

**CABINET
WEDNESDAY, 20 MAY 2009**

139. Public Question Time

The following questions were asked in accordance with Standing Order 28.

Questioner

The following questioners asked questions in relation to School Places in Highworth:

Miss Caroline Barnett

Mrs Nicola Beer

Mr Jason Kelham

Mrs Helen Lawrence

Miss Denise McSharry

Mr Chris Mead

Mrs Rachel Morrissey

Mrs Julie Nurden

Mrs Claire Power

Mrs Lesley Uzzell

Mr. Derek Bye asked a question in relation to car parking charges in the Borough.

Questions

Question 1 –

Can the Chair of the Cabinet please confirm that this is not a rubber stamping exercise of the officers' preferred option and that this is a free vote without a political agenda?

Question 2 –

Only in November and January this year the school, parents and governors were informed that there were no plans to close any school in Highworth. Can you explain why the preferred option has changed within months of this latest communication?

Question 3 –

On a separate issue, can the Cabinet explain why it has been necessary to introduce hugely inflated car parking charges across the Borough on Sundays. Is the Cabinet aware of the disgust felt by many residents at these increases?

Question 4 -

Michael Wills, MP, has asked that the assessment of Northview be based on its preclosure-threat performance and numbers, rather than current statistics today, because current figures would give a warped finding due to the number of recent pupil transfers which have occurred because of closure threats - has this happened and could you explain how?

Question 5 –

Has the Cabinet taken into consideration that although Westrop is being expanded there would still be insufficient room to accommodate all current Northview pupils which would temporarily mean mobile classrooms being used which goes against the Borough's Promise 17?

Question 6 –

Does the Cabinet consider that to remove 1 FE by closure could be risky as there will be insufficient capacity to increase in future years if roll numbers rise, when decreasing a school by ½ FE would ensure the capacity to increase if required without capital expenditure?

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Question 7 –

Can the Cabinet confirm that in 2010 there will be the recommended 6-8% surplus places in Highworth schools to give parental choice throughout all current primary years?

Question 8 –

The paper has looked at the options at reducing the surplus places in the Highworth area; can the Cabinet confirm if investigations have taken place on how to fill the surplus places?

Question 9 –

Has the cabinet considered the disruption that a school closure would have on the Highworth community compared to a ½ FE reduction in Highworth?

Question 10 –

Some Highworth cluster schools attract high percentages of out-of-catchment children; can you confirm if this has been taken into account in your future predicted roll numbers?

Question 11 –

Will the Cabinet take into consideration that if Northview were to remain open many parents have indicated they would transfer their children back and further transfers would cease, as there would no longer be uncertainty, and with a permanent Head in place the school could once again thrive?

Question 12 -

Does the Cabinet agree that in the absence of a consistent Northview representative the support for Northview closure would be unanimous amongst the cluster heads and governing bodies who stand to benefit?

Question 13 –

In reading the Officers Report do the Cabinet note how little reference is made to Northview Governing Bodies views whilst the views of other School Governing Bodies is frequently mentioned, what voice do the Cabinet think Northview has had in the Officers consultation?

Question 14 –

Is the proposal of what to do with Northview site relevant to why the proposal to close the school is the preferred option?

Question 15 –

Does the Cabinet agree that, within its ascribed catchment, Northview School provides an excellent role model for Safe Routes to School, and does the Cabinet agree that this is a comment that could be equally applied to the current Westrop catchment which would be lost by adding the Northview catchment?

Question 16 -

Has the Cabinet considered all the safety factors which will arise from a school closure - for example, children crossing the busy A361, additional congestion on local roads and insufficient car parking where problems already exist?

Question 17 -

Heaven forbid this happens, but in today's litigious society do the Cabinet Members accept responsibility for the first claim when an accident happens at Westrop School to a child, parent, surgery visitor or shopper?

Response

The Chair thanked the public for their questions and advised that he would ask Councillor

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Garry Perkins, Cabinet Member for Children's Services to respond to the majority of questions where appropriate. He and other Cabinet Members would respond as necessary.

Question 1 – The Chair advised that he could categorically advise those present that the Cabinet would consider all the information before it on its merits, that it had no predetermined position, and that it would certainly not be simply “rubber stamping” officer recommendations.

Question 2 – Councillor Garry Perkins advised that he could assure those present that, at the time of meetings with School representatives in November 2008 and January this year, no options had been considered and no plans drawn up for the closure of the School. It was only in recent weeks, following research and considerable work by the officers, that options had been put forward and evaluated. Those options were contained in the report to be considered by the Cabinet later in the meeting.

Question 3 - Councillor Peter Greenhalgh, Cabinet Member for, Sustainability, Transport and Strategic Planning, advised that he was aware of the disquiet of some members of the public at the increase in Sunday parking charges. A full review of car parking and car parking fees was currently underway, and the outcome of that review would be reported to a future Cabinet meeting.

