

SPECIAL MEETING OF BRIERLEY HILL AREA COMMITTEE

Monday, 12th December, 2005, at 7.00 p.m.
at The Kingswinford School, Water Street, Kingswinford

PRESENT

Councillor Mrs M Wilson (Chairman)
Councillor Tyler (Vice-Chairman)
Councillors Blood, Burt, Debney, Harley, Islam, Mrs Jordan, Miller, Mrs Patrick, Southall and Tomkinson.

Officers

Mr E Lawson (Area Liaison Officer) Chief Executives Directorate,
Director of Children's Services, Assistant Director of Children's Services,
(School Effectiveness Division), Senior Solicitor (Carol Bacon) and Ms K
Smith (Directorate of Law and Property)

Approximately 70 members of the public were in attendance.

60

MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16th
November, 2005, be approved as a correct record and signed,
subject to the inclusion in the list of attendees of Councillors Mrs
Jordan, Blood and Harley.

61

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Declarations of personal interest, in accordance with the Members' Code
of Conduct, in respect of Agenda Item No 4 (Investing in the Future :
Primary Schools Review) were made by the following Councillors;

Councillor Blood in view of his being a school governor of Belle Vue
Primary School,

Councillor Mrs Jordan in view of her being a school governor of Pens
Meadow School,

Councillor Miller in view of his being Chair of governors of Fairhaven
Primary and school governor at Glynne Primary Schools,

Councillor Tyler in view of his being Chair of school governors of
Maidensbridge Primary School.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors Ms Foster, Ms Harris and Mrs Pearce.

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

The Director of Children's Services 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 the reduction in income owing to surplus school 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 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 were being 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 Director of Children's Services 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 Director of Children's Services 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, but to address the issue of surplus school places and to ensure sustainability, the decision had to be taken. If action had not been taken there would be a considerable loss of 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 had not been accepted, as this would have prolonged the uncertainty and would have led to staff leaving and pupil numbers reducing.

There then followed a question and answer session in which the proposal to close Maidensbridge School was disputed and questions were asked on certain procedural issues. Questions, comments and responses included the following: -

1. In response to an allegation that an offer received from a Professor of Epidemiology in relation to the consultation process had not been taken up, it was confirmed by the Director of Children's Services that consultation had accorded with both statutory guidelines and Council policy and that discussions at officer level had been held with the Department for Education and Skills to ensure that all such criteria had been fulfilled.
2. In response to questions regarding voting by certain members, Councillor Miller confirmed that the closure of Maidensbridge Primary School had been supported at a meeting of the Conservative Group held on 15th November, 2005. Regarding further questions on that meeting, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that he had not made any representations to the meeting nor had he been in attendance.
3. A question was asked regarding how Members had voted at the Conservative Group meeting, given that the Area Committee, at its previous meeting had resolved unanimously to oppose the closure of Maidensbridge School. It was stated that this was a private meeting.
4. An allegation was made by a member of the public regarding a lack of transparency in the consultation process. The same person disputed information in the report submitted regarding a fall in the birth rate in the area, given the number of housing developments progressing. He also considered that a lack of information had been given regarding the financial value of the land should the Maidensbridge site be put up for sale.

5. In response to concerns expressed over the length of time allowed for consultation, given the final date for the receipt of objections of 2nd January, 2006, the Director of Children's Services explained the time limits prescribed by law. He also confirmed that the School Governing Body would be consulted at a meeting to be held on 13th December, 2005.
6. In response to questions regarding a possible partner school for Maidensbridge, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that this would be discussed at the meeting with the Governors to be held on 13th December, 2005.
7. In response to a question, the Director of Children's Services explained the rationale for proposing school closures in the light of falling school roles.
8. In response to a question from a member of the public, the Director of Children's Services clarified that the intention was that Maidensbridge would be kept open as an annexe with another school. The partner school could not yet be identified as further discussions were necessary and agreement had to be reached with the Governing Body of Maidensbridge School.
9. Concern was expressed by a member of the public on the date of the consultation meeting with the governors, given that three weeks of the statutory period for the receipt of objections had already passed.
10. A comment was made that considerations, such as traffic safety, needed to be considered as well as issues that would arise at the partner school. There was also the possibility that the partner school might be over subscribed with the result that Maidensbridge would remain open as an annexe and thus become a third new school on the same site. The Director of Children's Services accepted that the capacity of any nominated partner school would have to be reviewed.
11. A comment was made that the closure of Maidensbridge would have an adverse impact on the identity of Wall Heath.
12. The Director of Children's Services clarified the rationale for recommending schools for closure as those that were under-subscribed. He confirmed that representations with regard to pupil numbers should be made to the School Organisation Committee via the statutory objection process.

