

## **RESPONSE FROM WEST SUSSEX GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION TO THE WSCC CONSULTATION ON "PROPOSED REORGANISATION OF RURAL AND SMALL SCHOOLS IN WEST SUSSEX"**

### **A Executive summary**

- A.1 We wish to state, at the outset, that we broadly support the school organization part of the WSCC school effectiveness strategy, including the preference for all-through primaries and for federating small schools. We also accept that, where a specific area has a projected surplus of school places, according to proper analysis of pupil projections and parental demand, it might be better to close a school than to leave some or all of the others in the area vulnerable.
- A.2 We do not consider it to be our place to argue for or against any specific options for the individual schools involved in the current consultation, but we have some very strong views about the way the consultation has been conducted, the information given (and withheld) and the views expressed at some of the meetings and since.
- A.3 We believe the timing, manner (including questions), information content and notification of this consultation, their scrutiny by the select committee and the decision by the cabinet member to go ahead were so badly flawed that they have damaged the credibility of every element of the LA involved.
- A.4 We therefore call on the cabinet member to halt the process, withdraw the warnings on the admissions website immediately and refuse permission to go ahead with any statutory consultations until the situation has been rectified by our following recommendations.
- A.5 We further call on the cabinet member to put in place policies to ensure that future consultations – and the information provided for them – are discussed with groups representing chairs of governors and headteachers first.
- A.6 We recommend that the select committee and/or cabinet member call for a proper review of the "impact assessments". The LA refused our FOI request on the grounds that it would take too long to collate most of the information, so we believe the assessments were deeply flawed, producing dangerously misleading guidance and therefore totally unreliable responses.
- A.7 Before allowing any moves towards further "interventions", therefore, the cabinet member should instruct the LA to carry out proper comprehensive research on parental selection criteria and reasons for travelling to out-of-catchment schools, and on attendance at all small primaries by parental choice - which it says itself is at the heart of its strategy!
- A.8 We strongly urge the cabinet member to insist that the LA conducts a proper strategic assessment and consultation with governors in each area, as outlined below. If there is still seen to be a need for change, governors should be given the chance to come up with proposals before the LA puts forward any of its own, and these could be discussed in open meetings with parents and community groups. This might delay any major reorganisations for a further year, but should lead to more strategic, credible and acceptable proposals.
- A.9 Above all, we would urge the LA to take governors more seriously (and remember that HTs are governors too!) and work with them more closely. The thousands of governors in the county represent an enormous (and free) pool of skills, experience and knowledge. By volunteering for their increasingly responsible and onerous rôle, they are showing their commitment to the core aim of "Ensuring that all children and young people secure the best start in life" in W Sussex. We should never again be forced to take such a confrontational position on an LA proposal. The WSGA's core aim is to be a "critical friend" to the LA, so we stand ready to work with it on improving our schools' effectiveness and organisation, but will continue to challenge it where necessary.
- A.10** We recognize that we are asking a lot of the LA to back away from this process. However, para 2 of its school effectiveness strategy says it want to *"Be known for our ability to work in a supportive and challenging way delivering on commitments and dealing with issues regardless of how hard they appear to be."* Being seen to have listened to the feedback and putting in place the support necessary to bring about a positive outcome to the schools would demonstrate the 'you said, we did' attitude we would all like to see from our LA.

