

## **MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING HELD ON 19 MAY 2008**

10:30 a.m. – 6:05 p.m.

**Responsible Officer** Geraldine Childerhouse

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### **Present:**

J Barrow, B J Craig, G L Dakin, E A Hartley (Vice Chairman), J Hurst-Knight, P A Nutting, and M G Pate (Chairman)

Mrs K Calder was present by invitation in her capacity as support to the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services in relation to education matters.

Mr R A Evans, was present in accordance with paragraph 21.3 (b) of the Council's Access to Information Procedure Rules.

Mr N J Hartin, Mrs E V Parry and Mrs E D Sandford were present in accordance with paragraph 21.2 (b) of the Council's Access to Information Procedure Rules.

Mr A Mosley and Mrs E Parsons were present in accordance with paragraph 21.4 of the Council's Access to Information Procedure Rules.

### Chairman's and Portfolio Holder's Opening Remarks

Mr Pate opened the meeting by extending Cabinet's condolences to the families of the three young people who had been tragically killed in a motor accident on the previous day.

In relation to the conduct of the meeting, he reminded members of the public present that this was a formal meeting of Cabinet and that the three minutes allowed for each question would be strictly adhered to so as to ensure fairness for all.

He went on to explain that Mrs K Calder was present by invitation in her capacity as support to the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services in relation to education matters, that she would take a full part in the debates on the proposed school amalgamations but as she was not a member of Cabinet would not be able to vote on any proposition.

Mr Pate stressed that no decision on amalgamations would be made at this meeting and that the decisions to be made were whether to proceed to formal consultation.

Mrs Hartley, portfolio holder for Children and Young People's services, gave an assurance that all Cabinet members had read all correspondence received in relation to the proposed amalgamations and had signed to confirm they had done so. She also stressed the usefulness of Cabinet's visits to all the schools proposed for amalgamation.

These messages were repeated at the beginning of the debate on each of the school pairings being considered for amalgamation.

## **1. Apologies for Absence**

- 1.1 Apologies for absence was received from Mr E J Everall and Mr M J Owen

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

- 2.1 Mrs Barrow declared a personal interest in agenda item 7 – Proposal to Amalgamate Beech Grove Junior School and Oswestry Infant School as she was a Governor of Woodside Junior School, Oswestry. She made the declaration as soon as the interest became apparent.

## **3. Public Questions**

- 3.1 The Chairman invited Mr Birch who had indicated he wished to make a general statement, to speak.
- 3.2 Mr Connor Birch, Chairman of Marches Secularists expanded on the organisation's belief in a free society with the freedom of all people to choose their own beliefs free from the prejudice and religious dictates of others and highlighted their work towards religious tolerance. Mr Birch went on to express concern regarding several of the amalgamation proposals which would result in the transition from community to faith schools and made particular reference to the career prospects of non-religious staff.

## **4. Proposal to Amalgamate Longmeadow CE (Controlled) and Oakland Schools – Report on Formative Consultation**

- 4.1 Written questions had been received from Mr F Morris, Mrs J Fletcher, Mr C Taylor, Mrs J K Griffiths and Mr A Phillips. Their questions together with responses had been circulated, a copy of which is attached to the signed minutes. Each questioner was then invited to ask a supplementary question or make a further statement.
- 4.2 Mr Morris, Vice Chair of Governors at Oakland School, expressed concern regarding the apparent bias towards larger schools and to Longmeadow as the site for the new school. He referred to the overwhelming support for retaining Oakland School as evidenced by the referendum held on the amalgamation and by the correspondence received by the County Council in opposition to the proposal.
- 4.3 Mrs Fletcher, parent, stated that the closure of Oakland School would mean that there was no suitable alternative community school for her child to attend and that the only alternatives open would either be for her child to be educated outside the Bayston Hill area or to accept a school with a different ethos. She urged Cabinet to reconsider the closure of the excellent Oakland School
- 4.4 Mr Taylor, Chair of Governors at Oakland thanked Cabinet both for the opportunity to speak and for their visit to Oakland School. He stated that Oakland School met the criteria as a sustainable school as set out in the School Organisation Policy. He commented on the classification of Bayston Hill as urban in relation to the primary school proposals and the Council's dismissal of its village status. Mr Taylor also referred to the counter proposal which had been submitted to the County Council and concluded by urging Cabinet to vote against formal consultation and allow both Oakland and Longmeadow to work with the Policy Commission to explore the details of the counter proposal.
- 4.5 Mrs Griffiths, parent, was not present to ask a supplementary question.
- 4.6 Mr Phillips, Bayston Hill resident and After-School Care Provider, referred to the result of the recent referendum that had indicated support for the retention of both

schools in Bayston Hill. He stated that Bayston Hill could support both schools and maintain the quality of education

