

**SPECIAL MEETING OF
CENTRAL DUDLEY AREA COMMITTEE**

Monday, 12th December, 2005 at 6.30 p.m.
at Holly Hall School, Scotts Green Close, Holly Hall, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Rahman (Chairman)
Councillors Ali, Mrs. Aston, Cotterill, J. Davies, M. Davis and Ms Hart, and
Ms. H. Edwards

OFFICERS:

Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (As Area Liaison Officer), Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources and Planning), Acting Assistant Director of Children's Services (Access and Inclusion), Assistant Director, Libraries (Directorate of Children's Services) Principal Project Officer (Directorate of Adult Community and Housing Services), Priority Neighbourhood Manager (Chief Executives), Mr. K. Edwards (Principal Solicitor) and Mrs. J. Rees (Directorate of Law and Property).

Five members of the public were in attendance at the meeting.

58

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and in so doing expressed disappointment at the poor attendance and commented on the possible reasons for this.

The Chairman also advised that fellow Members had spoken at the full Council meeting requesting reconsideration of the proposals.

59

MINUTES

In view of the poor attendance at the meeting, it was

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8th November, 2005, be deferred for consideration at the next meeting of the Committee to be held on 24th January 2006.

60

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

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

61

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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.

62

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE: PRIMARY SCHOOLS REVIEW

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 brief oral presentation summarising the progress made since 17th November, 2005 and an outline of the implementation plan.

The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) in his brief presentation on the Primary Schools Review 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 numbers 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. All schools would experience a budget reduction of at least £50,000, which 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. Meetings with Governing Bodies and staff 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.

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 reach a decision. 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) further reported that initial discussions between staff of Wrens Next and Sycamore Green had taken place regarding staffing and how children would be accommodated. The first project meeting was expected to take place after the Christmas break.

The Chairman thanked the Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) for the presentation and commented that, in noting the content of the report together with the proposals, he did not consider that progress had been made, in particular regarding the Annexe systems, which he considered had not been explained adequately or consulted on. Because of this, he did not feel able to support the proposals and considered that some Members of the Committee and members of the public did not want the proposals to go ahead.

Comments and questions were then made by Members of the Committee and responded to, as follows:

- (a) Councillor M Davies expressed concern that the process had not been consulted on adequately. It was his opinion that the proposals were the direct result of not wishing to spend extra money on services to reduce class sizes.
- (b) In response to his question as to how long it would be before there were discussions on proposals to close secondary schools, the Assistant Director of Children's Services' (Resource and Planning) advised that no discussions had taken place regarding secondary school closures to date, but that this could not be ruled out in the light of the fall in the birth rate and resulting surplus places in schools.
- (c) In response to Councillor M Davies' comment that it was unfair that schools which had been able to build up a surplus reserve in their budget, as a direct result of good housekeeping should have their surplus taken off them, the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources and Planning) advised that the Local Authority had limited powers with regard to these surpluses, but that the Director of Children's Services had the full support of the Schools Forum in addressing the excess surplus balances. He 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.
- (d) Councillor M. Davis commented that parents and children were suffering from stress and anxiety regarding the proposed school closures.

- (e) Councillor Mrs. Aston expressed concern that throughout the presentation money had been mentioned, rather children. It was important to acknowledge the distress caused to the children and their families.
- (f) Councillor Mrs. Aston questioned when the staff and governors had been advised of the proposals submitted to Cabinet on the 17th November. In response, the Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) advised that he was unsure when staff and governors of Sycamore Green School had been spoken to regarding proposals, but that Head Teachers had met on the morning of the 16th November and the “Annexe” system explained. He further advised that the timescales had been very tight. He emphasised that children’s futures were of paramount importance.
- (g) Councillor Mrs. Aston asked what would happen if, after schools were disposed of, the birth rate were to mushroom in ten years’ time. The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) advised that as yet there were no plans to dispose of buildings under the ownership of Children’s Services. He also advised that if the proposals were approved by the School Organisation Committee there would be a surplus of 1600 places across Dudley, which could cope with any mushrooming of the birth rate in future years.
- (h) Councillor Ali expressed concerns regarding the consultation process and the way it had taken place. He agreed that the poor attendance at the meeting was as a direct result of people’s reaction to what they see as the lack of consultation on the process and their views not being listened to. He also considered that the Controlling Group were making unpopular changes, similar to previous unpopular decisions, such as the name change for the Concert Hall and the recently reported closure of day care centres. The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) advised that whilst he fully appreciated the concerns expressed, the reality was that there would not be sufficient funding to maintain the current number of buildings, as a direct result of the fall in roll numbers and the resulting loss of funding from the Government. Whilst the Director of Children’s Services would not wish to close schools, there was a need to take action before decreased spending had an adverse effect on staffing levels and children’s education.
- (i) Councillor J. Davies expressed concerns that a proposal which some Councillors and school governors were not in agreement with, could be progressed.
- (j) Councillor Rahman commented on the need for more information regarding the proposed Annexe situation within the proposed closures. It would be difficult for the Committee to forward views to the Lead Member, when sufficient members of the public were not available to give their views on the proposals.

