

**Notes of the Saltfleetby CE Primary School Public Consultation Meeting
Marshlands Village Hall Saltfleetby
6.00-8.00pm on 5 October 2015**

In attendance from the Local Authority (LA), School Improvement Service (CfBT), the Diocese and the school:-

Debbie Barnes:	LA - Director of Children's Services (Chair)
Patrick Webb:	Chair of Interim Executive Board (IEB)
James Siddle:	Vice Chair of IEB
Amber Latif:	Head Teacher
Lindsay Alldis:	CfBT
John O'Connor:	LA - Children's Services Manager – Education Support
Paul Thompson:	Anglican Diocese

Approximately 40 parents, staff, governors and members of the local community attended.

- Introduction from Debbie Barnes as to how the meeting would proceed.
- Introductions from each member of the panel.
- Introduction from the Chair of the IEB, Patrick Webb, including reasons for proposing closure, in that there are not enough pupils to make the school viable and the consequent inability to set a balanced budget which led to the IEB taking the difficult decision to ask the LA to commence consultation on closure.
- Introduction from John O'Connor who outlined the overall consultation process and timeline.

This document will be updated should further questions be received during the consultation period so is not just a record of points raised at the public meeting, but also from further points raised since with additional information provided in response where available. All questions and comments will be considered along with all response forms received during the 6 week consultation period which closes on 13 November 2015.

During the public meeting many questions were asked, concerns raised and comments and suggestions made regarding the following main areas:-

- **Points raised re low pupil numbers**

"I have lived in the village for many years and seen the numbers fall low before"

"I have lived in the village for 41 years and my 2 children attended the school. During this time there have been several times when the numbers have fallen as low as now"

"The governing body has had concerns about potential closure in the past when numbers have fallen as low as 25"

"We accept that the numbers are low but should this be a reason to close the school? Why is this any different to times of low numbers in the past when closing the school was not a consideration?"

"The only reason for low numbers is that the school has not been advertised adequately. We just need to promote the school"

"Not enough has been done by the IEB and Headteacher to promote the school"

"We must promote the school or we will lose the focal point of the village. If there is no school in the village families will not move here"

“There are plans for more housing in the area which will produce more children. It is short-sighted to close the school now when places will be needed in the future”

“The new housing developments include family homes so we will need the school places, there will not be surplus capacity”

“Exactly what is the minimum number of pupils required at the school for it to survive?”

- **Response to points raised re low pupil numbers**

Projections analysis and school place planning is not an exact science. Parental preference will always have an impact, although it is reasonable to expect most children to attend their nearest school. However, the data provided by GPs and the NHS confirm that there will not be enough children in the area to provide the numbers needed at the school. Data suggests that there will be no more than 3 or 4 pupils per year group within the area in the next few years in the immediate area which is not enough to secure a viable school.

Over the last 40 years the Number on Roll school census (the number that funding is calculated on) records shows that pupil numbers at the school have never been as low as they are now. As at 21st October 2015 there were 22 pupils on roll. The lowest on record before now was 32 in 1998 and 2003.

It is difficult to give a definitive number regarding the minimum number of pupils as all schools have different resources and commitments e.g. size of campus/ rates payable etc. In the past an optimum number of pupils for a small school to survive has been recommended as a minimum of 34. However, Ofsted is continually raising the bar increasing pressure on school staff and resources and the government has made changes to the way in which schools are funded both of which can affect the calculation of this optimum number. Some schools with more than 34 will still struggle to survive. Saltfleetby is the smallest school in Lincolnshire although there are other schools with pupil numbers in the thirties and forties. The optimum number for a small school to survive must be at least in the mid-thirties.

The LA does consider new housing data – however this also is not an exact science and the planning application process is very unpredictable. Housing developments must be fairly large to have a significant impact on the need for school places. For example even if the development goes ahead at Manby this is likely to produce approximately 10 primary aged children over the time it takes to occupy all of the properties, and there are no guarantees which year groups these children may be in.

