

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CHILDREN, FAMILIES & LEARNING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in Room 15, Priority House, Chicksands, Shefford on Tuesday, 2 February 2010

PRESENT

Cllr J Street (Chairman)
Cllr Mrs D B Gurney (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors: P A Blaine
Dr R Egan
P Hollick
K Janes
A Shadbolt

Parental Co-optees: H Copley
D Landman

Church of England
Co-optee: J Reynolds

Roman Catholic
Co-optee: F Image

Apologies for Absence: Cllrs D Bowater
N B Costin
I Dalgarno
Parental Co-optee B Sear

Substitutes: Cllrs Mrs M Mustoe

Members in Attendance: Cllrs P N Aldis
J G Jamieson
Mrs A Lewis
Mrs C Turner

Also in Attendance: Adrian Rogers, Headteacher

Officers in Attendance: Mrs E Grant Deputy Chief Executive and Director
of Children, Families and Learning
Mrs S Hobbs Democratic Services Officer
Mrs K Partington Strategic Finance Manager
Mr J Partridge Overview & Scrutiny Officer
Ms K Peddie Head of Policy & Strategy - Children,
Families & Learning
Mrs S Reed Head of Commissioning

CFL/09/71 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED

that the Minutes of the meeting of the Children, Families and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 5 January 2010 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CFL/09/72 **Members' Interests**

(a) **Personal Interests:-**

None.

(b) **Personal and Prejudicial Interests:-**

None.

(c) **Any Political Whip in relation to items on the agenda:-**

None.

CFL/09/73 **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

The Chairman reminded Members that the quorum for the Committee was 4 councillors and 2 co-opted members whenever considering education matters and 3 councillors at all other times. A co-opted Member stated that financial assistance was not provided to co-optees for child care, but was provided to Councillors. He had queried this with Officers, who were looking into this. The Chairman agreed to follow this up and provide a written answer.

CFL/09/74 **Petitions**

The Chairman announced that no petitions had been referred to this meeting.

CFL/09/75 **Questions, Statements or Deputations**

There were no applications from members of the public to speak under the Public Participation Procedure allowed for under Part A4 of the Constitution.

CFL/09/76 **Call-In**

No matters were referred to the Committee for a decision in relation to call-in of a decision.

CFL/09/77 Requested Items

No items were referred to the Committee for consideration at the request of a Member under Procedure Rule 3.1 of Part D2 of the Constitution.

CFL/09/78 Home to School Transport Policy

Members considered the report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Children, Families and Learning which proposed changes to the Home to School Transport Policy, to take effect from April and September 2010.

The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services introduced the report explaining that in 2009/10 Central Bedfordshire Council adopted the Home to School Transport Policy previously in place in the legacy authority, Bedfordshire County Council. There were 31,000 children in Central Bedfordshire with 6,200 benefiting from free transport to school. The Council was reviewing the most effective use of resources available due to the current economic climate. The Policy was being considered to enable any changes to come into force during the 2010/11 financial year.

In accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in paragraph 2 of Annex 1 of Part A4 of the Constitution, the Chairman then invited those members of the public who had registered to speak on this item to address the Committee. Each speaker was permitted a maximum of three minutes. Statements were received from four speakers raising the following queries/concerns:-

- the financial impact on the parents if they had to start paying to transport their children to school;
- what was the cost to the Council to educate a child and therefore what the additional cost would be to the Council if children currently attending denominational schools were to transfer in to a mainstream school;
- which benefits would be taken into account as part of the eligibility criteria for families with low income and in receipt of working tax credit;
- the impact of proposals on the children if they had to change schools especially those who currently attend a denominational school; and
- the different education system in Central Bedfordshire compared to Bedford and Hertfordshire.

Members were advised that the Children, Families and Learning budget was allocated to cost codes. The 2009/10 Home to School Transport budget was currently overspent by £0.6 million. The average cost of providing transport for a child to a denominational school was £2,000 per pupil, per year compared with the average cost of transport to a mainstream school which was in the region of £775 per year.

Members were advised that the consultation period was taking place from 6 January to 12 February 2010. Officers and the Portfolio Holder had viewed the responses so far and this showed that public opinion was equally weighted for those in favour or against the rationalisation of school transport at that point in time. Officers were working closely with the Passenger Transport Team, which was currently reviewing the Transport Policy to get the best value for money.

A concern was raised regarding the consultation process and it was proposed that Members needed to consider the full results of the consultation to enable the Committee to make an informed decision before making any recommendations to the Executive. The consultation document and questionnaire had been distributed to schools for circulation to parents. A copy could also be found on the web site at:-

<http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/consultations/transport-consultation.aspx>.

Members raised concerns that not all parents had received the consultation papers and Officers agreed to check with the schools that these documents had been circulated. Members were advised that there had been a one week delay in sending the letter to the Catholic Diocese and the Church of England Diocese, although Senior Officers had met with the Dioceses on 26 January 2010. As a result of this the consultation period was being extended from 12 February to 19 February 2010. Once the Council had a clearer direction, neighbouring authorities would be consulted. Members requested to receive further information regarding the consultation process including who had been involved and the full results of the consultation.