- 4.7 The Chairman then invited Mr Hitchings and Mr Hopkins, who had indicated they wished to make a statement in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 15, to speak
- 4.8 Mr Hitchings, Chair of Governors, Longmeadow School, rehearsed the background to the need for the Primary School Organisation Policy and referred to the considerable savings to the Council as a result of the amalgamations. He acknowledged the reservations surrounding the proposals but urged Cabinet to agree to the next step of formal consultation.
- 4.9 Mr Hopkins, Director of Education (Diocese of Lichfield), thanked Cabinet for the open way in which the consultations had taken place. He spoke in support of the amalgamation and of the principle of amalgamations where there were demonstrable benefits. He acknowledged the stress and difficulty of change but emphasised that the best interests of the children were paramount.
- 4.10 Mrs Hartley then presented the report of the Acting Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Services – copy attached to the signed minutes. She thanked the public for their contribution and gave an assurance that all the points raised during the formative consultation had been given serious consideration. Mrs Hartley stressed that the key issue to be decided was whether the amalgamation would be in the best interests of the education of children in the area and spoke of the strengths of both schools being combined in a single school to the benefit of all.
- 4.11 It was then proposed by Mrs Hartley and seconded by Mrs Craig that the recommendations as set out in the report be approved and adopted.
- 4.12 Mrs Hartley was invited to amplify on the effects on the community of an amalgamation. She commented that in her opinion it would bring the community closer together and result in closer community cohesion.
- 4.13 In answer to detailed questions raised by members of Cabinet, Mrs Hartley:
- undertook to work closely with providers in relation to nursery and early years provision
  - explained why Shawbury's schools had not been included for possible amalgamation in that they carried only 19% surplus places
  - advised that all members of staff would be protected
  - advised that the number of faith schools was not being increased
- 4.13 The proposals as set out in the report were then put to the vote and with 6 members voting in favour and one abstention it was

**RESOLVED:**

- A. That the outcomes from the formative consultation be noted;
- B. To proceed to formal proposals to close both Longmeadow and Oakland schools and invite the Diocese of Lichfield to publish proposals to open a new 420 place Voluntary Controlled school to serve the combined catchment area in line with the recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services;

*(N.B. Mr G L Dakin had abstained from voting as he had arrived late and had not heard the comments from members of the public or Cabinet's debate.)*

*The meeting adjourned at 11.15 a.m. and reconvened at 11.30 a.m.*

## **5 Proposal to Amalgamate Ashford Carbonell CE (Controlled) and Caynham CE (Voluntary Aided) Schools – Report on Formative Consultation**

- 5.1 Reverend Ian Terry had given notice he wished to make a statement and was invited to speak.
- 5.2 Reverend Terry spoke of the enthusiasm of both Governing bodies for the amalgamation which would result in a school that was fit for purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and would deliver a first class education, which combined the strengths of both schools, for children of that area. He requested that Cabinet should agree to the school having Church of England Foundation status.
- 5.3 Mrs Parry, the local member, referred to sites being considered for the school and requested that further consideration be given to all options as there had been some concern expressed locally that the sites had not been considered in sufficient detail. The Chairman drew attention to the document which had been circulated at the meeting – copy attached to the signed minutes – which set out initial planning considerations for all the sites being considered.
- 5.4 Mrs Hartley then introduced the report of the Acting Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Services – copy attached to the signed minutes- which set out the outcomes from the consultation, the recommendations of the Acting Corporate Director and sought Cabinet's views on whether to proceed with formal proposals. She spoke of the opportunity afforded both schools of an amalgamation and of the first class facilities and sustainable education for pupils in that area which would result from the amalgamation into a brand new school.
- 5.5 It was then proposed by Mrs Hartley and seconded by Mrs Barrow that the recommendations as set out in the report be approved and adopted.
- 5.6 The selection of a site was discussed and the Assistant Director explained that the site would have to be finalised before Notices could be issued.
- 5.7 The education of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) was discussed and the Acting Corporate Director advised that the amalgamation would enhance the range of expertise which would support the provision for SEN.
- 5.8 A question was raised regarding the proposal for the school to have Foundation rather than Voluntary Controlled status. The Assistant Director explained that there would be no difference in terms of ethos but that there were practical considerations in relation to capital projects.
- 5.9 On being put to the vote it was **RESOLVED** unanimously:
- A. That the outcomes from the formative consultation be noted;
  - B. To proceed to formal proposals to close Ashford Carbonell and Caynham Schools and invite the Diocese of Hereford to publish proposals to open a new 90 place Foundation School with a Church of England character to serve the combined catchment area in line with the recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services

