

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Commission held at County Hall, Glenfield on Friday, 5 July 2013.

PRESENT

Mr. S. J. Galton CC (in the Chair)

Mrs. R. Camamile CC
Dr. R. K. A. Feltham CC
Mr. S. J. Hampson CC
Dr. S. Hill CC
Mr. Max Hunt CC

Mr. A. M. Kershaw CC
Mr. P. G. Lewis CC
Mr. K. W. P. Lynch CC
Mr. R. J. Shepherd CC
Mr. L. Spence CC

14. Minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 June 2012 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

15. Question Time.

The Chief Executive reported that no questions had been received under Standing Order 35.

16. Questions asked by Members.

The Chief Executive reported that no questions had been received under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5).

17. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

18. Declarations of Interest.

The Chairman invited members who wished to do so to declare any interest in respect of items on the agenda for the meeting.

Mr. R. J. Shepherd CC declared a personal interest in respect of Item 8 entitled 'Consultation on Home to School Transport Policies on: (a) Faith School Transport, (b) 16+ School Transport and (c) Increased Farepaying Charges and Withdrawing "Change of Address" Eligibility' as a School Governor.

Mr. L. Spence CC declared a personal interest that might lead to bias in respect of Item 8 as he had children who accessed transport to a faith school.

The following members each declared a personal interest in respect of the Item 9 entitled 'Proposed Withdrawal of Discretionary Elements of the Concessionary Travel Scheme - Outcome of Consultation' as holders of concessionary bus passes:

Dr. R. K. A. Feltham CC
 Mr. M. J. Hunt CC
 Mr. P. G. Lewis CC
 Mr. K. W. P. Lynch CC

19. Declarations of the Party Whip.

There were no declarations of the party whip.

20. Presentation of Petitions.

The Chief Executive reported that no petitions had been received under Standing Order 36.

21. Consultation on Home to School Transport Policies on: (a) Faith School Transport, (b) 16+ School Transport and (c) Increased Farepaying Charges and Withdrawing "Change of Address" Eligibility.

The Commission considered a report of the Director of Environment and Transport concerning the outcome of the public consultation into proposals to change some elements of the Mainstream Home to School Transport policy. A copy of the report, marked 'Item 8' is filed with these minutes.

Following circulation of the Commission agenda, a report of the Director of Environment and Transport to the Cabinet meeting on 9 July outlining the proposals arising from the consultation had been circulated to the Commission. In considering the matter, the Commission had regard to a further supplementary Cabinet report, which reported the complete findings of the consultation exercise which closed on 30 June. A copy of both supplementary reports is filed with these minutes.

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Lead Member for Highways and Transport, Mr. P. C. Osborne CC, to the meeting who was present to introduce the report and respond to questions.

As part of the introduction to the item, it was reported that the proposals were part of the agreed Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in 2012/15. The Council currently spent £8.5m on mainstream home to school transport. A saving of £1.1m had been identified from discretionary elements provided in the Home to School Transport policy..

Arising from questioning by the Commission on the timing of the consultation and the way in which it had been conducted, the following points were noted:

- Concern was expressed that the consultation on Home to School Transport should have been part of the planned consultation on the MTFS. In response, members were advised that the Home to School Transport proposals were part of a previous MTFS and there was a need to agree changes now in order that parents and pupils were aware of the new policy ahead of making choices for entry in September 2014;
- The response rate, although disappointing, was still nearly 12% of those affected. The majority of responses were in relation to faith schools. The consultation was genuine in that the Cabinet would look carefully at the responses and comments made,

particularly if issues or concerns that had not been previously identified were raised;

- The suggestion that the review be done in two stages: introduce the proposed changes for 2014, but defer consideration of the proposed changes from 2015 onwards, would create an uncertainty, both in terms of parents and pupils making informed choices and in terms of financial planning.

The Commission then debated each element of the report, as outlined below:

(a) Faith School Transport: £350,000 (affecting 900 denominational pupils)

Mr. L. Spence CC, having declared a personal interest that may lead to bias on the issue of school transport to faith and voluntary aided schools, left the room during this part of the discussion.

The Commission, in considering this matter, had regard to the written submission of Father Colin Patey of the St Wilfrid of York Catholic Church, Coalville, which briefly outlined the objection of the Catholic Church community to the Council's proposed removal of subsidy for denominational transport. A copy of the comments is filed with these minutes.

The Proposals, if accepted, would mean that the following changes would be made:

- September 2013: £252 contribution for transport capped at £504 maximum contribution per family
- September 2014: £450 contribution for transport – no maximum cap
- September 2015 onwards: £640 full cost recovery for transport. No new transport agreed for new applicants and existing transport phased out over the following 4 years.

It was confirmed that, as part of the new proposals (from September 2014), the present cap of £480 per family would be removed and full cost recovery be made for all pupils, in line with the withdrawal of denominational school transport for new applicants.

