

Stansted Parish Council

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Mr Jared Nehra
Area Education Officer for West Kent
Sessions House
County Road
MAIDSTONE
Kent ME14 1XQ

Dear Mr Nehra,

Consultation on the Closure of Stansted C of E School

Stansted Parish Council formally objects to the closure of Stansted School.

The key reasons for maintaining Stansted School are outlined below:

- a) The basis for making the decision to consult on the closure
- b) The efficient use of the school asset
- c) Demand for places
- d) The effect on the Parish

Due to the instability caused by the current consultation and the poor management by all parties over the last two years, we believe that a moratorium should be placed on closure by KCC issuing a public pronouncement that the school will be kept open for at least two years. This would provide time to rebuild the pupil roll from the bottom up. It would also provide the opportunity to obtain input from Stansted's parish community which is willing and able to provide resources to ensure the survival of the school.

A) The basis for making the decision to consult on the closure.

KCC will have received substantial correspondence from parents and other key stakeholders in the school on the poor management of this consultation and the previous two years of school mismanagement. At best, there has been a catalogue of misfortunes and at worst there has been deliberate mismanagement by all the authorities that were tasked with restoring the school back to success.

Stansted Parish Council is an external stakeholder which represents the views of the greater community. Whilst it is difficult to get to the bottom of every allegation, it would seem that there has definitely been mismanagement by KCC, which started when Simon Webb (with or without the blessing of KCC) decided that he wanted to close the school and set in train actions that have made this self-fulfilling. Simon Webb appointed a Head without the approval of the Governors and this Head proved to be singularly ineffective.

Through the actions of KCC and by various other stakeholders and the way KCC has handled the consultation with their bullying tactics (for which they have apologised publically), the school has been put in the invidious position of a collapsing student roll. This has created a self-fulfilling prophesy by making the school financially unviable. This is neither morally right nor is the process by which it has been achieved just.

Clerk to the Council: Mrs Roxana Brammer

KCC should accept responsibility for the part they have played in the school's current demise and provide it with the appropriate support to bring it back to strength.

B) The efficient use of the school asset

Stansted school is one of the most modern small schools in the district owing to the amount of money invested by KCC into the school to ensure its viability (over £600,000 in the last 10 years). Other village schools of a similar size (Ryarsh and Trottscliffe to name but two) have old buildings that require significant investment in order to make sure they are fit for the 21st century.

In a period when the Government and KCC are having to make significant savings and cuts in essential services, it would be a scandal to close a modern school whilst pouring money into other facilities that require significant capital investment.

As part of the consultation, it is important that the elected members are provided with information on the anticipated capital that will be spent on schools in the surrounding area over the next 5 years, to create environments fit for the modern student. We will be checking with our elected members that they have been furnished with these facts when the recommendation is put forward to the Head of Education.

C) Demand for places

It has been argued that there is no demand for a school within the parish, however this is at odds with both the makeup of the community and the forecast for growth of primary places in the next five years (according to National pupil projections: trends in pupil numbers - July 2014 these are 9% nationally and 12.5% in the South East).

When the Parish Council conducted a survey of the parish for the superfast broadband project in 2012, the parish had the following demographics, based on 190 houses and 100 respondents:

Demographics	No in house	%	
0-10	31	12%	
11-20	38	14%	26%
21-30	15	6%	
31-40	22	8%	
41-50	45	17%	
51-60	34	13%	44%
61-70	51	19%	
71-80	21	8%	
Over 80	9	3%	30%
Total	266		

Since this survey, the village has seen a 5% increase in family housing stock increase due to new builds and conversions which will bring more families into the village.

The reason there is a perceived lack of support for the school by local parents is due to the mismanagement of the school, lack of continuity (there have been 5 heads since 2013) and inadequate support by KCC over the last two years. This has actively discouraged parents to send their children to the local school and to look for options elsewhere. Continuity in leadership and a clear vision for a school is vital. Once children leave a school, it is very difficult to reverse the trend while the school is lacking stability. Furthermore, if an eldest child is removed, the school does not benefit from siblings joining, which further reduces numbers.

