

PRIMARY SCHOOL ORGANISATION CONSULTATION

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

COMMUNITY/PARENTS' MEETING HELD AT 6.30pm

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

9 Parents

Headteacher

Penny McLagan (notetaker)

Apologies:

Cllr Phil Box

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. (Parent Governor) What would be the impact on this school in terms of headteachers etc?

Liz Nicholson responded this would depend which option was decided on. Should both schools be closed and a new primary created, if both heads were interested in the post here would be interviews and one would be selected. Or sometimes a head would obtain a post elsewhere, or retire or would seek redundancy out of choice.

2. (Parent Governor) But we have two young headteachers and it would be a shame if one had to go through doing this. We want the best for them too.

Liz Nicholson responded that this was understood but it was also about the future of the children. Shropshire had very good schools and the vision was to sustain that. The problem in Shropshire was that pupil numbers were decreasing and therefore the money from the government also decreased. Without the new vision and policy the excellent standard could not be continued because there would not be sufficient

resources. The potential impact was that that even if a school maintained its numbers the budget deficit would mean that the equivalent of one teacher or two teaching assistants would be lost. That was the issue: the government grant is based on the number of pupils, which had gone down. This decline in numbers had been going on for a number of years and the bottom had not yet been reached.

3. Sam Thomas, Parent. The leaflet says the numbers for Oswestry Infant have gone up.

Liz Nicholson responded that the government looked at numbers across the whole county, not just in one area.

4. Sam Thomas, Parent. Regarding the three proposals, what does it mean if you close both schools and have one? Or do one of the other options?

Liz Nicholson responded that the impact would be in the organisation and management of the school, that is, there would be one headteacher and one governing body.

Norrie Porter responded that regarding the other options, there were two issues. If the Infant School closed and Beech Grove expanded (or vice versa) then there would be a change in the church character of one of the schools, even though the RE syllabus was the same in each school. The third option (close both) gave more freedom to decide the character of the school. The governing body could, for example, explore voluntary aided status in which the governors decide the setting of the syllabus and admissions policy, or being a foundation school where the basis of the governing body would be local parents and businesses. However, there would be very little difference between the three options in terms of what the children would experience in the classroom.

5. Sam Thomas, Parent. How will it work practically if both buildings are used?

Liz Nicholson responded that this was something for the school to think through, the County Council was not coming to the consultation with a blueprint of what it would look like. There would be a whole year to plan if the school went on to the next stage of the procedure. The arrangement of the buildings was not the same at any two of the schools being considered for amalgamation and everyone therefore needed to look at what was best locally - the new headteacher and governing body may, for example, want to look at accommodating the children in one building.

6. Sam Thomas, Parent. At what point will you be able to give us the layout etc of the end product?

Liz Nicholson responded that a decision would be made by 20 July, unless the church appealed to the Schools Adjudicator. Then from September the authority would be working with both schools on what they would like to see regarding staffing, buildings etc.

7. Mandy Evans, Parent. I have a young child in this school with special educational needs. This school has bent over backwards to help her. Children of her age (year 1)

will not get that kind of help. The money will be geared towards the older children but it is to this younger age group that the money needs to go.

Liz Nicholson responded that funding for statemented children was ring-fenced to that child and followed them to whichever school they attended. The authority's formula recognised the needs of the children and that some did have a statement, but there were also children whose needs were due to learning delay and these were met by School Action and School Action Plus. There was no difference in this funding whether the child was at Infant or Primary school so parent should not worry that the money would only be spent on the older children.

8. Sam Thomas, Parent. Procedures here, though, are better than at Beech Grove.

Liz Nicholson responded that part of the ethos of working together would be looking at what was right for the school. The staff in the new school would know all the children and therefore some things would improve because it was one school. There would be one set of procedures and policies rather than two.

A governor added that the governors would keep an eye on it.

9. Kevin Sumners, Parent. Who will benefit, the children or the council?

Liz Nicholson responded the children.

10. Kevin Sumners, Parent. There would be additional costs for parents eg new uniforms etc.

Norrie Porter responded that in other schools a transitional fund had been established to help with such things. It had also been used to help fund staff training on working together eg on joint policy.

11. Kevin Sumners, Parent. What would happen to the site? Would it be sold for housing? Would the school benefit?

Liz Nicholson responded that Cabinet had already said that they had no plans to do this, but if in the future it did, then a commitment has been made that the money would be for children in schools.

12. Kevin Sumner, Parent. Will we have to go this again when the Unitary Council comes in?

Liz Nicholson responded no because District Councils have no responsibility for schools, only the County Council. It will be a policy in the new council.

