



Children and Young People's Services

**Proposal to Amalgamate Longmeadow and
Oakland Schools: Consultation Document**

Issued 7 March 2008

Shropshire County Council wishes to hear the views of the community on bringing Oakland and Longmeadow Schools together, and if so what form the proposals should take.

Initial consultation meetings:

Staff 4pm,

Governors 5pm,

Parents and other members of the Oakland School community

6.30pm,

19 March 2008 at the Oakland School.

(Note: there is a meeting for parents and other members of the Longmeadow school community 6.30pm, 20 March 2008 at the Longmeadow School)

Introduction

This Consultation Document sets out proposals for the amalgamation of Oakland and Longmeadow Schools. The consultation document also includes a timetable for the consultation process and details on how to respond to this stage of the process.

This consultation document sets out a selection of basic facts in order to inform the consultation. It is not intended to provide all the possible relevant facts about this proposal and submission of other relevant information is welcomed and encouraged through the consultation process. Officers will help within the law and available resources to find or extract helpful facts or data whether it argues for or against the proposals. Although the information in the document is believed to be correct, any proposed corrections with evidence will be incorporated and acknowledged in the report at the end of the consultation period, and alternative interpretations of data will be reported along with views and opinions.

Consultation is being undertaken whilst the proposals are still at the formative stage. No final decisions have been taken and the options presented in this paper are provided merely as illustrations of solutions to the issues faced by the Council. Other proposed solutions will be given full consideration.

The purpose of consultation is to test the accuracy of the facts, uncover and investigate additional information, and assess the significance of what is brought forward. There is an opportunity to collect the views and opinions of those informed by the debate. A consultation exercise is neither a competition nor a referendum, but is intended to gather evidence to allow decision makers to make a full and informed choice between alternatives.

Proposal to Amalgamate Longmeadow and Oakland Schools

Oakland and Longmeadow Schools serve Bayston Hill, a built-up area of over 2,100 houses, south of Shrewsbury. Both schools teach the whole primary age range of 4-11 years old. Longmeadow has a Local Authority nursery class which is intended to provide services for both schools. Oakland School has links to a private early education and childcare provider on the school site. There are other early years providers in the village. Wrap around care is provided at Oakland School and there are plans to introduce a service at Longmeadow School. Oakland School has hosted a holiday play scheme serving both schools for a number of years. It is proposed to bring the two schools together to create a single school to serve the catchment area. The detail of how this might be accomplished is part of the current consultation process.

Background to the Proposals

Longmeadow School is a Church of England Voluntary Controlled School, which means that the school has a religious character and links with the Church who nominate some of the Governing Body and own the buildings. Oakland is a community school, which means that a greater proportion of the Governing Body is nominated by the Local Authority. Staff at both schools are employed by Shropshire County Council, and admissions to each school are in line with the Council's admissions policy and within the School Admissions Code of Practice.

Longmeadow has 228 pupils in a building with 330 workplaces (although normally there wouldn't be more than 294 pupils admitted). Pupil numbers at Longmeadow are currently forecast to decrease to around 202 by 2012. Oakland has 108 pupils in a school with a maximum capacity of 210 (although one classroom is currently not used by the school). This number is forecast to increase slightly, to about 129 by 2012. The total number of children in both schools is forecast to remain around 330 to 340 over forthcoming years. This is in line with Shropshire County Council's School Organisation Policy on amalgamations which says amalgamated schools should not be forecast to remain above 420 pupils in the medium term.

Both schools are currently judged to be "good" by Shropshire County Council. In September 2007, Longmeadow School was judged by Ofsted to be "a very good school with some outstanding features". In June 2007, Oakland was judged by Ofsted to "provide a good education for its pupils".

The proposal is to bring the two schools together as equals, to create a new school community to serve the catchment area, which is dominated by the large built up area of Bayston Hill Village.

There is no definitive legal process for bringing two schools together in an amalgamation. As well as considering whether the schools should be brought together, the consultation will also explore the best way to make the change. The three technical legal options are:

- Close Oakland School and expand Longmeadow School to take all the pupils;
- Close Longmeadow School and expand Oakland School to take all the pupils;
- Close both schools and open a new school.

In all three cases, the consultation also needs to consider the location of the combined school, whether this is on one of the existing sites or elsewhere. It is proposed that the new school should be able to take up to 420 pupils, in fourteen classes, although the projected numbers suggest there would usually be around 330 pupils in the school. This recognises the possibility of expansion and allows the school to operate two classes in each year group should resources for employing teachers allow.

