

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in Council Chamber, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Tuesday, 22 July 2014

PRESENT

Cllr Mrs A Barker (Chairman)
Cllr N B Costin (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:	D Bowater Mrs R J Drinkwater P A Duckett	Councillors:	D Jones R B Pepworth
Parental Co-optees:	Mr J Chapman Mr S Court		
Church of England Co-optee:	Mr D Morton		
Roman Catholic Co-optee:			
Apologies for Absence:	Cllrs	Mrs G Clarke P Hollick Mrs F Image D McVicar	
Substitutes:	Cllrs	R D Berry (In place of Mrs G Clarke)	
Members in Attendance:	Cllrs	P N Aldis Mrs S Clark A L Dodwell Mrs S A Goodchild M A G Versallion	Deputy Executive Member for Children's Services Deputy Executive Member for Children's Services and Community Services Executive Member for Children's Services
Officers in Attendance:	Mrs P Everitt Mr R Parsons Mrs R Preen Miss H Redding	Scrutiny Policy Adviser Head of School Organisation and Capital Planning Scrutiny Policy Advisor Assistant Director School Improvement	
Others in attendance	11 members of the public		

CS/14/21. **Minutes**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 June, 2014 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CS/14/22. **Members' Interests**

Councillors declared the following interests in the business to be transacted:-

- Cllr Bowater as Chair of Governors at Leighton Buzzard Middle School;
- Cllr D Jones as Chair of Governors at Hawthorn Community Primary School;
- Cllr Pepworth as Chair of Governors at St. Augustine's Academy and a member of the Ashton Foundation;
- Cllr Duckett as a Governor at Maulden School; and
- David Morton as Church of England Co-optee.

CS/14/23. **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and outlined the process by which members of the public who had registered to speak would be invited to do so at item 9. The Chairman advised those in attendance that filming and recording of the meeting was not permitted. Those present were also advised that if there was a need to discuss the information contained within the exempt pages the Committee would decide whether to exclude the press and public from the meeting so that the confidential matters could be discussed.

CS/14/24. **Petitions**

None.

CS/14/25. **Questions, Statements or Deputations**

The Chairman confirmed that five members of the public and elected Members had registered to speak. Speakers would be invited to speak at the commencement of Item 9.

CS/14/26. **Call-In**

None.

CS/14/27. **Requested Items**

None.

CS/14/28. **Schools in Dunstable**

The Executive Member for Children's Services advised that following the previous Executive meeting it had been agreed the business cases produced by Brewers Hill Middle School, Streetfield Middle School, Ashton Middle CofE VA School would be submitted to the Committee prior to a decision on the proposals being taken by the Executive on 19 August 2014.

The Executive Member clarified that the purpose of the meeting was to consider the responses received by the Council to the statutory consultation which included the viability of each of the three business cases, which had been prepared by the schools as alternatives to closure. Input from Members of the Committee would be invaluable to the Executive prior a decision being made. The Executive Member commented that in his view the business cases were not viable and did not provide a suitable alternative option to closure of the schools. However, the Executive Member had not yet decided upon the final proposal he would make to the Executive, which would be determined after the Committee had challenged and scrutinised the business cases.

In light of the size of the report and the further clarification provided by the schools within their amended business cases Members commented on the inconvenience of receiving late reports. The Assistant Director of School Improvement advised that the schools and officers had been required to work to very short time scales, so this was unavoidable in this instance.

Brewers Hill Middle School

The Chairman invited three speakers to address the Committee in relation to Brewers Hill Middle School. Speakers raised issues that in summary related to the following:-

- The school felt they had presented a financially viable alternative, which would have minimal impact on other age ranges.
- Concerns that the consultation process had not ascertained the views of parents in Dunstable.
- Concerns that the proposal to close the middle school would affect key stage 1 and 2 results.
- Requests that further investment be provided to schools in order to provide greater parental choice.
- Concerns that opening academies in the area had a negative impact.
- The importance of the Executive's decision and the Committee's recommendations ensuring the best outcomes for education and the development of children

In light of the report and the comments raised by speakers in relation to Brewers Hill Middle School Members discussed the following issues in detail:-

- The ways in which the school felt greater pupil numbers could be generated, bearing in mind the different age ranges in schools in Dunstable and whether an increase in pupil numbers would have a negative impact on schools outside Dunstable and Houghton Regis. In response representatives of the school commented the report reflected growth data from Dunstable and Houghton Regis. The forecast growth and housing developments proposed locally had led the school to be confident that surplus school places would be filled as a result of that growth by 2019. The Head of School Organisation and Capital Planning advised the Committee that the schools had been provided with current local data and housing yield information which provided greater confidence in accuracy of forecasts than the demographic data referred to by the school in its business case. There were strong indications that new developments in the

area would provide their own infrastructure for education and data showed that there was already sufficient surplus places. The head of service also acknowledged the challenge regarding the provision of future secondary school places and in predicting parental preference but there was significant data demonstrating that parents were choosing non-catchment schools.

- Whether there had been a dialogue between schools regarding a joint approach. The Acting Head-teacher advised that a joint approach had not been considered due to local demographics and the schools aspiration to change age range.
- Concerns as to whether a broader curriculum could be delivered with the proposed level of teaching staff. The Assistant Director of School Improvement commented that an appropriate teacher/pupil ratio had to be demonstrated by the school. Previous information provided by the school had indicated that they were unable to pay for additional teaching staff. The Assistant Director had previously suggested that consideration be given to teaching staff being shared across other schools in order to spread the cost.
- Concerns that requests for further investment in the school would result in a duplication of funding.
- Whether there had been any conflict of interest for officers recommending closure of the school also supporting the schools to develop their business cases. The Committee were advised that officers had met with the schools individually to discuss what they felt they needed and that all requests had been agreed. This support was commissioned and paid for by the Council, and included education professionals to assist with the preparation of business cases, plus supply cover to support capacity of school staff to complete the work.
- Whether pupil numbers in key stage 3 indicated that there would be an increased demand in the future for school places. The Executive Member commented there were no schools in the area that would feed into Brewers Hill Middle School as other schools were changing their age range to become primaries.

