

A response to complaints surrounding the Isle of Wight Council's informal consultation on the reorganisation of Island schools

In January, Isle of Wight Council decided to consult on three options for educational reform on the Island. It was clearly stated in the local media and in the 'Which Way Forward for Education' booklet that 'no change' was not an option.

Although there was no legal obligation to hold a consultation period into the three options proposed, the council felt that, because of the high level of interest in education on the Island, an informal consultation should be launched around the three options. The representations made in the consultation would provide the council with key views from local residents in shaping the final model that will be brought in from 2010. The results from this consultation period have provided valuable information and have played a key part in the modelling of the final option that will be taken forward.

The information about the three options was published in a booklet, together with a questionnaire created with the advice of independent research company QA research. The draft booklet was shown to a representative group of residents before printing to ensure that the information provided was helpful and that the questions asked were balanced and easily understood.

Whilst the questionnaire was not intended to act as a referendum on the options, there was a question included (Q7) which asked respondents to state their preference for the three options that the council had proposed to take forward to help inform councillors' decision making. No other options were being considered by the council, hence it was not appropriate to include an option 'None of the above'. It was made clear to residents attending the numerous public information evenings held across the Island, and was stated in media briefings held with the local media such as the County Press and Isle of Wight Radio that if they were unable to state a preference they could tick the 'no preference' option and could put their views and suggestions in the box on question 8.

The council wanted Island residents to give their views by answering the questions in the booklet, to help come to a decision not just about the future of education on the Island but also about how we can best provide for the next generation of residents. The questionnaire was designed for residents to give the council their views on all of the issues in the questionnaire, as well as which of the three options they felt would achieve the best improvements in educational standards on the Island.

The only questionnaires rejected were those where only one question had been completed. This amounted to just 2% of the total questionnaires received.

In addition to the 'Which Way Forward' booklet the council's Schools Reorganisation website was regularly updated during the informal consultation process. This site, containing a wealth of information, had over 30,000 page views during the three month period from January to March 2008.

As well as the above, a period of formal, statutory consultation is scheduled to take place this summer, following a Cabinet decision on the final proposed structure for our maintained school provision. This consultation will last for a minimum of 6 weeks and offers a further opportunity for all interested parties to raise concerns surrounding the proposal. The feedback from this consultation must be considered before any proposal is formalised, by way of Statutory Notices, to close, open or otherwise alter individual schools. These Statutory Notices will contain many of the specific details that some complainants are seeking now.

Following the publication of Statutory Notices there will be a further period of 6 weeks of representation when comments on the proposals may be sent to the Local Authority. Any person can send comments, which can be objections as well as expressions of support for specific proposals or elements of proposals.

The decision maker (either the Local Authority or the Schools Adjudicator) **must**, before making a decision, be satisfied that the formal consultation has met the statutory requirements. In addition the decision maker **must** take into account comments made during the representation period, giving greatest weight to representations from those stakeholders likely to be most directly affected by the proposals.

Some complainants have called for a referendum over school reorganisation. A motion calling for such a referendum was put before the Full Council meeting of 19 March 2008 and was defeated by 28 votes to 17.

Throughout the informal consultation it has been made clear that there can be no guarantee that a change in structure will in itself bring about the desired improvements in educational standards on the Island. However, the proposed school structure, as determined by the council decision of 19 March 2008, is considered to provide the best framework to both enable and expedite these very necessary improvements. Criteria to measure the success of the new school organisation will build upon and develop from the advantages of option 3, as published in the 'Which Way Forward' booklet. The authority will continue, through the Children's Services Directorate, to work closely with its' schools to minimise the disruption to pupils' attainment during any transitional period.

The authority is keenly aware of its responsibilities as an employer and is in discussion with professional associations, governing bodies and headteachers to establish an appropriate way forward, within the parameters of relevant employment legislation, for school based staff affected by the reorganisation process. School based staff are also equally aware of their responsibilities as employees in contributing to the successful implementation

of council policy. Any suggestion that headteachers and school based staff were excluded from the public consultation evenings is entirely unfounded.

I believe that this letter answers all the elements of your complaint, but please don't hesitate to respond directly to me if you feel there are outstanding matters which I have not addressed.

However, if having covered all the issues raised you remain dissatisfied and would like to pursue the matter further, please make contact with the Customer Support Team in writing at Floor 1, County Hall, Newport, Isle of Wight PO30 1UD, telephone 01983 823092 or email CustomerSupport@iow.gov.uk. It would be helpful if you could make contact within the next two weeks, but if we hear nothing more we will assume that you are satisfied with the content and the matter will be considered closed.

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