

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in Grove Theatre, Dunstable on Wednesday, 7 May 2014

PRESENT

Cllr Mrs A Barker (Chairman)

Councillors:	D Bowater P A Duckett P Hollick	Councillors:	D Jones D McVicar R B Pepworth
Parental Co-optees:	Mr J M A Chapman Mr S Court Mr T Hodey		
Church of England Co-optee:	J Reynolds		
Apologies for Absence:	Cllrs Mrs G Clarke N B Costin Mrs R J Drinkwater Mrs F Image		
Substitutes:	Cllrs R D Berry (In place of Mrs R J Drinkwater)		
Members in Attendance:	Cllrs Mrs S Clark Mrs B Coleman A L Dodwell Mrs S A Goodchild C Hegley J Murray Mrs M Mustoe Miss A Sparrow R C Stay M A G Versallion N Warren J N Young	Deputy Executive Member for Children's Services Deputy Executive Member for Children's Services and Community Services Executive Member for Social Care, Health & Housing Chairman of Licensing Committee Executive Member for External Affairs and Lead Member for Troubled Families Executive Member for Children's Services Executive Member for Regeneration	
Officers in Attendance:	Mrs P Everitt	Scrutiny Policy Adviser	

Mr R Parsons	Head of School Organisation and Capital Planning
Mr J Partridge	Corporate Policy Manager
Miss H Redding	Assistant Director School Improvement

Others in attendance 155 members of the public

CS/14/1. **Minutes**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 25 February 2014 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CS/14/2. **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 Hollick as a governor of All Saints and a member of the Ashton Foundation;
- Cllr Duckett as a Governor at Maulden Lower School; and
- Mr J Reynolds as a Governor at All Saints Academy.

CS/14/3. **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

The Chairman welcomed new Members to the Committee and outlined the process by which members of the public who had registered to speak would be invited to do so at the commencement of Item 9. The Chairman also advised those in attendance that filming and recording of the meeting was not permitted.

CS/14/4. **Petitions**

None.

CS/14/5. **Questions, Statements or Deputations**

As previously advised the Chairman confirmed that eight members of the public and elected Members had registered to speak. Speakers would be invited to speak at the commencement of Item 9.

The Chairman also informed the Committee that two questions had been received from a parent relating to the criteria that would be used to make the final decision on school closures and whether the Council had any input or authority to reject a schools application for academy status. The Chairman

requested that the Executive Member respond to these questions when responding to others raised by public speakers.

CS/14/6. **Call-In**

None.

CS/14/7. **Requested Items**

None.

CS/14/8. **Statutory Consultations of Proposals**

At the commencement of this item the Chairman invited eight residents and elected Members to speak. The speakers raised issues that in summary related to the following:-

- Statements that reducing the number of surplus school places was not a priority.
- Additional information that had been circulated by Streetfield Community Middle School to Members and co-opted Members of the Committee.
- Concerns that the committee report contained inaccurate information which was misleading.
- The potential capacity to develop Streetfield Community Middle School as an alternative to closure.
- The lack of faith based information within the report.
- Concerns that several responses to the consultation had been omitted from the report
- Whether other schools in Dunstable would continue to be financially viable if these three were closed.
- The importance of providing children with the necessary skills to continue life-long learning outside of the classroom that included providing children with choices and the opportunity to become more confident before encountering older children.
- The difficulty of engaging children in science and the importance of teachers with the confidence to deliver a high class education.
- The importance of providing parents with choice over the schools that their children attend.
- Concerns regarding the way the budget had been set based on historical attendance numbers and a suggestion that the levels of funding should be reconsidered.
- Concerns regarding letters that had been sent to parents regarding the selection of sixth form places by a certain date, leading to confusion.
- The lack of funding for an identified number of students at Ashton Church of England Voluntary Aided Middle School.
- Sustainable improvement that could be demonstrated at Brewers Hill Community Middle School over previous years, which had resulted in a good Ofsted inspection in 2013 and concerns that this would not be maintained elsewhere if the school was to close.
- The potential capacity for growth at Brewers Hill Community Middle School, which continued to attract students at all ages despite the age range changes.

