

Cabinet

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Item**7**

Public

Paper**D****PROPOSAL TO AMALGAMATE BEECH GROVE JUNIOR CE (CONTROLLED) AND OSWESTRY INFANT SCHOOLS – REPORT ON FORMATIVE CONSULTATION****Responsible Officer** Carol Tiddy
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Summary

On 30 January 2008, Cabinet commissioned formative (pre-statutory) consultation on the amalgamation of Beech Grove Junior and Oswestry Infant schools. This report sets out the outcomes from the consultation, the recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services and asks Members to consider whether to proceed with formal proposals.

Recommendations

Recommendations are that Cabinet:

- (1) notes the outcomes from the consultation and the recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services;
- (2) decides whether to proceed to formal statutory proposals to close Beech Grove Junior School, and Oswestry Infant School and invite the Diocese of Lichfield to publish proposals to open a new Voluntary Controlled school with 360 places to serve the combined catchment area.

1. Background

On 30 January 2008, Cabinet considered a report on the future organisation of primary schools. At the meeting, Cabinet resolved to consult with eight pairs of schools on school organisation change. This decision was subsequently confirmed, following call in, by the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel on 20 February. The consultation period ran from 11 March to 2 May. A number of strategies were used to inform stakeholders and collect views and the outcomes are attached to this report. As this consultation is at the formative stage of the process, there were no predetermined outcomes, and the consultation documents made it clear that all options would be considered, including the option of making no changes. The consultation document also noted that the process was not a referendum, but a chance to inform the consideration of elected Members.

Cabinet is asked to decide whether to proceed with formal proposals to amalgamate the schools, and, if so, what form the proposals should take.

2. Proposals

Consultation took place on three options for possible routes to amalgamation, as well as whether amalgamation was appropriate. These were:

- expansion of Beech Grove Junior School with consequent closure of Oswestry Infant School;
- expansion of Oswestry Infant School with consequent closure of Beech Grove Junior School;
- opening a new school following closure of both existing schools.

In addition, the consultation sought views on the character of the amalgamated school.

Other options were sought as part of the consultation.

3. Consultation

A consultation document was prepared and distributed to all parents, governors and staff of the schools (see Appendix 1). A special section of the Council's website provided more information. Officers, accompanied by senior Members, held consultation meetings with each school included in the proposals, and the minutes of the meetings for Beech Grove Junior and Oswestry Infant schools are attached at Appendices 2a and 2b. Responses to the consultation were sought by post, e-mail, via the Customer Service Centre and via the Council's website. A file containing all responses received is available to Members. Appendix 3 contains key points abstracted from the consultation responses and a commentary on the responses by officers.

Three responses were received in relation to Oswestry Infant and Beech Grove Junior Schools.

- A response from a teacher which supported amalgamation, but emphasising the important of a fair and fresh start for the combined school.
- The response from the Diocese of Lichfield is supportive of amalgamation where there is opportunity to strengthen and improve the educational experience and facilities offered to pupils. The stated preferred option at Oswestry was to expand Beech Grove CofE Primary School, however the response also notes that if there is a general feeling that it would be more equitable to close both schools, then opening a new voluntary controlled foundation school would be promoted.
- The response from a joint meeting of the governing bodies agrees in principle that there should be a merging of the two schools conditional upon the provision of sufficient funding, particularly during the transition phase, and "fit for purpose" accommodation to deliver the vision of the governing body. Governors also supported the amalgamation being achieved through closure of both existing schools and opening a new voluntary controlled school.

Cabinet members visited Beech Grove Junior School and Oswestry Infant School on 28 April.

4. Key Issues and Factors for Consideration

4.1 The benefits of an 'all-through primary school' structure have been supported by research and the experience of practitioners, both locally and nationally. Developing an 'all-

through primary school' can build upon the strengths of each separate infant and junior school to ensure that experiences are enhanced, enabling even higher standards of education to be provided.

4.2 The Local Authority's principal concern is, of course, the children. However, an 'all-through school structure provides benefits for all stakeholders: pupils, parents/carers, staff, governors and the Local Authority. Many of the advantages are common to all parties involved in the school community. Some, however, may appear relevant to a particular 'group' but are mutually dependent.

