

Written Submission to C&YPSSC (14 April 2020)

Save West Sussex Primary Schools from Closure – September 2020

The Strategy

When the Council implemented the School Effectiveness Strategy 2018-22, it consulted schools. The wording of the strategy was carefully discussed and amended. Not a single one of the schools affected by the Small Schools Assessment (the process which has run since September 2019) would object to a valid application of the Strategy. This is an important point. Not one of the schools is intransigent or chooses to bury their head when faced with challenge. That said, all the schools involved in this process object to the weaponisation of the Strategy with a view to driving through a pre-conceived agenda. All the schools object to the failure by the Council to provide the support described in the Strategy. All the schools object to the subjective, pejorative and misleading nature of the written documents produced by the Council in connection with this process. All schools are appalled by the failures of governance to scrutinise the detail of these proposals.

“A balance of support and challenge”

The Strategy itself describes, “how WSCC will balance both the support and challenge offered to all our education stakeholders.” In practice, meaningful support to the schools has been entirely lacking. A lack of guidance, materials, precedent documents and perhaps most importantly, available expertise to deliver change within the walls of County Hall resulted in busy headteachers and volunteer governors apparently being expected to deliver structural change in an information vacuum. We say “apparently” because the schools concerned weren’t even aware that officers were expecting them to be delivering change unaided. After all, the strategy describes a blended model of support and challenge. The Council failed to provide the support required to explore and achieve structural change and secretly prepared a consultation on closure. When we say secretly, we refer to the written requests from officers to Chairs of Governors to keep the proposed consultation secret. A written release only being granted on the day the forward plan entry was finalised. How can it be acceptable for a local authority to seek to isolate and bully volunteer governors in this manner? Where is the collaboration and partnership described in the Strategy?

Pre-determination

The Schools involved in this process are convinced that the outcome of this consultation process was pre-determined. In some cases FOI requests have revealed direct written evidence. Often schools and communities have been left to draw that conclusion. This process is clearly not an application of the Strategy. In the absence of rational explanation by the Council of its action and a failure to apply the strategy, communities are left to conclude that other agendas are at work. For example, the Strategy very clearly describes closure as the “final” option. The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills repeatedly told the September 2019 meeting of this very committee that closure would be the final option. In October and November 2019 the Council sought the views of the communities and received a response which was overwhelmingly supportive of the schools involved. Yet, on 31 December 2019 the Council published proposals to close 3 of the schools involved. How can closure have been the final option? Where is the meaningful support described in the strategy to assist the schools to change, improve and raise standards? In the intervening period there were no visits to any of the schools by officers supporting reorganisation. No discussions exploring federation. No open conversations with schools on options for academisation. In many cases the officers involved in the process had not visited the schools concerned for 12 months (excluding public consultation meetings).

Failing Governance

The January 2020 meeting of this committee represents the only occasion that we have felt any meaningful scrutiny of these proposals. We were grateful for this committee's recommendations but remain disturbed at the wider landscape of governance within the Council. The September 2019 meeting of this committee was shambolic. We believe that the failure to halt this consultation emboldened those involved to proceed unchecked. The proposals didn't make sense at that time and the proposals before you today are no less rational or persuasive.

We are very firm in our view that consulting on the future of 5 schools at one time is a task which the Council is ill-equipped to deal with on every level. The reports are misleading, error strewn and subjective. Scrutiny committees have never been allowed more than an hour to discuss the proposals. How on earth can members be expected to understand the detail of the proposals in such a short period of time, particularly when much of that time is filled with misleading responses from officers which appear to have no relevance to the Strategy?

Even the Cabinet itself did not have sufficient time to consider the detail of the proposals. There are numerous examples from the January meeting of the Cabinet which highlight that members did not have the required knowledge to make an informed decision in relation to the schools involved by reference to the applicable criteria. This is a mass programme of school closures. Unfortunately, the time allowed for consideration and validation of these proposals has been minimal. Just because the schools are small, it does not mean they are any less valued by the communities they serve. The communities involved desperately need members to ask searching questions of the Cabinet Member and officers. The circumstances of each school are complex and distinct. All now have enticing options for their future viability. As members of the community you serve, we are angry and distraught at the failure by members collectively to demand more from the authors of these reports. Members have been consistently misled through this process. When will those responsible be held to account?

Subjective, Misleading and Pejorative

We cannot overstate how surprised we have been throughout this process at the nature, content and tone of the papers published in relation to our schools. How can the Council have seen fit to repeatedly publish such subjective and misleading documentation? On many occasions we believe the content to have been outright incorrect. On other occasions we are simply flabbergasted that authors would be permitted to publish such pejorative content without internal challenge.

Failure to value your small schools

The very reason many of us choose to live and work in West Sussex is because we value its rural communities. This process reveals that this Council is set on a course which seeks to destroy key institutions within those small and isolated communities. Small rural schools are protected by the DfE. The case for closure must be strong. The proposals for before you today are weak in every regard. They are without foundation under the Strategy and lack rationality. The reports are little more than propaganda from those who seek to close the schools concerned. We're now approaching the final opportunity for this Council to raise its hand, to raise the conscientious objections which are so clearly required and to seek a detailed review of these proposals. Why should the hard working communities that you serve be required to pursue these matters via other means? We seek nothing more than the application of your own Strategy.

This Submission

This document is a written submission to a meeting of the Council's C&YPSSC which is to meet on 14 April 2020. It is prepared by representatives of 3 of the schools involved in the current consultation process (Rumboldswyke, Clapham & Patching and Stedham). Representatives of Compton and Upmarden CE Primary School has previously advised us that it shares our concerns with the way the process was undertaken. Warninglid CE Primary School was always in a different position to other schools affected by this process having agreed to relocate in advance of the commencement.

The petition attracted over 4,600 signatories. In excess of 3,200 of those signatories were verified. We have the right to have our petition heard at a meeting of the Full Council. We believe that the failures in this process are so serious and the impact for multiple communities so severe, it is vital the petition is heard.