

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET - 15th APRIL 2010

REVIEW OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PLACES: PROVISIONAL REPORT ON OUTCOME OF CONSULTATIONS ON PROPOSAL TO CLOSE ROCK FERRY HIGH SCHOOL AND PARK HIGH SCHOOL IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH AN ACADEMY

Executive Summary

This report advises the Cabinet of the provisional outcomes of the consultation process which has taken place in regard to the closure of the predecessor schools; Park High School and Rock Ferry School, as agreed at Cabinet on 14th January 2010 as part of the Phase 1 Secondary Review. This report describes the responses, including additional suggestions put forward during the consultation process, and makes recommendations with regard to statutory proposals in this area. It does not cover separate consultations by the lead sponsor, the University of Chester, regarding the opening of an academy. These consultations end on 30th April 2010.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 At its meeting of 29th November 2007, Cabinet instructed that Phase 1 of the Secondary Places Review should comprise schools in Birkenhead and Bebington (Wirral South).
- 1.2 On 6th November 2008, Cabinet approved a consultation option for change comprising the closure of Park High and Rock Ferry High Schools in order to establish an Academy.
- 1.3 Following the announcement that Birkenhead High School for Girls would become a state-funded Academy, and further analysis of demographic trends, this option was altered to incorporate two Academies – a mixed Academy at the Park High site, and a Boys Academy on a site to be confirmed. This proposal was linked to the closure of three existing schools – Ridgeway High School, Rock Ferry High School and Park High School. This was reported to Cabinet on 19th March 2009 and approval was given for the Department for Children Schools and Families Expressions of Interest (EOI) to be prepared on the basis of a “three into two” model. These went to all three predecessor governing bodies in September 2009, and were approved by them albeit with caveats.
- 1.4 On 1st October 2009, Cabinet approval was given for the Expression of Interest documents for the two Academies, and for consultation to begin on the closure of the predecessor schools. This timescale was in line with Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and Office of the Schools Commissioner (OSC) guidance.
- 1.5 This decision was called in for scrutiny. The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee met on 3rd November 2009 with a single item agenda. This resulted in the decision being referred back to Cabinet on 26th November 2009, some 9 weeks after the original EOIs had been approved.
- 1.6 At its meeting of 26th November 2009, Cabinet decided that the option should revert to that approved on 6th November 2008, involving the closure of Rock Ferry High and Park High Schools, in order to establish a mixed Academy for their pupils, on either the Park High site or a new site, e.g. Borough Road/Shaftebury Playing fields. The Director was requested to consult with residents associations and Shaftebury Youth Club on the possibility of the Borough Road/Shaftebury playing fields site being utilised, with a report to Cabinet on 9th December 2009, two weeks later. The minute is attached as Appendix A.

- 1.7 On 9th December 2009, Cabinet approved the Park High site as the preferred site for the Mixed Academy, and asked that further discussions should take place to reach agreement on the composition of the sponsor team for the new Academy. The minute is attached as Appendix B. Negotiations took place with sponsors during the following week. Agreement was secured and a new EOI was prepared. This was sent to the DCSF by the end of December 2009. The governing bodies of the two predecessor schools approved the new EOI in early January 2010, albeit with caveats.
- 1.8 On 14th January 2010, Cabinet approved the Expression of Interest for an 11 to 16 Mixed Academy on the Park High site with a sponsor team lead by the University of Chester, with the University of Liverpool, Wirral Metropolitan College, Birkenhead Sixth Form College and Wirral Council as co-sponsors, intended to open on 1st September 2011. Cabinet also approved the commencement of formal consultations on the closure of the predecessor schools as set out by guidance. The minute is attached as Appendix C.

2.0 The Consultation

- 2.1 In order for all stakeholders to have access to relevant background information and have the opportunity to comment and respond, the following methods of consultation have been employed :
- a) A range of documentation has been produced and distributed (See Appendix D) This comprised:
 - (i) the full consultation document and letters sent to parents of pupils at Park High School and Rock Ferry High School; to staff and governors at both schools; to the Central libraries, local libraries, and relevant community centres, to local councillors in those areas and to the local MP
 - (ii) consultation letters to all parents/carers of pupils in Year 4, 5 and 6 at 58 Wirral primary schools including all those in Birkenhead;
 - (iii) all other statutory consultees, including trade union representatives, neighbouring authorities and the Learning and Skills Council have been notified by e-mail
 - b) A dedicated web-site on the Wirral Learning Grid was established and advertised on the council web-site, the council Intranet, and in the parents' consultation leaflets and letters. This site provided access to all the information produced in paper form and allowed e-mail responses to a dedicated e-mail address.
 - c) Meetings were arranged for all interested stakeholders at both schools. These meetings followed the same format, with a presentation on the overall position and the school specific position followed by around ninety minutes of time for audience comments, feedback and questions. The meetings were attended by parents, carers, staff, governors, Ward members and various other interested persons and bodies. Each meeting was chaired by the Cabinet member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning. The dates for the meetings were in the parents' leaflets and on the specific web-site and a general notice was published in the local press.
 - d) Opportunities have been provided for other means of response. Submissions have been received in paper and e-mail formats – all of which will be made available before and at the Cabinet meeting, in addition to the summaries contained in this report.
 - e) All of the relevant LA documentation produced for the consultation has been shared with the Diocesan Bodies.

