

## **Note of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Board (City Development) Working Group (Miles Hill and Royal Park Former Schools) held on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2007, in the Scrutiny Chairs' Conference Room**

Meeting Commenced at 3.30pm

**Present:** Councillor R Pryke (Chair)  
Councillor B Selby  
Councillor P Ewens

### **Officers in Attendance:**

Paul Brook, Chief Asset Management Officer, City Development  
Brian Lawless, Group Manager Projects, City Development  
George Turnbull, Team Leader, Education Leeds  
Tony Palmer, Team Leader, Education Leeds  
Rory Barke, North East Area Manager, Environment & Neighbourhoods  
Hannah Rees, Area Management Officer, Environment & Neighbourhoods  
Jason Singh, Area Coordinator, Environment & Neighbourhoods  
Richard Mills, Principal Scrutiny Advisor, Democratic Services

### **1.0 Apologies**

1.1 There were no apologies reported.

### **2.0 Introduction**

2.1 The Chair referred to the decision of the Scrutiny Board (City Development) on 20<sup>th</sup> November to establish this Working Group to look at the consultation process undertaken with regard to the former Miles Hill and Royal Park schools and to report back to the Board in January 2008 on any lessons learned as part of its wider general inquiry to review consultation processes.

2.2 Councillor Pryke detailed the requests for scrutiny by Councillor Dowson regarding the former Miles Hill school and Councillors Morton and Hussain regarding the former Royal Park school. He referred to their general dissatisfaction concerning the consultation process for the disposal of former school buildings, the timescales involved and the desire to retain former school buildings for community use.

### **3.0 Background Papers**

3.1 Members considered and noted the report of the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development and the following documents:-

- The report of the Director of City Development setting out an overview of the process for the disposal of surplus school buildings by the Council, including considerations for retention of alternative uses (Document A).
- The Terms of Reference for the Board's Inquiry to Review Consultation Processes (Document B).
- Chronology of Consultation and Information concerning the former Royal Park school (Document C).
- Chronology of Meetings and or consultation concerning the former Miles Hill school (Document D).

## 4.0 Issues and General Comments

4.1 Members and officers referred to the documentation and made a number of general comments on a range of issues including:-

- the difficulties in defining consultation and community.
- that consultation processes had evolved and were more defined now than when proposals for Royal Park first arose over 4 years ago.
- the statutory school closure proposal process and the view of Education Leeds that until a building was declared surplus to requirements that only then could discussions commence on alternative uses.
- reference to the additional paper circulated by the Chief Asset Management Officer and set out below as (Document E) which highlighted the need to determine the service requirements of an area at a strategic level much earlier in the process instead of waiting for properties to be released as surplus to requirements.
- that consultation starts much earlier for non school sites.
- Surestart and the fact that this group had never asked to move from the former Caretakers bungalow at Miles Hill.
- reference to the need to ensure that when consultation takes place that it was done at the right level. Many people within an organisation may express a view to Elected Members and officers that they would be interested in using a former school building but in reality Managers at a strategic level know that the capital and revenue implications were prohibitive and the proposal unrealistic. Consulting at the wrong level raised the communities expectations which then could not be met.
- that due to funding pressures on the Council's Capital Programme and current over programming of £43.6m it was stressed that the Executive Board in August 2007 had agreed that:-
  - no new injections to the capital programme will be made without identifying new resources or taking an existing scheme out.
  - existing schemes will be managed within current budgets, making no further call on Leeds resources
  - capital receipts from sites on the existing disposal programme cannot be diverted to other projects and initiatives
  - the disposal programme is kept under review with a view to seeking to identify any additional disposal sites that can be included
- the suggestion by Councillor Hussain that a specific group had not been consulted concerning the use of the former Royal Park school. It was reported that whilst there was no specific requirement to consult it is good practice and that, from the chronology of meetings, consultation was wide ranging for this difficult scheme involving commercial uses, student accommodation and community space. It was always unrealistic financially for a small group to operate such an old building which required major capital investment and the community use argument on its own was never strong enough. However, the initial discussions to use the whole site for community use raised expectations which then could not be met.

