

MINUTE
of
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Minute of virtual meeting held at 10.00am on 12 November 2020.

Present:

Councillor Paul O’Kane (Chair)	Councillor Gordon Wallace
Councillor Colm Merrick (Vice Chair)	Dr Frank Angell
Councillor Caroline Bamforth	Ms Dorothy Graham
Councillor Tony Buchanan (Leader)	Ms Mary McIntyre
Councillor Charlie Gilbert	Mr Des Morris

Councillor O’Kane in the Chair

Attending:

Mark Ratter, Director of Education; Fiona Morrison, Head of Education Services (Provision and Resources); Janice Collins, Head of Education Services (Equality and Equity); Graeme Hay, Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change); Tracy Morton, Education Senior Manager (Developing People); Joe McCaig, Quality Improvement Officer; Ron Leitch, Committee Services Officer; and Liona Allison, Assistant Committee Services Officer.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

1422. There were no declarations of interest intimated.

CHAIR’S REMARKS

1423. Councillor O’Kane welcomed Dr Ratter to his first meeting as Director of Education and wished him well in his new role.

EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE ADMISSIONS POLICY

1424. The committee considered a report by the Director of Education seeking approval for a revised policy and procedures relating to the application and admission arrangements for early learning and childcare establishments within East Renfrewshire. A copy of the proposed policy was appended to the report.

The Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) explained that with the introduction of 1140 hours of early learning and childcare (ELC) with effect from the start of the current school year, the department had taken the opportunity to review its existing admissions policy with a view to aligning it more closely with the schools admission policy. This would result in a more consistent approach across the department and the new policy, if approved, would be in place for the start of the 2021/22 academic year, for which applications would be invited in the near future.

He went on to explain that the revised arrangements set out the statutory duty of the Council to secure that the minimum amount of ELC was made available for each eligible child residing within the authority and clearly defined the arrangements in place to ensure that this could be delivered to all eligible families. This would be undertaken whilst reflecting the Scottish Government's blueprint principles of ensuring a high quality provision which was flexible, affordable and accessible. In addition, the revised arrangements reflected the Scottish Government's *Funding Follows the Child* approach, providing families with choice on how they wished to access their funded entitlement, in line with the Council's financial capacity.

Councillor Wallace sought clarification around the issue of deferred entry and enquired if this had been contentious in the past. In response, the Head of Education Services (Equality and Equity) explained that this could be contentious as parents of children whose birthday fell in January and February were entitled to a fully funded additional year whereas children whose birthday fell between August and December could request a deferral until the following academic year but that, in these circumstances there was no automatic right to an additional fully funded year of ELC. She went on to explain that the Scottish Government was planning to change the relevant legislation in the near future. This issue was of concern to the Council as parents of children with January and February birthdays tended to exercise their entitlement to an additional fully funded year of ELC to the maximum and this could have financial and resource implications for the Council. She concluded by explaining that the Scottish Government was listening carefully to the concerns of councils through the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES).

Councillor Wallace expressed the view that all members of the committee were acutely conscious of the importance of early learning in the development of children and he was encouraged to note that the department shared his concerns around future resourcing and would continue to raise the issue of deferred entry with the relevant parties. Councillor O'Kane advised that he would also raise the matter through CoSLA's Children and Young People Board.

Councillor Bamforth sought clarification regarding the priority status of children who had been granted deferred entry to school at the request of parents without the support of the Educational Psychology Service. In response, the Head of Education Services (Equality and Equity) confirmed that, where applications exceeded capacity, such children would be considered as Priority 7 with priority being given to younger children whose parents had not taken up their full entitlement to 1140 hours but that in all cases the department took such decisions on the basis of educational benefit to the child.

The committee agreed to approve the revised arrangements for application and admission to early learning and childcare establishments.

ELIGIBILITY FOR SCHOOL CLOTHING GRANTS

1425. The committee considered a report by the Director of Education seeking approval for a School Clothing Grant (SCG) policy and extension of the qualifying criteria for the clothing grant to include Council Tax Reduction (CTR) as an indicator of eligibility. A copy of the draft policy was attached as an appendix to the report.

The Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) explained that the current qualifying criteria and process for applying for and awarding SCG had developed over time through custom and practice and that currently there was no formal policy for the administration of this important benefit. The proposed policy sought to formalise current practice and set out a clear policy and procedure. The Council had seen a significant increase in the number of applications for CTR in recent months as a result of the financial

hardship being experienced by families exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic with many families requiring additional support, often for the first time. A number of applications had been received for SCG by way of CTR entitlement and these had been placed on hold due to the uncertainty over the qualifying criteria. In seeking to support these families, the Director of Education had agreed to award SCG based on CTR, with the SCG policy updated and formalised to reflect this change. This would ensure that families in receipt of CTR, but who may not be in receipt of other benefits, could still access this benefit and would bring East Renfrewshire into line with many neighbouring authorities.

