

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in Council Chamber, Priory House, Chicksands on Wednesday, 25 July 2018

PRESENT

Cllr D Shelvey (Chairman)

Councillors:	Cllr M Liddiard B Saunders	Councillors: P Smith
Parental Co-optees:	Mr S Court Mrs G Deans Mrs E Rowlands	
Church of England Co-optee:	Apologies	
Roman Catholic Co-optee:	Apologies	
Apologies for Absence:	Cllrs N B Costin Mrs D B Gurney P Hollick K Janes A Ryan Mrs D Main Mr D Morton	
Members in Attendance:	Cllrs S Dixon Mrs A L Dodwell K C Matthews R Morris	Executive Member for Families, Education and Children and Lead Members for Children's Services Deputy Executive Member for Families, Education and Children Chairman of Development Management Committee
Officers in Attendance:	Mrs S Harrison Mr C Kiernan Mrs R Preen Mr V Wan	Director of Children's Services Interim Head of School Improvement Scrutiny Policy Adviser Senior Education Officer (Planning)

Public: 8

CS/18/26. **Members' Interests**

None.

CS/18/27. **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

None.

CS/18/28. **Petitions**

None.

CS/18/29. **Questions, Statements or Deputations**

The Committee were advised that three members of the public and two Ward Members had registered to speak at the commencement of Item 10, in addition to which there were also three written statements which had been submitted.

CS/18/30. **Call-In**

None.

CS/18/31. **Requested Items**

None.

CS/18/32. **Executive Members' Updates**

None.

CS/18/33. **The Future of Shelton Lower School**

The Chairman invited three public speakers to address the Committee, who raised the following points in summary:-

- That since the start of the consultation process parents had mobilised an action group which had resulted in successful open days and an increase in anticipated pupil admissions at the school from September 2018.
- That families had stated they would have applied for school places at Shelton Lower had it not been for the threat of closure.
- That the school had support from Bedford Borough Parish Councils and promises had been made that Bedford schools were willing to feed into Shelton Lower school.
- That due to future development more children would require school places locally, particularly given that nearby and neighbouring schools were oversubscribed.

- Concerns that the projected figures produced by the local authority were inaccurate.
- That a robust business plan for recovery had been drafted by the action group.
- Concerns that siblings would not be able to secure places at the same school, the associated transportation costs and the disruption to the education of those children already settled at Shelton Lower.
- The need to provide choices of schools and educational provision for children and their families.
- That the school provided a stable educational environment and yielded good outcomes for its pupils.
- That the proposal to close the school be withdrawn and support provided to increase its numbers.

The Chairman invited two Ward Members to address the Committee, who raised the following points in summary:-

- Ward Members expressed sympathy with the circumstances of those parents affected.
- The view that there was a strong potential for the school to increase its pupil numbers due to its proximity to Bedford and the current surplus of pupils in that area.
- That Shelton Lower school was in a unique position to offer a tailored education provision to those children with additional needs due to its small classroom sizes and the benefits that yielded.
- That the most recent accounts for the school had not been ratified by the current governing body.
- Whether a number of other schools would find themselves in a similar position due to changes in structure and their own financial position due to their small size.
- That the written statements submitted by the school contradicted figures produced by the Council and the need for further analysis.
- That new developments proposed for the area had school provision built into their conditions so there was no guarantee families moving into the area would apply for places at Shelton Lower due to sufficient and closer provision on those new estates.

Officers confirmed that the written statements would receive a written response.

The Director for Children's Services (DCS) introduced the report and outlined the background to the recent consultation and subsequent decision to close the school, with the process delivered in an open and transparent manner working in close partnership with the school and governing body. The DCS expressed sympathy for those speakers and other parents who were concerned at the decision to close the school, expressed the view that keeping it open would have been the preferred option and highlighted that all other available options had been explored following the governing body's announcement of the large and unrecoverable financial deficit. The decision to close was not a reflection on the quality of educational provision at the school and the DCS formally thanked all officers and contributors to the process for their diligence.

The Head of School Improvement delivered a presentation which outlined the measures taken in recent months to support the school and governing body, that an appropriate recovery plan had not been produced and that despite the increase in admission numbers to Year R (Reception) there was a sharp decline in later year groups which was unsustainable and projected to continue. Members were advised that there was sufficient capacity in neighbouring schools to take the children currently at Shelton Lower and that despite the fact that current admission numbers had improved, the situation was still unrecoverable. The directorate had explored the possibility of federating the school but despite liaison with other schools none had been willing to take on the challenge, however officers were willing to contact any Multi Academy Trust which expressed an interest in supporting the school. If the proposal to close the school in August 2019 was delayed and pupil numbers did not increase then the process and consultation would need to start from the beginning, the Council would need to fund the deficit during that period from the dedicated schools grant which would draw funds away from other schools. A statement from Bedford Borough Council was read out which outlined their views and the number of pupils expected to come from that area.

In light of the report Members discussed the following in summary:-

- That the consultation process and threat of closure resulted in many parents choosing to withdraw their children before a final decision was made.
- The need to understand the reasons behind falling pupil numbers at some schools in order to mitigate closure in the future.
- That there was no indication that the structure of a school affected parental choice.
- That despite a greater number of consultees recently expressing a desire to keep the school open, pupil numbers had continued to decline for a number of years.
- That for a school to be considered viable, the overall number of pupils required were approximately 60 with 30 currently on role at Shelton Lower.
- A need to ensure the building was utilised appropriately and maintained once any decision to close had been implemented, working in close partnership with the Marston Vale Trust.
- That despite the current surplus of pupils, Wootton Lower school was expanding in September 2019 and would be able to accommodate all children within their catchment area.
- Whether the recent consultation period had been sufficient for the new governing body to respond and create a recovery plan and concerns that the process had been carried out in haste.
- That with a licensed deficit pupil numbers could possibly increase but only with an appropriate recovery plan.
- That although the school hosted small community events, the revenue generated was negligible.
- In response to a Member query the accumulative financial deficit was explained.
- The need for the Council to support schools and take a proactive approach, acknowledging that many schools may not have the required skills to detect the early signs of financial difficulty.

RECOMMENDED:-

- 1. That the Committee acknowledge the thorough report and the decision of the Director for Children's Services (DCS) to close Shelton Lower school.**
- 2. That a comprehensive financial analysis and breakdown be provided to the Executive based on the projected income and expenditure of the school, including the specifics in relation to revenue per pupil.**
- 3. That the DCS consider the impact and possible precedent to close other schools in a similar situation and that more support be provided to those schools at an earlier stage via the school improvement and finance team.**

(Note: The meeting commenced at 12.00 p.m. and concluded at 1.40 p.m.)

Chairman

Dated

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