

**PRIMARY SCHOOL ORGANISATION CONSULTATION
MEOLE BRACE INFANT AND JUNIOR SCHOOLS**

**NOTES OF A MEETING HELD AT MEOLE BRACE JUNIOR SCHOOL
ON 13 MARCH 2008**

GOVERNORS' MEETING HELD AT 5.00pm

Introduction

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

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

The meeting was then opened up for debate in the local context, as the subject headings in the consultation paper were discussed.

John Otter (Inf Sch) asked what other options were open on taking the schools forward.

IB explained that federations were another way forward, either between the two schools, or with others.

Robert Mulford (Inf Sch) asked why the threshold had been set at 420 pupils and why 3 to 4 year-olds had not been considered. Smaller schools, he felt, were more suitable to that age of child and he would be very disappointed if the 3 to 4 year-olds were not considered.

IB stated that if variations to the 420 limit were suggested then they would have to be considered. Recent successes had suggested that keeping both buildings had been beneficial in terms of children's familiarity with their environment. Pre-school children would be considered. There were no plans to take away the nursery facilities on sites.

Rev Kevin Roberts (Inf Sch) asked what the status of the County Council's policy was, and how resolute it intended to be with the policy. Would it be sufficiently flexible? If it were to appear like a 'juggernaut' being forced through, then some consideration would need to be given as to whether or not it was worth working against it.

IB explained that the County Council's Cabinet had voted 33 to 13 in favour of applying the policy. It was acknowledged that there were good outcomes from the schools, however, the County Council's staff had considered and advised that they could be even better as one school. The findings of the pre-consultation would be presented to Cabinet for consideration, although the basis of the consultation at this time was for an all-through primary school, in line with the County Council's Consultation Policy.

Robert Leighton acknowledged that the paper mentioned generic benefits, but asked what specific benefits there were for the schools at Meole.

IB responded by referring to experiences showing that, with local input, benefits included a wider skill base and range of curriculum opportunities. There was also a commitment to use the Primary Capital Programme to enhance and refurbish learning and working accommodation.

Robert Mulford expressed his concern that there was an implication that no consultation took place between the schools. He felt that the consultation between year 2 at the Infant School and year 3 at the Junior School had been very good. He stated that either they were very good at Meole Brace or they simply weren't being recognised for it.

Mark Crisp (Inf Sch) asked if there were any specific cases, locally rather than nationally, of a noticeable drop in attainment between infant and junior phases.

IB explained that there were no examples at all-through primary schools.

Mark Crisp asked why financial data was not included in the document.

IB explained that a document known as a Section 52 statement, produced by the County Council is publicly available. There was not a problem in producing further financial papers for discussion. However, a judgement had been made by County Council officers, Members and professional partners that concluded that infant and junior schools coming together as primary schools had significant benefits for the children. If different views are made then they will be reported on to Cabinet in order for an informed decision to be made. **IB's** personal experience had shown that where people had worked together then this had brought about good outcomes.

Mark Crisp felt that there was an implication that the Authority simply wanted to get on with the amalgamation without any argument.

IB emphasised that there was no set of end solutions and no blue print for provision. Continuation of discussions should produce something worthwhile.

Clare Davies (Jun Sch) asked why there was seen to be a need to change what was already provided, if this was already good.

IB explained that the issue had never been simply a question of throwing ideas in the air and seeing how they land. It was considered that if the strengths of schools were built upon then there were opportunities for producing excellent ones.

Robert Leighton asked how the benefits between now and future potential would be benchmarked. He reiterated this question and declared that he was in favour if the School would be markedly better equipped by going through the process.

IB explained that this was the formative stage of consultation. It was important to meet with others in the process and share the evidence produced. However, investment to improve and enhance facilities is one part of the process.

Alan James (Jun Sch) expressed concern over comparisons with the recent Albrighton schools amalgamation. That, he felt, was a different situation and he was only concerned with the effects at Meole Brace and not elsewhere in the County. The governors had not been consulted on the options available and he considered that the process was simply being railroaded through. As a parent, he wished to know what the County Council's preferred option was.

IB confirmed that there was no strong preference on the legal route, however, the judgement made was that an all-through primary had more advantages. It would be most unfortunate if people felt that they were not able to contribute to the shaping of the School's future. Overall, the Authority was committed to the improvement of education across the County. It was a question of producing the right way in which this could be done in each community.

Pat Swain (Jun Sch) referred to Woodfield Infant and St George's Junior schools as being the Town's most popular, yet were on the same site but were separate schools.

IB explained that St Giles was the most oversubscribed school in the Town.

Joanne Crisp asked if information on the suggested improvements was available.

JB stated that he felt that it was unfortunate if the governors did not wish to visit Albrighton to see the situation there.

Alan James objected to this comment.

IB stressed that he wished the discussion to proceed on an amicable basis.

Mark Crisp suggested that the Meole Brace and Albrighton schools were sufficiently different that other examples were needed.

IB confirmed that governors elsewhere had found it beneficial to listen to and learn from others who had previously worked through school organisational change to secure even better outcomes.

