

**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 WEDNESDAY 10 JULY 2013**

County Councillors:

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

Non-Elected Voting Member:

\* Mr R Carson

\*present

The following Member was also present:  
Councillor V Metcalfe

The following officers were present in support throughout the meeting:

Robert Fox	Governance Officer
Matthew Waldie	Committee Officer

The meeting opened at 10.30 am.

### **1. Apologies**

Apologies were received from Cllr Chandler.

### **2. Membership**

The membership was confirmed as above. It was noted that Richard Carson has replaced Mark Christmas, as Mr Christmas is a resident of Benfleet.

### **3. The future of The Deanes School: consultation**

**Timing.** The Chairman noted that the Group would gather evidence over the next three weeks and produce a report in the latter half of August, with recommendations for the Cabinet Member.

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Ray Gooding, Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning, and Tim Coulson, Director of Education and Learning, and asked Councillor Gooding to address the meeting.

Councillor Gooding pointed out that he was not only presenting the Council's case for this decision, but he was also presenting the case for moving forward, so that future decisions can be scrutinised with vigour.

There are complexities in this case. The Deanes is not a failing school – standards are good, as is staff commitment. The main issue is ongoing pupil numbers. These had remained on a reasonable plateau for some years, but

recently have fallen off significantly. When the numbers were projected forward, County was not confident that there would be an increase. If this situation were to persist, the school would have difficulty in maintaining the appropriate quality in the breadth and depth of its teaching – because of the consequent reduction in funding.

Another factor is the co-location of Glenwood Special School.

But the two major factors are, however:

- The future viability of the school
- Continuing to commit significant capital expenditure in the face of falling numbers.

The level of emotion aroused by this proposal has been demonstrated by the number of public meetings that have been held and Cllr Gooding would expect the Group to show some sympathy toward this. But Members must also be wary of the strength of emotion, and whether this is sustainable.

Having taken up the portfolio following the 2 May election, Cllr Gooding had a meeting with Tim Coulson on 8 May to discuss the school capital programme, when this issue was raised. This resulted in a further meeting, with the Leader.

The approach was not “We need to trim the budget” but “This is affordable, but is it good value for money?” The £22 million has been set aside in the budget and is currently ring-fenced; so work could proceed if the decision were made to use it.

### **Numbers:**

The predicted numbers for the next 10 years were noted. The Chairman expressed a concern that, presumably similar figures were available to the Cabinet Member’s predecessor, when he made the decision to fund the work; what has changed in the meantime?

Cllr Gooding explained the figures. There are 650 pupils this year in a school built for 1000. Over the next few years, a significant drop in numbers is expected, taking it down to 500. Even if the new school was built for a reduced number of 750, 500 would only represent 67% of capacity.

In response to the suggestion that having a new building would increase numbers, Cllr Gooding suggested that the local demographic would mean that any likely rise would be insufficient. Considering the figures: many parents would avoid sending their children to a school undergoing major rebuilding work, so that might lead to a further short-term decrease, perhaps of 5%. Once the rebuilding was finished, even if the numbers were pushed back up by the attractiveness of a new building, perhaps by 10%, that would still not bring them up sufficiently.

Historical preferences of local parents does not show strong support for the Deanes over other local schools.

The Chairman suggested that the Audit trail seemed poor for such a substantial project; and it was noted that neither Cllr Gooding's nor Dr Coulson's predecessors were still at the Council.

However, Dr Coulson has spoken to his predecessor about the process. The original plans were drawn up when the Government's Building Schools for the Future programme was still running. At this stage, schools in the Colchester area were pushed up the building programme, and when the BSF was scrapped, the south Essex schools just missed the cut. In 2011, Glenwood in particular was looked at, and in 2012, it was put back in the programme. The projection at the time was that numbers would fall below 750, but that the newbuild would reverse that decline.

It was in any case a marginal decision. In the event, numbers have turned out lower than anticipated and school budgets are also worse. 600 is considered an absolute minimum, and present indicators suggest numbers will drop to 500.

Cllr Gooding did not recall any discussion of this project at Cabinet.

The Chairman emphasised the importance of this to the Committee. He wanted to be able to consider the original decision and be able to say whether it was sound or perverse. He asked the Cabinet Member to look into this further and glean as much information as possible. Cllr Gooding agreed and welcomed this, pointing out that he would like to make the process as transparent as possible. The Chairman added that they might also learn from the process as well.

Cllr Hume noted the three options listed in the paper and he suggested there was little evidence that the Council had explored the other options. He reminded the meeting that this decision affected people's real lives. Cllr Gooding believed that doing nothing was not an option at all, as that would subject the school to a lingering death – for him, consultation was the only way forward.

Cllr Hume suggested that smaller schools can do well, as long as they are able to match their budgets to the education they provide.

