



Riverside Middle School Governing Body's
Response to the Answers from the FAQ Section of the
Suffolk County Council Website

- **Q Why do we need to review the way schools are organised?**
A To find out whether the current system of schools ('two-tier' (primary and secondary) in some areas and 'three- tier' (primary, middle and upper) in others) will best serve the children and young people of Suffolk in the long term, or whether changes will bring added benefits.

Response: Most of the arguments for change within the current proposals assume that problems in areas currently organised into a three-tier system are because of that system. There is no proven link to show that this is the case. There are a multitude of social, economic and historic factors that could account for these problems just as easily as the structure of the education system, but this has been completely ignored in the way that the Review has been organised. To draw the conclusions that have been drawn would require a much wider and more far-reaching investigation than the Authority is prepared to undertake.

- **Q Isn't this just about structures rather than children?**
A No. Every aspect of the review is driven by the five key outcomes of the Government's Every Child Matters agenda. We want to provide children with the support they need to:
 - Be healthy
 - Stay safe
 - Enjoy and achieve
 - Make a positive contribution
 - Achieve economic well-being.

The demands on the current education and school system have changed a lot in recent years. The review is about making sure young people and those who work with them have the facilities that best meet their needs and help them achieve their full potential.



Response: All of the above criteria are being fully met within the current three-tier system, as evidenced by the following independent quotes:

“Both educationally and socially pupils benefit from the unique opportunities provided by middle schools”

“Middle schools have been acknowledged as presenting one of the most enriching and formative environments in which it is possible to learn”.

“They provide for their pupils a positive influence, which has been seen to continue long after they have left, not only in knowledge, but also in motivation, self-confidence, teamwork and the capacity for independent study” .

Anyone who has had to fill in the huge variety of forms required in the present educational climate cannot fail to see that three-tier education doesn't fit neatly into the categories used by the 'decision-makers'. It is therefore simply for bureaucratic convenience that these changes are being proposed.

• **Q How many people were involved in the consultation?**

A Nearly 400,000 consultation documents were distributed across Suffolk in the 'About Suffolk' newspaper. Although there were some difficulties in distribution, a further 100,000 documents were sent to parents through schools. Consultation documents were also sent directly to a range of stakeholders, including all school governors.

Response: Distribution of important consultation documents through a free newspaper is hardly carrying out the process in a professional manner. Questionnaires and similar documents received in this way are rarely taken seriously by householders and are usually consigned to the recycling bin without even being read.

A massive publicity campaign should have been undertaken to ensure that the general public was fully aware of the consultation and that it was not simply an information-gathering exercise with no likelihood of imminent implementation. The wording of the documentation itself also did not make this clear.



- **Q How many people responded to the consultation? Can the outcome be regarded as conclusive?**

A In total, 4744 consultation documents were returned (1.6% of households in Suffolk), plus a further 335 written responses. These figures match responses received by other authorities who have carried out similar consultations about school provision. The Policy Development Panel (PDP) conducting the review considered the outcomes of the consultations carefully and concluded that they were not decisive in either calling for change or keeping the current system.

Response: The incredibly low rate of return may be in line with that received by other authorities, but this does not make it statistically valid. What it does show, beyond doubt, is that the people being ‘consulted’ clearly did not understand the significance of what they were being asked or the implications of any decisions that might be made on the strength of their responses. Alarm bells should have rung at that stage and the process put on hold until a statistically valid and truly representative measure of opinion could be obtained.

- **Q Does this mean the Policy Development Panel (PDP) was biased towards two-tier education?**

A No: in fact, four of the five councillors on the PDP came from three-tier areas. The PDP members represented the political groups across Suffolk (three from the Conservative Group and one each from the Labour and Liberal Democrat Groups), and not just their individual constituencies, taking into account the views of all the councillors in their groups. In addition, representatives from the Church of England and Roman Catholic Dioceses (both of whom help maintain schools in Suffolk), and the Learning and Skills Council (which has statutory responsibility for funding all post-16 education) were on the PDP.

Response: The councillors may not have been biased towards two-tier education by geographical proximity to it, but none of them (to my knowledge) has any experience of working within education at any level involving direct contact with children. This in itself leaves them open to ‘guidance’ from others who may well have been biased in favour of two-tier systems. With no personal knowledge available to offset this ‘guidance’, coupled with the knowledge that two-tier education is more common nationally, it is not surprising that this conclusion has been reached.



