

CENTRAL DUDLEY AREA COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 11th October, 2005 at 6.30 p.m.
at The Council Chamber, Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Rahman (Chairman)

Councillors:- Ali, Mrs. Aston, Bradney, Cotterill, Mrs Coulter, Ms. Craigie, J. Davies, M. Davis, Finch, Hart, Sparks and Ms. H. Edwards

OFFICERS:

Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (As Area Liaison Officer), Assistant Director, of Childrens' Services (Resources and Planning), Acting Assistant Director of Children's Services (Access and Inclusion), Senior Information Analyst (Directorate of Children's Services), Mr. K. Edwards (Principal Solicitor) and Mrs. J. Rees (Directorate of Law and Property).

Approximately 50 members of the public were in attendance at the meeting.

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CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

In welcoming everyone to the meeting, the Chairman explained the reason for the change of venue, at extremely short notice. This related to the concerns of Dudley College regarding possible safety and security issues arising from the possibility of large numbers of the public attending. He acknowledged that the new venue was not ideally suited for the purpose of public consultation but stated that the Council Chamber was the best option available given the limited time available to rearrange the venue. He also explained the reason for the later start time which was to ensure that members of the public who had not heard of the change of venue in advance were given ample time in which to be redirected to the Council Chamber in time for the meeting to start.

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MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 6th September, 2005, be approved as a correct record and signed, subject to the following amendments to Minute No. 26.

- (1) That the words “and the urgent need for repairs to the potholes at the entrance to the supermarket” be added to the last line of paragraph (4) to the issues raised by Councillor Hart.
- (2) That the following be added as paragraph (6) to the issues raised by Councillor Hart: “The need for a rapid conclusion to be brought to the problems at Scotts Green Close”.
- (3) That the name “Ashenhurst Road” be substituted for the name “Merryfield Road” in paragraph 1) of the issues raised by Councillor Ms Craigie.

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APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors Johnston, Male and C.L. Woodall; Mrs. Oakes, Mr. Sadiq and Mrs. Little.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Mrs Aston, Bradney, Mrs Coulter and Ms Craigie declared a Personal Interest in accordance with the Members’ Code of Conduct in respect of Agenda Item No. 4, in view of their governorships of schools.

Councillor Finch declared a Prejudicial Interest in accordance with the Members’ Code of Conduct in respect of Agenda Item No. 4, in view of his wife being employed at Sycamore Green School.

Mr Edwards declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item No. 4 in view of his wife being employed at Dudley Wood Primary School.

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PRIMARY SCHOOL REVIEW – CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

A report of the Director of Children’s Services was submitted on the Primary School Review Consultation document.

The Assistant Director of Children’s Services (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 Children's Services (Resources and Planning) emphasised that the review had been necessary purely 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.

In response to comments from members of the public he confirmed that numbers at Sycamore Green School had dropped to as low as 184 and were forecast to drop even further.

Following the public consultation, which would end on 21st October, all suggestions and comments would be considered by the Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning and draft proposals based on these considerations would be submitted to the Cabinet in November 2005. If they were agreed, 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.

Written comments and questions received from members of the public and the responses given included the following:

- (a) A request to reinstate the Inclusion Unit at Sycamore Green school for children with special educational needs was made. The Assistant Director of Childrens' Services (Resources and Planning) advised that the Unit had been closed due to a fall in numbers. When the unit was closed, no pupils were attending it.
- (b) A request was made for a guarantee that a family of 6, three of whom had special educational needs, would be allowed to attend the same school, in response to which the Assistant Director of Childrens' Services' (Resources and Planning) envisaged all children would be found places at the same school.
- (c) The manner in which the closures would affect pupil class sizes and whether closure proposals had been consulted on with school governors was raised. The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources and Planning) advised that the Local Authority was fully aware of the effects changes could have on pupils and would endeavour to ensure this was minimised. He also advised that governors had been consulted in June/July 2005 and that a special seminar had been organised with the Dudley Association of Governing Bodies in September 2005.