Whole School Benefits

4.3 Whilst separate phase schools are committed to working together and making transitional links, a single 'through school' for primary aged children can provide:

- a single vision and consistent ethos to benefit pupils, staff and parents/carers
- continuity, and progression, of learning
- unified leadership and management of curriculum, teaching and learning and social development
- an enhanced range of staff expertise
- consistency of approaches to inclusion and well being
- increased flexibility, allowing the school to grasp the opportunities offered to them by both the Workforce Reform and Every Child Matters agendas
- effective relationships with children and parents/carers over the full primary phase
- efficient use of resources – human and educational
- ease of site maintenance

Benefits for Curriculum and Attainment

4.4 'Excellence and Enjoyment: a Strategy for Primary Schools' describes primary schools as being "very diverse, each with its own identity". However, every school aims to provide a curriculum which will give a broad range of opportunities, catering for the interests, aptitudes and particular needs of pupils whilst ensuring progression in pupil learning. An 'all-through primary school' is in an excellent position to plan for progression and to deliver the curriculum in a continuous and coherent way from Foundation Stage through to the end of Key Stage 2.

4.5 An 'all-through primary school' structure offers the following benefits for the school's curriculum and children's attainment:

- a whole school view of and consistent approach to learning and teaching; curriculum delivery and attainment
- one staff and management team co-ordinated by one headteacher and guided by a single School Improvement Plan
- a single set of subject co-ordinators for the whole primary age range, thereby providing greater cohesion and continuity of learning across the key stages
- a suitable organisation (with single sets of learning and teaching policies and procedures) for delivering the national curriculum
- consistent assessment, tracking and target-setting procedures
- increased opportunities for flexibility in the organisation of classes, groups and methods of teaching
- the opportunity for further enrichment, for example more extensive extra-curricular provision and/or extended school provision

Benefits for Children

4.6 The National Curriculum Handbook for Primary Teachers in England emphasises the importance of “continuity” and “progression” for children. Both younger and older children have opportunities to share the outcomes of learning activities and develop an enhanced understanding of the range of personal achievement across the key stages. A ‘through school’ provides an environment where children can work and play together over a longer period of time developing a greater understanding and appreciation of one another’s diverse strengths, skills and personalities.

4.7 An ‘all-through primary school’ structure allows children:

- a longer period of time in which to develop closer contact with the staff and Headteacher
- to benefit from all teachers having a good understanding of the child’s whole experience
- increased stability; security and confidence can be built on more easily when children have minimal transition
- continuity, especially for the most vulnerable children and those with special needs
- access to a curriculum planned and assessed across the full primary range
- opportunities for increased educational contact with younger and older children and the chance to share the outcomes of learning across the key stages
- opportunities for increased social development, with older pupils having some appropriate pastoral responsibility for younger children
- access to a greater range of staff talent and expertise with a larger staff, wider enrichment opportunities are inherent across the curriculum and beyond

Benefits for Parents and Carers

4.8 Parents and carers have, of course, a crucial role to play in their child’s education. ‘Excellence & Enjoyment: a Strategy for Primary Schools’ says that parents “have a huge influence in setting aspirations and expectations for their children and in stimulating their learning“. A close working partnership between school and home can have a positive impact on the children’s learning and be advantageous to the parents/carers as well.

4.9 A ‘through school’ structure offers parents/carers:

- the establishment and development of closer contacts with school staff over a longer period of time
- a greater knowledge of staff, organisation and curriculum
- the opportunity for greater involvement in the school and their child’s education
- a flexible system of ‘educare’ including wrap around care which can be more effectively organised as parents/carers do not have to move from school to school
- the development of “dawn to dusk schools with breakfast childcare and after school clubs “ in a more cohesive manner for parents/carers
- a focal point for the community

Benefits for Staff (Teaching and Support)

4.10 Staff are an integral part of the benefits outlined above. However, amalgamation can provide specific benefits for staff, both individually and as a team. Fundamental to this is the chance to gain a broader and deeper understanding of how to support and challenge children’s levels of understanding across Key Stages. But, in addition to staff being integral to the outlined pupil benefits, there are advantages to the staff themselves from being part of an ‘all-through primary school’.

4.11 An 'all-through primary school' structure allows staff:

- access to a greater range of staff talent and expertise impacting positively both on pupil provision and personal professional development
- opportunities to gain broader professional experience from working with a wider range of ages
- professional support from a larger team
- the opportunity for staff to build partnership with pupils, parents & families over a longer period of time
- a larger number of staff to share the curriculum responsibilities and so reduce workload.

Benefits for Governance

4.12 Governing bodies have a central role in the overall direction of schools, being involved in the strategic planning and monitoring of the school's development. The benefits outlined above for each group of stakeholders would obviously be relevant also to the governing body. In addition, a key element of governance is the use of resources to support the school's development.

