

DUDLEY SCHOOL ORGANISATION COMMITTEE

Thursday, 26th January 2006 at 6.00 pm in the Dudley Concert Hall,
St. James's Road, Dudley

PRESENT: -

Mr Bell (Schools Group) (Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Aston (as alternate Member for Councillor Finch),
Crompton (as alternate Member for Mrs Ridley for Agenda Item 8
only), Mrs Dunn, Mrs Ridley (Agenda Items 1 –7), Vickers, and Wright
(LEA Group); Mrs Caunt (as alternate Member for Mrs Eden), Mrs
Jessup, Mrs Lewis, Mr Patterson and Mr Timmins (Schools Group);
Mrs Capell, Reverend Morphy and Reverend Wickens (Church of
England Group); Mr Potter and Mr Spurrell (Roman Catholic Church
Group)

Officers

Ms Stroud (Pinsent Masons) – Independent legal adviser to the
Committee and Mr Sanders and Mr Jewkes – both Democratic
Services, Dudley MBC, representing the Secretary to the Committee

Also in attendance

Mr Freeman, Director of Children's Services, Mr Watson – Assistant
Director of Children's Services (Resources and Planning), representing
Dudley MBC

11 MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 13th
December, 2005 be approved as a correct record and signed,
subject to the following amendment: -

The deletion of the words, 'given particularly that the contribution
from the Church of England could not be confirmed', from
Paragraph 2 of Minute 44 – Discontinuation of Hasbury and
Halesowen C.E. Schools and Establishment of New Voluntary Aided
C.E. School in Halesowen.

12 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

In relation to Minute 44 – Discontinuation of Hasbury and Halesowen C.E. Schools and Establishment of New Voluntary Aided C.E. School in Halesowen, the Chairman reported that due to further work being carried out by the Local Authority (LA) in relation to the proposals for Hasbury and Halesowen schools, the matter would not now be considered at the meeting of the School Organisation Committee (SOC) to be held on 2nd February, but at a later meeting to be determined in due course.

In relation to Minute 41 – Matters Arising from the Minutes, it was reported that the report on the current position of Ellowes Hall Sixth Form originally intended to be submitted to this meeting of the Committee was not yet complete and consequently would be submitted to a future meeting.

13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made in accordance with Paragraph 4.2 of the Constitution and Terms of Reference of the Committee.

14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Reverend Johnston (Church of England Group) and Mr Seaton (Black Country Learning and Skills Council).

In addition, it was noted that Councillor Mrs Aston was serving as an alternate Member of the LEA Group in place of Councillor Finch, that Mrs Caunt was serving as an alternate Member of the Schools Group in place of Mrs Eden and that Councillor Crumpton would serve as an alternate Member of the LEA Group in place of Councillor Mrs Ridley for Agenda Item 8 only.

15 ARRANGEMENTS FOR CONSIDERATION OF DUDLEY MBC PROPOSALS FOR DISCONTINUATION OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The Chairman outlined the proposed procedure for considering the proposals by Dudley MBC for the discontinuation of several local primary schools. This procedure consisted of six phases; the presentation of the proposal and responses to written representations received by the LA, the questioning of the LA by Committee Members, a thirty minute session in which members of the public present at the meeting would be given the opportunity to make oral representations on the proposals and further questioning of the LA by Committee Members would be allowed. The Committee would then retire to make its decision and would be reconvened to vote on the proposals

16 MAIDENSBIDGE PRIMARY SCHOOL

The Director of Children's Services (Mr Freeman) reported that in light of the responses received to the consultation on the proposals to discontinue Maidensbridge Primary School, the statutory notice relating to those proposals had been withdrawn. New proposals for the school were now being formulated, on which a consultation process would be initiated in due course.

In response to questions on the matter, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that statutory notice on the proposals had been withdrawn on Wednesday 25th January, 2006 and that a letter explaining the situation had been sent to the parents of all Maidensbridge pupils. It was also confirmed that any consultation would be conducted in accordance with statutory requirements.

