Notes of Furness Drop-In Session Meeting 24th February 2015 at 16:00-19:00

Panel	Mr Kevin Shovelton	Director of Education Planning and Access	
	lan Watts	Area Education Officer (North Kent)	
	Julie Ely	Head of SEN Assessment & Placement	

Introduction

Introductions where made by Mr Kevin Shovelton.

Kevin explained that the meeting was advertised as a Drop-In session but due to the large number of people attending would be formalised and recorded. The meeting will be recorded and a transcript presented to the Kent County Council Education Cabinet meeting on 15 April 2015. All views expressed will be taken into consideration by the Cabinet Member for Education and Health Reform when the local authority is looking at whether to go ahead with this proposal.

Purpose of the Meeting

- Kent County Council and the Interim Executive Board (IEB) have agreed to launch a public consultation, with regret, on the proposal to discontinue Furness School by 31 August 2015.
- To give members of the public an opportunity to ask questions and comment
- To listen to views and opinions

Proposal

Furness School is currently designated as a Special School, offering 60 places for pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The school was previously designated as a 60 place provision for pupils with Behavioural, Emotional & Social Needs (BESN).

If the proposal goes ahead, Kent County Council will work closely with schools in the locality to secure appropriate education for children in other schools.

KCC recognises the need to support parents & carers during this process. The local authority are also mindful of parental preference and some may like their children to be supported in mainstream schools where they have access to high quality specialist teachers and teaching facilities. For this reason this proposal is linked to a Kent County Council plan to establish a Specialist Resource Base Provision for pupils with ASD, at Hugh Christie Technology College, White Cottage Road in Tonbridge, Kent from September 2015.

This proposal is associated but not linked to a Leigh Academy Trust proposal to establish a Special Resource Base Provision with pupils with ASD, at Wilmington Academy, Common Lane, Wilmington, Dartford, Kent DA2 7DR.

Reasons

Since 2011-12 Furness School has encountered significant budget difficulties which can be attributed to low pupil numbers and high staffing ratios. This position has been exacerbated by the national changes to Special School funding introduced in April 2013.

The school is forecasted to have a cumulative budget deficit of £1.6m which is unsustainable.

The methodology for funding high needs pupils has changed. In April 2013 in line with government policy this changed to Place Plus funding which resulted in the majority of funding being linked to individual pupils need type and the months they remain on school roll. Previously funding was allocated to a Special School on the number of places available (regardless of how many attending). In 2013-14 the national funding methodology changed so only £10,000 per annum per place is available. The remaining funding then fluctuates during the year depending on actual numbers on pupils on roll.

This is currently a proposal on the future of Furness School for which the local authority is seeking views from parents, carers, staff and local residents. It is a proposal for consideration.

Questions were invited from the floor.

Question	Answer
During a recent meeting local authority colleagues categorically said that Furness School was closing.	It is a proposal, and I would like to emphasise that no decision has been taken to close the school. The EYPS Cabinet Member will formally consider the proposal, taking into account any comments received during the consultation period. The Cabinet Member decision will be taken by 23 April, with a Public Notice being issued on 15 May for 4 weeks. If a Public Notice is issued, the decision on whether the school should close will be made by KCC's Cabinet Member and the school will close in August 2015.
The deficit budget did not happen overnight, so why was the school re-designated in September 2014, offering an additional 60 places for pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder.	A high percentage of the children on roll at Furness had a primary need of ASD. It was decided that the school would be more appropriately designated to serve the needs of pupils with ASD. It appears the previous poor reputation of school remains and so it has continued to operate with low numbers. Potentially 24 children could have been accommodated at Furness but for one reason or another, parents have decided to send their children elsewhere.
Why was Lilac Sky instructed not to take any children for a year when the school budget is generated by pupils on roll and now the	I acknowledge the decision made at the time. Lilac Sky restricted the number of pupils coming into the school to allow standards to

school is faced with a massive deficit.

The school has low numbers following redesignation but 5-6 months on, parents are still not offered Furness as an option.

improve, following the Ofsted report in May 2012 which put the school in Special Measures.

