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Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Legal & Democratic Services

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07 December 2020

Dear Councillor

PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - MONDAY, 7TH DECEMBER, 2020

Please find enclosed, for consideration at the next meeting of the People Scrutiny Committee taking place on Monday, 7th December, 2020, the following report(s) that were unavailable when the agenda was printed.

Agenda No Item

3. **Questions from Members of the Public (Pages 1 - 6)**

Stephen Tautz

Principal Democratic Services Officer

Legal & Democratic Services

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PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7 DECEMBER 2020

CHALKWELL HALL INFANTS SCHOOL & CHALKWELL HALL JUNIOR SCHOOL **3**

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR
CHILDREN AND LEARNING

Thank you for your questions.

Out of necessity in view of the date of the Scrutiny Committee and the day the questions were received, the answer to the questions is brief. I did also offer to meet and speak with the Chair of Governors at the infant school, but it was not possible to arrange this in the time available.

(1) Questions from David Baldwin

- (a) (Paragraph 5.2) How do you know who attended given the attendees were anonymous?**

The invitations were sent only to staff and governors from the two schools. The report references this collective group.

- (b) (Paragraph 5.5.2) The pandemic "...featured strongly in the staff meeting". How do you define "strongly" given I was at the meeting and I only remember it coming up once?**

There were five questions referring directly to the pandemic/Covid and one relating to staff wellbeing.

(2) Questions from Kirsty Trim

- (a) (Paragraph 5.3.1) How do you account for 45 staff being named here, but the bar charts in the appendix adding up to 54?**

If they had a child on roll, they were picked up in parental counts and not as a member of staff.

- (b) (Paragraph 5.3.3) It states that "Of the staff, 36 (85%) were against, 9 (15%) were in favour". Those numbers aren't mathematically correct. Who reviewed the numbers in this report prior to submission and what confidence is there that the rest of the numbers are correct? (See also 5.5.3 where it says the school will contain 850 children when 7 year groups of 120 is 840?**

The information was derived from several sources, the online survey form, scrutiny of the details text-based comments made in the survey and a review of the questions asked in the staff meeting. Whilst I accept a small error in transition from these sources, the overall result would be unaffected.

(3) Questions from Emma Howe

- (a) **(Paragraph 5.5.2) At the virtual staff/governor meeting one of the questions was "But you didn't include C-19 as a disadvantage? Why was this not considered?" The response was that the pandemic cannot be seen as a disadvantage. What has changed since then?**

The question, and the statements in the original report related to the generic pros and cons of amalgamation compared to separate schools, as such the current context was not included. It was apparent from the consultation that the impact of the pandemic featured from both the survey and the meeting in the minds of both staff and community.

- (b) **(Paragraph 5.5.2) How many respondents mentioned the pandemic in the YourSay result and what percentage of that is the overall number of respondents?**

Approximately 12.5%, but it also featured in the staff/governor consultation.

(4) Questions from James Isaacs

- (a) **(Paragraph 6.1) The report states that governors were "very strongly against amalgamation". How do you define "very strongly" as a percentage and why weren't the numbers stated in the report given that staff numbers were? I'm aware of at least eight governors who voted in favour out of the 13 who responded.**

The information from the performance team indicates that responses were received from ten governors, five of which were against the amalgamation. I am however aware anecdotally that the Infant Governing body had previously voted unanimously in favour of amalgamation.

- (b) **(Paragraph 6.2.2) Why does the report say that in previous amalgamations one school was "considerably weaker" than the other when in the case of the last two amalgamations, Earls Hall were both good and North Street were good and outstanding? (Evidence via OFSTED reports for Earls Hall Infant, Earls Hall Junior and Cabinet report showing position of Leigh North Street Schools)**

The relative performance in one of the cases cited was different compared to the very similar levels of performance at the time of the previous inspection of the two Chalkwell schools, both were regarded as a 'strong' good.

(5) Questions from Sarah Clements

- (a) **(Paragraph 6.2) Given the process was kicked off during the pandemic and with both schools being rated as 'Good' by OFSTED, what do you know now that you didn't know then?**

SBC requires us to consider amalgamation, irrespective of a pandemic. Whilst the Council may hold a view, the purpose of the consultation was to gauge the view of the schools and community.

- (b) **Given that a vaccine was announced as available for distribution today, how does that impact your view that the pandemic is the reason not to proceed to the next state of the process?**

It has been made clear by the national government this week that even with the benefits of a vaccine, the impact of the pandemic and the threat it causes is likely to be present at least until the Summer.