17 SYCAMORE GREEN PRIMARY SCHOOL

The Committee considered a report of the LA on the proposals by Dudley MBC to discontinue Sycamore Green Primary School.

In introducing the report, the Director of Children's Services gave a brief outline of the reasoning behind the proposals. He explained that the numbers of children who attended schools in Dudley had fallen from 4116 in 1991 to 3444 in 2003/04. This represented a drop of 18% and as education was funded on a per pupil basis, this reduction in birth rate meant that the financial resources available to the Local Authority had also declined dramatically. Projections provided by the Office of National Statistics predicted that the birth rate in the Borough would stabilise in the next 20 years, meaning that the school population in Dudley would even out at approximately 3300. Should this projection prove correct, the education funding provided to the Local Authority would be reduced by approximately £7.8 million compared to current levels.

The Assistant Director of Children's Services – Resources and Planning (Mr Watson) then set out the Council's case in relation to the proposed closure of Sycamore Green Primary School. He echoed the sentiments expressed by the Director, adding that if the number of primary school places in Dudley was not reduced in line with the declining numbers of children, there could be up to 5000 surplus places 2010. Of the 321 places currently provided at the school, only 161 were occupied. The maintenance of surplus places was already having an adverse effect on the budgetary position of the school, with a reduction of £70,000 expected for 2006/07. In time, this would mean that the school would be forced to reduce the number of staff employed at the school, resulting in larger class sizes and possibly mixed age groups. It was reported that a bid for DfES funding for a new school of sufficient capacity to accommodate children from Sycamore Green and nearby Wrens Nest School on the Wrens Nest site had been approved, a condition of which was the reduction of surplus places in the area. It was the view of the Council that this option presented

the most cost effective means of providing education for the pupils of Sycamore Green and of providing high quality facilities to help raise standards. In concluding, Mr Watson stated that the number of children subscribed to Sycamore Green had fallen from 313 in 1997 to 147 currently. This meant that the cost of educating pupils at Sycamore Green had become disproportionately high resulting in the draining of funds from other schools across the Borough.

Following the presentation by the LA, the Chairman invited Members of the Committee to raise questions concerning the case for discontinuation of Sycamore Green Primary School.

Mr Patterson asked a number of questions of the LA, including why when Dudley MBC had been aware of the problem of under subscription in local schools for 7 years, no action had been taken prior to the current proposals being made. He also raised the issue of the approval by the DfES of the Council's proposals for the Wrens Nest School, asking if the bid had specifically identified Sycamore Green for closure, as this would have meant that the LA had made the decision to propose closure of the school well before the consultation process had been initiated. He also commented that the maintenance of the Sycamore Green site as an 'Annex' would minimise any potential saving as staffing and premises costs would remain a burden on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG).

In responding to these comments, the Director of Children's Services stated that the proposals to discontinue several schools in the local area were being made now due to the urgency of the situation in view of the fall in the local birth rate in recent years and the subsequent increase in surplus places by 2010. On the issue of the bid for funding for a new school on the Wrens Nest site, he confirmed that one of the main factors in any bid approved by the DfES was the potential for maximising value for money which in this case meant reducing the number of surplus places. He stated however, that the closure of Sycamore Green had not been specifically identified as a means of achieving this. The maintenance of the current site as a temporary annex was designed to soften the blow of the closure of the school and while this would mean a reduction in savings achieved in the years immediately following the closure, it was expected that the freezing of recruitment and the acceptance of retirements and voluntary severance would bring down the level of staffing in schools over time, in line with the reduction of funds expected as a result of falling rolls.

Reverend Wickens stated that while he understood the general case of the LA, he was uncomfortable with the response offered by the LA to the written representations made by objectors in that many had drawn attention to the Black Country Study which discussed the possibility of a considerable influx of migrants into the area in the long term which would mean that the number of children to be educated in the area could increase. The Director of Children's Services responded by saying that the aim of the Black Country Study was to

prevent outward migration and that there was no evidence that the number of people living or being educated in Dudley would increase in the future. However, the evidence did show that the number of pupils in Dudley schools would fall considerably by 2010 and that this problem needed to be addressed urgently. In addition to this, Mr Watson stated that Dudley was a net importer of pupils and that with birth rates in neighbouring Local Authorities also falling, the numbers of pupils being imported by Dudley was also likely to fall, resulting in further surplus places should reorganisation not occur.

