

PRIMARY SCHOOL ORGANISATION CONSULTATION

NOTES OF A MEETING HELD AT OSWESTRY INFANT SCHOOL ON 10 MARCH 2008

GOVERNORS' MEETING HELD AT 5.00pm

Present:

Liz Nicholson (Interim Director Community Services and Substantive Director Children and Young People's Services)

Norrie Porter (Head of Premises and Planning, Children and Young People's Services)

Cllr Karen Calder, Deputy Portfolio Holder for Children's Service

Cllr Joyce Barrow, Cabinet Member

10 governors

Headteacher

Penny McLagan (notetaker)

Introduction

Liz Nicholson opened the meeting and introduced those present. She explained:

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

The floor was then opened to questions/points as follows.

1. The governors felt that they had been kept in the dark as the consultation paper did not arrive at the school at the same time as Beech Grove had it and so Infant School parents had not received it until last Friday. They felt there was a heavy bias towards Beech Grove, who had their paper earlier. They also wished to emphasise that the governing body at the Infants School worked as a team and that they had issues with the approach by the chair of governors at Beech Grove. They also felt the consultation paper was not balanced as it put forward the case for a primary school but not the other side. They felt there had not been an opportunity for them to have their say on the policy.

In response, Liz Nicholson offered sincere apologies regarding the lateness of the documentation. She explained the Cabinet decision to consult on amalgamations had been delayed by the Scrutiny Panel call-in of the decision. The team had also wished to ensure the documentation was factually correct, so checking with schools had also taken time. She explained that the consultation paper put forward the case for a primary school as that is the Council's agreed policy and that the policy had been subject to public consultation during the autumn, when views on it had been sought over a six week period. The current consultation period was to give governing bodies the opportunity tonight to ask questions and then take the documentation away for

further consideration. There was a long period following tonight's meeting when the governors could respond, as the consultation period did not end until 2 May. Tonight was about seeking the views of the governors and parents on the proposal and different solutions could be offered by them.

2. The documentation did not make it clear that there could be any other options other than the three outlined in the papers.

Norrie Porter discussed the options outlined on p2 of the documentation. Liz Nicholson also explained the reasons for tonight's consultation meetings. The Council was seeking to deliver the vision contained in the policy, which was to maintain the high quality and standard of education in Shropshire, but there was also the financial problem of a £1.8million shortfall. Unless action was taken then the financial consequences could result in every school losing the equivalent of a teacher or two teaching assistants and that would affect the quality of education; even if all the amalgamations were agreed there would still be a financial shortfall.

3. Wasn't it up to the head to manage the budget?

In response, Liz Nicholson advised that the DSG did not give sufficient headroom.

4. Does the Council had a policy of fighting for more money?

Liz Nicholson responded that the funding problem was long-standing and that the Council had not been successful in getting additional money due to the way the national formula worked; it did not recognise the difficulties caused by sparsity. These difficulties were felt in all services provided by the Council, not just in education. The Council was part of F40, the group of 40 worst-funded authorities in the country, and SPARSE, both of which campaigned for additional funding.

Cllr Karen Calder added that a cross-party group from the Council had met with Jim Knight, Schools Minister, to put the case for more funding for Shropshire schools. He had recognised the problems but had said funding was set until 2011, when it would be looked at again.

5. If more effort was put into getting more money in Shropshire then there wouldn't be such a problem.

Liz Nicholson responded that the Council was doing what it could, there had been a meeting with the Schools Minister to put the case but he would not change the three year funding formula. She also said that Shropshire had a further difficulty in that it did not often meet national thresholds of deprivation or need, eg numbers of free school meals, to qualify for extra funding.

6. What are you doing differently to make it successful?

Liz Nicholson responded that we are continuing to talk with the government. The minister has given a commitment to look at it and Ian Budd is meeting with civil servants to ensure we get the capital we want for refurbishments. However, we are also being examined over our number of surplus places in schools. He was taken aback by the number of our surplus places but has still said he will not look at it again until 2011. We therefore do need to find a way to achieve a network of schools that we can sustain in order to decrease the number of surplus places.

7. Are surplus places still a problem in the schools that are now not closing?

Liz Nicholson responded that yes, they are but a policy commission is being established to look at this. A group including heads, governors, parents and diocesan representatives had formulated the original policy, but Councillors have said that they would like another look at it, hence the commission. Cllr Karen Calder added that this would strengthen our position with the government.

8. Could you clarify how you see the three options would work?

At the end of the consultation period, all the views from the meetings would be considered. There could be various options, not just the three outlined in the consultation document, for example two schools may put together a different solution, or a joint solution. It will depend on the response to the consultation. The Cabinet will then make a decision and either go ahead or not.

9. How would the Head be appointed? Would the head of the school taking the lead be the head of the new primary, if they wished it? We understood from our original interviews that there could be an interview competition.

Norrie Porter responded that there would be interviews if both schools close, but if one school expanded then the existing head would remain. If the head did not wish to take the post, or if they moved away, then ring fencing would apply provided the head at the other school was in a permanent post.

10. Can the school move away from LA control by agreement with the junior school?

Liz Nicholson responded that another organisation could bid to run the school. The permission of the Secretary of State would have to be sought. Norrie Porter added that the LA could bid and would be likely, though not guaranteed, to be approved because they are considered to be an excellent authority, which gives certain permissions.

11. Would a new governing body be established if the schools amalgamated? If amalgamation was on one site would that governing body take over?

Liz Nicholson responded that it was important for the new governing body to have the confidence of the parents and the community. It would probably therefore be better to

work together in partnership. There would already be some governors who sat on both governing bodies and others would come to the end of their term. There were a lot of things that the governing bodies could do to make it work in the best interests of the children. Norrie Porter added that of course larger schools had bigger governing bodies, as had happened at Bicton where as many of the Grafton governors as possible had been taken onto the new governing body.

