

MINUTE 'B'

'A' &

Special Services Committee
Main Hall, Town Hall, Lerwick
Monday 25 October 2004 at 10.30am

Present:

F B Grains	L Angus
B J Cheyne	A J Cluness
C B Eunson	B P Gregson
L G Groat	I J Hawkins
J H Henry	J A Inkster
E J Knight	W H Manson
J P Nicolson	W H Ratter
F A Robertson	J G Simpson
W N Stove	W Tait

Apologies:

R G Feather J C Irvine
Capt G G Mitchell T W Stove

In Attendance:

H Budge, Senior Education Officer
A Cogle, Service Manager - Administration
B Hill, Acting Divisional Manager, Legal
S Hughes, Financial Support Manager
A Jamieson, Head of Education Service
J Reyner, Acting Senior Education Officer
J Smith, Head of Organisational Development
J Watt, Executive Director – Community Services
L Geddes, Committee Officer

Chairperson

Mrs F B Grains, Chairperson of the Committee, presided.

Circular

The circular calling the meeting was held as read.

66/04 **Best Value Service Review – A Long Term Strategy for
Secondary Education in Shetland**

The Committee considered a report by the Head of Education (Appendix 1).

The Chairperson began by welcoming everyone to the meeting, and reminded members of the public that only Members of the Committee were permitted to speak at the meeting.

The Head of Education began by providing a PowerPoint presentation (copy of slides attached as Appendix 1a) detailing the background to the work carried out by the Best Value Service Review Member/Officer Working Group (BVSRMOWG), the findings of the consultation exercise, the relevant national and local initiatives and drivers for change, and the conclusions that had arisen as a result of the consultation exercise. He added that he felt the recommendations in the report would result in a workable strategy for secondary education in Shetland.

During the discussion that followed, Members speaking in support of the recommendations said that they felt that it was important that it was left up to each individual school as to whether they wanted to progress to Higher courses, and that the commitment to this would have to be demonstrated. It was also considered important that pupils could still choose whether to remain at their local school, or move on to Lerwick or Brae. A number of issues were raised regarding the new Anderson High School building, and it was noted that these issues were being considered and that flexibility regarding the size of the project was being taken into account.

Other Members expressed concern at the timing of the proposals and how they would relate to the new Anderson High School project. There were concerns that approval of the recommendations would result in a more expensive educational model, and it was felt that issues of critical mass had not been taken into account, so would have to form part of the considerations.

Mrs I J Hawkins commented that she felt this was the right way forward for Junior High Schools in Shetland, particularly as schools would be able to decide if and when to progress beyond current provision. Scalloway JHS, in particular, was waiting to progress to providing Higher courses.

She went on to move that the Committee agree to approve recommendation 10.1, and advised that she would not include recommendation 10.2 in her motion so that it could be left open for further debate.

Mr W Tait seconded.

Mr L Angus expressed concerns that whilst it was sensible to have a strategic plan, the Council had omitted to give clear strategy objectives when giving the BVSRMOWG their remit. There were still outstanding issues relating to the development of the new Anderson High School and what it would aspire to, and no attempts had been made to arrive at a strategy for ASN provision. Any decision on the long-term future of education in Shetland could not

happen in the absence of these strategic aims, and he therefore felt that the process was flawed.

Mr Angus accordingly moved, as an amendment, that the following addition should be made to recommendation 10.1:

“Those course developments at Junior High Schools should be undertaken to ensure critical mass exists for pupils. If no critical mass exists, it will have to be determined whether post-16 education takes place in Lerwick or Brae”.

Mr W A Ratter seconded.

In responding to the concerns raised, Mr W H Manson, Education Spokesperson, referred to paragraphs 5.3.3-5.3.6 of the report and said that any school wishing to progress to Higher courses would have to demonstrate that it was committed to ensuring that it could succeed. Therefore the question of critical mass would be addressed if and when the individual schools came forward with their proposals. Any changes in relation to this would have to come through the Services Committee and the Council, so there would be safeguards in place and cognisance taken of these concerns. In response to a query, he confirmed that the Anderson High School would still remain an option for pupils beyond Secondary 4.