Other questions were raised concerning the bid made by the LA for Targeted Capital Funding (TCF) for the construction of a new school on the Wrens Nest site and the financing of construction of the new facility. In responding to these, the LA representatives reiterated the point that the reduction of surplus places had been identified as a priority in the bid but maintained that the closure of Sycamore Green would have been necessary whether or not the bid had been successful. The LA saw the acquisition of the funding for the new school as a bonus in providing top quality educational facilities in the area. On the issue of finance, it was reported that the capital funding for the new school was included in the Council's Capital Funding Programme and that figures relating to the project were publicly available in the LA report now submitted.

Mr Patterson expressed concern regarding the absence of certain information which he saw as important in considering the proposal. He was of the view that although the report made it clear that the unit cost per pupil at Sycamore Green (£3318) was considerably higher than the borough average (£2572), the Committee had not been provided with information on similar schools in the area by way of comparison and it was not clear how the schools proposed for closure had been identified. Also, the 'Primary Refresh' document had maintained that schools accommodating less than 210 pupils were not sustainable, yet several other schools in the Borough with similar numbers on roll to Sycamore Green were not being proposed for closure. In responding to these comments, the Director of Children's Services stated that the comparative figures relating to the annual cost per pupil in Dudley schools were publicly available via the 'Section 52' document. The Committee was also referred to page 20 of the LA response to objections on the proposal which set out the criteria which had been considered in determining which schools would need to be discontinued. The main factors taken into consideration had been the requirement for schools to be educationally and financially viable and the need for a sufficient number of local places to be available for local children.

At the close of questioning by the Committee, the Chairman advised the meeting that a period of 30 minutes would follow in which members of the public would be allowed to make oral representations on the proposal and invited those who wished to speak to make themselves known. Mr Dean Perks then spoke on behalf of the objectors to the proposal, making the following points: -

- That the additional capital spending required to facilitate the closure of schools in Borough and extension of the 'partner schools' involved, along with the cost of reducing staffing levels, would cancel out any potential savings.
- That the removal of mobile classrooms currently in use at the school would reduce capacity sufficiently to remove surplus places and make the school educationally and financially viable.
- That the widespread regeneration planned for the area and for Dudley Town Centre was likely to cause an increase in migration into the Dudley area, thus increasing the number of children of school age and the number of pupils in the vicinity of Sycamore Green requiring school places.
- That one of the main reasons intake at Sycamore Green was low was that other nearby schools had nursery facilities where children made friends and became comfortable with their surroundings, meaning that parents were inclined to keep their children at these schools when they matured to primary school age. Had this facility been available to Sycamore Green there would have been more pupils on roll.
- That it was illogical to close Sycamore Green in favour of moving the children to the Wrens Nest. Sycamore Green was a school with high standards, particularly with regard to SEN provision, whereas Wrens Nest ranked 82 out of 83 Dudley primary schools in terms of attainment. Also, should Sycamore Green be closed, parents would be inclined to send their children to Bramford Primary School rather than a new school on the Wrens Nest site, meaning that the new school would also be operating with surplus places, making the whole exercise a failure.
- That the figures quoted by the LA were not conclusive, given that similar NHS figures showed the possibility of birth rate and fertility increasing in the area. Also, with the construction of large numbers of new dwellings planned for the Wrens Nest area, it was likely that the number of children in the area would grow considerably in coming years, meaning that if Sycamore Green was closed, the new school on the Wrens Nest site would be oversubscribed and overcrowded, bringing down standards.

- That the closure of Sycamore Green would be damaging to the wider community. The school was a focal point for virtually all community activity, as very few other community facilities existed in the area. Also, the integration of the Sycamore Green children into a new school on the Wrens Nest site would be particularly distressing for the children as relations between the two communities were already fraught at times and would be further exacerbated. Consequently, if it was decided that Sycamore Green must close, it was the view of the parents that a partnership arrangement with the Bramford School would be preferable to amalgamation with Wrens Nest.

