

Essex County Council
Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning
PO Box 11, County Hall
Chelmsford
Essex CM1 1LX



Cllr Graham Butland
Chairman, Task and Finish Group
People and Families Scrutiny Committee

Date: 29 August 2013

Dear Cllr Butland

Re Task and Finish Draft Scrutiny Report on proposed closure of The Deanes School

I would like to thank you and the Task and Finish Group for your time and hard work in putting together the scrutiny report on The Deanes School. I appreciate the work that the Group has done to look into the issues around the proposed closure of the school. It has been an open and inclusive process which has allowed all interested parties to put their views before the Group and I believe that is a positive outcome in itself.

The purpose of this letter is to provide a full response to the recommendations and comments that the Task and Finish Group have made in their draft report. You have already received an interim reply from me sent on 23 August. I hope that this letter builds on that interim response and addresses the points raised in your report.

The Group's Recommendation

My first point is on the recommendation from the Group to keep the school open and your conclusion that there is insufficient evidence to close the school.

Having carefully considered the issues set out in the scrutiny report I remain unconvinced that you have provided sufficient evidence to justify this conclusion. The decision must be based on the viability or otherwise of the school. I note that the scrutiny report does not provide any detailed view from the Group to challenge the Officer forecasts for pupil numbers.

As you are aware the recommendation by officers all along has been that the school is not viable and going forward any lack of viability and reduction in numbers and funding is likely to have a detrimental effect on the education of the children that attend the school.

It is worth stating here that the evidence received by the Task and Finish Group has highlighted the declining position of the school and (I believe) has confirmed that the decision to halt the building of a school to accommodate 750 pupils was the right one. The presentation of a proposal by The Deanes School governing body for a future for the school at 600 / 4 form entry is in reality expressing their agreement that 750 is not achievable (originally they argued strongly that 900 was possible and reluctantly agreed a reduced build at 750). To build a school at that size would have been a clear mistake.

Housing demand and Pupil Forecasting Data

The Task and Finish Group has challenged the assumptions that have been used to develop the forecasts for pupil numbers at The Deanes School but I note the Group has stopped short of presenting a set of figures that challenge those forecasts.

Future housing development is only one part of pupil forecasting. It is an element which is added to the core projections as built from known primary school numbers, G.P registrations and recent trends in parental preference. The figures as presented in the consultation document included knowledge of known housing developments; what was not included were projections speculated on unknown housing intentions.

Reflecting on the Group's report, I asked officers to compile forecasts based on a range of different assumptions around housing growth and also based on figures submitted by other parties. The purpose of this was to test even further the assumptions that have been made by officers. Appendix A sets out the assumptions provided by a range of parties and I believe this supports the view that the school will struggle to reach 600 pupils.

I believe that the original assumptions remain broadly correct and that even by applying more optimism bias on the delivery of housing growth in the short term, the school will still struggle to reach 600 pupils – a figure that the school, the County Council and (I believe) the Committee all accept is critical for its viability. I also asked officers to gather pupil projections from the school and while they have confirmed that they can support 120 pupil places a year, they have not, however, made forecasts for how that will be achieved other than a set of figures showing expected growth from new housing which they say supports their claim that a 600 place school of 120 year will be viable and successful rather than any attempt to change and respond to why parents are not currently selecting the school for their children.

I also disagree with the scrutiny report's conclusion that we have not looked beyond the Castle Point area. It is important to note that our assumptions have factored in trends from Southend and Basildon, as well as housing growth in Castle Point.

It is also important to note that there is significant spare capacity at Basildon schools and the expected housing and population growth in Basildon would be absorbed by Basildon schools, especially as they continue to improve.

I recognise that Basildon secondary education has had a poor reputation in recent years but the signs of progress are positive. Of the four schools across the town, Woodlands and De La Salle are judged good schools. The two weaker schools have been James Hornsby and the Basildon Academies but both have shown very positive recent developments: James Hornsby has during this year become an academy and is being sponsored by The King John School and the Basildon Academies, despite pupils generally having some of the lowest attainment on starting secondary school, has closed the gap rapidly in the last two years in terms of GCSE results compared to The Deanes School.

With these improvements, the prospect for further improvements and the several hundred surplus places currently in these schools, we see the Basildon schools as entirely sufficient for pupils in the Basildon area.

