

Primary School Organisation Policy

Responsible Officer Ian Budd
e-mail: ian.budd@shropshire-cc.gov.uk

Tel: (01743) 254312 Fax (01743) 254500

Summary

This paper reports back on the consultation exercise on principles underpinning primary education provision commissioned by Cabinet on 26 September. The report sets out the consultation process and outcomes from the consultation, examines the implications for the Primary Capital Programme, and draws conclusions from the exercise in the form of a draft vision for primary education and organisation policy.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked:

- (1) to note the consultation process undertaken;
- (2) to note the responses to the consultation (summarised here and available in the evidence pack) and the replies to those responses;
- (3) to consider the draft vision for primary schools and the proposed primary school organisation policy and entitlement to underpin school organisation.

1. School Organisation Policy - Background

The report to Cabinet on 26 September 2007 sets out the reasons why it is imperative that Shropshire County Council reviews its policy on school organisation and resourcing. Key factors included falling pupil numbers and consequent reductions in government grant. The report followed consideration of demographic and resourcing information by Schools Forum and other partner bodies. Cabinet commissioned a consultation exercise based on policy principles and requested that the outcomes from that consultation be reported back.

2. The Consultation Process

Headteachers received information about the process immediately on publication of the report, and again following the 26 September Cabinet meeting. Officers wrote to Headteachers to request them to use their channels of communication to ensure that parents were aware of the report and ask them to take part in the consultation. Briefings also took place with Primary Headteachers at three meetings and secondary headteachers at one meeting prior to Half-Term. Local media outlets were kept informed of the progress of consultation and this resulted in considerable coverage publicising the consultation in the local press, radio and on the internet. The consultation was publicised on the Council's website through a banner on the front page, and the consultation document, response form and Cabinet paper have been available electronically throughout the consultation period.

During the consultation period four meetings were held with Headteachers and Governors at three venues across the County. A briefing was held with the Shropshire Association of Local Councils. All Parish Councils were also given a paper copy of the report and consultation paper. Meetings have been held with the Shropshire School Governors Council, Diocesan Directors of Education and Primary and Secondary Central Policy Groups. Officers have

responded to requests for meetings with representatives of the Hereford Diocese and to attend a meeting organised by Lydbury North Parish Council.

Consultation has also taken place with representative young people in north, central and south Shropshire, at Lakelands, Priory and Oldbury Wells schools. The consultation events were focussed on younger secondary pupils with recent memories of their time in primary education and consisted of deriving from young people the characteristics of a desirable primary school.

A Reference Group of head teachers, governors (including a parent governor), union representatives, diocesan representatives and officers have also met on four occasions to review more detailed evidence and to consider the primary vision and organisation principles.

3. Outcomes from the Consultation

All the responses to the consultation have been available to Members in the evidence pack. The section below selects some aspects of the consultation which are worthy of particular note and the Question and Answer document (appendix 3) provides responses to questions raised across the general consultation.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts (set out above) to ensure that the consultation was clearly focused on the principles and entitlement set out in the report of 26 September and the consultation document available on the internet, a number of respondents raised issues relating to individual schools. As the current consultation does not relate to individual schools, responses to the future development of individual establishments are not considered in this report. However, where a point raised about an individual school can be developed into a general principle it is addressed in this report or the question and answer document.

In addition, a few respondents who had not read the full report and consultation document believed comments made by others that the proposals would lead to the closure of all rural schools of less than four classes in size. The intention of the proposed policy principles and entitlement is to ensure the continuation of a vibrant and effective network of schools to deliver high quality education to all Shropshire children, whether in towns or in rural areas. There is no consideration given to the wholesale closure of rural schools. A degree of rationalisation is possible and has been ongoing for the last half century at least. The principles are also not intended to concentrate schooling in larger towns and bus children from rural areas into two form entry towns. The six mile principle indeed provides a large degree of protection to a continuing network of rural schools. The proposed education vision provides a framework within which Shropshire schools can continue to offer high quality education.