4.13 An 'all-through primary school' structure allows governing bodies a combined budget which would allow increased efficiency and greater flexibility generating:

- resources being deployed more effectively
- resources matched to the identified needs across year groups
- economies of scale
- access to resources (staffing and physical) which a single phase, and thus probably smaller, school could not afford
- a streamlined and stronger administrative infrastructure, avoiding duplication of resources
- the capacity to meet the personalised learning agenda at the heart of the Primary Strategy and Workforce Reform
- the capacity to support the development of integrated children's services (Every Child Matters)
- the capacity to support the Extended Schools initiative
- greater possibilities for the effective, efficient and flexible use of accommodation
- the potential for more efficient site maintenance.

The key issues regarding whether or not to proceed to formal proposals, and if so what form the proposals should take, are set out in the paragraphs below. The key issues are: the effect on standards of education, effect on local communities, effect on equal opportunities and community cohesion, effect on diversity of provision, financial implications and effect on staffing.

5. Effect on Standards of Attainment

Standards of attainment at the existing schools are satisfactory in terms of value added, but the absolute level of achievement of pupils is below average because of poor prior attainment. Both schools are judged by the Council's Advisory and Inspection services to be "good". OFSTED evaluated Oswestry Infants School as very good in 2003. An inspection of Beech Grove Junior School in 2005 found the school to be satisfactory and rapidly improving.

Bringing the two schools together would allow the new school to build on the strengths of the two predecessor schools. The larger staff resource available would allow for improved curriculum support and development. In addition, the proposal would take out the transition from infant to junior school which frequently leads to a check in progress and for some

children can lead to a regression in achievement. The new school would be better able to develop existing links with pre-school provision, improving prior attainment.

It can confidently be predicted that creating a single primary school on the site would improve attainment.

6. Effect on the Local Community and the Environment

As the two schools would amalgamate on the current site and buildings, there would be very limited or no effect on the local community. Investment in the buildings of a combined school would almost certainly lead to a reduction in carbon emissions and an increase in community facilities. It is proposed that the two existing school buildings are refurbished. Details of the refurbishment, which would include new ICT infrastructure, would be agreed with the Governing Body of the new school. A key point in discussion has been the wish from the schools that the new schools should be physically linked, with a new main entrance. This could be readily accomplished.

7. Effects on Equal Opportunities and Community Cohesion

As the two schools currently serve the same community and families, there would be very limited or no effect on equality of opportunity and community cohesion. Investment in the buildings of a combined school would probably lead to an increase in the accessibility of facilities.

8. Effect on Diversity of Provision

The Beech Grove Junior School has a Church of England religious character. There is currently no Infant or Primary school in Oswestry with Church of England religious character. The Oswestry Infant School is a community school. Depending on the route chosen for amalgamation and the character of the school, this could mean the loss of 300 places with a Church of England religious character (2.5% of the County total of places of this type) if the Infant School was to be expanded.

Expanding the Beech Grove Junior School would mean an increase of 60 places (1.6% of the County total of places of this type) with a Church of England religious character.

Opening a new Voluntary Controlled Primary School with a Church of England character would mean an increase of 60 places of this type.

9. Financial Implications

The total budget for the two schools in the financial year 2010/11 (the first full year after the proposed date of implementation) is £1,098,965. The budget for a combined school would be £1,009,820, a saving of £89,145. This is an efficiency saving as a result of having one headteacher and fewer tasks completed twice, and will not affect the quality of education or the resources available. Investment in the buildings could also lead to reduced running costs, freeing more money for expenditure on staff and resources.

10. Effect on Staffing

Both schools currently have a permanent headteacher. One headteacher's post would be made redundant in an amalgamation. If one school were to be expanded and the other

closed, then the headteacher of the school which was to be expanded would become the headteacher of the new school. Should both schools close, then the temporary governing body for the new school would recruit a headteacher for the new school.

Other staff from both schools would be transferred to the new school. If the new school were to have a Foundation or Voluntary Aided character, the Governing Body would be the employer. TUPE type arrangements would apply, and the terms and conditions of many categories of staff, including teachers, are set by national agreement. The staffing structure of the new school would be a matter for the Governing Body. All or almost all staff would be allocated posts within the new structure on the basis of their experience and interests, in consultation with the head teacher designate and the Governing Body.

Staffing protocols have been agreed with the trade unions representing school staff. Assistance would be given by Shropshire County Council to any member of staff who could not be accommodated in the new staffing structure, for example where amalgamation coincided with a reduction in pupil numbers.

Staff from each the schools have indicated that they would prefer to remain employees of Shropshire County Council if there were to be an amalgamation.

11. Consideration of Alternatives and Conclusion

11.1 Making no change.

Making no change would have four main effects on the school community.

