

**Leicester City Council
Children and Young People's Services**

Riverside Business and Enterprise College Consultation

Minutes of meeting with the School Council

Held on Tuesday, 23rd June 2009, 10.00 am – 11.20 am

Present:

Trevor Pringle (Director of Planning and Commissioning)
Ray Wilson (Principal Advisor, Secondary, Learning Services)
Jenny Day (Riverside Business and Enterprise College)
Danielle Williams, (Participation Lead Officer, Access, Inclusion and Participation)
Rosemary Ball (Project Support, Children Services) – Minute taker

19 members of Riverside School Council

Mr Dunsmore, Acting Headteacher addressed the meeting briefly and introduced officers from the City Council.

School Council members welcomed Children Services officers to the meeting and Trevor Pringle introduced himself and gave a brief explanation of the structure of the City Council, Children's Services and the task that he had been asked to carry out by the Director of Children's Services.

Trevor Pringle introduced his colleagues, Ray Wilson and Rosemary Ball to the meeting and explained their role in the consultation exercise.

Purpose of the Meeting – Why are we here?

Trevor Pringle explained the background to the meeting and the fact that Councillors had asked officers to consult upon the possible closure of Riverside Business and Enterprise College.

Trevor Pringle explained that the background to this is that only 26 children were registered to begin Year 7 in September 2009 out of a planned intake of 180. As a result of this, politicians had agreed that it was necessary to look at the future of the school and a report had been presented to Cabinet earlier in the year on Educational, Financial and Business Factors affecting the school and a range of possible options to help the school overcome difficulties that low numbers presented.

Trevor Pringle drew the attention of the School Council members to the consultation questionnaire for young people that had been prepared in conjunction with the School Council. Trevor Pringle explained to the young people how schools are financed and the key fact that fewer pupils means less money. Money is distributed in all schools according to the same formula and a falling pupil roll means that it is increasingly difficult for a school to maintain the level of funding necessary in order to deliver the curriculum for secondary school pupils.

In response to questions Trevor Pringle advised the School Council that in the last two years, the Council had put an additional £250,000 and £300,000 into Riverside School to help maintain its financial position. As a result of low pupil numbers the Schools Forum and the City Council had taken a further decision to set aside £800,000 for each of the next two years to help the school

continue to operate. Trevor Pringle explained where the money for this came from and how it was increasingly difficult to make such sums available to help schools in financial difficulties.

In response to a question from a School Council member that less students equals less money, Trevor Pringle informed the young people that it is not economically possible to run a school and deliver the curriculum when there is insufficient funds to do so and it is difficult to employ teachers to cover all aspects of the curriculum particularly, in secondary schools, where teachers specialise in particular subjects.

Questions were asked about other schools who also have space in their buildings and whether they have similar problems. Trevor Pringle responded that this may indeed be the case, however, the situation was very pressing at Riverside School as parents were not expressing a preference to send their children to the school and that this was having a negative effect on the school.

Questions were asked about the Local Authority telling people that Riverside School is full when it is not. Trevor Pringle explained that he had met with Staff, Parents and the Schools Governing Body and acknowledged that people had claimed this had happened. Trevor Pringle assured them, however, that the Authority is not turning pupils away from the school and that the City Council is required by law, to offer places where a vacancy exists in a particular year group and will continue to do so.

A question was asked about whether a guarantee could be given that if a person phoned up now for a place at Riverside they would get one. Trevor Pringle responded that “yes, this would indeed be the case provided the enquiry was about a particular year group and spaces were available in that year group”. Issues were raised about the school not being on the “First Bus” map and the position of the school’s new build. It was asserted that the Local Authority must have known or intended to close Riverside School.

Trevor Pringle explained once again about the additional resourcing and money that had been put into Riverside in order to keep the school going. The City Council and Schools Forum had known that numbers were declining at Riverside and it had hoped that there would be a reversal of this trend with more parents choosing their school. Regrettably, this had not happened.

The City Council has not taken a decision with First Bus to remove any routes from the school – this is the matter for a commercial operator to decide.

On the matter of the New Build at the school, Trevor Pringle explained that the order in which schools would be rebuilt was agreed by Secondary Headteachers 2-3 years ago and that Riverside remains in this programme.

A number of questions were asked about declining numbers and why pupils were not told about this. Questions were also asked about whose responsibility it is to inform the students and why the press knew about the issue before pupils.

Trevor Pringle responded that the Headteacher and Staff at the school had been informed following a review of the school earlier in the year and that the City Council, the Schools Forum, Trades Unions and School Staff had all been made aware of this problem prior to any articles in the press being published. Trevor Pringle made clear that he had not been pleased with the way in which the Leicester Mercury had communicated the issues at Riverside and that he had apologised to everyone concerned, including the Headteacher and Staff about this. People at the school, including pupils, should have been aware of the City Council’s proposal to consult upon potential closure prior to news of this occurring in the media.

Danielle Williams asked the School Council a number of questions about the Leicester Mercury and as a result the School Council was clear that the City Council itself cannot determine the

nature of the editorial content within the paper. Trevor Pringle explained that he had met with the journalist and an understanding had been reached about when they would publish their information. Regrettably, the information had appeared in the paper earlier than anticipated.

Questions followed about the nature of the consultation process and Trevor Pringle reminded the School Council of the importance of completing the questionnaires that have been designed. Trevor Pringle asked the group to remember that the consultation process is a five stage process and that the current consultation is only the first stage in this process.

