

PRIMARY SCHOOL ORGANISATION CONSULTATION
NOTES OF A MEETING HELD AT LONGMEADOW SCHOOL
ON 20 MARCH 2008

COMMUNITY/PARENTS' MEETING HELD AT 6.30pm

Present: Cllr. Ann Hartley (Shropshire County Council – Portfolio holder, Children's Services), Ian Budd (Assistant Corporate Director, Children's Services), Norrie Porter (Head of Premises and Planning), Huw Roberts (Headteacher Longmeadow School) Colin Hopkins (Diocesan Director of Education, Lichfield) and 101 members of the public.

Also in attendance: David Owen (Note taker).

Ian Budd opened the meeting and introduced those present. He explained:

- the reasons for the review;
- the review process; and
- possible next steps

The public were invited to comment and ask questions on the proposals.

1. Mr. R. Price (member of public) made a statement opposing any proposal to merge the schools. He believed that Bayston Hill was the biggest village in England and it was still growing. He foresaw difficulties with extra buildings taking up play area space for the children as well as problems with traffic and sewerage connections.

2. Mr. M. Edwards asked for clarification of funding implications of any proposals?

A. Ian Budd explained that the Dedicated Schools Grant (revenue money which included teaching costs) was distributed to schools through the Schools Forum and this was under pressure due to falling pupil numbers. The £8.5m capital funding which was available could only be spent on the infrastructure of schools.

3. Mr. Percy asked how the teaching of the youngsters would be affected during the period of consultation and whether it was likely to take up too much staff time?

A. Ian Budd responded that both schools had a very good and experienced staff. There was a period of uncertainty whilst the consultation proceeded but he was confident that the staff would ensure a settled environment for the children.

4. Mr. Jason King asked if the Longmeadow site had accommodated large numbers of children in the past?

A. Norrie Porter confirmed that it had accommodated significantly more children in the past and could, in fact, accommodate over 500 children. If the proposal was to proceed, the local authority would work closely with the governing body of the new school to look at the options of parking, drop-off etc. and making the buildings appropriate for the first part of the 21st century. It was confirmed that the site had accommodated over 330 children, even with the Music Centre on site.

5. Mr. A Derry felt that both schools had a distinctive ethos and asked what choice Christian parents would have if the Longmeadow school status were to disappear.

A. Ian Budd stressed that it was important that such views be made clear as part of the consultation process. He confirmed that the current governing body placed a high value on the church ethos and that it would work alongside the community if the proposal was to keep it. If another option was chosen, parents would have the opportunity of expressing a preference for a neighbouring C.E. school if they did not wish to transfer.

6. Ms. A. Jones asked why some schools had been omitted from the original list?

A. Ian Budd referred to the Cabinet paper which explained the process fully (see Appendix E). He confirmed that only factors outlined in the paper had been used in the process and that all schools had been treated equally.

7. Mr. A. Derry asked how the third option in the bullet points in the consultation document would operate?

A. Ian Budd confirmed that the competition rules related to new legislation. If the third option were to be chosen, both schools would close and a competition could occur which could involve a number of bidders. In either of the other options, the foundation of the new school would be known. Mr. Hopkins confirmed that Lichfield diocese would definitely be interested in bidding if the third option proceeded.

8. Ms. Jeanette Griffiths asked what the preferred site would be if the third option was adopted?

A. Norrie Porter explained that the site was not dependent on the option chosen. Longmeadow was the largest of the sites, and had been put forward for consideration. but the site could be used whichever of the three options went forward.

9. Ms. E. Hanky noted that parents had been asked to submit their views but asked if any notice would be taken of them?

A. Ann Hartley confirmed that the opinions of all stakeholders were valued and that all comments would be taken into account.

10. Mr. C. Child asked if extra buildings on the site would impinge on play area for children?

A. Norrie Porter responded that he foresaw “better” rather than “extra” buildings on site. There would also be the opportunity of looking at sporting facilities for community as well as school use on site as had been successfully done at Bicton.

11. Mr. J. King asked in the views of staff on the proposals had been taken into account?

A. Ann Hartley explained that separate meetings were being held with staff and that the authority would work closely with them and headteachers at each stage of the process.

12. Mr. D. Pengelly asked why Bayston Hill had been treated differently from other areas e.g. Shawbury, which also had two primary schools and there were no proposals to merge?

A. Norrie Porter replied that the two primary schools in Shawbury, as well as Albrighton, took children from a wider area including other small villages and hamlets. In Bayston Hill, almost all children could walk to school along a pavement.

13. Referring to paragraph 2, page 5 of the consultation document, Mr. M. Edwards had calculated that 179 houses in Bayston Hill were not connected to a pavement. Norrie Porter thanked him for the information.

14. Mr. A. Derry asked of the position of the nursery if the chosen site were to be Longmeadow.

A. Ian Budd confirmed that Early years provision would be considered in conjunction with the providers. Responding to a question from Mrs. L. Wilson, from a local nursery setting, he said that a further programme of consultation with other bodies would be set up.

15. Mr. R. Price asked that, as both schools were connected by footpaths, if this was not the “cheap option”?

A. Ian Budd wished to make it clear that if a decision was made it was a legal requirement that any school organizational change should be in the best educational interests of the area.

