

PRIMARY SCHOOL ORGANISATION CONSULTATION

NOTES OF A MEETING AT CLUNBURY VILLAGE HALL HELD ON 18 MARCH 2008

COMMUNITY/PARENTS' MEETING HELD AT 6.45pm

Welcome

Andrew Davies, head teacher at Clunbury CE Primary School, welcomed everyone to the meeting and gave a brief account of its achievements and those of the local pre-school.

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

Alex Chamberlain (parent) claimed that a few weeks previously, she had been told by a County Council officer had stated that, if amalgamation were to go ahead, then the succeeding school would be at Clunbury, which would be enlarged and Lydbury Primary School closed. She had been clearly told that this would happen and to find out later that there were a range of options and that no decision had been made, led her to believe that the process was illegal, or that she had been lied to. Either way, the process should not go ahead.

AH responded by emphasising that no decision had been made. It was only Cabinet that could take that decision.

Alex Chamberlain asked who would take responsibility for what she claimed was wrong information. She felt that those at Clunbury had been given the impression that the School would remain open and they hadn't had the opportunity that the Lydbury community had had to campaign.

AH stated that she considered it irrelevant to the evening's proceedings, that her comments would be noted and that others in the audience deserved to offer their comments.

IB explained that Council Members would be making a determination on whether or not reorganisation should occur. It was very important that they did not predetermine the decision. Their role was to listen to evidence and make a decision. There would be a thorough investigation of any allegation or complaint made but it would be important that any complaint was evidenced. The formative consultation was to look at both existing sites and any alternative ones suggested. If any were found, they would be properly investigated and reported back upon. However, no alternative sites were known, and this included glebe (church) land. The strengths of both existing sites and buildings were known and, whilst very few met all requirements of the government's primary school design brief, the school site at Lydbury had more problems.

Andrew Davies asked if the land at Bicton (referring to the recent merger of Bicton and Grafton primary schools) was owned by the County Council prior to merger discussions.

JB confirmed that it had been owned for some time beforehand. It had taken around 30 years to find the capital to utilise the land. This had become possible due to significant additional capital becoming available in recent years.

Jackie Williams (Kemp Valley Ward Councillor SSDC) suggested that, in the light of a letter the previous night and the comments made at this meeting (by Alex Chamberlain), the meeting had been nullified.

AH stated that it was important that other views were heard at this meeting.

Jonathan Roberts (chairman of Clungunford Parish Council) explained that the school in his village had been 'lost' in 1950. Clunbury CE had been the preference for the parents in the Clungunford community and he felt that the children at the School were already achieving excellent learning at Clunbury. As a parish council, it would be very unhappy if the school were to be lost to the community.

Philip Wright (parent and resident) offered the following comments for consideration: -

I am not calling for the closure of Lydbury School, though if it were to close then we would be happy to welcome pupils from Lydbury to Clunbury, secure in the knowledge that they would receive a first rate education based on the principle that every child matters. I am alarmed that there is serious consideration being given to amalgamating the two schools on a different site other than Clunbury for the following reasons: -

- i. You have a thriving school judged by Ofsted recently as a good school with outstanding features.
- ii. You have an excellent forward-thinking head teacher who has led the School with vision and excellent management over the last 4 years.
- ii. The School has been recognised with national awards recently, something featured in local and national press and the Council might consider the adverse press it might generate were it to in effect close such a school).
- iv. From the consultation document it is noted that: -
 - a. Both Lydbury and Clunbury teach the whole primary range from 4-11 years - you seem to ignore the nursery attached to Clunbury School and the toddlers group based in the village hall, which provides seamless transition and continuity, which educationalists see as vital to the development needs of the child.
 - b. The Council suggests that there are 65 on roll at the School (we know of 4 more arriving imminently and you ignore in this figure the 12 in the attached nursery). This is almost double the number on roll at Lydbury School.
- v. From what I understand of the 41 on roll at Lydbury, only a very small percentage actually come from within walking distance of the School. Indeed, several come from Bishop's Castle, a town with its own primary school. There are 25, soon to be 27, children of primary school age and below within walking distance of Clunbury School. Were the Council to consider moving the School to an alternative site, then this would be not only forcing those from Lydbury North to use cars and/or buses to arrive at school, but also those 27 at Clunbury who already walk, thus adding to the carbon footprint of the School. This would be especially so were it to move to Kempton, a small village with few children living there and one which is ill-equipped for the influx of traffic that a new school would generate.
- vi. Whilst talking about the carbon footprint, the Council has outlined in the consultation document that Lydbury used 13.9 tonnes of co2 emissions and Clunbury 21.5 tonnes. These figures were deliberately distorting, as Clunbury serves the needs of twice as many students and includes a nursery, so in terms of co2 emissions per pupil, Clunbury becomes the more efficient school. Throwing in a theoretical use of co2 in a new building is unreasonable, as for a lot less money the heating system could be upgraded at Clunbury.

