

SLOUGH SCHOOL ORGANISATION COMMITTEE – Meeting held on Thursday, 6th November, 2003.

Present:- LEA Group

Councillors Bains, Mansell, Munkley, Small, Smith and Shine.

Schools Group

P Dale-Gough, B O'Brien and J Turnbull.

Roman Catholic Church Group

P Parker and Sister Mary Stephen.

Church of England Group

Reverend Dr J Hurst (Chair)

Berkshire Learning and Skills Council

J Douglas

Slough Race Equality Council

N Ali (observer)

Also Present:- C Spencer and J Preston (Slough LEA), K Marsh (NUT Observer),

Apologies for Absence:-

J Naylor (Schools Group), G Allison (Church of England Group), S K Dhaliwal (LEA Group).

PART I

6. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Munkley declared a personal interest as his wife worked for NFER. Councillor Smith declared a personal interest as he was Chair of Governors of Pippins School. Councillor Mansell declared a personal interest as he was a governor of Early Years Chalvey. Councillor Small declared a personal interest as she was a governor of Langleywood and Marish. Reverend Dr J Hurst declared a personal interest as he was a governor of Langleywood. Councillor Patrick Shine declared a personal interest as he was a governor of Beechwood. Mrs O'Brien declared a personal interest as she was a governor of St Bernards School and Sister Mary Stephen declared a personal interest as she was a governor at St Joseph's and St Anthony's Schools.

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7. Minutes of the Meeting held on 23rd September, 2003

The Minutes of the meeting of the School Organisation Committee held on 23rd September, 2003 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as a correct record subject to the fourth line of the first bullet point in minute number 5 – The Westgate School – Provision of Post-16 Education being amended to read 'both academic and *non academic* which would

8. Proposal to establish a new Sikh Voluntary Aided Primary School

The Committee considered a report outlining a proposal by the Slough Sikh Education Gurmat Trust to establish a new Sikh Voluntary-Aided School on land north of St Ethelbert's School. It was the responsibility of the Committee to consider the proposal together with any objections received and come to a decision. Once a decision had been reached by the Committee the Promoter was under a duty to implement the proposals.

Members of the Committee had been provided with the statutory guidance that had been issued on the facts which the Committee should consider when coming to its decisions. The guidance stated that these should not be taken as being exclusive but that all proposals should be considered on their individual merits. The DfES advised that the Committee in considering proposals for new schools should consider in particular:

- the effect on standards and the contribution to school improvements
- the need for places
- the availability of finance
- the views of interested parties
- community cohesion, inclusiveness and partnerships
- equality of opportunity
- effect on school journeys (for the pupils attending the school).

The report set out the full details of the proposals in the prescribed information prepared by the promoters and details of the consultation which had taken place on the proposals. A total of 51 objections had been received to the advertised proposals. These comprised of three individual letters and three duplicated letters as follows:

- Individual letters of objection from Mr C Sliski, Mrs P Macgarvey and Wexham Court Parish Council
- 25 copies of a duplicated objection letter
- 8 copies of a second duplicated objection letter
- 15 copies of a third duplicated objection letter.

The letters of objection all came from residents living in the Wexham area and were listed in the report along with the promoters' response to the points raised in the objection letters.

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The Director of Learning and Cultural Services spoke to the report and outlined the consideration given to the proposal by the LEA. Members of the Committee raised a number of points/questions which included:-

- What the position was with regard to surplus places in the primary sector.

The Director of Learning and Cultural Services indicated that this was a key issue to be considered and the surplus vacancies in the primary sector in Slough currently stood at 13%. The LEA was taking steps to reduce that capacity by amalgamating schools and possibly closing Thames Valley Community Infant School. The LEA had a robust formula for predicting pupil numbers and using this formula it was possible to predict that by 2007/8 there would be a 20% surplus places in the primary sector and the LEA therefore needed to take action to absorb surplus places. The Director advised that the DfES had taken this into consideration in granting money to this proposal. It was necessary to balance surplus places against the advantages of a school for one faith and the increased choice for parents. The Director of Learning and Cultural Services pointed out that the ebb and flow of school places was part of normal LEA functions. The Director advised that the DfES held him accountable for the number of surplus places in Slough but if surplus places arose as a result of the DfES creating them by way of a grant such as in this proposal he could not be held accountable. The Authority had until 2006 to manage the surplus place percentage down. A surplus place percentage of 5-10% was acceptable and there was some virtue in having some spare capacity.

