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## Draft Minutes of Consultation with Residents on selling of school land Held on Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> February 2014 at 7.45pm in the Drama Studio

### **Present**

Pauline Conway (PC) – Vice Chair of Governors

Faith Lusted (FL) – Parent Governor

Daniel Sadler Head teacher (DS)

Ross Stuart - Chair of Governors (RS)

Clare Thurston – Parent/Neighbour

Neil Thurston – Parent/ Neighbour

Neighbours present:

Ian Pearson; H&P Wickham; L Prior; Mr Horsley; Mr Gough; Mr Soden; Mrs Dunn; Mr Alcroft; Mr Bates; Mr & Mrs Manning; Mr & Mrs Poska; E Yarrow; R Soden; O Yarrow; R Dilger; Mr & Mrs Scoley; J McGee; L Smith; M Wickham-Smith; Mr & Mrs Kinealy; Charles Anderson

### **In Attendance**

Leena Wisely – Clerk

Leigh Rawlins – Sonning Common Parish Council

### **Welcome**

The chair welcomed everybody to the meeting and introduced the Governors present, the Head Teacher and Leigh Rawlins.

The Head Teacher, Mr Daniel Sadler explained the objective of the meeting and outlined the content that would be covered.

It was noted that there would be a presentation followed by questions from the floor.

It was reported that it was statutory to have a 6 week consultation period before applying to the Secretary of State to seek permission to sell the school land. The members learnt that the school were applying for permission with the view to sell some school land following discussions with the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) committee. The school wanted to ensure any development would be mutually beneficial for both the community and the school.

It was explained that the school has halved in size in recent years and the land is too big for future and current needs.

Q. Where have all the students gone? There are far fewer students travelling in from Caversham as Highdown have expanded.

Mr Sadler respectfully asked if he could ask questions at the end of his presentation.

It was noted that the NDP had surveyed the site to see if development would be suitable and the area past the school and to the right was an area of outstanding natural beauty and is currently used as playing fields and running track. The NDP divided the site into two plots Son15a and Son15b and it was concluded by the NDP following numerous studies that Son15a had been designated as a possible site for development for housing. The plot 15a would then go to a village referendum and be subject to normal planning only if permission was given to sell the land from the secretary of state.

It was confirmed that Son15a has been included in the NDP consultations.

The attendees of the meeting learnt that the school site is 10.7 hectares and an old site that needs updating. The school has an ageing infrastructure of drains, heating and computer cabling and high maintenance costs are high due to the age of the building with limited covered areas for students. DS confirmed that it was highly unlikely that OCC would pay for much of the works that need to be done, as there were many schools in a worse state of dis-repair.

The group studied the plans and site drawing and it was confirmed that the school fell under Kidmore End parish council.

The group learnt that the school currently has a deficit budget and although monies are available to Academies, the school has Foundation status is and unable to move forward to Academy status due to its financial situation.

The group noted that the land in question is currently used occasionally for lunchtime recreation and would need to be valued formally before the application to the Secretary of State to seek permission to sell. An approximate value was £1.8m

The presentation continued with a slide to show the ratio of students to the minimum area needed per student. The school has 509 pupils and the audience learnt that even if the school increased to 900 pupils, our considered maximum capacity, the school area without SON15a was still much more than the recommended area suggested by the Government.

The audience were shown a slide of the site and where Son15a would be and were recommended to engage with the NDP committee to discover the specific reasons for their decision. It was noted that the caretaker's house was included in the plans and Kidmore End Lane would not be considered for access.

The Chair of Governors asked the floor for any questions.

Q. Can we walk around the site? Yes, the ideal time would be at half term so there are no safeguarding issues with children.

**ACTION: Neighbours to** email the school to arrange a time and the head teacher will be there to accompany anyone that wants to walk around the site.

It was noted that Son15b was not considered by the NDP committee for development and the hard standing areas on Son15a may need to be relocated if the development went ahead.

Q. Who surveyed the site and divided it? The NDP committee arranged this

Q. Why was Son 15a picked, is it easier to build on, are there environmental reasons, and was the environment considered? LR replied that the NDP committee considered a whole range of reasons including which plot would be best for planting trees and plants and wildlife issues.

It was stressed that the Governors of the school have only agreed to send a letter to the Secretary of State for permission to sell the land and not to develop it .Once we have permission from the Secretary of State the governors will vote again. If the villagers say no at the referendum then the development will not go ahead.

Q. What are the parish boundaries? Currently the school site is in the Parish of Kidmore End.

Neighbour entered meeting at 8.10pm

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Q. Where did the figure of £1.8m come from? You can obtain an approximate figure on line to sell particular land with planning permission. This is only a rough approximation.

Q. If the Roads need to be widened who does that work? This is a matter decided in the planning process if the work goes ahead.

It was suggested that existing houses would devalue in price.

Q. Why are you considering this route? It is the responsibility of the Governing Body to ensure the school is not at risk and continues to remain competitive. This is not being considered for commercial gain and engaging the NDP committee made sense so we could come to a mutually beneficial solution for the village and the school.

Q. When the pupil numbers increase you may want more land? The school has currently got 507 pupils and this number would possibly increase by 30 Year on year. The current building and facilities would more than cover this increase.

There were several conversations on how the school was run and suggestions on increasing pupil numbers. It was noted that the purpose of the meeting was not to discuss how the school was run but the application to the Secretary of State and how this would improve the quality of education. The head teacher understood why emotions were running high but stressed that the landscape for schools such as Chiltern Edge was challenging and in some ways bleak, but it was the responsibility of the head teacher and the Governors to have the schools best interests at heart.