In light of the above, Mr W H Manson asked the mover of the motion and the mover of the amendment if they would instead agree to incorporate the following addition to recommendation 10.1:

“The prime consideration will be whether all conditions necessary to ensure quality of education are being met”.

Both the movers of the motion and the amendment, and their seconders, agreed to this addition to recommendation 10.1, and Mr L Angus accordingly agreed to withdraw his amendment to Mrs I J Hawkin’s motion.

The Committee then commenced discussion of recommendation 10.2 in relation to secondary provision at Skerries School.

Members who were not supportive of the recommendation referred to guidance that had been issued by the Scottish Executive in relation to what best value meant, and how it should be integrated. It was commented that wider factors than education had to be taken into account and demonstrated, such as the contribution to sustainable development, corporate and service level strategies and plans, and meeting present needs without compromising future needs of communities.

It was also pointed out that the guidance stated that it was necessary for the local authority to demonstrate responsiveness to the needs of the community, for members and senior managers to have an understanding of the diversity of communities they serve, and that plans, priorities and actions should be informed by the views of the communities.

Some Members said that therefore the Council were obliged to recognise the views of the community, and that it was incumbent on Members to ensure that Skerries thrived and recovered from its current economic situation, with the provision of secondary education seen as being crucial to this. It was felt that the views of the community had not been considered, that the social and economic aspects should have been taken into account, and that there was a need to make savings across the board, rather than concentrating on a number of individual schools.

Members speaking in support of the recommendations said that they felt that a range of criteria had been taken into account, and that the views of the community had been considered and given a weighting. It was pointed out that the model for secondary education was an extremely costly model that did not fit with best value, and that it was not viable from an educational point of view. Concern was expressed that, at some point, the Council would have no choice but to shut schools if it failed to sort out its general fund expenditure. It was also noted that secondary subjects were required to be taught by specialist teachers and that this presented problems in Skerries. New technology could only be used to supplement specialist teachers. It was felt that equality of education was not being achieved, and that the children should have the opportunity to access the best education to meet a wide range of circumstances.

Some Members commented that Skerries was not a unique rural island community in Scotland, although it was unique in that no other rural island communities had the same provision. It was also pointed out that the Council was working to support the economic development of the islands.

Mr J G Simpson said that it was apparent that the children did not want to leave Skerries, and that the parents did not want them to leave. The children did well at school and had confidence in the wider world. Skerries had faced a number of economic difficulties but were fighting back, and it was an objective of the Corporate Plan to strengthen rural communities.

He reiterated that the community's views had been clear and should be taken into account, and accordingly moved that the Committee agree to reject recommendation 10.2.

Mr B P Gregson seconded.

Mr A J Cluness said that whilst attempts should be made to support the infrastructure and economic development of Skerries, it was necessary to take account of the advice that the school could not provide the full educational or social curriculum that was provided elsewhere in Shetland.

He therefore moved, as an amendment, that the Committee agree to proceed with recommendation 10.2, as stated in the report.

In seconding Mr Cluness, Mr J A Inkster said that he was reluctant to see schools closed, but that a number of criteria had been taken into account by the BVSRMOWG, and it had been concluded that the model of provision did not fit with best value.

Mr L G Groat moved that voting take place by roll-call. Mr C B Eunson seconded, and 13 votes were received in favour with none against.

Accordingly, after summing up, voting took place by roll-call and the result was as follows:

Mr J G Simpson	Motion
Mr W N Stove	Amendment
Mr W Tait	Amendment
Mr L Angus	Motion
Mrs B J Cheyne	Motion
Mr A J Cluness	Amendment
Mr C B Eunson	Motion
Mrs F B Grains	Amendment
Mr B P Gregson	Motion
Mr L G Groat	Motion
Mrs I J Hawkins	Motion
Mr J H Henry	Amendment
Mr J A Inkster	Amendment
Mr E J Knight	Motion
Mr W H Manson	Amendment
Mr J P Nicolson	Motion
Mr W A Ratter	Amendment
Mr F A Robertson	Motion

Amendment (Mr A J Cluness)	8
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Motion (Mr J G Simpson)	10
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Accordingly, recommendation 10.1, as amended, and Mr J G Simpson's motion in relation to recommendation 10.2, were declared the finding of the meeting.