## **B The consultation process**

- B.1 This consultation follows very strong resistance to the one to double the size of Easebourne school, and to the initial announcement of the school effectiveness strategy. In both cases, the resistance was not to the actual proposals but to the lack of information given and the misunderstandings this caused. It now seems that WSCC learned little from those experiences . . . .
- B.2 Method and timing
- B.2.1 According to some of the schools, there was no prior discussion with all of the governing bodies, or even chairs, at schools local to the five under consultation, even though strategic decisions are the responsibility of governing bodies and they would almost certainly have been able to produce better ideas or concrete proposals for the five small schools. Yet again, it does appear that the LA made very little effort to find solutions amongst the schools involved before going for the public consultation.
- B.2.2 This consultation exercise was launched, apparently with no clear prior notice to the schools, only a few days before the end of the summer term, giving them very little time to agree the text of letters to parents. This timing is appalling: it was launched just before the start of the period in which parents have to make their selections for next September, and the decisions will not be known until close to the end of that period. In the meantime, the 5 schools were shown on the WSCC website admissions pages as being under consultation. This exposes potential parents to unnecessary uncertainty over an important decision, and the schools to almost certain reductions in admissions for next year.
- B.2.3 The LA's justification for this timing was to meet the required timetable for any subsequent formal closure consultations, and to avoid this emerging through the WSCC "Forward plan of key decisions". However, as we have argued above (and will expand below), it would have made more sense to hold open discussions first with groups of governors in each area – which would not have required full council authorisation.
- B.2.4 The launch was extensively covered in the media as being about the closure of the schools, seriously damaging their recruitment and retention of pupils – and this was the fault of bad communication by the LA – we, too, initially assumed this was to be a formal consultation under the DfE guidelines.
- B.2.5 Parish councils and other community groups were not overtly invited to respond or to attend the meetings.
- B.3 Information given
- B.3.1 As we saw for ourselves, and heard directly from the schools and from submissions to the WSCC select committee, some of the information given in the consultation papers, which were made public on the launch of the consultation, was seriously inaccurate (eg the wrong school's Ofsted results quoted in lieu of Compton's) and/or misleading (eg the weight given to "the % of potential pupils who live in the catchment", when this can include very high proportions of "Not declared" or private school pupils – who can hardly be described as "potential pupils" and should have been excluded). We wish to protest, in the strongest possible terms, against the LA being allowed to give statistics on schools in public documents that are not first checked with the schools for accuracy – and preferably with the organisations representing governors and headteachers for "appropriate fairness".
- B.3.2 Just as importantly, in our view, the information given in the consultation papers was woefully inadequate to enable consultees to assess the schools in context. To give just a few examples:
- B.3.2.1 As outlined above, statistics on pupils attending each school from inside its own catchment area should exclude "Not declared" or private school pupils. For example, using figures released by the LA last year (because we have not been able to get updates) this would have lifted Compton to 70% - well above the 50% threshold! Even with this adjustment, parents and others cannot possibly judge the importance of these statistics without comparisons with other local schools.
- B.3.2.2 The statistics on pupils attending each school from outside its own catchment area are also meaningless without local comparisons. However, they are also useless without the attendance and parent selection statistics of all local schools: if parents are bringing their children from outside the area by choice, and there are other places available to them, this should be considered a strength not a weakness – see also the comments below on this issue.
- B.3.2.3 It is also impossible to assess the community effect of closing any school without knowing how many parents chose to send their children there, as opposed to being forced due to other choices being full.
- B.3.2.4 Parents cannot assess the impact of closing any of the schools without knowing how many places are available in other nearby schools (and what size and sort of schools those are, and how far away)

B.3.2.5 It makes little sense assessing schools near county borders (eg Compton) without taking into account the school planning in the other county and the requirements of the “Greenwich Judgement” (requiring equal treatment of pupils from other counties).

B.3.2.6 Financial projections are mainly dependent on pupil attendance projections, so the funding forecasts are not valid if the pupil projections are this unreliable

B.3.2.7 Pupil projections for Stedham need to include some comment on the LA’s plans for Easebourne

B.3.3 We sent an FOI request to the LA to ask for this, and other, information that we would regard as being essential to any reasonable assessment of these (or any other) schools. Our request was refused (see appendix) on the grounds that some of the information is already publicly available and the rest would take too long to collate. In our view, if the LA had not already collated and analysed the information we asked for, then their assessment was totally inadequate and we will challenge any further actions (eg closure consultations) based on its results. This also suggests that outside oversight of FOI requests should be mandatory, so that departments cannot block requests for information they should have collected and analysed in the normal execution of their duties.

#### B.4 Survey questions

B.4.1 Even if the information given to consultees had been adequate, we do not believe the questions were appropriate for a survey aimed at parents. It is ridiculous to ask non-educationalists to comment on “highest quality educational provision”, “the needs of the children and learners” and financial viability under any circumstances, but particularly with such inadequate information (particularly on context) given to consultees.

B.4.2 It might have been much more useful to ask questions about why their children go to the school, how happy or otherwise they are with it, and many of the other questions that schools (and Ofsted) ask parents – and/or what they think about other schools in the area, and their importance to local communities. This might have helped to build up more of a picture of the value of each of the schools (and their local peers).

#### B.5 Public meetings – style and outcomes

B.5.1 The public meetings were generally poorly conducted with inadequate introduction of presenters and others (eg diocese representatives) and poorly prepared presentations and Q and A responses. We would recommend the use of a good “compere” from the LA, with the LA (and other) representatives forming a panel to answer questions.

