

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

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

COMMUNITY/PARENTS' MEETING HELD AT 6.30pm

Introduction

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

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

Discussion

Alan Eames (County Registered Childminder) stated that he was happy to listen to views on how to progress the issue, however, he asked how much of a done deal it was. He felt that decisions had already been made.

IB emphasised that no decision could be made in advance of the consultation period. This would not be legal. The consultation document sets out a commitment and understanding of consultation.

Joanne Crisp (parent) made reference to the inclusion of a preferred option in the initial document. She asked why this was mentioned if it was not the case.

IB explained that the position on church status was not predetermined. There are assumptions in the planning framework that would mean that Church links need to be carefully considered, and at least a balance of places maintained. However, this should not cut across the consultation process.

Graham Breakwell (parent) commented on the reference to a done deal. He felt that an earlier decision had been made to close 22 schools and this was subsequently overruled by the County Council's Cabinet.

IB explained that no decision had been taken to close any of the 22 schools. If the Cabinet had decided upon formative consultation then that's what would have happened.

Gary Brierley (parent) felt that the general perception had been that a decision had been made.

AH explained that the Press had misinterpreted what had been agreed, which was only to proceed with consultation. Scrutiny Panel then agreed to proceed with consultation on the amalgamation proposals.

Mark Crisp (parent governor, Infant Sch) asked why Scrutiny had called the matter in, when a decision on the 22 closures had been taken.

AH explained that the decision not to consult was taken largely on the grounds that the process needed more time, and that Cabinet required time to speak with various groups.

Mark Crisp asked if these decisions had been taken as a result of public pressure. The closures issue having been rushed through was no different, he felt, to the amalgamations.

IB stressed that Cabinet had to take separate decisions on each school when considering reorganisation.

Rev Kevin Roberts asked for clarification on what consultation meant. He wondered if it meant simply receiving opinion or weight of opinion. If the latter, there needed to be a way of measuring this weight.

IB explained that proper consultation meant that officers had to be very open to information and opinion, and report this back faithfully to Members. It was not a referendum. Officers were interested in assessing ideas that would and would not work. Responses were helpful when they had reasons and analyses to back them up.

John Otter asked if it was a case of weighing up schools individually.

IB emphasised the need to consider rational suggestions and not to make comparisons between schools individually in any eventual school organisation decision.

JB added that all County Council Members who would have access to the information gathered, and not just Cabinet Members. All of the information from formative consultation would be taken on into the next phase, the statutory process, if commissioned, and not have to be submitted again.

IB mentioned that there were also other ways of acknowledging the importance of the issue and people's opinions, and that was by meeting with any other groups that people suggested that had an interest.

Simon Mason (foundation governor, Infant Sch) asked if the weight of the financial aspects had reduced if the issue was not already a done deal.

IB explained that there were a number of benefits of all-through primary education. The financial position had not changed in that any action or lack of action would have an effect on the budget share of each school.

Simon Mason also asked how the financial weight would be offset against the education benefits.

IB explained that this was difficult to answer without seeming to predetermine an outcome. All cases were considered individually and all decision makers had to consider what was in the best interests of education in the area.

Phil Braddick (parent) asked if it was all worth the £92K involved.

IB reiterated that it was important for everyone involved to come together to develop the vision for future school organisation. Advice was available from the County Council on capital investment, before and after school childcare, etc. The best outcomes were where individuals and organisations came together to work their way through the process together. The formative stage of consultation was often proven to be the best time to get this vision and analysis.

Barbara Eames (childminder/carer) stated that she had worked with children for 28 years, had lots of experience, and no-one from the Shirehall knew what the community had at Meole Brace as far as a happy school was concerned. The children were from varied backgrounds and they adored the teaching staff and loved the School. If there were changes they would affect this situation.

IB explained that there were a number of things that needed to be listened to and considered during consultation where the existing communities were engaged and involved. However, the experience of previous reorganisations is that they were positive opportunities to improve local provision and services.

Barbara Eaves replied that it could if the structure was altered radically.

IB agreed and added that that was the reason why the County Council must work with school communities in that there are always areas for improving beyond the present high quality offer in the schools and this was best done working collaboratively.

Rachel Oliver (parent) felt that the two schools met very different needs. Amalgamation may lose the better aspects of this, and she wondered if there were examples of where amalgamated schools have resulted in facets being lost.

IB emphasised that the aim was not to change and 'patch up' that set up. The Authority was looking to improve it with the help of the governors and the community. It was useful to know what could be gained in terms of a range of community services.