- **Q Why was the Policy Development Panel (PDP) led by councillors? Why not someone independent?**

A Suffolk County Council's Administration (the political group in charge) has long-term responsibility for children's learning in Suffolk, with special responsibility for thinking ahead about the county's needs to ensure future prosperity. An independent consultant with extensive experience of Local Authorities - both from within and as an adviser - was commissioned to lead the process of gathering evidence for the PDP.

Response: A truly impartial decision cannot be reached by the organisation who will be responsible for implementing any changes (and who will benefit financially from any monies raised as a result).

Changes on this scale not only guarantee jobs within the Authority's Administration Department for years to come, but will probably result in additional staff being required. Sales of current School Grounds for housing/industrial developments as a result of closures will also make vast sums of money for the Authority.

With these kinds of possible inducements for change, a totally independent enquiry should have been the only ethically and morally acceptable choice.

- **Q Is change a foregone conclusion?**

A The review process has been open and honest. The panel's role was to look at all the evidence and research and consider the views of all stakeholders (including schools, governors, parents and children and young people), and decide whether to recommend change.



Response: As has already been noted above, the distribution and wording of the consultation documents has prevented the views of parents from being obtained in a meaningful manner.

Children were invited to the initial meetings across the county, but holding them out of school time and with only a miniscule number of children being realistically able to access them is hardly allowing a representative sample of children's views to be obtained.

Since publication of the proposals, children's groups such as School Councils have been discouraged and in some cases virtually banned from discussing the current situation through pressure being put upon staff (and Headteachers in particular).

Recent 'guidance' to Headteachers informing them of the need for them to remain impartial and not publicly express their views on the proposals is also not in keeping with the usual idea of an 'open and honest' process.

• **Q Isn't this just about the abolition of three-tier provision?**

A No. It's about a number of issues, including:

- pupil performance at all Key Stages
- increased choice of opportunities for 14-19 year olds
- population changes in Suffolk,
- the demand for early years and nursery provision,
- the need to provide for our most vulnerable children
- making the best possible use of the capital funds that might become available through the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme.

It is important to consider every aspect of our education system to deliver the best package of education for our children in the long term. Any changes would take a long time to implement, and we would fully support schools involved to help them provide as high a quality of education for their young people as possible.



Response: The recent DfES announcement regarding year-on-year testing and centralised reporting of results will ensure that schools are accountable for progress made by pupils each year, not just at the end of Key Stages. The transition points between schools therefore become irrelevant from the accountability point of view.

Changes to the population in Suffolk require flexibility and smaller, more local schools will always be able to adapt more quickly than large centralised ones.

Our ‘most vulnerable children’ are exactly the ones who are most at risk from the current proposals. Middle Schools have an excellent record for pastoral care and liaison with other agencies. It has also been statistically proven that children with Special Educational Needs make better progress under three-tier systems than under two-tier ones.

Since Middle Schools are deemed ‘Secondary’ by National Government, the amount of funding available through the BSF programme is unaffected by their existence. Upper Schools are also entitled to receive this funding.

What is affected is the amount of this funding that will be wasted in demolishing perfectly good schools and building extensions to others. If all of the money were put into improving the existing building stock then there are massive opportunities for improving the environment in which our children will learn.

In addition to this, the stated issues:

- increased choice of opportunities for 14-19 year olds
- the demand for early years and nursery provision,

are not even dealt with by this Review.



- **Q If this isn't all about middle schools, why is the review considering the future of the county's mixed two- and three-tier pattern of schools?**

A Outside the family, schools play the central role in the lives of children and young people. Therefore, all schools - primary, special, upper and high schools as well as middle schools - are at the heart of this review, and we need to ensure that every school can meet our children's needs. The data collected highlights some important differences between the two - and three - tier systems that cannot be ignored.

Response: The county of Suffolk is one of great diversity, and structures that may be suitable for urban areas, such as Ipswich are not necessarily suitable for the more remote rural areas. The schooling system was set up with a 'mixed economy' for exactly this reason and there has been no fundamental change to the population distribution or other local factors that undermines that decision. In addition, the recently announcement, regarding the collection of progress data on a yearly basis from all schools, means that underperformance at any level is easily identifiable and directly attributable to individual schools, regardless of transition points.

- **Q Does this mean that middle schools are failing?**

A No: Middle Schools serve Suffolk's pupils well. We need to build on their achievements and ensure everyone is confident our school system will best serve the next few generations of children and young people. We will be supporting schools throughout the review process to ensure they are making the most of the educational opportunities for their pupils.