3.1 Consultation with young people

Year 7 students from Priory, Oldbury Wells and Lakelands secondary schools were asked to look back on their careers in primary school and select the most important factors. The outcomes of the consultation are set out at Appendix 4. In general, the factors identified as most important by young people relate to four categories. These are:

- empowerment of pupils,
- good leadership,
- well trained and experienced teachers and
- good quality buildings and equipment.

These factors have been included in the draft Vision for a School of the Future.

3.2 Consultation with Headteachers and Chairs of Governors

The minutes of the four meetings with Headteachers and Governors are attached as appendices 5a to 5d. Key points raised by head teachers and governors were similar to those raised by other groups. Where these are covered elsewhere, they are not duplicated here. However, there were five general points raised which are listed below.

3.2.1 Quality of education in rural schools

Many headteachers and governors of rural schools raised the high quality of education offered in these schools. This high quality is acknowledged and frequently celebrated by Shropshire County Council. However, it is important to note that education of at least as high a quality can also be offered in large schools and in town schools. Children and Young People's Services remains concerned at the high workload placed on headteachers and other staff at small schools. While it is recognised that these staff are dedicated and hardworking, County Council officers remain concerned that the ability to recruit to senior management posts in very small schools is limited by the high workload, high levels of responsibility and limited pay differentials offered in particular to Headteachers.

3.2.2 Alternatives to Closure

Officers have considered in detail alternatives to closure such as federation and sharing of staff resources. Research amongst other local authorities has shown that these offer no savings and often require additional resources compared to maintaining individual very small schools, and the use of federations and shared resources does not generate additional government grant because it does not generate additional pupils. Federations and shared staffing would be a reasonable response where in order to meet the six mile entitlement principle it is necessary to maintain very small schools, but cannot be a general solution to the problem.

3.2.3 Amalgamation of Schools

There was little adverse comment regarding the principle of amalgamating smaller infant and junior schools in order to avoid the disruption of a transfer at age seven. However, Headteachers and Governors raised a number of points about how such amalgamations would be accomplished. In reply, reference was made to the recent example of Albrighton Primary School where, at the request of governors a consultation exercise and subsequent amalgamation took place in a very positive atmosphere between the infant and junior schools. There are particular points which would have to be discussed at the local consultation stage where the infant and junior schools are in different organisation categories – for example foundation and community or faith and non-faith schools.

3.2.4 Position of Staff

Headteachers and governors raised issues regarding the position of staff in school reorganisation proposals. In reply, reference was made to the recent closure of Grafton School and the Albrighton amalgamation where high quality support was offered to employees and no staff were made compulsorily redundant. It should be noted that the normal level of turnover of staff means that there are always vacancies for all types and levels of staff in Shropshire primary schools, and good staff are always in high demand. Trade Unions have encouraged the local authority to take a similar approach in future reorganisations to that undertaken locally previously.

3.2.5 Steps taken to Date

Headteachers and Governors were keen to explore the steps taken to date to contain the issue of reducing pupil numbers and whether these could be extended to encompass new challenges. It was explained that a considerable amount of work had been put into reducing surplus accommodation by converting it to other uses, but that Shropshire County Council is now approaching the limit on this kind of approach, whilst pupil numbers continue to decline.

It is the continuing fall in pupil numbers and consequent reduction in Dedicated Schools Grant that is having a significant financial impact on schools.

3.3 Consultation with other partners, parents and the public

Many questions raised in the general consultation exercise are considered below in the Question and Answer document (appendix 3). However there were six questions and points which were raised repeatedly and have been picked out below. A number of respondents identified issues in relation to individual schools. These are of often of limited assistance in seeking to address the impact of falling pupil numbers across the school system.