- (k) Councillor Rahman commented that he did not feel there had been adequate consultation on the proposals, but rather that Councillors and members of the public had been told what was planned.
- (l) Councillor Rahman asked what would happen if parents refused to send their children to the planned schools, particularly in the light of parents not being happy with the proposed plans? The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) advised that he was aware that children and parents had had to cope with changes regarding school closures in the past. It was acknowledged that although people do not like change, they adapt, when given adequate support and assistance. He considered that pupils affected by the Annexe systems would be encouraged to get to know each other in the very near future and encouraged to become involved with the planning of the new school buildings and other issues.
- (m) Councillor Rahman asked whether the School Organisation Committee could overrule the decision of Cabinet and/or Council, or whether it was just another group expressing its views on the proposals. The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) advised on the remit of the School Organisation Committee and how it worked. If a decision could not be reached by the Committee it would be referred to Independent Schools Adjudicator.
- (n) Councillor Cotterill expressed concern that consultation on other closures had taken place previously and despite opposition expressed, the closures had still taken place. He was not convinced that the birth rate was actually falling and expressed concern over what would happen if it in fact went up.
- (o) Councillor Ms. Hart endorsed Councillor Cotterill's concerns and stated that she understood that in 2004 the birth rate had increased. She also expressed concern at the decision which had caused a great deal of distress to families and children in Dudley. She requested that the Director of Children's Services and the Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning be requested to reconsider their decisions on the closures. She also expressed a wish that the School Organisation Committee reject the proposals to close schools, and in particular the schools within the area covered by the Central Dudley Area Committee and Maidensbridge school in Wallheath.
- (p) Councillor Ms Hart asked whether or not the reported £9 million in reserve could be used to offset the deficit which would result in closures, in response to which the Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) advised that using the reserve funding would only be a short term answer and not address the issue of continued lack of resources as a direct result of the falling numbers of children in schools.

- (q) Councillor Ms Hart requested information regarding previous closures of schools. The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) undertook to forward in writing to Councillor Ms Hart information regarding previous school closures in Dudley.
- (r) Mrs Edwards expressed concerns that the consultation had been curtailed and rushed and whether or not school governors had been fully consulted with. She also expressed concern that the proposed Annexes issues could be adequately dealt with.
- (s) The Assistant Director (Resources and Planning) advised that he fully understood all the concerns expressed. He was confident that full consultation had taken place. Several meetings had already taken place at which legal terminology had been explained. There was a very tight timescale to be adhered to. He was aware that there were still issues to be finalised regarding the closures, including building programmes. There would be support and assistance for parents and children to assist them through the proposed process.
- (t) In response to comments regarding who was responsible for the proposals, the Chairman advised that rather than look for someone to blame, it would be more useful and appropriate to ask for appropriate alternatives to be considered.

Upon consideration of all the comments made, it was

RESOLVED

That the information contained in the report and appendices to the report, submitted and on the progress made since 17th November, 2005, be noted and that the Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning and the School Organisation Committee be requested to reject the proposals for school closures, as presented to Cabinet on 17th November 2005.

DATES AND VENUES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED

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

24th January, 2006 - Saltwells Educational Development Centre
14th March, 2006 - Priory Primary School (to be confirmed)

The meeting ended at 8.00 p.m.

CHAIRMAN

CDAC/52