

REPORT FOR THE CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES ON THE CONSULTATION ON THE PROPOSAL TO CLOSE PENSNETT HIGH SCHOOL

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to summarise the outcome of pre-statutory consultation with all relevant individuals and organisations on the proposal to close Pensnett High School.

The report summarises the main issues raised by respondents to allow the Cabinet Member to determine whether to proceed to the next stage which would be the issue of a statutory notice under the terms of the Education and Inspections Act, 2006 which would allow for a further six weeks of formal consultation with all relevant parties. The object of this statutory notice would be to close the school on 31 August 2010.

BACKGROUND

A consultation document was produced in July 2009 and was provided to all relevant individuals and organisations as required by legislation; the closing date for all comments was 1 December 2009.

The document set out the key reasons why the Directorate for Children's Services had reached the decision to consult on closure of the school. In summary this was due 'in part to a sustained and significant fall in the number of pupils on roll at the school and also because of the challenges the school continues to face in its efforts to raise standards. These factors have resulted in the school becoming educationally and economically unviable' (Consultation document July 2009 page 4).

The school has a published admission number of 130 which could mean up to 650 pupils on roll. The consultation document anticipated that there would be a total of 310 pupils on roll in September 2009. The current number on roll in December 2009 is 303. As schools' budgets are based in part on numbers on roll this level of surplus places impacts on the financial viability of the school. In addition the Department for Children Schools and Families and the Audit Commission both require Dudley Children's Services to monitor the effectiveness of any schools with 25% or more surplus places. The current level of surplus at Pensnett High School is 53%.

Although the offers of places for the admission round 2010/2011 will not be made until 1 March 2010, by the closing date for parents' applications on 31 October 2009 only 9 parents had expressed a first place preference for a Year 7 school place for next September. In the previous three years the number of parents who placed Pensnett High as their first choice school for their child was, in 2007, 62 pupils, in 2008, 30 pupils and 2009, 27 pupils. In the event 32 places were offered to all preferences for September 2009 and 22 children took up the places.

The other reason for the proposed closure referred to in the consultation document concerned educational standards at the school which, despite the school's efforts and the support of the Local Authority and the Black Country Challenge, have remained inadequate. Central Government have set a target for all secondary schools of 30% 5+ A* - C (including English and Maths) GCSEs by 2011. In 2008 the school achieved 11% and in 2009, 19%. The Local Authority considers it unlikely the school will achieve this 30% target in 2011. Since the consultation document was issued the school has received an inspection by OFSTED and has been placed in Special Measures.

The consultation document was structured in such a way that the breakdown of responses could be analysed both from the links with the school i.e. parent, member of staff and ethnicity and gender etc, along with providing scope for written responses to the proposals. The remainder of this report is a summary of these responses received within the consultation period.

BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS TO THE CONSULTATION

Responses were received to the consultation in various formats by completing the consultation document questionnaire, by email or in writing. Allowing for more than one response from some individuals the respondents fell into the following categories:

30 parents

58 members of staff and the Head Teacher

The Chair of Governors at the school on behalf of 13 governors

119 individual local residents (106 of which used a response form provided by Councillors Foster and Jordan)

118 pupils (114 of which were part of a consultation exercise undertaken by 'the lookout project')

10 others (including 2 Councillors, Unions, LA staff and schools)

In addition two petitions against closure were received, one from 218 local residents and one from 976 parents and the community. Ten phone calls were also recorded mainly concerning admissions.

Evidence was also drawn from a number of meetings held with pupils, staff, governors and members of the public.

Despite the provision of a section on the consultation form where respondents could state their ethnicity, gender, age, religion and disability no meaningful data as to the representative nature of the respondents can be extracted as a high proportion of respondents submitted their responses in some other format.

Question 2 on the consultation document asked 'do you agree with the proposal to close Pensnett High School in light of the falling rolls and the inadequate educational standards?' Seven respondents said Yes they agreed with the proposed closure

although one of those also ticked the box for No. The remaining respondents who used the form or wrote separately or signed the petitions disagreed with the proposal.

Respondents were given space on the form to explain their answer; in addition Question 3 on the consultation document welcomed any other comments on the proposal. In reality the responses to Question 2 and 3 were interchangeable and are therefore summarised below along with the other written responses received.