Question 4 – Councillor Garry Perkins explained the work that had been undertaken to review the likely number of surplus primary school places in the Highworth area of the Borough. He advised that there was little that the Council could do to impact on parental preferences and choice for the education of their children, and referred to the specific circumstances of Northview Primary School. He did not believe that the only reason for surplus places at the school was the problem experienced over the last year. He drew attention to the projected demand figures for future primary school places in Highworth over the next few years that were set out in the report to the Cabinet.

Question 5 – Councillor Garry Perkins advised that Promise 17 referred to the commitment to remove unsuitable temporary classrooms. Any temporary accommodation provided from Westrop School would be new and fit for purpose. It was also anticipated that the temporary accommodation would be just that, and would not be a permanent provision.

Question 6 – Councillor Perkins commented that he did not believe that there was a risk, and he believed that the Council's officers and Highworth schools would ensure that there was sufficient capacity for local children.

Question 7 – Councillor Perkins commented that this was difficult to evaluate until decisions had been made, but that work would be undertaken on this.

Questions 8, 9, 10 and 11 – Councillor Perkins reiterated the limited control that the local education authority had over parental choice, whether for parents inside or outside catchment areas. He commented on the impact of two schools in Oxfordshire going into and out of “Special Measures” and how this had affected trends in pupil numbers in Highworth. There was no guarantee that if Northview Primary School remained open, with a new leadership team and support from the Council, that parents would choose to send their children there. The Council could use its best endeavours but this could never be a guarantee. There was also no guarantee that trends relating to “imported” pupils from out of catchment areas could be sustained or relied on to respond to issues of surplus places in the long term. He emphasised the ongoing trend of increasing numbers of surplus primary school places in the Highworth area, as referred to in the report. He commented that whilst the report seemed to concentrate on the future of Northview Primary School, its aim was to address the larger issue of falling numbers and surplus school places in Highworth. He

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indicated that if a decision was taken to proceed with the pre-statutory consultation this would enable the officers to do further work on projections and trends analysis to ensure that a robust and up-to-date analysis was available at the time that a decision on the future of the school was made.

Questions 12 and 13 – Councillor Perkins referred to the problems experienced by Northview Primary School as a result of the absence of the permanent head teacher over a lengthy period of time. However, he recognised the excellent work undertaken by the interim leadership team. Internal changes within the School's governing body were regretted, and it was recognised that these had not helped the discussions between the Council and the School. However, overall he believed that the School community had made its voice clearly heard. He also believed that regardless of the issues surrounding the School's leadership there would still be the need to address the problem of the projected increase in surplus school places in the Highworth area and the position of the School.

Question 14 – The Chair and Councillor Perkins advised that, as the Council had reached no decision on the future of Northview Primary School, no consideration had been given to any plans for the future of the site. Councillor Perkins reiterated that the recommendations in the joint report supported a move to pre-statutory consultation on a possible closure; they did not determine a closure.

Questions 15, 16 and 17 – Councillor Garry Perkins confirmed that the Cabinet was aware that Northview School was centred at the heart of its local community and that many children travelled to school on foot and by bicycle. However, it was equally clear that, even at Northview School, many, if not the majority, of parents chose to drive their children to school, and he believed this would continue to be the case if pupils transferred to another school. He did not believe that there would be significant increases in congestion or in road safety problems. He explained that the Cabinet took its responsibilities for the safety of children and young people very seriously. He referred to the work that had been undertaken and was continuing to be developed on "Safer Routes to Schools" and on "School Safety Zones" for Swindon. The Council would ensure that if the School were to close safe routes to school would be available.

140. School Places in Highworth

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and the Group Director, Children submitted a joint report concerning the increasing number of surplus primary school places in the Highworth area of the Borough, and setting out a series of options for reducing the number of surplus places from September 2010, which included a proposal to undertake pre-statutory consultation on the closure of Northview Primary School and the extension of Westrop Primary School, Highworth, from September 2010.

The Chair reported that, prior to the start of the meeting he had received a petition, containing over 2000 signatures, collected by the Northview Support Team, opposing the proposed closure of Northview Primary School. All Cabinet Members had also received a submission from the Northview Support Team expressing their views, and responding to the contents of the joint report. He explained that the majority of Cabinet Members had also, prior to the meeting, attended a "site visit" to Highworth to visit the schools concerned and the local communities they served.

