

## KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

---

### CABINET SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee held at Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Wednesday, 27 September 2006.

PRESENT: Dr M R Eddy (Chairman), Mr D Smyth (Vice Chairman), Mr A R Bassam, Mr R H C Bliss, Mr J R Bullock MBE, Mr C J Capon, Mr B R Cope, Mrs M E Featherstone (substitute for Mrs T Dean), Mr J B O Fullarton, Mr C Hart, Mr E E C Hotson, Mrs M Newell, Mr R J E Parker, Mr J E Scholes and Mrs P A V Stockell.

ALSO PRESENT: Mr R E King (Item D1(a)).

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr J Wale, Assistant to the Chief Executive and Mr S C Ballard, Head of Democratic Services.

#### UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

**27. Minutes**  
*(Item A2)*

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 12 September 2006 are correctly recorded and that they be signed by the Chairman.

**28. Informal Member Group on Budgetary Issues – 21 September 2006**  
*(Item A3)*

RESOLVED that the notes of the meeting of the Informal Member Group on Budgetary Issues held on 21 September 2006 be noted.

**29. Cabinet Scrutiny Committee – Standing Report to End September 2006**  
*(Item A4 – Report by Assistant to the Chief Executive)*

RESOLVED that the report on the actions taken as a result of the Committee's decisions at previous meetings, and on progress with Select Committee Topic Reviews, be noted.

**30. (1) Revenue & Capital Budgets, Key Activity and Risk Monitoring**  
**(2) Changes to Final Outturn for 2005-06 and Roll Forward of the Remaining 2005-06 Underspend**  
*(Item B1)*

RESOLVED that the decision by Cabinet on 18 September 2006 to agree the use of the remaining roll forward of underspend from 2005-06 as detailed in Appendix 4 to the report be accepted, and Cabinet's agreement that the unallocated £108.3k balance be used for highway maintenance, as suggested by the Committee at its meeting on 19 July (Minute 21(b)), be welcomed.

**31. Reduction of Surplus Capacity in Primary Schools:-**

**(a) Hothfield (Community) Village School – Proposed Closure (Decision 06/00829);**

**(b) Ashford South (Community) School and Oak Tree (Community) Primary School – Proposed Amalgamation (Decision 06/00831)**  
*(Item D1)*

(1) Mr J D Simmonds, Cabinet Member for Education and School Improvement; Dr I Craig, Director of Operations; and Mr D Adams, Area Education Officer, Ashford and Shepway, Children, Families and Education Directorate, attended the meeting to answer Members' questions on this item.

General

(2) Mr Parker quoted an article by Michael Howard MP in the Hythe Herald dated 14 September which criticised the Council's primary school strategy. In response, Dr Craig explained that both the DfES and the Audit Commission had made it clear that it was up to individual LEAs to decide what target they should adopt for surplus school places. The target would vary according to the size and distribution of the population of each LEA but the Audit Commission had indicated that surplus places should be kept to the minimum necessary and that a figure of more than 10% would trigger "further attention". The Audit Commission had also told LEAs that they needed to address as a matter of urgency schools with more than 25% surplus places.

(3) At the start of the primary school strategy process KCC had asked DfES and the Audit Commission for examples of good practice and had been referred to Liverpool, Gloucestershire and Durham. Durham had not yet completed its primary strategy but, on the basis of experience in Liverpool and Gloucestershire, Kent had adopted a target of 5-7% surplus places. The Audit Commission had said that this target seemed "perfectly reasonable" in Kent's circumstances. Essex, our nearest statistical neighbour, had adopted a target of 5% and Lincolnshire, a more rural county than Kent, had adopted a target of 4-8%.

(4) Mr Simmonds again reminded the Committee that, in January 2006, KCC had 14,270 surplus primary school places (11.6% of the total) and over 50 schools with more than 25% vacant places. This was not a good use of KCC's limited resources and the purpose of the primary school strategy was to rationalise the primary school structure and re-invest back into education the resources thereby released.

Proposed Closure of Hothfield (Community) Village School

(5) Members of the Committee, Mr R E King (local Member) and the Rev L Hammond (Vicar of Hothfield) asked questions about the reasons for the decision to propose closure of Hothfield School. These questions covered the following issues (answers in italics):-

- Number of pupils and surplus capacity at Hothfield. *(43 pupils in 1/05; 33 in 1/06; 42 during consultation; and 29 currently, against a capacity of 84. Currently 55 surplus places).*
- Other community facilities accommodated at school. *(Mother and toddler group, adult education classes).*

