

SPECIAL MEETING OF BRIERLEY HILL AREA COMMITTEE

Monday 10th October, 2005, at 7.00 p.m.
at the Kingswinford School, Water Street, Kingswinford

PRESENT:-

Councillor Mrs Wilson (Chairman)
Councillor Tyler (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Blood, Debney, Harley, Islam, Miller, Mrs Patrick, Ms Pearce, Tomkinson.
Also in attendance was Councillor Vickers (Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning)

Officers

Mr E Lowson (Area Liaison Officer - Chief Executive's Directorate), Senior Solicitor (Directorate of Law and Property), Assistant Director of Education (Directorate of Education and Lifelong Learning), and Ms K Smith (Directorate of Law and Property).

Together with approximately 50 members of the public.

42 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 1st September 2005, be approved as a correct record and signed.

43 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors Burt, Mrs Foster, Mrs Harris and Southall.

44 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Blood declared a Personal Interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct in agenda item 4 (Primary School Review Consultation Document), in view of his being a Governor of Belle View Primary School.

Councillor Miller declared a Personal Interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct in agenda item 4 (Primary School Review Consultation Document), in view of his being Chair of Governors of Fairhaven Primary School and Governor of Glynne Primary School.

Councillor Islam declared a Personal Interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct in agenda item 4 (Primary School Review Consultation Document), in view of his being a Governor of Brierley Hill Primary School.

Councillor Mrs Jordan declared a Prejudicial Interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct in agenda item 4 (Primary School Review Consultation Document), in view of her being a Governor of Pens Meadow School

Councillor Mrs Pearce declared a Personal Interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct in agenda item 4 (Primary School Review Consultation Document), in view of her being a Governor of Fairhaven and Milking Bank Primary Schools.

Councillor Tomkinson declared a Prejudicial Interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct in agenda item 4 (Primary School Review Consultation Document), in view of her being a Governor of Bromley Pensnett Federation School.

Councillor Tyler declared a Prejudicial Interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct in agenda item 4 (Primary School Review Consultation Document), in view of his being Chair of Governors of Maidensbridge Primary School.

PRIMARY SCHOOL REVIEW – CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning, who stated that following public consultation, which would end on the 21st October, all suggestions and comments would be considered and draft proposals based on these considerations would be submitted to the Cabinet in November 2005.

A report of the Director of Children's Services was then submitted on the Primary School Review Consultation Document.

The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) gave an oral presentation on the consultation document and the process for primary school review, which the Council had been obliged to undertake as a result of the falling birth rates and a consequential reduction in Government funding for primary schools.

In giving the background to the review, the Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning), emphasised that the review had been necessary partly as a result of falling rolls and an anticipated greater fall in future years and did not relate to the educational standards of individual schools.

It was stated that Maidensbridge Primary School had capacity for 210 children but numbers had fallen to 178 in January 2005 and consequently there would be too few children in the local area for the school to fill and become financially viable. Alternative places would be available at Dawley Brook, Church of the Ascension and Blanford Mere Primary Schools.

If the draft proposals put to Cabinet were agreed in November the second stage of consultation would proceed with proposals being submitted to the School Organisation Committee in January 2006, with a view to being implemented with effect from September 2006. He advised that details and information regarding the consultation process was available on the website, which was updated regularly.

Comments and questions, with specific reference to Maidensbridge Primary School, were received from members of the public and the responses given included the following:

- (a) Concern was raised over the questions on the response form attached to the consultation document, that they were considered to be “crooked” and that to carry on with the consultation as it was, was ill conceived. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that he was aware of the comments made with reference to the questionnaire and had invited the questioner to liaise with education on any future questionnaires.
- (b) It was queried whether it was financially viable to have classes of up to forty five pupils in later years, when legislation restricted reception classes to classes of thirty. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that it was infant class size legislation only that related to maximum class size of thirty and during consultation with head teachers they had supported class size groups of forty five.
- (c) A question was raised in relation to the fall in the birth rate statistics and the migration of people into the area. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that migration numbers across the borough and other local authorities had been looked at but as capital investment increased and quality of education improved in other authorities inward migration had slowed, and as such these factors had been included in the overall proposals.

