

Facts, Lies and Underhand Tactics

The purpose of this document is to respond to the various information leaflets, e-mails, press releases and other documentation produced by Suffolk County Council in its attempts to justify its Schools Reorganisation proposals. All of the information below has been accumulated by Parents Against Change and other similar Parents' Groups. More detailed **evidence** is available from the contacts listed at the end of this document.

Facts

- Many Councillors and County Officials are ignoring all communications on this issue and/or simply sending out standard responses via letter or e-mail (see later evidence in the 'Lies' section below).
- County Councillors have refused to answer individual questions at Public Meetings and simply shouted their 'party line' messages over contributions from the general public.
- Parents Against Change and other Parents' Groups have **evidence** of the following:
 - a) A 9,148 signature petition (so far) from people against the proposals.
 - b) A 1,790 signature e-petition (so far) to Tony Blair against the proposals.
 - c) Online polls in the Newmarket Journal, the Bury Free Press and the East Anglian Daily Times all showing significant majorities in favour of retaining the current system.
 - d) Letters of support from the Labour and Liberal Democrat Groups on Suffolk County Council.
 - e) Research papers from the National Middle Schools Forum, the Governing Body of St. Felix Middle School, the Governing Body of Riverside Middle School and Education Specialists at Homerton College, Cambridge, all highlighting major inconsistencies and errors in the Review report.
 - f) Hundreds of letters and e-mails from concerned parents and pupils.
 - g) Mildenhall Parish Council voting to oppose the proposals.
 - h) Newmarket Town Council voting to withdraw its previous support for the proposals.
- Norfolk County Council has still not succeeded in completing **its** reorganisation, despite the fact that it only had a 'shift' of one year group to deal with (since their Middle Schools were Years 4-7). Figures recently published in the Bury Free Press comparing schools in Norfolk and Suffolk showed that children in Norfolk schools, which had been reorganised, were achieving substantially less well than those in the three-tier system in Suffolk. Where, therefore, is the **proof** that reorganisations in essentially **rural** parts of England have improved standards?

- Tim Yeo MP has asked Suffolk County Council for two public assurances before it will have his support:

1. Evidence from an independent source that will show real educational benefits from a move to two-tier and for this to be made public.

2. Public assurance that there will not be any closures of primary schools, which he describes as 'our popular and admired village institutions'.

Neither of these has, to date, been forthcoming, so he has stated that his sympathies remain with the teachers and parents who have lost trust in what the authorities tell them.

- Richard Spring MP has said that he has very serious doubts that reorganization would achieve higher standards, due to his experience of other reorganizations such as those in the Health Service. He has gone on record as saying:

"As I have personally witnessed, we have excellent and dedicated teachers currently in our deeply valued Middle Schools".

In addition to this, a recent letter from Richard Spring MP to Western Area Middle School Headteachers, regarding the 'Made IT Happen' competition, contained the following paragraph:

"I know from my visits to the Middle Schools in my constituency about the excellent IT facilities and enthusiasm of pupils working with computers. Therefore, I thought this may be a good opportunity to highlight the skills that they have developed on a national level."

This statement, once again, highlights one of the key strengths of Middle Schools: their excellent specialist facilities and staff. These benefit **all** of the children, including Years 5 & 6, who under a two-tier system would have to wait until Year 7 for similar benefits. The competition in question is for 9-11 year olds (i.e. Years 5 & 6) and Mr. Spring should be applauded for giving Middle Schools the opportunity to show just how much difference they make to children's development in this very important area.

Local MPs therefore seem to be able to see the bigger picture: that education is not simply about statistics and exam pass rates. County Councillors would do well to recognise this indisputable fact in a similar manner.

