

CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

18 December 2008 at 6.00 p.m.

Panel Members present E. Hughes (Chair)
B. Cassidy
K. Chambers
H. Khan
M. Munir
E. Pitt
C. Towe

Non-Elected Voting Members

Alan McDevitt Parent Governor
Ken Yeates Church of England Schools
representative

Non-Elected Non-Voting Members

Bob Grainger Secondary School Teacher
Representative

Other Elected Members present

L. Beeley
D. Pitt
M. Pitt
I. Shires
B. Tweddle

Officers present

Karen Adderley Executive Director – Children's
David Brown Services
Louise Hughes Assistant Director – Universal
Services
Susan Lupton Head of Planning & Development
Services – Walsall Children's
Services, Serco
Sue Wedgwood Assistant Managing Director –
Walsall Children's Services, Serco
Craig Goodall Scrutiny Officer
Angela Walker Scrutiny Officer

Invited witnesses

Dr. S Sweeney Head teacher – Sneyd Community
School

69/08 APOLOGIES

Apologies were submitted on behalf of Councillor M Bird, Councillor R Martin, Paul Williams and Evelyn Chawira for the duration of the meeting.

70/08 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

71/08 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest and party whip for the duration of the meeting.

72/08 MINUTES

It was requested that all references to a 'co-opted trust', in the minutes for the meeting that took place on 20 November 2008, be amended to read 'co-operative trust'.

Resolved

That the minutes, as amended, of the meeting held on 20 November 2008 and 5 December 2008, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

73/08 FORWARD PLAN

Members noted the forward plan dated 8 December 2008.

74/08 REVIEW OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS: THE FUTURE OF SNEYD COMMUNITY – A SPECIALIST MATHS AND COMPUTING COLLEGE

The Chair welcomed those present to this, the second meeting to consider the options for the future of Sneyd Community School (Sneyd). The Chair reminded those present that the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel was not a formal decision making body, therefore it could only make recommendations to Cabinet who would consider the Panel's recommendations when making their decision. The Chair explained that public participation during this meeting would be minimal to allow the Panel to consider all of the options and have a full discussion. To commence the discussion, the Chair asked Sue Wedgwood, Assistant Managing Director of Walsall Children's Services – Serco to talk through the options report.

Sue Wedgwood explained that the options within the report needed to be considered within the wider context of the strategy for change and that all implications given within the report were general. The Panel heard a brief summary of each of the options given in the report. Following the options being outlined, the Chair invited Members of the Panel to comment.

A Member expressed disappointment that the options as outlined in the report to Scrutiny were not provided in the original report to Cabinet. David Brown responded that each option given in the latest report would impact on other schools in the borough and would have implications on their numbers. It was therefore important to investigate these options more fully. The Member added that a further issue with the report was that it did not refer to the specific wards affected, these should have been listed, as it was raised at the last meeting.

A co-opted member enquired regarding the option of the engineering academy and asked how far this had progressed. In response, David Brown stated that discussions had taken place, however these were early stages and expressions of interest were not being sought. This option would be considered as part of the wider strategy for change.

In response to a co-opted Member's question, Susan Lupton explained that there had been a significant decline in the numbers on roll at Sneyd over a period of years and that one form of entry was being lost year on year. The Co-opted Member commented that the reduction in numbers should not have been a surprise, due to the low birth rates for these years. David Brown stated that some schools attract pupils across boundaries and it was therefore not possible to predict numbers accurately based solely on an areas birth rates.

A Member enquired regarding the strategy for schools in the borough. Sue Wedgwood explained that Building Schools for the Future (BSF) and Primary Capital Programme (PCP) funding strategies were linked and that the Sneyd options have been considered in association with wider strategies.

Members discussed the implications of the available options outlined in the report. A Member stated that the opening of the Walsall Academy has had an impact on schools across the borough and that it would be preferable to have a clear plan for the future of schools in the borough, rather than dealing with each in a reactive, case-by-case, manner.