Essex County Council is also supportive of working with Basildon Borough Council to improve school standards in Basildon. We want families in Basildon to be able to send their children to good schools in Basildon, rather than for them to have to seek education far from home. Basildon schools have the capacity and we are now confident that the quality and standard is moving in the right direction for parents in Basildon to want to send their children to good and outstanding schools in Basildon.

I note that Southend recognised in their evidence to the Task and Finish Group that they need to look at school capacity in the Southend area and that is obviously a matter for them. However, in producing the forecast figures I can confirm that officers have factored in pupil trends from Southend as part of the forecast figures for The Deanes.

Other Local Schools

The Task and Finish Group have expressed some concern that there are no formal agreements or planning permissions in place to give the Group assurance that displaced children from The Deanes could be accommodated at King John or Appleton schools.

The governing bodies of both The King John School and The Appleton School had met and resolved in principle, pending consultation, to support the proposals and to accommodate the pupils from The Deanes affected by the closure, should it happen. They had consulted and in each case their consultation included a consultation event with parents. Both schools have been in communication with the Education Funding Agency regarding their intended addition of 30 pupils to their Planned Admissions Number (PAN). Both schools are academies and therefore are their own admission authorities. All of this pointed to two schools that were and are firm in their intentions.

Essex County Council have now received written confirmation from both The King John and The Appleton Schools to say that they are willing to take the extra pupils that would be required in the event of closure of the Deanes.

I am unclear as to the Group's point about the planning permissions not having been secured, as it would have been presumptuous for the Academies to seek planning permissions to expand to accommodate pupils from another school before the decision has been taken to close that school. The DfE guidance on closing schools recognises that sometimes decisions need to be taken conditional upon such technical aspects ultimately being deliverable. We see no likely difficulties in planning permissions.

School Business Case

It was commented at the Task and Finish Group that the school's business case for a 600 strong school had some strong elements and that a school of 600 (if achievable) would be a viable option. However, having looked again at the numbers, including submissions from other sources, it must be suggested that this is still not achievable based on any of the projections.

While the Council regards the curriculum and financial model proposed by The Deanes School for a promoted and marketed 'small school' of 600 pupils (120 PAN) as basically sound if the pupil numbers are achieved, we do not share the Task and Finish Group's view that the business case / plan as referred is robust. This is because it relies on an intake of 120 per year even on the most optimistic figures which we continue to believe will not be achieved in most years. The school can only achieve 600 pupils based on the most optimistic housing assumptions which must be regarded as unlikely to be fully realised given the risks of delivery.

Popularity of the school

The Group have also suggested that "there is evidence to support the view that enough parents across the wider community will prefer The Deanes for their child's secondary education."

However, Appendix B shows that the Deanes School struggles to attract first preference choices in the area. For a 600 pupil school to be maintained, the trend which has been very evident for five years of parents preferring the other schools locally will need to be reversed, and the Deanes will need to become a school of choice for increased numbers of parents from Basildon and Southend. We see no likelihood of the former and are unconvinced by the latter.

Other local schools are more popular with local parents and the local community. 45 of the 117 in the recent Year 8 (Year 9 from September 2013) pupils at The Deanes were offered the place having unsuccessfully expressed a higher preference for The King John School or Appleton; similarly 43 of the 119 of the recent Year 7 (Year 8 from September 2013) were offered the place having unsuccessfully expressed a higher preference for The King John School or The Appleton School. Last year (2012) only 11 Basildon pupils made the school a first preference and 14 Southend pupils made the school a first preference.

Glenwood School

There is wide acceptance that new provision is required at Glenwood. I would also endorse the way that the two schools have worked together over recent years.

I share the view that the co-location is imaginative and could take a lead in Essex but both schools must be viable for this to happen. Unfortunately that is not the case for The Deanes School.

We remain committed to investing in the Glenwood School.

Community Role

I recognise the important role that The Deanes School plays in the local community and fully understand that a proposal to close a school causes concern in any community. School closures are never taken lightly or easily.

However the community work in terms of outreach work and sport in primary schools and the making available of sports facilities to the community are not in themselves reasons for the school to continue.

Should the decision be taken to publish closure notices then the Council would intend to look closely at its commitment, as made in the consultation document, to find ways to sustain the community activity, including sports facilities.

