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WESTMORLAND AND FURNESS COUNCIL FURNESS LOCALITY BOARD

Minutes of a Meeting of the **Furness Locality Board** held on Tuesday, 28 November 2023 at 6.00 pm at Drawing Room - Barrow Town Hall

PRESENT:

Cllr T Assouad
Cllr D Brook (Vice-Chair)
Cllr A Burns
Cllr T Callister (Chair)
Cllr D Cassidy
Cllr F Cassidy
Cllr D Edwards
Cllr L Hall
Cllr K Hamilton
Cllr A Husband
Cllr B McEwan
Cllr B Morgan
Cllr J Murphy
Cllr N Phillips
Cllr D Taylor
Cllr R Worthington

Officers in attendance:

Alison Meadows (Senior Manager - Safe & Strong Communities)
Emma Haughin (Senior Lawyer)
Amy Holliman (Assistant Director Quality, Resources and Transformation, Children's Services)
Milorad Vasic (Director of Childrens' Services)
Katie Pepper (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer)
Mollie Currie (Legal Business Administration Apprentice)

Also in attendance:

Mike Cummings (Cumbria Association of Local Councils)

PART I ITEMS CONSIDERED IN THE PRESENCE OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS

28. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Biggins, Coles and Shirley.

29. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/DISPENSATIONS

Councillors Hall and Phillips declared an interest as they were Governors of South Walney Junior School.

Councillor Cassidy declared an interest as he was a Governor of South Walney Infant and Nursery School.

30. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

That the press and public not be excluding during the consideration of any items on the agenda.

31. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th October, 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

32. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

RESOLVED: - To note that no questions, representations, deputations or petitions had been received in respect of the meeting.

33. URGENT ITEMS

Councillor Morgan stated that Following a briefing on 16 November on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), and subsequent member correspondence, she proposed that the Furness Locality Board write to Cabinet and the relevant Portfolio Holders for Finance and Sustainable Communities and Localities, to express their concerns about the recent decision-making process and outcomes of the UKSPF. This would also include recommendations on how the Furness Locality Board should be included in any future funding decision-making, taking account of their local knowledge.

RESOLVED: - That Furness Locality Board write to Cabinet to express their concerns about the recent decision-making process and outcomes of the UKSPF

34. CONSULTATION ON A PROPOSAL TO CLOSE NORTH WALNEY PRIMARY AND NURSERY SCHOOL

The Director of Childrens' Services and the Assistant Director Quality, Resources and Transformation, Children's Services presented a report on the Consultation on a proposal to close North Walney Primary and Nursery School.

The Committee were informed that Westmorland and Furness Council was currently consulting on a proposal to close North Walney Primary and Nursery School from 31 August 2024.

Westmorland and Furness Council were concerned about the increasing pressure upon both the school's leadership and staff to continue to provide a quality educational offer given the decline in the number of pupils at the school and the resulting impact on the school's financial position. Given this, the Council considered that it had a responsibility to all members of the North Walney school community to formally consult on the school's future sustainability.

This proposal was being presented to Furness Locality Board for the Board's response as part of the consultation process.

A copy of the consultation document and the associated frequently asked questions relating to the proposal had been attached as an appendix to the report.

The Local Authority recognised that it was to the credit of the school's leadership, staff, parents and pupils that the school had continued to provide a quality educational offer during what had proven to have been a challenging period for the school.

As of September 2023, the confirmed number of pupils on roll at North Walney Primary school was 27. The total capacity of the school based upon the school's current published admission number was 161.

There had been a continuous drop in numbers across all year groups over recent years. In 2019/20 the number on roll was 84, by 2021/22 this number had fallen to 67 with a further reduction to 22 by 2022/23. The number of pupils on roll was predicted to remain low.

In line with national trends, the number of births in the North Walney catchment area had reduced in recent years, as it had across Walney Island. In addition, there was little opportunity for pupil growth from new housing developments as a result of inward migration to the area. Given this, there was little prospect of a significant increase in pupil numbers for North Walney Primary and Nursey School in the foreseeable future.

There were five schools within a two-mile radius of North Walney Primary School, with four of them located on Walney Island. The Walney Island area had a significant number of surplus places overall with the projected percentage of surplus places projected to be at 30% from September 2024.