- Changes in national government policy leading to a requirement to consider closing schools and the importance of listening to the responses received during public consultation.
- Concerns that the proposed closures would impact on all upper, middle and lower schools in the area who might be unprepared to respond to this challenge.
- The importance of providing appropriate support for children with special educational needs
- The importance of giving the schools an appropriate amount of time to address the challenges and work together before the Council made any final decisions.
- The importance of an effective education and ensuring that any decisions were taken in light of the best outcome for children and the need to provide continuity for children.
- The impact of the rising birth rate and the impact this would have in relation to increasing pressure on schools.

The Executive Member for Children's Services thanked the speakers and commented that he had listened to the concerns throughout the process and would continue to do so. The Committee were reminded that a decision would be taken at the Executive on 27 May 2014 and the Committee were asked to provide a recommendation to be considered at that meeting. In response to the issues raised Cllr Versallion commented that he was acutely aware of politics of this issue but this was a genuine discussion between members as to the best course of action in these schools in light of their financial situation. Whilst following the general election in 2010 the government had introduced academisation there had been no statement about two-tier or three-tier schools and the Executive Member himself had not developed a personal position. The perception that the closures were trying to remove the three-tier system was factually incorrect. The Council could not prevent academisation although it did have a statutory opportunity to comment on the academisation of a school and the Council had commented on other schools in the past.

The Executive Member outlined that the current position at these three schools was partially a consequence of other schools becoming academies or applying to change their age range. Changes to school age ranges was up to the parents of children in those schools and there had been up to 95% support for parents in those schools that had changed. Whilst there were implications of a school changing its age range the starting point was always the school coming to the Council to say they would like change. Schools could not be forced to agree to proposals, which had resulted in these current proposals.

In outlining the report the Executive Member highlighted that significant changes in the previous autumn had a profound effect on the remaining middle schools. There were anticipated to be low admissions from September 2014 and a more significant drop off in pupil numbers in the future. It was important that agreed proposals put the children's welfare at the centre. If the Council was to ignore the admissions numbers the schools would become financially bankrupt and would not be able to function as high-quality organisations, the situation for pupils in that circumstance would be far worse than the proposed closures. Whilst a recommendation was sought from the Committee to

Executive a final decision would not be taken until August 2014. Although it had been suggested this had been a truncated process it has actually commenced in February 2014 and teachers had known for several years that this challenge was emerging.

The Executive Member encouraged Members to reflect their views so that they could be considered by the Executive. The committee report aimed to address many of the issues raised during the consultation and in public meetings and Cllr Versallion specifically drew attention to the following:-

- Concerns regarding the financial viability of the schools, the report did not form any views about the quality of the education at these schools. There were too few children at these schools and a surplus of places of 63% elsewhere.
- The substantial number of consultees that had been involved throughout the process to date.
- The consultation responses from all three schools that had been summarised in the report and the total number of consultation responses that had also been set out.
- The net difference in the pupil numbers that had been set out in detail in the report.
- Changes in the numbers of pupils to reflect the changes following the previous Executive report that had been provided in February 2014.
- Viable alternative options had not yet been received by the Council from the schools.

The Executive Member also requested that his thanks to local ward Members and Andrew Selous MP be recorded for their involvement in the process.

Cllr Duckett queried whether the impact on these schools in Dunstable was a result of other schools becoming academies. It was also queried why some facilities in Central Bedfordshire were being refurbished but the same was not taking place in these schools and why the number of surplus school places was so high in other areas of Central Bedfordshire. It was not clear whether there were other schools in the area that would be impacted by these proposals and whether the potential population growth in Dunstable had been taken into account. In response Cllr Versallion commented that although the Council was building new schools they would not be ready for a long period of time and certainly not before the financial crisis within these schools occurred. There was a policy that local schools should be provided for local communities and these three schools might not be best located for those children living in the areas of growth. In relation to the demographics of the area the Head of School Organisation, Admissions and Capital Planning commented that Central Bedfordshire was a growth area and had witnessed an impact in light of the national increase in birth rate. The detail in relation to Dunstable and Houghton Regis had been reported in previous Executive reports, which set out that there was a significant over-supply in school places across Central Bedfordshire. Guidance from the Department for Education set out that reducing surplus places was not a priority but should be addressed by local authorities as much as possible. Whilst new homes were planned locally there was an immediate issue of financial viability that needed to be addressed. Previous reports also

set out the basis of admissions forecasts, which was the basis on which the budgets for the schools had been set.