vii. Lydbury North Primary School is less than 3 miles from Bishops Castle Primary School and several children came from Bishops Castle to Lydbury and there are also some from between Lydbury and Bishops Castle, e.g. Brockton. Clunbury, however, does not have an alternative primary school. Clunbury does not have an alternative primary school within the 6 miles as mentioned in the initial proposals.

IB welcomed the additional interpretation of data as a key part of the consultation process. In terms of access to education, the policy agreed in the autumn stated that pupils should have at least one school within six miles from their home address.

JB added that Bucknell had been recommended for retention in the light of the 6 mile rule.

Georgie Ellis (SSDC district councillor) explained why parents sent their children to Lydbury. The church status and smaller classes were important. If it were to close, Clunbury would be further to travel for most and Norbury School even further.

IB explained that parental preference was an important factor. If there was space at a school, then any parent can apply for a place and expect their child to be admitted. Shropshire was proud of its achievement in being an authority with one of the country's highest rate of parents obtaining their first preference of primary school for their child. 10% unfilled places is the benchmark to support parental preference.

Angharad Seabury (ex-pupil) stated that her peers had gone on from Clunbury to great careers and universities and she felt this was due to the smaller class sizes. Clunbury had the ability to expand physically, whilst Lydbury had a smaller school and no area to expand. It would be a great shame if both schools were to close and Clunbury should be kept open.

Patsy Norman (parent) explained that she had moved with her family to Clunbury from Wigmore and they had settled very well. If every child matters, why take away what there is at the School. She did not wish to have to move again.

An attendee of the meeting claimed that numbers had not fallen in either Lydbury or Clunbury. Affordable housing was a contributing factor to falling numbers. Lydbury was also getting a bad deal.

JB explained that numbers at both schools were buoyant, with more of an out-of-area ratio at Lydbury which has been brought about by parental preference. Surplus places were more of a problem across the County as a whole.

Sally Newton (parent) asked why, therefore, was the proposal being made here.

JB explained that projected numbers, even at buoyant schools, were dropping and, subsequently, finance was also. There was a significant loss in revenue for schools and this had an effect on jobs. Migration into the County was centred upon the towns, as opposed to the rural communities.

Philip Wright asked for clarification on the significance of falling rolls and less money for schools. He stated that, with the pre-school and toddlers groups providing future numbers for the School, it would be nonsense to move from Clunbury.

JB explained that there was a minimum funding guarantee for all schools, regardless of size, then a per pupil allocation. The Authority's pupil forecasts were shared with schools. At Clunbury, there was a bulge year group moving through the School and, unless numbers remained constant, funding would drop in line with the pupil levels. The good working

relationships forged by the head and staff with the pre-school and toddler settings were acknowledged, but the forecast drop in numbers and related funding were very real (around £1M) across the County).

Andrew Davies acknowledged that budgets in schools were very tight. Whilst numbers at Clunbury were good at the present, there was a need to maintain a certain level to staff the School as desired. Very detailed projections were received from the Authority and these were very accurate.

JB explained that Primary Care Trust (PCT) data was used in the forecasts and, as they were shared with schools, heads could contact the Authority to discuss them.

Sally Newton asked for clarification on the capital budget and what it covered.