2.2 The consultation process and the presentation of LA and school data to this wider audience does appear to have persuaded most people of the need to reduce the number of school places, though understandably people wish to advocate the case for their school in respect of closure or amalgamation options. There was general support for the Academy with the sponsor team as constituted.

2.3 In addition to the detail set out below, further records of views put forward during the consultation period are attached as Appendix E. Feedback is set out school by school. The record for each school brings together the responses from the meeting held at the school, together with any points raised in written or e-mail submissions to the Authority.

3.0 **Outcome of the Consultation**

Further suggestions in relation to secondary school re-organisation in Birkenhead were made as part of the consultation process:

- Locate the new Academy at the Rock Ferry site
- Locate the new Academy at a new site between the two existing schools
- Amalgamate Rock Ferry High and Bebington High Schools
- Close Rock Ferry High and leave Park High open
- Move Prenton High to the Rock Ferry site and turn the Prenton High site into a mixed Academy
- Keep both schools open
- Make both schools into smaller separate Academies

Further discussion of these suggestions is given below.

3.1 There were several key themes in the combined responses from consultees:

- General understanding of the falling rolls situation
- Support for the Academy in principle and the sponsor team
- Effect of proposed housing and demographic changes on pupil numbers
- Respect for school staff in their skills and relationships with pupils and parents
- Educational standards and quality of provision
- Concern for the fate of closed buildings and sites
- Desire for a new building on a new site
- Travel distance to school and the effect on traffic and road safety
- Disruption to pupils' education and confidence
- Class sizes
- Importance of small schools
- Effect of any change on children with special educational needs
- Importance of out of hours and community facilities
- Staff redeployment
- Continuity of school over several generations
- Maintenance of existing specialisms.

4.0 **Responses to the consultation**

The next section of the report contains a summary of comments on the proposal in relation to each school. Numbers on roll are from the January 2010 School Census. An analysis of the responses received and attendance at meetings is included as Appendix E1.

Park High School

With one exception, respondents from Park High School were generally in favour of an Academy with the proposed sponsor team. Some respondents expressed concerns about a short-term expansion in the overall size of the school on that site, whether this would mean increases in class sizes, and about disruption to pupil's education, especially at Key Stage 4. The importance of maintaining community facilities at the site were stressed. Questions were asked about the gender imbalance in school places in Birkenhead. Some respondents were concerned about losing the school's Sports College specialist status, and wanted to be sure that the good work of staff in the current school would be continued in the Academy.

Rock Ferry High School

Respondents from Rock Ferry High School were generally in favour of an Academy with the proposed sponsor team. Many expressed concerns about the travel distance to the Park site, and asked if free transport would be provided. Other concerns involved the impact of change on standards for existing pupils especially those in Key Stage 4 and pupils in the Sanderling Unit, the future of the Rock Ferry site and it's listed building (Ravenswood), relocation of memorials, the cost of new uniforms, and whether children would "fit in" at the Academy which some respondents saw as an "in name only" change to Park High. Some respondents were concerned about losing the school's Performing Arts College specialist status without any consultation on the new specialism, loss of parental choice and loss of staff expertise. A minority were concerned about gender imbalance in mixed schools.

There was a general understanding of the falling rolls and surplus place situation, although a minority of respondents believed that new housing would increase rolls, and one that schools without sixth forms were suffering falling rolls. The long history of the school within a relatively deprived area was raised by some respondents.

In relation to the consultation, some respondents believed a decision had already been made, and that consultation should have started earlier and been more extensive.

The majority of written consultation responses were from Rock Ferry High School staff (but few parents), who in the main advocated a new proposal, whereby the Academy would be in a new building on a neutral site in between the two, with some suggesting reopening negotiations with Shaftesbury Youth Club, or for the Council to purchase land in a central Birkenhead location. A minority wanted the Academy to be at the Rock Ferry site based on overall size and convenience of location for the Rock Ferry area, with single respondents suggesting the Academy should have a sixth form, or incorporate a primary school. The Park site was generally seen as distant, small, unable to expand and unfit for purpose. A single respondent said that existing buildings should be used rather than wasting money on new build.