He concluded by explaining that the department was continuing to work closely with the Revenues and Benefits team to improve access to SCG amongst other benefits, to ensure that all families who were entitled to this benefit could receive it. A new IT system was in the final stages of deployment within the Revenues and Benefits service and would offer enhanced opportunities to explore auto-entitlement and data matching to improve access and take up of this important additional benefit for families on low incomes. In addition, the new system would ensure that assessments of entitlement would be improved, ensuring that eligible applicants were approved and paid in a timely manner.

Responding to Councillor Bamforth who sought clarification on the income threshold applied in East Renfrewshire when considering applications for SCG in comparison to other neighbouring authorities, the Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change) explained that thresholds in relation to national benefits such as Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit were set by HMRC. However, he undertook to make further investigations into the thresholds for granting CTR being applied by neighbouring authorities and respond directly to Councillor Bamforth on his findings.

Councillor Wallace welcomed the formalisation of the policy on eligibility for SCG whilst expressing the view that the inclusion of CTR as a qualifying criterion could result in an increased number of applications in light of the current economic situation.

Councillor O'Kane welcomed the homologation of the inclusion of CTR as a qualifying criterion for SCG which had been introduced in response to the financial situation brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the formalisation of the policy.

Thereafter, the committee agreed to:-

- (a) approve the School Clothing Grant policy and the inclusion of Council Tax Reduction as a qualifying criterion for payment; and
- (b) homologate the decision of the Director of Education to include Council Tax Reduction as a criterion for School Clothing Grant.

PRESENTATION – SQA RESULTS 2020

1426. Under reference to the Minute of the meeting of 20 August 2020 (Page 1235, Item 1329 refers), when it had been noted that further, more detailed, analysis of the awards made to East Renfrewshire learners following the revision of awards initially made by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) would be carried out by the department, Councillor O'Kane invited the Director to make a brief presentation to the committee.

The Director provided an extremely comprehensive comparison of performance in 2020 highlighting that East Renfrewshire schools had once again performed very well and that the quality of awards had increased at all stages. Pupils had achieved outstanding, best ever results at S4, S5 and S6 as well as performing extremely well in a wide range of vocational

qualifications which now provided access for pupils to a very wide range of courses. Leaver destinations for learners in the senior phase had also produced the best ever results with 97.5% of leavers going on to positive destinations and 96.7% still in positive destinations as measured by Skills Development Scotland's (SDS) follow-up survey. He went on to advise that results for all East Renfrewshire young people, and particularly for the most disadvantaged pupils, had again improved, continuing the year on year trend seen over recent years; that levels of attainment for young people from the most deprived backgrounds as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) had increased at a faster rate than the overall cohort; and that this group had performed well above comparator groups nationally. The results provided clear evidence that East Renfrewshire had continued to raise the bar for all learners as well as further reducing the attainment gap and also that it continued to focus on excellence and equity to ensure that the department delivered on its vision of *"Everyone Attaining, Everyone Achieving through Excellent Experiences"*. The Director concluded his presentation by referring to a number of case studies which highlighted the results of a range of interventions tailored to the individual needs and learning styles of pupils and which had resulted in improved awards for those concerned.

Dr Angell welcomed the excellent report and noted in particular the improvements seen at Barrhead High School; further evidence of the closing of the attainment gap; and the increased uptake and variety of vocational course choices. He expressed his thanks to all school staff for an excellent performance in extremely difficult circumstances.

Councillor Merrick also commented on the excellent results achieved by young people and in support of Dr Angell particularly welcomed the further evidence of progress in closing the attainment gap. His comments were echoed by Mr Morris who thanked the Director for an excellent presentation and commended the hard work of all teaching and ancillary staff in light of the additional effort required in preparing and submitting assessments to the SQA within a short timeframe.

Councillor Buchanan added his congratulations to all staff and pupils for yet another set of outstanding results achieved in very difficult circumstances which would continue into next year. He noted that school staff were already working on pupil assessments for 2021 with a view to ensuring that all young people achieved the results which their efforts deserved.

Councillor O'Kane thanked the Director and all staff within the Department for their efforts in helping pupils to achieve an excellent set of results under a different system of assessment which would be used again in 2021. He expressed the view that the final results awarded to pupils had been fully merited. He concluded by explaining that he would continue to raise with CoSLA the need for clarity around the final shape of assessments in 2021 in order to ensure that staff could give pupils the best possible support at this important phase of their lives.

The committee agreed to note the report.

CHAIR