3.3.1 Demographics and development

Several questions were raised about the future demography of Shropshire, and in particular the possibility of rises above the forecast level, whether that arose through increases in birth rate, inward migration or development of new housing.

It is true that both the average fertility rate and the population of England as a whole have both been increasing for some time. Data has been presented through the consultation that the total number of live births in Shropshire has increased (although this data includes Telford and Wrekin and parts of Wales). However, there has been no evidence that the number of Reception age pupils in Shropshire is increasing, and, while there is some evidence that the rate of decrease is beginning reduce (as expected at this time), the year groups leaving primary from year 6 are still much larger than the groups entering at year R. The pupil number predictions prepared by Shropshire County Council have been remarkably accurate in the past and there is no reason to believe that they would be less accurate in the future.

Entitlement criteria in the draft policy also recognise that any major developments would require education provision to be planned close to children's homes. This would be planned through S106 arrangements with developers.

3.3.2 Effect on Communities

Policy principles recognise the importance of extended school activities across the communities served by schools across the County. Nevertheless, a number of consultation responses have indicated that changing the pattern of schools would have a severely detrimental effect on rural communities. Some of this concern has been exacerbated by the mistaken statement by some individuals and groups that the principles as currently proposed would lead to the closure of all two and three class schools and the absorption of the rural schools network almost completely into a number of schools in market towns.

It should be noted that there are many vibrant and connected communities in Shropshire which link to a school which is not in the immediate environment, and further settlements which consider themselves to be part of a wider community. It would be natural to assume that there would be some detriment to local communities when the local school moves to another location. However, this has not been the experience in other school closures in Shropshire, perhaps because the receiving institution has made considerable efforts to involve and welcome the new additions to its wider community. The issue here appears to be the definition of the word community in this context. Where community is defined as a single village or settlement then there would by definition be a reduction in access to school places. However, no truly rural school draws exclusively from the settlement in which it is based and where community is defined more widely, based on a rural catchment rather than a single settlement, continuity of access can be maintained and indeed improved for many. In addition, the slightly larger schools sometimes developed by reorganisation can offer additional curriculum and extended schools opportunities. This is recognised in the recent Northern Ireland Independent Strategic Review of Education (the Bain Report).

3.3.3 Effect on the Environment

Many responses were concerned that a reduction in the network of rural schools would lead to increases in traffic and carbon emissions. Once more, this concern might have been exacerbated by some external commentators indicating that all rural schools were to be closed and children sent to town schools.

Experience with closure of schools has indicated that while there is often (but not always) an increase in traffic, this is usually much less than predicted by the community around the school. There are two reasons for this. One is that changes in schools are accompanied by changes to home to school transport, resulting in opportunities to increase the number of children travelling to school by minibus and other shared modes of transport. The second reason is that only a minority of children in rural areas currently walk to school, and for some schools this can be a very small minority indeed. If these children move to another school then at worst there is no net increase in traffic, while in the best case some of these children transfer from private cars to shared transport and the number of vehicles and carbon emissions are reduced.

On the issue of carbon emissions, it is important to note that maintaining a large network of very small schools has in-built ongoing carbon emission inefficiencies. In parallel with the fixed financial costs of maintaining a school there are also fixed carbon costs ranging from heating through to the number of deliveries of food, materials and support workers. The smaller, and particularly the less full schools are, the less efficiently these fixed carbon costs can be shared across the population. An environmental impact assessment is part of the consideration of any school reorganisation proposal in Shropshire.

3.3.4 Small Schools Offer Better Education

Many respondents have concentrated on the position of individual schools, responding that their individual school provides high quality education. As noted above, the high quality of education provided in almost all schools is acknowledged and celebrated by Shropshire County Council. Although the quality of education in Shropshire's smallest schools is good in general, there are long recognised challenges involved in maintaining this high standard. High quality education can also be offered in all sizes of school. The reference group examined data which showed that there is no significant difference in the range of value added scores from small and large, urban and rural schools in Shropshire. There are, however, clear differences between one school and another in each group.