B.5.2 The most prevalent views at the meetings seemed to be:

- It was clear from all the meetings that parents feel small schools are more caring / nurturing – with staff knowing every child and able to match their teaching to their needs better than large schools can – quite a few had moved from large to small schools for this reason;
- the very strong parent demand for small, caring schools; many parents were obviously travelling considerable distances, at their own choice, to get to the schools; as suggested in para B.3.2.2 above, this would therefore appear to be a strong factor in their selection. Only further research would show how widespread this factor is but, where there are no other small schools nearby, it would suggest that closure would seriously reduce parental choice (a key element of the WSCC strategy (see **Error! Reference source not found.**) and that, in these cases, the high proportion of out-of-catchment attendance is a strength, not a weakness;
- that this was particularly the case for more vulnerable and SEN children, with strong views that many of these would need EHCPs if sent to larger schools – adding to an already-overburdened high needs budget; further research might be required to look at this factor on a more general basis, to inform the SEN strategy as well as the small schools issue;
- existing and potential parents were deeply frustrated at the lack of guidance on which other schools might have available places for their children and this has already caused further damage, with parents already looking for other places to “jump the gun” on the admissions process if their school is closed;
- many attendees at the meetings very clearly felt that the consultation was a sham and that the LA had already decided it wanted to close the schools; this can only undermine trust and confidence in the LA and WSCC in general;
- the diocese took a very passive role and should have been encouraged to express their views about each of the C of E schools;

## C Conclusions and recommendations

- C.1 The timing of the consultation, during the crucial admissions period, seemed calculated to produce self-fulfilling prophecies. It has done probably irreparable damage to the five schools and was a dereliction of duty by the LA. We recommend that the cabinet member mandates more effective oversight of such exercises in future.
- C.2 The information given was inaccurate and wholly inadequate, which we believe has seriously undermined public (and school staff / governor) confidence in the LA. We have repeatedly said that we stand willing to act as a sounding board on the LA's interchanges and relationships with governors and we are confident that the headteacher organisations have also been willing to advise and support the department – but we were not given the opportunity to prevent this damaging consultation. We therefore recommend the introduction of a policy requiring the LA to consult governor and headteacher bodies before launching any public consultation / engagement processes.
- C.3 It was also clear from the public meetings that most schools and parents were unable to understand why their schools were selected for this exercise, and the LA were unable or unwilling to give a clear answer. This increased the impression of a superficial or pre-judged assessment, and failed to give a clear warning to other vulnerable schools.
- C.4 We recommend that the select committee and/or cabinet member call for a proper review of the “impact assessments” carried out as part of this exercise. Given that the LA refused our FOI request on the grounds that it would take too long to collate most of the information, it is clear that their assessments were inadequate, producing dangerously misleading guidance and therefore totally unreliable responses.
- C.5 The clearest message from the public meetings was the value parents put on small schools. We therefore recommend that, before allowing any moves towards further “interventions”, the cabinet member should instruct the LA to carry out proper comprehensive research on parental selection criteria and reasons for travelling to out-of-catchment schools, and on attendance at all small primaries by parental choice. This should be a simple task from already-existing statistics that the LA is refusing to divulge but which it says itself is at the heart of its strategy!
- C.6 It has been very clear that most of the schools, parents and others believe the LA's not-so-hidden agenda is to close these five schools; from feedback to the WSGA, this seems to be the general view of other small schools too and, while this might force some GBs to look more carefully at their options, we believe that a more co-operative approach would have been – and still would be – more effective.
- C.7 We therefore strongly urge the cabinet member to insist that the LA conducts a proper strategic assessment and consultation with governors in each area. There should be no identification of vulnerable schools without credible presentations to, and discussion with, governors (including headteachers) in each area of the strategic position – eg:
- Overall school places projections for the area and for each school (taking into account properly estimated cross-LA admission / parental selection trends);
  - Attendance statistics by catchment area and civil parish (for possible later consultation with parish and district councils) for each area and school;
  - Parental selection trends in each area and for each school;
  - Educational assessments for each area and school, including Ofsted trends for 10 years, LA and diocese (SIAMS) assessments and pupil attainment and progress trends;
  - Pupil “wellbeing” assessments by school – eg exclusions, absenteeism, complaints, and other statistics;
  - Financial viability assessments for each area and school, using the schools' historical records and 3-year budget projections as well as licensed deficits and any LA projections;
  - Any available statistics on governor, HT and staff turnover and vacancy rates.
- This should lead to useful discussions on strategic options for small schools in each area, based on proper analysis. If there is still seen to be a need for change, governors should be given the chance to come up with proposals before the LA puts forward any of its own, and these could be discussed in open meetings with parents and community groups (eg parish and district councils). This exercise might delay any major reorganisations for a further year, but should lead to more strategic, credible and acceptable proposals.
- C.8 The credibility of the select committee has also been seriously undermined by its failure to scrutinise this consultation at its public meeting and hold the education & skills department to account. We urge the committee to repair this damage by backing our suggestions above.