The Chair stated that there were a number of difficulties in considering the options. It was not easy to predict the numbers of pupils a school would attract and the catchment area of a school could depend on how successful the school was. The fortune of a school could depend on a successful head teacher retiring for example. It was important to consider the options in light of BSF and tough decisions would need to be made to ensure children get the best education possible.

A co-opted member expressed the opinion that pupils at Sneyd should not have to travel miles to attend a new school. He stated that the results achieved by academies were due to a reduction in the number of children receiving free school meals at those schools. Raising attainment for children from deprived backgrounds should receive more resource. He added that it was important to create provision close to where people live and by closing a school, the wrong message is sent to those children attending the school. Academies impact on other local schools and even if an academy was the only option for Sneyd, he could not support this option due to concerns that a two-tier education system would be created in the borough. He continued by suggesting that the Panel should recommend that Sneyd does not close and a coherent plan for education in the borough should be established.

The Chair invited Dr Sean Sweeney to respond to the reports presented to the Panel. Dr Sweeney stated that the school were proud of parts of the Ofsted report and were embarrassed about other parts of it. However, none of the points raised in the report had been a surprise as it had been based on 2007 results. Dr Sweeney explained that the school was braced for a special measures category but actually received a notice to improve, which demonstrates some capacity to improve. The school now had 12-16 months to "get its act together". Dr Sweeney stated that the threat of closure had been an inordinate pressure and that through the whole process, the school has had to keep running. As far as the school was concerned, Dr Sweeney stated that closure in 2015 was not an option as this would be a worse deal for the children. Instead, this opportunity should be seized to create something better.

Concerning the options report, Dr Sweeney stated that option B, downsizing the school, was not viable, and should be rejected as it would limit the options for the pupils, furthermore the school would not be able to provide the necessary curriculum. Option C, the National Challenge Trust would be of interest to the school, should a partner be identified. Dr Sweeney stated that he was very excited about option D, an academy, and had already identified a potential sponsor in the Ormiston Trust. The proposed academy at Sneyd would be for the local community and would not adapt the same principles as the Walsall Academy. In terms of option E, a federation, Dr Sweeney stated that this would require more interrogation and refinement but in principle, this option would improve the life chances of local children.

A Member stated that it was important to ensure the admissions policy of any planned academy included local children and that there was a concern over the governance arrangements of academies. Members agreed that governance arrangements for academies should be properly addressed and managed. Dr Sweeney responded that the school had examined several sponsors, including Grace Academy, Mercers, Ormiston and other contacts and that the governing body had voted unanimously for Ormiston. Dr Sweeney stated that he was working hard to protect staff employed at Sneyd. A further option being considered was the possibility of bringing a primary school onto the Sneyd site, running alongside a smaller 11-18 provision.

In response to a Co-opted Member's question, Dr Sweeney stated that the Ormiston Trust currently work with Sheffield and therefore the school governors were familiar with their values. The Panel were informed that, for example, Ormiston Trust had paid for uniforms for all pupils at Sheffield and that pupils had had a say in the design of the uniforms. Dr Sweeney stated that an academy was very much the school's preferred option as it provided a quick fix and gave the opportunity to rebrand the school. The school had not considered the option of a co-operative trust.

A Member stated that at the last meeting, officers had been tasked with looking at the option of a co-operative trust for Sneyd and it was disappointing that this had not been included in the options report. Sue Wedgwood responded that she was not familiar with the co-operative trust model, however she had heard of instances of a variety of partners forming a trust. The Panel agreed that officers should investigate the option of a co-operative trust and should provide more detail in a report to the next meeting.

The Chair opened the discussion to the local and surrounding ward Members who had been invited to the meeting. A ward Member stated that this was a difficult task and that it would have been interesting to hear the Executive's views on secondary school provision in the borough. Closure should not be an option, regeneration in the borough aims to halt the decline and if the reduction in the population is arrested, these school places would be required in the future.

