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Minutes of the Extra-Ordinary Meeting of the Council held on 18th October 2012

Present Alice Wilkinson (Chairman), Jim Gillett, Jackie Jeffery, Liz Black, Piran Trezise, Paul Mundy, Chris Drew, Lauren McCann and Piers Brunning of the Wokingham Borough Council's Children's Services Department.

Apologies for absence – James Bell, John Davies and Borough Councillor Nick Ray

5808/12 Declaration of Interest – All councillors declared a personal interest in the subject of the proposed school

5809/12 To allow Charvil Parish Council Members to discuss recent updates on School provision with Piers Brunning. Piers Brunning introduced himself and explained the timeline that is to be followed to allow the new school provision to be in place by September 2013. The strategy that will be put before the executive committee on 25th October is that of opening new schools rather than expanding existing ones. By consulting with the public so widely, and researching the alternatives thoroughly, it is hoped that the executive will approve this strategy. Assuming it is, the next deadline is on 17th December, when the selected sites will go before council for approval. Piers thinks the idea would be to put forward specific sites, rather than to give a choice for councillors to choose between.

Piers was asked why new schools are needed, and he explained that the numbers of children involved made new schools a more sensible approach. He also explained why his department are in favour of the new schools being under executive headships, rather than academies or free schools; that with executive headships, all control stays within Wokingham Borough. All local schools have been asked to express an interest and as there are enough interested, an offer to the chosen school will be made once Council has approved it. Once a suitable head has been chosen, there will be a one month consultation period, followed by a one month public notice period. This means that a final decision will be made by the end of February as to the school's educational structure.

In parallel with this process will be the planning process. The legal department is already looking at all the proposed sites, considering covenants etc, and the planning department are also helping do back ground work on any likely sites. Once the sites have been approved on 17th December, planning applications can go in immediately.

There followed quite a lengthy discussion as to whether the public would be listened to regarding the management of the school, as there is quite a lot of local disquiet about Sonning School's admissions criteria being imposed on a Charvil School. The Chairman explained that there are a lot of misconceptions that need to be laid to rest on this subject, as the numbers of children out of catchment who secure a place due to their religious beliefs alone are very few – one or two per year at most. Another concern raised by Sonning running a Charvil School was the idea that money could be spent on a new school that is discriminatory. Further discussion on this subject included concerns that if the Church of England was given control of the school, there was scope for a

similar scenario to the issues with St. Patrick's, whereby Charvil could again be treated as a poor relation. The Chairman said that a federated school would not be run by the Church but by the Board of governors, and that it is quite possible for a Charvil school to have different admissions criteria to those of Sonning, so that faith need not necessarily be an issue.

Piers Brunning explained that planning applications would need to go in as soon as possible after the sites had been approved, so there would be a certain amount of work with risk, allowing for the educational framework to catch up; otherwise the timeframe would not be possible.

Cllr. Trezise brought up the issue of funding. Piers Brunning explained that the capital budget for next year will be discussed in December, so the finances would be confirmed by this point. He also said that there is enough money put aside to build a school in Charvil already.

There then followed an in depth discussion of the various sites that were under consideration, and also about those that were not.

The possibility of expanding Sonning School was discussed, and it was explained that the land behind the school is on a long lease from Wokingham Borough Council, with no break clauses, so it could be a tricky thing to do. However, it is being given serious consideration to see if it is viable. Planning permission is not so easy there because it is a green field site and on the edge of a conservation area. In addition, a new entrance onto the A4 might also be problematic as it is such a busy road. It would, however, be much easier to manage, and may take pressure off Pound Lane.

Piers explained that the highest criteria is identifying where the need is; at present most Charvil residents cannot walk to school, suggesting there is a need for Charvil to have one rather than expand Sonning. A lower criteria is that Charvil parents often don't get their preferred choice school, and the expansion of Sonning would improve this. Piers also explained why the expansion of Sonning had not been considered previously; that it has been considered landlocked and that the school had not expressed any wish to grow any more.

Cllr Mundy voiced a concern that had been evident at the public meeting on the 9th October; that Wokingham's data was inaccurate, and that there may not be the number of births in Charvil in the long term to justify a school. This could be a small demographic blip and that to keep it going, it may become a school for Twyford children as much as for Charvil. Piers reiterated the view from Wokingham that Charvil had had a steady birth rate for some time, and there was no reason to think this would change.

The exact location of where a school could go on East Park Farm caused concern because of the number of covenants on the land protecting it from further development. Cllr. Mundy was particularly concerned that a school had not been included when the estate was built. In defence of Wokingham, the Chairman pointed out that they are now trying to listen to public opinion while trying to rectify the schools place shortage, and this is in sharp contrast to the expansion of Colleton that happened with minimal consultation. Piers explained that all sites would probably have covenants on them, and Wokingham's legal team are looking at which ones may still be enforceable, and how easy it would be to either waive or remove them. Cllr.Trezise suggested that it would be better if a waiver could be granted to allow the school, rather than remove all covenants, as this would greatly worry East Park Farm residents who chose to live there precisely because the land was protected.

When pressed on where the school may go, Piers suggested it was most likely near the road where the tennis courts are, but this may depend on where the old land fill site is, as to make this safe would be very time consuming and expensive. He thinks this is under the football pitches. The site near the railway is part of the flood plain as is therefore unsuitable.

The possibility of Hicks' field was mentioned and Piers explained why this was discounted. Wokingham did not own the land, and as they are going to have to buy land for other new schools in the Borough, they are reluctant to do so here unless they really have to. In addition, both Wokingham and Charvil have been fighting plans to build there for a number of years, and so are reluctant to overturn existing planning policies. Cllr. Gillett asked whether building a school at East Park Farm would increase the likelihood of Mr. Hicks getting permission in the future and Piers did not think so but would take this specific question back to the planning department.

The Hawthorns site was briefly discussed. It is seen as a viable site, as it is big enough, but the proximity of amenity and more homes makes East Park Farm a better choice.

Piers also said that in the final report recommending sites for approval, there would also be a list of other discounted sites and the reasons why they were not chosen.

Asked what is happening at the moment, the highways consultants are conducting traffic surveys when the schools are open to gauge school traffic activity. The planning consultants are working on the suggested sites; property services are considering the covenant issue and potential contractors are working on possible school designs. Environmental health are also being consulted on the viability of sites. There are also two drop-in afternoons at the Village Hall on 8th and 14th November for residents to put forward their views. Once all the information gathered has been evaluated, then a decision on a site will be made. It is not possible yet to say which schools have expressed an interest in running a Charvil school.

The school would be factory built, but will be of high quality. Piers has checked with suppliers and there would be no problem with the outside skin being brick with a clay tile roof to fit in with other buildings in the area. The buildings would have a life expectancy of at least sixty years. Contingency plans would involve putting temporary buildings at other local schools rather than on the site of the proposed new school.

The Chairman thanked Piers Brunning for attending and he departed at 9.30pm.

There followed a brief discussion on the view that the Parish Council wished to pass onto the public. It was agreed that on balance, the Parish Council was in favour of a new school in Charvil. It was felt Council members could say that the proposed East Park Farm site would not impact on the playing field and would be in close proximity to the road, but that no decision had been made, and that the Parish Council did not yet have a view as to the best location.

The Council is concerned that the visual impact is in keeping with the rest of the village, and that proper consideration is given to traffic issues, considering that traffic is at a standstill from East Park Farm to Park Lane each school morning, and that the roundabout by the Texaco garage is also congested because of school traffic.

The following resolution was then passed: "We support the extra provision for Charvil children".