Rev Kevin Roberts felt indifferent about the proposals, as both schools were doing well and he wondered why it needed fixing if it wasn't broken. It could actually divide local feeling and be unhealthy for the local community. He considered that the obvious time to have undertaken such a proposal would have been ten or so years previously, when head teachers and deputies were then leaving. The County Council, he claimed, were not interested at that time, and it was difficult to take on board now. He asked if education principles had not been so well defined or had the policy now changed.

IB explained that changes of administration and demography contribute to County Council policy developments over time.

Robert Leighton asked if any outcome was possible. He felt that the options were being narrowed down.

John Otter claimed that IB was now saying that nothing was preconceived, yet the paper had stated how the process would happen.

IB emphasised that if other models were suggested, and evidenced, then the County Council would consider them. There were general assumptions made in the national school planning framework, that schools with Church Foundation should continue to have Church links. This was only an assumption, however, and if other ways were suggested, then these would be looked into. The County Council's policy included an assumption that church places in the County would be maintained. However, this did not cut across the consultation process.

Mark Crisp asked if the required balance meant that, were Meole Brace to amalgamate and become a church school, would the successor school in Oswestry, for instance, become a community school.

IB explained that it did not work like that. The balance of places was considered across all of the County's schools, and each situation would, therefore, be considered separately. The calculations included addition or removal of surplus accommodation even where school reorganisation was not occurring.

Mark Crisp did, nonetheless, feel that the options had been narrowed down.

Robert Mulford asked if the County Council was stating that there was a clear case of showing that change would make two good schools into one very good school. He commented on the school's indicated budget reduction of £92K and asked if it had affected others in a similar way.

IB acknowledged that the successor school would receive a lower budget allocation. He then suggested some areas where reductions might be achieved.

Robert Mulford then requested a breakdown of the £92K and questioned the possible staffing structure. He could not see where the management and administration structure of the school would take it from good to excellent. It was the staff themselves, he said, that would make that change to excellent.

IB confirmed that the formula allocation sheet was shared with the schools. He also explained that, following advice and guidance from the Authority in the transitional phase, it would be the decisions of the governing body and, at subsequent points, the head teacher and staff who would take the school forward towards that excellent status.

Robert Mulford suggested the need for a clearer view on the County Council's perceptions of what was entailed in schools progressing from good to excellent. No guidance had so far been

produced, in particular, to show him what he as a governor would be able to do to move the School forward within its budget constraints.

IB explained that Advisory Service expertise, along with other input, had been and would continue to be available all through the process. The key to any successful school, he said, was quality leadership and staff. The governors had the responsibility for creating the character, ethos, etc., and the County's very experienced staff would offer guidance. The County Council should enforce ideas on schools in such matters; local involvement was crucial. Expertise was also available in the development of the school buildings.

Robert Mulford asked if support would be given to the governors' views, if they were to ultimately decide not to go forward with amalgamation but remain as two separate schools.

IB explained that it was not possible to predetermine the decision of the Cabinet. If the governors came to that conclusion, then it was crucial to give sound reasons behind it.

Sue Rothwell (deputy head teacher) suggested that there was a need to look at areas of weakness and see if improvement was possible with a merger of the two schools. Both schools had areas to add to the debate.

Mark Crisp expressed concern that there was a danger of an all-through primary school not being as good as the present structure. There was defensiveness, he felt, over the initial document.

Robert Mulford asked how the benchmarking would be included in the process, and added that the schools as they currently stood had specialist head teachers at both Key Stage 1 and 2.

IB explained that this expertise would be available within the staffing set up.

Robert Leighton added that there was a decreasing amount of expertise at the centre of the staffing structure and an increasing dependency on volunteers.

IB re-emphasised that where amalgamations had taken place, then there had been improved outcomes. This was due to good collaborative work.

Robert Leighton asked how the governors could be involved in the 'gap analysis'.

IB explained that it was up to the governors themselves. The County Council could provide advisory input at all stages.

Alan James requested information about amalgamations that had not gone well, as he considered that this would be more beneficial.

IB explained that in the worst examples where this had occurred, a lack of combined working had been a cause.

Joanne Crisp stated that the discussion was returning to talk of simply getting on with the process and was not answering the questions raised.

IB emphasised that he was happy to provide more information and expertise to help in the process.

Mark Crisp added that he felt that it would be difficult without seeing the benefit of the process.

IB asked if the governors would consider it to be worthwhile having a visioning session.

Robert Leighton considered it to be a pre-requisite.

JB added that low numbers in the Infant School suggested that some difficult staffing decisions lay ahead, and that this might help in the decision-making process.

Mark Crisp made reference to the original proposals, which included the potential closure of 22 schools. He asked if any of the displaced pupils might come to Meole Brace, should these closures return to the table.

JB explained that the data was available for perusal.

IB made the offer to meet with the governors to help in the gap analysis process.

Mark Crisp requested that this involve the full governing body.

Richard Otto asked if this was the end of the consultations.

IB reiterated that this was the start of the consultation process and that he had just agreed to meet with the governors regarding the gap analysis exercise.

The meeting closed at 6:10pm