The government of Northern Ireland has recently (2006) undertaken a major independent strategic review of education. Like Shropshire, many areas of Northern Ireland (NI) are predominately rural in nature (37% of NI schools are under 100 pupils, 38% in Shropshire). Pupil numbers are declining as in Shropshire. The report, known as the Bain Report, defines a small school as being below 90 pupils (a definition shared with the Audit Commission). The Bain report says "this large number of small schools comes at a significant educational cost to some pupils in terms of reduced educational opportunity." The Bain report recommends that the minimum size of a rural school should be 105 pupils. A longer quote from the Bain Report notes key factors:

"Educationalists have long argued that larger schools are more effective than smaller schools as they are better able to offer a comprehensive curriculum with more specialised teaching at a lower cost per pupil. In a sample of small, rural primary schools, ETI found that although small school size had certain advantages, in terms of personal attention and focus on individual pupils, small schools struggled with a range of challenges. These included the demands of preparing a differentiated programme for classes with mixed-age groups, of ensuring adequate SEN provision, and difficulties in securing substitute cover for teachers. Also reported was a higher administrative burden on teachers (including teaching principals), leaving them less time for the preparation of lessons. Small schools had more difficulties than their larger counterparts in recruiting and retaining principals

and, overall, they experienced a considerable degree of financial pressure and uncertainty.”

The most recent published study on this subject is the Institute of Welsh Affairs (November 2007) study on the effect on pupils and communities in Powys and Pembrokeshire where reorganisation involving small schools had taken place. The study reports that a significant majority (up to 95% in some cases) of school staff, governors and parents reported improvements in educational quality, standards of achievement and social factors when small schools were combined into slightly larger schools.

Concluding the response to this section, it appears that independent research supports the principle that educational opportunity can be bolstered by ensuring that small schools are combined in schools of a slightly larger size where they can be financially and organisationally sustainable. However, such findings need to be balanced with local prioritisation of maintaining and providing enhanced support to small schools where they are needed to maintain access to education within range of children’s homes.

3.3.5 Effect on vulnerable children

Many respondents were concerned that children with special education needs would do less well in larger schools, or would become “lost” in larger institutions. Indeed, there were a number of respondents who were concerned that any “rural” child might become lost in a larger school.

The Reference Group has examined data on the value added scores for children with special educational needs (SEN) in schools of varying sizes. There was no significant difference in the scores achieved by pupils in larger or smaller schools. Evidence from Ofsted reports indicates that larger schools provide at least equally well for pupils with SEN, and some, like some small schools, provide outstanding support. Headteachers of larger schools suggest that the greater staff resources available to them enable more specialisation in SEN teaching and more in-class support. Headteachers of small school argue that the smaller size of school, and the likelihood that there will be a smaller absolute number of children with SEN mean that there can be a better focus on the needs of individual children.

Research on the dynamics of schools indicate that there is little difference at the primary school age range because in primary schools children’s relationships are first and foremost with the staff and children in their class, which is almost always 30 pupils or less. In the wider school, the same research indicates that up to about 300 to 350 pupils it is possible for all staff and pupils to be part of a single community. Indeed, new secondary schools are increasingly being planned on this basis, with either “schools within schools”, “houses” or vertical tutoring to create learning communities of 350 or less within the wider school community.

In the Shropshire context, the overwhelming majority of schools will be one form of entry (210 pupils) or less and capable of being considered a single community. The small number of larger schools will be able to use other strategies to create communities within the wider school. It should be remembered that the principles on school size indicates that the most common size for rural schools should be four classes or between 92 and 120 pupils. Thus, both children with SEN and children from small settlements would still be able to be individuals within a school community offering a range of expertise and experiences.

3.3.6 Options for savings

Many respondents suggested that there were other ways in which savings could be achieved and that this would solve the problem. There are two issues to be addressed from these comments. The first is to consider whether simply making savings would address the challenges faced by the schools network. As noted above, there are a range of issues faced in schools below 90 pupils in size. These are increased as schools reduce further in size.

Many small rural schools in Shropshire successfully overcome these issues. However, this requires considerable additional support, not least in financial terms. Based on the present pattern of school sizes, but taking into account the overall reduction in pupil numbers, the forecast for the size of the gap between pupil numbers and government funding by 2011 is £1.9m per year. If more schools reduce in size and are therefore more dependent on lump-sums and staffing protection funding this gap will increase.

The increase in costs per pupil as schools reduce below four classes has been considered by the Reference Group looking at data on Shropshire schools, and is readily evident in data presented by the Audit Commission in *Trading Places* (1996) and their follow up study in 2002, as well as in the *Bain Report* (2006). Both indicate that as well as having a higher unit cost, there are additional costs in supporting a successful network of small schools. It is therefore unlikely that making savings elsewhere in the education budget will be able to maintain a financially or educationally viable network of small schools, particularly since one of the few areas in which cuts could be made would be in those support services which are vital to the success of the current network of small schools.

The second issue arising from the question is whether the necessary savings could in fact be achieved. Even reaching the predicted shortfall against formula allocations of £1.9m per year represents a significant challenge. The great majority of resources for education are in the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) which is allocated by the government and passported to schools. Making the necessary savings from this budget could only be accomplished by removing significant resources from all schools. It is not appropriate to try to make these savings from resources allocated to the support of children with SEN.

Although it is outside the scope of the current consultation, it is worth noting that as the current reduction in primary pupil numbers feeds through into secondary schools, and as Shropshire County Council is accepted into the Government's Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme, opportunities are likely to exist to reduce the network and invest in secondary schools at the same time.

Finally, some respondents noted that funds could be raised by selling off some sites or by diverting resources from buildings to staffing. Resources related to investment in land and buildings, known as capital, are allocated by the government separately from revenue resources and it is not possible to swap capital resources to revenue funding. This is because capital resources are intended for long term investment. For example, the government has recently allocated £8.5m to Shropshire County Council as part of the Primary Capital Programme (see below). Although, converted to revenue, this could cover the projected deficit from the current schools network for approximately 4 years, the intention for this funding (and further sums adding up to another £10 to £15m over the next 10 years) is to prepare primary school buildings for education well into the 21st Century. Selling a physical asset as a "one off" contribution would (at best) only delay a funding problem that needs to be addressed.

4. Primary Capital Programme

In 2006, the Government announced a programme to improve primary school buildings as a counterpart to the Building Schools for the Future programme for secondary schools. The aims of the programme are to secure primary schools for learning in the 21st Century, through the refurbishment of at least half of all primary schools and the rebuilding or remodelling the poorest 5% (by condition) of the estate. Following a pilot period, the Government have recently (25 October) announced the arrangements and funding for the first two years (2009-11) of the programme. Shropshire County Council has been allocated £8.5m for this funding period, and can probably anticipate £1.25 to £1.5m per year through the remainder of the programme (anticipated to be a further 12 years).

The requirements of the Primary Capital Programme (PCP) are a very good fit with the proposed review of primary school organisation policy, and, indeed without a review of some kind it is unlikely that Shropshire County Council will be successful in meeting the DCSF requirements for funding through the PCP.

4.1 Requirements of the Primary Capital Programme

The funding arrangements for the primary capital programme require Local Authorities to submit a Primary Strategy for Change (PSfC) by April 2008. The purpose of the PSfC is to set out the Local Authority's plans for primary education over the next two, four and fourteen years in varying levels of detail. The requirements for the PSfC are set out below, but are similar in many ways to the consultation currently being undertaken and the review stages which could follow.