4.1 Commentary on these responses

4.2 Size of the Academy - The two schools together currently have a combined roll of 1,258 pupils, which is equivalent to 252 pupils per year group on average. This is projected to decline to 1,052 by 2019 if school re-organisation is not carried out. The total number of places at the two schools is 2,482, of which 42% in total would be vacant in 2019.

Respondents concerns about the size of the amalgamated Academy should be allayed by the transition arrangements, to be devised in detail during Feasibility. This is likely to include maintaining both sites for at least one year, if not longer. New admissions are likely to be to the Park site, nevertheless the Key Stage 4 group based at the Rock Ferry High site should be allowed to see out their education in situ without disruption or movement. Some pupils will, however, at some point, move sites. The split site arrangement also allows for phasing of staff movements and for any remodelling and refurbishment works to be carried out at the Park site.

- 4.3 **Travel and Transport** – The patterns of parental preference in this area indicate a high level of mobility, facilitated by high levels of surplus places and overlaps between the pupil populations of schools in the area already exist.

The distance between the Rock Ferry and Park High sites is 2.5 miles. Individual travel distances will depend on pupils’ home address. The DCSF and Wirral policy says that pupils aged over 8 can travel up to 3 miles to school before being eligible for free transport, although there are some exceptions - pupils whose parents receive the free school meal allowance or receive the maximum level of Working Tax Credit are entitled to free transport to one of the three nearest appropriate schools between 2 and 6 miles of their home address.

Public transport connects the two areas throughout the day and into the evening. As an example, the 410 bus runs every 10-15 minutes between Old Chester Road and Birkenhead Park from 8 am to 7pm and then every 20-30 minutes during the evening until late. Park High’s site is a 10-15 minute walk from Birkenhead Park train station, and a 20 minute walk from the major bus terminus on Conway Street from which various buses pass either by the school, or by Birkenhead Park on Conway Street.

The table below summarises the analysis of actual and projected journeys by current pupils to the two existing school sites. This demonstrates that should the Academy be located at the Rock Ferry site, the travel disadvantage to Park pupils is in fact substantially greater than that sustained by Rock Ferry pupils in travelling to the Park site in every respect. The Park High site is also significantly closer to the further education co-sponsor sites in the central Birkenhead area.

Travel analysis – Current Park High Pupils	
Average distance to Park site (walking time)	1.3 miles (26 mins)
Travel analysis – Other site	
Average distance to Rock Ferry site (walking time)	3.0 miles (61 mins)
Closer or similar distance to Rock Ferry site	12% (86 pupils)
Further to Rock Ferry site	88% (635 pupils)
Pupils travelling 3 miles or more to Rock Ferry site	343 (48%)

Pupil addresses taken from January 2010 School Census. Walking time calculated by Google Maps. Similar equates to up to 0.4 miles longer travel distance; Further equates to 0.5 miles or more longer travel distance.

Travel analysis – Current Rock Ferry High Pupils

Average distance to Rock Ferry site (walking time)	1.4 miles (27 mins)
Travel analysis – Other site	
Average distance to Park site (walking time)	2.2 miles (43 mins)
Closer or similar distance to Park site	82% (445 pupils)
Further to Park site	18% (95 pupils)
Pupils travelling 3 miles or more to Park site	44 (8%)

Pupil addresses taken from January 2010 School Census. Walking time calculated by Google Maps. Similar equates to up to 0.4 miles longer travel distance; Further equates to 0.5 miles or more longer travel distance.

- 4.4 **Alternative sites** - Respondents related to Rock Ferry who favoured a new site for the Academy cited the proposal as a lost opportunity for major investment. The Council has examined all possible sites of sufficient size in the area between the two existing schools. Under the original "three into two" model, there would have been a mixed Academy at Park High, and a Boys Academy on another site. The Borough Road/Shafesbury playing field site was originally considered as a site for a Boys Academy, as this was the only site of sufficient size in approximately the right location. However, the site is partially owned by Shafesbury Youth Club, whose board of trustees have made it very clear at that time (December 2009) that they would not be prepared to sell their land to the Council, without which any Academy project could not proceed further on that site. In addition, the residents associations bordering the Borough Road/Shafesbury site have made it clear that they would object strongly to the construction of any school on that site. There was little interest in an all boys school, and Ridgeway High School also withdrew from the process at that stage, all of which in combination caused the Cabinet to reject support of the "three into two" model.