- (d) It was asked, for what reason had the Published Admission Number for Mount Pleasant Primary School been reduced to 45, while the school had been designed to teach a year group of 50, thus adversely affecting the budget. The Assistant Director of Childrens' Services (Resource and Planning) advised that all suggestions would be considered and whichever was the most favoured option would be taken.
- (e) A question was asked that if Option 2 for Mount Pleasant was implemented, would the intake number remain at the current level? The Assistant Director of Childrens' Services (Resource and Planning) indicated that the decision on the options would be considered by the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning.
- (f) Projected figures for 2010 and projected birth rate figures were queried, in response to which the Assistant Director of Childrens' Services (Resource and Planning) undertook to give further consideration to the query and send a written response to the questioner.
- (g) In response to comments made, the Assistant Director of Children's Services' (Resource and Planning) advised that the Local Authority was working very closely with Head Teachers regarding provision for children with Special Educational Needs.
- (h) Regarding comments made relating to whether a new school would be built, the Assistant Director of Childrens' Services (Resource and Planning) advised that the reported bid for government capital grant would allow for two new primary schools and one secondary school to be built. However there was no guarantee that this bid would be successful.
- (i) The Area Liaison Officer advised that certain figures used for the projections within the consultation document had been provided by the Dudley Community Health Council.

Following written questions, comments were taken from the floor. Some of the comments were responded to at the meeting by the Assistant Director of Childrens' Services (Resource and Planning), and others he undertook to investigate and send a written response to questioners.

- (j) In response to a query by the representative of the Trade Unions as to the effects of the review on staffing, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resource and Planning) envisaged that all staff jobs would be retained under the reorganisation, but there was a need to work together within the budget.

- (k) In response to a request for clarification on comments in the press suggesting that the reported £9 million surplus, the reasons for this and whether the Local Authority had the power to redistribute this; the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resource and Planning) explained that the funding was unspent monies not earmarked for future use by schools. He confirmed that the Local Authority had the power to claw back any unspent and uncommitted funds from schools for redistribution.
- (l) In response to a request for clarification as to the exact number of Primary Schools in Dudley, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resource and Planning) advised that there were 83 primary schools in the Dudley Borough, one of which was a family centre.
- (m) In response to a query as to the legality of the consultation process, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resource and Planning) summarised the full process and emphasised that the proposals were as a direct result of falling numbers. It was envisaged that existing staff would be retained. He confirmed that if the consultation time were extended there would be practical difficulties in implementing whatever proposals were approved.
- (n) Comments from a former councillor included that Sycamore Green was an excellent school and he referred to the success of former pupils. He also referred to the need to consider future housing development plans, which would change the predicted figures dramatically.
- (o) Comments regarding the options for Mount Pleasant School included the previous spending of £3/4m on a rebuilding programme and the high quality of teaching at the school, including respect for all. The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resource and Planning) agreed with all comments regarding the high quality of education at Mount Pleasant School, the capital programme had been necessary at the time, and that any existing major replacement programme would not be affected by the Primary School Review. Consideration would be given to the preferred option by parents regarding Mount Pleasant School. Staffing issues would also be addressed.
- (p) A young pupil commented that he was proud of Sycamore Green School. Numeracy learning was excellent and teaching equipment and staff were excellent. He was concerned that closure would mean a long walk to an alternative school, where the children would feel uncomfortable. He preferred to retain his school and his friends and family links. The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resource and Planning) expressed the view that young pupils were usually adapted well to a change of environment, but that he would consider all comments made and send a written response after the meeting.

- (q) In response to a comment regarding Wrens Nest School and spaces not being taken up there, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resource and Planning) advised that the Local Authority would work closely with parents to identify schools with spaces within close proximity to their homes. He confirmed that the consultation process was in its early stages, but that consideration would be given to parental preferences.
- (r) In response to a query, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resource and Planning) confirmed that a planning application had been submitted for two mobile classrooms to cope with the new children's centre construction at the Priory Primary school, but that any mobile classrooms would be removed as soon as feasibly possible.
- (s) In response to a question regarding the figures in graphs quoted by the Director and Assistant Director of Children's Service at previous consultation meetings, The Assistant Director of Children's Services' (Resource and Planning) confirmed that the information contained in the graphs referred to was available, together with more detailed information, on the Children's Services' Website.
- (t) An allegation was made that church schools had not been affected by the Review, in response to which the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resource and Planning) advised that two church schools in the Halesowen area were proposed for amalgamation in the Review, to take effect as from 1st September 2006.
- (u) The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resource and Planning) agreed to investigate a request to make the website response form more user friendly. He also confirmed that Head Teachers had been invited to consultation meetings regarding the Primary Review in June/July 2005, but that he had no information to hand of whom had or had not attended.