IB explained that revenue funding, i.e. the Direct Schools Grant (DSG), was used for running costs, whereas capital monies were used for large, one-off building projects. Capital could not be used for revenue purposes and vice-versa. DSG was allocated from national funding and each child was currently worth £3550 of funding, and would be worth £3714 next year.

Janie Mitchell (parent) claimed that the vision was simply about saving money, and asked that if it (the education at the School) wasn't broken, then why fix it.

IB stated that this was not the case. It was important that there is clear vision for the future of schooling within the area. Any decision on school reorganisation, particularly in rural areas, had to be made in the interests of education in the area. Very clear decisions had to be made and good reasons for these given. It was important to value what went on at Clunbury already, but also to take account of ideas to improve it for the future.

Joe Roberts (member of the public) felt that it was important to make it clear that capital funding allocations had implications on public money (revenue), as it was a loan that had to be repaid. He also stated that he felt the proposals had set the two communities at each other's throats and asked why the models had not mentioned the possibilities of sharing resources, buildings, staffing, etc.

AH explained that the proposals were only at formative discussion stage and that other options put forward would be considered.

Joe Roberts then asked why, after taking two years to come up with the solutions offered, the partner options were not put into the public domain, particularly in the light of Jim Knight's (government minister) reinforcement of the idea of federated schools.

AH responded by making it clear that it was understood that the two schools were working together already.

Andrew Davies wished to make it clear that the two communities were not at each other's throats. Both he and previous head teachers had for some years nurtured many ways of sharing and partnering and he explained a number of these. He felt that it was important to maintain these arrangements as the whole issue was about the children.

Anna Taylor (parent) expressed her deep concern over the suggestion of a vision of the future. This, for her children, was exactly what was at Clunbury now and there was a need to hold onto this. There was no vision that was not already there. She did not know what was needed at Clunbury that was not already there. She had a number of concerns with the content of the consultation document and felt that the intention of the process was to produce a single school

from the two. She strongly supported Clunbury School and its staff and asked what the County Council felt was not currently being done there.

IB emphasised that he had not said anything negative about Clunbury School. Those comments just made had actually communicated very clearly what Mrs Taylor wanted for the future of the School and these were carefully noted. Everyone involved was very proud of the quality of education in Shropshire and wanted to safeguard this by listening to the views of the staff, governors and pupils.

He referred to an earlier visit he made to Clunbury, soon after he came to Shropshire, which was to try to track Broadband connectivity in the area. It was very gratifying to return and see the many and excellent ways in which the School had used that technology across the curriculum.

Mike Tucker (parent), referring to Cabinet's decision not to proceed with the intended closures in the County, asked why the amalgamations were not halted and 'thrown into the pot' also, as they would, in effect, mean the closure of schools.

AH explained that these formative discussions were only to help to decide on whether to formally consult. All feedback would be taken into consideration. Some of the schools in the amalgamation proposals were very keen to go ahead, so it was important that each case was looked at individually. Action clearly needed to be taken and if the amalgamation route were to be embraced now it would help sustain quality education and keep it safe for the future. She was determined to keep politics out of the children's lives.

An attendee of the meeting wished to congratulate the staff at the School for their continued efforts in the light of the distractions.

Pippa Halliday (parent) expressed concern over staff jobs and over the children not having a say in the process.

IB explained that the Authority always worked with the staff to ensure that they were alright and commented that the staff were carrying out its roles very well.

Mr Freeman (parent) stated that both schools had been classed as good and improving by Ofsted. They got on very well presently and there was the risk that the same thing would happen to the communities as happened when Hopesay Primary School closed and the parents boycotted Clunbury.

Susanne Rocke (parent) stated that there was a wonderful education system at Clunbury and that it should be promoted and not 'smashed down'.

Richard Saunders (parent) expressed concern at the loss of history in the UK. Clunbury, he said, was steeped in history. His wife had lived there all her life and his children attended the School. He felt that the proposals were all about finance.

Mrs Freeman (parent) stated that she had lived in Clunbury all her life. The School was a passionate one and she asked if AH was passionate about education, could she guarantee that she would vote against the amalgamation, and would the Press be in attendance.