- (i) Pupils would still undergo transition from one school to another at age 7. As noted above, this has a negative initial impact on the attainment of many pupils, and a serious effect on the attainment of a minority of pupils.
- (ii) Each school would continue with small staff compared to the combined school. This means fewer resources for professional and curriculum development, less support and cover for leadership, management and improvement and the possibility of additional staffing changes being required as pupil numbers change between the key stages but not in the school as a whole.
- (iii) If the schools continue as two separate institutions it is likely that they will have a reduced priority for early inclusion in the Primary Capital Programme because of the inbuilt inefficiencies of developing two separate schemes.
- (iv) If the two schools remain as separate institutions, the revenue savings set out above will not be achieved. This will have an effect on all schools in Shropshire, including Beech Grove Junior and Oswestry Infant schools, a reduction in resources equivalent to about one Teaching Assistant or 0.5FTE teaching staff.

11.2 Expand Beech Grove Junior School with consequent closure of Oswestry Infant School.

The new school would be a Voluntary Controlled School with a Church of England character. The staff would be employed by Shropshire County Council. The Governing Body would be based on the existing Governing Body, but could be expanded to include some members of the Infant School Governing Body. This would maintain diversity in provision (as the school would be a Church of England School).

11.3 Expand Oswestry Infant School with consequent closure of Beech Grove Junior School.

The new school would be a Community School with no religious character. The staff would be employed by Shropshire County Council. The Governing Body would be based on the

existing Governing Body, but could be expanded to include some members of the Junior School Governing Body. This would decrease diversity of provision, as it would take out Church of England school places. Both schools have indicated that they would be content with the new school having a Church of England character, and the Diocese of Lichfield and the Governing Body of Beech Grove Junior School have indicated a strong wish that this should be so.

11.4 Open a new school following closure of both existing schools

This option would require the consent of the Secretary of State if there is not to be a competition over the right to establish a school.

The new school could be in any category and have any or no, religious character. However, the option that was most supported through the consultation was that the school should have a Church of England character and be in the Voluntary Controlled category. This would mean that there would be a new shadow governing body until the school opens, drawn from members of the two existing governing bodies. The staff would be employed by Shropshire County Council. This option would slightly increase diversity in provision, in that there would be more Church of England places. There is no Church of England all through primary school in Oswestry, although there are several in both the Controlled and Voluntary Aided sectors in the surrounding rural area.

11.5 Other options if any raised in consultation

No other options were raised in the consultation.

12. Recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services

Following analysis of the available evidence including all the responses made during the consultation, due consideration of all the alternatives and their effects on the attainment of pupils, the environment and the community, it is recommended that Cabinet proceed to formal consultation on proposals to close both Beech Grove Junior and Oswestry Infant schools from 31 August 2009 and invite proposals by the Diocese of Lichfield to open a new 360 place Voluntary Controlled school in the same premises from 1 September 2009.

13. Next Steps

If Cabinet accept the recommendation of the Acting Director for Children and Young People's Services to amalgamate the schools by closing both schools and creating a new school, the next step would be for the Diocese of Lichfield to contact the Secretary of State to request permission to publish proposals to establish the new school, and the Council to publish proposals for the closure of the existing schools.

Publication of proposals would be followed by a six week consultation period during which comments would be invited from interested parties. It is intended to bring a report back to Cabinet on this phase of consultation on 22 July 2008, but this is dependent on a speedy response from the Secretary of State. Should the Secretary of State require it, the Council could be instructed to conduct a competition to commission the new school.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Primary School Organisation – Report to Cabinet 30 January 2008

Human Rights Act Appraisal

Children have a right to education. However, there is no right to a place within a specific maintained school. A proposed closure or amalgamation of a school does not, therefore, affect an individual pupil or parent's human rights.

Environmental Appraisal

The recommended proposal would mean a minor improvement in the effect on the environment as the new and refurbished accommodation would be more efficient than that in use currently.

Risk Management Appraisal

Changes to the organisation of schools must be carefully managed to achieve the full benefits, or there is a risk that the disruptive effects of change will outweigh the benefits to be gained.

Community / Consultations Appraisal

Formative consultation already undertaken is detailed in the report. Full community consultation would be undertaken as required by Statute if the decision is taken to proceed to formal proposals.

Cabinet Member

Cllr. Ann Hartley

Local Member

All

Appendices

- 1 Consultation document
- 2a Notes of meeting with Governors
- 2b Notes of meeting with Parents and Other Members of the Community
- 3 Key points from responses and commentary by officers