

PRIMARY SCHOOL ORGANISATION CONSULTATION

NOTES OF A MEETING HELD AT OAKLAND SCHOOL, BAYSTON HILL ON 10 APRIL 2008

GOVERNORS' MEETING HELD AT 5.00pm

Present: Cllr. Ann Hartley (Shropshire County Council – Portfolio Holder Children and Young People's Services) Ian Budd (Assistant Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Services), Norrie Porter (Head of Premises and Planning), Ann Gibson (Headteacher Oakland School). Governors: Rev. F. Biseker, Mrs. S. Brookes, Mrs. J. Clarke, Mr. T. Clarke, Mr. P. Cross, Mrs. N.Hughes, Mr. C.Lock, Mr. F. Morris, Mr. C. Taylor, Mrs. T. Thomas.

Apologies were received from Mrs. B. Lane.

Also in attendance: David Owen (Note taker).

Ian Budd opened the meeting and introduced those present. Rather than outlining the proposals which by now were well known to governors he believed the time would be better spent on a question and answer session and invited governors' questions.

1. Cameron Taylor asked why the figure of 92 had been chosen as the minimum number on roll for the criterion in the policy.

Norrie Porter explained that it was a balance between government generated income figures and admission ideals. He undertook to send a written answer explaining in detail.

2.Cameron Taylor asked when the written notes of the public meetings would be available.

Ian Budd responded that the drafts had been sent to schools that week and that it was hoped to publish them on line the following week.

3. Felix Morris sought clarification on Oakland's position as a rural or urban school.

Ian Budd acknowledged that there had been a great deal of debate on the subject. In terms of the statutory decision making process for both of the Bayston Hill schools the process is that undertaken for nationally designated rural schools. Councillors will need to make a decision in the best interest of education in the area. They will need to decide how best the County Council's own policy should be applied. He confirmed that the Authority was bound by the

terms of the Statutory Instrument which had been incorporated into the County Council's policy.

4. Paul Cross asked if councillors would make an "arbitrary" decision on which schools would proceed to the formal consultation?

Ian Budd responded that the Cabinet members were obliged, following the formative stage of consultation, to make a decision in the "best interests" of present and future children and to give the rationale for that decision.

5. Ann Gibson felt that Oakland should have been "filtered out" at the fourth stage of the process in comparison with similar schools in the county.

Ian Budd explained that, following the formative stage, there would be a report to members. Matters such as the nature of the community and what distinguished it from others would be taken into consideration. Similar schools in the county differed from Oakland in that some served a large rural hinterland and several hamlets as opposed to a built up compact area.

6. Cameron Taylor asked for it to be formally recorded that governors felt that Oakland School had been unfairly targeted by giving it an urban status and its inability to reach the 7 class minimum. He felt that the local authority had not produced evidence to convince governors that the school should be treated in the same way as other schools in the county.

Ann Hartley guaranteed that, despite comments made to suggest the contrary, all responses would be carefully read by Cabinet members before they came to a decision. She advised that Cabinet was visiting all the schools proposed for merger with an open mind and confirmed that, at governors' suggestion, they would take in the part of Bayston Hill to the east of the A5. Chris Lock suggested that a representative of the governing body could be available to accompany the party.

7. In answer to a question from Paul Cross, Ian Budd explained that the current aim in the formative consultation period was to hear and consider as many ideas as possible. Three proposals had been included in the consultation model, but it was possible that more could come forward as a result of the consultation. Other local groups, such as early years, were also being consulted. Answering a comment from Chris Lock, Norrie Porter pointed out that there was a difference between the school governance and the building. It was possible for one school to close but for the continuing school to use the "closed" school's premises in reorganisational changes.

8. Sue Brookes stated that the decision must be the best for the children but felt that it was not possible to make an informed decision without knowing the full possibilities.

Ian Budd responded that there were sites where governing bodies and staff were working together to look at all possibilities and the local authority was willing to help facilitate such discussion.

9. Ann Gibson sought confirmation that a status quo option was still possible.

Ian Budd confirmed that the nature of a formative consultation was that other proposals than the ones suggested could be considered. He agreed with Mrs. Gibson that governors could provide counter proposals. It was always better to have a consensus view in such matters but he realised that this could not always be achieved.

10. Tara Thomas noted that at the Longmeadow public meeting, officers had promised a document outlining the advantages and disadvantages of small and large schools and asked when this would be available?

Norrie Porter confirmed that it was currently in draft form and that it would be posted on the website in the near future.

11. Ann Gibson noted that on the “Politics Show” the school was described as “vibrant”. She felt that the school was, indeed, vibrant and had high quality with the numbers set to be stable. A parent had raised the point at a public meeting that, when Longmeadow was larger it had been on the verge of Ofsted special measures. She felt that parents needed assurance that the combined school proposal would work and pointed out that there were only 3 spare classrooms at Longmeadow.

12. Felix Morris regretted that having “thought outside the box” e.g. with the inclusion of the external nursery, the school was “under threat”.

