

## **Central Bedfordshire Council**

### **Executive meeting 9<sup>th</sup> December 2009**

#### **Response to issues raised at the Children, Families & Learning Overview & Scrutiny Committee (1<sup>st</sup> December 2009) regarding the future of Special Schooling in the east of Central Bedfordshire.**

The Overview & Scrutiny meeting considered the proposal, following consultation, to merge Hitchmead and Sunnyside schools, which is to be decided upon by Executive at their December meeting. A letter was received by the Chair of the committee, Councillor John Street from Mr John Court who raised a number of issues; the Committee also heard Mr Tim Walker, Head Teacher of Hitchmead School raise a number of questions on behalf of parents and staff at the school. The Committee resolved that a written response to the issues raised by both Mr Court and Mr Walker should be prepared and made available to the Executive before the meeting.

#### **Mr Court's concerns**

##### **The consultation was not fair or impartial.**

- The process was similar to that used previously by the County Council and other local authorities. Every attempt was made to publicise the consultation, public meetings were held. The pros and cons for each option were fairly and impartially identified. There is no evidence that respondents were unduly influenced by the layout of the consultation document.

##### **The term merger is misleading.**

- The only way to merge two existing schools is for one school to technically close (cease to be registered with the DCSF) and the other to become the basis for the "new" school.

##### **The SEN review is referred to but 3 key findings are not identified.**

- The review's findings are not reproduced in the consultation document. The review is a public document and is referred to as part of the context for the consultation.

##### **The removal of £111,000 from the combined budget will not address the financial viability of the school**

- The proposed merger would reduce the fixed costs of the new school and therefore the "lump sum" formula funding which is paid to each school. (Referred to above) For example only one Head teacher is required by a merged school. The combined pupils numbers and reduced fixed costs addresses the viability issue which Hitchmead faces on its own.

**There is no mention of the capital expenditure required to make the Hitchmead site suitable for Sunnyside children.**

- Some Sunnyside Children already access the site. There would be some capital expenditure required should the decision to merge be taken. Preliminary work suggests that this is relatively minor and could be met from the formula capital already delegated to both schools supplemented by existing resources within the SEN budget.

**The report makes mention of the proposed Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Strategy which forms part of the vision for learning. This vision has not yet been adopted by the Council.**

- The transitional task force accepted the SEN review. The SEN & Inclusion strategy, based on the review, will form an integral part of the vision for learning. This is consistent with that earlier decision.

**No new analysis of the pros & cons and the relative costs has been commissioned or undertaken before the Executive is asked to consider this important matter.**

- The SEN review was a substantial piece of work which established the case for area special schools. This approach was adopted by the Council through the transitional taskforce. The executive is being asked to decide, following consultation, whether to issue statutory notices relating to merger of the two schools. To undertake further detailed work prior to the decision would potentially pre-judge the outcome of the consultation and Executive's decision. Both Heads and both Governing bodies support merger as the best way forward.

#### **Questions raised by Mr Walker on behalf of parents and staff.**

**Can Hitchmead's current financial difficulties be remedied by the merger?**

- Hitchmead's difficulties are a consequence of the increased ability of mainstream schools to meet appropriately the needs of more children with Moderate Learning Difficulties. The proposed merger would reduce the fixed costs and maintain the overall number of pupils.

**What assurance can be given that the best features of both schools would be preserved in the new schools?**

- The ethos, culture and character of the new school will draw on the foundations laid down in the two existing schools. The Head teachers and Governors are committed to work together should the decision to merge be taken. It is the School's leadership and Governors who would be responsible for the standards and ethos of the merged school.

**Is there a policy for merging schools?**

- There is an established process to establish the governance arrangements for a new school. The implementation of a plan to merge will be undertaken jointly between the Heads, the Governing Bodies and the Local Authority.

**What assurances can be given of the commitment of Central Bedfordshire to proper resourcing and longer term development of 21<sup>st</sup> century school?**

- The development of a new building to house the merged school is an aspiration but is dependant on capital funding being available.

**The report avoids or glosses over some of the most important issues.**

- The report, which is necessarily concise, reports the outcome of the consultation and proposes a preferred option. This option is supported by the consultation and is consistent with the Council's declared approach. The detailed planning can only take place once the decision is reached in principle. The Local Authority is committed to working with the Heads and Governing bodies to implement the plan following the decision. The first meeting with Heads and Chairs of Governors is provisionally booked for Monday 14<sup>th</sup> December.

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