Members of the Committee then gave their comments as follows:

- (v) Councillor Hart asked for certain statistical information to be sent to her in response to which the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources and Planning) undertook to send her the information requested.
- (w) In response to comments made by Councillor Hart, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources and Planning) advised her that the Local Authority was aware of the effect the proposals might have on children and assured her that measures would be taken to mitigate adverse effects as far as possible.

- (x) At this juncture, and in response to further comments by Councillor Hart, the Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning commented that he had attended all the schools referred to in the review, except Mount Pleasant, which he was due to visit the following day, to listen to everyone's views. While the proposals had been draw up prior to his appointment as Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning, he undertook to listen and consider all comments made during the consultation process before making any proposals to the Cabinet.
 - (y) The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources and Planning) advised that while the Local Authority appreciated the need to provide a quality and safe environment suitable for teaching children and providing good quality care, there were financial considerations that had to be taken into account.
 - (z) Councillor Craigie raised concerns regarding whether adequate provision for refugee and immigrant children had been identified within the review. In response to this, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources and Planning) advised that the Local Authority could only plan for children already born and those projected for the future. He was aware that a limited number of spaces were reserved for refugees and immigrant children.
 - (Aa) Councillor Mrs Aston was concerned that the community within the vicinity of Sycamore Green school had been divided by the proposals in the review. She was also concerned for the elderly people, and other groups who regularly used the school outside of school hours. She also asked if there were any plans regarding the future use of the school premises. The Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources and Planning) advised that only when a decision had been finally made by the School Organisation Committee could any meaningful discussion take place regarding the future of the building and that no suggestions had yet been considered.
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SUSPENSION OF COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 22.1

The time having reached 9.30 pm and pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 22.1 it was

RESOLVED

That Council Procedure Rule 22.1 be suspended to allow the meeting to continue until 9.45pm to enable the Members of the Committee to continue to express their views.

PRIMARY SCHOOL REVIEW – CONSULTATION DOCUMENT
(CONTINUED)

- (Ab) Councillor Mrs Coulter raised a number of queries, which she indicated she was happy to receive a written response to. These related to:
- (i) The distance children would be expected to walk to new schools following closures.
 - (ii) Clarification regarding how the posts of NNEBs who work with children with Special Educational needs, could be protected.
- (Ac) Councillor Bradney expressed disappointment at the proposal to close Sycamore Green, a school which was only 45 years old, when a school in his Ward was over 100 years old and in need of replacement.
- (Ad) Councillor M Davis expressed concern for less well off parents who would find longer distances difficult to achieve due to lack of transport.
- (Ae) It was suggested that a dramatic change in the birth rate could leave the Borough without sufficient school places in the future.
- (Af) Councillor Sparks requested longer and wider consultation on the proposals. He indicated that his preferred option for Quarry Bank would be option 1.
- (Ag) Councillor Ali was of the view that the consultation had been rushed and that more work was needed, as some groups had not been consulted. If response forms were difficult to complete, it might be difficult for the Local Authority to achieve a clear view. He also had concerns regarding transport.
- (Ah) Mrs Edwards expressed concern at the shortness of the consultation process and requested that the time be extended in particular to allow ethnic families to obtain assistance to be able to understand the review.

RESOLVED

That the Council, Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning and the Director of Children's Services be requested to extend the consultation time to allow parents and parents' community groups time to consider proposals and enable them to express their views appropriately.

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NATURAL DISASTERS

In response to a request by a member of the public, the Chairman undertook to request that the Council give consideration to assisting the Asian Community with the review by extending the consultation period. The recent natural disasters in the Indian Sub-Continent and the United States of America, had affected sections of the Community. It was suggested that greater time was needed to enable the communities to seek assistance regarding the review. He also undertook to request a book of condolences be opened.

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DATES AND VENUES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED

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

8th November, 2005 - Hillcrest School and Community College
24th January, 2006 - Saltwells Educational Development Centre
14th March, 2006 - Priory Primary School (to be confirmed)

The meeting ended at 9.50 p.m.

CHAIRMAN