Rachel Oliver stated that there was uniqueness about the set up and it was about allowing the children to grow through that process.

IB affirmed that there was no reason why that uniqueness could not continue in each key stage.

Mark Crisp stated that, in the context of the policy agreed in December, the Schools needed to know that a change would bring demonstrable benefits. There was a loss of confidence that needed to be addressed also.

Jacquie Yeardley asked what benefit there would be other than the financial aspect. She felt that there was a challenging intake at both infant and junior stage, and it was good to have smaller schools where the children were looked after better. She also had concerns about the impressions that might be given in the light of the lack of numbers present at the meeting.

IB stressed that the importance was placed on the quality of comment, as opposed to numbers present.

Simon Iddon (member of the community) asked what quantitative data existed to back up the content of the consultative paper, and asked what the positives were.

IB offered to make the advisory service evidence available. The paper mentioned that the experience of Infant/Junior amalgamations had been a positive one. There were considered to be a number of benefits, including the lack of a dip in attainment at the beginning of key stage 2 and access to a broader range of staff and curriculum experience and expertise. However, the purpose of the meeting was not one of hard sell and the paper must not cut across the fairness of the consultation process. Both schools and the Authority were committed to high quality education and needed to work together to achieve excellence.

JB commented on the huge amount of key stage data that was available from the Fischer Family Trust.

IB referred to the options on page two of the consultation document, stating that, in each case there was a need to work together carefully to gain a consensus that represented both schools. All views would be gratefully received.

Mrs Eames expressed concern at the potential disruption. If the three buildings (including the nursery) were 'lumped' together, then children would get lost in the system the larger the school became. The needs of the children would also be harder to meet and there would be more pressure on them and the teachers. She asked if there would be only one building.

IB explained that the proposals were not intending to reduce the facilities at the Schools. He could not see how the effect would be so radical and negative if there was a collaborative working arrangement. There were no proposals to remove accommodation at the Schools, but rather to develop and enhance it.

Phil Braddick asked for an explanation on funding, as he felt that the children would lose out. He asked where the £92K savings would come from and if this would be made from the school receiving less funding

IB explained that capital monies were for large scale building work and were obtained by bidding to the government. Revenue funding was used for the running costs of the school. The governing body would need to work out sensitively how the staffing structure would be put into place. There were key areas of difference from the present set up, such as on head teacher instead of two, and changes to the administrative and site staff. The numbers would dictate the funding level for the school and savings would, in the main, be made in those areas mentioned above.

Francesca Bumpus (parent) asked why there seemed to be a presumption that any successor school would be either Church of England (CE) or community.

IB explained that in the National Planning Framework for Schools there was a presumption that the church link would go forward. This was not a rule, however, and views on the importance of Church links were welcomed, though reasoning would also be helpful to back comments up.

SR explained the background to the provision of the Schools on their current site. Essentially, the previous CE primary school was too small and the church provided the Infant School site and buildings. It could not afford to provide the Junior School site and buildings also, so this was done by the Local Authority.

Patricia Swain (governor, Jun Sch) commented that there was quality and diversity across all boundaries at the Junior School, and so she questioned why there was a perceived need for a church basis.

Mary Braddick (parent) stated that the children of the School learn about all religions.

Phil Braddick asked why there should be more emphasis on CE.

IB explained that, in terms of the curriculum, there was no difference in content between controlled and community schools.

Rev Kevin Roberts warned that the situation could become divisive, if a pro-religious/anti-religious debate were allowed to take place.

IB emphasised that the best way of organising and developing education is what is important.

David Vasey (parent) asked why the Schools could not remain separate. He felt that the Authority had made an assumption that the proposals offered something better, but that the community was better off before the Authority raised people's anxieties. He asked what benefits there would be for the sake of the divisions now caused.

IB reiterated the point about working collaboratively towards excellence.

Phil Braddick claimed that it was not possible to work together with the divisions that had been caused.

IB stressed that it was therefore most important for everyone to work together for the best possible outcome for this community. It was necessary to raise the issue within the local community to see what other ways might be put forward.

David Vasey raised the previously-made point on funding.

IB explained that this was the formative stage of the process. It was essential to work together to come up with the right way forward for the best outcome for both Schools. Experience suggested that it was unwise to enter into the process with closed minds as to the final outcome. The Authority would work with the communities and return to Cabinet with its findings. For an informed decision on whether or not to proceed to statutory consultation, there must be evidence supporting the best way forward. This cannot be predetermined.