Issues arose again about the promotion of the school and pupils disagreed strongly with the belief that Riverside is a bad school.

Trevor Pringle explained to the School Council that there school is included with all other schools in a Secondary Transfer Admissions booklet that is revised and released each year and that this was the case for the last school intake. This booklet is sent to all parents of all Year 6 students for intake in the following autumn. The booklet provides details of how to apply for a secondary place in City schools. Trevor Pringle stressed, however, that it was important for the pupils to realise that it is up to parents to express a preference for the school that they would prefer their child to go to and that the City Council is under a duty to meet this wherever possible.

Trevor Pringle assured the meeting that all parents are treated equally and explained that Leicester is the best performing City in the Midlands with regard to parents getting their first choice for secondary admission preference. Ultimately, the Council must try to give parents what they would like.

Discussion returned again to the article on Riverside that appeared in the Leicester Mercury and young people made clear that they thought it contained an assumption that Riverside was definitely closing. Trevor Pringle emphasised that no decision had yet been taken and that, even if following the current consultation Councillors agreed that the school should close, then this would not happen immediately. Any closure would be carried out in a planned and phased fashion.

One young person stated that his friend knew about the proposed closure at Riverside before he did and went on to ask whether all options had been tried first to save the school. Trevor Pringle once again explained that a press release had been given to the Leicester Mercury with an embargo attached to it such that staff, parents and pupils at Riverside would receive notification before hearing about it in the press. Regrettably, as indicated above the City Council cannot control what articles appear in the local press. Again, Trevor Pringle apologised for this and assured the School Council that following this all information with regard to the proposed closure had been sent out to Riverside parents via personally addressed letters via Royal Mail. Further letters had been issued to all staff and the School Governing Body. Trevor Pringle also assured the School Council that as the Admission's authority it will continue to admit children as required by Educational Law.

Discussion turned once again to the financial issues at the school and the further £706,000 mentioned within the Business Case that had been spent in the school. Trevor Pringle explained that the consultation exercise had only focussed upon the extra money spent at the school to maintain the curriculum and address financial issues. The £700,000 referred to is money for a range of other initiatives that other schools too had received such sums and that it would not have been fair to include this in the value for money discussion as this would have misrepresented the amount of funding in the school to address financial difficulties.

The School Council then turned its consideration to the 26 pupils who are expected to join the school in September 2009. A number of pupils felt that these young people would get the best possible education. It was acknowledged by City Council officers that this may indeed be the case as the ratio of pupil to teachers would potentially be more advantageous. Trevor Pringle explained

however that such ratios would not be seen as providing the best value for money by bodies such as OFSTED.

Trevor Pringle reminded the School Council that the key issue here was not enough pupils were taking up places at the school and not enough pupils were making satisfactory progress in their examinations and educational attainment.

A member of the School Council indicated that quality is better than quantity and felt that young people would be better off with advantageous teaching ratios.

One young person stated that a decision had been taken to close Riverside four years ago but this was categorically denied by Trevor Pringle who indicated that clearly there had been a misunderstanding on this.

Young people asked how they could stop their school from closing.

Trevor Pringle responded that officers were meeting with the pupils purely in relation to the consultation and invited young people to say what they wanted to say with regard to the proposed closure of their school. In the discussion that followed it was recognised that not everyone agrees that officers should meet with young people of the school and that the background to this meeting had challenged officers on this. The City Council was clear, however, that it would be disrespectful not to hear young people and also that there was a legal requirement to do so.

A number of people acknowledged the financial issues but enquired about the emotional issues around keeping the school open. In response to these questions Danielle Williams invited the students to tell officers what they felt the Council could do to help them.

Trevor Pringle assured the School Council that young people's views would be listened to and included in the report that he would write once the consultation period was over following the 10 July 2009.

Discussion continued along these lines with the question being asked about what will happen next.

Trevor Pringle explained that the consultation ends on the 10 July 2009 and that over the summer period he would look at all the responses and write up a report that would go before the Children's Services Scrutiny and City Council Cabinet early in the Autumn Term.

Trevor Pringle encouraged young people to tell the Council what they think and what their concerns are – he assured them that their voices would be heard and that their views would be included in the report to Councillors.

Trevor Pringle said that should the Councillors agree to go to the next stage of the process then the City Council would need to publish a detailed proposal that would include issues about what would happen to Years 7, 8 and 9 students, etc. – whether displaced pupils would get bus passes – costs towards replacing uniforms etc., and issues about concerns about bullying.

In the event that Riverside closes students were assured that a high priority would be attached to addressing their concerns and that students would be supported in a sensitive way.

Concern was expressed by some students about having to move once again having previously moved from Fullhurst to Riverside. Concerns were expressed about friendships.

Ray Wilson explained how authorities address issues like this from his personal experience as a Headteacher of a former closed school and as an officer of the authority. Local authorities typically seek to support friendship groups and try to keep such groups together where possible.

Trevor Pringle addressed the School Council and expressed how important it was for them to share their concerns and to encourage others to do so by completing the questionnaire that can be found on the website at www.leicester.gov.uk/riversideyoungpeople.

Trevor Pringle assured them that their concerns, fears and suggestions would be included in a report later in the year and he acknowledged the importance of friendship groups.

Pupils were reminded that they can also make their concerns known by filling out a questionnaire and handing it to Mr Williams or even email their concerns and questions to riverside.consultation@leicester.gov.uk.

Meeting ended at 11.20 am.