- **Points raised re standards at the school**

“This is a good school - the last time Ofsted visited it was graded as good”

“The school has been in special measures before and has been brought round”

“I chose this school because of its size; I believe small class sizes enable higher standards”

“This is a good school; 2 of 3 leavers have gone on to grammar school”

“The school provides excellent SEN provision and many parents travel a long way because of its reputation for excellent SEN provision. If these pupils have to move to a larger school they will not thrive academically or socially”

“I moved here from Nottinghamshire for my autistic child to attend the school and I my child has thrived here but will fall behind again at a larger school”

“Why is Theddlethorpe not supporting Saltfleetby more? Why has Theddlethorpe got stronger and Saltfleetby got weaker?”

- **Response to points raised re standards at the school**

The most important consideration is that the children at the school receive the standard and breadth of education that they are entitled to. No-one is questioning the dedication of the hard working staff at the school. However, Ofsted are continually raising the bar and it is more difficult now than in the past to meet their standards. It is challenging for all schools to meet Ofsted's requirement but particularly so for small schools. It is not a case of Saltfleetby getting weaker – the issue is low pupil numbers with the consequent impact on funding. Nobody is saying that Saltfleetby has allowed standards to fall but this is about being able to provide quality education under extremely challenging circumstances.

It is the aim of all schools to meet the individual needs of all their pupils including children with special needs. All schools in the area would want all children to thrive and are expected to provide the same level of care as that provided at Saltfleetby.

It is vital for the school to be able to maintain standards but the low numbers make this very challenging. Staff at the school are dedicated and hardworking but the resources are restricted, as funding is based on pupil numbers, and the demands of an ever-broadening curriculum together with the raising of standards by Ofsted place increasing pressure on the staff to maintain a quality education.

- **Points raised re finance**

“We appreciate that finance is a main factor. Before the IEB was formed we had a governing body with parent governors and based on their figures we understand that there are sufficient funds for the school to survive for at least 2 years. The governing body was maximizing the budget – what has happened to these finances? Will you share financial information with us as parents?”

“We should use the money to support the school rather than pay for the consultation process”

- **Response to points raised re finance**

Funding is based on the number of pupils and therefore a small school must operate with severely restricted resources. Any costs incurred by the consultation process could not be used to provide additional support to the school. The LA must provide finance to each of its schools according to government funding rules. Because of Lincolnshire's rural nature the LA's funding formula does support small schools. However the LA must follow government funding guidelines to ensure fairness to all schools in the county.

The school is in receipt of additional funding support from CfBT (e.g. the cost of the Interim Headteacher) but this will not be available as long term support in the future. If all reserves are used the school may be able to continue as it is for up to 2 years but then would not be able to set a balanced budget to move forward. However if changes were made such as appointing a Headteacher at the school the finances would run out before 2 years. The school already has expenditure exceeding income due to the low pupil numbers.

A school is not legally allowed to continue if it cannot set a balanced budget.

- **Points raised re the early years provision at Cygnets**

“Why were the links with cygnets severed so abruptly?”

“There was a natural progression from cygnets to the school so cutting off the link would be likely to have a damaging effect on pupil numbers at the school’

“Many of the children who attended cygnets stayed in the village to attend Saltfleetby School. If the cygnets and the school are separated the parents of the children at cygnets are more likely to consider other schools”.

- **Response to points raised re the early years provision at Cygnets**

There were safeguarding issues raised by Ofsted which required the IEB to take immediate action. These were serious issues which had to be managed and the IEB was obliged to act.

There appear to have been misunderstandings on both sides leading to both feeling that the other was not being fully co-operative and leading to both blaming each other for a breakdown in communications. However, a decision was taken and we have to move forward from this. Cygnets will now function locally as an independent early year's provider and is receiving LA support. The flow from early years to school within the village is therefore still available.

