

SPECIAL MEETING OF HALESOWEN AREA COMMITTEE

Tuesday 26th September, 2006, at 6.15 p.m.
at Colley Lane Primary School, Colley Lane, Halesowen

PRESENT

Councillor Jackson (Chairman)
Councillors Body, Crumpton, Mrs Dunn, Mrs Faulkner, Hill, James, Ms Nicholls, Ms Partridge, Taylor, K Turner and Mrs Turner

Also Present

Cabinet Member for Children's Services – Councillor Mrs Walker

Officers

Area Liaison Officer, Director of Children's Services, Assistant Director for Resources, Senior Engineer, Mr M Farooq (Principal Solicitor) and Mrs M Johal (Directorate of Law and Property)

Approximately 195 members of the public were in attendance.

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APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors Burston, Mrs Shakespeare and J Woodall.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Body declared a personal interest in respect of any reference made to Pedmore College of Technology in view of his son being a pupil at that College.

Councillor Mrs Turner declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item No 3 (Consultation Proposals to close Halesowen (Church of England) Primary School) in view of her being a Member on the Electoral Register and regular worshipper at St Margaret's.

Councillor K Turner declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item No 3 (Consultation Proposals to close Halesowen (Church of England) Primary School) in view of him being a Member on the Electoral Register and regular worshipper at St Margaret's.

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PROPOSALS TO CLOSE HALESOWEN (CHURCH OF ENGLAND) SCHOOL

A document regarding the consultation on proposals to close Halesowen (Church of England) Primary School prepared by the Director of Children's Services had been circulated with the agenda for this meeting. A summary document was also circulated for the benefit of Members and members of the public together with a translated version in Arabic.

The Area Liaison Officer pointed out that an incorrect version of the report had been distributed with the agenda and that the correct version was now available.

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and assured everyone that all comments made and issues that were to be raised would be fully considered as part of the consultation process. It was requested that the question slips should be completed and handed in to enable the question to be raised by, or on behalf of the individual. It was also requested that should a written response be required then the address details should also be completed.

The Director of Children's Services then gave a short presentation and, arising from the presentation, the following main points and queries were raised by members of the public.

- The proposals were considered to be a short-term proposal and the problem with surplus places would not be resolved by closing smaller schools. The proposals would have immense ramifications for other schools, as children would have to be transferred to alternative schools and consequently, these schools would suffer, as they would not be able to cope with extra pupils. This would further impact on the quality of education and expertise would be lost.
- Reference was made to a point about the school not being financially viable and it was commented on that the school's accountants had given an assurance that the school could continue. It was also pointed out that the building costs were paid directly by the Government.
- The published admission number for schools could be increased, however the site could not and there would be implications on space for children. The pupil teacher ratio was also queried.
- Hasbury (Church of England) School were not aware of plans to accept nursery children from Halesowen (Church of England) School, as they were informing parents that they were full and already had a waiting list. It was further pointed out that Hasbury nursery was private and had to be paid for.

- Upheaval and disruption would be caused to pupils with special educational needs, as they would have to get used to a new environment and new teachers and children. Disruption would also be caused to pupils who spoke very little or no English.
- It was queried what would happen to the site following closure.
- The accuracy of statistics was queried and it was questioned why the Council had withdrawn its proposal for a 420 place school when its figures had, until last summer, indicated otherwise.
- It was queried whether a place at a school with equal or a better teaching rate could be offered, as a 100% pass rate had been achieved by pupils in Science.

In response the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director for Resources advised that the number of pupils attending schools was falling and consequently this impacted on the budget and resources for the school, which would further impact on the quality of education and standards would not be met. It was pointed out that the budget share per pupil at Halesowen (Church of England) School was 27% above the average of other schools in the Borough and yet OFSTED had only passed it as "satisfactory value for money". It was further pointed out that the pupil teacher ratio depended on how much money was available and that the Governing Body decided how much money to spend on staffing. In relation to the future plans for the site the Director of Children's Services informed the meeting that the site was owned by the Church and it was up to them to determine the future plans for the site.

The Assistant Director for Resources assured parents that discussions would take place with parents of pupils with special educational needs and appropriate support would be given during transition. The Director of Children's Services further added that all schools in the Borough dealt with varying communities and staff had the expertise to deal with children that spoke little English. Staff would also be redeployed and offered jobs at other schools in the Borough. He further assured members of the public that every pupil attending the Halesowen (Church of England) School, including the nursery, would be offered a place at Hasbury if they so wished. However, plans could not be put into place until the numbers of parental preferences were known for Hasbury (Church of England) Primary or other schools.

Members then commented on the proposals and concern was expressed that the Governors had agreed to the closure four years ago but, at that time, they had been told that they would be getting funding for a new school. It was also pointed out that the vast majority of children attending the Halesowen (Church of England) School walked to school, which reduced congestion and, due to the distances involved, it would be difficult for young children to walk to Hasbury School. Reference was made to conflicting stories and it was requested that an assurance be given in writing that during the transition period, siblings would not be split and that a place would be made available, where parents had expressed a preference, at Hasbury nursery to all children attending Halesowen (Church of England) nursery.

A Member commented that classes at Hasbury School were at bursting point and requested that an assurance be given that the removal of the three mobile classrooms, to create a right of way, be replaced with three permanent classrooms. An assurance was also sought that the removal of the language room would also be replaced. A further Member also referred to the difficulties being experienced by pupils with language problems and acknowledged that staff would be redeployed but queried whether there were plans to keep teams together.