Furness can only admit pupils subject to a SEN statement. The needs of the child have to be determined and discussed with the parents to assess suitability. The parents have a right to say where they wish their children to go and on numerous occasions when asked to consider Furness School, parents indicated a preference to Laleham Gap, or an alternative special school.

Paul Farthing, Parent

My son has attended Furness School for 7 months and it's changed him in so many ways. We had several schools in mind for Kieran but many had no places or deemed unsuitable for him so Furness was our last option. We were aware of the serious problems the school had encountered but after visiting Furness were convinced that it was the right school for our son.

Unfortunately if you 'Google' Furness School you get various reports which highlight the issues of the 'old days' which is unfair and irrelevant now. I think given a chance and the relevant direction and promotion, the school are well placed to thrive in going forward.

You said potentially 24 pupils had been offered the school but refused places. Had they been informed of the good progress school is making and how different it is now.

Local Resident

KCC are saying that they are proposing to close the school because of a deficit budget of £1.6m and the impact on funding as fewer children are attending Furness. When Lilac Sky took over the school's budget had a surplus and the school roll which is now 31, had over 100 pupils on it. Lilac Sky stopped admitting children for over a year, surely that will have had an impact.

The school was re-designated to meet the pressure for Autism Spectrum Disorder places and better serve the needs of the pupils. At that time parents would have been reassured of the progress the school was making, in terms of recovery but unfortunately families talk to other families, undertake research to get more information and in doing so, many have decided not to send their children to Furness.

The level of pupils attending Furness has been reducing for some time which we have ascertained is mainly attributed to loss of confidence among parents who have chosen to place their children in other schools. In August 2012 the decision was taken not to admit any new pupils for a year as the school looked to improve standards, behaviour and safeguarding. The school was re-designated in September 2014 to try and address the increased need for ASD provision, however, due to its poor reputation and parental choice it has been unsuccessful in increasing pupil numbers to a level that makes the school financially viable.

KCC entered into a contract with Lilac Sky to provide leadership and management support to the school. They continue to work with KCC and the IEB to improve standards, and doing so the school is now Requires

	Improvement
Ev Dunil	Improvement.
Ex-Pupil I am an ex-pupil of the school and am disgusted how this has been handled. Thanks to this school for making me the man I am today. The school needs the backing of KCC as there are a lot of people who would benefit from attending this school.	Thank you for your statement.
Staff The school was re-designated in September 2014. Do KCC consider that a reasonable amount of time for school to change. Staff	The evidence proves there is a need for ASD provision in this area and by re-designating the school KCC felt numbers would increase. Unfortunately that has not happened. I don't know off hand. Apologies, I cannot
As you represent KCC at this meeting, how many boarders do the school currently have. You are the head of SEN and have come here tonight with a proposal to discontinue the school, surely you must have this information.	remember every school I deal with.
Well we currently have 8 boarders, near to capacity, with 3 day boarders wanting to attend and others enquiring about provision. In January we had 3 parents not only interested in the school but also in boarding. I am sure you will see that from September 2014 the trend is going upwards.	
Staff We are being told that in September 2014 KCC were unaware that the school budget was in deficit. Surely there are control mechanisms in place to ensure this does not happen. KCC must have been aware of the situation.	KCC does not have a way of predicting the level of vacancies. Action was taken last year, through re-designation, to try and increase the number of pupils attending the Furness. The responses to the consultation last year did not indicate any concern about parents perception of the provision.
Will the public be allowed to see the type of figures involved as there isn't that level of detail in the consultation document.	Enquiries will be made to see if some figures can be made available.
How much does it cost to send a high needs pupil to another establishment in the county or out of the county.	The cost varies, dependant on whether the provision is Kent maintained, from the independent sector or need type. If the local authority is unable to support a pupil then the independent sector is looked at through the procurement system. It is quality assured to ensure best price is sought for the child.
Staff Surely by placing pupils out of county, the costs rack up. Surely it has to be more cost effective to keep the pupils here at Furness. We just need help in re-branding the school to promote facilities and increase numbers.	The maintained sector is cheaper and better value for money. It very much depends on who runs the school, i.e. a Charity or the Priory Group (the latter being very expensive). Unfortunately parents seem unwilling to send their children to Furness and the school has a deficit of £1.6m which you cannot get away from.
You keep talking about the deficit and lack of pupils at the school. Is KCC looking at other options rather than just closing the school.	Unfortunately it is not just about balancing the budget and what we do with the £1.6m deficit. The needs for specialist provision for

