



Lowbrook Academy Extraordinary Meeting Minutes

Wednesday 22nd March at 6pm at Lowbrook Academy

Present: Dave Rooney (DR), Dominique Du Pre (DdP), Bianca Iasi (BI), Paul Harrison (PH), Guy Van Der Knaap (GK), Christine Sherwood Phelps (CS), James Spiteri (JS), Mary Gallop (MG), Pauline Reid (PR)

Visitors: Cllr Simon Dudley, RBWM (SD)

Clerk: Kate Bailey (KB)

Item		Action
1.	Apologies for Absence	
	There were no apologies.	
2.	Notification of Any Other Business (AOB)	
	There was no other business to discuss.	
3.	Lowbrook Expansion Project 2017-18	
	<p>DdP opened the meeting by thanking SD for attending and then stating how shocked she had been by the content of the Council paper entitled “Additional Capital for Lowbrook Academy” which had been received by the school on Thursday 16th March. DdP referred back to meeting with SD in December 2016 when the governors had been reassured by him that RBWM was happy with the expansion plans for the school and the shortfall in funding, which had been discussed previously with Kevin McDaniel. DdP expressed her disbelief at the change in direction from RBWM.</p> <p>SD replied that he had only been give outline detail on the scheme but that he felt that the increase in funding needed was a significant incremental figure which had been identified but not approved and therefore the paper had been produced by officers, and the Lead Member for Education, and circulated to Councilors for their review ahead of a vote. SD explained that he had received the paper and had asked Alison Alexander if it was true and accurate and she had replied that it was. SD explained that he had looked at the report and at the school’s correspondence and could see that they were diametrically opposed. He went on to explain that it had been decided that the matter would be put to a free, or conscience, vote as school funding was a very contentious issue with a lot of opposition. SD advised that if the matter went to a full Council vote then it ran the risk of being turned down due to the opposition particularly as the Council paper had made it look like a re-trade. DdP replied that she took issue with this, “taking it at face value”, as the scheme had been progressed with RBWM from day 1. SD then asked if the governors wanted him to launch a full investigation into the matter. DdP replied</p>	

that the governors did not want an investigation they just wanted to be able to serve their local community by taking in their catchment children. SD replied that he understood the governors' position and frustration. JS introduced himself to SD and explained that he had joined the governing body as a chartered architect in order to monitor and assist with the project. He reiterated that it was clear from the outset of the project that £1.6 million was never going to be enough and that the school would never have progressed the scheme so far if they did not believe that further funding was available from RBWM. SD replied that he wanted to try and facilitate the expansion but in a different way and then outlined a potential solution to the governors which was as follows: -

- To increase the remaining RBWM contingency from £50k to £100K
- To add this to the school's contingency of £50k giving a total of £150k.
- To provide an interest free loan on the remaining shortfall which was then likely to be in the region of £600k.

This loan would be given to the Trust over a 25 year period and would be payable in 25 equal installments from the school's surplus. A waiver would be written in to the loan that payments could be deferred if the school had no surplus and that the loan would not be enforceable if payments were not made. GK asked SD if he thought that the EFA would give permission for the school to take the loan and SD replied that he thought that it would because the loan was between RBWM and the Trust and because it was not enforceable. GK confirmed that the school had run the numbers on this loan and PR confirmed that taking into account a loan of £750K once repayments and all other costs had been accounted for it would leave the school £300/month to spend on 30 children's education. SD replied that he did not know the school's current financial position. PR replied that the school currently had a surplus of £172k but that £50k of this was already committed to the expansion project with the remaining funds committed to the fit out of the classrooms and the shortfall in funding for three years of expansion. DR explained that the school's accountants McIntyre Hudson had advised against the whole scheme given the school's current financial position. JS confirmed this by saying that the governing body would find it hard to put the school in this position. SD replied by saying that his officers had advised him that the school could be expanded for £1.6million and that would be the Council's position. JS replied that you probably could expand the school for this budget but only with half a dozen portacabins which is not a sustainable model for an outstanding school. DR added that not having a hall would be a significant disadvantage to the education of the children and was therefore non-negotiable for the governing body. SD replied that schools were facing these issues all around the Borough. DR then asked SD why, when discussions had been taking place in partnership with RBWM for one year, this was being re-visited now. SD re-iterated that this is a very contentious issue and likely to cause a political storm as all schools were crying out for money and that giving the school an additional £750k would not be seen as a win for RBWM. DR confirmed that the school was not in a position to take out a loan and asked SD whether he had been successful in obtaining funding from Spoore, Merry and Rixman for Holyport College. SD confirmed that he had not been successful in this. DR then asked SD what other options the school might have as they felt that they were letting their community down. SD replied that the loan would be as cheap as the school could get as it would be zero interest and deferred if no surplus. SD then commented that if the loan was not affordable for the school then it would

<p>have to consider reducing the scale of the project. GK replied that the governors appreciated the loan but that it would place a massive burden on the school and asked if there was a possibility that the school could take out a smaller loan with a smaller top up in funding coming directly to the school. SD asked if the governors had a loan amount that they felt comfortable with as the gap was too big a quantum at the moment. DR replied that this was something that the governors would have to consider and asked SD what the process would be following the meeting. SD replied that they would need an answer from the school by the 9th April for the final allocation of places. DR reminded SD that even if an agreement could be reached the milestone date for the project had now passed and asked for a commitment from RBWM that they would assist with the accommodation for children in September 2018 when the building was not finished. SD confirmed he felt that an agreement with Cox Green seemed like the most sensible option for this. DR then asked what would be the outcome if the school turned down the loan. SD replied that RBWM would say that the scheme was too much money and would allocate the children elsewhere. DR asked about the possibility of joint PR as he said that the school did not want to have a public battle with RBWM. SD then talked about the emerging Borough plan and the need for more primary school places in the future and indicated that he thought that Lowbrook might have a big part to play in this plan and that this current expansion plan was only a 'halfway house' to what could be achieved in the future. DR replied that by taking on a loan the governors would be diminishing the school's chances of creating or joining a MAT in the future. SD replied that it may be possible to write a clause in to the loan that it could be re-assessed if the school wished to form or join a MAT. JS replied that he felt that it would have to be a fairly robust document to cover that level of loan over that period of time.</p> <p>GK then asked whether, given the tight timescales involved, that governors could have a template of this loan agreement to review as they could not be in a position to agree to anything if they did not have all of the information to hand. SD replied that he would be able to get the loan drawn up if the school would be prepared to look at the numbers involved.</p> <p>Cllr Dudley left the meeting at 7.15pm</p> <p>The governors then discussed the offer of a loan made by Cllr Dudley in order to decide whether this was an offer that the school was in a position to accept.</p> <p>CS then left the meeting at 7.45pm.</p> <p>The governors finally agreed that PR would carry out a review of the school's finances with a view to GK having another meeting with Cllr Dudley to explore further the possibility of some middle ground between the two parties. However, the general consensus amongst the governors at this stage was that the school was not in a position to take on borrowing of any amount nor did the governors want to reduce the size of the scheme or value engineer it in any way.</p> <p>It was agreed that DR would continue to work on the school's exit strategy, PR would work on the budget figures, particularly focusing on the next three years of expansion and GK would set up another meeting with SD to discuss the matter further.</p>	<p>DR</p> <p>PR</p> <p>GK</p>
<p>The meeting closed at 8.00pm</p>	

Signed.....Dominique Du Pre (Chair)