

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE DEANES SCHOOL CONSULTATION TASK AND FINISH GROUP, A COMMITTEE OF THE PEOPLE AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE, HELD AT COUNTY HALL, CHELMSFORD, ON TUESDAY 6 AUGUST 2013

County Councillors:

* G Butland (Chairman)	* N Hume
* J Chandler	* A Wood
T Higgins	

Non-Elected Voting Member:

Mr R Carson

*present

The following officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Christine Sharland	Scrutiny Officer
Matthew Waldie	Committee Officer

The meeting opened at 10.00 am.

1. Apologies

Cllr T Higgins
Mr R Carson.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Additional Evidence from Cllr Gooding, Dave Hill and Tim Coulson

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Gooding, Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning, Mr Hill, Executive Director for Schools, Children and Families and Dr Coulson, Director for Education and Learning, to the meeting. He reminded Members that, following the initial meeting, the Committee had sought further information in certain areas. One of these was corporate knowledge, providing an account of events as they took place, when the original decision was taken. He invited Mr Hill to address this issue.

Mr Hill pointed out that when he arrived at the County Council in November 2010, the BSF programme had just been withdrawn. He took a view of capital use across the board; and one conclusion he reached was that special schools had been neglected and should be supported. He shared this view with Terry Reynolds, the Director of Education and Learning at the time. At the same time, Cllr Castle, the Cabinet Member for Education, made it clear that the Deanes was his first priority. Mr Hill noted that the original capital figure of £26 million had not included Glenwood but was simply a replacement for the BSF Plan for the Deanes. However, as it was considered a marginal decision at the time, discussion ensued, resulting in the idea of bringing the two schools together. The figure also reduced to £22 million.

Mr Hill noted that the responsibility for mainstream and special schools was at times divided between different portfolios during the previous administration, so involving Cllrs Castle and Candy at different times.

Mr Hill believes strongly that there is no correlation between rebuild and good education outcomes and he made this clear to Cllr Castle at the time. (In response to this point, the Chairman questioned whether linking newbuild to education outcomes in this way is relevant in this case, given that the Deanes is not a poor standard school.)

Mr Hill suggested that what has happened in the intervening period is that the numbers have not been maintained and so the school is not now viable, moving forward.

Regarding documentation, the capital programme would have come to the Corporate Leadership Team, but it would not have been presented in great detail. Mr Hill had urged the Cabinet Member to be cautious, and he heard similar concerns voiced by Mr Reynolds. If there was to be a rebuild, it should be ensured that

- It would do what it was supposed to do
- It would seem a reasonable decision to other schools that had had their own BSF funding withdrawn.

In response to a question from the Chairman about whether Cllr Castle thought he should walk away from this decision, given the potential for a perceived conflict of interest, Mr Hill stated no, but he, as SCF Director had made it clear to the Cabinet Member that he should be careful in general. Such conversations did take place.

The Chairman noted that Cllr Candy did demonstrate the commitment for the rebuild with Glenwood by signing off £400k to purchase the property at the school entrance.

Mr Hill agreed that it may have been a close call, but it had not been a perverse decision. However he added that Cllr Castle would have received the same advice as Cllr Gooding, had he remained Cabinet Member in May of this year.

Cllr Hume expressed surprise that, following the capital reductions of 2010, this project had not been subject to more discussion, being one of the larger surviving projects.

When asked about the reliability of the numbers, Mr Hill explained the process. On his arrival, he had asked for a major review to be carried out across the county, using a national formula and expert assistance to review the findings. This review, conducted in late 2011/early 2012, suggested there would be pockets of large growth (eg Colchester) but predicted no demographic growth for this area or Rochford. In Harlow, for example, there is a surplus of school places, but these will fill up in the next few years. Even if building started on new housing in the area immediately, it would take many years for the resulting new

children to reach secondary school age. The Deanes simply cannot be allowed to struggle for a ten year period, waiting for numbers to rise. This is the same policy that the ECC has adopted throughout the County.

In response Cllr Hume pointed out that families moving into new houses bring children of all ages with them, not just infants. He also suggested that the development of Shell Haven will bring a large influx of people wishing to live in this area, in preference to certain other areas. Mr Hill replied that the evidence they had seen implies that the impact will be spread right across the area (rather than be mainly felt in Castle Point).

