

**QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL**  
**Wednesday, 13 April 2016**

**1. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR CONNETT**  
**Re: Sutcombe Primary School**

Did members of the Cabinet discuss the proposed closure of Sutcombe Primary School either informally or at an informal meeting of the Cabinet?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CLATWORTHY**

As Councillor McInnes said at the People's Scrutiny Committee – in response to similar questions asked then - a pre-meeting is normally held on the day of each Cabinet meeting simply to run through the administrative/procedural arrangements for the meeting, to ensure Cabinet Members are aware of any relevant matters such as any urgent items to be raised, members of the public attending under our public participation rules or representations received on any matter that would need to be reported to the Cabinet; to ensure the smooth running of the Cabinet meeting. It is not to pre-judge the outcome of any discussions.

**2. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR CONNETT**  
**Re: Sutcombe Primary School**

Which councillors were present at that informal meet?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CLATWORTHY**

To the best of my recollection, all Cabinet Members.

**3. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR CONNETT**  
**Re: Sutcombe Primary School**

Was an officer of the Council present at or during any part of the informal cabinet meeting?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CLATWORTHY**

No.

**4. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR CONNETT**  
**Re: Sutcombe Primary School**

Is an agenda prepared for, or minutes taken of informal meetings of the county council cabinet?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CLATWORTHY**

No.

**5. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR WESTLAKE**  
**Re: Academy Schools**

In welcoming and supporting Cllr. McInnes's statement, which I quote, regarding the Chancellor's announcement that all schools would have to become academies within six years:

*"We've always adopted a neutral stance on this but less than a quarter of our 365 schools have chosen to become academies. We believe it is a decision for schools themselves and it is wrong to try to coerce heads and governors into following a path that they would not otherwise choose. Only this week we completed a series of meetings with Devon heads and governors and there was a lot of unease amongst them about forced academisation. They feel that choice and autonomy is being removed from them. I am also concerned that whilst people can remove me at the ballot box if they're not happy, the role of overseeing schools' performance is now being passed to unelected and generally faceless bureaucrats in London and Bristol. Where's the democracy in that? And this isn't about performance either: 88 per cent of pupils in Devon are taught in primary, secondary and special schools that are judged good or outstanding by Ofsted. That compares with 84 per cent nationally."*

Would the Leader of the Council tell us what steps he proposes to take to make clear the County Council's grave concerns about the effect of this proposed policy on Devon schools. How can councillors and the other political groups help to make the case that Devon schools should be free to make their own choice? Does he agree that there are serious concerns about the impact of this policy on Devon's small primary schools and on admissions, particularly the availability of places for children with special needs.

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CLATWORTHY**

As Councillor Westlake will be aware the Leader of the Council has no hesitation in making his views known when he thinks that the people of Devon will be adversely affected by the decisions of others, whoever they may be. Councillor McInnes has already made known his views about the importance of local accountability and Members and Officers will continue to make those views known to our MPs and Government.

This Council has always taken the view that decisions about school status should be a matter for Schools themselves and should not be imposed either way. Many maintained schools have told us that they want to retain their autonomy and choice by remaining with the local authority and that a 'one size fits all approach' does not work for Devon schools and I would defend their right to be able to do so.

The Council has a strong school improvement track record with 88% of our schools judged good or better and has always conscientiously exercised our role as 'Champion for Children' regardless of the school they attend. This core function of the local authority will not change and our responsibilities for safeguarding children and ensuring equality of access remains. At national level, the Council will continue to promote choice for schools but will not stand in the way of those schools who wish to pursue academy status or join multi academy trusts. Locally, we will continue to adapt our structures and offer to ensure we meet our core statutory responsibilities and deliver services for schools albeit on a traded basis.

It is frankly too early to say what impact this policy and the new national funding formula will have on Devon's schools regardless of their size or context. The Cabinet has already asked the People's Scrutiny Committee to consider the challenges and issues for Devon's small schools and the implications of the White Paper will no doubt be reflected in that piece of work.