- **Points raised re the Headteacher**

"Our previous Headteacher was always to be seen at the school and in the playground but we never see the Interim Head"

"Sports day was cancelled and the school seems to be pulling away from the community since the appointment of the Interim Head e.g. no school plays to see, no distribution of harvest parcels, the Head does not attend parish council meetings"

"It is difficult to meet with the Interim Head – why can we not email her direct?"

"This Head has been chosen specifically to close the school – she has already closed one school"

"Who appointed this Head; if we advertised for a Head we would be inundated with applicants"

"What has the Interim Head actually done?"

- **Response to points raised re the Headteacher**

There are significant recruitment difficulties along the east coast area of Lincolnshire and vacancies do not attract many applicants. No local Headteachers or deputies were interested in a position at Saltfleetby and when advertised externally there was no interest in a long term headship at the school. CfBT do employ 2 interim heads but these are both currently in post at other schools. There was interest for an advertised interim position with 3 strong applicants. Mrs Latif was appointed by the IEB as having the right skill set, a track record of improving schools and was praised by Ofsted for the progress made at a school in Grantham whilst under her leadership. A primary school was closed whilst Mrs Latif was Headteacher but this was a completely different set of circumstances and due to a reorganisation of primary schools to an all-through basis in Nottinghamshire, not in relation to a small rural school. No Headteacher wants to see a school closed and this appointment was definitely not made with the intention of closing the school.

Mrs Latif is physically on site for at least half a day every day. The reason for setting up the process to contact Mrs Latif via a member of staff rather than direct was not to create distance between parents and the head but to avoid any communication difficulties that may arise with the head being responsible for two schools. It is accepted that communication with parents could be improved and needs to be looked at as we move forward.

The decision to cancel sports day was unfortunate but made in the light of the weather forecast. As the responsible person Mrs Latif must make such a decision on the grounds of safety and cannot put the children at risk.

Mrs Latif was appointed in January 2015 as interim head across the two schools. She has undertaken a significant amount of work on policies, procedures and practices which may not be seen by parents but had to be her priority to meet DfE and Ofsted requirements.

- **Points raised re federation of the 2 schools and the IEB**

"As parents we don't know what the IEB is doing? How have they let the school come this close to closure without letting us know?"

"We do not feel that the IEB has done a good job."

"Who appointed the IEB? Why is there no parent representation? Should there be a representative from another local school now presenting the case for closure particularly as when 6 pupils recently left they all went to this neighbouring school. Is there diocesan representation on the IEB?"

"The governing body did not want to federate but was threatened with closure if the 2 schools did not federate. We feel that the schools have gone downhill since federation – a Headteacher cannot successfully run 2 schools."

"I was a governor for 7 years, including time as the chair, and when I joined there were only 3 governors and 24 children at the school. We dismissed and reappointed the head and built up the school to 50 pupils and a "good" Ofsted report. We should defederate, appoint a new Headteacher and build up the school again."

"Why were we not made aware of the staff recruitment difficulties?"

"Communication has been very poor; we have tried to meet with the IEB and have also emailed in suggestions/questions but have had no response. We feel that this is because the IEB was set up to close the school."

"We understand that the IEB recommended defederation – why was this? Was this to enable the ease of closure? If the 2 schools defederate what happens to the IEB?"

- **Response to points raised re federation of the 2 schools and the IEB**

The DfE judged the support provided by the governing body to be inadequate with issues that needed to be dealt with and therefore required an IEB to be set up, but this decision was not taken without due consideration. Nominations were made but it is the DfE who decides the composition of the IEB but there is a representative of the Anglican diocese on the IEB at Saltfleetby. Members are appointed by the DfE according to their level of skills and local knowledge. This included the vice chair who was appointed for his skills and ability proven in the improvement at his own school and he has made strenuous efforts to support and improve Saltfleetby school.