The Director reported that the proposed removal of subsidy for faith transport would bring it in line with other school transport in the County, (ie. there was still an entitlement to free transport if it was the nearest school to the home address and over the relevant statutory distances). It was further reported that the County Council provided a "hardship fund" grant of £20,000, administered by the Diocesan Board, which would continue until the 2019/20 academic year to allow for phasing out of this discretionary provision.

Arising from the debate, the following comments of the Commission were noted:

- The phasing of the changes would ensure that pupils currently at faith schools and those joining in the next academic year would have certainty about transport provision. Pupils joining in subsequent years would need to be aware that transport provision would not be available;

- The increase in charges agreed previously had given rise to a marginal impact on faith school intakes and the ethos of such schools. It would be a matter for the school as to how it managed the position. Most faith schools in Leicestershire were academies and, as such, were independent of the County Council;
- There was an issue relating to equity. Pupils attending Roman Catholic schools were provided with a subsidy which was not available to parents of pupils who wished to exercise the right to have their child attend a school which was not their nearest school.

It was moved by Mr. Lewis and seconded by Mrs. Camamile:

“That, with regard to the proposals for transport to faith schools, the Cabinet be advised, that whilst noting the concerns expressed by consultees and by members during the course of debate, the Commission supports the proposed changes to transport arrangements for pupils attending faith schools.”

The motion was put and carried, six members having voted for the motion and none against (members of the Labour and Liberal Democrat Groups asked that it be recorded that they had abstained).

At this juncture, Mr. Spence CC re-joined the meeting.

(b) 16+ School Transport: £605,000 (affecting 3,500 students)

The Proposals, if accepted, would mean that the following changes would be made:

- September 2013: £252 contribution for transport – no “low income” exemption
- September 2014 onwards: £425 full cost recovery for transport with a “low income” exemption introduced

The Director reported that the low-income exemptions would apply to those families who were in receipt of maximum working tax credit. The proposals had been discussed with the heads of Further Education colleges, who had given some positive feedback to the retention of a service, given that other local authorities had removed 16+ transport completely.

The Chairman welcomed students and tutors from Beauchamp College to the meeting, who had requested the opportunity to speak on the proposals affecting the cost of 16+ transport provision. With the consent of the Chairman, Neeraj Thakar and Jack Hancock (students at Beauchamp College) addressed the Commission and made the following points:

- The consultation had not been widely advertised to all parents and had been conducted at a time when, following completion of their exams, a good number of (largely year 11) students were not at school and would not have been aware of the consultation, despite being most likely to be affected by the proposals;
- Those students from less affluent rural families would be most hit by the proposals and, generally speaking, public footpath and cycleway provision in these areas was poor. Road safety concerns would therefore prevent some

making this choice;

- The effects of the proposals would be felt further down the line as some students might not continue their further education as a result of the proposals to increase charging and would therefore be less employable as adults. This would represent an added cost to the taxpayer in unemployment benefits;
- The proposals would give rise to an increase in car use. The traffic increase would consequently give rise to increased traffic management costs to the Authority;
- There was a concern that the removal of concessionary elements of the Policy would impact upon academies who might have to provide some support for transport, thus diverting funds away from the classroom.

Arising from questioning by the Commission, the following points were noted:

- There was a concern that less affluent pupils in rural areas were being disadvantaged and might decide not to continue with their education;
- There appeared to be little in regard to qualitative feedback from heads of Further Education Colleges, which would have been beneficial;
- Arising from the Government's removal of Education Maintenance Allowance, funds were made available to schools and colleges to support the less well-off students to continue with their education;

(c) Increased farepaying charges and withdrawing "change of address" eligibility: £145,000 (affecting 400 students)

The Proposals (to reflect costs of other discretionary provision), if accepted, would mean that the following changes would be made:

- Currently charged at £300 for primary school and £400 for secondary school
- September 2013: £318 for primary and £420 for secondary
- September 2014: £450 flat charge
- September 2015: £640 flat charge
- Withdrawal of transport from September 2013 for those children changing address in their final year of each phase of education (this currently applied to the last year of primary school, the last year of high school and both GCSE years)

Arising from questioning by the Commission, the Director reported that the proposal to withdraw transport for those changing address in the final year of each phase of education was subject to exemption covering exceptional circumstances such as those families who had been relocated due to a house fire. This would mean that, unless the move was beyond the parents' control, they would be responsible for the travel arrangements from the new address.

It was further noted that the new farepaying rate was being set at the highest level and would equate to a small surplus in the first year of operation.

RESOLVED:

That the comments and concerns now expressed in respect of the proposed changes to various aspects of the Home to School Transport Policy other than transport to faith schools be drawn to the attention of the Cabinet at its meeting on 9 July.