In responding the Cabinet Member for Children's Services acknowledged the frustrations and concerns expressed but informed the meeting that funding had not been granted for the new build. She also gave an assurance that she would endeavour to replace what was removed but it would need to be included in the appropriate building programme.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the document and summary, as circulated, regarding the consultation on proposals to close Halesowen (Church of England) Primary School be noted.
- (2) That all questions raised and comments made by the Committee and members of the public, as indicated above, be referred to the Director of Children's Services for consideration as part of the consultation process and that a written response be submitted to questioners as appropriate.

PROPOSALS TO CLOSE CRADLEY HIGH SCHOOL

A document regarding the consultation on proposals to close Cradley High School prepared by the Director of Children's Services had been circulated with the agenda for this meeting. A summary document was also circulated for the benefit of Members and members of the public together with a translated version in Arabic.

The Chairman welcomed everyone to this part of the meeting and assured everyone that all comments made and issues that were to be raised would be fully considered as part of the consultation process. It was requested that the question slips should be completed and handed in to enable the question to be raised by, or on behalf of the individual. It was also requested that should a written response be required then the address details should also be completed.

The Director of Children's Services gave a short presentation and, arising from the presentation, the following main points and queries were raised by members of the public.

- Why had Cradley High School been excluded from the secondary schools review when it had achieved outstanding results over the years and all other Dudley Borough schools had been considered, even though some had had poor results, poor OFSTED and falling numbers? Millions of pounds had been spent on other high schools but not on Cradley High even though they had achieved better results.
- Further housing developments were anticipated for the area and the houses on offer attracted families and children. It was commented that the children would have to travel considerable distances to get to another school, risking their personal safety, especially in the darker mornings and nights during the winter.
- Children would be forced to use public transport or cars to get to schools, which would reduce exercise and impact on children's health. Moving children to other schools would also mean having to build extra classrooms, which would take away existing play areas for children, which would further impact on exercise and health.
- Why were other schools, such as the Grange and Hillcrest receiving extra funding and why was Hillcrest being allowed to increase their published admission number if pupil numbers were falling? It was also queried when increasing places, what costs were involved in terms of capital, maintenance and running costs.

- Almost three hundred children would need to be transferred if the proposals were approved and it was queried how many would be accommodated at their preferred choice and what level of choice would be allowed.
- It was queried why parents were being told that they could not have a place at Cradley High School because it was closing when a decision had not been made. It was also commented that pupil numbers at Cradley High in Year 7 had been affected by the announcement of its closure.
- Had pupils and parents of other Halesowen Schools been consulted about the implications for their children's education if Cradley High closed?
- Why was there no mention of arrangements for children with special educational needs in the consultation proposals and were there resources and places available in other schools, particularly as 50% of children at Cradley High were given support in one way or another?
- What would happen if birth rates increased again and there were not sufficient places available as schools had closed down?
- Previously, preferences had been expressed for Windsor and Earls and the answer had been that they could not accommodate further children, as they were full to capacity and that to accept more children would affect the education of current students. Why were these schools now being forced to take extra children resulting in increased and overloaded classes?
- How would children cope with moving schools particularly those in Year 9, as they would only have two years before their final GCSE's and would have to deal with the trauma of resettling along with taking their GCSE's?
- What support would be available to children that were bullied due to "gang wars"?
- Why were documents not translated in other languages, particularly Arabic?
- If schools could not be provided to educate children then discussions on educating children at home should be considered.

A list containing 269 signatures of parents of primary school children in Year 6 expressing preference for their children to attend Cradley High School next year was presented to the Director of Children's Services.

The Assistant Director for Resources responded to comments made and the queries raised and pointed out that the good results that had been achieved were commendable but insufficient numbers of parents still did not express the school as their first choice and so numbers at the school were still falling. The consultation document would not be translated, as there was no guarantee that it could be accurately translated and therefore would remain in English but a meeting at which an interpreter could be present could be arranged as offered at previous meetings. He further commented that it was not envisaged that children would be travelling great distances and consultation would take place with parents over the next few weeks in relation to their preferences. It was further pointed out that consultation also involved other schools. In relation to the increase in the published admission number at Hillcrest, the Assistant Director for Resources informed the meeting that this was due to Hillcrest being the most popular school in Dudley and was oversubscribed several times over.

The Assistant Director for Resources also pointed out that the admissions team had been informing parents that the school was undergoing consultation proposals for closure but continued to accept children on the role. The Cabinet Member for Children's Services pointed out that investment had been made into Cradley High School although precise details were not available at the meeting.

Members then commented on the proposals and comments made and concern was expressed that the issue of parents being told that the school they could not accept pupils because it was closing down had arisen on previous occasions. In responding, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that procedures had been put in place since the matter had first come to light and the admissions team were now provided with a script, which rightfully informed parents of the start of the consultation proposals for closure but still accepted children on role.

A Member expressed concern at the number of questions that had not been asked or answered due to the time limit and requested that consideration be given to the consultation period being extended.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the document and summary, as circulated, regarding the consultation on proposals to close Cradley High School be noted.
- (2) That all questions raised and comments made by the Committee and members of the public, as indicated above, be referred to the Director of Children's Services for consideration as part of the consultation process and that a written response be submitted to the questioners as appropriate.

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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:-

22nd November, 2006 – Colley Lane Primary School
24th January, 2007 – Olive Hill Primary School
14th March, 2007 – Lutley Community Centre

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SELECT COMMITTEE PUBLICITY

As a way of giving additional publicity to meetings of the Council's Select Committees, details of Select Committee meetings had been included on the agendas of meetings of Area Committees.

The information given in respect of publicity for future meetings of Select Committees was noted.

The meeting ended at 9:20 pm.

CHAIRMAN