

**Public Consultation Meeting on Proposal to Merger
Winchcombe Infant and Winchcombe Junior Schools**

Winchcombe Junior School

Wednesday, 7th July 2004, 7.30pm

Minutes of Meeting

Independent Chair: Brian Waters, Parent Governor on West Berkshire Council, Children and Young People Select Committee, Chair of Governors Bucklebury Primary School

Attendees: Approx. 117 Parents and Members of Local Community
 Ian Pearson (IP), Head of Education Service, West Berkshire Council
 Andrew Butler, HR Manager, Children and Young People

1. Introduction by Brian Waters.
2. Ian Pearson explained the Council's proposal, emphasising that nothing had been decided.

He explained why the Council wished to explore the proposal to merge the two schools. There was a clear desire to maintain schools in communities. The proposal to merge the Infant and Junior schools would reduce capacity thus taking out surplus space and helping to meet government targets. Any new school formed would cover the combined age range i.e. nursery to year 6, be on the same site and serve the same catchment area. It would retain the existing secondary link and the existing specialist resources. The aim would be to create a school of an appropriate size which was sustainable and successful serving all pupils well. The decision to go ahead with the proposal was agreed at the Council's Executive meeting held on 17th June. Savings accrued from merging the schools would be re-invested in the new school.

The new school would contain all the existing facilities. With the possibility of expanding the Speech and Language unit into Key Stage 2. The school would be tailored to accommodate pupils coming into the system with 1 ½ classes of entry (45 pupil intake). This would create a school of similar size to Birch Copse, Hungerford and Whitelands Park in Thatcham. It is anticipated that the new school would be based on the existing buildings initially.

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To remove the negative impact of any long period of uncertainty it is hoped that a decision would be made in the autumn with the new school opening in September 2005.

The proposal will be considered at Newbury Town Council, and the Newbury Area Forum. If approved by the Executive public notices would be posted and objections could be lodged. The final decision will rest with the Schools' Organisation Committee, a body independent of the Council. Any disagreement would be resolved by the Adjudicator.

At the moment there are no blue prints available of what the new school would look like. Work on this would be undertaken by the new head, the new governing body, the local community and West Berkshire Council. The aim would be to create a school and community resource.

Andrew Butler explained that the first task of the temporary governing body would be to appoint a new head. In the first instance this appointment could be made from the two existing heads. A staffing structure would be put in place once this appointment had been confirmed. As with the head appointment, the deputy head appointment would initially be considered from the existing deputies and possibly the other head. It was anticipated classroom-based staff would be slotted into existing positions. There was some risk as far as administrative and caretaking staff were concerned, where there were likely to be duplicate posts. However, if two buildings continue to be used initially any reductions may take place over time. HR in Avonbank would be offering support and continuity to all existing staff.

3. Patrick Davies, Chairman of Governors, Winchcombe Infants School spoke on behalf of the school. 1.5 form entry means mixed age classes. This may work at junior level but not at infant level, particularly in the lower age classes because of the differing levels of development. It was felt in the Infant School that everyone knew everyone and that everyone was working for the children. He admitted that there was spare space but that the school had just agreed to let the spare classroom to a pre-school age group. This would give, it was felt, the advantage of possibly being able to move the children into the nursery.

Because of the rate of growth of Newbury it was felt by the school that any surplus would be used. Was there a financial penalty to be attached to the level of surplus places?

Politically, it was felt that any targets would not exist by the time of any general election.

There was not a belief that teaching staff would be protected, as staffing decisions would be made by the governing body and headteacher.

In summing up Mr Davies believed the proposal was a reaction to current political targets and there was no need to do anything. The schools served the community best as they were and he wholeheartedly opposed any proposal to merge them.

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4. Mark Flitter, Chair of Governors, Winchcombe Junior School spoke on behalf of the school. He wasn't in principle opposed to the proposal and he could see some benefits for the children – continuity in the future.

However:

- How much land would be available for the new school and what would happen to land not needed?
- Where was a schedule for the building work?
- Safety issues during the rebuilding, presumably the school would continue to operate during this time.
- What financial assistance would be available during the transition period?
- Levels of finance after the merger.

He felt that the consultation was being carried out too quickly.

5. Questions.

- Nicky Dawe (Parent, Resident, member of PTA) handed over a petition. She believed the numbers of children quoted was inaccurate and didn't include the nursery. What has happened to Mike Fowler, headteacher of the junior school? She felt that the information contained in the leaflet didn't inform – doesn't say what's going to happen to spare land – more housing, more traffic, etc.

A IP thanked Mrs Dawe for the petition and explained that it would form part of the consultation response. As far as the nursery is concerned there is no suggestion that the nursery will not continue. Numbers are not included because returns only take account of school age children (5-11). He explained that the surplus numbers change but the trend was clear. Mike Fowler was retiring at the end of the term as planned. Unfortunately, the initial distribution of merger documents had not covered the whole area, however, copies were available in both school offices and a further distribution in the community would be arranged. As far as selling land, there was no proposal to do this. Site layout and use would be something that the new governing body, local community and Council would need to discuss in the future. He pointed out that the government actively discouraged LEAs from selling school land and had to give approval to.

