

Consultation on the Proposal to Close Grafton Primary School

Minutes of Public Meeting – 17th February 2011

Present:

Nigel Hunt	NH	Head of School Buildings & Places, WC
Anne Davey	AD	Assistant Director, Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education
Chris Harries	CH	Primary School Adviser, WC
Nick Glass	NG	Education Officer and note taker

Also in attendance were 40 local residents and the Headteacher.

Nigel Hunt opened the meeting by introducing himself and the representatives of the Local Authority and Diocese present. He welcomed everyone and explained that the purpose of the meeting was to give people more information on the closure proposal to enable them to make a considered consultation response.

NH explained that there was a legal consultation process that must be followed, hence this public meeting and the wide circulation of the consultation document.

NH explained that the number of pupils attending Grafton School had declined and this was possibly due to two factors. Firstly, parents may have recognised that a higher quality of education was being provided at other schools in the area and secondly that there were fewer children in the catchment area than previously. There had been a significant drift of pupils towards other local schools. Only one pupil had joined in September 2010 and information had been received that there were no pupils joining in September 2011 out of the 10 that could have applied. NH stated that he believed that the staff and Governors had worked hard to find alternative solutions but believed that there was now no other option but to consult on closing the school. The Governors had tried to Federate with a number of local schools but these were rebuffed. The LA cannot force another school to federate with Grafton. The Council had to be mindful of the quality of education provided and high standards are difficult to achieve with small numbers.

NH went on to discuss the future of the school buildings should the decision be taken to close the school.

NH asked for any questions about the process of consultation.

Questions

1. What part does finance play in the closure of the school?

The school is increasingly difficult to sustain with small numbers. The cost of transport to the local schools, or school, will be taken into account by the LA but the decision about closure is made with full consultation not solely on financial grounds. NH believed that Grafton is the smallest school in the LA and that although the numbers have fluctuated over the years it was time to bring the uncertainty in the

community to a close through consultation. A resident pointed out the school grew to around 40 pupils in the nineties. As a small school there is a financial protection that is Wiltshire Council policy.

2. Will the consultation responses make a difference?

NH assured the meeting that they do make a difference and that the Cabinet Member that makes the recommendation takes the responses into account.

3. What will happen to the school building and playing fields if the school closes?

The Parish Council could decide to take on the playing field along with the school building for community use. Any local groups interested in using the building should also contact NH. The intention of the pre school group that are already housed in the building is to remain. The Council and the Diocese will continue to maintain the building if no suitable provider comes forward who will take on the liability.

4. Residents asked questions that if the school closed it was important that the community was not split. It was important that the young people from the local community were all designated to go to the same primary school?

NH suggested that this should be written in the returned consultation document. There was a general consensus from parents present that it would be best to redesignate the Grafton catchment area to Great Bedwyn as the latter feeds St Johns School in Marlborough, the preferred choice of secondary school for the majority of parents and pupils. The meeting was assured that if this happened then the cost of transport would, under current regulations, be borne by the LA. There was some dissent about the necessity as well as the environmental and social implications for transporting young people long distances to school. There was also some support for Pewsey Vale to remain the designated secondary school.

5. As the school was Voluntary Aided what is the view of the Diocese to closure?

Anne Davey stated that the Diocese of Salisbury were supportive of the Governors' consultation on closure as they, too were worried about the standards in small school and the social and emotional development of the pupils.

6. Can it be explained why it is considered that the young people are not getting a good education?

CH: The teaching of a number of age groups in one class is challenging for any teacher. The pupils often do not have the range of children to mix with socially in a very small school. The activities that are available in a very small school like Grafton can be much more limited than in a larger school due to the resources that are available. Staff recruitment is more difficult in a small school due to the range and scope of the work involved being unattractive.

NH concluded the meeting by explaining that once the consultation period had ended a report would be taken to the Cabinet Member for Education which would summarise the responses and main points raised. All individual responses would also be made available. The Cabinet Member would then have to decide whether to proceed with the closure of Grafton Primary School and if so, decide what was the best solution for the community and young people. If the decision is taken to close the school, statutory notices would then be published for 6 weeks. At the end of this statutory consultation period, another report

detailing any objections would be taken to the Cabinet Member to enable a final decision to be made.

NH thanked everyone for attending.