

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 3 November 2009

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	S Clarke (Chair)	
	Councillors	F Doyle T Harney K Hayes P Hayes	C Povall T Smith W Smith A Taylor
<u>Deputy</u>	Councillors	AER Jones (in place of J George)	
<u>Co-opted</u>		Mr M Clarke Mrs J Kearney	Mrs M Liddy Mrs J Owens

CALL IN OF CABINET MINUTE 143 (1/10/09) REVIEW OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PLACES PHASE 1

30 CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS

The Chair welcomed members of the public to the meeting. She outlined the call-in procedure and introduced Councillor Jeff Green, lead signatory to the call-in notice.

The Chair circulated letters received from the chairs of governors of Rock Ferry High School and Park High School in support of the Academy proposals.

31 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST / PARTY WHIP

Members were asked to consider whether they had a personal or prejudicial interest in connection with the item on this agenda and, if so, to declare it and state what it was.

Councillor T Harney declared a personal interest by virtue of him being a governor of a number of schools including Wirral Grammar School for Girls, the Observatory Special School, and the Pupil Referral Unit Board.

Councillor C Povall declared a personal interest by virtue of a family member's employment at Rock Ferry High School.

Councillor Walter Smith declared a personal interest by virtue of him being Chair of Governors for Rock Ferry High School.

Councillor Tony Smith declared a personal interest by virtue of him being a governor of Woodchurch High School.

Councillor Sheila Clarke declared a personal interest by virtue of her being a governor of Wirral Grammar School for Boys and Bebington High School.

Councillor Phil Davies declared a personal interest by virtue of him being a governor of Wirral Metropolitan College.

Mrs M Kearney declared a personal interest by virtue of her being Chair of Governors for Devonshire Park Primary School

Members were reminded that they should also declare, pursuant to paragraph 18 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with the item to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement. No such declarations were made.

32 EXPLANATION OF THE CALL-IN BY LEAD SIGNATORY

Councillor Jeff Green, Leader of the Conservative Group, outlined the reasons for his opposition to the proposed closure of Ridgeway High School, as set out in the call-in notice. He referred to the contents of the Ofsted report indicating that Ridgeway was an outstanding school with exceptional examination results, making it the second best community school in Wirral with one of the highest 'value added' scores in the country. He commented that this school's record in raising educational attainment should be nurtured, supported and celebrated, and suggested that it should therefore be retained in the core of any school reorganisation proposals as an excellent school.

Councillor Green also commented on the bidding documents for the two new Academies and the future predictions in terms of educational attainment indicating that it would take them five years to achieve the results which were now being achieved at Ridgeway.

In light of the above, he asked Cabinet to show more decisive leadership and reverse its decision to close Ridgeway High School.

33 EVIDENCE FROM CALL-IN WITNESSES

(a) Mr Andrew Taylor, Tranmere Hall Estate Residents Association, addressed the meeting. He referred to the significant responsibilities associated with the running of a large school and in overseeing the design and building of the academy and commented that Mr Hughes had no experience in this field. He also expressed his concern that Mr Hughes had refused meet with residents associations and ward councillors to discuss planning and highway issues associated with the proposed new building on the Shaftesbury Youth Club site. He suggested that the use of the playing field for sports activities would be a more legitimate use of this site.

Mr Taylor asked that Cabinet reconsider Mr Hughes' involvement in the proposal as lead sponsor and suggested that there was a potential list of organisations that would be prepared to act as sponsors to the Academy and fulfil this role more effectively.

(b) Mrs June Foster, Mount Estate Residents Association, addressed the meeting and endorsed Mr Taylor's reservations regarding Mr Hughes' role as lead sponsor of the proposed Academy.

(c) Mrs Sally Reynolds, Chair of Governors Ridgeway High School, addressed the meeting. She stated that the governors had embraced the principle of academies to enhance the education of children in Birkenhead but shared the concerns of parents, pupils, staff, and the local community regarding the impact of the current proposals in diluting the achievements of Ridgeway High School. She highlighted the progress which had been made year upon year in terms of educational attainment which demonstrated that it was a proven successful forward thinking school with a family orientated approach.

(d) Councillor Stuart Kelly addressed the meeting. He referred to the Open Roll situation and its consequences in terms of the impact of falling rolls in the primary sector, vacancy rates in Birkenhead schools, and the cost of maintaining empty places. He also acknowledged the need to improve achievement and standards in some of the poorer performing schools.