In addition it was clarified that academy status had not been pursued by the school and that the Pupil Premium had been overestimated, which may have been a clerical error. In summary a Member also suggested that the school's business case did not identify adequate provision based on pupil numbers.

Streetfield Middle School

The Chairman invited one speaker to address the Committee in relation to Streetfield Middle School. The speaker raised issues that in summary related to the following:-

- Concerns that Members had not read the report in detail.
- The numbers of responses that had been received from parents to consultations.
- The inclusion of early year's provision in the school's business plan, which was independently funded.
- The importance of focusing on the best way to achieve positive outcomes.
- Benchmarking with other schools in Dunstable, which had been used by the school to determine the financial viability of the business case.

- The nature of the high quality and purpose-built facilities located on the school site.

In light of the report and the comments raised by speakers in relation to Streetfield Middle School Members discussed the following issues in detail:-

- Concerns that whilst the business case provided an exciting and aspirational proposal, there had been a lack of coordination with other schools, particularly Manshead. The School Governor in attendance explained there had previously been a partnership but it had not continued as each school had different objectives. However, the school was keen to achieve a more unified approach in the future.
- Concerns regarding the need to attract pupils from out of the current catchment area and the uncertainty of predictions for future pupil numbers.
- Confirmation of the Chair of Governors (Cllr Pepworth) at St Augustine's School that the school would not enter into a shared governor approach or shared working arrangement as the proposed lyceum suggested.
- Concerns that the pupil premium had been overestimated.
- The close working relationship between the school and the Council with regards to early years provision.

In summary Members concluded that whilst they liked the proposal they felt it was not costed appropriately and posed significant potential financial risks and was not viable.

Ashton CofE VA Middle School

The Chairman invited one speaker to address the Committee in relation to Ashton CofE VA Middle School. The speaker raised issues that in summary related to the following:-

- The school felt the business case laid out exciting proposals that were financially viable.
- Progress on school results had been positive, particularly in relation to Maths.
- Many parents had stated anecdotally that they desired a small faith based school in Dunstable. If the school remained open parents had commented they would have no reason to move their children to other schools..
- The school recognised the seriousness of its current funding deficit, which was a result of changes in the funding system.
- Morale was high within the teaching body and both staff and governors were keen to provide alternative options with regards to education.
- The school felt it was unique in providing a faith based education within the local area.

In light of the report and the comments raised by speakers in relation to Ashton CofE VA Middle School Members discussed the following issues in detail:-

- Concerns that the Pupil Premium had been overestimated and that the projected numbers of pupils were unrealistic.
- Whether the school had entered into discussions with other schools regarding a joint proposal. Representatives in attendance confirmed that they had early discussions with Priory Academy with a view to sharing the curriculum, more formal links were not appropriate due to their faith status.

- Concerns regarding teaching allocation and curriculum delivery. The Deputy Head stated that the school required additional physical education facilities but these could be delivered within walking distance via the local leisure centre. Other subjects would be delivered via the local College.
- The distances from which pupils travelled to attend the school. The Committee were advised that pupils lived both locally and out of the area, 33 pupils lived in Luton.
- Whether the school had used any other small secondary schools as a model for performance. It was conformed that the school had benchmarked against other small secondary schools and were aiming towards those that performed better with approximately 500 pupils.
- Clarity that the Church would not fund a change in the structure of the school, they would be subject to the Council's formula for funding.

In summary several Members agreed that the school's proposal was interesting and that a small secondary school was appealing. It was acknowledged that in 2016 the Council would be commissioning more secondary school places. However, the financial figures and pupil numbers identified in the business plan were disputed and there was a significant risk for the Council in light of the schools current deficit.

RECOMMENDED

- 1. That the proposal of Brewers Hill Middle School represented significant risk, which had not been addressed in the business case with regards to finances.**
- 2. That the Committee were concerned that future curriculum delivery at Brewers Hill Middle School from reception to year 11, especially for years 9-11, was questionable in such a small school.**
- 3. That predicted future pupil numbers at Brewers Hill Middle School could not be guaranteed.**
- 4. That the proposal of Streetfield Middle School represented significant risk that had not been addressed in the business case with regards to finances.**
- 5. That predicted future pupil numbers at Streetfield Middle School could not be guaranteed.**
- 6. That the Executive recognise the innovative alternative model submitted by Streetfield Middle School, but take into consideration the financial risks.**
- 7. That the Committee were concerned of the impact for other schools in the area on pupil numbers if the alternative model submitted by Streetfield Middle School was implemented.**
- 8. That the model proposed by Ashton CofE VA Middle School was of interest, but the Committee were concerned that the financial risks of implementation had not been addressed in the business case.**
- 9. That predicted future pupil numbers at Ashton CofE VA Middle School could not be guaranteed, however, the school could gain pupils out of catchment area from Luton.**
- 10. That Executive consider the risk attached to the financial deficit in the interim if the proposal of Ashton CofE VA Middle School was approved and the school remained open.**

**11. That the Executive consider the scale of additional secondary places,
which was acknowledged would be required from September 2016.**

(Note: The meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m. and concluded at 1.50 p.m.)

Chairman

Dated