Officers are however already talking to Civil Servants to make them aware of the impact and practicability of what is being proposed in the White Paper which, while suggesting local authorities will have greater powers for school admissions including in-year and appeals and protecting the most vulnerable children, does not acknowledge the considerable additional costs falling upon local authorities in managing the transition of schools to academies (e.g. transferring staff and property) and through having continuing responsibility for school

transport and safeguarding; these will need to be met from County Council budgets and those costs should be reflected in any transitional arrangements under the White Paper.

Councillor Westlake can be assured that these views will be made known to Devon's MPs and Government in any future discussion or consultations on the White Paper and there will no doubt be a lot of water to pass under the various bridges the proposals will have to cross yet!

**6. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR OWEN**

**Re: Parent Governors**

Could you give your views on the government proposal to remove parent governors from school governing bodies?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CLATWORTHY**

The White Paper does not set out to 'remove parent governors from school governing bodies' although it does suggest that places will not be reserved automatically on Academy Governing Bodies in future, and expects those Governing Bodies to focus on appointing the right people with the right skills. Who better to provide that than parents?

Many governing bodies already include parents who have the skills and experience necessary to strategically govern the school and I would expect this to continue. Schools are rooted in their communities and therefore Academy Governance arrangements should ensure they have meaningful engagement with parents to both seek and value their views.

**7. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR VINT**

**Re: Devolution/Strategic Housing Market**

Whilst planning authorities across Devon and Somerset are carrying out Strategic Housing Market Needs Assessments to calculate the appropriate number and kind of houses to be built in each District, the Devolution Prospectus for the HOTSWS has proposed building 179,000 homes across Devon and Somerset by 2030. Will the final housing targets for Devon and Somerset and its Districts be adjusted in line with the objective evidence base being compiled by each District or will each District have to adjust its own targets to accord with the existing unevidenced HOTSWS Devolution Prospectus target of 179,000 homes?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CLATWORTHY**

The Devolution process is iterative and important evidence such as Strategic Housing Market Needs Assessments will of course be considered alongside other evidence in the development of targets within the Devolution proposal.

**8. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR VINT**

**Re: Devolution/Affordable Housing Provision**

Is the County Council, as a co-author of the Heart of the South West Devolution Prospectus, committed to working with other councils to ensure that houses built in Devon will be of the kinds needed by local people (e.g. affordable houses including social and rented houses) rather than the kinds that maximise the profits of developers (such as second and holiday homes)? What steps will be taken to indicate these priorities in revisions to the Devolution Prospectus and how might references to affordable housing targets and the calculated local need for affordable social or rented homes be made explicit?

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR CLATWORTHY**

All Devon housing authorities are committed to ensuring the effective balance of housing stock in their area and the County Council will continue to support them in their objectives and how this is reflected in any devolution arrangement.

**9. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR CONNETT**  
**Re: Connecting Devon & Somerset**

Will the Leader of the Council commit to undertaking an 'independent' external audit of phase 2 programme undertaken by Connecting Devon and Somerset, as agreed by Place Scrutiny.

**REPLY BY COUNCILLOR LEADBETTER**

I can confirm that the CDS Board considered the recommendations of the Special Place Scrutiny held in September 2015 and agreed that Devon County Council should fund and appoint an independent auditor of the Phase Two Procurement. Grant Thornton were approached and briefed to undertake the work, and a fee agreed. A final step in their appointment was for Grant Thornton to seek approval from the PSAA to complete this work. An initial view was given in February that there was a conflict of interest. This was clarified further by Grant Thornton with the PSAA and Grant Thornton confirmed to the County Council that they were not able to undertake the brief at the end of February. The County Council subsequently approached a number of other auditors who declined the brief as they did not have the capacity. The search did however lead to The South West Audit Partnership to be appointed last month. The South West Audit Partnership is a public authority owned, and legally independent company. It provides internal audit services to a large number of local authorities, including Somerset County Council. It has been appointed to undertake this work because it has no direct links to the County Council. The South West Audit Partnership accords to all Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) and all ethical codes.