Mr Hill responded to a few questions from Members:

- The Deanes has not been considered in isolation – mobility in respect of the unitaries and other areas has been factored into the figures
- There seems to have been a sudden push for a different decision; but this is not so – the capital programme is reviewed annually and decisions made on the back of this. The change in administration provides an extra timing element here, with the addition of the pre-election period, during which time few changes are implemented
- Regarding the potential “chicken and egg” dilemma of prospective parents, who may be put off the school by its state of poor repair, because it has been promised capital expenditure, but also the prospect of a newbuild may also put them off – this may be so, but the prospect of a better school emerging is what parents have to take into consideration. No doubt it will put some off, but that is inevitable
- Although there is a difference in approach shown by the Deanes in comparison to the two other local schools, he did not accept the argument that this is an issue of choice for parents. In an ideal world, the ECC would provide the full range of schools in every area, but that is not possible. Closing the Deanes leaves two very good schools in the area; it certainly means less choice for parents, but not a lack of choice
- This is a harder choice to make, as the Deanes is not a bad school; but this does not make the decision wrong.

The Chairman thanked Mr Hill for his input and Mr Hill left the meeting.

The Chairman reminded Members that certain questions had arisen from their initial scrutiny, which they had referred back to the Cabinet Member and Dr Coulson. Some of these had been answered already, but some remained.

The first concerned the £2 million funding for Appleton and King John schools. Cllr Gooding explained the proposals. The money was for capital expenditure, to allow the development of facilities. Each school would need to present a plan; the money would be held by the ECC and would pay off bills as they occurred. Sign off will be required from both schools to confirm they are able to do this. The Appleton School will use their existing footprint. The King John will be making alterations to existing buildings; the suggestion that Deanes children will be segregated in a youth centre is inaccurate – the building will be adapted appropriately and children mixed accordingly. The commitment is crucial, but the fine detail is not expected at this stage.

Dr Coulson pointed out that the issue of the sixth form in each school has been fortuitous, as it will provide spare capacity to accommodate the extra pupils from the Deanes, over the next few years. Officers from Property Services have been in touch with both schools and are happy with the situation.

Cllr Gooding confirmed he was confident that these schools would take the extra children. Each school has conducted its own consultation and nothing has come back indicating a significantly adverse reaction. The only negative comments have centred on the potential lowering of academic standards. But the Governors and Head Teachers are in support of the plan.

Cllr Wood pointed out that it appears that a new school will be required in the area in due course. Cllr Gooding agreed that it may turn out to be the case, but questioned whether a school like this could be retained in the meantime. If numbers were to drop, say to 300, it would be hard to see how it could employ the necessary teaching staff.

Cllr Hume believed that the school could thrive if it is marketed properly and given some support. Cllr Gooding acknowledged the School's cogent argument, but doubted that they would be able to achieve the significant jump in market share to take their numbers to 600.

The Chairman noted that the exercise has concentrated the mind of the school, which has produced revised figures. He added that the area under review is wider than just Castle Point, and the issues concern more than just the secondary schools.

A further question arising from the first meeting was whether the Council had a view of the integration of special schools with mainstream schools. Cllr Gooding believed there was no ECC policy or view. It may need to be looked at, but his own belief was that it should develop on a local basis. In this case, barriers had been broken down, but the way it has developed has been the result of convenience. The redevelopment of Glenwood is evidently required, but it should be considered as a separate issue.

The Chairman queried whether the purchase of the property at the entrance to the Deanes indicated the existence of some policy. Dr Coulson replied that a rebuild for Glenwood had been sought since 1998 but it had proved difficult to find space. Using potential space at the Deanes presented a pragmatic solution. In the wake of this, a vision arose. For the Deanes, there was no other option. For Glenwood, the priority is getting the rebuild. In response to the Chairman's question whether Glenwood would prefer co-location or being on their own, Dr Coulson suggested they might find that hard to answer.

The Chairman asked whether the County Council was satisfied with the housing situation. Cllr Gooding acknowledged the apparent disparity between the different sets of figures. He quoted from the new Local Plan Proposed Policies document (dated May 2103), which Castle Point had shared on a confidential basis with the County Council (and so is not referred to in the documentation).