REASONS FOR NOT SUPPORTING THE CLOSURE OF PENSNETT HIGH SCHOOL

The strength of the opposition stemmed from a clear view that the school is the heart of the community which not only benefits Pensnett pupils but because it also has very successful extended school and adult learning opportunities. The school was seen as a caring school which met the needs of all pupils including those with special educational needs. Examples were given of pupils who had made successful careers after leaving Pensnett. Respondents especially from within the 119 local residents were very concerned for the future of these facilities. One local resident and ex-parent summed up this view by stating that to shut the school would take the heart out of the community. There are no parks and nowhere for the children to play, football teams use the school weekly, and the adult education courses run five nights per week. The elderly residents use the school to get together and play bingo and this was referred to by many of the respondents using the return slip provided by Councillors.

Individuals gave a range of reasons for rejecting the proposed closure. Many felt that the earlier consultation for the Academy to be sited at Crestwood School had destabilised Pensnett School and contributed to the decline in numbers which was now being used as one of the reasons for closure. This view was also expressed by the staff, the Chair of Governors, the two teacher unions and the two Councillors who responded. Of the 30 parents who gave individual responses a third commented on the effect on pupil numbers of this earlier consultation. Some of the parents expressed concerns that Pensnett pupils would not be received well in alternative schools and were likely to be bullied. In addition some respondents argued that there were no available spaces in other schools and a smaller number of respondents referred to proposed new housing in the area and the impact that would have on availability of places. Some parents were concerned about their child having to travel further to school and others respondents commented on the increased traffic this would generate.

Of the 4 individual pupils and 30 parents who commented on the proposal 21 expressed concerns regarding the disruption that these proposals would make to their own education or that of their Year 10 child. One pupil stated that he was half way through his GCSE's and he was concerned that it would interrupt his studies and affect his results. Most of the parents who had Year 10 pupils wanted reassurance that if the closure were to go ahead their children could remain at Pensnett until the end of Year 11.

Some respondents including the staff letter representing 58 staff, the Head Teacher, the Chair of Governors, and the NASUWT and NUT referred to the emphasis placed on the GCSE results in the consultation document and that the 2009 results had already shown a marked improvement to 19% which could be sustained. The Select Committee on Children's Services, 12 November 2009 resolved that these improved results 'be considered in the consultation now taking place on the future of the school'. All of the respondents listed in this paragraph referred to and supported the document entitled 'A vision for the future of education in the community of Pensnett' which proposes the creation of a small school of 250 – 300 places either as part of a larger institution or as a stand alone facility. They felt that this option had not been sufficiently explored; many of the community respondents using the response form provided by Councillors Foster and Jordan also supported this proposal which was set out in the Councillors letter sent to local residents in November 2009.

COMMENTS ON THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

The consultation document Question 4 provided space for comments on the consultation process and individual letters and other responses also commented on the process. Most responses were against the closure although a small number considered the process long overdue and others suggested that the process be more rapid to minimise the effect on pupils.

The majority of comments on the process were that it was a foregone conclusion, a paper exercise and reference was made once more to the effect that the previous discussions about an Academy had had on the perception of the school. One respondent asked that the community be kept fully informed regarding each stage of the process. Others requested more meetings and asked why a special area committee had not been convened. The local councillors commented that the meetings had been poorly marketed and organised with no records of attendance, minutes, a sound system, or a Chair person. Other respondents used this section on the consultation form to reiterate concerns expressed in the other sections as outlined above.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council, through consultation, sought views on the future of Pensnett School. In particular, it sought views concerning the financial viability and the student outcomes of the age of 16. Whilst most responses opposed the closure of the school, no practical alternatives were forthcoming. The alternative creation of a smaller school as part of 'A vision for the future of education in the community of Pensnett' does not sufficiently address how:

1. to improve the school's current performance especially in light of the government's target for 2011 (i.e. no school to be below 30% 5 A*-C including English and maths).
2. such a school could be financially viable within the context of national school funding formula.

In addition, provision for a secondary school of the size proposed is well below government guidance contained within the Building Schools for the Future documentation.

Therefore this report recommends:

- A. The Cabinet Member receives this report
- B. In light of the evidence contained within, consider taking the decision to move to the next stage in the statutory process by publishing a statutory closure notice.