

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, 21 May 2009.

PRESENT: Mrs V J Dagger (Chairman), Mrs C Angell, Mr C J Capon, Mr A D Crowther, Mr G A Horne MBE (Substitute for Mr R B Burgess) and Mr M J Northey

ALSO PRESENT: Mr M C Dance

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr D Adams (Area Children's Services Officer, Ashford & Shepway), Ms C Lay (Area Children's Services Officer - Sevenoaks, and Tunbridge Wells, Cranbrook and Paddock Wood) and Mr G Mills (Democratic Services Manager (Executive))

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

1. Minutes - 23 April 2009

(Item. 3)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 23 April 2009 be agreed as a true record.

2. Proposed Closure of the Bradbourne (Foundation) School for Girls and the Wildernesse (Foundation) School for Boys, Sevenoaks, to replace with an Academy

(Item. 4 – report by Mr Grahame Ward, Director – Operations)

(Mr N Chard, Mr P Lake and Mr R Parry were present for this item as local County Members)

(1) This report presented the results of a public consultation exercise regarding the proposed closure of the Bradbourne School and the Wildernesse School, Sevenoaks and their replacement with a government funded Academy from 1 September 2010. Members had before them an updated report on the representations received since the publication of the agenda. Ms Lay said that in

total some 222 responses had been received of which 132 were against the proposal, 65 were in favour and 25 were undecided or did not state a clear view for or against.

(2) Mr Chard, the local Member for the Sevenoaks East Division and a governor of Bradbourne School, spoke in support of the proposal as it would provide an opportunity to establish a high quality school of choice for young people of all aptitudes and abilities in Sevenoaks. He said he fully understood the concerns of some parents around the issues of single sex and co-educational education but was confident that these concerns could with careful planning and co-operation be addressed as the proposals were developed in more detail. He said he believed this proposal presented a one-off opportunity to have a school fit for the 21st Century and he believed that the proposal should proceed.

(3) Mr Lake spoke as the local Member for the Sevenoaks South Division. During the course of his submission Mr Lake spoke in favour of retaining the Bradbourne School for Girls which he said was a well subscribed, all ability school which maintained high standards and enjoyed specialist status in the visual arts. OfSTED have found the school to be outstanding in its specialist area and therefore there was no need for it to be closed or brought together with the Wildernesse School. He said he believed the way forward was for the County Council to undertake improvements to the Wildernesse School as that would be far more cost effective than a new Academy being built which had not even at the present time received planning permission. He said that he did not believe that the land available at the Wildernesse School would be sufficient for the Academy and the increase in student numbers would put further pressure on the local traffic road network. Mr Lake also questioned

whether the Academy would have sufficient capacity to accommodate all the students who currently go out of county to schools in East Sussex and Surrey.

(4) Mr Lake said that he believed the solution to providing existing educational opportunities in West Kent was to leave the Bradbourne and Wildernesse Schools in place, invest money into the Wildernesse School in order to bring its buildings up to a higher standard and then for an Academy if one was needed to be created in the Edenbridge area. Such a proposal would enable the retention of the existing single sex schools in Sevenoaks together with the ethos that so many parents wanted for their children. Also the Council would be allowing children to be educated in Kent rather than Sussex and Surrey and would be creating the flexibility within the educational system to build for the future.

(5) Mr Parry spoke as the local Member for Sevenoaks West and said he supported the views which had been expressed by Mr Chard. The Bradbourne School was a credit to the headteacher and her staff and he was sure that the School's ethos would continue as part of the Academy proposals. He said other schools in the Sevenoaks area had successfully changed to co-education in the past and those changes had been very well undertaken and he believed that success could be repeated in this instance. He said that some concerns had been raised about access and traffic issues in and around the site of the proposed Academy but he believed those concerns could be satisfactorily resolved. He concluded by saying he believed the proposal would provide a centre of educational excellence and do a great deal in improving the educational opportunities within this area. For those reasons he supported the proposal.

(6) Mr Adams then read to the meeting a statement from Mr Martin Vye, who was unable to attend the meeting. In his statement Mr Vye said that he was in favour of the proposal subject to conditions, one being a realistic solution being found to any additional traffic problems which an Academy may create and also that clear and detailed plans of how single sex education in the core subjects would be retained and managed in any new co-educational school.

(7) Members of the Advisory Board then raised a number of issues of detail to which officers responded as appropriate. Officers emphasised that careful regard would be given to continuing the best of single sex teaching where it was judged to have most impact. This could, it was said, be provided within a co-educational setting that would provide a further range of learning opportunities for young people so combining the best of “both worlds”. Officers also said that whilst KCC had to lead on the necessary closure of the two schools the Council had no remit to consult about the opening of an Academy because such establishments were independent of local authority control. Therefore detailed consultation about the proposed Academy’s ethos, aims, culture, curriculum and organisation would be part of the consultations undertaken by the independent consultants appointed by the DCSF and accountable to the sponsors. Officers also explained that the traffic management issues relating to the Wildernesse site would form a critical part of the process towards gaining planning permission and, again, would be subject to full public consultation processes.

(8) Following further discussion the Advisory Board considered the proposal to publish a Public Notice to close the Bradbourne (Foundation) School for Girls and the Wildernesse School for Boys, Sevenoaks on 31 August 2010 so that subject to the

approval of the Department of Children, Schools and Families they could be replaced with a government funded Academy. Three Members expressed a view that the proposal should not be supported. Two Members said they did support the proposal and one Member abstained from expressing a view.