

**CABINET  
WEDNESDAY, 21ST OCTOBER, 2009 6.15 P.M.**

**48. Public Question Time**

See explanatory note below. Please phone the Committee Officer whose name and number appears at the top of this agenda if you need further guidance.

**Minutes:**

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

Questioner

The following questioners asked questions in relation to the Outcome of Pre-Statutory Consultation on School Places in Highworth:

Mrs. Kathleen Spencer

Ms. Linda Fogerty

Ms. Sue Pollock

Ms. Juliana Hadjimichael

Mrs Nicola Beer / Mr. Chris Mead

Mrs Lesley Uzzell

Questions

Question 1 - Is the Cabinet aware that the proposal for the expansion of Westrop Primary School and the closure of Northview Primary School is likely to increase traffic problems in the area, particularly at peak times and particularly in relation to parking difficulties around the school and affecting the nearby Doctors' Surgery? Can the cost of the required alterations to Westrop School be found, and justified given the existing excellent facilities available at Northview?

Question 2 - Can the Council look at the implications of the option of providing a "One Form of Entry" School? Why does the Council see "Two Form of Entry" as the preferred option when there are many "One Form of Entry" schools in existence?

Question 3 - As part of the Pre-Statutory Consultation exercise a form was circulated for comments that asked the question "Which School are you representing?" I am aware that many people felt it inappropriate to provide this information as they wished to comment as members of the local community and not a particular school. The results of the consultation are shown as being grouped by school. Were responses received from people who did not provide a direct link to a School discounted? If not how were they assigned?

Question 4 - Does the Cabinet recognise the significant improvements and achievements delivered by the new management team at Northview Primary School that results in it being viewed by those associated with it as being an excellent school?

Question 5 - The outcome of the Pre-Statutory Consultation exercise appears to show that approximately 99% of those who responded were opposed to the Council's proposals. What is the Cabinet Member for Children's Services opinion on that result?



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Question 6 - In viewing the outcome of the Pre-Statutory Consultation Exercise few responses appear to originate from Westrop School is the Cabinet confident that this reflects the view of the School Community, and in view of the assignment of views to schools, can it be guaranteed this was done correctly to reflect the origin of the comments received?

The Chair thanked the public for their questions and advised that he would ask Councillor 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 - Councillor Peter Greenhalgh, Cabinet Member for Sustainability, Transport and Strategic Planning responded that the Council was aware of the potential traffic and highway implications of the proposals and that further work and transport modelling would be undertaken to identify measures that could be introduced to overcome potential problems. Councillor Garry Perkins, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, explained that the financial implications of the necessary alterations associated with the proposed expansion of Westrop School had been identified and funding would be available for these works.

Question 2 - Councillor Garry Perkins, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, explained that it was the Council's policy to support two-form of entry schools, as it believed this offered the "best value" solution to the provision of education in Swindon, both in resource and educational terms. This had been Council policy for a number of years. The two form of entry model was also seen nationally as good practice and he was happy to provide the questioner with the more detailed explanation and rationale behind the two form of entry model if she contacted him directly.

Question 3 - Councillor Perkins confirmed that detail of all responses had been included in the report, and that all the individual responses received had been made available to Cabinet Members and placed in the Members' Room. Where no indication had been given on which school was being represented the officers had "placed" the response against the school that the comments seemed most relevant to. No response had been ignored.

Question 4 - Councillor Perkins confirmed that he and Cabinet colleagues recognised and welcomed the improvements and achievements delivered by the new management team at Northview Primary School. He reiterated that the issue concerned falling school numbers and surplus places in Highworth, and not the performance of the School. He recognised that the problems of the School in the past, and the current proposals, had impacted on the popularity of the school with parents, but he again drew attention to the trend analysis estimating the potential numbers of pupils in the Northview catchment area in the next few years. He explained how these figures took into account NHS data on the birth rate for the area.

Question 5 - Councillor Perkins advised that he was not surprised by the outcome of the Pre-Statutory Consultation exercise. Any decision to close a school was always unwelcome, and the Northview Action Group had organised a thorough and robust campaign. The Cabinet would take all the views received into account alongside the further information provided in the report on this matter.