D) The effect on the community

Even with the current small pupil roll, the school has an extremely positive effect on the community. Below is a list of some of the events where the school plays a central part:

- Church Services eg
 - Wreath laying with the Parish Council and local residents on Armistice Day
 - Easter and Christmas services
 - Harvest Festival
- Fêtes, eg
 - May Fair and May Queen
 - Village Fête, Dog Show and Horse Show
- Use of the Village Hall for all sorts of events
- Use of the pubs and hotel within the parish
- Entries to the Horticultural Society
- Support for the Farmers' Market
- Providing the design and decoration of the parish telephone box

The Parish Council is in the process of spending £10,000 for new play equipment based around the requirements of the schoolchildren and their parents who were involved at the planning and specification stages.

St Mary's Church is undergoing a significant expansion due to the need to cater for the existing community (made up of church educated children) and the future needs of the community which will come from parish educated children.

The school is a key part of our community. It provides much of the parish glue to allow a small parish to thrive and survive. Removal of the school will destroy this glue and remove the youthful element to the parish.

How to provide a future for the school

We have been advised that the school cannot become a Church academy and the Diocese of Rochester has publically stated that they want the school closed. However, we know from experience that the school can be viable because it has been at threat of closure in the past. Assuming the Diocese will forfeit their right to the building and not develop it, the community has significant resources (both capital and human) that could and would be willing to support a school with a strong plan and management team supported by KCC.

As a parish, we do not feel that there has been sufficient investigation of viable options that can make use of some of the resources we can draw on from within our community. Prior to this consultation, whenever we have tried to engage with either the Governing Body or KCC as a Parish Council, we have been advised that there was not a problem at the school and therefore feel we have been unable to contribute or rally expertise from within the community to assist the school to be a success.

The future of the school will involve the whole parish and therefore we recommend putting together appropriate people to make this happen. For example could we have a board of "pastoral" governors made up of village experts (of which we have a few) who can work alongside the IEB?

What the school requires is a period of stability. This requires KCC to state publicly that the school will be kept open and fully supported for at least two years. With this assured, the school roll can be increased from the bottom up and as a community we can provide our time and resources to ensure

the school provides a first class education. This will create a virtuous circle and the school will be filled.

If KCC is minded to recommend the closure of the school – which we believe must not happen, we ask that KCC join Stansted Parish Council in objecting to any change in future use of the building. This is important because:-

- a) The school is a valuable asset to Kent and could be used at a future point for educational purposes (a free school, a place for nursery students, a federated non-denominational academy etc). Furthermore, it would be wrong to use tax payer funds to provide capital to upgrade other facilities when there is a good and usable facility within Stansted.
- b) Change of use has the potential of incurring significant cost to KCC. Under the terms of our lease with KCC for the Parish land that provides the playground (date 18th August 2006 clause 3.7) *“upon determination of this agreement shall reinstate the Property to the reasonable satisfaction of the Landlord”*.

As Stansted Parish Council owns the land surrounding the school, we recommend that the full cost of this reinstatement is made public and taken into consideration when reviewing the costs of keeping the school open – albeit with reduced numbers for the next two years.

In summary

There are many reasons why the school is in the current critical position. It is easy to apportion blame to KCC, the past governing body, the IEB and the management for many of these failures. What is important now is to come up with a workable solution to re-establish a thriving school, providing a first class education to its students within the excellent facilities that have been so recently provided by KCC.

We believe that KCC has a moral and long term financial obligation to provide the breathing space to help rebuild the school so that it is economically viable. The moral obligation is clear from the recognition that KCC followed flawed processes, an example of this is Simon Webb’s clear intention to close the school from the first moment that he became involved.

The financial obligation is to Kent taxpayers, in protecting the £600,000 investment KCC made to the school to make it one of the most modern in the district. Should the planning use class of the school buildings change then there will be a significant cost in reinstating parish land which should be factored into any costing calculations.

We ask that KCC take our views into consideration when making its recommendation.

Yours sincerely

Harry Bott
Chairman of Stansted Parish Council