- (d) A question was raised in relation to the A449 trunk road and the safety issues that would consequently arise with children having to cross this road, in particular the process for consultation with the Highways Agency in implementing traffic calming measures. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that discussions with the Highways Agency would take place at the appropriate time over concerns of traffic safety issues.
- (e) A question was raised as to why schools that were overspending and underperforming were not being considered for closure. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that the issues were about projected pupil numbers for Maidensbridge and the fall in numbers on roll. In the longer term the school would not be financially sustainable as by “2010” there would be just over 5,041 surplus places within the Dudley Borough leading to a deficit of £4.5 million in funding from government.
- (f) Questions were raised concerning the proposed future use of the Maidensbridge School site and that the site would provide prime building land. Also, that although the school ranked third best in the borough, how could school performance not be a deciding factor in the criteria for school closures. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that the criteria for school closures were not based on the value of the site and at this stage in the consultation the future use of the site would not even be considered, although he was aware the site was on a flood plain and future development would be very slim. With regard to educational standards, proposals were that schools should be local schools for local people and as Maidensbridge was, not at the centre of the population, so proposals for the site would be most deliverable with less disruption.
-
- (g) A question was asked regarding how the money saved from the closure of Maidensbridge Primary School would be spent and if there would be evidence that it would be used exclusively for the support of Maidensbridge pupils. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that the procedure was not about savings, it was about making better use of money that was available, as due to the fall in pupil numbers funding would be reduced by one million pounds. There could be no guarantee that reinvestment of resources back into education would be used solely for Maidensbridge pupils as that would be a political decision.

-
- (h) Questions were raised with regard to the possibility of children being moved to up to three different schools, being taught in mobile class rooms and mixed year groups during the next fourteen months and the provision of pastoral care that would be put in place for pupils at Maidensbridge Primary School. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that issues with regard to pastoral care would be addressed during the next round of consultation to ensure that this transitional period would be smooth. Pupils would be taught where places were available and where parents preferred, where possible. It would be impossible to state pupils would not be taught in mixed year groups or in mobile classrooms in the short term.
-
- (i) It was commented on that in “2000”, academic performance had been taken into consideration but not in the “2004” criteria. If it had been included then, why not now. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that the “Primary Review Refresh” consultation, had asked people what range of criteria should be included and it had been decided to try and assess the overall performance and broaden views.
-
- (j) It was queried why the principles of consultation for Dudley Borough and all the options had not been listed in the consultation document. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that closure of various schools had been looked at and in addition, a wide range of alternatives. However, it was decided not to consult on the whole range of options as there were too many and a straightforward approach to closures had been followed and alternative proposals had been invited from the schools.
- (k) It was commented on that Maidensbridge was the only school on this side of the A449 and why had the amalgamation of the church schools not been looked at. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that this would need to be brought forward as a specific alternative to be considered, but neither school site was large enough and therefore would have to be run as a split site with the only financial saving being that of one head teacher.
- (l) It was commented on that the consultation document did not give a range of options and very little information on feedback from head teachers, on special needs, extended school usage to raise extra income, and reduction of class sizes. It was stated that another meeting with parents should be held with alternative proposals put forward.