(6) Question from Reim Rowe

- (a) (Paragraph 6.2.1) "it was made clear that these benefits would only be evident over the medium and longer term," Can you please reference where this is mentioned in the original paper. The closest approximation is "outcomes for pupils improve over time"**

Any amalgamation will not necessarily lead to immediate improvements in outcomes for pupils, which is the purpose of bring the schools together. The inevitable disruption that a consultation and possible amalgamation may cause is known to take some time to begin to impact on outcomes.

(7) Questions from Kate Crawford

- (a) (Paragraph 6.2.1) "even in "normal" times, the potential disruption on staff and the impact on pupils can be marked and prolonged" Why wasn't this mentioned in the original paper and if true, why are there so few separate infant and junior schools remaining in England**

The benefits of an all-through primary school over two separate phase schools is recognised, hence the low numbers. But at the same time, the energy and time taken to realise these benefits fully is also noted.

- (b) (Paragraph 5.5.2) Given the staff and governors meeting was anonymous attendees, how do you know whether the views expressed there were shared amongst all the attendees or were being posted by a select few?**

We were required to conduct the meeting under Covid conditions. As such, participants were free to enter a question, or more. All participants had the opportunity to ask questions, there were no means of tracking the number of responses made by a single participant.

(8) Questions from Simone Isaacs

- (a) (Paragraph 6.2.1) How do you define "profound" and are all schools impacted similarly?**

At the time of writing (4 December 200), only this week, 26 pupils and 8 staff have tested positive. As a consequence, 1424 pupils and 84 staff have been required to self-isolate. There are four separate outbreaks in schools (where there are more than one case on one or more different year groups). Whilst no schools have yet had to close, in many schools, entire year groups have had to miss direct education at various times. Unfortunately, in at least one of our education settings there has been a tragic Covid-related death.

- (b) (Paragraph 6.2.3) How does the current context relate to a future state?**

The statement reflected that in the current context, both schools are engaged with activities that can be regarded as business as usual, on top of a possible amalgamation and the effect of the pandemic.

(9) Questions from Ben Isaacs

- (a) (Paragraph 6.2.3) How is the recruitment of a HT for the junior school relevant given the process has been paused pending the results of this consultation?**

Irrespective of the outcome of the consultation and the decision taken by Cabinet, either way, the school/s would have to engage in the crucial task of the recruitment of a substantive Headteacher, for either an all-through Primary School or for the Junior School.

- (b) (Paragraph 6.2.3) How is the PAN relevant given the consultation hasn't closed yet and any changes won't be implemented until Sep 2022**

It is an example of activity over and above the pandemic and amalgamation that schools are still required to undertake, along with many others.

(10) Questions from Dr. Lital Goldberg

- (a) Have you spoken to or visited the two schools to understand how they are dealing with the pandemic (not all schools are having the same issues)?**

Officers, including the Director of Education and Public Health have run a number of regular webinars throughout the pandemic, where headteachers have actively shared their experiences. In addition, officers have also advised senior leaders in one of the schools in relation to positive Covid issues. There is also an Education 'Cell', a meeting of officers and school and college leaders that has taken place at least weekly throughout the pandemic, sometimes more often, where the scope of the impact has been shared by headteachers. In general officers have not visited schools directly during the pandemic in order to lessen the burden on schools. (The exception to this has been a visit to your school where a site inspection was required that could not have been conducted remotely. The visit was conducted with both headteachers under Covid secure conditions.

- (b) Was it considered that doing nothing is worse than doing something given the logistical challenges and imperfect outcomes that managing separate schools on a single site causes?**

Some responses in the consultation indicated that the leadership of the two schools were working closely in collaboration on a number of matters. This is to be welcomed and encouraged going forwards.

(11) Questions from Stuart Judd

- (a) What is the downside to moving to the next stage of the process given the process can still be stopped then and the external environment will be clearer?**

Cabinet have made the decision based upon the rationale in the report. They have also made it clear that at some stage in the future they reserve the right to revisit their decision.

- (b) Was it considered that doing nothing is worse than doing something given you stated previously that all through schools improve pupil outcomes and we know that children need any advantages we can offer post their lockdown lost learning?**

As stated earlier, the benefits of amalgamation do not necessarily impact on outcomes in the short or medium-term.

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