This being the case, Cabinet decided to proceed with consultations on the current proposal for a Mixed Academy, which would begin with the Academy on two sites, eventually moving towards the Academy being based on the Park High site, which has already received £10 million of investment through PFI, and would be further improved under the Academies programme.

- 4.5 **Change to Academy status** – The Academy would not be Park High with a new name, it would be a new kind of school, with a new governing body and ethos, and with staff and pupils from both Park and Rock Ferry High Schools. A small number of respondents believed that some parents would not choose the Academy due to a perceived difference in background, however geographical analysis demonstrates there is already an overlap between the pupil populations of the two schools. Staff from both schools have strongly expressed their commitment to ensure that all pupils would be welcomed in any setting, whatever the outcome of the proposal.
- 4.6 **Size of Park High site** - With regard to site size, respondents are correct that the Rock Ferry site is larger than the Park High site, however most were probably not aware that Park High School also has designated playing fields within Birkenhead Park, an all weather pitch at the Joseph Paxton Campus and also uses Birkenhead Park's extensive facilities for PE and sporting events, which would continue to be the case for the new Academy. The building is about the same size as Rock Ferry's in terms of pupil capacity, which in both cases are significantly larger than is required for the number of pupils projected to attend the Academy at Park (approx 1250 capacity, 750 total Academy pupils). Demographics show that there is no need for current or

future expansion of the building, but Park's building would have scope to take additional pupils if required and there are no current plans to purchase any additional land in relation to an Academy on the Park High site.

- 4.7 **Afterschool and community facilities** - Before and after school activities are becoming progressively more essential to schools and their communities. The governing body of the Academy will want to ensure that pupils and their families have access to extended services, and this will be an important factor in the development of the Academy. The Park site is well served with public transport, both bus and rail.
- 4.8 **The Rock Ferry High site** - The Rock Ferry High school site was considered alongside others as a potential Academy site, however the Park site is more centrally located for the population it is intended to serve, Rock Ferry site being at the far south of the Birkenhead area with a great deal of competition for places from other neighbouring schools. The building is about the same size as Park High's in terms of pupil capacity, which in both cases are significantly larger than is required for the number of pupils projected to attend the Academy (approx 1250 capacity, 750 total Academy pupils). In addition, if Park High School were no longer in use as a school, the Council would have to find another use for the building which would pay the PFI contractual costs until 2031, or face a buyout from the PFI contract.

A small number of respondents asked if there were listed buildings on the Rock Ferry site - Ravenswood (currently occupied by the Sanderling Unit) is Grade II listed. Some respondents stated that the proposal was solely motivated by financial considerations due to the potential value of the Rock Ferry site. The reasons for the proposal are clearly in relation to dealing with demographics and surplus places, raising ambition and aspiration and raising standards. There are no plans or planning applications in relation to the Rock Ferry site. Decisions about the future of any school site no longer required as a school are only made when all the educational decisions have been taken.

4.9 **Demographics and Surplus Places**

Park High has 718 pupils on roll, 445 fewer than the peak in 2004 when there were 1,163 pupils at the school. This is projected to reach 701 pupils on roll in 2019. There are a large number of surplus places (43%, 532). This is predicted to rise to 44% (549 places) by 2019. One respondent from Park said that there were no surplus places at Park High School. Net Capacity is determined by a national formula based on the number, size and type of teaching spaces, and the admission number of the school, treating every school equally. The Net Capacity at Park High School is 1250 places.

- 4.10 Rock Ferry High School has 540 pupils on roll, compared with the recent peak of 1,222 in 2002. This is projected to fall further to 351 pupils on roll in 2019. There are a large number of surplus places (56%, 692). This is predicted to rise to 72% (881 places) by 2019. The Net Capacity at Rock Ferry High School is 1232 places. Some respondents said that rolls had fallen at Rock Ferry either because of the review process, or because the school does not have a sixth form. The falling roll at Rock Ferry predates the beginning of the review by several years, and relates to falling birth rates and parental preferences. At time of writing, 11 current pupils have applied via the Pupil Admissions team to transfer to alternative schools since January 2010, which is a relatively small number in terms of the whole school roll. Regarding sixth form provision, it should be noted that neighbouring Bebington High School, which has retained a sixth form department, is also experiencing a significantly falling roll.
- 4.11 The impact of housing development in the area for future pupil numbers has been raised. The Housing Market Renewal Initiative in this area incorporates Church Road in Tranmere, Fiveways in Rock Ferry, and the North Birkenhead/Bidston area. Housing Market Renewal is intended to stabilise the population of an area, not to

significantly increase it. For example in Fiveways, around 230 houses of a relatively poor standard will be cleared and will be replaced with 260 dwellings, of which 57 will be apartments. The number of pupils produced by new housing development is lower than might be expected. Wirral's projection is for 4-6 pupils per year group per 100 homes. The type of home also has an impact, as flats and retirement dwellings produce fewer pupils than houses. Also, the additional pupils are likely to be existing Wirral residents and may already live locally, in which case they may continue to attend their existing school. Local housing changes are unlikely to make a significant impact on the issue of surplus places in this area.

