

<u>Committee and Date</u> Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Panel  20 February 2008  14:00
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<u>Item</u>  <b>6</b>  Public
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<u>Paper</u>  <b>B2</b>
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## EXTRACT FROM THE UNCONFIRMED MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 16 JANUARY 2008

14:00 – 16:00

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### **Present**

#### County Councillors

Mrs A M Chebsey, Dr J P M Drummond, R A Evans (Chairman), Dr J E Jones, Mr C Lea and Mrs M E C Winckler.

#### Co-opted Members

Mr A Atkinson	Roman Catholic Diocese
Mr S Barras	Parent Governor (Primary and Special Schools)
Mrs L Burns	Parent Governor (Secondary Schools)
Mrs E Griffiths	Children's Trust
Mr C Huss	Primary Head
Mr P Rowland	Church of England Diocese

Mrs E A Hartley, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, and Mr J B Gillow, Local Member, were in attendance.

### **STANDARD ITEMS**

#### **1. Apologies and Substitutions**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Mr B Pitt and Mr J Hitchings (substitute) of the Shropshire School Governors Council.

#### **2. Declarations of Interest**

Mrs E Griffiths declared a personal interest in agenda item 7 as a governor of a small primary school.

### **MAIN ITEMS**

#### **7. Review of Childs Ercall CE Primary School**

- 7.1 The Panel was in receipt of a report (copy attached to signed minutes) which explained that the statutory notice period was now underway with regard to the closure of Childs Ercall CE Primary School. A statement from the governors of the

school and a map of the area were tabled at the meeting ((copies attached to signed minutes).

- 7.2 The Chairman welcomed Mr Steve Rayner, from the Lichfield Diocese and invited him to join Members for discussion of this item.
- 7.3 Ian Budd, Assistant Director – Strategy and Business Support, introduced the report. He explained the report which had gone to Cabinet in December was attached as an appendix and this report detailed the results of the early stages of the consultation. Cabinet had approved the publication of statutory notices at their December meeting and there was now a six-week period in which bodies could make formal representations to the authority. In March, Cabinet would decide whether or not to implement the statutory notice.
- 7.4 The Chairman invited the Assistant Director to answer the points raised by school representatives at the December meeting of the Scrutiny Panel and which were set out in paragraph 4.2 of the minutes of that meeting.
- 7.5 The Assistant Director answered each point as follows:
- The alternative school identified for Childs Ercall pupils was Hinstock Primary School. Parents could express a preference for another school if they wished.
  - The nearest church school was at Tibberton, in Telford and Wrekin. All schools in Shropshire followed an agreed RE syllabus.
  - The point about the school being a focal part of the community had been considered within the Cabinet report.
  - The population forecasts were regularly updated.
  - The costs of transporting the Childs Ercall pupils to Hinstock had been calculated by the Integrated Transport Unit and could be achieved in a cost-effective manner.
  - With regard to the consultation process itself, the Assistant Director explained that officers and Members of the local authority had met with staff and governors and held formal consultation meetings at the school.
- 7.6 Mr Steve Rayner, of the Lichfield Diocese, then commented on the Diocesan role in this matter, as Childs Ercall was a church school. He explained that church schools offered a distinctly Christian ethos which reflected the core Christian principles and values of love of God and of one's neighbour. The relationship with the parish church was of paramount importance, with both school and church sharing the same values. He went on to say that the alternative school identified did not offer this Christian approach and the nearest church schools in Shropshire were too far away for parents to consider as alternatives. The closure of Childs Ercall School would therefore mean parents in the area would no longer be able to send their children to a church school in Shropshire.
- 7.7 The Assistant Director confirmed that a representative from the Lichfield Diocese had attended the Cabinet meeting in December and contributed to the discussion. He added that the revised primary school organisation policy which had been agreed by Council on 14 December 2007 was based on maintaining or enhancing the provision of church places across the county.
- 7.8 The Chairman asked if it was known whether places were available at the nearest Telford and Wrekin schools. The Acting Corporate Director explained that numbers at any particular school were constantly changing. Mr Rayner added that he was aware there were some places available in some year groups at Tibberton.

- 7.9 Mr Barras asked if the authority was confident that Hinstock School would remain open beyond the proposed reorganisation and expressed concern that, if not, a family could be faced with a school closure twice which would be extremely traumatic.
- 7.10 The Acting Corporate Director explained that Cabinet would be looking at primary school reorganisation at their meeting on 30 January. The decision on whether or not to implement the statutory notice for Childs Ercall CE School was not due to be made until March.
- 7.11 Mr Rowland asked if Telford and Wrekin had any plans to reorganise the primary schools in their area and was informed that this was not the case.
- 7.12 There was then a wide-ranging discussion and a number of issues were raised:
- Dr Drummond asked if all the parents whose children attended Childs Ercall CE School were practising Christians. She went on to say that children could receive a Christian-based education in a non-church school.
  - Mr Atkinson referred to the paper tabled at the meeting by the school governors and drew attention to Ian Terry's words on the first page that "The school is at the heart of the village...If the school feels it is under threat, that's a threat to the life of the whole local community".
  - Mrs Winckler asked how emphatic the parents were that their children attended a faith school and, if so, whether the authority would provide free transport to the nearest Shropshire church school. Alternatively, she asked if Hinstock could become a church school.
  - Mr Barras asked what would happen if Hinstock was identified for closure.
  - Mrs Griffiths asked about the commitments on church school places in the county.
  - Mr Huss wondered if all the pupils at Childs Ercall were local to the area.
- 7.13 The Assistant Director informed Members that school transport was based on providing transport to the catchment school or a school nearer the home address providing that it was still at least two miles from home to school by the shortest route.
- 7.14 Members were reassured that there would be individual consultations with all the families if Childs Ercall CE School was closed and this would include transport arrangements.
- 7.15 In response to the query about whether or not the children attending Childs Ercall were local to the area, Members were told that some children were from out of the area and a significant number of other children within the catchment attended other schools, including those in Telford and Wrekin.
- 7.16 The Acting Corporate Director referred to the close working relationship with the Diocese and explained that there would be discussions about the overall balance of school places across the county, at both church and non-church schools. There were a number of historical anomalies and the primary school organisation policy provided an opportunity to review these strategically. In response to a question, she confirmed this could include the creation of church schools to fill gaps, e.g. if a new primary school was being built. There were also procedures to change the designation of non-church schools to church schools, but this was a lengthy process.
- 7.17 Mr Rayner was pleased to hear that children could receive a Christian education at non-church schools, but added there was no requirement for non-church schools to offer this. The strength of church schools was the strong links they had with parish

churches. Mr Rayner welcomed the intention to provide a geographical spread of church school places, but felt there was little provision for church schools in the immediate area. Indeed, Childs Ercall CE Primary School was the only school in that particular locality.

7.18 Mrs Ann Hartley, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services thanked everyone for their contributions to the debate and assured Members that she would pass on the Panel's comments to Cabinet.

7.19 The Chairman concluded the debate by asking the Panel to report to Cabinet and this was agreed. He suggested this report should include the availability of school places in other schools, both in Shropshire and in Telford and Wrekin. He also felt it was important to draw Cabinet's attention to the distance to the next nearest church school in Shropshire and ask that consideration be given to the provision of free transport to this school for families affected by the closure of Childs Ercall CE Primary School.

7.20 **RESOLVED:**

A That it was noted the statutory notice period was now underway with regard to the closure of Childs Ercall CE Primary School.

B That the Panel's discussions be reported to Cabinet.