- The current lack of progress in some Lower Schools during Years 3 and 4 is not being acknowledged by Suffolk County Council. This has a major knock-on effect for Middle Schools who are being blamed for low Key Stage 2 results and are thus in danger of being closed down. This is despite the fact that the Council has not collected any data on progress during Years 5 and 6. Individual Middle School records (verified by Ofsted) show that this progress is **at least** satisfactory and often good, whereas standards **on entry from Lower Schools** are often significantly below the expected level. Recent Ofsted/HMI Inspections at Westley, Riverside and Beccles Middle Schools have all resulted in them being judged as 'Good' for pupil progress, and standards when pupils transfer to Upper School.
- Based on Value Added data from the DfES (the only reliable indicator of an individual school's performance, there is no significant difference in performance between two and three tier systems. The calculations below use value added data at Key Stage 2 (based on progress from 7 to 11), and contextual value added data at KS4 (based on progress from 11 to 16):

As expected, the attainment for pupils in Middle Schools is **slightly** below that of Primary Schools:

Average VA score for Middle Schools (3-tier): 99.2

Average VA score for Primary Schools (2-tier): 99.6

Both of these are very close to the national norm.

Of course, that doesn't take into account things like a more balanced curriculum at Middle Schools, or the impact of the KS tests being at a mid-point rather than at the end of the pupils' time at the school.

Notably, the DfES website states that *"at KS1 to KS2 when comparing schools with cohorts of about 30 pupils, differences of up to 1.3 should not be regarded as significant, while for schools with about 50 pupils, differences of up to 1.0 should not be regarded as significant."* The data falls well within this range for Primary and Middle Schools.

However, looking at the contextual value added results at Key Stage 4 (supposedly more reliable than standard value added results), the Upper Schools seem to come out better than High Schools:

Average CVA score for Upper Schools (3-tier): 1008.2

Average CVA score for High Schools (2-tier): 1007.8

This suggests that pupils make greater progress in the three-tier system from age 11 to 16.

So, regardless of context, children make almost identical progress by age 11 (the difference is, in DfES terms, insignificant), but make great progress over the years from 11 to 16 - in line with what we would expect with a system which is biased towards two-tier collation of results.

- Good quality teaching (and other) staff will not wait to be redeployed to other schools where they will be not necessarily be able to teach their specialist subjects or the age groups of their choice. They will take control of their own careers and look to established schools across the borders in Cambridgeshire, Norfolk or Essex. The losers will be Suffolk's children for generations to come.
- Recent research from education specialists at Cambridge University has shown that the 'transition dips' that are said to occur each time children change school are far from insurmountable, and in any case are due to a wider range of factors than simply the change of educational establishment.
- Suffolk County Council recognises the high standard of social and pastoral care currently being given by Middle Schools and is unable to claim that this can even be matched, let alone bettered under a two-tier system. This is therefore clearly a strong factor pointing to the inadvisability of change. If Middle Schools are closed, the 'good work' will inevitably be lost, as the ethos of this particular type of school is a major factor in allowing it to happen.
- Suffolk County Council claim to value small schools, but where these are physically unable to accommodate two extra Year Groups of pupils due to restricted sites, etc. they will inevitably be closed and amalgamated in the nearest town. This will lead to children as young as 4 or 5 years old facing a bus journey at each end of the school day, or a vast increase in traffic congestion/pollution as parents feel obliged to extend their 'school runs'. Using the Council's own figures, at least 20 Lower Schools are unable to expand on their current sites, but no plan appears to exist for their closure, amalgamation or relocation, or for where the funds for the inevitable building works will come from. There is no money available from National Government for this, since 'Building Schools for the Future' funding only applies to Secondary Schools.
- The redundant sites (including those of all 40 Middle Schools) will be sold off as building land, thus making vast sums of money for Suffolk County Council. This may also result in a change of land use from educational/recreational to residential or even industrial, in areas totally unsuited to this type of development. Other Counties have done exactly this during similar reorganisations and there has been a public outcry at the resultant damage to local communities.
- Dorset Middle Schools are nationally recognised as an area of excellence and good practice, thus disproving the claim that three-tier systems are always worse than two-tier ones, due to 'structural weaknesses'.