Cllr Pepworth commented that the schools closures were a result of allowing the increase of academies and allowing all schools to change their age ranges. Cllr Pepworth had specific concerns in relation to the numbers of support teachers in Central Bedfordshire and the impact on middle schools as a result of primary schools changing their age ranges. The growth of competition between schools had been deeply divisive and rather than closing schools the Council should support schools to encourage the development of alternative proposals.

Mr J Reynolds suggested there were merits in both a two-tier and three-tier school system but it was important to understand what would work best for the children in this area. It was important that subjects were taught by specialists and issues relating to financial and educational viability in these schools needed to be addressed. Mr Reynolds commented that in his opinion the alternative proposals provided to date were not viable based on the projected figures that had been included and as such they could not be endorsed by the Committee.

Cllr Hollick commented on the importance of ensuring that schools were viable and being aware that in cases where schools had changed their age range or become an academy this was a direct result of the choice of parents with children at those schools. Any alternative proposals that were submitted to the Council should be considered but only if they were financially viable. It was not clear that appropriate conversations had taken place to date between schools so that viable proposals could be developed, and a lack of constructive co-operation appeared to be a contributing factor in this issue. However, communication between schools had commenced and there should be an opportunity to continue this.

Cllr McVicar commented on the impact of other schools becoming academies or changing their age range at the request of parents of children at these schools. It had been difficult to start conversations between the schools in Dunstable previously and as a result the alternative proposals that had been proposed were not currently viable. There were insufficient pupils from September 2014 to keep all three schools running and ultimately although the school buildings might close it was the teachers and pupils that really mattered. In response to a specific question the Executive Member confirmed that if talks continued the Council could revoke a decision that had been made. If any viable alternatives were presented to the Council the Council would reflect on them and act appropriately.

In response to a question the Head of School Organisation, Admissions and Capital Planning commented that all of the figures detailed in the report and the previous report to the Executive in February 2014 were considered to be accurate. Although numbers would change over time the report to the Committee provided an update on pupil numbers to ensure they were as accurate and up to date as possible and made openly available.

Mr S Court commented on the importance of schools being financially viable and the importance of viability to ensure that standards of education did not fall. If the figures in the report were accurate it had to be accepted that the schools were not financially viable. However, if the three schools could demonstrate viable alternatives the Council should do everything it could to support them.

Cllr Bowater commented on school results in Leighton Buzzard where co-operation between four head teachers worked very effectively. Proposals to federate schools and share specialist staff and funding were currently being considered. Co-operation between schools was essential and it had been possible elsewhere to develop viable proposals to combine schools.

In conclusion the Committee commented on the importance of considering alternative viable proposals and the need for the Council to support schools in developing these alternatives in a timely manner. The Committee discussed whether it was feasible for proposals to be presented in time for the May 2014 Executive and suggested that a Special Executive might be necessary to consider the detailed business cases. In response it was commented that proposals needed to progress to statutory timescales. Although a decision was required at the Executive meeting in May 2014 the schools involved could still submit alternative proposals up to the Executive meeting in August 2014. Officers undertook to publish the lead in times for the August Executive to ensure that all parties were aware of the timescales. In light of the discussion the Committee did not feel that a Special Executive meeting was necessary.

RECOMMENDED

- 1. That the Executive agree to progress to the publication of statutory notices and final representation period to close Brewers Hill Community Middle School in Dunstable, phased from September 2015, with final implementation in August 2016.**
- 2. That the Executive agree to progress to the publication of statutory notices and final representation period to close Streetfield Community Middle School in Dunstable, phased from September 2015, with final implementation in August 2016.**
- 3. That the Executive agree to progress to the publication of statutory notices and final representation period to close Ashton Church of England Voluntary Aided Middle School in Dunstable, phased from September 2015, with final implementation in August 2016.**
- 4. That there be further opportunity for schools either individually or in conjunction with another or other schools to bring forward a viable business plan with any appropriate assistance being provided by Council officers, which can be scrutinised at the May 2014 Executive if possible or August 2014 at the latest.**

(Note: The meeting commenced at 7.00 p.m. and concluded at 9.45 p.m.)

Chairman

Dated