Mary Braddick commented that the two Schools had specialist infant and junior teachers.

IB explained that they were all primary education trained.

Joanne Crisp stated that the two Schools had excellent specialist head teachers. The consultation paper suggested that one head or other would become head of a successor school. Whilst acknowledging that both head teachers were high quality, she felt it narrowed down the options for the governors in their desire to appoint the highest quality head for the post.

IB explained that it was up to the governing body to decide on the staffing structure. However, there were legal issues to consider in terms of the inheritance right of the incumbent.

In response to a question on providers of education, **IB** explained that until recently there was no competition procedure. Recent legislation placed a requirement on the Authority to run a competition to see if there were bodies interested in running a new school. There was, however, an exemption available from the Secretary of State if diversity in provision was a likely outcome.

Jessica Lamond (parent and governor, Jun Sch) acknowledged that, if the amalgamation went through, the professional bodies and staff would work hard to make it work. However, she claimed that everyone was happy with the Schools as they were. Parents, she said, chose small schools for specific reasons.

Alan Eames commented on how much everyone appeared to enjoy the Schools as they were at present. He asked if the status quo was an option.

IB affirmed that this was an option, although, if allowing this, the County Council would not be implementing its own policy. Members could also ask officers to work further on formative consultation.

Alan Eames suggested that this was 'changing jockeys'.

IB reiterated that schools and the Authority were always working to improve, which was part of their collaborative culture. There was a need to look at what additional services and facilities were attainable and valuable.

Francesca Bumpus stated that people saw the schools as a positive thing, claiming that it was good for the community and it worked. She had not heard officers refer to the status quo in a positive manner.

IB explained that he had never worked with any governing body or head teacher who did not feel that there were ways to improve. The Authority had always recognised the commitment of staff, governors, parents, etc., but this had not stopped them thinking that there were still ways to improve.

Phil Braddick asked what would happen if the set up was changed and it didn't work. There would then be no way back.

Barbara Eames expressed sadness that she never heard anyone talk of schools and staff as doing well. It was soul-destroying, she said, that there was always an impetus on having to improve.

IB stressed that he knew that officers and Councillors frequently commented on the outstanding work done in Shropshire schools. All views made, however, would be taken back to the County Council and reported accurately and faithfully. At the end of consultation, there was a need to assess what had been put forward as ideas to reorganise and build on good work.

Sarah Duckers (parent) felt that there would perhaps have been a different response, had the consultation document been centred on improvement of education, rather than amalgamation. The issue, she felt, looked more like a financial one.

Joy Jones (parent) asked if the staff would keep their jobs or need to reapply.

IB explained that most staff would slot into posts in such amalgamations, without the need to apply or interview and, in most cases, on the same level as existing. There was likely to be displacement for a small number of staff, e.g. one of the head teachers. However, there would be a place for all teachers somewhere, and head teachers would get preference for vacancies. The trade unions would want to be very much involved, and there was also a need to respect that some staff might not wish to stay on.

Phil Braddick made reference to an article in the Shropshire Star which claimed that the process was fundamentally flawed.

IB explained that this was not the case and that the story covered the fact that one of the unions had wanted to bring secondary schools into the review, due to falling numbers in that sector.

Phil Braddick asked why the Authority was not looking at the reorganisation of the secondary schools now.

IB explained that capital finding was available now for primary schools only. Building Schools for the Future would provide funding for secondary school developments from 2013.

An attendee asked for follow up documents giving the key educational benefits of keeping the status quo.

IB explained that the countywide policy was for primary education rather than separate infant and junior.

Joanne Crisp asked why a policy existed if it were not to prejudge on the status quo.

IB stated that there were a number of national and local policy commitments on a range of issues, but these could be matched where compelling sustainable alternatives were raised.

Robert Leighton asked why there were eight pairs of amalgamations and why were they not dealt with separately. He also asked what was happening now with the other issues (in Cabinet's decision in January.).

IB explained the County Council's strategy was to have local consultations in each case. Block decisions on final school reorganisation proposals were not allowed. Cabinet agreed to form a cross-party group to discuss the other issues with other bodies. The only proposals Cabinet agreed to proceed with were the amalgamations.

Christine Massey (grandparent) asked if it were policy for this meeting to take a vote.

IB explained that it was more a case of needing to have all views submitted by the end of the process.

Meeting closed at 8:45pm.