- Building Schools for the Future (BSF) funding is already massively delayed in other parts of the country and thus extremely unlikely to reach Suffolk on time. Even without delays caused by this, Suffolk's children will face at least 10 years of disruption and the use of temporary facilities, but at the current rate of progress this could easily be 15 or even 20 years. Temporary classrooms (i.e. portakabins) are poorly insulated, draughty, difficult to keep warm/cool and far from ideal for their purpose. They certainly will not have the high standard of specialist equipment found in most current Middle Schools classrooms (e.g. Interactive Whiteboards, LCD Projectors, Internet/Network-connected PCs, etc.). These current facilities also benefit the local community during out of hours use and will simply not be available during the changeover period.
- New classrooms and other facilities will be needed at all of the Secondary and Primary Schools, in order to accommodate the extra year groups. Many of these sites are already full to capacity and the only way to expand them would be to build on playing fields and other green areas. Apart from the loss of these amenities to the schools and the quality of life that they bring to the pupils, local communities are often in a position to use these facilities out of school hours and will thus also lose out.

Lies

- Despite **repeated** claims that this is **not** a Party Political issue, political (not educational) advice is being sought from Party Leaders before (the very few) individual responses from Suffolk County Council and its representatives are sent (e.g. *“I would not reply there are statements in it which are simply not true. You will end up by having a tit for tat.”* – Councillor Jeremy Pembroke (leader of SCC) by e-mail to Councillor Paul Hopfensperger). In addition to this, those at the Public Meeting held in Beccles were told that local opinion would not decide the outcome, but that County Councillors would be given that responsibility in the March vote, at which point the ruling Tory party would instruct its Councillors on which side to take and thus how to vote.
- County Councillors are publicly declaring that they don't care if they are not re-elected as a result of the strong feelings shown during this protest. They are ignoring the wishes of the people who elected them in the first place, but still insist that they know best. They would not have stood for election in the first place unless they were keen to hold the position and the status that it brings. To suggest that this is a matter of principle more important to them than retaining that status is clearly just political bluster, in the majority of cases.
- Suffolk County Council claim that no plans yet exist for HOW the reorganisation process is to take place in each part of the County. This is clearly untrue since a standard reply from Ian Brown (Head of Infrastructure) states *“We are now actively working on the many suggestions and concerns raised so that the implementation strategy is informed by all the correspondence as well as by the evidence from the consultation and the research on pupil attainment set out in our earlier findings.”* In addition to this, Sally Simpkin stated at the Beccles Middle School meeting that there were already plans that had been made regarding the changes (i.e. they've already prepared where High Schools will be needed, where Middle Schools will go and who will be first). A timescale showing which areas of the County are to be reorganized first, is now also in the public domain. Clearly plans are well advanced despite this proposal not having received the approval of the Full Council.
- Rosalind Turner states in one of Suffolk County Council's latest leaflets that *“Understandably, many people with experience of the three-tier system (with first, middle and upper schools) are concerned about the proposals. **They want more information on how the changes will be put in place.**”* This is simply untrue. The necessity of the changes and the damage that they will do is what is being questioned, not the detail of how these changes will happen.