Some unavoidable difficulties and delays arose out of replacements having to be made to the IEB after its initial formation due to unforeseen personal circumstances. The IEB accept that there could have been better communication with parents but the IEB has had a limited time to take action and has been working hard to explore all options open to the school although this may not have been obvious to parents. It is always difficult to choose the right time to make public such information – too soon can result in parents moving their children to another school so reducing the numbers further and worsening the situation but too late can result in less time and opportunity to find an alternative solution. Also the IEB were keen to have something to say to parents and avoid holding a meeting before they could be up to date with all options and provide parents with answers. When the IEB met with parents in January 2015 it was made clear then that if pupil numbers didn't increase the school was vulnerable.

If Saltfleetby closes this automatically dissolves the federation. The IEB did consider defederation as it felt that it offered no benefit other than financial, but that it would be better for the schools to have separate budgets than one school support the other. It would also enable each school to try to secure their own future independent of each other. The DfE would decide what happens to the IEB if the schools defederate – i.e. either the IEB would continue at Saltfleetby or the DfE would appoint 2 separate IEBs. If an alternative solution is found to closure and the numbers and finances are able to support the school then a governing body could be set up which would initially run in parallel with the IEB before becoming the newly established governing body.

As previously advised, if the two schools were to defederate and appoint a Headteacher at each school this would severely impact on the finances and possibly lead to teaching mixed Keystage groups at the school. This would

produce even more curriculum challenges and increase pressure on the staff which is also compounded by the recruitment difficulties in the area.

- **Points raised re the way forward/communication/promotion of the school**

“If the school closes can all the children go to one school to continue as a family?”

“If Saltfleetby School closes will transport be available for the alternative school chosen by parents?”

“Surely it is not right for children as young as 4 or 5 to have to travel on a school bus – will there be a supervisor on board?”

“Will existing bus routes be used? Does this mean 4 year olds travelling with 16 year olds?”

“The school is the focus of the village. We must work together and make the village a community. The process so far has been too secretive.”

“You must let us as parents help. But there is not enough time now.”

“Can we form a working group to look for a solution to save the school?”

- **Response to points raised re the way forward/ communication/promotion of the school**

Schools in the area do have the capacity to offer places to all the children on roll at Saltfleetby. Some year groups are full at Theddlethorpe but could accommodate all the pupils without difficulty by reorganising. North Somercotes have places in all year groups and could also accommodate all Saltfleetby pupils if required.

Transport would be provided if it is the nearest school and is more than 2 miles away. Across the LA many 4 and 5 year olds already travel on school buses, it is not unusual in a rural county such as Lincolnshire. Routes change each year according to where the children live. There are no supervisors on buses but routes are inspected and only safe routes are used, bus drivers are DBS checked and are aware of safe stopping and waiting places, and each school produces a travel plan to ensure pupil safety and well being.

We agree that parental support is vital and we are here now to inform the community. The purpose of this meeting is to confirm the current position and offer the opportunity to generate new ideas. There is still time for alternatives to closure to be proposed and all credible options will be considered. However there are strict guidelines laid down by the DfE and the consultation process must meet the statutory timelines. No decision has been made with regard to closure and the scrutiny committee at the LA will review the whole process before a final decision is taken to ensure that the process has been open and fair and all alternatives have been given due consideration. The Executive Councillor will ensure that all factors are taken into consideration before taking the final decision.

We all accept that communication between all parties needs to improve as we move forward in this process. The LA and the IEB would welcome the formation of a parental working group that would look to work with the school.

Summary at the end of meeting which closed at 8.00pm

Debbie Barnes thanked everyone for attending the meeting and for the many positive contributions.

The consultation period ends on 13th November and we would encourage you to submit a response form. All responses will be considered when the decision is taken as to whether to proceed to the next stage of the process. If the process continues to the next stage there will be a further 4 week Representation Period commencing with the publication of a Statutory Notice.

If there are further questions please contact either the school, the IEB or the LA.

Contact details for the LA

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