At the close of the presentation by Mr Perks, the Chairman invited the Committee to ask any additional questions of the LA on points which had emerged during the presentation.

In response to a question from Mr Potter concerning the current standard of performance of the Wrens Nest School, the Director of Children's Services reported that standards were currently improving.

Mr Spurrell raised the issue of the recent removal of the mobile classrooms at the Bramford School and enquired as to whether or not the removal of the mobile classrooms at Sycamore Green and across the Borough would reduce surplus accommodation and places. In responding, Mr Watson explained that the mobile classrooms at the Bramford School had been removed as they were in dilapidated condition and were unfit to accommodate classes. He added that many Dudley schools, including Sycamore Green, were currently maintaining empty classrooms in buildings, due to undersubscription. The Director of Children's Services also stated that the DfES required the LA to look at schools' popularity in terms of subscription. One of the main reasons Sycamore Green had been proposed for closure was that not enough parents decided to send their children there. Although long term birth rates were impossible to predict accurately, the numbers of children already born who would enter primary education in the next 5 years was significantly lower, meaning that funding from DfES would also fall sharply in the next five years.

In response to a question from Mrs Jessup, the Director of Children's Services (Mr Freeman) again confirmed that whilst the commitment to reduce surplus places in the area did form part of the TCF bid for funding to build a new school on the current Wrens Nest School site, the closure of Sycamore Green had not been identified as requirement for the approval of the scheme.

At this juncture, and once all parties had asked all the questions they wished, the meeting was adjourned temporarily in order that the Committee could consider how best to proceed. During the adjournment the Committee agreed that, in view of time constraints and the level of public attendance at the meeting, the decision making on the proposals for both Sycamore Green and Highfields schools would take place in private after the hearing of the Highfields proposals, in order that representatives of that school would not be kept waiting any longer than was necessary to make their representations.

19 HIGHFIELDS PRIMARY SCHOOL

The Committee then reconvened in public session to consider a report on the proposals by Dudley MBC to discontinue Highfields Primary School.

Having previously declared an interest in the proposal to discontinue Highfields Primary School in view of her position as a Governor of Christchurch Primary School, Councillor Mrs Ridney left the meeting for the duration of the consideration of the Highfields proposal and Councillor Crumpton sat as an alternate member of the LA Group in her place.

In introducing the report, Mr Watson stated that broadly speaking, Dudley was an average performer nationally in terms of educational standards and said that the statutory proposals being considered at the meeting were part of a wider strategy to improve the standard of education provided for children in Dudley. The future of primary education in Dudley was in jeopardy due to the escalating number of surplus places being maintained in the Borough and the inefficient use of resources this entailed. As the number of children being educated in Dudley was currently falling by approximately 400 a year, the amount of funding provided to the Council by the DfES was also declining year on year, meaning that the funding available to every primary school was falling. It was envisaged that should no reorganisation of educational provision be conducted in Dudley by 2010, 5000 surplus places would exist in the area. This would further exacerbate the problems already being experienced by some smaller schools in balancing their budgets and affording adequate levels of staffing.

Specifically in relation to Highfields school, Mr Watson reported that the school had 210 places available and that subscription levels had fallen from 198 in 1997 to 171 in 2005 and 147 in 2006. As a consequence, the funding available to the school would decrease by at least £70,000 in April 2006 and because of this, unless the school was discontinued staffing reductions and mixed age teaching groups would be unavoidable in the future. In concluding his comments, Mr Watson said that the proposals were not a reflection on the quality of Highfields as a school or on its performance, as these were both of a high standard. The proposal was based purely on educational and financial grounds and the fact that the

school was no longer viable given the continued fall in enrolment.

Following the presentation by the LA, the Chairman invited the Committee to ask questions concerning the case for discontinuation of Highfields Primary School.