*(The meeting adjourned at 11.45 a.m. and reconvened at 1.30 p.m.)*

## **6. Proposal to Amalgamate Clunbury CE (Voluntary Aided) and Lydbury North CE (Voluntary Aided Schools – Report on Formative Consultation**

- 6.1 A letter from Philip Dunn MP was circulated. He urged Cabinet to exclude the proposed amalgamation of Clunbury and Lydbury North from further consideration. Correspondence from Mrs N Pugh, together with the responses given, was also circulated – copy attached to the signed minutes.
- 6.2 Written questions had been received from Mrs P Peters, the questions together with the responses had been circulated, a copy of which is attached to the signed minutes. Mrs Peters was invited to ask a supplementary question. She thanked Cabinet for the responses to her questions but emphasised the anxiety being experienced by both communities and in particular the children, over the proposals. Mrs Peters questioned the accuracy and objectivity of the site report and also of the suitability of expanding the Clunbury site. She urged Cabinet to retain the status quo until the Policy Commission had made its recommendations.
- 6.3 The Chairman then invited, Mrs R Williams, Mrs N Pugh, Mr Hartin (the local member) and Reverend I Terry, who had given notice they wished to ask a question or make a statement, to speak.
- 6.4 Mrs Williams spoke in support of retaining both schools and expressed concern that overcrowding in the replacement school would lead to the deterioration of the educational environment. She also referred to the cost of transport and the loss of the current sustainable transport, i.e. walking or cycling
- 6.5 Mrs Pugh suggested that a new school on the Clunbury site would be cramped and inadequate. She referred to perceived factual errors in the report and questioned its objectivity. Mrs Pugh concluded by urging Cabinet not to proceed in the face of such opposition and by stating that the schools were willing to enter into dialogue to explore alternatives to closure.
- 6.6 Mr Hartin, the local member, commended Cabinet on visiting the schools concerned. He did however stress that the communities, local organisations and local politicians were all opposed to the proposed amalgamation and urged Cabinet to exclude Clunbury and Lydbury North from formal statutory proposals.
- 6.7 Reverend Terry praised the high level of research carried out by the communities and the professionalism of the officers concerned. He did however suggest that the Governors of the schools had put forward a cogent argument and that the communities would be best serviced by maintaining the current arrangement. He urged Cabinet not to commission further formal consultation.
- 6.8 Mrs Hartley acknowledged the well made points and stressed that the schools' ethos was not in dispute. She acknowledged the anxiety being experienced but said it would be wrong to prolong that anxiety and commented that the schools should think of the proposed amalgamation as an opportunity rather than a threat as it would secure the school's long term viability.
- 6.9 Mrs Hartley reiterated that no decision on a merger would be being taken today and that interested parties would have a further six weeks to make their points during the formal consultation period. She also stressed the need for the Administration to be consistent in its approach to school amalgamations.

- 6.10 Mrs Hartley referred to the inference that officers were not objective and their reports factually incorrect. She strongly refuted that claim and emphasised the professionalism and astuteness of the officers concerned and stated that the constant undermining of their facts and figures was counter productive.
- 6.11 She also referred to the often-misquoted Jim Knight MP, Minister for Schools, and advised that he had said that rural school closures were justified when the alternative school could offer better facilities.
- 6.12 It was then proposed by Mrs Hartley that the recommendations as set out in the report – copy attached to the signed minutes – be approved. She further proposed that officers continue to work on identifying alternative sites should the recommendations be approved. The proposals were seconded by Mrs Barrow.
- 6.13 The Chairman agreed that, having visited both schools, neither building appeared ideal and that work should continue to try to identify a site between the existing schools for a new facility. This view was echoed by several Cabinet members.
- 6.14 The inconsistency of Reverend Terry opposition to this amalgamation whilst supporting that of Ashford Carbonell and Caynham schools was questioned and it was stressed that the prime motivation behind the proposed amalgamation was the quality of education which could be provided. Mrs Hartley emphasised the enhanced provision to all children, including those with Special Educational Needs, a larger school would afford.
- 6.15 The Chief Executive explained to Cabinet that before they could proceed to statutory consultation a site for the school would have to be identified and only then could a Statutory Notice be issued
- 6.16 On being put to the vote it was unanimously **RESOLVED**;
- A. That the outcomes from the formative consultation be noted;
  - B. To consult for a period of four weeks on a suitable site for a new replacement school
  - C. Once a site has been agreed by Cabinet, to proceed to formal proposals to close Clunbury and Lydbury North Schools and invite the Diocese of Hereford to publish proposals to open a new 120 place Foundation School with a Church of England character to serve the combined catchment area in line with the recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services