- (m) Councillor Islam stated that his main concerns were that all options had not been fully explored with parents and that teaching of pupils in mobile classrooms was not acceptable. Also, that the points raised by a member of the public concerning the methodology of the consultation questionnaire should be looked into. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that all proposed alternatives would be considered, and the member of the public who had raised concerns over the questionnaire, had been written to requesting his advice with regard to future forms.
- (n) Councillor Mrs Patrick stated that she refuted the information given with regard to the fall in numbers of the population migrating into the area, when there had been three hundred applications for one council house and appeals had been received from developers keen to build in the area. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that in comparison to other areas Maidensbridge's intake was relatively small.
- (o) Councillor Tomkinson stated that if the closure of schools was a solution to the decreasing number of children then adequate time must be given for parents to consult. Also, an assurance had been given that the Maidensbridge school site would not be used for building when in fact there were buildings already there, so what would the site be used for. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that the future use of the buildings could not be considered at this stage as a decision had to be made on the school closures first.
- (p) Councillor Debney stated that he was not convinced that there would not be future development on the site and that by closing Maidensbridge it would put further pressure on other schools as the children had to be relocated. This would lead to local children being displaced and having to go to appeal for a place at their local school, further exacerbating the problem. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) noted the comments made.
- (q) Councillor Harley commented that the original proposals had been drawn up in "2000", and that six years later no decision had been made to reduce capacity and on school closures, suggesting there was no point to the consultation process and that no-one was listening to the parents and their requests to merge schools, such as the church schools. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that other options had included alternative school sites and parents wishes had been considered, however, the local authority had no power over the local church schools.

- (r) Councillor Blood stated that there were already issues with regard to new housing developments and the increased pressure on local schools having to take the increased number of children in the local population; how were the schools expected to cope with the placement of these additional children. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that housing issues gave different results in number of children on average being four children per year group for every hundred houses. Eight hundred houses equated to one class per year group.
- (s) Councillor Mrs Jordan reiterated concerns raised over the extra pressure these children would place on existing schools within the Kingswinford and Wordsley areas as the children from Maidensbridge would be migrating into the area and not outwards and would be competing for school places. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that it would be difficult to look at school placements today for the future. Until parents had expressed a preference, the number of new places to be created and on which school sites would not be known. However, it was envisaged that enough places would be created to accommodate siblings, guaranteeing that families would not be divided.
- (t) Councillor Tyler commented that he did not believe all options had been explored and if the consultation was not about education what was it about. There had been no evidence shown of migration numbers into the area and pupil figures on roll for Maidensbridge had increased showing a community need for the school and that Maidensbridge Primary School was the centre of the community. Also, if this consultation had been ongoing since “2000”, how urgent were the decisions to be made. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) noted the comments made and advised that the projected number of pupils for Maidensbridge had not included the live birth rate figures. He also stated that he had said Maidensbridge was not the centre of the local population, not the local community. The decision had to be made as a matter of financial urgency and the consultation had adhered to Council policy and followed the Department for Education and Skills guidance and legislation.
- (u) Councillor Mrs Wilson commented that consideration needed to be given to ensure that children and parents were accommodated and not unduly stressed at this time and that other options had been given due consideration. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) noted the comments made.

- (v) Councillor Tyler commented that on the Dudley website the document relating to consultation procedures listed people to be consulted and was standard to all consultation documents. The consultation document stated that there should be a three-month period of consultation but in reality parents had only been given six weeks. Nowhere in the document had it stated that an interim report should go to Cabinet, but that a full document and summary should be produced at the end of the consultation period. The consultation process had not been adhered to and therefore the Council procedures were flawed. The Assistant Director of Education (Resources and Planning) advised that he had nothing to add at present.

The following additional comments were made at the close of the meeting:-

- That the concerns raised with regard to traffic calming measures be looked at
- That school playing fields needed to be maintained to encourage children to participate in sports in light of the current problem with child obesity.
- That people will travel to go to a good school
- That pupil numbers at Maidensbridge increased throughout the year
- That all parents affected, not just those at Maidensbridge, should have copies of all the consultation documentation
- That secondary schools would be affected by the primary school closures in the future
- That houses around Maidensbridge School were primarily large family houses.
- Parents commented that they had had no notification of the review and consultation taking place although they had been assured letters had gone out to them
- It was requested that additional government funding be asked for to keep the schools open

RESOLVED

That the Area Committee was concerned about the length and quality of consultation being carried out during the Primary School Review and asks that the Council extends and reviews the consultation document.

DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

That the following schedule of dates of meetings and venues for the ensuing municipal year be noted.

Thursday, 27th October, 2005 at Brockmoor Primary School

Thursday, 19th January, 2006 at Crestwood School

Tuesday, 9th March, 2006 at Brierley Hill Civic Hall

The meeting ended at 9:30 pm

CHAIRMAN