

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON LIFELONG LEARNING - SPECIAL
MEETING**

Monday, 16th January, 2006 at 6.00pm
in the Council Chamber at the Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Mrs Ridney (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs Dunn (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Boys, Mrs Coulter, Johnston, Mrs Pearce, Rahman, Rogers,
Ryder and Wright; Mr Dudley and Mr Smith; Mrs Capell and Mr Hatton;
Mrs Hewitt-Clarkson and Mrs Roe; Mr Nottingham and Mrs Simms

OFFICERS

The Director of Finance (As Lead Officer to the Committee), The Director
of Children's Services and the Assistant Director of Children's Services
(Resources and Planning)

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WELCOME TO NEW MEMBER

The Chairman introduced Mr G Dudley, the newly appointed parent
governor representative for the primary phase of education, and
welcomed him to the meeting.

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MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 6
December, 2005 be approved as a correct record and signed.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No member made a declaration of interest, in accordance with the
Members' Code of Conduct, in respect of any item to be considered at
this meeting.

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APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence from the meeting was received on behalf of
Councillor Hart. An apology was also received from Councillor Vickers,
who had intended to attend this meeting, notwithstanding that he was not
a member.

(During consideration of this item, in so far as discussion related to partnering arrangements in the Coseley area, Councillor Mrs Ridley declared a personal interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, in view of her chairmanship of the Governing Body of Highfields Primary School.)

A report of the Director of Children's Services was submitted summarising progress on the review of primary schools since the meeting of the Committee held on 15 March, 2005, at which the Primary Schools Review document had first been considered.

The Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources and Planning) reminded the Committee of the reasons for which the review had been necessary, with particular reference to the surplus of primary school places identified in the external consultancy report by KPMG in 1999, and in the OFSTED inspection reports of 2000 to 2002. The report summarised the position with regard to annual birth rates from 1990 to 2003, which had fallen in every respective year except one during that period, and contained projected birth rates over the period from 2005 to 2010, in which a further 9% fall was anticipated.

In introducing the report, the Director of Children's Services amplified the position regarding the falling birth rate and discussed the impact this would have on funding, should no action be taken. Since the school budgets were allocated on a per pupil basis, the general consequence of a major reduction in numbers would be that there would be a reduction of some £7.8m across the Borough, representing a reduction in the budget per school of some £50,000 to £190,000 by 2010. Dudley primary schools currently spent over 80% of their delegated resources on staffing and a reduction of £7.8m would equate to an indicative reduction of 230 posts in schools, or more than 10% of the current workforce in primary schools.

The Director and the Assistant Director then summarised activities that had taken place within the directorate and the Council which had led to the approval of the school organisation proposals by the Cabinet in November 2005. These involved initial consultations with Headteachers, which had resulted in the establishment of a framework of principles to be used in the development of proposals; and a series of meetings held in the summer term of 2005 with Headteachers in township groups and Chairs of Governors, also in township groups, at which a range of options for meetings had been provided for members of the Council. This and other information had been used to shape specific proposals for 82 primary schools. Consultation on the proposals has started on 12 September, 2005 and ended on 21 October, 2005.

The consultation document in this regard had been circulated to all schools for distribution to parents and all parents had been informed of the consultation by letter. 11,000 questionnaires had been circulated with the consultation document, with 778 responses being received, almost 50% of these being from schools proposed for closure or amalgamation. Responses had been received in relation to 73 of the 82 primary schools. Following determination of the proposals by the Cabinet, at its meeting on 17 November, 2005, statutory notices in relation to the proposals had been published. Since objections had been received to all closure proposals, each proposal had been referred to the School Organisation Committee for determination and meetings of that body were to be held on 26 January, 2 February and 21 February, 2006, to consider the proposals. The Assistant Director indicated that, should the proposals be not approved by the School Organisation Committee, they would be referred to the School Adjudicator.

A question and answer session then followed. The Director and the Assistant Director confirmed that issues raised at Area Committees had been answered but that certain requests made could not be acceded to, particularly when these related to a plea to retain a school proposed for closure. On the issue of consultation on proposed partner schools, reference was made to the implications relating to the size of governing body, staffing, workload and other issues, in response to which the Director acknowledged that any changes in this respect would result in the authority having to address various issues with all schools concerned. He also reported that one school had indicated that it did not want to be engaged in partnership arrangements and that this was a matter of some regret. Regarding Wrens Nest, the relevant Assistant Director would be discussing the matter of partnership with the school in the near future but the centre was anxious to insure that the new head was not overloaded. The Assistant Director then summarised the attitude of the DfES as far as financial considerations were concerned, with particular reference to Wrens Nest.

In response to questions asked regarding the implications of closures on teaching staff, the Director indicated that it was unlikely that there would be any consequential redundancies as teaching staff would be redeployed at alternative schools. It was also anticipated that some mature teaching staff might opt for voluntary severance. The Director then summarised the procedures that would follow should the School Organisation Committee approve the closures.

Regarding the proposal to close Maidensbridge Primary School, the Director confirmed that measures were being taken within the directorate aimed at establishing a partnering arrangement. However, he refuted reports in the local press that the Church of the Ascension School would close. A letter of reassurance would be sent to parents of children at the Church of the Ascension School in the next day or so in the light of the press report.

A brief discussion ensued on procedural issues which had emerged from consultation, particularly regarding the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act. In response to further questioning, the Director emphasised that all school closure proposals had been made having regard only to educational reasons and that land value considerations had not been taken into account.

In response to a question regarding proposals made initially for the merger of the Mount Pleasant and Thorns Primary Schools, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that, resulting from a lack of support from the local population, initial proposals had not been proceeded with and that Mount Pleasant would continue to operate, albeit with fewer pupil numbers.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the report, presentation and answers given be received and noted.
- (2) That the Director of Children's Services arrange for a press release to be sent refuting the accuracy of the report referring to a proposed closure of the Church of the Ascension School.

The meeting ended at 7.40 pm

CHAIRMAN