



**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**TUESDAY 6 FEBRUARY 2018
COUNCIL CHAMBER, TOWN HOUSE, HADDINGTON**

Committee Members Present:

Councillor S Akhtar (Convener)
Councillor F Dugdale
Councillor J Findlay
Councillor A Forrest
Councillor N Gilbert
Councillor J Goodfellow
Councillor K Mackie
Councillor P McLennan
Councillor B Small
Councillor J Williamson
Ms E Malcolm
Mr S Bunyan

Council Officials Present:

Ms A McCrorie, Depute Chief Executive (Resources and People Services)
Ms F Robertson, Head of Education
Ms S Saunders, Head of Adult & Children's Services
Ms J Mackay, Media Manager

Clerk:

Ms F Currie, Committees Officer

Apologies:

Councillor W Innes
Councillor S Kempson
Ms G Gillan

Declarations of Interest:

None

The Convener informed Members of the resignation of Teresa Sharp from her role as the Catholic Church representative on the Committee. She thanked Ms Sharp for her contribution and stated that her replacement would be appointed in due course.

1. EMPOWERING SCHOOLS: A SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION ON THE PROVISIONS OF THE EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) BILL

A report was submitted by the Depute Chief Executive (Resources and People Services) to present the outcome of the East Lothian consultation on the provisions of the Education (Scotland) Bill and to seek approval to submit the East Lothian Council response to the Scottish Government by 7 February 2018.

Fiona Robertson presented the report outlining the background and purpose of the consultation. She advised Members that the Council carried out a local consultation, including a public meeting on 9 January 2018, which resulted in 55 responses from Parent Councils, parents/carers, staff groups and individual members of school staff. An analysis of these submissions was carried out to inform the Council's response to the Scottish Government.

Ms Robertson advised Members that any future policy implications would form the basis of a report to full Council. She also drew attention to concerns relating to the proposals contained within the Education (Scotland) Bill, including the potential effect on the democratic accountability of education services and on equalities for staff and for children and young people requiring additional support needs.

Responding to questions from Councillor McLennan, Ms Robertson stated that, compared to other local authorities, the number of responses had been significant. She said that many respondents had commented on the timing and length of the consultation period which they felt had given them insufficient time to reply. Ms Robertson also referred to a lack of clarity around some of the proposals and how this would affect the future role of the Council.

Councillor Forrest asked about the response from parents to the proposals for Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs). Ms Robertson said that parents had expressed concern about the size of the proposed RICs and of local issues being lost in a larger forum.

Councillor Goodfellow queried the similarities with previous consultations. Ms Robertson acknowledged that this was the latest in a series but that the difference with this consultation was that it could lead to legislative change.

Councillor Dugdale asked how the proposals might affect the duties placed on Head Teachers and Parent Councils. Ms Robertson said that, in terms of the respondents, there were concerns that the duties would put parents off becoming involved in their children's schools. They also referred to the lack of details around the potential consequences of any failure to fulfil the duties. In respect of Head Teachers, she said that many felt they were already empowered to make decisions relating to funding and staffing and that, rather than new legislation, the example provided in East Lothian should be replicated elsewhere.

In response to further questions from Councillor McLennan, Ms Robertson outlined some of the work already being undertaken by the authority to support and encourage both pupil and parental engagement in schools. She acknowledged that there needed to be a change in approach in order to engage with the hardest to

reach pupils and parents. She said that schools were being asked to put forward ideas and she cited an example already being used to target these groups.

The Convener asked Ms Robertson to expand on the evidence base for the proposals and the key messages contained in the Head Teachers' response. She also asked about the impact any changes may have on partnership working across Council services.

Ms Robertson said that many stakeholders had noted the lack of educational research underpinning the proposals in the Bill. Her staff had undertaken their own review of existing research and had shared this with schools during the consultation period. She also advised that she had facilitated discussions with Head Teachers and staff at different schools.

On the issue of partnership working, Ms Robertson said that this was a key question and there were concerns about aspects such as support for Looked after Children and other vulnerable young people.