13. Paul Cross believed that it had been difficult getting hold of “hard” information. As a parent he had one child that would thrive in any school organization but had concerns for the other. Another governor felt that there had been unfairness in that not all the information had been shared with both schools at the same time.

Ian Budd commented that this was an important perception to recognize and he knew that some people in both school communities had felt “hurt” by statements made by some in the community. He confirmed that the process had been totally even handed but he was aware that such perceptions existed. In other areas schools had moved into constructive discussions without prejudice and without commitment about different ways forward that could be possible.

14. Nicola Hughes understood that an approach had been made previously to Longmeadow governors for a discussion without success.

Norrie Porter believed that they had not wanted to be involved before the consultation stage but he confirmed that Mr. Roberts (Longmeadow Headteacher) was very keen on instigating discussions and visits across the schools.

15. Cameron Taylor asked how, at the end of the formative consultation, the report would be formed.

Ian Budd responded that a separate report would be prepared for each proposal which would include a summary of all contributions, background information and a recommendation from officers.

In answer to Mr. Taylor's fear that any proposals put forward by governors could not be as professionally presented Ian Budd confirmed that the local authority would give any assistance they could. Ann Hartley said that Cabinet could also commission officers to look further into proposals which had come forward if they were seen to have merit. There was no strict timetable and the priority was to "get it right".

16. Cameron Taylor and Ann Gibson expressed concern that items that they had asked to be included in the consultation document had not been. They cited some percentages which had been omitted and some differences in the Ofsted reports between both schools.

Ian Budd emphasised that the LA had never sought any form of competition between the schools and welcomed the joint fact file which was currently being produced. The overriding factor in the process was what was best for local children and he felt that any competition between the schools got in the way of this.

Cameron Taylor responded that the governors had the right to express their views. Janice Clarke regretted that, already, an element of competition had been created both in adults and children and that a certain amount of segregation was evident. If the proposal were to go ahead it was necessary that the children should be integrated at an early stage.

Ann Hartley agreed that, if the decision was to proceed, it was important that it be done positively and also confirmed that Cabinet members would have access to Ofsted reports when making decisions. Ian Budd felt that everyone, the County Council, governors, staff and the wider community had a responsibility for community leadership.

17. As a teacher, Sue Brookes had received many questions from parents on the situation. Whilst trying to be positive, she felt that she had not got sufficient information to give a total assurance.

Ian Budd confirmed that all groups would be involved with any transition and the planning process as well as the building programme. Other people who had been through the process had found it positive.

In answer to Ann Gibson, Norrie Porter could not give total commitment to a merger being held over until building was complete until it could be discussed with the governing body of a new school. He confirmed, however, that all options could be discussed.

18. Sue Brookes reminded the meeting that teachers knew their children and that their views should be taken into consideration.

Ian Budd responded that as well as existing children, future generations and the community would also be considered. He reminded governors that a rationale would also be provided.

19. Paul Cross asked if education practitioners would be involved in designing any new school.

Ian Budd confirmed that the lead officers all had experience of school reorganisation projects elsewhere and that both he and Norrie Porter had a teaching background. The advisory service team was situated in the same building and was easily accessible to officers.

20. Ann Gibson asked how the decision as to whether a new school would have a religious or community character would be made.

Ian Budd responded that there was no predetermination although there was a requirement at least to keep a balance. The statutory proposals would have to make clear what was proposed. Diocesan representatives would be willing to visit the school to discuss the situation. Norrie Porter felt it important for governors to give their views on this element as part of the consultation process.

Rev. Biseker felt that it was important that, currently, there was one faith and one community school in the community and that something would be lost if that were to change.

21. Chris Lock asked how much weight would be given to parents' views in the decision process?

Ian Budd emphasised that the decision was not based on a referendum or the number of replies received, rather it would be the quality of the evidence brought forward. It was important to encourage people to get their views across.

22. Chris Lock noted that the school was currently in the Shropshire top ten and that existing parents would wish a new school to at least equal that. He believed that both of the Bayston Hill schools felt that the current position with two schools was “fine”.

Ian Budd responded that all staff and governing bodies were committed to providing the best possible education for the children and, he was sure, would continue to do so. He did not believe it to be true that everyone connected with both schools felt that things could not be improved in the interests of the children.

Norrie Porter pointed out that the newly amalgamated school at Bicton featured in the top 50 improved schools in the country which proved that there was not necessarily a “dip” connected to a change. A new school would also have the opportunity of a great deal of capital spending including, for example, “state of the art” IT equipment.

Ann Gibson pointed out that top ten positions change but that Oakland had shown consistent improvements since 2004. She believed that parents remained to be convinced that a larger school would be an improvement on the present arrangement. She confirmed, however, that, together with the staff, she would work for the benefit of all the children whatever the final outcome of the consultation.

Ann Hartley thanked the governors for their attendance and their useful contributions to the meeting. Norrie Porter suggested that, if any governor had a detailed question, they should write in with it.

The meeting closed at 18.35.