Councillor Crumpton commented that the £1.69 million referred to in the report which was to be made available to build additional classrooms at both Christchurch and Wallbrook Primary Schools, in order to recover the capacity lost by the closure of Highfields, seemed a large amount of money, particularly in view of the fact that adequate classroom space was already in place at the Highfields site. In responding, Mr Watson said that the additional classrooms would be new, high quality facilities and that in building them the Council was required to follow government guidelines, health and safety specifications and design quality indicators.

In response to a comment that the LA had not answered all the questions raised in written representations on the proposals, Mr Watson stated that the Directorate of Children's Services had responded to over 6000 enquiries and hundreds of letters and had conducted 21 consultation meetings in relation to the proposals. Many of the questions raised were not yet answerable, as the work required to bring to light the required information had not yet been undertaken.

In referring to the criteria used by the LA to identify schools for closure, Councillor Crumpton commented that the closure of Highfields school, a community school, and the extension of Christchurch, a denominational school, would alter the balance of religious and community school places available in the area. Also, the closure would require many former Highfields children to cross major roads in travelling to the nearest alternative school, thus compromising their safety. In responding, Mr Watson explained that across the Borough, the balance of denominational and community places would be largely maintained. On the issue of travel, he reported that parents of children at Highfields had been surveyed on their travel arrangements and 60% had confirmed that they took their children to school by car. However, the Directorate of the Urban Environment was aware of the situation and would be able to make adjustments to the roads in the area to ensure that safe routes to alternative schools were available.

Mr Patterson raised the issue of the positioning of Highfields school and of others proposed for closure and asked if it had been intentional to identify one school in each of the Borough's five townships for closure. In responding, the Director of Children's Services stated that all of the schools proposed for closure had been chosen according to the criteria referred to previously at the meeting, which could be found in Appendix H to the LA report.

Mr Patterson commented that because of the limited additional capacity available at Christchurch and Wallbrook, in the event of Highfields being closed, children in the area would be forced to attend Hurst Hill Primary which currently also had a sizable surplus of places. In responding, Mr Watson said that mapping exercises conducted by the LA had shown that a large number of the children attending Highfields actually lived near to Hurst Hill Primary, meaning that in terms of travel this school could be more convenient for them. Further to this, it was the LA's wish to provide parents in the area a real choice of school and capacity at Christchurch and Wallbrook would be increased to reflect demand for those schools if Highfields was closed.

Mr Blythe, a member of the public, informed the meeting that he had made numerous requests under the Freedom of Information Act for copies of the detailed analysis concerning the criteria and the selection process for determining which schools would be proposed for closure as a result of the Primary Review, and had not received any documentation from the LA in response. Mr Watson responded by saying that the Directorate of Children's Services had replied to all of Mr Blythe's requests for information and that the process of selection of schools had been explained to him at length. However, the specific documents relating to the selection process had been produced by different specialist officers and presented to senior officers of the Directorate of Children's Services for their analysis. The documents relating to the development of the proposals had remained confidential in order to stop speculation and to try to maintain order and stability in the schools involved.

At the close of questioning by the Committee, the Chairman advised the meeting that a period of 30 minutes would follow in which members of the public would be allowed to make oral representations on the proposals, and invited those who wished to speak to make themselves known. Nine members of the public, including the headteacher of Highfields Primary School, then spoke on behalf of the objectors to the proposals, making the following points: -

- That since the survey of 'school facilities and condition' referred to in the LA report was conducted, approximately £150,000 had been invested in modifying facilities at the school in order to make them 'suitable for purpose', rendering this criticism of the school buildings invalid.
- That the main reason Highfields was undersubscribed was that neighbouring schools offered nursery services and once parents had enrolled their child at nursery at a particular school they were usually inclined to keep their child at that school for the sake of continuity. Enabling Highfields to open the Early Years facility, which was already completed, would increase subscription to the primary school.