67/04 **Best Value Service Review – A Long Term Strategy for Primary Education in Shetland**

The Committee considered a report by the Head of Education (Appendix 2).

The Head of Education gave a PowerPoint presentation to the Committee (copy of slides attached as Appendix 2a) detailing the background to the work carried out by the BVSRMOWG, the findings of the consultation exercise, the initiatives the exercise had been set against, and the conclusions that had arisen as a result of the consultation exercise. The Head of Education said that the BVSRMOWG had come up with a strategy that attempted to improve the quality and equality of education in Shetland.

Mr L Angus said that he had difficulty in accepting that this was a long-term strategy for Shetland when it failed to take into account primary provision in Lerwick. Around 10% of pupils in the Lerwick primary schools were from catchment areas outwith Lerwick, the schools were inadequate and there were high pupil/teacher ratios. No attempts had been made to agree optimum class sizes, and there were traffic management problems. He felt that the Lerwick schools deserved no less than the country schools.

He went on to move that consideration of the report should be deferred until Members had had a proper debate on the provision of primary education in Lerwick along with the rest of Shetland.

Mr E J Knight seconded.

Mr W H Manson, Education Spokesperson, said that these concerns had been previously noted and the issues raised were being addressed. A report on primary provision in Lerwick would be presented in the next two cycles once technical information on the condition of the buildings had been received. However the figures he had indicated that maximum class sizes were not being approached in Lerwick.

Mr A J Cluness moved, as an amendment, that the report should be considered at today's meeting, and Mr W H Manson seconded.

After summing up, voting took place by show of hands, and the result was as follows:

Amendment (Mr A J Cluness)	16
Motion (Mr L Angus)	2

The Committee accordingly began consideration of the report.

Members speaking in support of the recommendations commented that the model of primary provision in Shetland was the costliest

model in Scotland. It was noted that the amount spent on education provision in Shetland was £15-17 million in excess of the sum received from the Scottish Executive, and it was also pointed out that Shetland had 11 more primary schools than Orkney, and over 100 more teachers.

It was also noted that the school rolls in Shetland had been falling steadily and had declined 15% over the last 15-20 years. There was no indication that these trends would change, so the issue of falling school rolls would have to be tackled at some point.

It was pointed out that the matrix used as part of the exercise was a tool that had been approved by the Council to assist with comparisons. It was not intended to close schools on the basis of the matrix, but instead school closures were proposed to maintain a better standard and equality of education throughout Shetland.

In relation to travelling distances, it was noted that the Services Committee had approved criteria regarding travelling distances, so these criteria had accordingly been used for the BVSR exercise. The travelling distances were not considered to be of great difficulty in areas where closures were proposed.

Members opposed to the recommendations said that they felt that scant regard had been paid to the views of the communities, and that these views were only briefly referred to in the report. It was commented that the communities were disappointed, disillusioned and angry that their views appeared to have been disregarded, particularly in light of the guidance received from the Scottish Executive which stated that those consulted must feel that they have been listened to.

Concern was expressed that the Members had not taken the lead and that the exercise appeared to have been driven by officials on purely educational grounds, whereas Members had a duty to consider the wider socio-economic effects of closures. Strengthening rural communities was one of the objectives of the Council's Corporate Plan, and it was felt that this would be the key to the overall economic health of Shetland. Some Members also commented that the matrix used had been difficult to comprehend and was therefore difficult to challenge.

Reference was made to a letter issued to local authority education conveners by the Minister for Education & Young People on 30 September, which accompanied guidance setting out issues and factors that should be taken into account by local authorities when considering school closures. It was felt that the Council had not taken these issues and factors into account, and it was pointed out that the guidance recognised wider socio-economic factors.

In response to comments that the exercise had been directed and driven by officials of the Council, the Chairperson pointed out that the BVSR had been requested by Members and that the BVSRMOWG was comprised of both Members appointed by the Council and relevant officers. It was the responsibility of those Members to make recommendations, and all Members to make the decisions.