School budgets were directly linked to the number of children on roll at that school. Many costs were fixed regardless of pupil numbers, and it followed that, where the numbers on roll at a school were decreasing, there was less money available to the school to support teaching and learning. This makes it increasingly challenging for a school to provide a broad and balanced quality educational offer. Whilst the school had taken steps to reduce costs over the years, the impact of the falling pupil roll had made balancing the budget very challenging with no potential to address projected deficits.

The Local Authority recognised that it was to the credit of the school's leadership, staff, parents and pupils that the school had continued to provide a quality educational offer during what had proven to have been a challenging period for the school.

However, the Local Authority was concerned that the school's current financial position had been increasing the workload on school staff to levels that the Council believed was reaching an unsustainable level. This would inevitably impact on teaching standards and would likely give a reduced rating under the current Ofsted inspection framework. The current framework required all schools to evidence a 'good' quality of education over time, demonstrating a broad, rich curriculum sequenced in a logical progression to enable all children to acquire the intended knowledge and skills from Reception to Year Six.

The Local Authority was concerned that staffing instability and funding had also hampered development of leadership at subject level and impacted on the professional development, workload and well-being of staff.

This proposal was being consulted upon in order to ensure that the Local Authority met its statutory duties to ensure that appropriate standard of care and education was being delivered, contributing to a thriving community.

A public consultation exercise on the closure proposal was currently underway. The consultation began on 1 November 2023 and would end on 12 December 2023. This report was being presented to the Locality Board as part of this consultation process.

A post-consultation report, setting out all of the responses raised during the consultation, would be presented to Cabinet in January 2024 for a decision as to whether, or not, to proceed to the next stage of the statutory school organisation process.

If the Council's Cabinet decided to proceed to the next stage of the statutory process the Local Authority would be required to formally publish a statutory notice setting out the proposal to close the school. This would allow all stakeholders a further four weeks to make 'representations' about the proposal. Following the completion of the four-week statutory representation period a report would be submitted to the Cabinet in March 2024 for a final decision as to whether, or not, the school should close on 31 August 2024.

Westmorland and Furness Council was concerned about the increasing pressure upon both the school's leadership and its staff to continue to provide a quality educational offer given the ongoing decline in the number of pupils at the school and the resulting impact on the school's financial position. Given these risks, taking no action was not an option as the Council considers that it had a responsibility to all members of the North Walney school community to formally consult on the school's future sustainability.

The school closed financial year 2022/23 with a cumulative deficit of £161k

and had been in deficit since 2012/13. If the school closed any deficit at the point of closure would transfer to the Council and be funded from the DSG contingency budget.

The Local Authority understood that staff at the North Walney Primary and Nursery School would have both professional and personal concerns about the implications of the consultation. During the consultation, officers from the Local Authority would be listening very carefully to the views of the school staff and their union representatives to ensure that all members of staff were given appropriate advice and support depending on their individual circumstances.

If following the completion of statutory school organisation process, then Local Authority took the final decision to close the school then the Local Authority Would consult with school staff in accordance with relevant employment related policies, procedures and statutory timescales.

The Local Authority recognised that pupils and parents would be concerned about this proposal and recognised the responsibility that arose from taking the decision to consult on a proposal to close a school. The school would continue to run as it currently does throughout the consultation and decision-making process.

If the decision was taken in March 2024 to close the school in August 2024, then the Local Authority would contact the parents of all the pupils at the school to discuss their individual circumstances.

Given the level of surplus school places across the area the Local Authority was confident that there were sufficient places available at other school to enable pupils to be accommodated at other schools in line with parental preference.

A package of support would be devised to assist parents in applying for new school places, discuss their transport arrangements, assist parents with the purchase of school uniform and ensure that all children, including those children that may have EHCP's and SEND needs, were fully supported to transition to their new school.

The Locality Board discussed the report.

Councillor Frank Cassidy requested that it be noted that it was the Walney Councillors wish that the school be repurposed to accommodate children who would find it difficult in mainstream education.

RESOLVED: -

1. To Note the rationale and details of the consultation proposal.
2. To Note that that Cabinet would consider all responses arising from the consultation, including any response made by the Furness Locality Board, before deciding on whether or not to proceed to the next stage of the statutory process.

The meeting ended at 6.28 pm