

CONSULTATION ON CLOSURE OF CULHAM PAROCHIAL SCHOOL FORMAL RESPONSE FROM SCHOOL GOVERNORS AND LOCAL SUPPORT GROUP

The decision by OCC to consult on the closure of the school is something that has been taken very seriously by the school, the body of parents and the wider community of Culham.

Immediately following the announcement of the consultation the writer was appointed to the governing body and was subsequently elected as Chair. There have been further changes to the governing body subsequently. At the same time, a local support group 'Save Culham School' (SCS) was formed to work alongside the school and the governing body to address the issues that have been raised by the Council.

OCC identified three main issues:

1. Permanent Head

It is acknowledged that the appointment of a permanent Head is vital to the school's future. The governing body intends to run a national advertisement for a full-time Head within the next week or so. At the same time, conversations are taking place with Heads in other local schools who might consider a shared Headship. These conversations continue. Whilst there is no concrete outcome from these measures at the time of writing, it is considered that there is a strong likelihood of a positive result before the end of Term 4.

The timescales within the consultation process do not realistically allow for a concrete outcome within the consultation period but there is confidence that this issue can be addressed to the Council's satisfaction. We consider that appointing a permanent head is the key to the saving of the school and all avenues are being explored and every effort is being made. It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that the Governing body take this extremely seriously.

2. Finances

The writer is a practicing Chartered Accountant and has worked on the school's budgets. It should be borne in mind that the school is expecting to be in surplus on 31 March 2011.

The number of pupils in the count in January 2011 means that there will be a deficit in the financial year 2011/12. This is acknowledged by both the governing body and SCS. Obviously actual outcomes will remain under review but the expectation is that the 2011/12 deficit will be in the order of £50,000. Further modelling reveals that, where the number of children on the school roll exceeds 40, the school will be in a break-even position year on year. The writer is happy to meet with council officers to review the figures.

SCS acknowledge the 2011/12 deficit and have undertaken to find this sum over time. Some fundraising efforts are already under way. It will be appreciated that whilst the possibility of closure remains, there is some difficulty about raising substantial sums. However, Council can be reassured that serious efforts would commence once it was announced that the closure was no longer a possibility. It is hoped that, in such a circumstance, it would be possible to discuss with Council officers a timescale over which the deficit could be eliminated.

3. School Roll

The current threat of closure has led to some parents transferring their children to other schools to secure an acceptable place for academic year 2011/12. There is clearly no real possibility of addressing the current falls in pupil numbers whilst the threat of closure remains.

SCS and the school have begun to identify initiatives which would see pupil numbers increasing once the school's future is secure. It is acknowledged that the appointment of a permanent head would have some part to play in this. The school's website has been redesigned and increased visibility of the school is intended. Initiatives around after school clubs, run by parents and other interested parties, are also being considered and some should commence in the very near future.

Anecdotally, the writer is aware of some families who would consider returning their pupils to the school if the closure process were stopped.

As noted above, it is considered that a school roll in excess of 40 children should be sufficient to provide a viable school and a good standard of education. This is considered to be a realistic target and work will begin as soon as any threat of closure has receded. Whilst 40 is an immediate target there is an aspiration to increase this further subsequently.

It is to the credit of the existing staff in the school (some of whom have been engaged in the full knowledge of the possibility of closure) that the standard of education provided by the school has not suffered as a result of recent events. It is firmly believed, by both governors and SCS, that there is something worth saving in educational terms and that the school can be a valuable asset to the LA in the provision of education in the county.

All the LA projections we have seen show that there is to be an increased demand for school places in the next five years. It is firmly believed that Culham Parochial School can play its part in that provision and contribute towards the delivery of excellence.

To summarise:

- There have been changes to the governing body which have revitalised the leadership of the school.
- Governors are actively seeking either a full-time head or a permanent executive head arrangement with another school.
- Figures show that the school is viable with more than 40 pupils.
- There will be a deficit in 2011/12 and there is a firm commitment, by the community of Culham, to fund this within an acceptable time frame.
- Work to increase the numbers on the pupil roll is ready to begin as soon as any threat of closure is lifted.
- The school continues to offer an excellent standard of education in a friendly and focused environment and this will appeal to prospective parents across the age range.

The damage to the community of Culham would be considerable should this school close and this would bring to an end 160 years of schooling on this site. It is firmly believed that the Council's concerns can be addressed by the governing body and the local community working together and current efforts bear this out.

A decision by cabinet not to proceed to closure would enable work to begin to help this 'small but perfectly formed' school increase its numbers and enjoy a stable future providing quality education to the children of the local community and the wider community of Oxfordshire.

Andrew Churchill Stone
18 January 2011