4.12 The establishment of Birkenhead High School for Girls as an Academy in the area was also raised as an issue causing more pressure on the roll of the existing schools and amplifying the existing gender imbalance in local mixed schools. This school admits 100 pupils per year group in the secondary element of the school. At present about 40% reside in the Birkenhead area, and many of these were existing primary pupils from the fee-paying era of the school. As time passes, the impact of an additional Girls school on the local area, as opposed to the wider Wirral area, may increase, and this will be monitored.

4.13 **Standards**

Respondents from both schools valued and praised the excellent work carried out by staff. A minority felt that standards at the two schools had not been made clear enough. The following paragraphs set out the position at the two schools.

4.14 *Contextual Value Added (CVA)*

This is a measure of how much progress pupils make at a school, compared with similar pupils in other schools. It takes into account various background factors – not just how well pupils have achieved at Key Stage 2 (Y6 SATS), but whether they are boys or girls, whether they have special educational needs, the level of deprivation in the area and so on.

In the last three years CVA scores show that pupils in both schools made at least the expected rate of progress, with pupils at Park High (2007, 2008) and Rock Ferry High (2008, 2009) making significantly more progress than similar pupils in other schools.

4.15 *National Challenge*

The Government says that at least 30% of the pupils at every school in the country should get 5 or more GCSEs at grade A* to C, including English and Maths. Schools that don't meet this target are called "National Challenge" schools and can get additional assistance to help them reach the target. Both Park High School and Rock Ferry High School are "National Challenge" schools. Although both schools remain below the target in 2009, the GCSE results show a year on year improvement.

4.16 *Ofsted*

Ofsted last inspected Rock Ferry High School in March 2008. This is taken from Ofsted's report.

"Rock Ferry High School is a good school providing high quality education and care. It provides an inclusive and attractive learning environment where all pupils are able to flourish in a happy, family, community atmosphere based on mutual respect and excellent relationships...The personal development and well-being of pupils is outstanding...The school provides its pupils with an outstanding curriculum."

Ofsted last inspected Park High School in January 2009. This is taken from Ofsted's report.

“This is a good school in which the quality of care, guidance and support is outstanding. The school has made very good progress since the last inspection because effective and purposeful leadership is driving the school forward strongly...The relentless focus on improvement and rapidly rising standards mean that the school has outstanding capacity to improve even further....The school uses its extensive links with outside agencies outstandingly well.”

The good work carried out by staff at both schools has been recognised. The intention of the sponsor team is to take the best practice from the two predecessor schools and to build on it in the Academy to improve standards and raise ambition and aspiration.

4.17 Needs of Pupils

Parents at both schools were understandably concerned about disruption to pupils education, particularly for those students who would be in Key Stage 4 at the time of the change, and for the pupils in the Sanderling Unit at Rock Ferry High School. Loss of staff was also raised as an issue.

The Academy will incorporate resourced provision for statemented pupils. Discussions have already begun with staff in the Sanderling Unit, and parents of pupils in the Sanderling Unit will be contacted in the coming weeks regarding discussions about the future of the Unit in relation to the Academy proposal. The local authority, which is responsible for ensuring that the needs of the pupils (as described in their statements of special educational needs) are met, will work closely with all those involved – pupils and their parents/carers, Sanderling staff and the sponsors of the academy – to ensure that the excellent work of The Sanderling Unit, achieved over many years, is not lost.

Transition arrangements, to be decided during the Feasibility stage, will protect pupils from disruption as far as possible. It may be that Key Stage 4 pupils continue and finish their secondary education on their existing site. If the proposal is approved, the support of all concerned is vital to ensure a smooth transition and minimise disruption to all pupils and their families, as well as staff.

Other suggestions raised during consultation for these schools

4.18 Alternative site options

During the consultation, four alternative sites for the Academy were raised. This included the Shaftesbury/Borough Road playing field site (see 4.4) and the Rock Ferry site (see 4.8).

- 4.19 One respondent to consultation suggested the Prenton High site as the site for the Mixed Academy, as a “site swap” with the Rock Ferry High site. This site is shared with Bedford Drive Primary School – the total site size is 34,760 m², which would technically require use of off-site pitches. The site is in Council ownership. The portion of the site occupied by Prenton High School is subject to a PFI contract until 2031.