Governance Arrangements

We are aware that during their evidence gathering the Task and Finish Group expressed comment that on the basis of the forecasted decline in the roll, as known in 2011 / 2012, the decision to invest in the rebuild of The Deanes raised questions.

Following the conclusion of the consultation, and despite the extent of the opposition to closure, we believe that it was the correct decision to halt the building project and to consult on the future of the school. As referenced earlier, the presentation of a proposal by The Deanes School governing body for a future for the school at 600 / 4 form entry is in reality expressing their agreement that 750 is not possible (originally they argued strongly that 900 was possible and reluctantly agreed a reduced build at 750). To proceed and build a school at that size (750) would have been a clear mistake.

The decision to commence a consultation on a proposal to close the school was a Chief Officer decision, not a member decision. I can confirm that I was briefed and consulted before the decision was taken so that I was aware of the changed circumstances for the school in relation to its falling pupil numbers.

Conclusion

This decision is not an easy one as you are aware. Officers have scrutinised a number of figures including those provided by the Save the Deanes group and the school and they have also reassessed their own figures based on the latest information available from Castle Point Borough Council about likely housing in the area.

The decision will come down, as I have constantly said, to the viability of the school. With numbers below capacity and with the numbers dropping, it seems a hard case to make that the school will be able to achieve the projected intake that will ensure its on-going viability.

I am anticipating receiving your finalised report by the end of Friday 30 August and have asked officers for a final version of their report to me on the consultation also for Friday. I am keen to spend the weekend considering this important decision and intend to make a decision on Monday 2 September. I recognise the importance of there not being a delay in making the decision. The headteacher of The Deanes School has made the case this week about the importance of knowing the decision for the start of term. The first day for staff is Monday and pupils start on Tuesday 3 September.

I propose that both the officer report and your own report are published on Monday 2 September, along with the decision I make.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Ray Gooding

Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

Appendix A: Pupil forecasts scenarios

See separate spreadsheet

Appendix B: Preference choices for schools in Castle Point

The tables below highlight how The Deanes School has struggled to attract pupils to the school in recent years.

Total number of preferences expressed for the 2011/2012 academic year, S11 transfer group

School	Pref 1	Pref 2	Pref 3	Pref 4	Pref 5	Pref 6	Total Prefs
Castle View School	171	94	24	16	0	0	305
Greensward Academy	224	120	132	57	19	0	552
The Appleton School	287	178	112	71	0	0	648
The Cornelius Vermuyden School	139	105	24	21	0	0	289
The Deanes School	58	103	138	81	18	0	398
The FitzWimarc School	265	266	154	84	11	0	780
The King Edmund School	234	111	103	95	20	0	563
The King John School	307	252	209	70	13	0	851
The Swayne Park School	199	215	135	100	8	0	657
Total	1,884	1,444	1031	595	89	0	5,043

Total number of preferences expressed for the 2012/2013 academic year, S12 transfer group

School	Pref 1	Pref 2	Pref 3	Pref 4	Pref 5	Pref 6	Total Prefs
Castle View School	228	94	18	19	0	0	359
Greensward Academy	188	123	166	75	28	0	580
The Appleton School	252	195	147	95	1	0	690
The Cornelius Vermuyden School	107	114	34	25	0	0	280
The Deanes School	65	99	149	81	13	0	407
The FitzWimarc School	247	311	170	112	7	0	847
The King Edmund School	208	94	110	110	27	0	549
The King John School	323	294	231	90	13	0	951
The Swayne Park School	237	214	176	101	10	0	738
Total	1,855	1,538	1201	708	99	0	5,401

Total number of preferences expressed for the 2013/2014 academic year, S13 transfer group

School	Pref 1	Pref 2	Pref 3	Pref 4	Pref 5	Pref 6	Total Prefs
Castle View School	155	100	24	13	12	3	307
Greensward Academy	174	133	117	55	42	10	531
The Appleton School	237	185	127	85	39	29	702
The Cornelius Vermuyden School	188	135	13	11	6	6	359
The Deanes School	57	103	165	86	63	24	498
The FitzWimarc School	307	245	176	84	29	25	866
The King Edmund School	252	122	82	79	38	10	583
The King John School	309	244	159	77	43	20	852
The Swayne Park School	189	276	149	94	51	14	773
Total	1,868	1,543	1012	584	323	141	5,471