12. How does the religious character of the school get decided?

Norrie Porter responded that technically the decision-maker for everything was the Council and they would take account of view expressed in the consultation. The diocese have the opportunity to refer decisions to the office of the schools adjudicator but if there is strong local preference the schools adjudicator would take that into account.

13. How would any building work be funded?

Liz Nicholson responded that there was government money earmarked for this and Shropshire had a robust plan for this which would go forward in January. It would provide over £8million for refurbishment and, in some instances, replacement. Norrie Porter added that there was additional government capital funding for primary schools which would bring the amount to almost £11 million between 2008-2011. This was part of the government's plan to make all schools fit for the second half of the 21st century and therefore, whatever happened, substantial investment in buildings could be expected.

14. Would the budget for an amalgamated school be less than for the two schools?

Liz Nicholson responded that yes it would and we would be happy to look at finances with you if you wished.

15. How much money would we get?

Liz Nicholson responded that the figures had not been run through the funding formula for the various options but reiterated that we would be happy to look at finances with the school. They are broadly based on a lump sum plus an amount per pupil.

16. How much work would there be to bring the buildings up to 21st century standard?

Norrie Porter responded that there would be the potential to create a better staff space or better shared facilities.

17. The practicalities don't add up if there are two separate buildings, it would be the same as now but with one less head. The staff don't have the time to go between the two buildings.

Liz Nicholson responded that this was the kind of thing that the governors needed to

think about when considering what would be the best local solution if the amalgamation went forward. There did not need to be a replication of what existed now, even though an infant and junior building was needed.

18. So what is the point of amalgamating if we stay the same but less? It's all about one less head's salary.

Liz Nicholson responded that it was definitely not just about saving one head's salary. The benefits the school would see from all through primary education lay behind the proposal.

19. We would need to put as much money as possible into making this work.

Liz Nicholson responded please feed this into the consultation, it was helpful to receive your comments such as this.

20. But it might be watered down because we cannot afford it, we have got to be practical but it must work.

Liz Nicholson responded that, again, this is why we are consulting to get the best local solution.

21. It feels like we have to agree but sort out how it is done.

Karen Calder responded that the Cabinet needed to know what was wanted locally. It feels like you actually don't quite know what to do with this, we would love to know your vision.

22. What is your vision?

Liz Nicholson responded that there would be different solutions around the county, there was not one overarching solution as each area had a local context and situation. At the moment we are at the early stage of discussion with each school rather than saying "here you are, this is it". We have until 2 May to discuss and provide you with information.

Norrie Porter responded that it was not the Shropshire way to tell people what to do, rather to work with organisations and people towards a satisfactory solution.

23. It is not something we have ever thought about so it's very difficult for us.

Liz Nicholson responded that the discussions during the autumn were in terms of agreeing a policy that would deliver a network of sustainable primary schools, it is not something that has just happened, indeed several schools have since the autumn voluntarily put themselves forward for amalgamation.

24. (Headteacher) The previous policy was to amalgamate only if it could be into one school. My concern is how this will work with two buildings.

Liz Nicholson responded that we are very happy to talk about all the options once all the meetings are completed.

25. (Headteacher) We have got some of the things outlined. We do work together but some of the disadvantages, eg transferring of staff and their skills, are going to be much harder in two buildings and we would want to be in one building as soon as possible. We would want a commitment from the authority that if we agree we would want that. The children need someone on hand if there is a difficulty, how would it be best for the children if that person was not in the same building?

Liz Nicholson responded that the authority would look at that and some will come out and talk to you again during the consultation period (ie before 2 May).

Action point: Norrie Porter and Karen Calder to visit the school before 2 May.

26. Two of us are also governors at Beech Grove; we don't want to set one school against another, we are just concerned how it will work.

27. So long as the discussion is on a level playing field i.e. Information goes to both schools at the same time. We are concerned that there might be a hidden agenda.

Liz Nicholson apologised again that paperwork seemed not to have reached the two schools at the same time. She reassured the governors that nothing was driving this in terms of other schools and said that if they had concerns in the future they should contact either Carol Tiddy, Acting Director, or herself. She said it was very important to her that if the governors felt things were not working, or if there were issues, they should get in touch. She added that she had met with other heads and chairs of governors and was happy to do this for Oswestry Infants if that would help to reassure them.

28. We have not talked about building a new school.

Liz Nicholson responded that it was most unlikely because of the quality of the current buildings. There were schools in other areas with a higher priority for a new building because their buildings were no longer fit for purpose. So at this moment in time a new building here was not an option.

Norrie Porter added that the authority did, however, have generous funding for refurbishment as part of the government's primary schools capital programme. This was not just for amalgamation but for all primary schools, to ensure they were fit for the 21st century.

29. So in our particular situation there should be substantial investment?

Norrie Porter responded yes.

Liz Nicholson reiterated that she was happy to come out and continue discussions with the staff and governors before 2 May. The next step of the process would be for Cabinet Members to examine the result of the consultation at their meeting on 19 May. The papers for this would be in the public domain (on the SCC website) a week before. If Cabinet decided to go ahead with the proposals, there would be a further period of consultation of statutory notices, with a final decision being made on 20 July.

30. What if most schools say no?

Liz Nicholson responded that would be a decision Cabinet would have to take.

31. You have still got to save the money?

Liz Nicholson responded yes.

Karen Calder advised that what might come out of the consultation could not be pre-empted. The consultation on the policy during the autumn had unfortunately been turned into a referendum on individual schools, which was not what it was about.

Liz Nicholson thanked everyone for their time and drew the meeting to a close at 6.25 pm.