- Suffolk County Council claims that the cost of the Review Process has been estimated as £23 million. However, this is, at best, deliberately misleading since it does not include the costs of **any** Building Work. A substantial amount of construction work would clearly be needed, since virtually every Primary and Upper School would need additional classrooms and/or facilities. They have already spent £240,000 on the preparation of the proposals, which would have had a much more significant effect had it been divided up between the Middle Schools as a one-off grant to improve whatever the Headteachers felt was the priority for their school. A lot can be done with £6,000 placed in the right hands with no strings attached!
- Suffolk County Council also claims that the new structure would save approximately £4.4 million pounds annually. Even based on their own (massively underestimated) figure of £23 million, it would take five years to recoup this alone (not allowing for interest payments incurred on any loans). In the context of the whole education budget, £4.4 million is a totally insignificant amount when a typical Middle School has an **annual** budget of approaching £1.5 million (i.e. £60 million pounds annually for all existing Middle Schools, let alone all of the Primary and Upper Schools). Delays at any stage in the reorganisation process (which all other Counties that have reorganised **have** experienced) will cause the costs to rise dramatically.
- Suffolk County Council have claimed that only by changing to a two-tier structure can funding from National Government under the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) scheme be secured. This is completely untrue, since Suffolk's Middle Schools are all 'deemed Secondary' and thus **are** eligible for these funds based on their KS3 cohort. This funding will benefit **all** pupils in the school, since it is nonsense to suggest that the newly built/refurbished parts of the school would be out of bounds to KS2 pupils. In a two-tier system, **no** KS2 pupils would directly benefit from this phase of BSF funding and yet this is exactly the age group that is being cited as missing out under the current three-tier arrangements.
- County Councillors have claimed that all opposition to the current proposals is coming from those closely associated with the threatened Middle Schools, and that Primary and Upper Schools are in favour of the proposed changes. This is a completely unsupported assertion that is easily disproved since the membership lists of all the Parents' Groups involved in this campaign show a broad cross-section across all three tiers of the current education system.
- The 'Policy Development Panel Summary Leaflet' claims that "*Extra help (money and resources) over a long period has not improved three-tier performance enough*". This is a misleading statement since the highest recent rates of improvement in Suffolk schools (as measured by the DfES and Ofsted) have been found in **Middle Schools**. There is every reason to suppose that given a sustained period of stability, and adequate resources, this trend would continue.

- The ‘Policy Development Panel Summary Leaflet’ also claims that *“If we have different structures in Suffolk to the rest of the country, it will be harder to recruit and retain staff in the future”*. This is untrue on two counts. Firstly, there are a number of other counties running successful three-tier systems (including Bedfordshire, Northumberland and the Isle of Wight), so Suffolk is not by any means alone. Secondly, most current Middle School staff will have, at some time, worked within two-tier systems in other parts of the country. They have consciously chosen to **specialise** in this segment of the three-tier system because they genuinely believe that it produces the best all-round experience for the children. Recruitment is therefore not an issue, since both Primary **and** Secondary Trained staff are fully qualified to teach in Middle Schools. In fact, for this very reason, there is far greater choice available to Headteachers and Governing Bodies in choosing suitable, well qualified staff.
- Suffolk County Council has claimed that GCSE pass rates that are lower than the national average are due to the disruptive effect of changing schools more often within the three-tier structure. However, closer examination of the situation shows that Ofsted has recently found good progress during KS3 in the three-tier system and also that children have often achieved their **Year 9** targets **before** leaving Middle School at the **end of Year 8**, the problem with progress would therefore seem to be in the Upper/High School segment of the system. Under the current proposals, these schools (where, based upon Suffolk County Council’s own figures, rates of pupil progress appear questionable) would continue, whereas Middle Schools (who are already achieving independently verified good rates of progress at KS3) would be closed down. Add to this the burden of two extra year groups to deal with in the Upper Schools and this is surely a recipe for **worse** GCSE results than those at present.
- Suffolk County Council used independent Universities to validate the data presented in the Policy Development Panel’s Report and thus claim that it is unquestionably correct. However, the value of corroboration by independent Universities very much depends on the data made available to them. On a purely statistical level, they may be able to comment and come to a conclusion, but they have no way of taking into account local factors, and no experience of the way that this area operates on a wide range of issues (including transport, infrastructure, population distribution, demographic trends, etc.). Only local people can have the necessary overview and this also excludes people from the more urban areas, such as Ipswich.

