

GODALMING TOWN COUNCIL

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TOWN MAYOR'S OFFICE

11 April 2018

Green Oak Closure Consultation
Room 326
County Hall
Penrhyn Road
Kingston upon Thames
KT1 2DN

Dear Sir/Madam

On Monday, 9 April, a Town Meeting was held in Godalming, called by electors, under the Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12, Part 3. I was Chairman of the meeting in my capacity as Mayor of Godalming.

The meeting was well attended and very constructive. Many questions were asked in an orderly manner and Mr Alex Tear and Mr Nicholas Smith, officers of the Diocese and SCC respectively, responded as fully as they were able. The meeting also heard from Mrs Lou Anderson, Castle Hill Academy Trust, who indicated a willingness to continue discussion with the Diocese on the potential admission of Green Oak School into that Academy.

The proper business of the meeting commenced with a statement on behalf of those who called the meeting setting out six clear objectives.

One of the objectives asked that I, as Chairman of the Parish Meeting, express the views and questions arising from the meeting, in writing, to Surrey County Council and the Diocese.

I undertook to do this and attach a list of the questions received.

Below I summarise the points which arose from the meeting:

- 1 First, it was felt that the consultation process was being rushed and insufficient time had been given for proper consideration of the issues. Indeed further facts have emerged since the decision by SCC to commence a consultation process and the Public Meeting on the 14 March 2018. The Council appears to have only allowed the minimum period of consultation. The meeting heard that this was to ensure that a decision could be reached before the end of the current school year. However, this should not override the need for adequate discussion and, furthermore, the meeting did not accept that it was a good reason when dealing with the future of young children, the future of current staff at the school and parents who do not have the flexibility to adjust working arrangements to accommodate a change of school at short notice. These considerations should weigh more in the decision-making process than the need to rush a decision.
- 2 The meeting understood it to be said that financial viability was not the key issue. The key issue was about the desire to provide a good education for children.
- 3 The meeting believed that there was every possibility that the school would succeed if it could continue building on improvements achieved since the Ofsted Inspection. It was always felt that with the right commitment from the various organisations there could be a way ahead.

- 4 It was understood that a proposal had been made for the admission of Green Oak into the Castle Hill Academy Trust. Some discussions have taken place although it is understood that this MAT was unable to meet certain governance criteria required by the Diocese to maintain the Christian ethos of a CofE school. The meeting urged the Diocese to enter into further discussions with the MAT and explore the possibility that its objectives could be achieved by other means.
- 5 It appeared to the meeting that insufficient attention had been made on the effect of relocation of pupils when there was already pressure on places. Furthermore, it seemed that no explicit account was being taken of the impact of current housing development in Godalming and the potential future development in the immediate vicinity of Green Oaks. Anxiety was expressed at the possibility that class sizes would be prejudiced or would come under pressure which would be detrimental to the good education of children. Whilst it was explained that 'future provision' would be the subject of separate consultation in due course it was felt that a more 'joined up' approach now would be preferable.
- 6 It was appreciated that there would be substantial financial implications for any MAT in keeping the school open. These arose from the special costs of improving standards and funding the school until it reached the sustainable number of pupils. Both improved standards and increased demand for places would address the issue of sustainable pupil number. The Diocese indicated that they would be prepared to reconsider admission with their MAT if the funding issue could be resolved. The meeting believed this to be a viable option to be considered.
- 7 In the wider context it was felt that that the closure of the school would remove a 'community' hub which would adversely affect the fabric of the whole community.

In conclusion, the meeting has asked that when considering the way forward, the SCC and the Diocese have due regard to the points raised at the Town Meeting. The retention of Green Oak School, it is believed, would provide the best education opportunities for the children of the area.

Yours faithfully

Signed on the Original

Councillor Anne Bott
Mayor of Godalming

Enc

CC: Rt Revd Jo Bailey-Wells – Chair of the Diocese of Guildford, Diocesan Board of Education
Mr Alex Tear – Director of Education – Diocese of Guildford
Cllr Mary Lewis – Cabinet Member for Education – Surrey County Council
Mr Nicholas Smith – Schools Commissioning Officer – Surrey County Council

QUESTIONS ASKED AT THE PUBLIC MEETING HELD ON 9 APRIL 2018

Would it be possible for a MAT to take over the school that would not guarantee the religious aspect of the school?

Is it possible for a non CofE Trust to meet your requirements?

Is the Diocese prepared to compromise on Point 4 of the MAT criteria or is it better to close the school rather than compromise on this point and who defines the criteria?