How will you recoup the money once the school has closed. What about refurbishing the school to make it more attractive to parents.

ASD continues to rise but unfortunately it's persuading parents to send their children here. Due to the low pupil numbers being experienced the viability of the school comes into question. KCC are looking at alternative options even at this late stage.

The methodology for funding high needs pupils changed to Place Plus funding from April 2013 and this resulted in the majority of funding being linked to individual pupils needs type and the months they are on school roll. Place Plus funding only guarantees £10,000 per annum per place. The remaining funding then fluctuates during the year depending on the actual numbers of pupils on roll. Issues surrounding Ofsted and safeguarding have led to reduced pupil numbers and this situation is going to be difficult to reverse.

Why didn't the proposal to re-designate identify funding issues as the school is now left with a huge deficit. The school were not permitted to admit pupils during 2013/14 and then there was a change in funding policy. The staff have worked extremely hard to turn school around and now we are faced with a deficit of £1.6m and closure.

Reluctance of parents to place children here still exists today. We thought numbers would increase following re-designation but this has not happened. The school's reputation was damaged following the Ofsted report and in order to raise standards a decision was taken not to admit pupils for one year. KCC are not disputing that staff have not worked hard for the school.

Paul Farthing, Parent

Parents of children and young people with special education needs have a choice where their child is educated.

There's been lots of details on finance and I personally feel that the school has been set up to fail financially in that year.

It was evident from the SEND strategy that parents wanted the broadest range of provision available for their children, including mainstream, special schools and if appropriate out of county.

When my wife and I originally visited the school we had a positive meeting with the where she hiahliahted principles underpinning the way the school was working and that the school was hoping to build numbers. She answered all our questions regarding the schools funding position and was clearly confident that things were set up for the medium/long term. Clearly they were not. The need for this school was obviously prior to re-designation and in January this year 3 prospective parents made enquiries to the school. I do not know how many children currently attend the school but I know that the school deserves a chance. Write the £1.6m deficit off, give the school a promotional push and try to attract some of the pupils currently educated outside of Kent to this school. Noone asked me if I wanted Furness, Kieran loves his school so why aren't KCC pushing Furness more to keep this school open.

The SEND strategy also acknowledged more places were need for pupils with autism spectrum disorder but unfortunately parents have chosen not to send their children to Furness.

Lilac Sky has worked with KCC and the IEB to improve standards, acquiring an Ofsted judgement of Requires Improvement. With the re-designation and this upward trend we were hoping more parents would be convinced to send their children here. Unfortunately that has not happened so funding remains low.

Staff

At the time of re-designation there were over 100 children on roll with ASD, BESN and ADHD needs. I cannot understand that since re-designation the number of children coming to Furness has fallen so dramatically that we now have a school with no children which is not financially viable. Perhaps the consultation around re-designation was not extensive enough.

KCC consulted fully with parents, carers and pupils on the re-designation of Furness School.

We worked with the Kent Parent Carer Forum to gather views on the services provided. Roadshows and information events were held across Kent and the forum undertook a number of surveys of parents which they shared with us to illustrate what parents would like to see put in place.

Resident

what it stands for.

The consultation document is completely wrong as the building is not an old Manor House it was an Orphanage for boys and has had children here for over 60 years. The Governing Body was disbanded, why? Pupil numbers have halved despite the fact that there is a great need for this school and

Do you feel you are discriminating children with ASD in West Kent by not providing a school similar to Laleham Gap in East Kent.