Q. Has the school looked at other options to save money? Yes, there is extra income from the Children's Centre and Bishopswood Special School (co-located), which is looking at the possibility of an expansion. The Governors are in negotiation with the Oxfordshire Low Energy Hub about ways to reduce energy costs. The school bursar is looking at other possible sources of additional funding..

Q. From an environmental perspective the area is already flooding, so how can this be built on? This is a matter for planning.

Q. What will the school do if the development doesn't happen? Money will have to be spent on emergency repairs and and less on improving Teaching and learning.

Q. Do Funds increase with pupil numbers? Yes, it is per pupil funding, so more children at the school, the more funding is given to the school.

It was suggested that the school market itself properly to increase numbers of pupils.

It was noted that to increase pupil numbers was not that straightforward. Two extra free schools in Reading are likely to be approved in the near future and other local schools are suffering with small numbers of pupils too. A University Technology College has also recently opened in Reading which is certainly a threat to numbers at Chiltern Edge. Extra capacity is being created when there are currently sufficient places.

Q. Who owns the land for the school? The Governors of the school as it is a Foundation School.

Q. Is it an option for the school to become an Academy to gain extra funding? There used to be a financial gain to become an academy, but not so much now. The school had applied for Academy status but this had been rejected by the DFE on the grounds of our falling roll and budget problems.

Member of staff entered room – 8.25pm

The meeting discussed the funding differences between Academies and Foundation/Maintained schools.

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It was stressed again that the Governors have only made a decision to seek permission to go to the Secretary of State to sell the land and not at this stage to develop it. This will require another vote if permission is granted.

Q. What will the school do when the money runs out? The money would not all be spent but managed prudently. Initially only emergency repairs that were necessary would be carried out and funds used to match any grant funding available

It was suggested the future funding of the school was a government decision and prediction is very difficult.

Q. What has gone wrong with the school as numbers were never a problem? The demographic profile of the village has changed considerably. The village has less young families. In the past young families settled in the village and used the local school, the children left but the parents stayed in the village and now is full of an older age group without young children

It was noted that the village have a great need for smaller housing to encourage young families back.

Q. If the demographic trend is less children in the village, should the school plan for 300 pupils instead? There is a bulge in primary schools in Henley and Reading and the demand is there. In 2012 the school had 60 1<sup>st</sup> preferences and this has increased to 96 in 2014, so there will be an increase in pupils.

It was noted that the figures show no sign of the numbers of pupils collapsing.

Q. Do Caversham Park Village pupils come to the school? In the past Highdown school was not regarded well and hence pupils travelled to Chiltern Edge. Highdown have in recent years improved and many parents have chosen Highdown over Chiltern Edge. A major reason for this is that their children can walk to school. Oxfordshire and Reading pay for buses to Chiltern Edge but some chose to walk to a local school rather than catch a bus to school.

It was noted that Chiltern Edge did go through a rough patch but neither the Head Teacher nor the Governors were at the school at this point. Since those times the school has improved greatly.

Q. How many children come to school by bus? Two thirds of the pupils are bussed into school.

It was noted that it would not be good for the village not to have a school as children can walk to both their primary and secondary schools at present.

It was suggested that £1.8M won't plug the gap for the school needs and the reason residents are emotional is mainly due to multiple sites around Reades Lane being designated by the NDP for development. It was noted that other sites have been turned down for development. It was suggested residents have a dialogue with the NDP Committee to discuss this further.

It was noted that the Head Teacher had a responsibility to the school and went to the NDP committee in good faith to engage for the greater good of both the village and the school. It was agreed that £1.8M will not fix all the problems but will fix the drains and emergency repairs. The school wants to remain transparent and there will be no building until 2017 even if the application and planning is passed.

Q. Is the road outside school safe? This is a question that will be considered at the planning stage and free flow of traffic will be a huge consideration in Reades Lane.

Q. Is £1.8 M a short term fix? Most of the money will go in the bank and then the school will look at how costs can be reduced, such as energy costs.

Q. Who knew about this meeting? Neighbours and parents, students and primary schools were notified. The Secretary of State is not interested in flooding or traffic, wildlife or disruption, just quality of education. It was a Chiltern Edge decision to have this meeting and include the neighbours. The whole village are included via the NDP consultation process which includes SON 15a. The school wanted to be transparent and have an open door policy.

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It was suggested that the Government have a policy not to build on school sites.

It was also suggested that there was a small turn out of parents and if the letter sent to direct neighbours had not been distributed to a larger number of villagers there would not have been so much representation for the village.

Q. Has the application gone to the Secretary of State? No. It is still in the consultation period.

Q. How long is the consultation period? It started on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January for 6 weeks

Q. Are both the plots being considered? No just Son15a Surveyors decided Son15b was not suitable for development. There were strong rejections for development on Son15b for various reasons.

Q. What was the decision behind where the dividing lines were drawn on both plots? There are many things that are taken into account that are standard in planning a plot for consideration.

Q. When does the application go in? Soon after the 6 weeks are up

Q. How many governors are there? 17

The floor was asked if there were any more questions. There were not

The audience were told that any further questions could be sent via the website or hardcopy to reception at school.

It was noted that the minutes would be on the website.

There was no other business

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm.

Next meeting: TBA