed out that up until now, parents in Rhondda Cynon Taf had been fortunate that the Council had been in a position to provide free transport over and above the legal requirement but ultimately whilst the Council can facilitate, it is a parent's responsibility to ensure that a child attends school. He explained that the proposals set out in the report were intended to be a compromise and pointed out that Merthyr Tydfil County Council did not provide transport over and above the statutory requirements and that the situation at Bridgend was still not clear following their consultation exercises. He pointed out that Neath Port Talbot Council provided no transport at all for Faith Schools and pupils had to make their own way to schools and that their attendance levels were very good. Whilst there could be an initial dip in attendance he felt sure that parents would value their children's education and ensure their attendance.

The Service Director for Highways and Streetcare reported that in relation to the Home to School Transport Operators' Contracts there were a number of scenarios: smaller vehicles and taxis have framework contracts with electronic tendering and an e - auction process. These contracts run for a 4 year period with 1 month notice for termination. On mainstream, larger vehicles such as coaches operate on longer term contracts, over a 7 year period with an option to extend for up to a further 3 years. There is a 3 month notice period to

terminate these contracts. He reported that the contracts would be analysed alongside likely take-up to enable informed decision making. However, there would be a need to err on the side of caution rather than risk pupils being without transport. With regard to safe walking routes the existing routes had been subject to an initial review, those considered not to be available had been excluded from consideration.

A Member suggested that the Council could only do its best and suggested that there would be criticism regardless. The Council was at the sharp end of massive budget cuts and ideas had to come forward to reduce costs.

A Member questioned how it was intended to collect the money from parents.

The Service Director for Highways and Transport explained that it was likely that there would be an on-line application system which would result in a pass to be used on the provided transport which would not make a distinction in relation to whether the child was receiving free school meals or not.

It was suggested that parents needed to be given as many options as possible.

A Member questioned the situation with regard to transportation because a route is deemed unsafe.

The Service Director, Highways and Streetcare explained that they tried to encourage people to bring any concerns to them for investigation.

A co-opted Member commented that her key concerns had already been put forward. However, she was concerned that there was a perception that whilst people were giving their views these opinions were not being taken on board.

The Group Director, Corporate and Frontline Services explained that all the information was being collected whether from the on-line consultation process or the various events being held. He further explained that all the feedback would be available for Cabinet's inspection and that a summary of the key issues drawn out from the feedback would then be included in the report for Cabinet and it would be for Cabinet to address these issues. Again, this would be a meeting which is open to the public to attend.

A Member reported that in his opinion, more parents would be choosing to drop their children off at school in the mornings, adding to congestion around schools and then just pay their half fare journey home on the service bus.

The Group Director, Corporate and Frontline Services explained that the proposal put forward was intended to give people choice.

A Member questioned whether there was a danger of a legal challenge as the proposal would have an unequal impact on Faith Schools.

The Director of Legal & Democratic Services responded by explaining that the risk of a legal challenge was very high. Therefore there is a need to ensure that the document which goes before Cabinet includes a proper and robust response to the findings of the consultation.

A Member asked whether the proposal would have any effect on the Council's Looked After Children.

The Director of Education and Lifelong Learning explained that they would not be affected as they would be transported to their usual school to maintain and ensure stability.

A Member asked whether the measurements to determine the mileage from schools would be accurate.

The Service Director, Highways and Streetcare explained that given the Council transported over 11,000 pupils it would be inevitable that there will be the odd anomaly but he reported that measurements would be accurate in nearly all cases.

A Member voiced her concern that the proposal would hit one parent families hard where the parent works but is in low paid employment. She pointed out that they would struggle to pay for the transport and be unlikely to be a position to adjust their hours of working to take and collect children from school.

A Member referred to pupils in her area travelling to Gwaelod y Garth School. She explained that from September only those who already had siblings at the school would be able to start there and she questioned the position with regard to transport.

The Service Director, Highways and Streetcare explained that it would depend on the distance and that any potential child would receive the same benefit as the sibling.

A Member commented that there was a need to consider the impact of any proposal on all schools whether they are Faith, or English or Welsh medium.

The Director of Education & Lifelong Learning explained that to some extent the Council was bound by legislation.

In conclusion, the Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and comments.

(Mrs) J S Ward
Chairman

The meeting closed at 6.20 pm.

