

On the 15th of March a proposal came to Cabinet regarding Rhiw-Syr-Dafydd school. It was reported that there was a shortfall of money available to build the new school. Originally the new school was costed at £2.2 million but has now been revised and will cost £3.2 million. This represents an increase of over £1 million (50%).

The reason given for this overspend was that there had been an increase in building costs of 20-25% over the last 12 months. The remainder of this overspend was attributed to the need to replace the existing changing rooms and realign the two pitches, costs that the Local Authority say had not been originally envisaged. In order to alleviate the overspend CCBC could sell off the present school site with an estimated return of £500,000. The Education Directorate have stated that they would have no need for the site once the new school had been completed.

The Councillors asked the Cabinet to re-look at the proposal for a number of reasons. First the Partnership had not been consulted which contradicted the Partnership Agreement signed by Malgwyn Davies and members of the Local Authority. The Partnership Agreement was adopted so that there would be free and open discussion on all issues relating to the local area between all parties. Cllr Pritchard therefore objected on these grounds.

There had also been complications relating to the housing developments (Persimmon and Redrow) at the top. They had originally agreed to pay CCBC to connect into their services, the proceeds from which could have gone towards the cost of the new school. However, this was later found to be impossible as any connection fees would have to go back to the Welsh Development Agency not CCBC. Cllr Pritchard is now taking this up.

Granville then contacted the Chair of the Education Committee at CCBC in order that the Partnership's views could be taken into account. He also spoke to Cllr. Hardacre, who assured him that their opinions would be taken forward and discussed. However, when the decision was made at Cabinet no mention was made of the Partnership's feelings.

Cllr. Pritchard has suggested to CCBC that the school could be used as a community facility e.g. for use by the various groups in the area such as the guides, scouts, youth club etc. At present the Community Centre lacks adequate storage space which prohibits other groups from using the building. Unfortunately, the Cabinet still went along with the official's decisions.

However, the Partnership then heard that the scheme would be brought back before the scrutiny committee for re-consideration. This took place on Monday afternoon (4th of April). Granville and Roger both went along to represent the Partnership and put forward the Partnership's concerns. They also spoke to Cllr. Tudor Davies (Cabinet member for Regeneration) and Tim Peppin about the importance of the Partnership Agreement and how the Partnership's views had not been included in the discussions.

Roger presented to the committee the Partnership's disappointment that proper Partnership working had not been adhered to and the importance of the Partnership's voice being heard. The Oakdale and Penmaen Partnership meet monthly and have a regular attendance of 30 people and various very active subgroups so should not be overlooked. Roger also asked for the opportunity to put forward alternative uses for the school site.

Some research has also been carried out by the Partnership into the claims made by CCBC that the building costs had risen by 20 to 25% over the last year. Using the same sources as used by the Local Authority it was found that in fact they had only risen by 4.5%. The other claim that the costs of replacing the changing rooms and carrying out the pitch improvements had been unforeseen has also been questioned. This must have been anticipated when drawing up the original plans and costings.

The Cabinet have agreed to re-look at the site next Tuesday where they have asked that the Partnership present a firm proposal of what their intentions are with the building. Any presentation would therefore need to be with CCBC by the weekend, Monday at the latest. This gives the Partnership very little time to prepare a case for community use of the school. Granville has therefore spoken to CCBC to say that this is unfair and gives the Partnership insufficient time. It is hoped therefore that an outline proposal can be presented to the Cabinet following which an extension may be granted in order to have the time necessary to draw up a detailed scheme. Granville has spoken to Jonathon Jones, the scrutiny committee organiser who guided them through the meeting to try and grant this extra time. He is due to come back to Granville today or tomorrow.

The Partnership members present were in full agreement of the actions taken by the committee so far.

Many members could not understand how the original costs could be so far short of the revised costs. Other schools had cost over £2.2 million 3 years ago so the original costs were always going to come short.

Plans for the new school have been presented to the governors at Rhiw-Syr-Dafydd and were available for the general public to view at the end of last term.

Money obtained through planning gain was also mentioned as a possibility of extra funding but unfortunately there has been very little planning gain with the housing developments. Much of it has been used on road improvements and access etc. Redrow and Persimmon cannot be forced to pay money to CCBC for the building works carried out at the site.

Ideas for community use of the school were requested from those present. Various suggestions were made including a centre for health and wellbeing, youth activities, arts workshops etc

Tina explained that any proposal must not duplicate facilities already in the area. Any project must be able to evidence the need for the project, must have identified funding and must be proven to be sustainable in the long term (in terms of staffing, volunteers, running costs etc).

The Partnership must look at the objectives contained within the Community Strategy and find out what it is aiming to deliver in the County Borough. If the proposal can meet both a need identified in the Strategy whilst at the same time meeting the needs of the local community the project will have a far better chance of succeeding. It may also be a good idea to get a number of other Partnerships on board, for example the Partnership has already worked very successfully with the Trinant Partnership. Economic issues and job creation are very important issues for the County Borough and therefore try and link any proposal with this.

The building could also be partly hired out to local businesses for office space, which would help with meeting the running costs and aid long term sustainability. This could also mean that other parts of the building could be devoted to community activities, classes etc.

The Partnership does need to bear in mind that it is not a deprived ward and therefore where others (e.g. New Tredegar) have had success in securing funding for major community initiatives it will always be that much harder in Oakdale.

Contact has been made with Lanfarnam Grange regarding the school site as they are looking for premises for art workshops. However, in order for any arts project to be successful would require the backing of CCBC and therefore must fit in with its Arts Strategy. The Arts Strategy has recently been completed and has identified Bedwas as the location for an arts centre. The area also has Blackwood Miners Institute.

There are several avenues that can therefore be explored but the Partnership need to be granted this extra time to develop a firm proposal. With the growth in new housing in Oakdale there will be the need for new facilities.

The Partnership would like to thank Cllr. Pritchard for all his hard work in having the issue called back before cabinet.

Oakdale and Penmaen Community Partnership

www.oakdalevillage.net

Chairman: Roger Evans
Treasurer: Paul Taylor

Secretary: Granville Hale
Vice Chair: Robert Onions

M.G.
R.H.
B.H.A.

Mr Granville Hale
34 Waungoch Road
Oakdale
Blackwood
NP12 0LL
(01495) 225785

11th April, 2005

Councillor David Hardacre
Cabinet Office
Ystrad Mynach

Dear Cllr. David Hardacre

Re: Rhiw-Syr-Dafydd School

We are writing on behalf of the above Partnership, following the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee meeting on Monday 4th April and outcome relating to the Rhiw-Syr-Dafydd School. Owing to the short space of time to prepare a detailed plan, as to our vision and practical application, we would ask Cabinet to consider our first stage strategy at the meeting in two weeks time, with a view of presenting a fuller more robust report and action plan about six weeks after that.

As very active volunteers to develop projects and initiatives for our local community we are working for a well planned innovative and creative approach to regeneration and community development.

We have no doubt that the Rhiw-Syr-Dafydd School forms part of that plan.

Yours sincerely,



Granville Hale
Secretary, Oakdale and Penmaen Community Partnership