Councillor Garry Perkins, Cabinet Member for Children Services explained the background to the report and commented on the trend of increasing numbers of surplus primary school places in the Highworth area of the Borough, and particularly at Northview Primary School. He commented on the specific circumstances relating to this school, which he believed had exacerbated a fall in pupil numbers. He referred to the Department for

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Children, Schools and Families guidance on surplus school places and the requirement for the Council to act to overcome the problem. He highlighted the impact of surplus school places on the budgets available to all schools in the Borough, and on the importance for the Council to be able to be assured that it was achieving “Best Value” from the use of that Budget. He commented on the options available to the Council, that were set out in the joint report, and his support for the option proposing the undertaking of a pre-statutory consultation exercise on the closure of Northview Primary School and the extension of Westrop Primary School from September 2010. He did not welcome the closure of any school, particularly of one with a good academic record, and he noted the important issues highlighted by the Northview Support Team, and by the parents and others who had attended the Cabinet Open Forum, held prior to this meeting, and who had asked public questions. However, it was clear that to do nothing about surplus school places in Highworth was not an option, and he believed the outcome of the proposed pre-statutory consultation exercise would help inform the decision making process and the difficult decisions that had to be made. He explained the consultation process that would be followed before any final decision on the future of the school was taken, and emphasised that this was just the first stage of the process with parents, schools, governing bodies and other interested parties all having further formal opportunities to submit information and make their views known.

Councillor Melanie Duff, Highworth Ward Councillor, expressed her support for all the schools in Highworth, and her hope that a solution could be identified that would avoid the closure of Northview School. Councillor John Short, Highworth Ward Councillor, expressed his opposition to the proposed closure. He highlighted the very good condition of the school buildings, and the excellent facilities provided at the school. He referred to the practical and financial implications of seeking an expansion of other area schools to replace Northview. He explained that local Highworth estate agents had reported that, as a result of the ongoing recession and fall in house prices, there was an increasing interest from new families wishing to move into Highworth, and that this could impact on the projections of likely demand for school places.

Councillor David Renard, Cabinet Member for Health, Housing and Adult Social Care, expressed his concerns at the proposed option. He referred to the location of Northview in comparison to the other schools in Highworth, and to the consequences of additional pressures on the road network should the school be closed. He explained that Westrop Primary School was built as a one form of entry school, and he believed it would struggle to cope with the proposed additional pupils. He believed that Option 4 as set out within the report, involving the reduction in size of Eastrop Infant and Southfield Junior Schools to become 1.5 form of entry schools, was worthy of further investigation and offered a solution that would enable Northview to remain open, and would offer a high standard of education for all children within Highworth.

Councillor Peter Greenhalgh, Cabinet Member for Sustainability, Transport and Strategic Planning, supported this view and referred to the academic achievements of Northview, its position in the heart of the local community, and the excellent condition of its buildings in comparison to some other schools in Swindon. He believed that, whilst he was sure a technical solution could be found to the issue of children travelling from the Northview area to Westrop School, he did not think any solution would be ideal. He commented on the merits of Option 4, and the longer-term risks to the education of young people in Highworth if the school was lost as a result of a relatively short-term downturn in both pupil numbers and “popularity”.

Councillor Fionuala Foley, Cabinet Member for Local Environment and Corporate Affairs, Councillor Colin Lovell, Cabinet Member for a Safer and Stronger Borough, Councillor Brian Mattock, Cabinet Member for Connecting People, Connecting Places, and

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Councillor Phil Young, Cabinet Member for Culture, Regeneration and Economic Development, complimented the parents and residents on the quality of the arguments presented and acknowledged the importance of the decision that had to be made. However, the four councillors advised that they believed that there was sufficient evidence to support the joint report's recommendation regarding the undertaking of pre-statutory consultation on the future of Northview Primary School.

Councillor Perkins reiterated that he did not wish to see any school close, but that there was significant evidence of a downturn in school numbers that was likely to continue, and that the maintenance of surplus school places put significant pressure on the budgets of every other school in the Borough. He did not believe that Option 4 would offer a long-term solution to the problem of surplus places in Highworth.

The Chair referred to the difficult decisions that the Cabinet had to make, but emphasised that this was just the first stage of the process, enabling the gathering of more information and views. He thanked the public who had attended and participated in the Open Forum and public question time. He hoped that they had seen how difficult it was for the Cabinet to reach decisions on such issues and on the thought and care that went into Members' deliberations.

Resolved – (1) That the Cabinet notes the issues, set out in the joint report, regarding the increasing number of surplus primary school places in the Highworth area of the Borough, which are forecast to continue to rise in the long-term.

(2) That the Group Director, Children be authorised to undertake "pre-statutory" consultation with parents, staff and Governors, together with other key stakeholders, on a proposal to close Northview Primary School, Highworth, and extend Westrop Primary School from September 2010, and to report back to the Cabinet on the results of the consultation in Autumn 2009.

The reasons for the decision and alternative options are as set out in the report to the meeting.

(Councillors Peter Greenhalgh, Garry Perkins and David Renard made personal declarations of interest in respect of the above item, as they served as school governors to schools in the Borough.)