Response: Middle Schools are at the heart of many local communities across Suffolk and provide opportunities to pupils that are not available under a two-tier system:

- Middle schools offer specialised education and support for the crucial middle years
- Strong middle school ethos and opportunities for creative activities and public performance helps our children to thrive rapidly and gain confidence
- Children feel safe and secure because it is a gradual development in their education
- Schools work together in pyramids to plan the curriculum and to share information



- **Access to specialist staff and facilities begins at the age of 9 – 2 years earlier than in the 2 tier system**

All schools constantly strive to improve and it has been shown that there is no significant difference in rates of improvement within 2 tier and 3 tier areas. There can therefore be no possible justification for the upheaval and expense of changing the structure, if Middle Schools are currently “serving their pupils well”. You don’t build on the achievements of Middle Schools by closing them down and fragmenting the staff and ethos that enabled these achievements to occur.

- **Q Don’t Middle Schools provide a unique environment in which young people can develop their social skills?**
A The Policy Development Panel (PDP) recognised the good work that Middle Schools do in this area. However, there is also good pastoral care in two-tier schools. We would make sure that the good work of our Middle Schools was not be lost in any reorganisation.

Response: The Authority 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.

- **Q Middle schools provide a steady transition between the smaller primary schools and the larger secondary schools. Is a move to Secondary School too early at age 11?**
A Secondary Schools in Suffolk are led by talented and committed head teachers, experienced in building a welcoming and supportive atmosphere for newly-arrived Year 7 pupils. Two-tier schools are the norm in most areas of the country and provide a successful and enjoyable experience for the majority of pupils.



Response

In the current social climate, mixing 11 year olds and 18 year olds in the same school is indisputably exposing the younger children to more risk (e.g. through bullying, drugs, etc.). Middle Schools provide a buffer against this kind of peer pressure during the all important years of puberty and all its associated difficulties. The single biggest fear identified by current Middle School pupils, of starting Secondary School at the age of 11, is bullying.

- **Q Will this not signal the closure of many small primary village schools?**

A Small schools are valued, and this review may help to make them more sustainable. One of the Panel's recommendations is to ensure that village primary schools are retained.

Response: Small schools may be valued, but where they 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'.

- **Q If Middle Schools do close, what will happen to staff?**

A We will still need teachers and support staff to support the same overall number of pupils in Suffolk, whatever the structure of our schools. And wherever possible, we hope that staff will follow pupils to their new school. If the decision goes ahead to close specific Middle Schools, staff working in those schools would be redeployed wherever possible to suitable alternative employment in other maintained schools in Suffolk. We would work with schools and unions to agree on the most effective way of redeploying those staff.

Response: 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.



- **Q Won't all our best teachers leave while this review is happening? Surely any changes would make it difficult to recruit good teachers?**
A We will still need teachers and head teachers, especially our very best ones. Many of our teachers will retire over the next few years, creating lots of opportunities for current teachers. We will make sure proper training is available to staff should they need it.

Response: See previous response.

- **Q If the minimum size of sixth form is 200, does that mean our sixth form will close because it has less than 200 pupils?**
A Not necessarily. The Policy Development Panel (PDP) found that Sixth Forms with more than 200 students were generally more successful in providing opportunities for young people and achieving high standards. If the recommendations for change are accepted, when we review provision in each area, we will look at Sixth Form provision to ensure that it can provide the best education for students in the long term. This might see Sixth Forms working together formally in partnership.

Response: The only way to produce Sixth Forms of 200+ in some parts of the County would be to remove them from a number of existing schools and create dedicated Sixth Form Colleges in 'nearby' towns. This would, in effect, create another three-tier system! The recent discussion about raising the school leaving age to 18 would also have a major impact on 14-19 provision that has been completely ignored by this Review.

- **Q How much has the Review cost to date?**
A To date, the review has cost about £240,000. This includes the cost of expert research, printing, publicity materials, advertising and staff time.

Response: £240,000 is the tip of the iceberg as far as the total cost of these proposals is concerned. However, if invested into the current education system it would have had significant benefits for today's children.

- **Q How much will all the changes cost and how will they be funded ?**
A This is currently being assessed but we can be confident that we can meet costs through savings that would come from changing the system. Any savings - currently estimated at £4.4 million a year - would in due course be reinvested into schools.