There are no current plans to close or relocate Bedford Drive Primary School. This site is not recommended for further consideration.

- 4.20 A further site was suggested as the Hind Street former gasworks site. The site is large enough to house a 750 place Academy. It lies adjacent to Rock Retail park, and is close to Birkenhead town centre, Birkenhead Central station and the central bus hub.

However, only a small area of the total site is in Council ownership, and it is next to two large gasometers. The rules about exclusion zones around hazardous sites were tightened in the wake of the 2005 Buncefield oil depot explosion in Hertfordshire, and the Health and Safety Executive will not approve any development within 150 metres of a gasometer. A visually low grade brownfield site with major redevelopment costs, there are existing approved plans in place for commercial development and a new

access road which will divide the site. In addition to site purchase and brown field costs, removal of the gasometers, even if practical, is likely to require very significant Council funding. This site is not recommended for further consideration.

4.21 **Amalgamate Rock Ferry High and Bebington High Schools**

In this option, both Rock Ferry High School and Bebington High Schools would close and be replaced by a school, presumably at the Bebington High School site. There is extensive overlap between the pupil populations of the two schools, which are 1.7 miles apart. Bebington High School, like Park High School, is also a PFI school with all the same obligations and issues. It is also a Foundation Trust school, which means that the governing body of the school could refer a proposal to close or amalgamate the school to the School's Adjudicator.

If the Council is minded to proceed with this option, consultation would need to begin again. This option is not recommended for further consideration.

4.21 **Close Rock Ferry High School**

This option would retain Park High School as a community school. Parents of pupils currently attending Rock Ferry High School would be asked to express a preference for an alternative local school, which could include Park High School, however staff and pupils would not have the opportunity to participate and benefit from the Academy sponsor team's expertise and vision. Particularly for staff, in an amalgamation, both sets of staff are made technically redundant and can apply for posts in the new school. Under this option, only Rock Ferry staff would be made redundant and would be eligible for redeployment. The Sanderling Unit would also need to be rehoused in an alternative local secondary school by agreement with the governing body of that school.

The Governing body of Rock Ferry High are aware of this and made this point in their response to consultation:

"The demographic argument (pupil numbers) for closing Rock Ferry High School is clear.

Either:

(i) The school will simply close and pupils, the community and staff will have nothing,

Or:

(ii) Rock Ferry High School will close and join with Park High School, which will also close, to form a new Academy with the University of Chester as Lead Sponsor."

Should the Academy proposal fall at any stage, this option may require consideration. This option is not recommended to proceed at this time.

4.22 **Keep both schools open; either as community schools or as Academies**

This option does not deal with surplus places or demographics, and leaves both schools vulnerable to the considerable challenges of operating small schools.

As reported in Section 4 of the November 2007 Cabinet report, the Wirral working group agreed that a definite size beyond which a school was no longer viable was impossible to determine in Wirral. However, the discussion group did agree that compromises became increasingly difficult for cohorts approaching 100 pupils or less. National research on secondary school size has been scarce, but a study carried out in 2002 suggests that the optimum cohort size for a comprehensive school is **between 175 and 200** pupils. For an 11 to 16 secondary school, this would result in

between 875 and 1000 total pupils. The past, current and projected average cohort size at each school in the Birkenhead part of the Phase 1 review area is shown in the table below. Shaded cells indicate a fall in average cohort size.

Average Cohort Size	2008 11 to 16	2010 11 to 16	2019 11 to 16 projected	Difference 2008 to 2019
Park	174	144	140	-34
Prenton	128	127	144	+16
Ridgeway	152	140	123	-29
Rock Ferry	138	108	70	-68
St Anselm's	128	129	131	+3
Upton Hall	136	139	145	+9
Woodchurch	259	261	273	+14
BHS Academy	64	70	100	+36

Actual and projected average year group (cohort) size by school. Actuals are from January School Census 2008 and 2010.

- 4.23 Over the next five years, average cohorts at Prenton High, St Anselm's College, Upton Hall, Woodchurch High and Birkenhead High School Academy are projected to remain stable or grow in size, while average cohorts at Rock Ferry High, Ridgeway High and Park High are likely to experience a significant fall.
- 4.24 The Authority had expressed its concerns to the DCSF and GDST about the proposed size of Birkenhead High School Academy for Girls during the Feasibility stage for that Academy, and will continue to monitor the situation over the forthcoming years.
- 4.25 Overall in the Birkenhead area, the Authority projects a planning requirement for 32 classes per year group by 2019, however there are currently 38 classes worth of places in Birkenhead schools – we must look to reduce by one school. This “no change” option is therefore not recommended for further consideration.