Inter alium, this alludes to the need for more smaller dwellings to be built, to provide housing for entering the property ladder. This emphasis, which was reflected in the County Council's original document, seemed to contradict the view expressed by Borough Councillors at the 30 July meeting, which put the emphasis on the need for 3-bedroom family homes.

Dr Coulson made several points:

- Castle Point had confirmed that the details were right at the time of the review
- Joanna Killian has written to the Chief Executive of Castle Point BC, seeking clarification of the figures, as these are important for the proposals
- Two issues arise from the figures:
 - What are the actual numbers?
 - Some sense of the phasing of this development over the next 5/10 years is needed, to indicate when and how changes will occur
- The school itself agrees that 600 is the crucial number – the problem seems to be that parents have indicated that they do not want their children to go there. The school is also no longer seen as a school of escape, as the negative side of the schools in the surrounding area is changing. There is capacity in the Basildon schools, although they are not particularly popular. We need to see if the demographics will change sufficiently to ensure that the school will fill up in the medium, rather than the long term.

The Chairman accepted that the housing figures were based on the information given. He noted that Castle Point are now under significant pressure from the Inspector and Secretary of State to do something about the lack of housing development. But there would not be clarity on this before the deadline for the decision (2 September).

A second point is the position of the Appleton and King John schools – will they definitely take the children from Deanes? Again, confirmation of this seems unlikely before 2 September.

In response, Cllr Gooding felt confident about the schools' position. Regarding the housing, he had serious concerns that there will be a significant gap in the numbers of children in the short to medium term, which would adversely affect the level of education, whatever the housing figures turn out to be.

Cllr Hume asked Cllr Gooding for a response to Southend's letter, where their Executive Councillor, Children and Learning, had expressed the Borough's opposition to the closure.

Cllr Gooding noted:

- At a meeting with parents from Southend whose children attend the Deanes, the response of these parents was to ask what Southend is doing, as they were unable to get local places in the Borough
- The approach is different in the Borough, where there are grammar schools. There is a trade-off, as ECC children attend their grammar

schools, and children from the Borough attend ECC schools. All three of these Castle Point schools have children from Southend

- He acknowledged that closing the Deanes would affect the movement of children around the area – the wider area is relevant, but it is not as simple as it may sound at first.

In response to a question from the Chairman whether any newbuild had led to a reduction in numbers, Dr Coulson confirmed that Basildon Academy, which had cost £50 million, had proved very unpopular. On Canvey, the closure of one school had led to two successful schools. And Belfairs (in Southend) had been unpopular, but is now over-subscribed and results in children attending the Deanes. However, it was unlikely that a popularity factor might be built into any remodelling – it would be too hard to measure.

The Chairman pointed out that these other schools had been failing, whereas the Deanes was not. However, Dr Coulson pointed out that there is a very strong secondary school base in the area and the Deanes is being squeezed, as the weakest of the three.

In response to the Chairman's question on the issue of giving choice to parents, Dr Coulson agreed that in an ideal situation, they would want to keep it. However, the Council is saying that the school will dip, and when it does it will cease as a worthy choice.

Dr Coulson responded to the Chairman on the process:

- Should one of the two schools produce an Ofsted Report at a lower level than that of the Deanes, the County Council would still be able to use it to provide places for the Deanes pupils
- The Cabinet Member would have to take a decision, based on two particular reports: 1, from County Council officers, which comprises a synthesis of the consultation, a working through of the argument and a recommendation; and 2, the report of the Task & Finish Group.

Cllr Wood reminded Members that, for all the importance of the 600 minimum number, the children are what matter here.

In response, Dr Coulson agreed, pointing out that in his view the County Council would be letting these children down if they were to leave the situation as it was. In the past, decisions have been delayed until a later stage. This had made the situation very obvious and the final decision easier to make; but it had also created a very bad spiral of decline. On this occasion, the intention is to deal with the situation before the spiral kicks in. This is for the children's benefit above all.

As a final statement, the Cabinet Member confirmed that he believed the school's case to be robust about the roll figure of 600, the only issue being whether this figure was achievable.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their input. He confirmed that the Committee would produce its report for the Cabinet Member by the end of the month.

The meeting closed at 2.23 pm.

Chairman