If the third method was chosen, there would be an opportunity, if there was local support, to change the character of the new school by having a "competition" to find a body to run it. This could be a foundation composed of local parents and/or businesses, a church or other religious body.

Why are we making these proposals?

Shropshire County Council is keen to ensure that there is a sustainable, accessible network of primary school education across the County. Pupil numbers have dropped over recent years and will reduce further in the next few years, so that there will be 3,400 fewer pupils by 2012 compared to 2001. This in turn means that there will be a large number of unfilled places in Shropshire primary schools, up to 5,540 by 2012. Unfilled places mean both a reduction in government grant and an extra cost to the service. If Shropshire County Council does not address this in a planned way, there is a danger that individual schools could fail, affecting the quality of education for all children.

Shropshire County Council has adopted a new Vision for Shropshire Primary Schools of the Future which sets out key characteristics for successful schools. There is also a new Primary School Organisation Policy, which is summarised below. Both these documents are available in full at

<http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/youngpeople.nsf/open/29F4D9462121DA1080257359004A7B35> or through your local school, and were summarised in the leaflet “Shropshire Primary Schools for the Future: Proposed Changes and How They Might Affect You”. The current proposals for school organisation have been developed through implementation of the new policy.

Shropshire Primary School Organisation Policy

The new policy is based on five principles: a sustainable network of primary schools serving communities; high quality, inclusive provision; access from every Shropshire home; opportunities for life-long learning and support for families, and; support for geographically isolated communities.

These principles then give rise to a number of policy statements which say that:

- Shropshire children should have access to a primary school within 6 miles (or 45 minutes travelling time) of their home address in rural areas and 2 miles in urban areas;
- Schools should normally have at least 92 pupils, but where this would mean homes would be more than six miles from a school smaller schools should be supported. The preferred (but not exclusive) sizes of schools are 4 or 7 classes;
- Schools should normally cover the whole primary age range, but separate infant and junior schools are acceptable if an amalgamation would result in too large a school (normally over 420 pupils in the medium term);
- There should be at least maintenance of the proportion of primary school places in schools with a religious character, and existing early years providers should not be replaced wholesale by maintained nurseries. Other commissioning models, such as foundation schools, will be considered;
- Schools should be inclusive of children of all abilities and backgrounds;
- The new network should be developed over time to provide access to other services, including childcare, family support and lifelong learning.

The Review Process

Once the County Council agreed the new policy, officers reviewed every school against the policy criteria. Oakland and Longmeadow schools were identified as serving the same area and that a combined school would be below the maximum size for a school in a built up area. As both schools offer high quality education, it was therefore proposed to consult on bringing the schools together rather than proposing the closure of one or both and the transfer of the pupils to the other. As noted above, the legal route to amalgamation technically does involve closures, but the intention and the feeling of the process is to create a single school which draws from the strengths of each school and feels like an equal partnership.

A combined school would be able to offer improved facilities, a greater range of support staff, and better facilities for pupils with special educational needs. It would also make it easier for the area to cope with changing numbers between the two schools. Pupils will have a larger group of children with similar physical or intellectual development with which to interact, although they will still spend most of their time with their classmates in an inclusive, mixed ability environment.

In advance of the consultation process, some individuals have referred to the fact that Bayston Hill is a village as a significant factor. In fact, the school organisation policy does not mention the word village. The distinction is between rural, that is sparsely populated, and urban, which is a built up area that is not densely populated. Bayston Hill clearly falls in to the latter category. There are less than 100 houses which are not connected to the school site by roads with pavements. Children from all areas of the village already attend each school.

It is true that both Longmeadow and Oakland Schools are included in the Department for Children, Schools and Families' list of rural schools. This refers to the fact that the Secretary of State requires the decision makers (which would be the Cabinet in this situation) to require a higher standard of educational and environmental case before they can approve the proposals. Once more, the Shropshire school organisation policy goes beyond this minimum position, requiring a higher standard of case for all proposals and offering additional protection to schools in sparsely populated areas.

The case regarding the proposal to amalgamate Longmeadow and Oakland schools would be both developed and tested through the consultation process, and Members will consider all relevant information before deciding whether to take the proposals into the next, formal stage.

Community and Environmental Appraisals

Bringing the two schools together will have some positive community effects. Pupils and adults, through extended schools activities, will socialise with peers from a larger and more cohesive community. The Council will be better able to invest in facilities to benefit pupils and in the community of a larger school, which will be known to remain viable for an extended period. However, as at least one of the school sites which will be vacated, there will be some residents who will be concerned about the effect this will have on nearby services and the community.

