

Debbie and I moved to Buckden in 2001, along with our two children Dominic, then aged 6 and Stephanie, 3. We were fortunate in that we could have moved pretty much anywhere in the Country but we chose Upper Wharfedale, and Buckden in particular, because of the very strong sense of community, built around traditional institutions such as Kettlewell Primary School. Many families, it now transpires, came before us and I know many have followed, keeping the Dale alive.

**To be blunt, on December 3, that will end – yes, in three weeks or so.**

Why? - Because Caroline Bird, as the un-elected Assistant Director of Strategic Services Group for Children and Young People’s Services, North Yorkshire, has decided it will and will advise the elected members of the Education Committee accordingly.

An Exaggeration? – Not to anyone who attended the public ‘consultation’ at Kettlewell Village Hall last night and watched a visibly bored Ms. Bird reject submission after submission to retain the school or even to extend the three-week ‘consultation’ period. The decision has been made – ‘consultation’ over.

On What Basis? – Cost, falling numbers, pupil development and staff recruitment.

On the face of it very valid reasons, except that the actual facts tell a different story.

At this point I should hold my hand up. I was a Governor at Kettlewell School and on the Finance Committee from 2002 to July 2009, and as such had exposure to North Yorkshire Children and Young People’s Services, it’s Corporate Director, Cynthia Wellbourne and some of the Officers. I am not a big fan.

*Cost and Falling Numbers.* Put simply, a school budget is dependent on the number of pupils in the school. Any school which falls below a certain number of pupils is deemed un-viable both in terms of cost and, more importantly, pupil development. Such a school faces the prospect of possible (but not definite) closure. In 2002 the critical figure was 19 but by 2009 this had crept up to 23 pupils.

Each May the Finance Committee at Kettlewell School produced 3-year projected pupil numbers, and although at times pessimistic, they were always, without exception, bettered as the result of new arrivals (natural or otherwise!).

Year	3 yr Project.n	Mid- Revision	Actual	+/-
Sept. 2002	26			
Sept. 2003	24			
Sept. 2004	25	31	31	3%
Sept. 2005	22	26	26	4%
Sept. 2006	19	23	25	32%
Sept. 2007	15	28	32	113%
Sept. 2008	29	32	33	14%
Sept. 2009	24	29	29	21%
Sept. 2010	20	24	30	50%
Sept. 2011	17	27		
Sept. 2012		25		

These Reports and all Committee and Sub-committee Minutes and Reports have to be retained on school premises and Audited, by County, from time to time. They are well known and were also

constantly referred to by County during protracted Confederation discussions between 2002 and 2009. The projections DO NOT make any provision for gains as the result of the closure of say Arncliffe or the rapid expansion of the Scargill Community.

The submission on pupil numbers and the possibility of increasing school was however rejected by Ms. Bird last night as irrelevant. The overall trend is clearly down, the decision has been made – ‘consultation’ over.

But if this is the case now, with 30 pupils on roll, why was it not the case 2, 3 or 4 years ago, when County Officials, Arncliffe Staff and Governors together with Kettlewell Staff and Governors were going through time consuming and very expensive Confederation negotiation?

We were also told last night that the average cost per child was as follows;

Grassington	4208
Kettlewell	5262
Threshfield	3202
County Average	3342

and that by closing Kettlewell School savings of £51,000 could be made. When pressed regarding additional costs such as transport associated with this, the meeting was advised (to much sarcastic laughter) that these costs came from a separate budget and were not part of the figures. Decision made – ‘consultation’ over.

The suggestion was made to extend the consultation period, giving time to look at the true overall cost, including the environmental impact of the proposals on the National Park. Rejected the decision has been made – ‘consultation’ over.

Susan Beazley kept pressing for a commitment to look at the whole cost of education as part of a joined up strategy to get the true cost but this was ignored – more than once.

The Education Authorities proposal? Bus children, some as young as 4 years old, a minimum 34 miles along mostly single track roads, every day, in all weathers and in areas not covered by mobile ‘phone coverage. It was generally accepted that those same 4 year old children would be on the bus at 7.00am, returning home at around 5.00pm (assuming no afternoon clubs, sports events or other after school activities). A longer day than the Officers making the proposal!

Bill Wilkinson, who ran the school bus service for 30 years, pointed out that the figures put forward by County for transportation of some £22,000 were wholly unrealistic and would be ‘at least double that figure’. Again, this was rejected the decision has been made – ‘consultation’ over.

The suggestion was made to extend the consultation period, giving time to look at other proposals, including possibly satellite schools, remote learning . . . anything to retain high standards at reasonable cost. Again, rejected the decision has been made – ‘consultation’ over.

Pupil development and their well-being should, of course be paramount in this and there have been three Ofsted inspections at Kettlewell Primary School since 2001,

15.01.01 – (31 pupils) “ . . . . reflected in rising standards . . . . The school is well placed to build on its strengths and improve”

16.11.05 – (28 pupils) Overall, Grade 2, Good. “ . . . . The school’s capacity to improve is good. It provides good value for money”

08.10.08 – (29 pupils) Overall, Grade 1, Outstanding. “. . . The school’s track record of high standards and continual improvement demonstrate its outstanding capacity to continue to improve in the future”

Although acknowledged by Ms. Bird that Kettlewell School was ‘a jewel’ the relevance was rejected, in effect the decision has been made – ‘consultation’ over.

Above I touched on Confederation. For those who have not come across the term before it’s an agreement entered into between two or more schools to share resources (usually a Head Teacher and key staff) as a way of maximising those resources while reducing cost. A Confederation can only take place with the full agreement of all parties but primarily the County Council. Confederation is also seen, by prudent Governing bodies of small schools, as an effective way of avoiding the threat of possible staff shortages or closure.

Suggestions for a possible confederation started in 2002 and negotiations concluded in 2009. The successful integration process has been costly (both in personal time and money) but will now be thrown away.

*Staff Recruitment.* My personal frustration at the un-professional way in which the Officers of the Children and Young People’s Services go about the mis-management of our school is nothing compared to that of some staff. I know that it has cost us all the services of at least one exceptional leader. If we’re not VERY careful it will cost us all much more.

Now we come to the real reason for closure.

Put simply, two schools 1 mile apart, one of them with 2 new classrooms built at a cost of £1m (yes, One Million Pounds for two primary school classrooms!!) that have to be justified. That combined with total mismanagement and a total lack of understanding on the part of highly paid, unaccountable, so-called professionals will result in the closure of Kettlewell plus up to 4 other small schools in the immediate area.

What can I do? – Peter Yorkstone, as Vicar for the three Parishes affected by the proposals pointed out that we had been asked by Ms. Bird to write in with any observations, suggestions or objections but without details of who to write to. Unfortunately, each County representative present, including Ms. Bird, managed to avoid giving a direct answer.

The ‘consultation’ period is due to end on December 3, 2010.

For my part I have asked for advice on whether it is possible to table a vote of no confidence in the Corporate Director, Children and Young People’s Services, North Yorkshire County Council, and the Officers. I will also be sending slightly revised versions of this letter to;

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. . . . . but any other suggestions are very welcome!