Given that the church land that the school sits on is neighbouring SCC school grounds and the land defers to SCC if it ceases to be an educational establishment, would it be better to step down now and give non CofE MATs a chance to run the school?

In what sense is no school better than a secular school?

How can a school be closed in close proximity to a proposed several hundred new homes?

It is appreciated the school has 92 pupils with a capacity for 200 and expensive to run because of standing costs. If the money became available would that change the position (not in a religious way, but a financial one)?

The school needs to be financially viable, how many more pupils does that mean?

What's the projection in relation to the housing plans eventually for capacity within the local schools?

Will we have enough capacity elsewhere if Green Oak closes?

Considering the large number of new homes being built in the Godalming area, SCC will need to provide at least 40 primary and 80 secondary school places alone. Amongst the existing 6 schools there are 52 vacancies. How will SCC guarantee to provide 92 places (ie. current Green Oak pupils) within the Godalming schools?

Consultation period should last no longer than 12 months, but an absolute minimum of 6 weeks and 6 weeks should exclude school holidays. This consultation started on the 5 March and is due to end on the 16 April so this 42-day consultation process is 24 working days long. Surely this foreshortened consultation alone should fail the process?

You say the school is failing our children. I received a letter today from Ofsted. I can confirm Ofsted carried out a monitoring inspection and that leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the reversal of special measures. Would you not say it's fair for the current leadership to carry on with the improvements they are currently already making?

My children went to Shackleford, which was threatened with closure. It did not get closed. To cut costs, the number of teachers and classes was reduced and was kept at these levels until they could increase numbers again. The school became viable again. Can this be done in this situation?

There has been an indication that the spare places in schools around Godalming is exceptionally tight. I have heard that there are a number of large developments coming on stream. What is going to happen to pupils that come from residents moving into Prime Place and also all of the families moved into the Alderbank Drive area – have they got places? I have heard you say nothing about the ability of SCC to be able to offer alternative places if Green Oak were to close and given existing pressure on other junior and secondary school places.

At the previous consultation meeting SCC stated class sizes would not rise above 31. I have carried out an extensive investigation in class sizes and written to SCC that by my calculation will rise to 34 as it stands and with the projected housing to 38. Asked for SCC calculations under FOI request. Did they do any calculations because the lady at the previous meeting said she had?

Merton has Portakabins on the playing fields and playgrounds. Would SCC do that?

The Diocese stated that church governors must be represented at director and trustee level. Who gave that advice? Or does that advice come from elsewhere?

How much more money in total has been offered in order to protect the trust for Green Oak School?

Guidance from Department of Education is that all schools who enter into MAT are given money at a standard rate of £110-130,000. You say it has not been offered?

As a parent who works and obviously for parents who have more than one child, how do you intend us being able to get our children to school? It might take maybe until the end of August to know where our children will be going. I start work at 8.30am so I would have to leave 1 hour early and get childcare. I will only get about a week to sort out our arrangements or may be have to quit my job.

Has the SCC made a decision on the school being open or on it being closed?

How will that be communicated to prospective parents?

Can you confirm SCC legal class sizes for an infant school and junior school class?

What will it take to have the consultation period extended? Time for all the ideas to be properly explored, so the local school remains open and information sorted through in a fair process?

It appears from what the Diocese has said that the school is not financially viable and requires funding in order to be able to proceed with any kind of proposal to continue. Is there a budget recovery plan for Green Oak School? One is always drawn up when a school is facing financial difficulty and is it not agreed by SCC?

What will happen to Green Oak site? Will it be used for educational purposes come September if the school closes?

The school is not viable with the number of pupils, however, how do you expect us to get more pupils if it will not be allowed to take on more pupils? First choice for Green Oak has been taken off the list and given another choice. Already looking at the school being closed. How can numbers increase if this is what is happening?

What will happen to the growing population of 0-4 year olds?

I wonder if the Board of Trustees asked Ofsted to do another inspection and if that inspection was good that would make the school much more attractive to sponsors and MATs. A plan is required to increase numbers of children at the school as it is being underused at the moment. Is it possible SCC would be prepared to fund something under these circumstances?

What is going to happen to Year 5 children if school closes?

I am wondering how we can have a proper consultation when fundamental short and long term facts and how they are addressed is not providing clarity on what these options might be?

I understand that should the school close we will not want to increase class sizes in other schools in the area. There is not a lot of capacity around other schools. What plans are in place to accommodate 92 children in terms of building accommodation, etc?