5.0 Closure Consultation process

- 5.1 In order to establish the Academy, it is necessary to follow the statutory procedures to close the existing community secondary schools. The process must be completed during Feasibility before the Funding Agreement with the DCSF can be signed.
- 5.2 Currently the Academy is due to open in September 2011, as stated in the Expression of Interest. It is anticipated that the Funding Agreement between the sponsor team and the DCSF to finance the Academy will be signed by September 2010. For this to happen, it is necessary for the Council to secure the necessary approvals to close the existing schools. If the Council were to approve the current proposal, as consulted upon, involving the Academy on the Park site, it may just be possible to formally open the new Academy from 1st January 2011 if this earlier date is agreed by the Sponsor team as outweighing the notable advantages of a 1st September start date. However if

further consultation is required, for example, in relation to the eventual single site for the Academy, the January 2011 date is no longer a possibility.

- 5.3 The Local Authority's closure consultation ended on 7th April 2010. If Cabinet's view is that the Academy proposal should proceed, the next step is for statutory notices to be published, followed by a six week representation period during which comments and objections can be made by any person or organisation in relation to the proposals. Council's Cabinet, as the Decision Maker, would then be asked to determine the notices taking into consideration the representations received, to decide whether the predecessor schools should close, with a proviso that approval of the closures is conditional on the Funding Agreement for the new Academy being successfully signed. This decision is expected at the end of July 2010. The 6 week representation period following notice publication is statutory and cannot be compressed any further.
- 5.4 The sponsor team is currently undertaking the official consultation on the opening of the Academy. This consultation finishes on 30th April 2010. The consultation outcomes are reported to the Secretary of State as part of the required documentation for the Funding Agreement. The consultation is on-going, but has included meetings for stakeholders at both schools, and provision for written and e-mail submissions. The consultation website address is www.proposeduab.co.uk.
- Cabinet may feel that it is premature to agree a closure process on schools whilst the consultation process for the replacement school is still open. Cabinet may decide that it needs to see a response from the lead sponsor concerning their proposals after a full consideration of the consultation responses. In that case, the Director would submit a report agreed with the University of Chester to the Cabinet meeting on 27th May. The timetable would then be the column marked with an asterisk * on the table in 5.5 below.
- 5.5 The timetable below outlines the necessary stages of consultation for each school concerned. Consultation will involve staff, governors, parents and the local community in relation to each affected school, as well as other statutory consultees set out in guidance.

Action	Date	
Report to Cabinet	14 th January 2010	
Formal closure consultation begins (6 weeks)	24 th February 2010	
Formal closure consultation closes	7 th April 2010	
Report to Cabinet	15 th April 2010	27 th May 2010*
Statutory closure consultation begins (6 weeks)	12 th May 2010	9 th June 2010*
Statutory closure consultation closes	21 st June 2010	21 st July 2010*
Report to Cabinet	22 nd July 2010	2 nd September 2010*

Dates marked with * indicate the timeline if the report is deferred until 27th May Cabinet. Note that Cabinet dates after 15th April 2010 have not yet been set – indicative dates are given here as a guide only.

- 5.6 If the decision on the closure proposals is deferred to 27th May 2010 to coincide with the conclusion of the separate yet linked Academy consultation, it would not be possible to establish the Academy on 1st January 2011. It would certainly be possible to establish the Academy on 1st September 2011, unless there were further delays, for example concerning the choice of site. Should the lead sponsor and the Cabinet wish to pursue a new site, it is impossible at this stage to define what the timescale would be. It is inevitable, however, that the timescale would be longer than shown in 5.4 above.

6.0 Financial Implications

- 6.1 Operating a public consultation as part of the Feasibility stage of the Academy process has financial implications to the Council in terms of resources and staff time.
- 6.2 Capital funding for new and refurbished Academy buildings is from the national Building Schools for the Future programme. The responsibility to provide sites for Academies rests with the LA. There are likely to be significant costs in the management of the Academy programme and the transition stage which will be the subject of future reports.
- 6.3 Establishment of an Academy will result in an on-going impact on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). The Academy would be funded via an adjustment to the DSG through replication of the local formula, in addition, funding would also be removed based on the level of central expenditure within the schools budget. This funding adjustment may require the LA to cut central expenditure in line with the reduction in funding. Due to fixed costs, economies of scale and varying support provided for individual schools the budget reduction is unlikely to match the cost reductions achievable by no longer providing certain services to an Academy.
- 6.4 As the Academy would be located on the former Park High site, a leasing arrangement will need to be in place, otherwise at the end of the PFI term in 2031, the buildings and land which under Community status would previously have reverted to the Local Authority will be signed over to the Academy Trust without any payment or compensation to the Authority
- 6.5 Academies that open in the predecessor school buildings may be entitled to a small additional capital grant to cover costs such as renewed signage and other small capital projects required to open the school as an academy.