- In response to a point that families were getting smaller and there would therefore have to be school closures, the Director of Learning and Cultural Services indicated that the birth rate was falling and the LEA's formula could only predict 5 years forward.
- In answer to a question as to whether the establishment of a Sikh school could lead to segregation rather than promote cohesion as advocated in the statutory guidance, the Director of Learning and Cultural Services indicated that in arriving at that view an assumption would have had to be made that faith schools led to disintegration of social cohesion. He pointed out that 25% of the schools in Slough were already faith schools (eg Catholic and C of E) and that the existence of these schools had not resulted in segregation. Social cohesion was one of the Promoters key objectives.

The Chair invited Mr Kandola of the Slough Sikh School Gurmat Trust to address the Committee on the proposal. Mr Kandola read out a letter about faith schools and highlighted the main points of the proposal. When the Trust had initially approached the DfES three to four years ago, they had been advised that funding would not be forthcoming because of surplus places in Slough. The DfEs had reconsidered this position and had now indicated that, regardless of basic need, they would be prepared to fund the proposal. The Trust had tried unsuccessfully to convert the Lea Junior School to a Sikh school. Mr Kandola acknowledged that surplus places in the primary sector

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would be reduced by the LEA. The report put together by the Trust focused on this and the Trust had tried to make a best estimate as to the number of Sikh children who would move to a Sikh school from all schools in Slough. The school that would be most affected was Castleview but there would be, on average, 11 Sikh children from each school in the Borough moving across to any new Sikh school. He argued therefore that the Sikh school would not have a material impact on the schools already most affected by surplus places. In answer to concerns about segregation Mr Kandola indicated that there were currently over 6000 Christian schools and 30 Jewish schools in the country and that a Sikh school would not cause segregation. He cited the Guru Nanak School in Hayes as a Sikh school already in operation which had no segregation issues. Teachers were drawn from all faiths despite being a Sikh school and in fact 70% of teachers were non Sikhs. He believed that a Sikh school in Slough would be very similar.

Mr Kandola emphasised that the school would be open to all and that 20% of school places (84) would be reserved for non Sikhs. This percentage had been agreed because the Trust was not trying to isolate Sikh children. The school would practice multi faith curriculum and would concentrate on breaking down barriers to develop tolerance and respect.

Mr Kandola argued that a Sikh school was urgently needed and that some Sikh parents had been prepared to pay privately but that the Trust had decided that it wished to provide a Sikh school and 600 Sikhs had given written approval to the school as part of the consultation. 10% of the capital needed for the school was to be found from the Sikh community. £110,000 has been pledged in writing at the time of writing the report and a further £350,000 had now been pledged. Mr Kandola was confident that £250,000 outstanding would be raised as it was a fundamental issue for Sikhs in Slough. He argued that the Slough community would have the benefit of the Sikh school and the Sikh parents would have additional choice. Mr Kandola urged the Committee if they were unsure or could not decide whether or not to approve the proposals to abstain from voting or give conditional approval as, if the proposal was rejected by the Committee, the proposal would be delayed by another year.

Members of the Committee raised a number of issues/questions following the presentation which included:-

- What account had been taken of the congestion that would be caused by Sikh pupils being brought in from other areas such as Reading and Luton. Mr Kandola indicated that this was a serious issue that had been considered as the Trust did not want to exacerbate traffic problems. He advised that it was estimated that 70 pupils would come from surrounding areas such as Reading, Maidenhead, and Hayes. The Trust had given consideration to measures such as opening and closing the school earlier, providing a school bus from outside the area and creating a left hand turn only from Wexham Road. The Director of Learning and Cultural Services indicated that a traffic assessment would be undertaken as part of any planning application and would therefore be considered by the Planning

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Committee in due course. A school travel plan would be developed if the proposal was to go ahead.

- Greek children in the town attended a Saturday school and Mr Kandola was asked whether this would not be an option for the Sikhs. Mr Kandola indicated that some Sikh children did go to Saturday school but that it was hard to keep the language and traditions going through Saturday School only.
- With regard to standards, Mr Kandola indicated that the proposal had focused on core issues of equality and ethos. He advised that the Sikh Secondary School in Hayes had become the top third or fourth school in the Borough.
- With regard to allocation of places at the school Mr Kandola was asked why the school would not be populated entirely with Slough pupils. Mr Kandola indicated that the admissions policy would give preference to children based on distance from the school. The Director of Learning and Cultural Services indicated that the Council had little influence over parental choice and in practice there was a large migration of children out of Slough schools and that, particularly in the selective schools, half the children were from out of borough.
- A Committee member emphasised that the School Organisation Committee needed to get the best possible achievement out of schools and in his view it would be an improvement to reduce the drift of children out of the Borough. He asked Mr Kandola if he thought he had been modest in estimating the impact on other schools and whether there was any capacity for expansion in the future, Mr Kandola advised that there was not enough land for a three form entry school.
- Reference was made to an Ofsted report from the Guru Nanak Primary School in Hayes as this school had recently failed an Ofsted inspection. Mr Kandola indicated the circumstances behind the Ofsted report and stressed that he had referred to the secondary school in Hayes as being an excellent school.
- A Member of the Committee drew attention to the privilege she had felt as a Headteacher in accepting sikh children into her school. She emphasised the richness of morals and family values the Sikh children had brought to the school and the value this had added to the school.
- In answer to a question as to what would happen if the 20% of the non-Sikh places were not taken up, Mr Kandola advised that the 20% would be reserved for non-Sikhs but if they were not taken up they would be filled with Sikh children.
- With regard to segregation issues a Member of the Committee indicated her view that the proposal to create a Sikh school would maintain the