A motion was proposed and seconded:

“to hold a special meeting of the Children, Families and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee, to take place after the consultation closing date and before the Executive meeting on 9 March 2010 to discuss the Home to School Transport Policy.”

This motion was **carried**.

Members debated the following proposals:-

- (a) **Road Safety Transport** – to reassess the routes on road safety grounds from 1 April 2010. The reassessment might result in changes to the current entitlement to free transport on road safety grounds. The Committee was largely supportive of this proposal. The Chairman of Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee, who was present at the meeting, suggested that Officers work closely with other corporate teams on more sustainable solutions such as footpaths and a sustainable transport, benefiting the whole community.

- (b) **Denominational Transport** – to end the provision of transport to denominational schools with effect from 1 September 2010. This proposal would not affect the entitlement to transport for families with a low income. A joint letter from the Catholic Diocese of Northampton and the Church of England Diocese of St Albans was tabled at the meeting, making representations against the proposal to abolish free home to school transport for children who were attending Church of England and Catholic Schools. The letter set out facts and principles relating to denominational schools and the children attending them. The Dioceses representatives suggested that if the Council agreed to this proposal it should be phased in and free home to school transport should continue to be provided to children already in a denominational school and those children who had already made an application to a school. Members requested further information regarding the phasing out of denominational transport over a five year period as opposed to ending the provision with effect from 1 September 2010. Members debated this proposal extensively including raising the following:-
- if another religious school was built outside the Central Bedfordshire area would the Council have to transport additional children from home to school?
 - if the Council agreed to continue funding the current home to school transport policy then funding for other areas of Children, Families and Learning would need to be reduced;
 - the possible impact this would have on the intake at denominational schools and on increasing the intake at mainstream schools within Central Bedfordshire; and
 - those families on low income and just above the threshold. Members requested to receive further information on the low income criteria, particularly on the working tax credit threshold.
- (c) **Looked After Children and Refugees and Asylum Seekers** – it was clarified that this related to unaccompanied asylum seeking children and the report to the Executive would need to make this clear.
- (d) **Special Educational Needs Transport** – it was being proposed that children with special educational needs be assessed as part of the Statutory Assessment process to determine the most appropriate mode of travel to school. For those children who lived more than the statutory distance between home and the nearest school that would meet their needs, transport would be provided.

For those children living within the statutory distance the Assessment would include consideration of whether, with parental support, a child would reasonably be expected to walk to school. An amendment was proposed and seconded to:-

“remove the words ‘with parental support’ from the proposal”.

This amendment was **carried**.

A concern was raised with regard to the Assessment process and the criteria when making a decision regarding the transport needs of a child with special needs. The Assessments would be held at an appropriate time with agencies and parents present. The majority of Members supported this proposal subject to the above amendment.

RESOLVED that prior to the proposals being presented to the Executive a Special meeting of the Children, Families and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee be scheduled after the consultation closing date and before the Executive meeting on 9 March 2010 to hold a further discussion in light of the consultation results.

CFL/09/79 **Educational Vision**

Members considered the report and a presentation from the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Children, Families and Learning regarding the vision for transforming learning in Central Bedfordshire. Members were introduced to Adrian Rogers, Headteacher who had been working closely with Officers.

The presentation set out:-

- where we were;
- where we are now;
- issues;
- current position of Trusts, Federations and Partnerships; and
- next steps.

Members raised concerns regarding the number of transition points in schools and the negative effect that this might have on levels of attainment. The number of transition points between schools needed to be reduced where possible and this should be a key principle for the educational vision.

Members discussed the differences between Trusts and Federations. Members were advised that it was a school’s decision to become a member of a Trust. If a school became part of a trust the school and land would be handed over to the Trust. If the Trust was no longer in existence these assets would be handed back to the Council. There were opportunities for schools to work in partnership, which could provide collaborative benefits to schools, but a view was presented that there needed to be a fuller debate around the development of trusts, federations and partnerships and their potential benefits.

Members also raised the 2-tier and 3-tier education system and the education of children in the 0-19 age range to ensure that there is a 'one-phase' approach to learning. Officers agreed to revise the wording of the vision at paragraphs 2.2 where it stated that 2-tier and 3-tier debate was irrelevant and 12.1 where it is stated that the Council would review the number of transition points, so that these two sentences no longer contradicted themselves.

NOTED the contents of the educational vision.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive that the following comments on the principles of the educational vision for Central Bedfordshire be taken into consideration:-

- Members raised concerns regarding the number of transition points in schools and the negative effect that this could have on levels of attainment. The number of transition points needed to be reduced where possible and this should be a key principle for the education vision;
- the educational vision should focus on continuity of provision across the 0-19 age range to ensure that there was a 'one-phase' approach to learning; and
- there were opportunities for schools to work in partnership, which could provide collaborative benefits to schools, but views were presented that there needed to be a fuller debate around the development of trusts, federations and partnerships and their potential benefits.

CFL/09/80 **Work Programme 2009-2010**

Members considered the current work programme for the Children, Families and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Members were advised that the Chairman of Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CROSC) had been advised of the request for CROSC to scrutinise the performance of Mouchel.

NOTED the work programme for Children, Families and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

(Note: The meeting commenced at 10.10 a.m. and concluded at 1.30 p.m.)