*(The meeting adjourned at 2.10 p.m. and reconvened at 4.00 p.m.)*

## **7. Proposal to Amalgamate Beech Grove Junior CE (Controlled) and Oswestry Infant Schools – Report on Formative Consultation**

- 7.1 Councillor M Bennett, Chair of Governors of Oswestry Beech Grove school had submitted a question to which a written response had been given – copy attached to the signed minutes. As Councillor Bennett had been unable to attend the meeting, an email received from him was circulated at the meeting.
- 7.2 .Mr C Hopkins had given notice he wished to make a statement and was invited to speak. Mr Hopkins spoke in support of the proposal. He acknowledged the anxieties

associated with change but gave an assurance the Diocese would work with both predecessor schools to assist in a smooth transition.

- 7.3 An email from Mrs J Mosford, Chair of Governors Oswestry Infant School was circulated. Mrs Mosford then spoke of the need to provide a learning environment deserving of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and which was best for the children.
- 7.4 Mrs Hartley then introduced the report of the Acting Corporate Director – copy attached to the signed minutes. She spoke of the benefits of an ‘all-through’ primary school structure where numbers were not too large and of the prospects for enhanced curriculum and attainment by building on the strengths of the predecessor schools
- 7.5 It was proposed by Mrs Hartley and seconded by Mr Dakin that the report and recommendations contained therein be received and adopted.
- 7.6 Mrs Barrow advised that the schools were generally in favour of the amalgamation and asked how much funding would be available for capital works. The Assistant Director explained that no precise sum had been allocated to individual schools by that the Council was committed to working with the school, children and staff to ensure the school was fit for purpose.
- 7.7 Mrs Barrow then referred to the significant number of children at Beechgrove with Special Educational Needs and also to the growing number of non English speaking pupils. The Acting Corporate Director explained that a larger school would be able to provide enhanced SEN services and also to provide personal provision for non-English speaking pupils.
- 7.8 On being put to the vote it was unanimously **RESOLVED**:
- A. That the outcomes from the formative consultation be noted;
  - B. To proceed to formal proposals to close Beech Grove Junior Schools and Oswestry Infant School and invite the Diocese of Lichfield to publish proposals to open a new Voluntary Controlled School with 360 to serve the combined catchment area.

*(The meeting adjourned at 4.15 p.m. and reconvened at 4.30 p.m.)*

## **8. Proposal to Amalgamate Holy Cross CE Junior School and Springfield Infant Schools – Report on Formative Consultation**

- 8.1 Mrs Hartley presented the report of the Acting Corporate Director, Children and Young People’s Services – copy attached to the signed minutes- which set out the outcomes from the consultation, the recommendations of the Acting Corporate Director and sought Cabinet’s views on whether to proceed with formal proposals. Mrs Hartley corrected the response to question 3 at Appendix 3 to read “Early Years provision..etc”
- 8.2 Mrs Hartley referred to the capital investment which would be made to the building and to the partnership working required to ensure the end product was something of which everybody could be proud. She also reported that there was general support for the amalgamation from both schools.
- 8.3 The enhancement both to education and to the fabric of the building which would result from an amalgamation was stressed.

- 8.4 It was then proposed by Mrs Hartley, seconded by Mr Dakin and unanimously **RESOLVED:**

- A. That the outcomes from the formative consultation be noted;
- B. To proceed to formal proposals to close Holy Cross Junior School and Springfield Infant School and invite the Diocese of Lichfield to publish proposals to open a new Voluntary Controlled School with 360 to serve the combined catchment area

*(The meeting adjourned at 4.35 and reconvened at 5.00 p.m.)*

## **9. Proposal to Amalgamate Mount Pleasant Infant and Mount Pleasant Junior Schools – Report on Formative Consultation**

