

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SCHOOL ORGANISATION ADVISORY BOARD

MINUTES of a meeting of the School Organisation Advisory Board held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 14 June 2007.

PRESENT: Mrs V J Dagger (Chairman), Mr W A Hayton (Vice-Chairman), Mrs C Angell, Ms S J Carey, Mr A R Poole, Mr R B Burgess and Mr M J Northey

ALSO PRESENT: Mr J D Simmonds, Mr L B Ridings, Mrs E Green and The Reverend Canon J L Smith

IN ATTENDANCE: Dr I Craig (Director Strategy Policy & Performance), Mr M Doole (Area Education Officer Thanet & Dover) and Ms C Lay (Area Education Officer Sevenoaks, Swanley, Tunbridge Wells, Cranbrook and Paddock Wood)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

1. Minutes of the Meeting held on 16 May 2007
(Item. 2)

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 May 2007 were agreed as a true record.

2. St John's Church of England (Voluntary Controlled) Primary School, Tunbridge Wells - Proposed Change of Status
(Item. 3 - Report by Director (Operations))

(1) This report sought the views of the School Organisation Advisory Board on the Governing Body's proposal to seek Foundation status. Members' views would advise the Cabinet Member for Education and School Improvement when he formally responded, on behalf of the County Council, to the school's consultation process.

(2) Ms Lay gave a short presentation to the Board regarding the proposal, stating that the main issues surrounding the proposal related to admissions, school premises and personnel at the school. Ms Lay highlighted how the Board were being asked to formulate a view that the Cabinet Member should take in response to the consultation on the proposal that the school move from a Voluntary Controlled status to Foundation status.

(3) Mr Burgess asked what the reservations of the Cluster Board were as outlined in the report, and Ms Lay answered the question stating that their concern had been related to the fact that when admission patterns are changed, as with this proposal, it can have a domino effect upon surrounding schools, and affect their admissions policies.

(4) In response to a question raised by Mr Burgess regarding admissions criteria, Dr Craig stated that the 'ease of access' criterion had been removed after an observation made by the Ombudsman had suggested this may prove confusing to

parents. The County admissions system now in place was that of a clear proximity rule. Dr Craig went on to explain that St John's previous 'figure of eight' catchment area did create some admissions issues, and KCC representatives had discussed this with the Governing Body of St. Johns' School. The result of the discussion had been that the local authority had proposed that instead of the school being the 'node' point for a catchment area as would usually happen, it had been suggested that a 'node' point exists between the two sites in order to incorporate a wider and fairer catchment area that would not exclude pupils who had attended the infants school site. Dr Craig stated that this was a compromise on the school's current proposal and would remain the local authority's preferred option regardless of the outcome of the consultation, and it would be for the school to decide as to whether or not they would adopt it.

(5) Mrs Angell asked what was happening with the 'old' infant school buildings. Ms Lay stated that these school buildings are now housing a privately run nursery school. Secondly, Mrs Angell asked what effect this proposal will have on surrounding schools' admission numbers, to which Ms Lay responded stating that St. Lukes Primary School in the surrounding area is closing in August 2007, and that the Headteacher of St. John's is currently managing this closure. St. Augustines and St. Matthews Primary Schools are full for this September so the effect on surrounding schools should be minimal. Mrs Angell asked if the school had a transport plan, to which Dr. Craig responded that he was certain one was in place, and that this proposal would have a minimal effect on transport related issues.

(6) Mr Hayton asked if children attending the school from outside a 2-mile radius would receive travel assistance? Ms Lay answered Mr Hayton's question, stating that so many children lived within walking distance of the school that there was no real cost implication here. Mr Hayton also had a question answered by Ms Lay regarding the expected rise in pupil numbers at reception age. Ms Lay confirmed that it was possible to accommodate all children in the area for at least the next two years.

(7). Mr Northey stated that he felt the critical point of this discussion was not as to whether the school should achieve the foundation status it desires, but that it implements and adheres to a robust and fair admissions policy. Mr Northey asked what opinions Mr Bullock, the local member had expressed regarding the proposal, but Ms Lay stated that she would not wish to comment in Mr Bullocks' absence, for fear she may misrepresent his views.

(8). Canon Smith explained that having studied the map showing the distribution of students attending the school, it is the case that few students currently live outside the area. Canon Smith felt that the proposed moving of the 'nodal point' for admissions was a good idea as this would meet all of the needs of St. Johns' Primary School, and does not exclude the children wanting to attend from the area surrounding the old infants school buildings.

(9). Mr Hayton supported the view expressed by Canon Smith, stating that the new 'figure of eight' catchment area proposal was a good idea, ensuring that no child who would have been in the catchment area for the old infants school site would be excluded from the new admissions policy. Mr Hayton supported the school's proposal to move to foundation status.

(10) Following debate, The School Organisation Advisory Board agreed on a vote of 3 for, 1 against and 3 abstentions that the Cabinet Member for Education and School Improvement should on behalf of the County Council express support for the proposed change to Foundation Status.

3. Proposed Amalgamation of Ellington School for Girls and The Hereson School, Ramsgate

(Item. 4 - Report by Director (Operations))

(1) This report sought the views of the School Organisation Advisory Board on whether to go to public consultation on the proposal to amalgamate Ellington School for Girls and The Hereson School, Ramsgate with effect from 1 September 2008.

(2) Mr Doole introduced the proposal outlined in the report, highlighting how it aimed to maintain good schools in Ramsgate against the pressures of falling school rolls in the catchment area, with surplus places at the two schools due to increase. Mr Doole stated that the proposal aimed to keep the strengths of both schools, raising standards and maintaining them. He also stated how the new school site for Ellington Girls School at Pysons Road in the town was a dramatic improvement on their old site.