A refurbishment programme, which had been estimated as costing £4 million, was not thought to be a viable option.

In response to a question, Dr Coulson explained the methodology for estimating projected figures for the next ten years:

- The figures are based initially on how birth and GPs' records translate into numbers for primary schools.
- Then the popularity of the relevant schools is assessed. This is the certainly the hardest to predict. The Deanes has historically been a popular school – but to some extent with children for out of catchment, and one reason for a dropping popularity may be that the schools in these areas from which Deanes pupils used to come have now improved, and so the parents are now happy to see their children in their catchment schools.

- An assumption has been made here that the other two schools, King John and Appleton, will continue to be oversubscribed
- A further consideration is the likely change to housing in the area of the school over that period, which relies on the forward planning of local authorities. In this case, Castle Point's plans are: 550 new homes by 2019, with 220 each year after that. A basic assumption is that a housing development of 800 homes will require 1 new class per year group.

When further asked about numbers of pupils coming in from out of catchment areas, Dr Coulson pointed out that Year 11 at the Deanes has 79 pupils from Southend, whereas the figure is only 15 in Year 7. With Basildon, although the trend appears upward (16 in Year 11, 22 in Year 7), the numbers have never been large. The Basildon position is important, as there is population growth, but its secondary schools are very undersubscribed at the moment, partly because of poor perception of them; and it is hoped that they will improve soon. This will make it less likely that parents will want their children to travel to the Deanes. Appleton has historically received more Basildon pupils, being geographically nearer.

Cllr Wood asked about the impact on the quality of: (i) the education of those having to move from the Deanes, and (ii), the education being provided by the other schools, as they have to expand to cope with the new intake.

Dr Coulson pointed out that both schools are looking into this matter. Both have indicated their intention to take these extra pupils, but are consulting relevant parties about it; and they will not compromise on quality just to oblige the County Council. With regard to the other schools, both are looking at three courses of action to accommodate the changes foreseen by the closure: expansion of their sixth forms, provision for children coming in at mid point, and creation of a new class. The sixth form expansion in particular should enable them to deal with the initial increase. He conceded that it will be hard to progress the closure of the Deanes, if the other schools ultimately decide not to take these extra pupils.

Cllr Higgins suggested that more figures were required for a larger area than those provided, citing the experience of Colchester. Dr Coulson agreed to provide these, but pointed out that this area was not experiencing a population "bulge" akin to that of Colchester.

In response to questions, Cllr Gooding confirmed that the Deanes could change to Academy status at any point before its doors actually close in 2016, but they must meet certain criteria:

- a good enough inspection – which they certainly fulfil
- prospects for improvement
- financial viability.

The Deanes have suggested that previously they had been persuaded not to pursue Academy status, because of the promised £22m funding from Essex; Mr Coulson conceded that the school might feel let down by this.

However, given the figures presented by Essex, the school was faced with a deficit of £220k, with a projected tenfold increase over the next few years, which made their position weak with regard financial viability. Dr Coulson did point out that they have produced revised figures that do balance. He added that County is continuing to liaise with the school but is not convinced by these new figures.

Dr Coulson added that an application to convert to an Academy made now might become effective in January 2014 at the earliest.

Regarding the position of Glenwood, Cllr Gooding reiterated the intention of rebuilding the school on the existing site of the Deanes. He noted that the site itself is actually owned by the Governors of the Deanes, as it is a Foundation School, so any redevelopment would require their permission.

Mr Carson asked about the sports facilities on site and what thought had been given to the provision of these to the local community, if the building were to be demolished. Cllr Gooding acknowledged that the school does provide such facilities to the public, but he pointed out that County's prime concern here is the provision of education for children. If the school happened to have good facilities used by local people as an add-on, that was good, but was not necessarily a major factor in the decision-making process. However, he conceded it would need some further consideration.

When asked whether those pupils being transferred to alternative schools would receive the level of sports provision currently enjoyed by them at The Deanes, Cllr Gooding pointed out that all secondary schools have a certain level of sporting provision.

Dr Coulson was asked about the effect of this consultation on the selection process for prospective parents. Parents were being asked to select their schools as if the school will remain open; but if the decision is made to close the school, those who have made the Deanes their first choice will have this choice discarded, so they are not disadvantaged. The Chairman asked for further details of the schools selection in this area, to see how those currently at the Deanes made their initial choices.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Gooding and Dr Coulson for their contribution and reminded them that the Committee might approach them again, once it had progressed further. In the meantime, he asked that they provide the information requested at this meeting.

#### **4. Dates of next meetings**

The Committee noted the date of the next meeting:  
Wednesday 17 July 2013, at the Deanes School. at 10.00 am.

The meeting closed at 12.09 pm.

Chairman