Councillor Small asked how other Councils were viewing the proposals for a larger collaborative. Ms Robertson advised that two of the county's neighbouring authorities had discussed the consultation at their Council meetings and the minutes published on their websites indicated that they had similar concerns.

Councillor McLennan queried the timetable and next steps in the process. In addition, he asked whether consultations could in future be brought to the Education Committee before being considered by full Council. He also suggested the drawing up of an annual work plan for the Committee to include any future consultations.

Councillors Dugdale and Goodfellow also asked about the timing of this consultation and the possibility of providing feedback on timing to the Scottish Government.

Ms Robertson said she would be happy to bring consultations to the Committee at an earlier stage but that this was not always possible given the timings of the consultation periods and the Committee meeting dates. She outlined the timeline for the current consultation and advised that general feedback on timings was provided to the Scottish Government via CoSLA and other bodies.

Councillor Williamson advised that the standard consultation period was 12 weeks and advance notice of forthcoming consultations was provided on the Scottish Government's website. Ms Robertson confirmed that the Council was aware of the notifications. She added that there had been a number of consultations in the last year and that this had perhaps contributed to the frustration of some respondents who felt that their previous submissions had been ignored.

Elizabeth Malcolm queried the purpose of the Bill stating that the five areas it highlighted could not solely address the poverty related attainment gap. Other services were required to support the role of education.

Ms Robertson explained that the Scottish Government's view was that not all Head Teachers were currently empowered to do the best for their schools and addressing this was part of the basis for the proposals in the Bill and the rationale around closing the poverty related attainment gap.

Ms Robertson agreed with Ms Malcom that other services were required to support the education service role and that the consultation had not adequately taken account of these other services.

Councillor Mackie stated that the present system did not do enough to raise attainment and standards. While she supported giving greater empowerment to Head Teachers, she had concerns that the proposals regarding RICs would not improve attainment. Referring to the public meeting, she said that most parents had given these proposals a lukewarm reception. She concluded that any reforms needed to be clear about how they would improve attainment. She supported the Council's response to the consultation.

Councillor McLennan acknowledged that there were other factors involved in raising attainment and that if there were concerns about the proposals for RICs these should be relayed to the Scottish Government. However, he emphasised the need to improve parent participation and he believed that the general principles of the Bill were correct. He suggested setting up meetings with other local authorities to discuss how these proposals could be made to work and he urged Members not to dismiss them out of hand at this stage.

Stephen Bunyan observed that, as the Council's response to the consultation had to be submitted to the Scottish Government by tomorrow (7 February), there was no time for further discussion. He supported the proposed response.

Councillor Goodfellow said that, based on his own involvement within the schools in his ward, he felt that the response accurately reflected the views of Head Teachers, class teachers and parents. He added that a number of respondents had questioned the benefit of submitting a response to yet another consultation when their previous responses had been ignored and the proposals currently under consideration did not offer the improvements needed in schools.

The Convener thanked all of those who had been involved in arranging the consultation events and the respondents who had submitted their views either collectively or individually. She said that significant concerns had been expressed by stakeholders across the county and that she had heard similar views expressed by those in her own ward. She stated that parents and staff clearly valued the links with the local authority and other organisations, however, any new proposals needed to add value to the existing systems. She noted that there was already a range of good practice within the county's schools and work was continuing to encourage greater parental engagement. She concluded by echoing Ms Malcolm's remarks that schools could not address all of the issues in isolation and they needed to work in partnership across services to close the attainment gap. The Convener commended the Council's response to Members.

Decision

The Committee agreed to:

- (i) Note the contents of the report;
- (ii) Approve the contents of the Council's response to the *Empowering Schools: a Scottish Government Consultation on the Provisions of the Education (Scotland) Bill*;

- (iii) Authorise the Head of Education to submit the Council's response to the Scottish Government by 7 February 2018. The Consultation closed on 30 January 2018. East Lothian Council has been granted an extension to the closing date on the basis that it submits its response no later than 7 February 2018.

Signed

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Councillor Shamin Akhtar
Convener of the Education Committee