

SPECIAL MEETING OF HALESOWEN AREA COMMITTEE

Wednesday 7th December, 2005, at 6.30 p.m.
at Cornbow Hall, Hagley Street, Halesowen

PRESENT

Councillor Jackson (Chairman)
Councillor Burston (Vice-Chairman)
Councillors Body, Boys, Crumpton, Mrs Dunn, Mrs Faulkner, James, Ms Nicholls, Ms Partridge, Mrs Shakespeare, Taylor, Mrs Turner and K Turner.

Officers

Area Liaison Officer, Director of Children's Services, Assistant Director (Resources and Planning), Head of Policy (Executive and Support), Senior Engineer (Directorate of the Urban Environment), Senior Solicitor (Gary Collins) and Mrs M Johal (Directorate of Law and Property)

Approximately 30 members of the public were in attendance.

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MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16th November, 2005, be approved as a correct record and signed.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A declaration of personal interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, was made by Councillor Mrs Dunn in respect of Agenda Item No 4 (Investing in the Future : Primary Schools Review) in view of her being a member of the School Organisation Committee.

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APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors Ms Partridge and J Woodall.

A report of the Director of Children's Services considered by Cabinet on 17th November, 2005 was submitted on the background to the Primary Schools Review, together with a presentation summarising the progress made since 17th November, 2005 and an outline of the implementation plan.

The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) gave a presentation on the Primary School Review and in doing so, reported that the reasons for change were because the current system of primary schools could not be afforded due to reducing income owing to surplus places. Primary pupil number would fall by 2,358 (9%) between 2005 and 2010, which would reduce the budget by £7.8 million. Dudley primary schools, on average, spent 83% on staff, 6% on personnel and 11% on supplies and services and all schools would experience a budget reduction of £50,000. A budget reduction of £50,000 would have an inevitable impact on staffing and the quality of education unless action was taken. This had led to the decision to close five schools from 31st August, 2006. School closure notices had been published on 22nd November, 2005 and since then, several meetings had been held with Head Teachers to plan the next stage and meetings with Governing Bodies would also be undertaken. It was intended that the schools for the future would be created to offer 21st Century learning to include extended school facilities, community use, childcare, adult education, sports and leisure facilities.

The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) further reported that the Schools Forum had recently agreed to make available to parents affected by closures, support for uniforms, a revenue grant to fund schools in the transitional period and also a staff salary protection to accommodate any differentiation in earnings.

He then gave a brief background to the School Organisation Committee and how it operated. It was reported that the School Organisation Committee would meet on 26th January, 2006 to consider the objections and representations made and then to reach a decision. The decision would be conveyed to all objectors in writing. It was pointed out that the School Organisation Committee could approve, reject or modify the proposals, however if a decision could not be reached it would be referred to the Independent Schools Adjudicator for a decision, which would slow the process. The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) advised that all objections should be made in writing and submitted to Westox House.

The Director of Children's Services reiterated points made and further commented that he acknowledged that closing schools was unpopular and the decision had been made with regret. All schools in the borough were good, however to address the surplus problem and to ensure sustainability, the decision had to be taken. If action had not been taken there would be a considerable loss in finance, which would impact on the quality of education, staff reductions and lead to increased class sizes. He further reported that requests for extending the consultation period for another year had been rejected, as this would have prolonged the uncertainty and would have led to staff leaving and pupil numbers reducing.

Written questions and comments from members of the public were then made which included the following:-

- Would the education of the children of Holt Farm Primary School suffer during the transitional period and due to staff leaving
- Would the Holt Farm Governing Body still exist or would it become part of Hurst Green
- Had the Governing Bodies from Hurst Green School been consulted
- What would be the position if admission numbers went up at Holt Farm
- Would children be in larger class sizes
- Did the two schools use the same teaching techniques/curriculum and, if not, would the children be expected to learn in a different way
- How would events such as sports day and school plays take place across two sites
- Why had the statutory notices been removed
- Given that Holt Farm would become an annexe of Hurst Green and all staff would become part of Hurst Green, would the transferred staff have the same rights in the case of redundancies when the annexe eventually closed.
- What would happen if a Governing Body of the parent school did not agree with the proposals
- Would views of Hurst Green parents be considered if a change of name and merger was considered
- Would Halesowen and Hasbury Church of England Schools each retain small schools funding allowance while both schools continued to be used until they merged into one site
- Had the fact that, in Sandwell Borough, within a mile of Holt Farm School, there was a large housing development been taken into account in the decision
- Who would decide about governor representation or voice for Holt Farm children

The Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) responded to questions raised and comments made. It was reported that there was an issue with maintaining standards and quality and due to the surplus places in schools and the decreasing budget the matter had to be addressed. The proposals addressed demographic problems and did not have any bearing on staff. Schools across the borough were performing well and efforts would be made to ensure that staff continued in employment. It was not envisaged that there would be any compulsory redundancies due to the normal staff turnover, promotion and retirement and education personnel would be working with staff to accommodate their needs. All staff would have the same employment protection and would acquire the same rights. If staff chose to leave on their own accord the quality in education would not be affected, as alternative staff would replace them to ensure standards were maintained. The Joint Schools Steering Group would be determining the staffing structure in relation to the split sites and would be working with staff and children to ensure early integration. The decision to operate on split sites had been taken to minimise disruption. The Group would also be considering class sizes and it was anticipated that class sizes would be managed with a view to maintaining them. There was a commitment to communication and the Group would be engaging with children with a view to allowing them to have their say.

The Governing Body in consultation with the Joint Schools Steering Group would be responsible for managing and arranging events on split sites and there was no intention to have them on separate days. In respect of teaching techniques the Government were aiming for personalised learning and the Local Authority would be supporting schools towards that direction. It was further commented that schools were required to operate to the national curriculum.

The change of name was a matter for Hurst Green Primary School and discussions would be undertaken shortly. The Cabinet had amended proposals to ensure that partnership working took place and consultation with Governing Bodies would be undertaken to air and address any concerns. The likelihood of increased admissions had been discussed and, should there be a significant increase, the proposals had sufficient capacity to absorb the impact. It was further commented that it was not a duty and the Local Authority did not have the power to plan school places for those resident in another borough.

The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) undertook to replace the statutory notices.

In respect of the small schools allowance the Director of Children's Services confirmed that sufficient funding to maintain standards would be made available.

The Committee then made comments and the proposals were fully supported for the benefit of the children and to enable the quality of education to continue in the borough. Reference was made to the small schools allowance and confirmation was sought that the grant would be continued. Members further pointed out that the decision had not as yet been taken and would only be made by the School Organisation Committee and clarified that the process was still in the consultation process.

The Director of Children's Services reported that the mechanism of funding was a matter for the Schools Forum.

The Chairman and Vice-Chairman thanked all officers, schools, Governors and parents and advised that the declining numbers at schools was a national issue and other Local Authorities were going through the same procedure and it was a decision that had to be taken.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report, and Appendix to the report submitted, on progress made since 17th November, 2005, on the Primary Schools Review, be noted.
- (2) That the Committee recognises the need for action to be taken to address the implication of surplus places in Primary Schools and welcomes the Cabinet's response to the first stage of the consultation process.
- (3) That the Cabinet proposals for further consultation be endorsed.

DATES AND VENUES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED

That the dates and venues of future meetings of the Committee be noted as follows:-

25th January, 2006 – Halesowen College
22nd March, 2006 – Olive Hill Primary School

The meeting ended at 8.15 pm.

CHAIRMAN