- That should Highfields close many parents would be forced to send their children to a denominational school, Christchurch, against their wishes.
- That closing Highfields and integrating the children into a new school would cause them great distress and anxiety, particularly to children with special educational needs, which would disrupt their education.
- That the school was the focal point of a deprived local community and that closure would damage the social cohesion currently enjoyed by residents of the area.
- That children having to walk to Christchurch, Wallbrook or Hurst Hill would be put in danger by crossing busy main roads with large numbers of parked cars.
- That traffic congestion, already a problem in the area immediately surrounding Christchurch would be further exacerbated by the expansion of the school.
- That Highfields was a good school, well liked by parents and children, which provided a choice of primary schools for parents in the Coseley area.
- That the closure of Highfields would only eliminate 70 surplus places and as such was too drastic a solution to the current problem.

At the close of the presentation by members of the public, the Chairman invited the Committee to ask any additional questions of the LA on points which had emerged during the presentation.

Mrs Jessup asked how many children the Early Years facility at Highfields was designed to accommodate and how many children were expected to be enrolled should it open. In responding, representatives of the school explained that the facility was designed to accommodate 24 children of ages 3-4 and that 12 had been confirmed to start in January 2007.

Councillor Crumpton made reference to the fact that Wallbrook Primary School was currently oversubscribed and asked why the LA had not considered reducing the capacity of that school in order to reduce the number of surplus places at Highfields. In responding, Mr Watson said that the only way to provide financially sustainable education in Coseley and across the Borough was to reduce staffing and resources costs in order to offset the year on year reduction in funding from the DfES. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that parents refused entry at Wallbrook would choose to send their children to Highfields instead.

20 COMMITTEE IN PRIVATE SESSION

Following the end of questioning and the withdrawal of the public, the Committee met in private session to receive advice from the Legal Adviser on legal and procedural issues regarding consideration of the proposals. In this regard, the Legal Adviser to the Committee indicated the requirements of the legislation regarding decision-making and referred to the matters set out in the statutory and non-statutory DfES Decision Makers Guidance with which the Committee had to be satisfied.

21 DECISION MAKING

Having first determined that they were satisfied that they had sufficient information and were able to consider the respective proposals in that the published notices and consultation notice complied with the statutory requirements and adequate capital resources were available to implement the proposal, the Committee retired into its component groups to determine how they proposed to vote. They then returned to the meeting for a discussion, following which the vote was taken separately in relation to both respective schools.

22 DETERMINATION OF PROPOSALS

A. Sycamore Green Primary School

The groups then voted as follows:

Local Authority Group – Approved the proposals for the reasons set out in the resolution below.

Schools Group – Approved the proposals for the reasons set out in the resolution below.

Roman Catholic Church Group – Approved the proposals for the reasons set out in the resolution below.

Church of England Group – Abstained, noting that they had concerns as to whether Dudley MBC had an adequate strategic plan for closure proposals across the Borough and whether Dudley MBC had taken sufficient account of community cohesion factors particular to the area, given the historical diversity and background of the population of the Priory/Wrens Nest/Sycamore Green area, but taking the view that local educational provision is a matter which if at all possible be should be determined in Dudley.

It was therefore

RESOLVED

That the proposals of Dudley MBC that Sycamore Green Primary School be discontinued with effect from 31st August 2006 be approved for the reasons set out below.

- a) That the proposals would assist in maintaining educational standards across the Borough in that if Sycamore Green School was permitted to remain open despite declining numbers and diminishing class sizes eventually the School would be so under-resourced and not financially viable that the pupils at the School would not receive the quality of education that they deserve. It was also noted that continuing to maintain a School which has become financially unviable would also have a detrimental impact on the funding and educational provision available to other children in the Borough.
- b) That the proposals would allow for sufficient provision for the overall supply and likely future demand for places in that there is sufficient capacity to accommodate displaced pupils in the area, and there is an overall surplus in places across the Borough which must be addressed. Those voting in favour of the proposals were satisfied there were sufficient places to accommodate pupils from Sycamore Green at Bramford Primary School, Wrens Nest Primary School and in many other Primary Schools a little further away. It was also noted that the successful bid for funding for the rebuilding of Wrens Nest Primary School would benefit those pupils who chose to attend Wrens Nest.
- c) That the proposals represented a cost-effective use of public funds. The Local Authority had to reduce surplus primary pupil provision in order to mitigate the impact of an anticipated reduction in the budget for primary school pupils of £7.8m by 2010 because of reduced pupil numbers, and the closure of Sycamore Green School would help achieve this objective. It was also noted that adequate capital resources required for the re-building of Wrens Nest Primary School were available.
- d) That the views of interested parties had been received and were taken into account in determining the proposals. It was recognised that some objectors and other parties had concerns about the impact of the proposed closure on the local community in view of the role Sycamore Green School occupies in its local community and the differing nature of the Sycamore Green, Wrens Nest and Priory communities. Those voting in favour of the proposals did not find community cohesion issues to be of sufficient concern to prevent the proposals being approved but nevertheless wished to seek an assurance from the Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning at Dudley MBC that the Council would work with the local community in an endeavour to mitigate difficulties caused to children and other members of local community by the closure of the School.