22. Proposed Withdrawal of Discretionary Elements of the Concessionary Travel Scheme - Outcome of Consultation.

The Commission considered a report of the Director of Environment and Transport concerning the outcome of the public consultation into proposals to withdraw the discretionary elements of the Concessionary Travel Scheme. A copy of the report, marked 'Item 9' is filed with these minutes.

Following circulation of the Commission agenda, a supplementary report of the Director of Environment and Transport to the Cabinet meeting on 9 July outlining the proposals arising from the consultation had been circulated to the Commission. In considering the matter, the Commission had regard to a further supplementary Cabinet report, which reported the complete findings of the consultation exercise which closed on 30 June. A copy of both supplementary reports is filed with these minutes.

The Chairman welcomed the Cabinet Lead Member for Highways and Transport, Mr. P. C. Osborne CC, to the meeting, who was present to introduce the report and respond to questions.

As part of the introduction to the item, it was reported that the proposals were part of the agreed Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in 2012/15. The Council currently spent £5.26 million on the statutory English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS) (£4.9 million on the Older Person's Pass and £360,000 on the Disabled Pass). A saving of £270,000 had been identified from the discretionary elements provided, in addition to the main ENCTS from 1 September 2013. The ENCTS would remain unaffected by the proposals.

The proposed savings (which only related to the discretionary element of the Scheme, funded by the County Council) were outlined as follows:

- Free travel for disabled concessionary pass holders before 9.30am Monday to Friday: £20,000
- Free travel after 11.00pm Monday to Friday for disabled and older concessionary pass holders: £10,000
- £33 of vouchers for use on local taxi and bus services as an alternative to the statutory concession scheme if the applicant is disabled or lives over 800 metres from a frequent bus service: £80,000
- Half fare on community transport services: £160,000

The proposals would affect 120,000 older person concessionary pass holders, 8,500 disabled person concessionary pass holders and 3,600 holders of travel vouchers.

In response to concerns expressed, the Commission was advised as follows:

- Pre 9.30am free disabled transport – the alternative would be payment of a fare or later travel when the free scheme was applicable;
- Post 11.00pm transport – the alternative would be payment of a fare or earlier travel;
- Whilst it was recognised that the loss of taxi vouchers would affect those in rural areas with no regular bus services and those disabled persons who were unable to use less frequent buses, community transport and Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) would be available to such persons;
- Concessionary travel passes could be used on DRT and the ongoing review of the supported bus network was looking at an expansion of DRT where it was uneconomic to operate a scheduled bus service;
- Whilst the proposed changes to Community Transport charges would have an impact; it was not thought that this would affect the viability of the service;
- Care would be taken in the communication of the changes to those affected.

RESOLVED:

That the concerns and comments made in response to the proposed changes to Concessionary Travel Scheme be drawn to the attention of the Cabinet.

23. 2012/13 Provisional Revenue and Capital Outturn.

The Commission considered a report of the Director of Corporate Resources concerning the Council's 2012/13 Provisional Revenue and Capital Outturn. A copy of the report, marked 'Item 10' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the debate, the following points were noted:

- The Environment and Transport Departments' financial position had been affected by the severe winter weather, which had equated to a net overspend of £200,000. This was becoming a trend year-on-year and it was reported that it might be necessary to top-up the budget to take account of less predictable weather in future;
- The net underspend relating to the work of the Police and Crime Panel was largely due to the need to administer a complaints process, which had yet to be required and to the early stage of development of the Panel which had only just begun its work;
- The risk assessment of the Capital Programme would be reported as part of a quarterly capital monitoring report to the Commission at its meeting on 4 September.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

24. Corporate Complaints and Commendations Annual Report 2012-2013.

The Commission considered a report of the Director of Corporate Resources concerning the Corporate Complaints and Commendations Annual Report 2012/2013. A copy of the report, 'marked' Item 11', is filed with these minutes.

Arising from the debate, the following points were noted:

- The significant increase in the number of complaints relating to Highways issues. Most of these related to information flow and feedback to customers, rather than the quality of officers' work. The Director of Corporate Resources had commissioned an "end-to-end" review of the way in which Highways matters were being dealt with, which some members would be involved in;
- Better joint-working was taking place with partners in health to ensure that joint health and social care complaints were being dealt with efficiently and by the appropriate agency;
- The Customer Relations Manager was taking a more active role at a higher level in dealing with complaints that had stalled in the system, acting as the 'Champion of the Customer';
- Commendations for Council staff were on the increase and the Customer Relations Team was working to further increase the visibility of the positive contributions staff made on a day-to-day basis.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the contents of the third Corporate Complaints and Commendations Annual Report 2012-2013 (covering the period 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013) be noted;
- (b) That the positive steps being made in both complaints handling times and capturing commendations be supported.

25. Date of next meeting.

It was NOTED that the next meeting of the Commission would be held on 4 September at 2.00pm.

2.00 - 4.40 pm
05 July 2013

CHAIRMAN