

**MINUTES OF THE PUBLIC MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY
23RD JANUARY 2007 TO DISCUSS THE FUTURE OF THE OLD
SCHOOL**

PRESENT:

Cllr J Hutchinson – Chairman (QPC) Cllr P Child – Vice-chairman (QPC)
Dr R.K.A Feltham – Cabinet member (LCC) Cllr I Bexon – Finance chairman (QPC)
Mrs C Bramley – Officer (LCC) Mrs K Paterson – Clerk to QPC

County Cllr T Kershaw
Borough Councillor D Slater

Parish Councillors:

T Tyler, T Stirling, J Bloodworth, S Templeman, P Webster, E Harrison

48 members of the public

1. INTRODUCTION

Cllr Hutchinson opened the meeting, welcomed all present and introduced the lead speakers.

2. CLLR I. BEXON - RESUME

Cllr Bexon gave a resume of the situation to date. He explained how it had been the intention of the Parish Council to include acquisition and refurbishment of the old school as part of the current lottery application. Dialogue and meetings had taken place. The County Council gave the Parish a timescale of the end of March 2007 to provide a firm commitment to purchase the school at a cost of £300,000. The Parish does not have access to this level of funding and the outcome of the lottery bid was at least one year away so the old school was dropped from the lottery application.

3. DR R.K.A FELTHAM – THE COUNTY COUNCIL’S CASE FOR DISPOSAL

Dr Feltham stated that he was pleased to be invited to this meeting. He paid tribute to the Parish Council as a respected and well-run council.

He agreed that the County Council was looking at the future of the old school from a financial perspective. Leicestershire is one of the worst funded authorities in the country, it receives less money from central government due to its position on the Deprivation Index (of inhabitants most/less able to pay council tax). Dr Feltham took some time to explain the workings of the County’s Revenue and Capital budgets and that it cost £30 million out the Revenue budget to fund the Capital programme. The County needs to reduce these costs and is therefore undergoing a major review of its property and assets.

The old school, acquired in 2000 from the church is surplus to requirements. The play school is moving out in March and the County has no need for the building. A valuation was obtained of between £300-500,000 and the Parish was offered the school at the lowest price, in effect a 40% discount. Dr Feltham stressed that the County Council was responsible for over 100 parishes and if an exception was made

for Quorn, by not selling the school, they would not be achieving best value for the whole county. Quorn has first refusal, but within a 'realistic' timescale.

4. CLLR P. CHILD – THE PARISH COUNCIL’S CASE FOR RETENTION OF THE BUILDING FOR COMMUNITY USE.

Cllr Child presented the Parish Council’s case for retention. He had ascertained that the school had been transferred to the County at no cost in 2000. He noted that many references had been made in previous correspondence and meetings to the County Council’s need to obtain ‘best value’ for the buildings. He queried the meaning of ‘best value’ which has not been defined by central government. Recent publications by bodies such as English Heritage and the General Disposal Consent 2003 give firm indication that best value does not just mean best price.

Cllr Child drew particular attention to English Heritage’s document ‘The future of historic school buildings’ where it states that generally, conversion to general use is preferable to demolition.

Finally, Cllr Child drew the meeting’s attention to the current government white paper out for consultation ‘Strong and Prosperous Communities’ which offers funding for the preservation and restoration of buildings such as the old school. He proposed that the Parish Council works with the County Council using this white paper to secure funding to support and refurbish the old school.

5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Chairman invited comments and questions from the meeting.

Q – Are there not fund/loans that the Parish Council could apply for?

QPC – The amount of money required, £600,00+ for purchase and refurbishment would amount to £35-40,000 pa in interest and would be in the region of one-third of the precept. There was no guarantee that the Parish would be granted this amount of loan by the Public Works Loan Board. In any case, the precept for 2007/8 has already been set.

Q – Why has the County Council allowed the building to deteriorate over time? Was it doing so in anticipation of demolition?

LCC – The building was only acquired in 2000 and has been rendered water-tight.

Q – Did the Church not put any covenants on the transfer which would prevent disposal in the way the County Council is suggesting?

QPC – There are many unknown questions over this transfer and the Parish Council does not know the answers. Why, for example, would the church give away an asset which now seems to be worth half a million pounds six years later?

LCC – Mrs Bramley agreed to investigate the circumstances and detail of the transfer.

Q – Whilst acknowledging the difficulty that LCC faces in its budget shortfall, how does this short timescale for commitment to purchase fit in with the consultation process which local authorities undergo in so many other areas? Why can’t the reserves be used as a ‘stop gap’ to the give the Parish more time?

LCC – The County Council has reserves but they are intended for emergencies such as flood and fire.

Q – Is it correct that the LCC are not going to demolish Roseberry school building and Nanpantan Nursery School as the buildings are considered worthy of saving?

LCC – Roseberry has been declared surplus to requirements and the County Council is waiting for English Heritage to make a decision on whether it is to be listed. It will then be sold.

Q – If the old school was listed, would this reduce the price?

LCC – Probably, but it would have to be of particular architectural merit to be listed.

Q – In view of the recent news that local authorities will be given an additional 65-70 million pounds for education, could the decision to dispose of the building be put on hold?

LCC – Education is a totally different budget and is ringfenced separately.

Q – Doesn't Dr Feltham appreciate that what would be a short-term gain for the County, would be a long-term loss for the parish?

LCC – The need is to reduce the deficit across the county. Has the Parish Council considered applying for S106 money?

QPC – This would produce nothing like the £300,000 required for the purchase. More like £21,000

LCC – You need to find something 'special' about Quorn to save the school buildings. Tonight is the first time the County has been made aware that the school had been taken out of the lottery bid.

QPC – It had been taken out because the timescale was impossible.

LCC – The building will be disposed of during the next financial year. The County Council will be flexible on the date of 31st March for a limited period. The County Council will look at working with the Parish Council to explore ways in which funds can be raised.

QPC – Would the County Council consider placing a covenant on any sale to prevent demolition of the buildings?

LCC – Not if it goes on the open market.

QPC – Would the County Council look again at using the old school as a replacement library?

LCC – No, this has been looked at and discounted.

COUNTY COUNCILLOR KERSHAW – was gratified at so many people showing their commitment to the old school. He felt it inconceivable that any major movement towards purchase could happen within 2 months but noted that Dr Feltham had agreed to extend the deadline into 2007/8. This would allow for research on the ideas which have come forward tonight.

QPC – Can Cllr Kershaw confirm that he gives his full support to opposing the disposal of the old school

TK – This is what I have been fighting tooth and nail over for the past months.

QPC – This new flexibility over the timescale causes dismay to the Parish Council. The date of 31st March was the reason why the Council was forced to drop the school from its lottery bid. The Heritage Lottery Fund had shown interest in the school but only for refurbishment not purchase

At the conclusion of the meeting, Cllr Hutchinson, on behalf of the Parish Council tabled this resolution:

"We, the Parish Council and residents of the village of Quorn, wish the 1834 St Bartholomew's School on School Lane, Quorn to be restored and returned to use as a community building. Given the stated positions of The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and English Heritage on such buildings, obligations on County Councils to sensitively manage heritage assets within their property portfolios and consult with local communities about decisions affecting such assets, and Government intentions to provide funding for the restoration of such buildings for use by communities, we call upon the County Council to suspend its plans for disposal of the site and enter into discussions with Quorn Parish Council to examine ways in which this objective can be achieved"

This was carried.