A ward Member stated that there was no political will to close the school and that the Panel should be looking to provide an intelligent input to Cabinet on the options available. He suggested that perhaps this could be best achieved via the formation of a working group to examine the issue more thoroughly. Another ward Member expressed his agreement with this suggestion and stated that it had been a positive sign that the potential closure of Sneyd had not been in the local media recently. The ward Member stated that he would like to see an academy catering for local children at Sneyd.

The Panel then entered into a discussion, the main points ensuing being:

- the closure of Sneyd should no longer be an option and that the Panel should resolve that option A, closure, be taken off the table
- a good local school for local children was required
- a quick fix academy was not necessarily the solution for providing education for the borough and that the academy would have a knock on effect on other schools
- A strategic plan for education in the borough was required
- making a decision on an individual school would cause a requirement for subsequent similar decisions to be made in the future
- there maybe the possibility for making a downsized school work
- the Panel should act quickly but not in haste
- consultation with local people on the options was important and that any consultation should contain appropriate questions and information and should be carried out within suitable timescales

The following resolution was proposed:

The Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel recommends to Cabinet that options A and B, as set out in the options report dated 18 December 2008, are deleted as possible options for Sneyd Community School, and that options C, D and E along with the additional option of a co-operative trust are investigated further

An amendment was then proposed:

The Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel recommends to Cabinet that option A, as set out in the options report dated 18 December 2008, be deleted as a possible option for Sneyd Community School, and that options B, C, D and E along with the additional option of a co-operative trust are investigated further

A vote was taken on proposed amendment, the result of which was 1 in favour, 7 against. The original resolution was therefore considered and passed with 7 in favour and 1 abstention from Alan McDevitt.

Members then discussed the formation of a working group to examine in more detail the options for Sneyd. The following was agreed:

- A working group to be formed consisting of one representative from each of the political groups from the full Panel
- The working group to meet during the first week in January
- Officers of Walsall Children's Services – Serco and Walsall Council Children's Services be in attendance
- Dr Sweeney to be invited to the meeting
- The working group was tasked with exploring the remaining options as resolved

Councillors Chris Towe, Barbara Cassidy and Eileen Pitt were nominated as Members of the working group and Councillor Chris Towe was appointed as Lead Member.

RESOLVED:

That:

- a) Officers should investigate the option of a co-operative trust and provide more detail in a report to the next meeting relating to Sneyd Community School;**
- b) the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel recommends to Cabinet that options A and B, as set out in the options report dated 18 December 2008, are deleted as possible options for Sneyd Community School, and that options C, D and E along with the additional option of a co-operative trust are investigated further;**

and;

- c) a Sneyd working group be formed to meet during the first week in January to examine the remaining options for Sneyd Community School as per resolution (a) and to present its recommendations to the full Panel at an early meeting to take place prior to the Cabinet of 14 January 2009.**

74/08 UPDATE ON BUILDING SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE AND PRIMARY CAPITAL PROGRAMME (PCP)

Louise Hughes explained that it had been agreed that the Panel would receive a verbal update on progress with Building Schools for the Future (BSF) and the Primary Capital Programme (PCP) on a regular basis. Walsall was currently at the pre-engagement stage and the development of a strategy for change was underway, along with consultation with Head teachers and other stakeholders. The strategy for change was still a working document at this stage and an editorial working group was in place to oversee its development. There had been a Member's appointment board during the day to appoint a BSF Project Director. The first meeting of the project board took place on 28 November 2008.

Louise Hughes reported to the Panel that the Secondary Head teachers forum was being consulted to seek an advisor to the BSF programme.

In response to a Co-opted Member's question, Karen Adderley stated that all health and safety considerations as part of the programme were being dealt with and to a high standard.

The meeting terminated at 7.45 p.m.

Chair:

Date: