

PROPOSAL TO AMALGAMATE MEOLE BRACE CE (CONTROLLED) INFANT AND MEOLE BRACE JUNIOR SCHOOLS – REPORT ON FORMATIVE CONSULTATION

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Summary

On 30 January 2008, Cabinet commissioned formative (pre-statutory) consultation on the amalgamation of Meole Brace Infant and Meole Brace Junior 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

Cabinet is recommended to:

- (1) note the outcomes from the formative consultation;
- (2) decide whether to proceed to formal statutory proposals to close Meole Brace Infants and Junior Schools and ask the Diocese of Lichfield to issue proposals to open a new Voluntary Controlled school for 360 pupils, to serve the combined catchment area, in line with the recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services.

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 Meole Brace Infant School with consequent closure of Meole Brace Junior School;
- expansion of Meole Brace Junior School with consequent closure of Meole Brace Infant 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 also 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 Meole Brace Infant and Junior 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.

Twenty one individual letters have been received. The majority of the letters express concern about aspects of possible amalgamation. Concerns are expressed about the rationale for infant and junior reorganisations, dips in performance at Key Stage 2, the Christian nature of the community and its relationship to any new school and procedures should the amalgamation proceed. A further strand of comments focuses on the quality of the current local educational offer being such that change isn't necessary. General comments on aspects raised in the letters are dealt with in this report, whilst individual comments or concerns and the responses to these can be found in Appendix 3.

The response of the Diocese of Lichfield states that "we are aware that the Governing Bodies of these two schools consider that the case for amalgamation has not been made clearly enough, and that they would wish to retain their existing separate identities. If the Cabinet decides to proceed with the publication of Statutory Notices, in order to take the discussions further, then our preferred option would be to close the Community Junior school and to expand the C of E Voluntary Controlled Infant School in order to provide an all-through C of E primary school. This would again reflect the historic situation in which Meole Brace was served by a Church of England school (first established in 1860). The Trustees of the Church of England school are the Vicar and Church Wardens and no change to these arrangements is currently proposed.

If it were considered to be more equitable to close both schools and open a new one, subject to the outcome of discussions on competition, we would wish to promote either a new C of E Voluntary Controlled primary school or a new C of E Foundation primary school with a foundation majority."

Cabinet members visited Meole Brace Infant and Junior Schools 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 comparable with other schools in their situation. Both Ofsted and Shropshire County Council have judged the schools as "good". However, neither school is judged to be "outstanding", which indicates that further progress is possible.

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.

It can confidently be predicted that creating a single primary school on the site would lead to improved pupil 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 temporary Governing Body of the new school.

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.

It should be noted that in the consultation there was strong opposition from each governing body and school community to the prospect of a “takeover” by the other. There was also some element of division about whether the school should or should not have a religious character. The Infant School has a religious (Church of England) character and almost all the Junior School pupils have previously attended the Infant school.

8. Effect on Diversity of Provision

Meole Brace Infant School is a Voluntary Controlled school with a Church of England religious character. Meole Brace Junior School is a community school. Depending on the route chosen for amalgamation and the character of the school, this could mean the loss of 150 places with a Church of England character if the Junior School was to be expanded.

Expanding Meole Brace Infant school would mean an increase of 210 places with a Church of England Character, as would opening a new school with Church of England character.

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 £982,840. The budget for a combined school would be £890,250, a saving of £92,590. This is an efficiency saving as a result of having one headteacher and fewer tasks completed twice, and will not negatively 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

Only the Infant school currently has a permanent headteacher. The Junior School is currently seeking to appoint 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 existing permanent headteacher would become the headteacher of the expanded 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. Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (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 temporary 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 temporary Governing Body to decide.

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.

11. Consideration of Alternatives and Conclusion

11.1 Make 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 a 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 Meole Brace Infant and Junior schools, a reduction in resources equivalent to about one Teaching Assistant or 0.5FTE teachers.

11.2 Expand Meole Brace Infant School with consequent closure of Meole Brace Junior School.

The expanded 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 Infant School Governing Body, but could be expanded to include some members of the Junior School Governing Body. This would maximise diversity in provision (as the school would be a Church of England School).

11.3 Expand Meole Brace Junior School with consequent closure of Meole Brace Infant School.

The expanded 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 Junior School Governing Body, but could be expanded to include some members of the Infant School Governing Body. This would decrease diversity of provision, as it would take out Church of England school places.

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 Infant school already has a religious character and the Council's policy seeks to maintain or extend the proportion of places in faith schools. Staff from both schools have indicated a wish to remain as direct employees of Shropshire County Council. Opening a new Voluntary Controlled School would mean that there would be a new temporary 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 marginally increase diversity in provision, in that there would be more Church of England places.

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 consult on formal proposals to close both schools and open a new Church of England Voluntary Controlled school with 360 places to serve the catchment area.

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 notices to close the two 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