Members for the relevant areas affected by the proposed school closures also spoke in support of their local schools, and raised a number of issues.

With regard to Sandness school, it was accepted that whilst the school roll had fluctuated, it had now increased. There was potential for further families moving into the area due to the availability of social housing and the thriving wool mill. Following the loss of the shop and post office, the school was now the focal point of the community and its closure would have long-term detrimental effects. It was not desirable to have young children driven 8-9 miles over what were considered to be the worst roads in Shetland. It was felt that the primary consideration for closure of smaller schools - the educational benefit - was a subjective assumption and that there appeared to be no justification or evidence for this. It was noted that a scheme for joint management had been piloted and had proven to be an unqualified success, resulting in a joint management Head being appointed to manage all West Side schools.

In Yell, it was felt that the continuing indecision over the schools at Burravoe and Cullivoe had already affected the communities. It was noted that young children would be expected to travel long distances over poor roads, and there was disappointment that the HMI reports for the schools had not been considered as important. Closure of these schools would mean that there was a lack of parental choice, as the Mid Yell School would be the only school in the island.

It was suggested that the figure of £680,000 included in the Capital Programme for repairs at Olnafirth School was incorrect and misleading, and that it had skewed the position for Olnafirth School. The School itself had come forward with suggestions on shared management with Brae, which would mean that the school could remain open and that savings could be made. It was pointed out that there were currently housing developments in both Voe and Brae that could result in an increased school roll for Olnafirth, but that there would also be an effect on the capacity at Brae School. Therefore it would be premature to close the school before the effects of these housing developments were apparent.

In relation to Uyeasound School, it was suggested that the school was well underway to achieving the requirements of an integrated school, and that it was at the heart of the community. It was felt that the community had already been damaged as the School had been considered for closure on a number of occasions.

Mr A J Cluness said that it was in the best interests of parents and children to make a decision at the meeting today. The BVSRMOWG had worked hard to make decisions based on the criteria given to them, and they had tried to ensure fairness in the overall system. The Council was committed to economic sustainability in rural areas, but consideration had to be given to the fact that the Council spent more on education than any other local authority in Scotland.

Mr A J Cluness went on to move that the Committee approve recommendations 8.1 and 8.2, and Mr W N Stove seconded.

Mr F A Robertson referred to the successful joint management scheme in the West Side, and commended joint management as the way forward for small rural schools.

He moved, as an amendment, that the Committee agree to reject the recommendation to commence formal consultation on the proposals to close the five primary schools, namely Uyeasound, Olnafirth, Burravoe, Cullivoe and Sandness; that they remain open; that enabling reports are brought forward to examine systems of joint management, as piloted by Sandness School and now operating satisfactorily in the West Side; and that, in the case of Olnafirth School, the capital requirement is reassessed.

Mr J P Nicolson seconded.

In response to a query from a Member, the Head of Education advised that the total cost of the BVSR exercise still had to be ascertained and the figure would be given to Members in due course.

Mr L Angus requested that in addition to the report on primary provision in Lerwick, a report on the provision of ASN education throughout Shetland should also be presented.

Mr L G Groat moved that voting take place by roll-call. Mr B P Gregson seconded, and 13 votes were received in favour with none against.

Accordingly, after summing up, voting took place by roll-call, and the result was as follows:

Mr A J Cluness

Motion

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Mr C B Eunson	Amendment
Mrs F B Grains	Motion
Mr B P Gregson	Amendment
Mr L G Groat	Amendment
Mrs I J Hawkins	Amendment
Mr J H Henry	Motion
Mr J A Inkster	Motion
Mr E J Knight	Amendment
Mr W H Manson	Motion
Mr J P Nicolson	Amendment
Mr W A Ratter	Amendment
Mr F A Robertson	Amendment
Mr J G Simpson	Amendment
Mr W N Stove	Motion
Mr W Tait	Motion
Mr L Angus	Amendment
Mrs B J Cheyne	Amendment

Amendment (Mr F A Robertson)	11
Motion (Mr A J Cluness)	7

Accordingly, Mr F A Robertson's amendment was declared the finding of the meeting.

The meeting concluded at 1.45pm.