B. Highfields Primary School

The groups then voted as follows:

Local Authority Group – Approved the proposals for the reasons set out in the resolution below.

Schools Group – Approved the proposals for the reasons set out in the resolution below.

Roman Catholic Church Group – Approved the proposals for the reasons set out in the resolution below.

Church of England Group – Abstained, noting that they had concerns as to whether Dudley MBC had an adequate strategic plan for closure proposals across the Borough and whether Dudley MBC had taken sufficient account of the impact on the local community of the proposals, but taking the view that local educational provision is a matter which if at all possible be should be determined in Dudley.

It was therefore

RESOLVED

That the proposals of Dudley MBC that Highfields Primary School be discontinued with effect from 31st August 2006 be approved for the reasons set out below.

- (a) That the proposals will assist in maintaining educational standards across the Borough in that if Highfields Primary School is permitted to remain open despite declining numbers and diminishing class sizes eventually the School will be so under-resourced and not financially viable that the pupils at the School will not receive the quality of education that they deserve. It is also noted that continuing to maintain a School which has become financially unviable would also have a detrimental impact on the funding and educational provision available to other children in the Borough.
- (b) That the proposals will allow for sufficient provision for the overall supply and likely future demand for places in that there is sufficient capacity to accommodate displaced pupils in the area, and there is an overall surplus in places across the Borough which must be addressed. Those voting in favour of the proposals are satisfied there are sufficient places to accommodate pupils from Highfields Primary School at alternative nearby schools, including Christchurch CE School, Wallbrook and Hurst Hill. The Committee notes the reluctance of some parents to send their children to a denominational school but is satisfied that a choice of non-denominational schools will still be available within the local area.

- (c) That the proposals represent a cost-effective use of public funds. The Local Authority has to reduce surplus primary pupil provision in order to mitigate the impact of an anticipated reduction in the budget for primary school pupils of £7.8m by 2010 because of reduced pupil numbers, and the closure of Highfields Primary School will help achieve this objective. It is also noted that adequate capital resources required for the building works that may in the future be required at Christchurch CE are available. There was discussion about whether reducing and reorganising the number of school places across all of the local primary schools will adequately address the issue of surplus capacity without the need to close Highfields. However, those voting in favour of the proposals agree that the closure of Highfields is already part of a wider strategy to reorganise educational provision and reduce surplus capacity across the Borough and that keeping a school the size of Highfields open is not cost-effective in the long term.
- (d) That the views of interested parties have been received and were taken into account in determining the proposals. It is recognised that some objectors and other parties have concerns about the impact of the proposed closure on the local community, particularly given the number of community activities operating from the School premises. Those voting in favour of the proposals do not find community cohesion issues to be of sufficient concern to prevent the proposals being approved but nevertheless wish to seek an assurance from the Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning at Dudley MBC that the Council will work with the local community in an endeavour to mitigate the impact on the local community of the closure of the School.
- (e) The Committee is satisfied as to the length and nature of journeys to be undertaken by pupils in order to reach alternative schools, although it is recognised that this will involve crossing main roads in some cases.

20 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the SOC was scheduled for Thursday 2nd February, 2006.

The meeting ended at 11.30pm.

CHAIRMAN