

MEDIA RELEASE

Oldham Council will Decide the Location of the New Saddleworth School

Leading Saddleworth Independent Councillors and Saddleworth School campaigners travelled to Coventry last Thursday to present a petition to the Education Funding Agency (EFA) urging the Agency to build the New Saddleworth Secondary School in Uppermill rather than Diggle. The EFA are currently assessing four sites as options for the location of the new school. The petition, signed by over 3,000 Saddleworth residents and other concerned parties was handed to Mr Mike Green, Education Funding Agency (EFA), Director of Capital, at the Agencies offices in Coventry. A forty five minute meeting followed with Mr Green in which he explained the EFAs position and the present state of the feasibility study.

The Group were surprised to learn that, contrary to impressions given to date, the EFA are only responsible for the feasibility studies, not the final decision on the location of the new school. This is entirely the responsibility of the Local Authority and School Governors. Provided the preferred site is technically feasible and acceptable in cost terms, the EFA will build the school wherever Oldham Council wished.

Contrary to previous statements by Oldham Council and MP, Debbie Abrahams, there is no fixed budget of £17 million for the project, site specific factors will determine the final costs. If these are acceptable for a particular site the EFA will build the school in the location preferred by Oldham Council.

Finally, Mr Green stressed that there was clearly a need for a new school in Saddleworth and the EFA are fully committed to deliver a state of the art school within the existing programme. There is no threat to the project by the present feasibility studies, these are necessary to ensure that planning issues have been properly addressed and that the school build will go ahead smoothly without technical difficulties once a final decision on location is taken.

Cllr Mike Buckley said "Mr Green was very candid with us. He gave us straight answers to all the questions we asked. We were very grateful that he gave us nearly an hour of his time and listened carefully to our concerns. This was in strong contrast to the response we have received to date from Jim McMahon, the Leader of Oldham Council, and MP, Debbie Abrahams. We have still been unable to fix a date with either party to hand over the petition and discuss why they favour the Diggle location over Uppermill."

Cllr Nikki Kirkham, who handed the petition to Mr Green said "Residents and parents have been misled by Oldham Council and the major political parties. They have claimed that the decision on the site rests with the EFA, clearly now this is not the case. Oldham Council will make the final decision. It is a disgrace that there has been no consultation with local people on this decision, that they won't speak to us and that they have tried to deflect responsibility for the decision to the EFA. Jim McMahon should be prepared to meet the people of Saddleworth at a public meeting and justify why he wants the school in Diggle."

Stuart Coleman, who attended representing the Diggle Community Association echoed these concerns "We have invited Cllr Chadderton to our meetings to discuss the school issue but she has declined. Debbie Abrahams, our MP, apparently also does not wish to discuss the issue until a decision has been made. So far Independent Councillors have been unable to secure a date when they can meet with her to discuss the issue and hand over the petition."

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