COSLA Response to Petitions PE 945 and PE 955

COSLA is acutely aware of the need for appropriate parental involvement in a whole range of education matters, and very specifically on issues relating to the possible closure of a school.

Councils have a statutory duty to make adequate and efficient provision of school education across their entire area far beyond the current school population and pattern of demand. This means ensuring that their schools are the best possible places to learn in an ever-changing landscape, and involves assessing the suitability of some schools in order to take difficult decisions on their long-term future. Councils need to meet these challenges within finite resources, and must use the resources available in a way that provides best value, whilst also providing the optimum educational benefits.

The nature of education is constantly changing in line with 21st century cultural and societal changes meaning that councils need to consider whether school facilities are positive learning and teaching environments. School estates are diverse within and across both urban and rural councils, with schools varying in age, type, condition, and suitability of location. Councils also need to keep the suitability and condition of their school estate under constant review to ensure that school buildings are appropriate to respond to both national curricula and local curricular variations. Furthermore, demographic or transport changes can result in the need for more or less school buildings with changing populations and settlement patterns.

We are keen to stress that councils take all decisions on school closure very seriously, and base their considerations on many factors, including consultation with parents. COSLA has recently worked with councils to explore the process of managing school estates, including school closure decisions. It was evident from this work that councils are well aware of the need to involve parents at appropriate stages during the decisions making process.

We strongly believe that current legislation is appropriate in requiring consultation with parents, and that over-prescription will add unnecessary delays to the decision-making process. Furthermore it will interfere with a council’s ability to make decisions locally that are appropriate for the local circumstances.

We understand that those affected by the closure of a particular school are likely to be concerned or even angry. However, the suggestions set out in the petitions PE945 and PE955 of individualising the consultation with parents and personalising the process are impractical. These steps would simply add further delays to the decision-making process. We stress again the importance of the educational benefits of all decisions taken by councils around their school estates management. The status quo is simply not sustainable indefinitely, and difficult decisions need to be taken to ensure that finite resources provide the best education for all across an area.

In conclusion, we do not believe there is merit in making any changes to the existing legislation. Councils are already required to undertake consultation and, in our view, go over and above their minimum requirements simply because they recognise the importance of involving parents. It is also our view that the evidence submitted in the evidence is largely influenced by the emotional attachment that the petitioners have to the specific schools concerned. Whilst we sympathise with their views, we do not believe that the councils concerned would have come to different decisions with changed legislation, and have made their decisions based on sound information that will lead to better overall educational benefits in their respective geographic areas of responsibility.