*Question 6* - Councillor Perkins reiterated that all consultation responses received had been included in the figures in the report, and that where an individual had not indicated which school they were representing the officers had placed the response according to the comment received against the appropriate school. Whilst there was a degree of "guesswork" by the officers in this, it was the best estimate the Council could make and he did not believe that it impacted on the validity of the exercise as all views were recorded.

### **49. Outcome of Pre-Statutory Consultation on School Places in Highworth**

#### **Minutes:**

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and the Group Director, Children submitted a joint report concerning the results of the "pre-statutory" consultation carried out on the proposal to close Northview Primary School and extend Westrop Primary School in order to address the increasing number of Primary school surplus places in the Highworth area.

The Chair advised that since the publication of the report Cabinet Members had received and considered further submissions from the Northview Action Group and from the Governing body of the School responding to the proposals.

Councillor Garry Perkins, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, commented on the surplus places and falling school numbers in Highworth, and in particular referred to the situation regarding Northview Primary School. He referred to the key issues to be considered and the difficult decisions facing the Council. He commented on the achievements of Northview School over recent months and its excellent standards. He noted the outcome of the pre-statutory consultation exercise, and in particular the work undertaken by the Northview Action Group. However, he reiterated the problems of falling school numbers in Highworth and the surplus places issue that had to be addressed and resolved by the Council to avoid it impacting on the education of children not only in Highworth but across the Borough. He believed that the best solution for the education of children in Highworth was to progress the proposal to move to statutory consultation on the closure of Northview Primary School and the extension of Westrop Primary School from September 2010, as detailed in the report. He recognised that further work was required on the impact of such a decision, particularly in respect of traffic impact and on the potential flow of children between the catchment area and other catchment areas both within and outside of the Swindon Local Education Authority's area. However, he believed this work could be undertaken as the proposed statutory consultation period progressed and before a final decision was made.

Councillor Melanie Duff, Highworth Ward Councillor, referred to her wish to see the Council do its best for children in Highworth, and that she hoped that a solution could be found that would avoid the closure of Northview School. She asked whether, as Highworth was seen as a rural community, officers could seek to identify whether additional funding was available nationally to support small rural schools to remain open. Councillor Perkins commented on the classification of Northview School and agreed to ask the officers to investigate whether any additional funding could be identified.

Councillor Peter Greenhalgh, Cabinet Member for Sustainability, Transport and Strategic Planning, explained that he had a number of concerns over the proposals, and could not support a move to statutory consultation at this stage. He



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referred to the transport and highway difficulties associated with the proposed solution and the academic achievements of Northview and similar small schools. He believed that if the threat of closure was lifted and with positive leadership from the management team, this could result in more pupils wishing to attend the school. He believed that further work should be undertaken to investigate the merits of the other options presented to the Cabinet at its meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2009, in particular on the financial implications of these, as there may be better solutions than the one involving the closure of Northview School.

Councillor Philip Young, Cabinet Member for Culture, Regeneration and Economic Development, expressed sympathy with Councillor Greenhalgh's views, but commented on the impact of surplus school places on the funding of other schools across Swindon and therefore on the education of all children and young people within the Borough.

Councillor Garry Perkins explained the process of funding school places in Swindon, and referred to the poor Government funding available to Swindon schools in comparison to other similar local authorities. This resulted in Swindon having to make difficult decisions. He reiterated the reasons behind the trend of falling numbers of pupils in Highworth, and to the lengthy time scales associated with school place planning and providing schools.

The Chair reminded those present that if the decision was taken to move to statutory consultation, although significant, this was only one step in the process that might lead to the closure of Northview School, and that a final decision was still to be made.

Resolved - (1) That the results of the "pre-statutory" consultation carried out with parents, Governors, staff and the wider local community, on the proposal to close Northview Primary School and extend Westrop Primary School from September 2010, as set out in the joint report, and in Appendices 6 and 7, together with officers' responses as set out in Appendix 9, and other key issues highlighted in the joint report, be noted.

(2) That the Group Director, Children be authorised to undertake "statutory" consultation on the proposal to close Northview Primary School and extend Westrop Primary School from September 2010, as detailed in the joint report, with the results of the consultation being reported to a meeting of the Cabinet Panel for School Organisation, which will be held in late 2009 or early 2010.

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