4.2 The Primary Strategy for Change

The purpose of the PSfC is to provide a strategic basis for investment in primary schools over an extended basis. The PSfC will consist of five elements: the local perspective; baseline analysis; long term aims, approach to change and initial investment priorities. The local perspective should include a broad vision for primary education. The baseline analysis is the analysis of needs and available resources, including school places. The long term aims should include both the pattern and types of school to be sought after fourteen years of investment and the investment priorities to reach this goal. The approach to change should set out the details of the operation of the PCP. The initial investment priorities should include the actual projects for the first two years, the priorities for the next two. This is where the Primary Capital Programme and the primary review can support each other most closely.

4.3 How the PCP can support the primary organisation review

Should the primary organisation review proceed, the PCP can be a key additional factor in its success. In addition to providing a long term strategic framework for primary education through the PSfC, the PCP can also provide pump-priming investment to ensure that decisions taken during the review result in schools which are ready to build on previous success to achieve higher quality and standards in the future. The programme also offers a longer term investment strategy which can continue to develop the primary school network as pupil numbers change further through the next decade.

5. Conclusions

The consultation on the principles for a new Primary School Organisation Policy has, uniquely, involved a substantial number of parents and young people at an early stage. Our experience of this will be shared with other Authorities as part of the County Council's position as a national pathfinder project. The consultation has also involved traditional consultees of Headteachers, Governors and the Diocesan Authorities. A Reference Group of key partners has been involved in reviewing responses and evidence and in developing the next stages. The consultation has also been successful in attracting a number of extremely high quality, well considered responses (both critical and supportive of the original paper) which have contributed to the development of the Draft Vision and Proposed Policy and Entitlement attached as appendices 1 and 2 and considered below.

5.1 Draft Vision for a Primary School for the Future

The draft Vision for Primary Education was developed from the deliberations of the Reference Group, and refined in the light of the responses received from the consultation. The draft Vision (attached as appendix 1) sets out the characteristics which were seen as the most important for a school of the future by the Reference Group and young people, and which came through most strongly in the general responses to the consultation. The Vision covers the ethos, curriculum, experiences and staffing of a school while allowing sufficient flexibility for individual schools to develop distinct identities and offering choice and diversity within the primary school system. It does not at this stage include a statement on accommodation and

facilities for a school of the future, which will be developed as part of the Primary Capital Programme.

5.2 Proposed School Organisation Policy and Entitlement

The proposed School Organisation Policy and Entitlement (attached as appendix 2) is the other main proposed outcome from the consultation. Although it is based on the same stated principles and entitlement statements set out in the original document, it has been further developed as a result of the consultation process, taking into account many of the points raised.

The intention of the proposed School Organisation Policy is to synthesise proposals from the original statements and responses received in the consultation process. As considered previously, the situation facing Shropshire schools is such that no change is not a viable option. The proposed policy sets out a strategy to create a high quality sustainable network of schools which is sensitive to local communities' circumstances.

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

School Organisation Report to Cabinet of 26th September 2007

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 of a school does not, therefore, affect an individual pupil or parent's human rights.

Environmental Appraisal

A full environmental appraisal is a key component of any individual school organisation proposal. However, the broad environmental appraisal set out above shows that the policy will be largely neutral and might well involve some environmental benefits.

Risk Management Appraisal

Pupil number changes are projected to drive a reduction in Dedicated Schools Grant from £139.2m to £132.5m (at today's costs). This represents a significant risk in educational resources and outcomes for all Shropshire schools unless action is taken.

Community / Consultations Appraisal

The report includes details of consultation undertaken on principles to underpin the future vision for Primary Education in Shropshire. A full community planning appraisal is a key component of any school organisation proposal.

Cabinet Member

Cllr. Ann Hartley

Local Member

All areas of the County.

Appendices

1. Vision for Primary Education
2. Primary School Organisation Policy and Entitlement
3. Question and Answer Document
4. Young People's Views on Primary Entitlement
5. Minutes of Consultation Meetings with Headteachers and Governors