

MINUTES of the meeting of School Organisation Committee held at Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Wednesday, 26th May, 2004 at 3.00 p.m.

Present: Councillor J.P. Thomas (Chairman)
Councillor J. Stone (Vice Chairman)
Councillor Mrs M.D. Lloyd-Hayes

Mr. A. Curless (Learning and Skills Council), Mr. C. Jones (Roman Catholic Church Representative) , Mrs. J. McColl (School Governor - Primary), Mrs. K. Rooke (School Governor - Special) and Mr. P. Williams (School Governor – Primary)

In attendance: Councillor D.W. Rule (Cabinet Member - Education) and Councillor B.F. Ashton.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor J. Stone, Mr H. Cullen – Special Education Group and Rev. I. Terry.

2. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Rev. P Towner was a substitute for Rev. I. Terry.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 23 October 2003 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

5. ANNUAL REVIEW OF SCHOOL ORGANISATION PLAN

The Head of Policy and Resources (Education) updated Members on the School Organisation Plan and reminded the Committee that the report was an annual update and not a full plan. Members were also presented with revised statistical data for pupil rolls in primary schools and housing allocations for Hereford City, the market towns and main villages as set out in the draft Unitary Development Plan (UDP).

Members were addressed on the continued fall in primary numbers. The Head of Policy and Resources (Education) stated that the fall in the pupil roll was under regular review. He also drew the Committees attention to the number of primary schools in rural areas with less than 100 pupils.

Despite the falling primary roll the Head of Policy and Resources (Education) reaffirmed his support for the proposal to provide a new school at Staunton-on-Wye

even though there were currently only 70 pupils on roll. He emphasised that the school was greatly needed and should not be seen as a threat to neighbouring schools. He added that if the school at Staunton were lost there would be difficulties dividing its catchment area amongst the surrounding schools.

The Head of Policy and Resources (Education) then drew Members attention to the problems of falling roll numbers in Hereford generally. He informed the Committee that the majority of schools in Hereford were suffering from falling rolls, which was creating organisational problems particularly with regard to class sizes, causing one city school to ask for a reduction in its Planned Admission Number. It was noted however that pupil numbers in the city could increase due to proposed housing developments within City school catchment areas.

The Head of Policy and Resources (Education) reported to Members that whilst the primary school roll was reducing the roll for secondary schools was currently peaking but would then decline. However, it was expected that roll numbers in Further Education would continue to rise due to larger year groups being fed through and an increasing staying on rate.

Members were informed that the percentage of pupils from an ethnic background other than British remained small at 2.3%. This represented a small increase on figures from 2003.

Concerning proposed housing development, the Committee noted the need to monitor the impact of development at Putson (Hereford) on schools as the new development was being increased by 100 houses to 500.

Members then discussed the need for a new primary school in Leominster with regard to the new proposed housing development at Barons Cross in the west of the town. After much discussion Members decided that a more detailed debate should be initiated regarding the future pattern of primary school provision in Leominster.

RESOLVED:

That:

- (a) the statistical update contained in Appendices 1 - 5 of the report be issued to consultees for information and comment;**
 - (b) the Committee confirm their support for a primary school at Staunton-on-Wye;**
 - (c) the Committee request a review of primary school provision in Hereford City be undertaken and the results of the review be reported at the next meeting;**
- and**
- (d) a debate be initiated on the future pattern of primary school provision in Leominster.**

6. SUSTAINING THE VIABILITY OF SMALL SCHOOLS

Phillip Morris, Acting Senior Inspector informed the Committee of the local and national activities related to sustaining the viability of small schools.

The Acting Senior Inspector told Members that small schools rolls were stable and

often growing because they were attracting children from town schools because they are highly valued by parents. However, in the long term the falling roll across the County would impact upon school and LEA budgets therefore reduced funding could inevitably have a bearing on the sustainability of the County's smaller schools.

Members were told how the Education Directorate was engaged in a number of research and action based projects to inform the development of a local strategy for sustaining the viability and quality of small schools during a time of falling rolls.

The Acting Senior Inspector reported to the Committee the initiatives that were being undertaken in other authorities with regard to small rural schools. He described the idea of 'Federation' schools, whereby 2-3 schools would share a Head Teacher and reported that schools within Herefordshire were not looking favourably at this approach although he stated that there was a chance of this idea working if there were suitably close links between villages/communities and appropriate schools. He spoke of 'cluster' arrangements between schools whereby schools would link together to share strengths and buy resources together and referred Members to existing 'cluster' arrangements already being used in the Golden Valley. He also raised the issue of Beacon Schools and the importance of 'cluster' schools working with them for training opportunities.

The Acting Senior Inspector concluded that the Education Directorate would support any initiatives they thought would work. He saw problems with the 'federation' model on grounds of practicality, logistics and incurred expenses. It was thought that 'federation' would not bring great financial savings merely help to ensure that the education budget was spent in the most effective way. Information Communication Technology was already being utilised to create linkages. He emphasised the need to support small schools although if numbers were to drop sufficiently then there would be a need to make appropriate investigations.

Members indicated that they were keen to support small schools so long as they were providing children with an appropriate education and the access to all necessary facilities with particular reference towards ICT. Members were also keen to know how school facilities were being utilised by the wider community and in particular by the voluntary sector. The Acting Senior Inspector advised the group that school facilities were being used on an increased basis by the schools themselves for pre and post school activities. However, they were not being utilised by other groups to a great extent, which was something that could be addressed where appropriate facilities were available.

Members then discussed the Extended Schools Initiative (ESI). The Acting Senior Inspector reported to the Committee that this initiative was still in its early stages and that it would not be until the autumn term before impact was made. The Head of Policy and Resources (Education) further informed Members that in terms of ESI Herefordshire was ahead of other authorities and bids were being made by Bodenham, Clehonger, Fairfield, Golden Valley and Ledbury schools with limited availability to other schools. These schools had been encouraged to work together and had this had been emphasised to them. The Head of Policy and Resources (Education) commented to Members that some schools saw partnership working as a threat although this was an attitude which was being discouraged.

RESOLVED:

That (a) the report be noted;

(b) a report on the Extended Schools Initiative be presented at the next meeting;

and

(c) a financial analysis of school transport costs for the County be provided for the next meeting.

7. ASSOCIATION OF SMALL SCHOOLS

This item was put on the Agenda for information and members were advised that at a national level there were several definitions for a small school.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the letter received from National Association for Small Schools.

The meeting ended at 4.40 p.m.

CHAIRMAN