

REPORT TO LIFELONG LEARNING SELECT COMMITTEE

SELECT COMMITTEE, TUESDAY, 20 MARCH 2001

Report to the Cabinet Member - Schools on the proposal to determine the Statutory Notices for Hatters Lane School, Wycombe.

1. This report seeks to address the issues raised in "calling" the proposed decision to determine the Statutory Notices to close Hatters Lane School and Fresh Start it as a new school on 1 September 2001.
2. I understand that Members of the Select Committee will have received a copy of Mr Greenburgh's letter of 28 February; and a copy of the report of the Wycombe Commission that was set up by Education Committee in April 2000 to make recommendations on appropriate arrangements for the provision of quality education in the east Wycombe area.
3. I include with this report, at Appendix 1, a copy of the Director of Education's report to the Education PPF Panel on 18 July 2000, by way of background and as an example of the reporting that was made to Education Committee, or Schools Sub-Committee or PPF Panel during 2000.
4. I will address the specific issues raised in Mr Greenburgh's letter, below but, on the basis that some Members of the Select Committee may not be familiar with the Hatters Lane issue, I will set out some of the history to this matter below.
 - 4.1 At the beginning of November 1999, Hatters Lane School went into crisis. Review of the recovery plan agreed by the school and the LEA in June 1999, showed that the plan was not being adequately implemented. At the same time, the school was notified that it was to receive a full Ofsted inspection in February 2000. The then headteacher went on sick leave, and did not return. There was a management vacuum; planned recovery wasn't happening. The situation had to be stabilised urgently and the school had to be got through its forthcoming Ofsted inspection. The Director of Education's analysis was that the school would go into special measures; that a new management arrangement was required and that recovery planning had to start afresh.
 - 4.2 The governing body agreed with the analysis of the seriousness of the problem and concluded that the school could not be turned round in its present circumstances.
 - 4.3 The Hatters Lane problem was a compound of:
 - poor and unimproving educational standards
 - cumulative reductions in local support for the school as evidenced by the fact that in September 1999, the Year 7 at Hatters Lane was 71 out of a potential available in the reserved area of some 350

- pupil behaviour problems and perceptions in the community of pupil behaviour problems
- a range of internal management, staffing and morale issues
- a mounting budget deficit. The decline in pupil numbers meant that the school was becoming financially unviable (a secondary school needs to admit 120 pupils per year - four forms of entry to be financially viable. If numbers drop below that on a sustained basis, viability is threatened)

The Strategy

5. The strategy adopted and proposed to and agreed with the governing body included:
 - rapidly to stabilise management and confidence so as to prevent the further loss of pupil numbers and staff
 - get the school through Ofsted and help it acquit itself as best it could
 - introduce the management and curriculum direction arrangements that would tackle the issue of improving the educational quality for current pupils
 - improve curriculum direction, management of teaching and teaching quality so as to improve educational standards
- 5.1 Mainly this strategy was to be tackled through new management quality and the introduction of new systems and rigour into the management and direction of curriculum delivery.

The Circumstances

6. This was an extremely difficult situation for all concerned, most notably, for the staff and pupils. The scale of the task should not be underestimated. Hatters Lane was, and remains still, the secondary school which is the "least preferred" by parents in the Wycombe area. It is in competition with all other upper schools. The problem cannot be minimised. Measures of success in the medium term will be when SATs and public examination results improve steadily: local public confidence grows and admission numbers grow to the point where the school becomes educationally and financially viable.

The Alternatives

7. When a school is designated by Ofsted as requiring "special measures", as part of its proposed actions, the LEA is required to consider closing the school and providing for the children otherwise. Our analysis of current and future secondary pupil numbers showed that we could not do without Hatters Lane School or; rather, we could not do without a school for the pupils in the Hatters Lane area. The following alternatives were explored, in constant discussion with the DfEE because it was an essential part of the strategy to ensure that the DfEE understood the problem and was prepared to support the proposed solutions (especially when it became clear that the DfEE might

be prepared to make significant funding available to support an agreed solution)

- 7.1 we considered closing Hatters Lane and dividing its reserved area between other upper schools in the area which would have had the effect of dispersing the Hatters Lane children. This option was explored formally with two other upper school governing bodies. Both governing bodies considered the matter seriously. Both would have had to grow in size to accommodate the increased numbers and both concluded that this course of action would not serve the interests of their schools and their communities.
 - 7.2 We explored in detail the idea of a "partnership" with one upper school in the area which would have entailed joint management and joint staffing arrangements and; in effect, the direct support to Hatters Lane School of the experienced management from another school. Ultimately, both the other school and ourselves concluded that the cons of such an arrangement considerably outweighed the pros and the other school withdrew from the proposal.
 - 7.3 The alternatives above were explored seriously and in good faith. The governing bodies concerned made rational decisions in the interests of preserving and improving the quality of education for their existing pupils. I thank them again, for their willingness to consider this whole matter so seriously.
 - 7.4 We considered buying in expertise from elsewhere and we made approaches to some of the commercial organisations that are beginning to be active in this field. We also explored this as an idea with the DfEE. Ultimately we concluded that we would potentially have been in the market to buy in the management of the Hatters Lane School; that management would have been bought in at a considerable premium; and by this time, we had secured effective change to the management and leadership of the school such that the HMI revisit in June 2000 was complimentary of the progress being made.
 - 7.5 As a part of and following on from the work of the Wycombe Commission, we are exploring the idea of "private finance initiative" (PFI) that could potentially take in improvements to secondary and primary school facilities in that part of Wycombe. An outline feasibility study on a PFI proposal is expected by the end of March. However, PFI is complex. We would need to make our submission to the DfEE by September 2001 potentially for approval in January 2002 for PFI credits to be available in financial year 2002/03). The PFI timetable is out of kilter with the timetable to Fresh Start Hatters Lane School and to improve its facilities. Also, there can be no guarantees in advance that a PFI bid will be successful. We understand that the success rate for PFI applications is no more than in 1 in 2. Therefore, we have planned the physical resurrection of the Hatters Lane School on the basis that PFI simply might not be available until the improvements that we make will need to stand on their own.
8. We have now reached the following stage with the Hatters Lane project:

- 8.1 We have secured effective management and leadership and all credit must go to Linda Melton, the headteacher of the Wye Valley School, who stepped into the breach in November 1999; and to Tina Barnes, who has taken over as substantive head from May 2000.
- 8.2 Since the Ofsted inspection in February 1999, HMI have made three formal revisits, most recently on 6th & 7th March, 2001. On all three occasions HMI have reported on "reasonable progress" on all the "key issues" which the school and the LEA were required to address arising from the Ofsted report. This is good progress.
- 8.3 The DfEE supports our "Fresh Start" proposals for Hatters Lane having made visits to the school and Education Department, and having analysed and agreed the improvement plans that we have drawn up with the school and that we are helping to implement
- 8.4 We have persuaded the DfEE to allow us to use £200K of the New Deal for Schools (NDS) fund - not for the general repair and maintenance which are the main purpose of the New Deal for Schools fund, - but to refurbish Science and Technology facilities - which is on track for completion in July 2001. Through use of the NDS funding and other early calls upon the promised DfEE capital grant, we aim to have refurbished by August 2001, a total of 4 laboratories and 4 technology workshops. We also aim to have completed work to refurbish toilets and corridors. All of this is aimed at giving the school upgraded facilities in time for its September 2001 "Fresh Start".
- 8.5 Ministers have now approved our Fresh Start proposal which will bring with it a revenue grant of £300,000 per annum over three years and a capital grant to implement the improvements to buildings and facilities that the DfEE has now agreed with us.

9 As to Mr Greenburgh's specific points:

9.1 The proposed school is insufficiently different from the current provision and does not tackle the underlying problems.

- the proposed new school (Highcrest School from 1 September 2001 when it has been "Fresh Started") remains bound by the requirements of the national curriculum but within that, curriculum emphasis will be upon "key skills" of literacy, numeracy, and ICT; together with a developing vocational element. This shift in curriculum emphasis is already happening during academic year 2000/2001. The underlying problems were to do with quality of teaching, effectiveness of learning, too low standards, and issues of management and leadership. These problems are being tackled; see the report above, and note also that HMI and DfEE are supporting the proposal. Our advice from the DfEE Fresh Start team is that it would be inappropriate to seek specialist status, or to change the nature of the school. In their experience this can be a distraction from the proper focus on improving standards of teaching and learning.

9.2 There is no requirement to provide 6th Form education on that site.

- The statutory notice proposal is for an all-age secondary school. In fact the previous, small 6th Form at Hatters Lane was discontinued as of September 2000 and there will not be a 6th Form intake in September 2001. However, both we and the school want to retain the option of working up arrangements with other educational institutions and, in particular, the FE College so that we can provide progression to 6th Form courses for Hatters Lane youngsters. It would have been a mistake to deny ourselves the possibility of post-16 courses being provided on the Hatters Lane site in partnership with another provider, simply because the school was not formally recognised as an 11 -18 school.

9.3 The proposed capital build does not address the needs of the school, such as upgrading the science and other teaching facilities.

- We are spending £200K of NDS4 Grant in 2000/01 and 2001/02 on upgrading 4 science labs and 4 technology facilities with the express view of improving these crucial facilities in time for the Fresh Start opening on 1 September. In addition to the Science and Technology upgrades, we plan to upgrade vehicular and pedestrian access and to improve the "front of school" further and upgrade toilets. The major adaptations to the Sports, Performing Arts/communal represent a later phase of work. The next stage of the Capital Programme, to be funded out of the Fresh Start capital grant is for the agreed programme to change and dramatically improve the appearance of the school and the most unsuitable part of the current premises which are the PE facilities which are currently housed in very small, old gyms and halls on one corridor at the back of the school. NB: Hatters Lane was built more than 60 years ago as separate boys and girls schools, with separate entrances and mirror image facilities all under the same roof. That is what the school continues to have. Surveys of pupil attitude show that when primary pupils are making their selection of secondary school placements the Hatters Lane facilities for science, technology and PE, above all, are what help to determine pupil and parent choices. Therefore, it is these areas that are being tackled in the current building programme and the proposed Fresh Start building programme. If the option is taken to pursue a PFI bid, very substantial improvements will be made to the school, including a potential complete new build of major parts of the school (except where major refurbishments have recently been done.)

9.4 There is no evidence that other options have been pursued such as the outsourcing of provision, specialist status, or other alternatives to address the weaknesses identified in the Ofsted report.

- See above for other alternatives explored. The Committee should note also that when a school is in special measures it is ineligible for

consideration as a "specialist" school. The idea of Hatters Lane/Highcrest becoming a "specialist "technology" school is very, very attractive to us and to the school in the medium term but it has to be got out of special measures before that option becomes available. We have received strong advice from the DfEE's "Adviser on Schools in Challenging Circumstances" that seeking specialist status would be undesirable in the short term, including the period immediately following Fresh Start. The school management's prime focus should rest with continuing the improvements identified in the action plan. The DfEE would not support a bid for specialist status until the school and LEA have "solved" the standards problems.

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Cabinet Member – Schools

Report to Lifelong Learning Select Committee
PJM - 08/03/01