13. Sam Thomas, Parent. Does one of the three options have to go ahead?

Liz Nicholson responded that the policy was to set up a network of schools for all-through primary education. In your response you should say which option, in your opinion, fits best with that policy, or offer an alternative option of your own that also fits with the policy.

Karen Calder said that the autumn consultation on the policy had turned into a referendum on whether to close individual schools, when what Cabinet really wanted to know was what people thought about the policy on primary schools. Tonight's meeting and the rest of the consultation period until 2 May was for people to say how they see things progressing. If parents had any innovative ideas or suggestions then they would be very welcome as part of the responses to the consultation.

14. Sam Thomas, Parent. So what if we said we did not want it?

Liz Nicholson responded that Cabinet would have to look at your opinion that this particular proposal did not fit with the policy. You would need to let us know why it did not fit and give an alternative proposal, which must also fit within the policy.

Joyce Barrow said that Cabinet wanted what was best for the children in Shropshire, the best education and the best facilities.

15. Mandy Evans, Parent. Are you happy that a school with a split site works well? I didn't enjoy my personal experience of it and there was no feeling of enhancing a good community.

Liz Nicholson responded that lessons had been learned from how things were done in the past and there was an opportunity for some capital refurbishment and investment. The authority had experience of what did and did not work well and how to use capital to prioritise. Norrie Porter and Karen Calder had also agreed in the meeting with the governors that they would come and talk to them about this.

16. Parent Governor. How many previous amalgamations have been done in Shropshire?

Liz Nicholson named examples Albrighton, Bicton, Trinity, Brown Clee, St Leonards, Bridgnorth.

17. Parent Governor. It would be good to know what mistakes were made and what did and didn't work well. Do you have information like that which could help us?

Liz Nicholson responded that the Headteacher had visited Albrighton and discussed this with the head there, also that Bicton and Grafton had involved the children in creating something new and working together, but that each community would find that different things would work for them. She said that she knew it was hard for the parents, with their own concerns, to be calm and reassuring with their children.

18. Headteacher. There is always a positive side, there is always a bit of anxiety currently about "moving up" to Beech Grove, but one young pupil has said she is not going up to Beech Grove now because it's going to be one school.

19. Parent. But moving schools now helps with the bigger move when they go to secondary school later on.

20. Sam Thomas, Parent. It is good to get them used to the idea of moving schools.

There is also the worry of Year 1's mixing with the older pupils.

Liz Nicholson responded that there are different views and concerns but that she believed there were many more advantages than disadvantages. The authority would not professionally advise something that was not backed by research into the positive aspects and advantages of primary schools, which provided real opportunities for children.

21. Kevin Sumners, Parent. Are we just sitting here because the County Council lost the battle to close schools? Because the rural ones shouted louder? Are you now picking up on the town schools?

Joyce Barrow responded that no, this was already in the policy and agreed.

Liz Nicholson responded that it was one of the five principles. Councillors still needed to find ways to remove the surplus places and so were looking at how to do it. This is where the Policy Commission will come in. The commission would go back and check out the assumptions regarding size of school.

22. Kevin Sumners, Parent. This came out afterwards.

Joyce Barrow responded that no, it happened at the same time.

23. Mandy Evans, Parent. It is important that you come out and talk to us because we are hearing all sorts of rumours. We need to hear from you what really is going on.

Liz Nicholson agreed that communication was important. The authority did receive feedback from clerks of governing bodies if something had been raised and information was shared within the council to support schools, but if you as parents have concerns, please telephone and talk to us otherwise we won't know if things are not right, or correct misinformation.

Joyce Barrow added that she was very happy for people to contact her if they wanted to ask anything.

24. Sam Thomas, Parent. We chose this school because it is small, the only one in Oswestry.

25. Parent. We like it because they come into the nursery and then go into Reception rather than into a big school. If the amalgamation is going to be done it needs to be done properly.

Liz Nicholson responded that it was these sorts of things that would be very helpful to receive into the consultation. Tell us what you think would make it work properly and what is important, such as the transfer from nursery and SEN policy. Members can then challenge officers and ask them how they are looking at these things and what are the options.

26. Parent. Current children will not benefit from investment.

Liz Nicholson responded that headteachers had been told they must invest today's money in today's children and not save it up. There was going to be a significant amount of investment and headteachers will not stop investing because there might be a change.

27. Kevin Sumner, Parent. Why have we left the decision until now? You could knock them down and start again.

Liz Nicholson responded that nothing would be knocked down, it would be one governing body not new buildings. This proposal had not happened before because it was not in the previous school organisation policy. Members looked at the old policy and decided it needed to change, hence the new one, adopted in December.