In West Kent we are not discriminating, quite the reverse. By re-designating Furness to an ASD establishment we were intending to offer an equivalent education to Laleham Gap. Unfortunately parental choice and the decision not to send their children to this establishment have demonstrated that Furness isn't considered equivalent.

Staff

I understand that a child who currently boards at Furness school has been offered a place at a school in Shropshire which means the boy will be travelling from Folkestone in Kent to Shropshire. Is that correct. I can appreciate the school is in deficit but cannot see how the county is saving money by sending pupils out of Kent for an education.

Sorry I cannot comment on individual cases that I am unaware of. We have to look at the options available to parents and pupils according to their need type and suitability.

If KCC are conducting a public consultation like this then I think you need to be aware of issues such as this.

Sorry KCC are not aware of this particular case but accepts it is a valid point. Parents have a huge say in finding the most suitable placement for their children and sometimes the independent sector is the most appropriate. KCC is not always in a position to dictate where children with special education needs go.

Staff

We had prospective parents visiting the school in January were they told of the decision to go out to public consultation on 4 February on the future of Furness School.

We had a new child start at Furness a couple of weeks ago, so why was this allowed if the The County Council and the Interim Executive Board agreed to launch a public consultation.

Parents have a choice. If a parent wishes to send their child to Furness School we cannot stop them, even if at the end of the consultation period a decision is taken to

school is due to close by August 2015.	close the school.
What efforts have KCC made to promote Furness School. They have done nothing and allowed this to happen.	Unfortunately, it's down to parental preference.
The changes in funding have impacted hugely on the school and we would have expected someone to look at long term financial strategies to overcome this. I have worked at the school for 2 years and have seen no plans to develop or maximise its potential. It seems that no-one externally seems to take responsibility and has allowed school to go into deficit.	
I think you are probably aware, the staff are passionate about the school, it is not just a job for them. The staff have jumped through hoops to try and improve standards from Special Measures to Requires Improvement and prior to re-designation the school was over-subscribed. KCC changed the status of the school and since then numbers have fallen, the anticipated pupils have not come, therefore, Kent must accept their mistake and not put the blame on our shoulders.	There is nothing in the consultation document to imply that it is the fault of the staff. If you feel like that, then I am sorry you have the wrong impression. No-one is attaching blame. The authority acknowledges responsibility.
Ex-Pupil I have ASD and BESN and left the school 6½ years ago. I think the school is the best school with fully qualified teachers to help people like me. The school has undergone massive change. I love and cherish this school with all my heart and it must stay open. Money is one thing but the pupils, hearts and souls and compassion are important so you must listen to what we say.	Thank you.
A lot has been said about parents perception and choice but I cannot understand why we were never asked what we wanted, we never had a choice. Furness was the only school available to us. Someone mentioned a pupil being offered a place in Shropshire which is very upsetting for both the parents and child alike. We held a summer party here and all the students who left now have work placements and I wonder how many schools can say that. Its pupil's lives we are talking about.	
There has been a lot of discussion about the budget but what about the income from students who board. Prior to re-designation the school had over 100 students and a Headteacher. Lilac Sky were contracted to provide a Principal and leadership and	Enquires to be made as to whether figures can be released.