Underhand Tactics

- The Consultation Questionnaires were initially only distributed inside a free County Council newsletter (at a cost of over £30,000). The majority of households receiving communications of this nature simply put them into their recycling bins with barely a second glance. The importance of the questionnaires was also seriously played down so that the majority of those who did see them thought that they were simply part of a fact-finding exercise about a vague possibility in the fairly distant future.
- For the reasons given above, only 4,744 responses to the Questionnaire were received, of which only 1,500 people wanted a two-tier system (including those who have already got it!), 2,040 people wanted a three-tier system and 640 people wanted an unspecified different system. This is from an eligible population of 485,000 adults. Despite this, Suffolk County Council is passing this off as a legitimate and rigorous Consultation Process. Councillor O'Brien has even made the absolutely unbelievable claim that the people of Suffolk "*are too lazy*" to bother reading the information given and fill out the questionnaire! The response since the proposals have been properly publicised by Parents' Groups, shows how untrue and deeply insulting this statement is.
- Pupils were **invited** to attend the original consultation meetings and give their views, but once the proposals had been made public, Headteachers were told in no uncertain terms that pupils **MUST NOT** be involved in debating or protesting against these proposals. Legitimate forums such as School Councils were also expressly forbidden from discussing these issues. This is despite a recent Suffolk County Council initiative entitled 'Children's Voices', which states the importance and value of consulting children and hearing their views.
- The Full Report was published on Wednesday 20th December – the day **after** Suffolk schools broke up for the Christmas Break. This made it impossible for the Media to contact representatives of most schools for comment. The resulting media coverage was thus extremely one-sided and any reaction to the news was stifled by preparations for the impending festivities.
- Schools are being told that they **MUST NOT** distribute materials, canvass opinion or actively protest against the proposals and have been given answers to frequently asked questions that **MUST** be used when responding to parents. Not surprisingly, many parents **are** seeking information direct from schools on the effects that these proposals are likely to have on their children. Staff are thus put in an impossible position. If they express their true opinions, they face the (implied) threat of disciplinary action, since individual members of school staff have already been heavily 'leaned on' when showing signs of supporting the protests. If they follow the 'party line' they give a false impression to, and betray the trust of, the very parents who have asked them for advice and support.

- Parents' Groups have been accused of distributing misleading and factually incorrect information by Suffolk County Councillors, but no details have been forthcoming about the nature of these inaccuracies, despite numerous requests.
- Schools have recently been obliged to distribute two leaflets stating the Council's point of view **VIA PUPILS**. These leaflets have been printed and distributed using Council Funds (taxpayers' money) in order to try and win support for its proposals. This method of distribution ensures that the majority of parents will receive at least one copy of the leaflets and gives a sense of legitimacy to the claims made within them. Parents' Groups have similar information to disseminate amongst parents, but have been denied the mechanism for doing so directly via pupils. One of the leaflets even claims that the 'Myths' that it is trying to address are being put about by groups opposed to the reorganisation. The implication is that everything the County Council says is true and beyond question, whilst everyone else is wrong or deliberately telling lies.

As can be seen from all of the information above, Suffolk County Council's proposals are based on incomplete and inaccurate information, false assumptions and a deeply flawed Public Consultation Exercise. To proceed with a reorganisation on this scale (and one which will detrimentally affect the lives of so many of Suffolk's children) based on this kind of Review would be irresponsible, foolhardy and morally reprehensible. I would urge the County Council to have the courage to admit that this Review in its current form is **not** a mandate for change. They should therefore defer a decision on **any** changes until a full, **independent** assessment has been made of the current situation and of any likely benefits that a change might bring.

Further information can also be obtained from the following websites:

www.parentsagainstchange.org

http://www.lettergold.co.uk/~lettergold.co.uk/public_html/sos/

<http://www.h-pac.org/>

www.friendsofriverside.co.uk/Review.htm

<http://www.middleschools.org.uk/materials.php>

Direct contact can be made with Parents Against Change using the following e-mail address:

parentsagainstchange@yahoo.co.uk