Response: A typical large Middle School has an annual budget of approaching £1.5 million. A saving of £4.4 million a year is therefore hardly significant in the context of 40 Middle Schools across Suffolk. The most recent estimate of the total cost of change (excluding Building Works) is £23 million and based on the experience of other authorities this is a gross underestimate. The figures speak for themselves!

- **Q Isn't the review being carried out simply because the Government is holding out a big pot of money (Building Schools for the Future (BSF)) which is available only for secondary schools?**

A Planning ahead for the schools building stock that will best serve future generations of pupils is good governance. The extra BSF funding is a bonus that we must make best use of.

Response: See earlier response. Middle Schools are deemed 'Secondary' by National Government and are therefore just as entitled to BSF funding as two-tier Secondary Schools. Three-tier Upper Schools are also entitled to the money.

What is affected is the amount of this funding that will be wasted in demolishing perfectly good schools and building extensions to others. If all of the money were put into improving the existing building stock then there are massive opportunities for improving the environment in which our children will learn.

- **Q This is unsettling all the Middle Schools in Suffolk. Can't you just get it over with quickly so that we can all get on as normal?**

A The review is about the long-term future of education in Suffolk and we owe it to future children and parents to be thorough; the long-term effects of rushing the review could be damaging. Suffolk is a large county with over 350 schools. This sheer size means we will need to carry out any second stage of the review in three phases (starting in Summer 2007, Summer 2008 and Summer 2009 respectively).



Response: The effects of this review are already being felt in all three-tier schools, not just Middle Schools. Staff are already considering their options and in many cases actively seeking alternative employment in neighbouring counties. If this is allowed to continue, the quality and quantity of staff available to Headteachers to fill vacancies will decline sharply. Staff morale is also at an all-time low.

This proposal is certainly a long-term one considering the amount of building work that will be required before there is even the possibility of beginning to move children into different schools. Much of this building work cannot happen without BSF funding and that is not scheduled to be available to parts of Suffolk until 2015-2018! By that time, the education of several generations of Suffolk children will have been seriously damaged by a lack of suitably qualified and motivated staff. This is in stark contrast to the situation before this review was announced and Middle Schools, in particular, were perceived to have a reasonably secure future. In the interim period, split-site or federated schools will cause major problems with leadership and management at all levels.

- **Q When will we see the first signs of any change?**

A The Policy Development Panel (PDP) will present its recommendations to Suffolk County Council's Cabinet on 16 January 2007 and to Full Council on 22 March 2007. Proposals for general change would be unlikely to be implemented before September 2008, although there might be the opportunity to follow up some specific local issues earlier. Substantial change would be implemented over a number of years so we could carefully plan and manage the impact on pupils and school staff.

Response: See previous response.

- **Q How long will the whole review take?**

A It would take about a year to consult each of the three areas of the county, and then another two years before the first changes would take place. Phasing the review in this way would make sure we link with the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) Programme, which will cover the whole county and take place over the next 12 years or so.

Response: See previous response.



- **Q Why haven't you said which areas of the County will be reviewed first?**

A We are working on some proposals for councillors to consider, and will consult with schools on which areas to look at first in the period between Cabinet on 16 January 2007 and Full Council on 22 March 2007.

Response: This information is already in the Public Domain without any consideration for the welfare of affected staff, pupils or parents. There has been no consultation with schools prior to the following information becoming widely available:

“Change would occur in 3 stages: Lowestoft, Beccles, Bungay first, followed by Haverhill and Newmarket, then Stowmarket, Sudbury and Bury areas. Each stage would begin only a year after the previous one - starting in Summer 2007.”

- **Q If an area opposes change, will it be possible to reject the recommendations and retain the school system?**

A No. If the Policy Development Panel's (PDP's) recommendations are accepted, these principles will guide the future pattern of our schools. One particular principle is the single line of accountability for Key Stages: at the moment, Key Stages 2 and 3 are split between three schools in the three-tier areas.

Response: This principle has now largely become irrelevant following the recent DfES announcement regarding year-on-year testing and centralised reporting of results. This will ensure that schools are accountable for progress made by pupils each year, not just at the end of Key Stages. The transition points between schools therefore becomes of much less importance from the accountability point of view.

As can be seen from the above responses, there are serious inconsistencies in the Council's replies to very valid questions. The whole review process is clearly flawed and is therefore not a mandate to proceed with the proposed changes.