13. In response to a comment from a member of the public that residents and parents considered they were not being listened to, the Director of Children's Services stated that the views of the public were being considered; that consultation had been or was taking place in all areas of the Borough and a plan had been developed for each area. Objections would be considered by the School Organisation Committee.
14. In response to a request for the proposed closure of Maidensbridge to be reconsidered, since it was a 'flag ship' school and in the light of a comment made that birth rate figures quoted were not reliable, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that the Council was likely to be faced with a deficit of some £8 million in 2010 should action be not taken. The Director of Children's Services also stated that while he agreed that Maidensbridge Primary School was a good school, that was also true of all the other local schools.
15. The composition, membership and powers of the Dudley School Organisation Committee were clarified.
16. The number of schools proposed for closure was clarified as five. The Director of Children's Services indicated further proposals were in hand to close two Church of England Primary Schools in Halesowen and to replace them with one new Church of England primary school.
17. In response to a question on teaching staff, in the event of school closures, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that no redundancies would take place; that, should staff choose to leave, the standard of education would be maintained; and that a Joint School Steering Group would determine staffing structures in relation to split sites and would work with staff and children to ensure early integration.
18. Arising from questions put by one member, the Director of Children's Services:-
 - Confirmed that the information given in the presentation made to staff, governors and parents of Maidensbridge in relation to pupil numbers, as shown on page 3 of the report submitted to the meeting, was correct.
 - In response to a question on how the figures were arrived at, agreed to respond in writing to the member (on the member's indicating that he was not happy with this response, the Director referred the member to page 28 of the report).

- In response to questions regarding responsibility for the accuracy of information placed on the internet web site regarding education, the Director of Children's Services replied that he was ultimately responsible but did not enter information personally. The member alleged that presentations made to other schools had been placed on the web site but none of the data given to Maidensbridge staff had appeared on it and consequently the public had not been given a chance to respond to the presentation or the questions that had arisen. In response, the Director stated that a wide range of questions and responses were contained on the web site. The member then alleged that the data related to 133 pupils and that all financial data had been erased from the presentation on the internet.
 - In response to an allegation by the member that the version of the presentation made to Maidensbridge on the web site had been edited since it had been made to the school and the web site comprised two pages fewer, the Director agreed to check and respond to the member, but said that all admissions had to follow the due process.
 - In response to an allegation by the member that a further four pupils had registered at Maidensbridge, thus adding to the pupil numbers, and that he had obtained signed affidavits to this effect, the Director replied that he had not seen the revised data. The Director did not dispute the information provided by the member.
 - Confirmed that a partner school for Maidensbridge was proposed but none had yet been recommended.
19. In response to a question from another member, on the length of time it was proposed that Maidensbridge would be kept open as an annexe, the cost likely to be incurred and the manner in which the site would be managed, the Director of Children's Services indicated that the period was expected to be for two to three years; and that the additional costs would be met for a short period from revenue.
20. In response to a question from a member, in relation to road safety, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that he expected that any safety issues could be met with provisional additional crossing patrols, but that this was a matter for discussion.

21. Concerns were expressed by one member regarding the impact on primary school provision of major housing development in the general area of Wordsley, Kingswinford and Wall Heath, in respect of which the Director of Children's Services stated that there were no major developments in the Wall Heath area although it was recognised that there were substantial developments taking place elsewhere in the Borough.
22. In response to a question from a member, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that up to date figures on school admissions would be supplied to the School Organisation Committee.
23. In response to a question from a member, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that decisions taken by the School Organisation Committee regarding school proposals would stand, even if there was a change in the political control of the Council.
24. The view was expressed by a member that a school with such high standards as Maidensbridge should not be closed.
25. In response to a question from a member of the public in which that person also commented on the importance of primary school education, the Director of Children's Services acknowledged the importance of primary school education but emphasised that provision had been considered in the light of a reduction in school income across the whole of the Borough. The School Organisation Committee would consider all available facts, including financial elements.
26. In response to a question by the Chair of the Maidensbridge Home and School Association on options considered, the Director of Children's Services confirmed that options had been considered and that the Council had looked at ways of reducing potential closure of all schools and the re-opening of some schools. In response to a supplementary question regarding the recording of options considered, the Director stated that some issues discussed had been documented and some had not and that all requests made under the Freedom of Information Act had been replied to. The Director then confirmed the manner in which options had been considered at officer level and which had culminated in the report submitted by him for consideration.
27. A member of the public referred to tensions within the pupil community arising from the uncertainty regarding the future of Maidensbridge School and its nominated partner school. In response, the Director of Children's Services acknowledged that there could be difficulties if the partner school was a small school and was expected to take on extended roles and this was an issue that the School Organisation Committee would consider.

During consideration of the above matters, and the discussion thereon, upon a member criticising the consultation process carried out and questioning why the statutory period could not have been extended, it was moved, voted on and RESOLVED by a majority vote

That the Brierley Hill Area Committee should respond to the consultation process by petitioning for the future of Maidensbridge Primary School; that it should remain open to continue as a beacon of education and excellence for the village of Wall Heath.

64

DATES AND VENUES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED

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

19th January 2006 – The Crestwood School

9th March 2006 – The Brierley Hill Civic Hall

The meeting ended at 8:45 pm

CHAIRMAN