(3) Mr Doole continued, stating that the proposed amalgamation would be a phased transition over a two year period, with those studying for their GCSEs at the Hereson School at the time of amalgamation remaining at the Hereson site to minimise disruption to their studies. He understood that the proposal was a sensitive one as people felt strongly about maintaining the single sex provision available currently. Mr Doole stated that the schools would be able to decide for themselves the organisation of the new school should the proposal go ahead, so would not necessarily mean the end of single sex provision.

(4) Mrs Green, local member stated that this proposal represented a loss of diversity of education and choice in Thanet. The new Ellington School site at Pysons Road had initially been proposed as a new site for Clarendon Girls Grammar School and Ellington School for Girls. This amended proposal has left many parents of girls at the Ellington School feeling bemused and unhappy. Mrs Green felt that this proposal had been designed to fail, as with the new Marlowe Academy very close by, this will be seen as a school of last choice, should the proposal go ahead. She added that the overall picture of secondary schools in Ramsgate needed to be looked at in detail, and therefore this proposal was far too premature.

(5) Mrs Green asked what provisions would be made were the boys from the Hereson School to move onto the new Ellington site to accompany the girls, and also asked what would happen to the Heads of the two schools, as with her understanding it was the case that the amalgamated school would only need one Head. Mr Doole answered the questions Mrs Green had posed; firstly stating that he was aware that both Heads were in support of the proposal, but that the Amalgamated school would indeed only need one headteacher. The physical provision for boys on the new site would take one year to be provided and works completed.

(6) Mr Doole agreed that the overall picture of secondary schooling in Ramsgate did need looking at, especially at why pupils migrate to schools in Broadstairs. He added that school provision would be looked at in a wider context, looking at how schools could work together for the benefit of pupils across Thanet.

(7) Mr Hayton stated that he was a member of the Governing Body of the Hereson School, but had not made any comment or taken part in discussions at meetings of the Governing Body regarding this proposal, and this had been duly minuted at those meetings. Mr Hayton stated that he had been directly involved in securing the new site, at great expense, for the Hereson School for Boys which had been greatly needed as the old site had been the second worst provision in the County, so he greatly supported the move to the new site. Mr Hayton understood that a new school would attract new clientele as the Marlowe Academy had, but the loss of single sex provision would most likely counteract the pull of new buildings, as the single sex provision was what made both schools so special. He added that at least 90% of parents were against a proposed amalgamation. Mr Hayton felt that it was right to go out to consult on this proposal, but was opposed to the proposal outlined in the report, and did not believe that these schools should be amalgamated.

(8) Mr Poole, as a local member for the area and also a member of the Board, outlined how neither Mr Hayton (the other local member for the Ward) nor himself had been consulted on the proposal, to which Mr Doole responded stating that all local members and other interested parties would be consulted in full were the Cabinet Member to make the decision to do so. Mr Poole was discontented at the possible loss of single sex provision, and suggested that a “federation” of the two schools sharing one site was investigated further, in order to maintain the provision. Mr Poole stated that he would rather not see the schools amalgamated at this time.

(9) Mrs Angell asked for some clarification on some points in the report which Mr Doole gave. She asked how if Thanet was high up the list for the Building Schools for the Future Programme (BSF), if falling student rolls would be addressed within this programme? Dr Craig responded stating that waiting for the BSF programme to be rolled out in Thanet was not an option, as student numbers were already critically low, and surplus capacity was going to increase in the next few years, so action was needed to prevent both schools from ceasing to be viable. Throughout the course of discussion, Mrs Angell asked questions such as what the ‘modest cost’ of adaptations to the site in order to make it viable to accommodate the boys would be. Dr Craig stated that at this time, precise figures were unknown, but it would become clear were the consultation to go ahead, and more work surrounding the proposal would be undertaken. Dr Craig also answered a question Mrs Angell asked regarding the Travel implications for students attending the new amalgamated school. He stated that as both schools serve the same catchment area, transport implications should prove minimal.

(10) Mr Burgess stated that throughout the course of discussion it had become apparent that the main issue here was one surrounding single sex education provision in Thanet. Mr Burgess felt it was important to maintain parental choice, but having just completed the Primary strategy, noted that a healthy sized 4 form of entry school should be welcomed as the increase in surplus capacity in the area, could eventually threaten both schools. Mr Burgess was in favour of a consultation being undertaken, subject to the clarification of timescales should the amalgamation go ahead.

(11) Miss Carey stated that she supported action being taken now, because of falling school rolls and the fact that for the forthcoming year there have been only 32 first choices for the Ellington School for Girls and 38 for Hereson School, so closure is a reality if no action were to be taken.

Miss Carey felt that it was a necessity to go out to consult on this proposal, and from this point these schools can find a way forward to secure their future.

(12) Mr Hayton stated that the Hereson School had once been a two form of entry school, and had managed to provide a reasonable standard of education. Mr Hayton stated that there was currently little spare capacity at the Marlowe Academy, and 1,102 new homes were planned in the Westwood area, so he asked how many more places would be needed to accommodate more children on this basis. Dr Craig stated that this many new homes currently produces a 'pupil product' of approximately 200 secondary aged children. Mr Hayton made the point that should this proposal go ahead, there would be nowhere to accommodate this many children, if the surplus capacity of both the Ellington and Hereson schools removed.

(13) Mr Northey stated that he had held back in order to listen to the local members who have a keen interest and level of expertise in this particular proposal. He added that if this proposal can save both schools in some form, it should be supported; however there were obvious issues that would need resolution before a way forward was found. Mr Northey supported the proposal to go out to consultation on this issue.

(14) The School Organisation Advisory Board were agreed to the proposal to move to public consultation on the proposed amalgamation of Ellington School for Girls and the Hereson School in accordance with the proposal and timescale set out in the report.