

SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE

MINUTES

13 April 2012

Extract

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool

Present:

Councillor: Marjorie James (In the Chair)

Councillors: Christopher Akers-Belcher, Mick Fenwick, Sheila Griffin, Brenda Loynes, Ann Marshall, Arthur Preece, Linda Shields and Ray Wells.

Resident Representatives:

Evelyn Leck and John Maxwell

Also Present:

The Mayor, Stuart Drummond
Councillor Cath Hill, Children's Services Portfolio Holder
Children's Services Scrutiny Forum Young Representatives:
Ashleigh Bostock and Robyn Reid

Officers:

Nicola Bailey, Acting Chief Executive
Andrew Atkin, Assistant Chief Executive
Chris Little, Chief Finance Officer
Dave Stubbs, Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
Denise Ogden, Assistant Director, Neighbourhood Services
Sally Robinson, Assistant Director, Prevention, Safeguarding
and Specialist Services
Sue Beevers, Admissions, School Place Planning and Support
Services Manager
Peter McIntosh, Head of Planning and Development
Juliette Ward, Participation Worker
Joan Stevens, Scrutiny Manager
Angela Armstrong, Principal Democratic Services Officer

274. Call-In of Decision: Admission Arrangements for Admissions to Schools 2013/14 and Co-ordinated Admissions to Primary and Secondary Schools and in year transfers 2013/14 and an update on new school admissions code 2012

The Scrutiny Manager presented a report which provided Members with the relevant information relating to the Call-In of the decision taken by the Children's Services Portfolio Holder on 27 March 2012, in relation to the admissions policy for community and voluntary controlled primary schools in Hartlepool for the school year 2013/14 and the co-ordinated admission procedures to primary and secondary schools for 2013/14, as per the Authority's Call-In procedure. On considering the information contained within the Call-In notice, the Committee accepted the Call-In of this decision.

The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services was invited to address the Committee and indicated that the decision taken was based on the strong commitment of the Council to keep families together. Members were informed that the Portfolio Holder and Department had received a number of emails from parents with positive comments on the decision taken and the Portfolio Holder was not aware of any adverse comments being received.

A Member commented on the potential situation where children living within an admission zone would be unable to attend their local community school, as places within that school had been taken by siblings of children already attending the school who live outside the admission zone. Whilst the difficulties of children within the same family attending different schools was acknowledged, it was considered this was ultimately a consequence of a family moving out of the admission zone or applying for children to attend a school outside of the admission zone they lived in.

A discussion ensued on the right for parents to declare a preference for the school their children attended as opposed to a choice. There was concern that once a child was accepted into a school outside their admission zone, the parents then had a choice whether to place their siblings into the same school outside the admission zone or into the catchment school within the admission zone. The potential problems of having children who may live opposite a school they were unable to attend due to children who live outside the admission zone taking places at that school was also highlighted. This situation would result in two families travelling outside their admission zone to enable their children to attend school. A Member emphasised the need for local community schools to be accessible to the families living within that local community.

Whilst acknowledging that the majority of governing bodies accepted the proposed changes to the admission policy, it was considered that the full consequences of this decision were not made clear at the governors' meetings. Members believed that parents of children hoping for their child to attend the school within their admission zone would be disappointed with the decision once the full implications of the decision were known.

In addition, the potential difficulties to be faced when parents have children attending different schools was discussed, including start and finish times and parents attendance at events within the school such as harvest festivals.

Due to the town-wide impact of this decision, it was proposed that consideration of this issue be referred to Full Council to ensure a town-wide reflection from all Members. A Member suggested that the Chairs and Vice Chairs of all governing bodies should be invited to attend the Council meeting.

In response to a query from a Member in relation to the timetable for formulation of the revised policy, the Assistant Director, Prevention, Safeguarding and Specialist Services confirmed that consultation on the proposed changes to the admission policy was undertaken between September to December 2011. Upon the conclusion of this consultation, the previous Portfolio Holder for Children's Services requested a further round of consultation with primary school teachers. This subsequent extension to the timescale resulted in the submission of the report to the current Portfolio Holder for Children's Services being delayed until the 27 March 2012. It was noted that the formal deadline for submission of admission arrangements to the Secretary of State was 15 April 2012. However, it was acknowledged that whilst there may have been a delay in the decision making on this issue, the importance of seeking the views of all Members was emphasised. The Assistant Director confirmed that the Department for Education had noted that the Council was currently in dispute on this decision and highlighted the potential implications of this.

In view of the above it was suggested that the issue be referred to Full Council, at the earliest convenience, with the views of Members. The outcome of the discussions to be reported back to the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee to inform the formulation of the formal Scrutiny response to the Call-in.

Recommended

- (i) That the Call-in was accepted due to the decision not being taken in accordance with the principles of decision making set out in Article 13 of the Constitution in relation to (i) proportionality and (xii) reasonableness.
- (ii) That the decision be referred to Full Council, as soon as practicable, to enable a town-wide elected Member debate to be undertaken.
- (iii) The outcome of the Full Council meeting and views of Members be reported back to the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee, as soon as practical, to inform the formulation of the formal Scrutiny response to the Call-in.

The meeting concluded at 4.23 pm