- Sybil Marsh (Governor of Winchcombe Infant) believed the diversity of infant and junior schools was very important. She believed that it gave an opportunity for a fresh start if necessary at 7. The difference should be valued and the feeling was that it wasn't.

A While it was acknowledged that some parents liked the thought of a change of school during their children's schooling others liked the idea of continuity i.e. a primary school without a break at age 7.

- Kim Westall (Parent and local resident). She was annoyed by the fact that she had received the Calcot leaflet and that despite the re-delivery her neighbours had not received the correct leaflet and therefore were unaware of the meeting. How could it be a fair consultation, shouldn't the meeting have been postponed.

A IP apologised for some incorrect leaflets being delivered. He still felt the meeting gave an opportunity to capture the community's views. The leaflet issue would be addressed.

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- Teresa King (Vice-chair of Winchcombe Infants governing body). Because of the problems in the information distribution, what guarantee what there that the merger would go ahead properly and the children and staff would know what was happening.

A The LEA would ensure that this would be the case.

- Charlene Cook (Parent). Mrs Cook challenged the number of surplus places, how were they worked out. She felt that by reducing the space children wouldn't have sufficient space to do their best. She felt that any surplus space would only be used for housing. There was going to be two years of uncertainty and children need stability to achieve their best. In her vigorous opposition to the proposal she suggested closing Shaw cum Donnington and moving their 85 children to the Winchcombe thus getting rid of the surplus places.

A IP explained the process of calculating surplus places based on school building space.

- Sheila Birchall (Parent). Many of the local community first heard of the possibility of the merger through the NWN. She suggested that an advert be put in that paper informing members of the public where they could obtain copies of the consultation document.
- Maria Knight (Parent). She believed that the numbers didn't make sense. A lot of children came from outside the catchment area, at the choice of their parents since parents could choose the school they wished their children to attend. The capacity in the two schools at the moment is 485 but in the new school only 315. What happens to the staff not needed? She felt that clarity was needed about figures. Spurcroft is being expanded to take account of the housing development being carried out on the MOD site in Thatcham – some could be bought by Vodaphone employees. With Vodaphone headquarters just up the road surely their children would come to the school?

A Nobody is saying that the staff are not valued because they are. The forecast figures are based on trends over time. They are not just based on number of children in the area but the number moving in and out. In actual fact the number of children living in the area seeking places outside the area is greater than those living outside the area seeking places at Winchcombe. IP asked if parents would be happier having their children in schools nearer their place of work than their home.

- Joan Softley (Parent). She was probably in favour of the merger but felt that the delivery was poor. Couldn't the land be ring fenced because she thought this might have pre-empted a lot of debate. Because there is no blue print there is a need for an alternative.

A IP emphasised that there were three options within the consultation proposals:

- The status quo
- The merger
- An alternative proposal

He disagreed that at this point in time there was a need for a precise blue print. Any building plans would be the product of consultation and negotiation.

- Sian Bailey (Parent and Governor) asked if there was any financial penalty attached to the status quo being maintained apart from a "black mark".

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A Funding depended on the number of pupils in a school so there was a need to maximise revenue and where there was empty classrooms this was not a sensible use of limited resources.

- (No name) What about the children and staff? They were all upset because they didn't know what was going to happen. The Infant school had recently had a good Ofsted report but weren't going to get a chance to make it work.
- (No name) It was necessary to think about the teachers and children. What benefits to be gained after the merger? More research needed on the figures used.
- Tracey Whately (Parent). Were the LEA aware of the effect on the children.

A The reason the consultation was being carried out in the timeframe chosen was to minimise uncertainty. IP had noted the feelings of the children when he had seen the posters displayed on the infant site.

- (No name) Had chosen small school with small classes. Can't teach 5 and 6 year olds in the same class. Wanted the security and stability of the Infants as it was now. Didn't want change.

A IP accepted the views of all parents. The LEA were proud of ALL their schools and were trying to configure schools to maximise resources available.

- (No name) Small classes suit children with dyslexia.

A If the roll of a school is contracting funding is affected. If the school is larger more money is generated and are able to have small classes for children with special needs. The schools support dyslexia well and this would be the case in any new school formed.

- Mark Jenkins (Parent). Can't schools be publicised as having spaces.

A Parents have choice and some would rather apply to full schools than to schools with spaces. The LEA will inform parents, when enquiring, which is the catchment school for their address and suggest they visit other schools to find out which they consider to be the most appropriate school for their child.

6. In responding to statements and questions from the floor Ian Pearson reiterated that the meeting had been held in order for the LEA to set out the case for the proposal and to listen to peoples' views. He emphasised that the process is a consultation and that there was no preconceived outcome. All responses would be read and a report would be submitted to Council Members. He thanked every one for coming to the meeting and emphasised that he understood that not everyone feels that the proposal is in the childrens' best interests.
7. Brian Waters thanked everyone for attending and their views. Meeting closed at 9pm.