28. Kevin Sumner, Parent. Why have the finances not been made available to schools before?

Liz Nicholson responded that this was because the government had not made it available. Norrie Porter added that the money came under government policy of Schools for the Future. All secondary schools would be refurbished by 2015 and now something similar, but on a smaller scale, was being done for primary schools. It happened at the same time as discussions began with Councillors on the Primary School Organisation Policy.

29. Kevin Sumner, Parent. At what level will this school benefit from that money?

Norrie Porter responded that he would be meeting with the staff and governors of both the Infant and Beech Grove school to decide this, but substantial refurbishment of the buildings could be expected as well as improved educational facilities such as better library facilities.

Liz Nicholson added that, at the same time, the problem of decreasing school revenue must be tackled. Norrie Porter said that the authority did not have a plan to tell schools how things would be done, the council wished to work with schools and take ideas on board.

30. Kevin Sumner, Parent. We want reassurance about the changes.

Liz Nicholson responded that there would be change but how much could not be said.

31. Sam Thomas, Parent. Do you really want one site, or joined up with buildings?

Liz Nicholson responded if that is what you want.

32. Sam Thomas, Parent. We don't want Infant children walking across, there would have to be some kind of check up.

Liz Nicholson responded that this would be something for the new governing body and headteacher to look at, along with other options.

33. Sam Thomas, Parent. The document reads like that.

Norrie Porter said that was not a County Council view and there were quite a lot of unfilled places in both of the two schools. The issue was what was the best use of the facilities.

34. Kevin Sumner, Parent. So if Beech Grove is chosen and we added extra classrooms would they be permanent buildings?

Liz Nicholson responded they would be permanent not temporary and Norrie Porter added that they would not be mobiles, but buildings to last around 60 years.

35. Mandy Evans, Parent. Each school has a yearly budget available to spend, will it be two budgets added together?

Liz Nicholson responded that the new budget would not be exactly double, the school would have a lump sum and an amount per child.

36. Kevin Sumner, Parent. So it is just about cost cutting?

Liz Nicholson responded that it was a way of saving money but the vision came first and was paramount.

37. Kevin Sumner, Parent. People in Oswestry feel they are being sacrificed because of decisions in London.

Liz Nicholson responded that the aim was to keep the quality with less schools

38. Sam Thomas, Parent. Are there any extra savings eg for extra staff?

Liz Nicholson responded no. The authority received a pot of money from the government which funds education provision, the vast majority of this funded schools. It is called the Dedicated Schools Grant and also funds Early Years, school meals and special educational needs.

Karen Calder said that she had been part of a cross-party group from Shropshire that met with the Schools Minister, Jim Knight, to say that Shropshire does not have sufficient funding. The Minister had said that, although sympathetic, he would not look at it until 2011. What we have now is it, there would be no more.

39. Headteacher. The price of educating here is more and parents need to know that they are not getting as good a deal for their taxes – you get less here than, for example, in Telford, but more than a rural school.

40. Sam Thomas, Parent. I don't see what we are going to gain, I haven't seen anything yet that tells me we will. We need to have things explained in plain English to get the funding message through.

41. Headteacher. The financial situation is inherited.

42. Sam Thomas, Parent. Why does the Junior School have less than here? Parents need to know how a school is managed.

Liz Nicholson responded that there was more to the proposal than just money. Junior schools are historically less well funded than infant schools, based on different schools and context and different ways of working. Governing bodies now make those decisions and so there could be a different management and staffing structure

Liz Nicholson added that a benefit would be a consistency of practice and an opportunity to ensure that teachers can support children from one class to the next. We had tried to explain the benefits of all-through primary schools, if parents are not convinced we need to look again at how we are explaining things.

43. Headteacher. It could be good but the biggest concern is the building re-organisation. I don't think a primary school is a bad thing but the physical building and how it will work does need discussion.

44. Sam Thomas, Parent. I don't want the good start the children now have to be lost.

Liz Nicholson responded that this is a critical thing for the governing body to ensure and parents must share with them what they think.

45. Sam Thomas, Parent. Information needs to be put in language we can understand. A lot of parents do not understand it.

Joyce Barrow agreed that information needed to be in plain English.

Liz Nicholson said she would take this comment on board.

Liz Nicholson asked if there were further questions and drew the meeting to a close. She welcomed the opportunity to discuss the proposals with parents and was pleased they had felt able to ask so many questions. She reiterated that this was just the start of the consultation period, there were parent governors at the school who would be having further discussions with the authority. Parents should feel free to write in, use the website form or email to add their views, individual or collective, to the consultation. She said that parents should put across any points that were important to them eg SEN or the ethos/feeling of the school. She thanked everyone for attending and the meeting closed at 7.50 pm.