

Public meeting at Shalbourne School, Thursday 5th October 2023 5.00p.m.

Present: Sara Slade (SS), Katie Turner, 4 members of the Governing Body, 4 members of the public and Andrew Best (AB), Clara Davies (CD), Jenny Rowe (JR) & Samantha Tudgay representing Wiltshire Council

The meeting took the form of an informal question and answer session:

Question 1) Speaker has a long history with the village, children & grandchildren attended the school. The school is a big part of the village community and has been for many years, very sad to learn of its closure and the speed with which this has happened. What are the reasons behind this?

AB & CD gave a brief history of the events of the last few months – 3 members of staff retired earlier this year, many children left during the summer term and others throughout the summer holidays which dramatically reduced the number of pupils in the school to only 5 at present. There was also only 1 application made to Reception in 2022 & 2023 which is indicative of the lack of parental preference for the school in recent years; a lack of children being born in the catchment area which is unsustainable going forward due to the lack of academic and social benefits long term; transition from such a small school to secondary very daunting and difficult for children etc. All of these factors influenced the need for consultation on the school's future.

Question 2) Parents have already been told school is closing so why is Wiltshire Council consulting on closure if the decision has already been made?

SS – The situation was discussed with parents in order that they may make an informed decision on their children's education given the drop in pupil numbers and the subsequent impact on learning, friendship groups, transition to large secondary school etc.

AB – The Council has to take account of children's needs and options Educationally as the school now has so few children. It is also necessary in order to protect staff too.

CD – The DfE set out a statutory, legal process for school closures which has to be followed, informal and formal consultation must take place prior to a final decision.

Question 3) Regarding the decline in birth numbers going forward – is this situation limited to Shalbourne or does it also apply to Wiltshire as a whole/nationally?

CD – This situation is reflected nationally as the decline in birth numbers has been seen over the last ten years or so. There were 3 in-catchment children living in Shalbourne this year but only one application for a reception place. Low in-catchment numbers coupled with the low percentage of those children actually applying for a place at Shalbourne unfortunately makes the school unsustainable going forward as larger year groups are also feeding out at Yr6. There is also a lot of very good schools across the area, including private provision, which gives parents a wide choice locally.

Question 4) What is the future of the school site?

CD – No decisions on the future of the site have been made, we are currently focussed on the education of the children and their future.

JR – Explained the school buildings are leased by the Marquis of Ailesbury to SDBE with a reverter clause to the Marquis and his descendants. The building can only be used as a CE School and would therefore need to be sold by the Marquis or his family if it is not retained as such. Wiltshire Council

own the playing field and, should it become surplus, then the surplus property procedure would apply and the public would have the opportunity to comment at that stage.

Question 5) Is this a 'done deal'?

AB – The Council has a duty regarding the education and the best interests of children involved and, sadly, low numbers of children inevitably leads to a reduction in staff and subsequent recruitment issues. The school therefore becomes vulnerable and, unfortunately, a strong case for closure becomes inevitable.

Question 6) The Foundation Governor explained that Shalbourne has traditionally been a very nurturing school with a family feeling which has always supported the children. He is aware that some children who have already moved are struggling having gone from a *school* of 30 into a *class* of 30. Would it be possible to continue the school as a specific, unique small school catering perhaps for SEN children, nursery aged children?

AB – Pragmatically this is not an option although it is a great idea.

CD – This is what Shalbourne has been offering but unfortunately still only received one application into reception in 2022 & 2023 so sadly not a popular choice with parents. There are other small schools available in the area, but larger schools can also offer a family atmosphere so this not always relative to size.

The Foundation Governor continued saying he wished to highlight the excellent meeting held at the school regarding the retirements earlier this year where Katie and Vicki had outlined some great ideas for future provision at Shalbourne. However, there were more Governors than parents in attendance at this meeting so these ideas could not be put into practice as then the 'mass exodus' started.

AB – Agreed, it would've been great to have had the chance to implement Vicki, Sara & Katie's plans so the Governors frustrations are shared by the LA.

At the end of the meeting, another member of the public arrived and asked whether site security would be put in place if the school closes. CD and JR agreed that fences would be installed at the front of the site for prevent vehicular access.

Meeting closed 5.30p.m.