7.0 Staffing Implications

- 7.1 There are none arising directly from this report.
- 7.2 The creation of the Mixed Academy will require significant staff transfers under TUPE, provision of staff matched to the transition arrangements and the management of the transfer from existing staffing structures to those of the new Academy.
- 7.3 Costs arising from redundancies agreed prior to establishment of the new Academy are shared between the LA and the DCSF. Any redundancy costs arising following the establishment of the Academy are to be met from the Academy's budget.
- 7.4 As a PFI school, the Academy Trust will not be able to directly employ staff providing services under the PFI contract until the end of the contract.
- 7.5 There are contractual issues to be considered, for example existing contracts with private providers at Rock Ferry, e.g. catering.

8.0 Equal Opportunities Implications

- 8.1 It is essential to plan school provision across the Authority so that it is both efficient and effective in the interests of all pupils.
- 8.2 An equality impact assessment will be carried out on this report.

9.0 Community Safety Implications

- 9.1 Rationalisation and refurbishment of schools allow the most vulnerable accommodation to be removed and other security improvements carried out.

10.0 Local Agenda 21 Statement

- 10.1 The removal of old, inefficient accommodation contributes to Council principles and targets in respect of Agenda 21.

11.0 Planning Implications

- 11.1 The relationship between housing development policy and school place provision is a factor in considering surplus place removal.
- 11.2 All capital works will be subject to the relevant national and local planning legislation.

12.0 Anti-Poverty Implications

- 12.1 The capital investment in refurbished Academy provision is intended to contribute to "narrowing the gap" which is one of the Council's priorities.
- 12.2 The redistribution of funding released by school reorganisation, in combination with the Authority's intention to realign the schools budget to give higher levels of funding to schools with high levels of deprivation, as well as improved accommodation, goes towards raising aspirations and narrowing the attainment gap for vulnerable groups.

13.0 Social Inclusion Implications

- 13.1 School re-organisation and transforming accommodation through the forthcoming Building Schools for the Future programme and other schemes, provides opportunities to promote joint agency work to promote co-ordinated solutions for pupils and their families.

14.0 Local Member Support Implications

- 14.1 Secondary school re-organisation and potential surplus place removal have relevance to all Wards.
- 14.2 The secondary schools named in this report are located in Claughton and Rock Ferry Wards.

15.0 Background Papers

Audit Commission Report: Planning School Places in Wirral September 2004.

School pupil number returns, January 2010 (Annual Census return to DCSF).

School Net Capacity Calculation, July 2009, to DCSF requirements.

Consultation Documents

Other data held in Department including that provided by Wirral Health Authority.

16.0 Appendices

See list attached.

17.0 Summary

17.1 No one closes schools lightly. However, there is general agreement amongst all stakeholders that action must be taken to address the issue of surplus capacity. Officers are required to offer clear advice as to appropriate action in order to spend public money wisely and ensure all Wirral's children benefit equitably from the funding available. The recommendations below I believe will ensure best value for the future generations of children in the review areas, and more equitable spending for the benefit of all Wirral's pupils, from the savings made.

18.0 Recommendations

The Cabinet instructs the Director to follow one of two courses:

Either 1a:

- 1) That statutory proposals be published in respect of the following proposals
To close Rock Ferry High School and Park High Schools
- 2) That the closure date for the two schools be set in accordance with the proposed opening date for the new Academy, by agreement with the University of Chester as lead sponsor and the Department for Children, Schools and Families
- 3) That the Director of Children's Services be authorised to take all necessary steps to publish these proposals, ensure the prescribed procedures are followed, including requesting permissions from the Secretary of State, in furtherance of the proposals.

or 1b:

- 1) That the Director reports to the Cabinet meeting of 27th May 2010 setting out the views of the lead sponsor following the end of the consultation period.
- 2) That consideration of the current report be deferred until that time.

Howard Cooper

Director of Children's Services

List of Appendices

Appendix	Description
A	Minute to Cabinet report of 26 th November 2009
B	Minute to Cabinet report of 9 th December 2009
C	Minute to Cabinet report of 14 th January 2010
<i>Consultation</i>	
D	Consultation document and letters
E1	Analysis of Consultation
E2	Summary of responses