Councillor Kelly expressed his concern that there were no other alternative options to the current two Academy proposals and highlighted the need for a more open and transparent consultation process to test the potential market for any schools, establish the viability of a boys only school, and bring forward all viable options for consideration by Cabinet. He emphasised that Ridgeway was the best performing school of the three schools affected by the Academy proposals and it should not therefore be closed.

(e) Andrea Bryant, Ridgeway parent, addressed the meeting. She paid tribute to the school for its many achievements and excellent reputation which had been experienced by both family and friends and commented that this was always her first choice secondary school. She described her daughter's experience as a year 7 pupil and thanked the staff for their enthusiasm, hard work and dedication in creating a successful learning environment. She also commented that the Academies' projected examination targets were quite poor when compared with Ridgeway's current achievements.

Mrs Bryant commented on the viability of the proposed Boys Academy. She reported that that both Mosslands and Pensby Boys School were currently undersubscribed and this had supported her view that Birkenhead parents would not choose to send their boys to a new single sex secondary school.

(f) Julie Forshaw, a parent and member of the Ridgeway Community Association, addressed the meeting. She reported that a petition, containing 3,500 signatures, had been gathered expressing the community's opposition to the proposed closure of Ridgeway High School. She referred to the consequences in terms of the loss of education and community facilities, the effect on local businesses, and the removal of parental choice.

She commented that children entering Ridgeway have a high chance of success, as demonstrated by her daughter who had gained a university place and was now involved in mentoring children with a similar background to herself.

(g) A letter setting out the views of Megan Shaw, a current Year 11 pupil at Ridgeway, was read out to the committee. In her opinion "Ridgeway was a great school with a wide range of educational and fun clubs. The school had received an

outstanding Ofsted Report and it was achieving very good examination results. It was an outstanding school and should not be closed.”

(h) Mr W Chan, English Teacher at Ridgeway High School, addressed the meeting. He highlighted Ridgeway’s many achievements and commented that their success was due to inspired leadership, committed staff and the relationships forged with pupils on a daily basis. He commented that the school was well established with a good record in developing new innovative methods to “narrow the gap” in educational achievement and it was also an integral part of the local community. He therefore could see no reason to change a school that was working extremely well and exceeding its targets each year.

(i) Mr G Hogben, Chair of Governors of Park High School, addressed the meeting. He reported that his governing body was clear and unanimous in their support for the proposals and had particularly noted the following issues:-

- The forecast spare capacity of 35% of places if no action is taken
- The limits imposed by the District Auditor of no more than 10% surplus places
- The impact of the new girl’s academy at Birkenhead High school for Girls in conjunction with Prenton Girls School meant that other co-educational schools would have a substantial gender imbalance in favour of boys.
- The data on pupils’ home addresses strongly supports the creation of an Academy in central Birkenhead

The governors acknowledged the need for change in the light falling rolls and the potential consequences for all 3 schools, and supported the Academy proposals because they provided an alternative future for education in Birkenhead and the commitment of significant finance from central government to bring it about.

34 **EVIDENCE FROM CABINET MEMBER'S WITNESSES**

(a) Howard Cooper, Director of Children’s Services, gave a presentation outlining the background to the current two Academy proposals, including a number of slides showing: the falling population in Wirral and the need to plan for this long term social trend; capacity and surplus places in Birkenhead schools; gender imbalance; the pattern of pupils’ addresses to determine the optimum location for the two new secondary schools; and the available funding.

The Director explained that the Academy proposals were being developed in line with government policies “Building Schools for the Future” to improve the quality of facilities that are available, respond to the demographics of the area, and drive forward the aspiration to achieve even higher standards.

The Director responded to questions from members regarding issues identified in the presentation slides.

(b) Frank Field M.P. - Councillor Phil Davies presented a written statement on his behalf in support of the Academy proposals indicating that all evidence currently available concerning Academy schools showed that they dramatically improve the performance of their predecessor schools.

The independent Gyte Review had recommended the amalgamation of Park High School and Rock Ferry High School into one new Academy and the closure of Ridgeway and its possible replacement as an Academy, and it was on the basis of these recommendations that the current plans were based.

He urged Members to reflect carefully about the opportunity provided by the Academy proposals.