One of the aims of the consultation is to collect views and information on these concerns so that Members can take decisions on the basis of full information. There might also be some environmental benefits from an amalgamation. Removing at least one of the school sites and building more efficient buildings will save carbon emissions and reduce pollution. Any development of the new school would include increasing the energy efficiency of the buildings. All or almost all of the built up area is within one mile of either of the current sites, so there should be no increase in vehicle use and planning the new school to be pedestrian and cycle friendly could reduce vehicle use from current levels.

What Would The Proposal to Amalgamate Mean For The Staff Of the Schools?

There is no reason why your child shouldn't continue to be taught by the same team of staff before and after the proposed amalgamation, apart from one headteacher. We would expect that, whatever model for change was adopted, the governing body of the primary school would initially employ all the existing staff, with the exception of a headteacher. If the new school was a Foundation or Voluntary Aided school, the employees of the current schools would all become employees of the Governing Body. However, there would be no break in service and no change in conditions of service. If the new school was a Voluntary Controlled or Community School, the staff would be employed by the Council, but would be under the control of the governing body.

Which headteacher became the head of the primary school would depend on whether one school was used as the basis of the new school, in which case the current head of that school would remain the head of the combined primary school. If a new school was formed there would be a selection process to choose the new head. There might also be changes to the administrative and site staff, such as secretaries and caretakers, as the two schools come together. However, this is not always the case, and the final decisions would lie with the Governing Body of the primary school. Shropshire County Council would help the headteacher who was not successful and any staff who might be displaced from their current post to find suitable alternative arrangements. We have always been successful in this in the past. As time goes on, there will inevitably be changes to staffing levels. As these natural changes happen, we will help any displaced staff find a suitable alternative. There will be full consultation with and support for staff before any decisions, and if the decision is to amalgamate on-going support will be put in place.

What About The School Buildings?

The proposal is to create a fourteen class school with a capacity of 420 pupils, but a normal occupancy of around 330 pupils. This would enable the school to have two teaching groups in each year group should resources allow, or should there be a particular large year group. There would also be a need to provide accommodation for the range of nursery, early years, childcare and extended facilities currently at the school and which the new Governing Body might wish to commission or develop. For these reasons, it is proposed that the new school is based at the site occupied by Longmeadow School, but no decisions have been taken. The location of the combined school will form part of the discussions during the consultation, and if the amalgamation is approved, the form of the new buildings will be part of the discussion with the Governing Body which will run the combined school. The decision on the location is also independent of any decision on which of the three routes to amalgamation is used. There is no presumption that if the new school is based on a particular site that it will be in effect a continuation of that school.

If the new school were to be based at the Longmeadow site, it is proposed that the other Council services currently using the site should vacate the site. These might then be based at the Oakland site. This would reduce the carbon emissions savings,

but would mean that the site, including its playing fields, would not be available for disposal or development.

Further Information

Shropshire County Council has dedicated a special section of the Council web site to the Shropshire Primary Schools for the Future school organisation process. This can be accessed from www.shropshire.gov.uk. We will also continue to send information out to and through schools, and through the media. A senior officer and a member of the County Council's Cabinet will visit each affected school to explain the proposals to staff, governors and the local community including parents. For parents of children at Oakland School, this meeting will take place on 19 March 2008.

Making your views known

Shropshire County Council want to hear the views of all interested parties, particularly children, their parents and staff. In addition to feedback at the school specific meetings, you will be able to comment on the website (www.shropshire.gov.uk), by e-mail (schools.consultation@shropshire.gov.uk), letter (to Children and Young People's Services, Shirehall, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, SY2 6ND) or telephone (0845 678 9000).

Shropshire County Council is very keen to hear your views at this formative stage on whether the proposed amalgamation should take place and the reasons for or against, and what method should be used to amalgamate the schools if amalgamation is to take place. In addition, we would be interested to know your views on whether the school should be run by a foundation or as present and whether or not it should have a religious character.

Next Steps

Following the meeting on 19 March, and receipt of views through the consultation process, a report will be presented to Cabinet on 19 May. You will be contacted again through the school when this report is published, explaining what the report's recommendations could mean for your school. If the agreement at that stage is to go forward to the next stage, then there would be a further round of consultation, a further examination of the case to proceed, and if every decision is positive then amalgamation would take place from September 2009.