- reference was made to the number of existing community centres within the area of the former Royal Park school and their competing demands.
- office use, by the Council, of the first floor of the Royal Park building would have meant that approximately 100 staff would have been working from the former school site with only 17 car parking spaces available for the whole building. Highways safety concerns were expressed, when the original scheme was being investigated in detail, regarding additional movements on the network and the on-street parking that would have resulted.
- reference to consultation fatigue by communities who do not respond to questionnaires.
- Miles Hill and a whole range of interested parties who dropped out once the financial implications became clear and the funding gap of £2m could not be met.

## **5.0 Royal Park former Primary school**

- 5.1 Members discussed the chronology of consultation and information for Royal Park school and the length of time it had taken to get the scheme of the ground.
- 5.2 Members recognised that there had been consultation with Elected Members and the community at all stages in the process .The community's aspirations had been raised beyond what was achievable once the cost of the scheme became clear and, additionally, that private sector funding was necessary in order to move the scheme forward to provide some community use. A final viable scheme was only agreed earlier this year and the community tensions and fatigue at how long this had taken was acknowledged. Reference to changes to ward boundaries had resulted in some tension between the 6 elected Members involved with this scheme.
- 5.3 Reference was made to the letters and surveys distributed in October 2007 and the consultation event on 24<sup>th</sup> October concerning the fit out and use of the community space and the low response rate of only 57 returns. It was reported that 6,000 leaflets had been delivered by hand.

## **6.0 Miles Hill School**

- 6.1 Members discussed the chronology of meetings when Miles Hill school was discussed.
- 6.2 Reference was made to the decision to "Call In" the closure of Miles Hill school and why this school was selected for closure as opposed to Potternewton school. Officers explained the reasons and in particular the £1m costs to refurbish Miles Hill.
- 6.3 It was noted that although ward members suggested that the Social Services department and a number of community groups and organisations were interested in providing services from the former school the reality was they did not have the capital or revenue funding to undertake such an expensive scheme.
- 6.4 Restrictions would apply in future developments of this kind as planning consent for office schemes will, generally, only be possible within a town and district centre.

6.5 Whilst it was recognised that deprivation in a community is an important factor in providing community facilities it was acknowledged that the facilities that tend to succeed are those located on main radial routes where the footfall is high. Those community facilities which are in the centre of communities away from main radial routes serve only small groups within a community and often fail as a result.

## **7.0 Final Comments and Lessons Learned**

7.1 The Chair invited final comments from Members and officers and asked if any lessons had been learned from the Royal Park and Miles Hill schemes and the following were raised:-

1. That more time should be taken reviewing at a strategic level the options available for school buildings earlier in the school closure programme.
2. That consultation should take place well before a school building becomes empty.
3. That sensitive issues surrounding the disposal of any former school building should be based upon a basic set of principles, that are transparent and that provides a consistency in approach that is supported by all Council Departments and Members.
4. That the Executive Board decision in August 2007 meant that any proposals for alternative uses of former school buildings must be funded from outside the Council as the school building programme was dependent upon capital receipts from their sale to underpin the Building Schools for the Future programme under the Private Finance Initiative. As a consequence there was great pressure on the Asset Management Group to obtain receipts quickly to fund the Council's capital programme and it was essential that a strategic view was taken early on concerning the viability of any alternative proposals that may be put forward.
5. That when the Council does consult with communities on disposal of a former school asset that it is clear about what it is consulting on and it is done at the right level.
6. Members and officers at all levels who meet community groups have a duty to explain the funding restrictions set down by the Executive Board in August 2007. They must encourage groups to be realistic about what might be achievable and what the strategic view is on a particular building in order that they put forward what may be possible and financially achievable and avoid raising communities expectations too high.

Meeting ended at 5.05pm