27 September 2006

- Possible demand for places from new housing developments on north-western fringes of Ashford town. (*Unlikely because new school being built as part of largest development*).
- Need for pre-school provision at Hothfield. (*None there at present; in future would be provided at Children's Centre; unlikely that village like Hothfield could meet criteria to host a Children's Centre*).
- Legality of changing proposal from amalgamation with Charing to straight closure. (*Legal. Proposal changed because consultation showed that few Hothfield parents would send their children to Charing*).
- School transport arrangements following closure. (*No special arrangements – standard KCC policy would apply*).
- Were prospective parents deliberately discouraged from applying for Hothfield? (*No, but it would have been wrong for KCC to conceal possibility of closure once consultation process started*).
- Organisation of school. (*2 classes, but classes sub-divided into learning circles for some subjects*).
- Why close a high-performing school, with an added value score of 102.3, now that it had the chance to allow its improved performance to attract more pupils? (*Added value score based on tiny cohort of pupils and improvement from a low base*).
- Impact of closure on village given its particular character and importance of school as focus for the community. (*School not well-supported by local community*).
- Distance from Hothfield to nearest alternative schools by road. (*Free transport would be provided where home to school distance more than 2 miles for under-8s or 3 miles for over-8s*).
- Future of charitable foundation associated with school. (*It was hoped that foundation would still be able to offer educational opportunities to local children even if school closed*).
- Proportion of pupils from traveller families. (*Headteacher said to believe 45% of pupils from traveller background, although most now settled locally*).

Proposed Amalgamation of Ashford South (Community) School and Oak Tree (Community) Primary Schools

- (6) Members of the Committee and Mr S Neal (Chairman of Governors, Ashford South) asked questions about the reasons for the decision to propose amalgamation of the two schools. These questions covered the following issues (answers in italics):-
- Were forecasts right given that local birth-rate on upward trend? (*Forecasting process (described in detail) took account of all known factors and trends*).

27September 2006

- Impact of development in Ashford on school capacity. (*Where needed, schools now being built as part of new housing developments – meant school capacity for each new community increased in line with demand. Better than old system where new schools built some time after new development – created problems of “boom and bust” for existing schools*).
- Surplus places at Ashford South/Oak Tree. (*244 pupils at Ashford South; 177 at Oak Tree; giving total of 421. Amalgamated school would have 420 places, but:-*
  - *larger year groups at top of Ashford South gradually working through;*
  - *new John Wesley School (nearby) to increase from 1FE to 2FE when necessary;*
  - *Ashford South PAN to reduce from 60 (2FE) to 45 (1.5FE) in 9/07 (as part of pre-primary strategy efforts to reduce capacity – but even with this school still had significant spare capacity);*
- Claim that amalgamation would result in loss of following facilities based at Ashford South:-
  - nursery (newly-built)
  - wave 3 provision and behaviour improvement support
  - collective staff ethos and staff themselves
  - community use of premises
  - SEN provision
  - expertise in coping with non-English speaking pupils

*(Purpose of amalgamation rather than closure was to try to retain the good work, facilities, and staff of both schools).*
- Was school being closed simply to provide KCC with large capital receipt? (*No. Purpose of amalgamation was to reduce surplus capacity; most of capital receipt expected to be used to build additional high-standard accommodation on Oak Tree site*).
- Why was Oak Tree allowed to exceed its PAN by 32 pupils? (*It wasn't. Oak Tree had a PAN of 182 pupils and 182 pupils on roll, but its **net capacity** was only 150. Undersized classrooms currently being extended under modernisation programme to increase net capacity*).
- Poor access to Oak Tree School site. (*Negotiations taking place to improve access as a priority*).

## Conclusions

(7) In considering what conclusions the Committee should reach, Mr Smyth proposed, Mr Hart seconded, that Decision 06/00831 on the amalgamation of Ashford South (Community) and Oak Tree (Community) Primary Schools be referred back to the Cabinet Member for Education and School Improvement for reconsideration.

*(Lost 9 votes to 5)*

(8) It was then RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Mr Simmonds, Dr Craig and Mr Adams be thanked for attending the meeting and answering Members' questions;
- (b) Rev Hammond, Mr King and Mr Neal be thanked for attending the meeting and giving their views;
- (c) Decision 06/00829 on the closure of Hothfield (Community) Village School be referred back to the Cabinet Member for Education and School Improvement for reconsideration on the following grounds:-
  - (i) having noted the evidence presented to it about the importance of the school as a focus for the Hothfield Village community, the Committee was concerned that the wider social issues for the community which would arise from the closure of the school may not have been sufficiently taken into account;
  - (ii) the Committee also felt that there may be merit in the Governors' argument that, with the improvements in educational standards that the school had achieved in recent years, more time was needed to allow its improving reputation to attract more pupils;
- (d) Decision 06/00831 on the amalgamation of Ashford South (Community) School and Oak Tree (Community) Primary School be implemented but, in the detailed planning for the amalgamation, the Cabinet Member for Education and School Improvement be asked to give careful consideration to the need to ensure that:-
  - the amalgamated school was provided with the facilities to fully meet the special educational needs of the children currently attending both schools;
  - the ethos of Ashford South School was not lost in the amalgamation;
  - the amalgamated school was provided with adequate accommodation to allow the community facilities currently provided in both schools to continue;
  - access problems to the Oak Tree School site were resolved.

*All carried without a vote*