AH explained that she could not pre-determine the issue. There would be a show of hands at the Cabinet meeting when the decision on whether or not to proceed was made. The Press would be there, as it was a public meeting.

IB added that the decision would be brought back to the community.

Mrs Freeman claimed that the consultation was simply lip service and that the decision had been made. If the sixteen schools were reprieved then they would then be next in line for closure. She felt that, while they were fighting for the children's education, the decision had already been made.

AH reiterated that no decision had been made. All views received via any of the regular communications channels, letter, e-mail, etc., would be considered. On 19th May, a decision on whether or not to undertake formal consultation would be made and AH would guarantee that that would be done. Furthermore, a trip would be organised that would bring Cabinet members out to see the schools involved, so that they can get a better appreciation of those communities.

Karen Marston (parent) stated that her vision was Clunbury School at present. It was a very special school and highly successful, and her child was very happy there. She hoped that Members and officers would listen to what a wonderful school it was.

Stephen Howard (parent and resident) stated that these kinds of decisions affected whole families. He explained that his family had moved to the UK from Mongolia and, concerned for their child's education, lots of thought and prayer had gone into choosing the right school. They had been very impressed with Clunbury School and the support given to their children. He felt that, if action was taken, it would be tragic to close the two schools and double the pain for both communities.

Jayne Morris (parent) explained that she had two children at the Clunbury School and another had attended previously. Her family had moved into the area because of the set up at the School and, she claimed, others were doing the same. Regardless of falling numbers, the School was one of excellence and this brought people into the community. Whilst there might be a problem across the rest of Shropshire, things were working well at Clunbury.

Angharad Seabury believed that Lydbury and Clunbury were good communities. With one bigger school there would be less teacher contact time for each pupil, and the School would, she felt, become larger and larger and end up like Bishops Castle Primary School.

IB reiterated that the decision made by Cabinet would have to be based on the best education outcomes for the area. If amalgamated, the successor school would still be one of the smallest in the County. If the outcome was to improve provision, then nothing would be lost and this was important. Any outcome had to work for the children. There were reasons why the School would not grow to the size of Bishops Castle. Schools were planned to serve their own communities. The government's Building Bulletin 99 gave design ideals for different types of primary schools.

Philip Wright felt that the idea of amalgamation should not be dismissed entirely, as it could lead to long-term security for Clunbury School. He asked if the buildings and site at Lydbury were owned by the church and, if so, would they be willing to invest the income from the property in Clunbury, were Lydbury to close.

Ian Terry explained that the buildings and site were owned by a church educational trust and that, if Lydbury were to close, then the church would only wish to see Clunbury thrive. The Diocese did not want any of its schools to close. When Ian Terry first visited Clunbury five years ago, Mr Morris was the head teacher and he was very good and was enjoyable to work with. Mr Davies was now at the School and it had grown with a vision in place. He believed that you could feel the vision in the community and this was supporting the visionary leadership of the head teacher, his staff and the governors.

Karen Marston asked about the position regarding revenue shortfall and capital availability, and if capital was time-limited. She also asked if work would be funded on pupil numbers.

IB explained that the Primary Capital Programme (PCP) would run until 2022, and would replace or refurbish all primary schools. £8.5M would be made available by 2011. The Authority's Plan therefore had to be submitted by the end of June this year. The government would take most of the summer to consider this plan and, when it was approved, it would provide an opportunity to improve provision. Local prioritisation of funding would need to be assessed. Any proposals would have to be in the best educational interests of the area.

Lynne Morris (parent and governor) stated that Clunbury governors had always made it clear that they wanted to ensure that places were available for the children in the area. If that were to extend further, then that was fine, although the excellence of Clunbury School was done on the basis of serving the children in the area and nothing else.

AH made it clear that this step was only the beginning of the process and offered all of those present the opportunity to get in touch with the Authority by whatever means.

JB added that he would ensure that all those comments made previously would be considered in the next stage of the process. A file of correspondence would be put together for all to peruse.

The meeting closed at 8:05pm.