

Lancashire County Council

Education Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the Meeting held on Friday 25 January 2013 at 10.30 am in Cabinet Room 'D' - County Hall, Preston

Present:

County Councillor Mrs Pat Case (Chair)

County Councillors

Mrs R Blow	A Jones
K Brown	Y Motala
W Cropper*	C Wells
P Evans	M Younis
P Hayhurst**	

Co-opted members

Mrs Janet Hamid, Representing Parent Governors
(Secondary)
Fred Kershaw, Representing CE Schools
John Withington, Representing Parent Governors
(Primary)

*County Councillor W Cropper replaced County Councillor S Fishwick for this meeting

**County Councillor P Hayhurst replaced County Councillor S Riches for this meeting

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from County Councillors S Derwent, C Grunshaw and A Kay, and Mr K Wales

2. Disclosure of Pecuniary and Non Pecuniary Interests

Mr Kershaw declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 3 – Out Rawcliffe Church of England Primary School, as an employee of the Diocese of Blackburn

It was clarified that the land for the school was originally given to the Church for the purposes of education, and that if the school closed, the property would revert back to the original owner or descendants.

3. Out Rawcliffe Church of England Primary School

The Chair welcomed County Councillor Susie Charles, Cabinet Member for Children and Schools; Bob Stott, Director for Universal and Early Support Services, Directorate for Children and Young People; Lynne Mappin, Head of Capital and Provision Planning, Directorate for Children and Young People; County Councillor Vivian Taylor; Councillor Alison Metcalfe, Out Rawcliffe Parish Councillor; and Peter Jones, Head of Governors, Out Rawcliffe Church of England School.

The Committee was reminded of the purpose of the meeting, being to consider whether the Cabinet member for Children and Schools should be invited to reconsider her decision made on 11 January 2013 to discontinue Out Rawcliffe Church of England Primary School on 31 August (to "call in" the decision). The meeting had been called following a request signed by five County Councillors, named in the report.

Councillor Taylor was invited to put the case for the call in. Supported by Councillor Metcalfe and Mr Jones, the following points were made in support of the view that the decision should be reconsidered:

- The closure of the school would have a significant impact on the community, and the decision had not taken account of the important links between the school and the community
- There was concern that the Cabinet Member had not seen all of the evidence in coming to her decision, most notably the 396 responses to the initial consultation and the petition. In addition, it was suggested that the council had not made clear how the consultation process would work and that the large number of responses made to the initial consultation had not be carried forward and taken into account in the second formal consultation stage.
- It was felt that the proposals for the "Forest School" had not been given due consideration. It was also felt that there had been a lack of clarity from the county council on the issue of the school establishing a federation, in that the council had not responded to the proposals made to form a "soft" federation, and had not made it clear that only a "hard" federation would be considered sufficient in the circumstances.
- The issue of the creation of a nursery was also raised, and it was suggested that the council's assertion that there were "no plans" were incorrect, and that plans, although temporarily on hold due to the uncertainty surrounding the future of the school, had got to an advanced stage.
- Attention was drawn to plans for at least 14 new homes in the village and 18 in the wider area.
- The most convenient alternative school, Hambleton, was oversubscribed, and other schools in the area may not be appropriate for denominational or geographical reasons.
- There was confidence among the Governors that the soft federation proposals would be sustainable and benefit the children at the schools.

- It was argued that the current position of the school could be traced back to 2009, when around 20 pupils were withdrawn from the school by parents following events at the school which have not been properly explained to the community.

In response, the Cabinet Member confirmed that the consultation process had been carried out fully in accordance with DfE guidance, and that the process had been widely and openly communicated. It was additionally confirmed that all responses to the initial consultation, including the petition, had been considered at the decision making session on 27 September, at which the decision was taken to proceed to issue the Statutory notices.

It was also highlighted that the decision had been delayed to allow the school more time to develop its federation proposals.

The committee were advised about the process and the factors taken into account in reaching the decision.

- Discussion had begun with Governors in June 2011, demonstrating that this had not been a decision taken without proper consideration and engagement.
- The decision was an objective one based on quality, standards of achievement and pupil numbers.
- Significant extra support and resources were put into the school during the period that its future was under review. The school was in deficit and was not able to function on its own budget. Pupil number had remained low for several years, and this indicated that community links with the school were not strong, although it was acknowledged that some church based activities involving the school took place.
- Out Rawcliffe was the only school in the area to receive a "satisfactory" rating in its latest Ofsted inspection. All other schools in the area were rated "good" or "outstanding", and all but one had significant excess capacity.
- It was confirmed that there was a general presumption against the closure of rural school, but that given the lack of financial viability, the Ofsted rating and the failure of the school to increase numbers even with extra resource and support, the decision to proceed with the process of considering closure was made.
- The full statutory process for consultation was explained, and the list of consultees was provided.

The committee then discussed the issue, and the following issues were raised:

- An issue within the school in 2009 had been dealt with in full accordance with proper processes. Whilst it had been suggested that this had been the main cause behind the current low numbers, it was also noted that numbers had shown no sign of increasing at any point since.
- It was confirmed that there were a total of 238 empty places in nearby schools, and even if those of different denominations were excluded, the

number of excess spaces was still significant. There was some discussion of which schools were likely to be preferred by children from Out Rawcliffe, based on historic al community links.

- The committee noted that the assumption used for modelling for future pupils based on new housing developments was 0.35 pupils per new house. It was suggested that up to 70 new houses would be built in the surrounding area in the next 5 years. It was however, suggested that this would not increase numbers significantly, as those children would be likely to attend a range of schools.
- Members noted that the proposed soft federation would be between schools 26 miles apart. Although reassurances were given, concerns remained about the viability of the arrangement. Members also clarified that the Council had requested proposals for a hard federation, and had received an alternative proposal for a soft federation. The committee accepted that the council had acted reasonable in not seeking to further request proposals for a Hard federation given this response from the Governors.
- Members were satisfied that all of the responses to the consultations had been given full consideration by the Cabinet Member.

It was moved that the Cabinet Member for Children and Schools be requested to reconsider the decision made on 11 January 2013 to discontinue Out Rawcliffe Church of England Primary School on 31 August 2013. No seconder was forthcoming.

It was then moved and seconded that the Cabinet Member for Children and Schools not be requested to reconsider the decision made on 11 January 2013 to discontinue Out Rawcliffe Church of England Primary School on 31 August 2013.

The motion was put to the vote and carried, and it was therefore:

Resolved: That the Cabinet Member for Children and Schools not be requested to reconsider the decision made on 11 January 2013 to discontinue Out Rawcliffe Church of England Primary School on 31 August 2013.

4. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business for discussion at the meeting.

5. Date of the Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee will be held on Tuesday 12 March 2013 at 2pm at County Hall, Preston.

County Hall, Preston

I M Fisher
County Secretary and Solicitor