management support but at what cost. Could the figures be made available to the public.	
If Furness should close, KCC are now recommending that the needs of many ASD pupils can be met in a mainstream environment. Pupils with ASD can find changes to their environment challenging, taking longer to adjust than many mainstream pupils. I have visited a unit and seen classes of 30+ pupils with no SEN qualified teachers teaching. By closing this school I do not feel the students will get a sufficiently good education in mainstream schools/units.	For some pupils an alternative Special School will be most appropriate. The units are aimed at pupils who are capable of achieving academic success in mainstream schools. These pupils are sometimes described as high functioning ASD. As an authority we will take the broadest possible view, so that includes looking at the independent and non-maintained sector and neighbouring authorities to ensure that pupils needs are met.
KCC entered into a contract with Lilac Sky to help improve standards. Following a second Ofsted inspection in 2013, the school was judged to be requiring improvement and currently still is. If Lilac Sky has not fulfilled their contractual obligations, has termination of the contract been considered.	Lilac Sky is contracted to KCC to provide a Principal and leadership & management support.
Is it correct that the ex KCC Director of Education is now the Managing Director of Lilac Sky.	I cannot confirm whether or not this is the case. I genuinely do not know the answer to that question.
Why didn't the proposal to re-designate highlight the funding issues.	The whole purpose of the re-designation was to try to address those funding issues. There is a need for more ASD provision across Kent and the proposal to re-designate related to the demand for places. The responses to the consultation did not indicate that the parents had any concerns about placement at Furness school. In fact we felt re-designation would fill the school and make it more viable.
If at the end of the consultation period a decision is taken not to close the school, will consideration be given to updating the website, promotion of school to prospective parents and strategic support. Have you looked at ways of keeping our school open.	We have tried academisation and redesignation in an attempt to attract more parents to the school. If the school remained open then of course we would be looking to re-market the school to make it more attractive to parents.
Over the last 2 years there does not appear to have been any attempt to look creatively at developing the school and maximising its physical aspects. If the case for closure is financial, can you demonstrate that all options have been exhausted and all business plans have been explored to give a realistic assessment of whether or not the school is viable. I do not think you have. Once Lilac Sky is out of the way I think a long term strategy can be looked into supporting the school. Perhaps Mr Farthing could be on the governing body.	

Mr Farthing, Parent I still have not received a reply to my 4 page letter. My view is that KCC, the IEB and SEN have seriously let Furness School down due to the lack of strategic approach, relevant support and genuine promotion of what it is doing now and not recognising its true full potential. Whose responsibility is it to fill this school with pupils.	Kent County Council has a contract with Lilac Sky to provide the post of Principal but the overall responsibility is Kent County Council.
There are a lot of people with various ideas of how to support the school. We have different facilities to offer and different ideas to suggest but no one is listening to us.	If the school remains open there will be an opportunity to look at the good ideas that have been suggested.
If the school remains open these options will be looked at. Why aren't they being explored now in an attempt to raise revenue like could the spare boarding accommodation be utilized in any way.	Options have been and continue to be explored to try and support the school. In so far as the boarding facilities are concerned, unfortunately the County Council is not able to operate in the same way as independent sector.
In the Public Consultation document it refers to the poor reputation of the school and that it continues to operate below capacity. That judgement was done on old way of teaching but there is nothing on the consultation document about the positive steps being undertaken. Things are progressing in terms of pupils performance improving but there is no mention of this in your documentation.	Apologies if the statement in the Public Consultation document is factually incorrect but there are negatives. I thought the positives were recognised in the document but obviously you disagree. We try to concentrate on the facts but I am sorry if you feel this.
Do you accept that the IEB are responsible for the deficit. I feel the officer responsible should be subject to a disciplinary for running our school into the ground but no they've all moved on to better jobs. I am not aware of any of them being disciplined.	I said that KCC has the overall responsibility for the school. KCC manage the school and therefore is responsible for the financial situation.
If you do shut the school how are you going to get your money back then. If we close are you going to sell the land for housing to help recoup costs.	I do not know is the honest answer. There is no intention at the moment to sell off the land. The population continues to rise and the need for school places is increasing therefore, my advice to KCC would be to retain the site for educational purposes as it may be required in the future.
Are you saying that this site will remain as a school. Yes or no that is all that we are asking. That is your advice so it could be sold off for housing.	There is a need to provide sufficient school places for all children and that at the moment is one of the biggest challenges for KCC. My advice would be to retain the site for educational purposes so it could not be sold off to a developer. It has NOT been a consideration behind
Furness School is doing a fantastic job and is part of the community, something that is now sadly lacking. KCC have embarked on	these proposals. As part of the regulations around these proposals, KCC are required to provide an offer of an alternative place.

