

24th June 2009

Mr Mervyn Cooke
Deputy Head of Human Resources
Belfast Education & Library Board
40 Academy Street
Belfast BT1 2NQ

Dear Mr Cooke

RE: Equality Consultation Questionnaire on proposal to cease education provision at Suffolk Primary School on 31st August 2009

Thank you for your letter, enclosures and request to consult with the Community Relations Council (CRC), about the equality implications relating to the closure of Suffolk Primary School.

As you know Section 75 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between people of different religious belief, political opinion, racial groups, age, marital status, gender, disability and dependant status. In addition Section 75 (2) of the Act obliges public authorities to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

CRC has a specific interest in assisting statutory organisations in Northern Ireland to carry out their Section 75 (2) duties. We are also keen to stress the importance of benchmarking new and developing policies against government priorities in the Programme for Government.

Within the current policy framework of the Programme for Government one of the key priorities is promoting tolerance, inclusion and health and well being. Within the document the statement is made: *Advancing social transformation and the inclusion of all of our people is essential if we are to deliver the peaceful, prosperous, fair and healthy society we all want.* Furthermore part of the current Programme for Government rightly seeks to bring forward a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future to address the divisions within our society and achieve measurable reductions in sectarianism, racism and hate crime.

Council is acutely aware of the growing problem within the schools estate in terms of surplus spaces and the need to provide a more effective and efficient system. According to Bain developing schools that are effective in meeting the needs of all pupils, are educationally and financially viable, and are sustainable long-term is the goal. Council's response to the ISRE stated that whilst any

¹ ISRE. 2006.

rationalisation policy has to be financially viable it must also be socially viable, and it also offers an historic opportunity to ensure that the future does not simply reproduce the past but points in a different direction.

Above all else our main reason for responding to this particular consultation relates to the long-standing relationship the Council has with the Suffolk/Lenadoon community, its Forum and in particular Suffolk/Lenadoon Interface Group (SLIG). The work of these two communities has been tremendous and Council values the work this interface community has undertaken. Individuals from both communities have committed an insurmountable amount of time and energy to tackle difficult issues such as inter-communal tensions, flags, parades and economic deprivation. It has not been an easy journey and because of the tenacity of those involved that Council feels obliged to write to the Board. They have succeeded in developing and delivering successful social economy projects which have transformed an environmentally blighted landscape and brought jobs to the area and the drive and determination of the two communities has shown how economic regeneration should be done.

It has not been an easy process, and along the way, Council along with others have supported the group, financially and advisory, to develop projects that would help to ensure a long-term sustainable future for the community. The journey these two communities have gone on is by no means over . it is an ongoing process which why they are continuing to work on the implementation of their ~~Peace Plan~~

Council is aware that since the publication of this equality questionnaire the Minister for Education has made a formal announcement regarding the closure of the primary school. Whilst, unfortunately the re-opening of the school is not an option, Council would like to make the following comments and observations and appeals to the Board to take them into consideration when considering future plans for the site. Primarily, Council believes this current situation offers BELB an opportunity to shape their policies within the context of sharing and good relations.

The closure of the primary school means that children living in the Suffolk area will be seeking places in a number of other schools; it is also important to note that some children have already left the school prior to the official announcement. Therefore, safe transport to and from school becomes the big issue; it is also essential in the quest to maintain a sustainable community. The Board will already be aware that access to alternative schools will require travel across a number of interfaces and this poses a number of concerns.

In the arrangements put in place for transferring pupils from the school, the Board has guaranteed free transport to remaining pupils at the school to Taughmonagh Primary School. It is Council's understanding that those pupils who have transferred before the Ministerial announcement will not be eligible for

this provision, nor will those pupils who opt to attend other schools in the area or all of those children in the Suffolk Primary School nursery. Currently, some parents in the area have hired a community mini-bus to transport their children at their own cost. It is clear that this is an unsustainable solution in an area of high deprivation, public transport connections are not available and where access to private transport is limited. Ultimately, the transport issue will have a longer term impact on those children not yet born and considerably impact on the decision of young families to move to the area.

The equality questionnaire asks if there are adverse impacts in this decision. The Council would highlight the differential impact that this decision has had on carers/parents and, ultimately, young people in the Suffolk area, which is almost exclusively Protestant/Unionist. In terms of the burden this places on carers, the adverse impact is significant, not only in terms of cost, but in terms of perceptions of safety, access to services and a sense of belonging in the area.

The Council urges the Board to consider introducing a broader transport solution to meet the needs of the local community and mitigate against this significant adverse impact.

Council would also ask the Board to consider how the closure of the school and the possible relocation of families to other residential areas could negatively impact on the work of SLIG e.g.

- Increase feelings of isolation within the Suffolk community.
- Reduce community cohesion as families will be reluctant to move into the area due to lack of education provision and school transport.

This could negatively impact on community engagement around contentious issues and put at risk the sustainability of a diverse and inclusive community.

Opportunities

In terms of mitigating measures Council would like the Board to consider the following:

- Support the endeavors of the Community to develop and maintain a shared site for the people of Suffolk and Lenadoon.
- After School support and youth provision will be central to ensuring the work of these two communities can continue. Council would like to see a positive outcome to the current discussions on future development of the site and deliver a package that enables children and young people from both communities to meet and interact. This will counteract the impact of have reduced primary education provision in the immediate area and will provide essential community infrastructure to promote sharing, cohesion and integration. We are keen to work with you and your partners in realising the development of the site as a shared space.

- Infrastructure is even more important given that nursery provision will also cease with the closure of the school, despite being full. Whilst the Board has supplied details of free pre-school places, Council urges the Board to provide realistic alternatives for parents. It has been reported to us that parents are being offered nursery places in East Belfast and beyond which is obviously an unfeasible solution.

Conclusion

The Council welcomes the decision by the Board to secure youth provision in the area with an increased budget, as well as accommodate Surestart provision on the site. These are positive moves which have demonstrated the Board's support for the area and has begun to re-build some of the confidence of the local community. The Council believes that an extension of the transport options available to parents of current and future generations of pupils would alleviate some of the adverse impact of this decision on young people, carers and the Protestant/Unionist community in Suffolk as well as stabilise and secure good relations in the wider area.

Council is aware that a number of discussions have recently taken place regarding transport and other issues and would like to use this opportunity to stress the need to develop public policy within the context of good relations and sharing. We hope there is a satisfactory conclusion to transport concerns and that provision can be made for current, previous and future pupils. Whilst Council urges the Board to consider the particular circumstances and sensitive issues of living in an interface community and to address these needs through the lens of promoting and maintaining good relations, it is important that good relations and sharing are embedded within the entire policy development and implementation process.

Sustainable, vibrant and shared communities are the goal and we look forward to continuing to work with the Board to deliver this.

Best Wishes

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