16. Mrs. L. Price referred to building development in the village and asked if this had been taken into consideration?

A. Norrie Porter responded that, on average, it would take a development of 250 family houses to produce 50 school age children. The local authority's view was that numbers would be stable over the foreseeable future although some flexibility would be built in to any proposals. Projections were currently available until 2012 and historical and population trends gave a prediction after that date.

17. Ms. C. Farrow asked how accurate the figures were and cited the example of an earlier reorganization which had suggested the closure of several secondary schools which were now successful?

A. Norrie Porter explained that it was the pattern of schools which was being examined at that time. Subsequently legislation on parental preference had altered the situation of a number of secondary schools. He warned that, in the primary sector, a relatively small drop in numbers could have a significant effect on funding.

18. Mrs. Farrow asked if consideration had been given to bringing children in to Bayston Hill from other areas.

A. Ian Budd confirmed that there was a policy to maintain a network of rural schools.

19. Mr. D. Pengelly asked if money would be available to improve access to the main road.

A. Ian Budd responded that, the local authority would work with planning and highways colleagues, as well as the school, governors and parents to establish a "safe route to school" framework.

20. Ms. S. Cousins asked if there was a future "bulge" in the birth rate would the Authority have to build another school?

A. Ian Budd emphasised that this possibility was not borne out by the figures. He believed that it was important to have confidence in the data and to take time to consider the future educational and extended school facilities needs of the community.

21. Mr. A. Derry sought clarification of the position of the staff as part of the process if a remodeling took place.

A. Ian Budd explained that there would be a very clear staffing protocol in place with a focus on providing jobs for everyone who wished to remain. He felt it important that staff had a feeling of security. The pattern of any merger would see the governance arrangements being put in place first, followed by the budget and then the staffing structure. The aim would be to include as many existing staff as possible into the new structure and to work with anyone displaced until a suitable alternative was found. The Authority had a good record in such matters.

22. Mr. A. Derry asked how the objectivity of the existing governors could be ensured?

A. Ian Budd stated that it was vital to ensure fairness to both school communities. There should be fair representation from both communities in the governance arrangements as well as the monitoring committees within the staffing protocol. Fairness would be the focus of any change.

23. Mr. Derry pointed out that the most important aspect of any reorganization would be the children and asked how the staff would be kept focused on their education in the period of uncertainty.

A. Ian Budd explained that meetings had been held with the staff of both schools. Each member of staff would have the contact details of officers dealing with the project and they were committed to meet up at each stage. The staff were highly professional and would ensure a safe, caring environment for the children.

24. Ms. E. Yend asked for confirmation of the positive impact of amalgamation.

A. Norrie Porter believed that an amalgamated school would be more resilient with a wider range of specialisms. He agreed to produce a paper with adviser colleagues, listing the perceived advantages as well as other factors which would change as a result of a merger. Ian Budd believed the vision was of a high quality learning environment, but emphasized that the local authority wanted to hear ideas from the public as to their visions for the future. He also noted that the Countywide vision for primary education could be adapted to different communities.

25. Mr. J. Farrow stated that the proposals had created a lot of tension in the village and wondered what the County Council was trying to achieve e.g. where were any savings coming from?

A. Ian Budd noted that savings are calculated from funding formula calculations. He added that if any reorganization was to take place it had to be in the best educational interest of the children of the area. This was an opportunity to receive investment and an opportunity to forge a vision and consensus. It was only after a lengthy process that detailed work could proceed.

26. Mrs. L. Wilson felt that all advantages would be long term and asked what support would be given to children through the interim period.

A. Norrie Porter cited the recent example of the merger of Bicton and Grafton schools where the local authority had worked with governors, children and staff for a one year period prior to the amalgamation as was being proposed in this case. There was a need to ensure that there was not a “dip” in performance and Bicton had, in fact, featured in the top 50 most improved schools. Ian Budd confirmed that all partners, including the children would be listened to. In the past, colleagues from other schools who had been through the process had visited schools to advise on their experiences and this had helped in transition planning.

27. Ms. J. Burnell sought clarification that capital funds would only be available from government if the two schools were to merge.

A. Norrie Porter explained that the proposal was not solely driven by capital, or indeed revenue, funding. Amalgamation would go ahead only if it was in the best interests of the children of the area. £8.5m of capital funding was available and this created an opportunity for an excellent outcome for the children (who would also be involved in the design of the new school). It was not the sole factor to remove spare places but to make best use of the opportunity of creating a new school. If two schools remained there was no guarantee that they would receive the same priority for capital money.

28. Mr. J Hitchings (Vice chair of Longmeadow governors) sought clarification that that his understanding of the position was correct. i.e. Overall there were fewer children in the system which was generating less money. The county, therefore, had to save money in some way and, as a result, each school’s budget would be affected. The driver for the exercise in Bayston Hill was the best educational model for the children taking the very best facets from both existing schools, which could also give a saving of £90k through the funding formula.

A. Ian Budd confirmed that his understanding was correct.

29. Mr. A. Phillips (service provider at Oakland Primary School) stated that he had opened a nursery in the village 6 years ago and that numbers were continually rising.

A. Norrie Porter suggested that this was because of the fact that more parents were seeking nursery places for early years children than had previously been the case.

30. A member of the public expressed concern that the issue was creating a divide in the community.

A. Ann Hartley confirmed that the local authority was aware of the position and it was certainly not wanted or intended. The Chairs of governors and Heads of both schools were currently working together.

She thanked all for their attendance, courtesy and patience and closed the meeting at 20.10.