- 9.1 Councillor Price, Chair of Governors of Mount Pleasant Infant School advised that after initial concerns, which had been allayed by the Assistant Director, both schools were supportive of the proposals. He referred to the excellence of both Head Teachers and requested that their future be settled as soon as possible.
- 9.2 Mrs Sandford, the local member, also referred to the issue of the selection of a Head Teacher which was stressful to both current Heads. The Interim Corporate Director, Community Services explained that staffing issues were of concern and that they would be dealt with fairly and appropriately in accordance with the established protocol.
- 9.3 Mrs Hartley presented the report of the Acting Corporate Director – copy attached to the signed minutes – and commended the recommendations contained therein to Cabinet. This was seconded by Mrs Barrow.
- 9.4 Cabinet noted that the effect on the community of the proposed amalgamation would be minimal.
- 9.5 On being put to the vote it was unanimously **RESOLVED:**
- A. That the outcomes from the formative consultation be noted;
  - B. To proceed to formal proposals to close Mount Pleasant Infant School, close Mount Pleasant Junior School and open a new Community school for 240 pupils to serve the combined catchment area, in line with the recommendations of the Acting Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services.

*(The meeting adjourned at 5.10 p.m. and reconvened at 5.30 p.m.)*

## **10. Proposal to Amalgamate Grange Infant and Grange Junior Schools – Report on Formative Consultation**

- 10.1 Mr L Thomas, Ms K Romasiuk and Mr B Townson had submitted questions to which written responses had been provided – copy attached to the signed minutes.
- 10.2 Mr Townson, Chair of Governors of Grange Junior School, spoke in general favour of the amalgamation, which he felt was in the best interests of the children's education. He did however express some concern regarding the timescales and suggested that with efforts being put into getting the school out of special measures, there would be insufficient time to plan effectively for the amalgamation. He also expressed concern

regarding displaced staff should the school remain in special measures at the time of the amalgamation.

- 10.3 Mrs C Downs, Parent Governor of Grange Infant School expressed some concern regarding the closure of both schools rather than the expansion of the Infant School to an all-through primary school. She referred to the 'good' Ofsted rating of the Infant School and suggested there were no grounds for not extending that school.
- 10.3 Mrs Sandford, the local member, commented on the benefits and high standards the Infant School would bring to the amalgamation. She also referred to the need for an open selection for the Head of the new school.
- 10.4 Mrs Hartley thanked everyone for their contributions and introduced the report of the Acting Corporate Director – copy attached to the signed minutes. She advised that both Governing Bodies supported the principle of a primary school and spoke of the need for all parties to work together for the benefit of the children and their education. Reference was also made to the capital resources that would be available for improvements that would make the school fit for purpose and for the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- 10.5 It was then proposed by Mrs Hartley and seconded by Mr Nutting, that the report and recommendations contained therein be received and adopted.
- 10.6 On being put to the vote it was unanimously **RESOLVED:**
- A. That the outcomes from the formative consultation be noted;
  - B. To proceed to formal proposals to close both Grange Infant School and Grange Junior School and open a new Community school for 420 pupils to serve the combined catchment area in line with the recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services.

*(The meeting adjourned at 5.45 p.m. and reconvened at 6.00 p.m.)*

## **11. Proposal to Amalgamate Meole Brace CE (Controlled) Infant and Meole Brace Junior Schools – Report on Formative Consultation**

- 11.1 Mr Hopkins spoke in support of the proposed amalgamation and of the logic behind merging schools that shared a site. He informed Cabinet that the Governors of the schools felt that the case for amalgamation had not been made, however he felt the proposals would deliver excellence in education and urged Cabinet to proceed as quickly as possible
- 11.2 Mrs Hartley thanked Mr Hopkins for his support and expressed the wish that all would work in partnership to deliver a school of excellence. She then presented the report of the Acting Corporate Director – copy attached to the signed minutes.
- 11.3 The usefulness of the visits to the schools which had enabled Cabinet members to appreciate the current close working between the schools and existing shared facilities was stressed.
- 11.4. The Policy of creating all-through primary schools where pupil numbers were not too high was again emphasised as was the enhanced quality of education and capital funding which would be achieved as a result of an amalgamation.
- 11.5 It was then proposed by Mrs Hartley, seconded by Mr Hurst-Knight and unanimously **RESOLVED:**

- A. That the outcomes from the formative consultation be noted;
- B. To proceed to formal proposals to close Meole Brace Infant and Junior Schools and ask the Diocese of Lichfield to issue proposals to open a new Voluntary Controlled School with 360 to serve the combined catchment area, in line with the recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services

Signed: ..... (Chairman)

Date:.....25 June 2008.....