a consultation process to close the school and parents are being offered alternative placements.	
Staff are being approached by parents wanting to move their children now, regardless of the results of the consultation. Parents are unhappy about the uncertainty and want to move the children now as feel it will be less unsettling.	The conversations we are having with parents is about their options if the closure goes ahead, simply their options. There are some children whose circumstances may be changing regardless of these proposals so we are looking at alternative schools. If parents are unhappy with the uncertainly and want to look at options we would be happy to have those conversation but at the moment we are pushing that as this is merely a consultation at this moment in time.
If this is a public consultation and the decision has not been made, why were we told on 2 February by Deborah Bruce and Ian Watts that the school would be closing. Why were we told to advise the children on Tuesday that school was shutting. Parents have been feeding back that during phone calls they were told it was shutting. Why are Y10 pupils being moved out before Easter if the school is not closing, as all the evidence suggests that the decision has already been made.	
No, why did you tell us that the school was shutting and not that this was a consultation. I think if we spoke to everyone at the meeting the words were the school is closing. Words were not used that it is a consultation. So basically you are accusing all staff of being liars.	Referring back to pre-consultation meeting with staff attended by Deborah and I the opening line was that it was a proposal and views were being sought. We met with all staff and it was clear that this was a proposal and that a decision had not been made. We worked through the timelines at the second meeting with staff, showing the different time periods.
	The opening meeting was billed as a preconsultation meeting and that it was a proposal.
	There is a difference of opinion on this. It is a proposal and no decision has been taken. This point has been reiterated a number of times.
I understand that there is a special needs school in Tower Hamlets that is keen to engage with KCC to try and retain a school in the Hextable area.	I am not aware of that approach.
	Thank you for your views expressed here this evening. I am aware that not everyone will be entirely happy with the responses they have received. We have tried to be as open with you as possible and all the comments are recorded as part of the decision making process. I would urge you

	all to submit your responses to
Mr Farthing Is the meeting recorded. If so, could a copy of the meeting be made available to us. It seems the only way to keep the school open is to get more pupils. Can I have a plan or strategy of how KCC intend to do this as it is the only way this will happen. I want to know how, what and when the changes will happen. There is a suggestion that if this is not put in place before the deadline, then there is only one decision.	
Could we have copies of the strategies of what you have tried already and failed as you said you have looked at other avenues. We could take a look and try to promote our school in a more positive way. Where are the 70+ pupils previously at the school went and where the BESD pupils now attend school	Most of the children moved to independent sector or Kent maintained provision. What is available in West Kent is Rowhill, both primary and secondary provision. Our strategy is about getting children into local schools, perhaps a mainstream, unit or special school and where we opening new schools we are opening specialist provision alongside those schools.
BESD pupils do not sit very well with mainstream school. 70+ pupils with BESD seem to have disappeared, don't know where they have gone. At vast cost those 70 children were moved out. Lilac Sky were brought in to recover the school and it was due to convert to Academy status. Why didn't that happen.	I don't know where they went as it all happened before I was here. I can reassure you that they were moved somewhere to match their statements as there are not 70 children out of school. Following the Ofsted inspection in 2012 the school was placed in Special Measures. KCC entered into a contract with Lilac Sky to provide management support to the school with the aim of converting to academy status. Despite levels of ASD pupils the school became financially unviable. Due to the severity of the budget position Lilac Sky withdrew their interest in sponsoring Furness as they believe it is no longer financially stable. They are continuing to provide managerial support to the school, under contract to KCC.
You are proposing to spend £8.3m on new schools but you can't invest in this school at a lower cost and greater need for children.	It is a valid point. Funding for new school places, given by central government can only be used for new school places and cannot be re-invested into an existing school.
If you rebranded the school as new school, closed Furness with a new name the parents would be looking at a brand new school with 30+ trained staff and I am sure people would come with new facilities and a lot cheaper than £8.3m to build a new school	We can only use the funding for specific things. It would not be a new school, it would be a re-branded school. If it were possible, it would have been done.