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richness of the society in Slough and would keep friendship groups together which would in turn increase social cohesion.

- In answer to a question, the Director of Learning and Cultural Services indicated that the proposal would not impact on council tax. The DfES was to provide £6.2m to build the new school which was a real capital investment opportunity and the impact on revenue budget would be covered by schools with places in the Borough as it would result in redistribution of existing funds across schools.

The Chair thanked Mr Kandola for his presentation.

The Chair then called upon Mr Richard Matsell to speak on behalf of the objectors. Mr Matsell tabled a summary of the objections to the proposal which he spoke to. In summary he indicated that there were objections to any school on the land north of St Ethelbert's and indicated his view that the consultation had not been well handled. He drew particular attention to the traffic problems that would be created.

The Chair proposed and it was agreed that the Committee adjourn for five minutes to enable Members to read the paper that had been circulated.

(The Committee adjourned from 8.15 p.m. to 8.20 p.m.)

Having read the paper and listened to Mr Richard Matsell, Members of the Committee asked the following questions/made the following points:-

- Page 98 of the agenda showed the proposed school in the wrong place and that it should in fact be south of the allotments and sports ground. The Director of Learning and Cultural Services indicated that it would not affect the allotment site.
- In answer to a question the Director of Learning and Cultural Services indicated that the school would have its own playing fields but that there was a possibility of some shared use of both playing field areas with St Ethelbert's and the Sikh School. Mr Kandola indicated that there were no plans to share playing fields but the Trust would invest and explore ways to share resources.

The Chair asked the Director of Learning and Cultural Services, Mr Matsell and Mr Kandola whether they had presented all the information they wished to at the meeting and they confirmed that they had done so. The Chair asked Members of the Committee if they had sufficient information to make a decision and all Members of the Committee indicated that they had. A Committee member asked a question of clarification with regard to funding from the Sikh community and whether, as the full funding had not yet been received, the Committee could make a decision. The Director of Learning and Cultural Services indicated that at this stage it was for the Proposers to demonstrate to the DfES that the money was forthcoming.

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The Chair drew attention to the procedure for decision making by the Committee. Each of the constituent groups on the Committee had one vote and, before a decision could be made, the voting by all groups which exercised a vote must be unanimous. Any Group abstaining from voting did not count as a vote against. The Chair advised that if the Committee could not reach a unanimous decision the proposal would be passed to an Adjudicator who would then make a decision.

The Chair advised that the rules with regard to deputies attending Committee meetings and voting required the committee member to advise the Clerk in writing the name of the deputy before the start of the meeting. As the representative of the Slough Race Equality Council (SREC) has not done this the representative of SREC deputising for Mr Ali would not be able to vote on this occasion.

Constituent groups on the Committee withdrew to consider how to cast their vote.

The Groups voted as follows:-

Schools Group	-	reject proposal
Church of England Group	-	accept proposal
Roman Catholic Church Group	-	accept proposal
LEA Group	-	abstain
Berkshire Learning and Skills Council	-	accept proposal

The Chair advised that as the voting was three groups for acceptance, one for rejection and one abstention, the decision was clearly not unanimous and the matter would be referred to the Adjudicator.

9. School Organisation Plan

The Committee considered the draft School Organisation Plan for 2003/4 to 2007/8. The Committee was asked to either approve the Plan as submitted with or without modification, prepare an alternative plan for publication by the Authority as the Committee's approved plan or refer the draft plan to an Adjudicator appointed by the Secretary of State.

Members were advised that no comments had been received by the Clerk of the School Organisation Committee during the statutory 11 week notice period which followed publication of the Plan on 1st August 2003.

Resolved Unanimously - That the School Organisation Plan for 2003/4 to 2007/8 be approved without modification.

Chair

(Note: The meeting opened at 6.30 p.m. and closed at 9.10 p.m.)