35 SUMMING UP BY MOVER OF THE CALL-IN

Councillor Jeff Green stated that the proposed closure of Ridgeway High School would do nothing to close the gap in educational achievement, particularly in view of the fact that it was a successful school that was achieving its educational targets and where pupils were encouraged to reach their full potential. He acknowledged the contributions made by pupils, parents, teachers and staff, and said that excellence and success should be rewarded. He therefore urged Cabinet to think again regarding the original proposal for a new academy in the Birkenhead area involving the closure of Rock Ferry High and Park High schools, and take the threat of Ridgeway High school off the school reorganisation agenda.

36 SUMMING UP BY CABINET MEMBER

Councillor Phil Davies thanked the speakers for their contribution to the debate. He acknowledged that all 3 schools affected by the reorganisation were excellent schools but change was necessary owing to:-

- the hugely falling rolls in secondary education
- the closure of 8 primary schools and the implications for the secondary sector
- the projected 3,000 surplus places in the period 2007/2014
- work in primary to take surplus places out
- all party support for the primary school closures
- all 3 governing bodies had agreed in principle to the Expressions of Interest for the Academy proposals

Councillor Davies explained that the next step was to enter into the feasibility stage of the process which included consultation. He said that he was open minded regarding alternative options but none had been presented so far and urgent action was needed to address the issues raised above.

37 COMMITTEE DEBATE

The Chair thanked all of the speakers for their contribution to the debate on the reorganisation proposals and explore opportunities to achieve the best educational and life opportunities for children in the Birkenhead area. She also acknowledged the hard work and dedication shown by the headteachers, governors, and staff in all three schools.

Councillor Paul Hayes said that there was overwhelming evidence against the closure of Ridgeway High School and this was not just about the issues raised in the Director's presentation as justification for the reorganisation proposals.

It was moved by Councillor Hayes and seconded by Councillor Povall:-

“Committee resolves that as no credible evidence has been presented this evening to support the closure of Ridgeway High School, an outstanding school; committee therefore refers this matter back to Cabinet to examine further options, excluding the closure of Ridgeway High School.”

The motion was put to the vote and carried (7:6) by virtue of the Chair’s casting vote.

Councillor Taylor commented that only one option for the 2 academies had been generated so far and he asked for information as to what other options had been considered. Councillor Doyle endorsed these remarks and suggested that further work was also needed to assess the demand for a boys only secondary school in Birkenhead.

It was moved by Councillor Doyle and seconded by Councillor Taylor that ;-

“Scrutiny Committee thanks witnesses for their evidence and submissions.

Scrutiny considers that it has no ‘in principle’ objection to the concept of Academy Schools status.

Scrutiny further notes the investment opportunity presently available in the region of £30m for establishing two new academies in Birkenhead.

Scrutiny notes the problem of surplus places in schools and affirms its support for the policy of review to ensure that as much money as possible is spent on educating children rather than maintaining empty spaces.

Scrutiny further affirms its view that educational attainment remains a key priority for the Council and schools not meeting target attainment should be subject to review.

Scrutiny notes the recent rise in attainment results for Ridgeway and Park High Schools.

Scrutiny believes that consultation on reorganisation of schools which may result in the closure or change of status of a school should be open and transparent, and consultees furnished with sufficient robust information and options to make an informed response for consideration.

Scrutiny Committee therefore requests Cabinet to carry out the following additional work prior to proceeding to consultation:

1. A further review of the Expressions of Interest. This review should:-
 - (i) Establish parental demand for a boys-only academy
 - (ii) Re-evaluate the proposed attainment targets for both academies in light of the significant improvement made at the current schools
2. Ensure any consultation includes options for change rather than one ‘take it or leave it’ package. For example:-

- (i) Closure of Ridgeway, Park High and Rock Ferry, and their replacement with the two academies as set out in the Expressions of Interest of the two sets of sponsors
- (ii) Retention of Ridgeway as a Foundation Trust School, with a new academy replacing Park High School and Rock Ferry High School on the current Park High School site
- (iii) Closure of one of the Birkenhead schools as a response to falling rolls.

The motion was put to the vote but not carried (5:5)

Resolved (7:6) Committee resolves that as no credible evidence has been presented this evening to support the closure of Ridgeway High School, an outstanding school; committee therefore refers this matter back to Cabinet to examine further options, excluding the closure of Ridgeway High School.