

IMPROVING SECONDARY SPECIAL SCHOOL PROVISION FOR PUPILS WITH COMPLEX LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Executive Summary

This report informs members of discussions that have taken place recently regarding secondary provision for pupils with complex learning difficulties and proposes further consultation in conjunction with a feasibility study on the amalgamation of the two schools.

Background

- 1.1 The Local Authority has two secondary special schools for pupils with complex learning difficulties (CLD). These schools meet the needs of pupils with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties. Many of the pupils have associated needs such as autistic spectrum disorders or physical and sensory disabilities. Foxfield School and Meadowside School both provide for pupils within the 11-19 age range. Following work undertaken by the seconded consultant headteacher and initial discussions with governors, staff and parents, the schools have approached the Authority and requested that formal consultation is undertaken with all of the relevant stakeholders on a proposal to amalgamate the two schools and create a single new school. This would provide appropriate facilities for 11-16 year old pupils in one building and an age appropriate environment for 16-19 year old students in a separate environment.
- 1.2 A range of exploratory meetings have been held with headteachers, staff, governors, parents and pupils in both of the two secondary CLD schools to gather views on current provision and how it could be enhanced. Consideration was given to the future needs of this group of young people and their families over the next decade and beyond, and the anticipated demands that will be placed upon Wirral's special school provision. A particular focus was on how the schools can best prepare the pupils for adult life, the choices that are available at 16 and 19 and how the special school provision offers a clear route for the young people with learning difficulties to progress onto relevant local post school provision.
- 1.3 This initial work within the two secondary special schools for pupils with CLD has considered the quality of the current provision, including the standards of teaching and learning, the accommodation, facilities and the opportunities available to the pupils and their families. There is agreement amongst many of the staff, governors and parents that provision could be improved if some reorganisation of places and changes in accommodation were made.
- 1.4 This report proposes that a formal consultation on a reorganisation of secondary special schools for pupils with complex learning difficulties is undertaken, to assess the feasibility and benefits of changing existing provision, and the degree of support for making such changes amongst all of the relevant stakeholders. This consultation could lead to the production of a plan to reorganise secondary CLD schools in Wirral over the next 5 years in a

way that has widespread support among stakeholders and which will lead to clear improvements in existing provision.

- 1.5 The Wirral special school headteachers group have worked collaboratively to begin the task of considering all of the different types of special school provision in Wirral, and setting out their view for how this could be developed and improved in the future. The headteachers began by considering the present and future provision needed locally for secondary age pupils with complex learning difficulties. There was a strong agreement that while the present standard of provision is very good it could be further improved. They suggest that an option for changing the organisation and location of provision should be explored and considered.
- 1.6 This work of the headteachers has progressed onto examining primary CLD schools, and provision for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Consideration of the future development of special school provision for pupils with moderate learning difficulties and specific learning difficulties is underway
- 2.0 **Secondary Provision for pupils with Complex Learning Difficulties - Current Position**
- 2.1 Meadowside and Foxfield currently provide for a combined current population of 201 pupils. (Foxfield has 136 pupils and Meadowside 65). The combined number of 16-19 year old students with complex learning difficulties is currently 72. While the numbers of pupils in each school vary over time the size of the combined population remains fairly constant. The projected number of 16-19 year old students across both schools is expected to remain between 70-80 over the next five years.
- 2.2 Both schools were inspected by Ofsted in 2006/2007 and were each judged to be good with outstanding features
- 2.3 Foxfield has traditionally provided for pupils with more complex needs including pupils with severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties, and associated difficulties including autism or complex, challenging behaviours. Meadowside's population historically covered a wider ability range of pupils but over recent years it has become increasingly similar to Foxfield's. There is now little difference between the pupil populations in both schools.
- 2.4 While facilities for 11-16 year old pupils in both schools are sufficient, Foxfield and Meadowside both have difficulties providing suitable specialist, discrete accommodation for their post 16 learners. Constraints in the buildings mean that there are limited 6th form facilities and both sites struggle to offer adequate environments for age appropriate vocational and work related learning environments alongside independent living skills teaching areas. Increased numbers of pupils have remained on roll post-16 because of the shortage of alternative provision in the local colleges.
- 2.5 While the 16-19 curriculum offered in each school is relevant and challenging, the size of the 6th form cohorts limits the range of options and opportunities that can be offered within the timetable. This issue will become a growing concern as the work in the Foundation Learning Tier and the new Diplomas begin to reshape the secondary curriculum offered to pupils in all schools including these two special schools.
- 2.6 Effective transition and coordination of provision between the special schools and the local further education colleges, work place training organisations and adults social services is a key issue. Partner organisations suggest this could improve if they had to work with fewer special school sixth forms.

- 2.7 A disproportionately high number of students with learning difficulties progress from Wirral schools to out of area specialist residential FE colleges. These college placements are currently funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). A lack of a clear progression route into suitable, high quality local post school provision is often a key factor behind applications by students and their parents to these specialist providers. Improved local post school provision for young adults with learning difficulties, which closely links to the special school sixth form, would offer an improved local route for students with such needs. This could also result in a substantial saving for the Authority, who take over responsibility for post school provision including FE college costs for this group of students from 2010.
- 2.8 The Learning and Skills Council are currently funding a number of new initiatives that will improve the local opportunities available to young people with learning difficulties and disabilities when they leave school. While substantial progress has been made over the last two years, key issues that require ongoing attention include transition arrangements, partnership planning and joint funding arrangements, and ensuring that clear progression pathways exist between special school sixth form provision and local post school providers. Better partnership planning has now been established between the Children and Young Peoples Department, the LSC, Connexions, Health and Adult Social Services to improve transition and local provision for this group of young people.
- 2.9 It is the view of the special school headteachers that all of Wirral's provision for 11-16 year old pupils with complex learning difficulties should be combined into a single special school. The long term objective is to have newly built accommodation that would be funded from Building Schools for the Future funding that is co-located alongside a secondary mainstream school. In the meantime the present Foxfield School building has sufficient space and facilities needed to accommodate the combined population of pupils.
- 2.10 Headteachers also recommend that a specialist provision for the combined population of 16-19 year old students with learning difficulties should be established on another site that is more focussed on the curriculum, social and independence needs of this group of young people. Initially the present Meadowside site could be used for this purpose with minor modifications but the medium term objective would be to create new co-located specialist sixth form provision alongside a local FE college.
- 2.11 There is some interest and support within the Learning and Skills Council for creating combined specialist 16-19 provision for Wirral's students with learning difficulties. Initial conversations have also taken place with the Principals of both of the local colleges who are generally supportive of this suggestion.
- 2.12 **The findings from initial discussions with governors, staff and parents**
- 2.13 A number of parents attended the initial discussion meetings in both schools. All of those parents present were generally positive about their child's current school and education and care that was provided.
- 2.14 Given the high standard of current practice within both secondary special schools for pupils with complex learning difficulties there was agreement that any changes that were made to local provision must build on existing standards and bring clear benefits for pupils and their families .
- 2.15 The majority of people involved in the initial discussions expressed concern about the transition from school to adult life, the planning and preparation for young people entering the adult world and the support that is available to them. Many students and their parents currently look towards specialist provision outside Wirral as the best post school option, as

they see limited local options and choices of relevant provision in further education, employment training and adult care. Students and parents suggest that they would prefer to access local provision across the 16-25 age range rather than feel out of area provision is necessary.

- 2.16 The development of extended schools provision and services for pupils with complex learning difficulties, including wrap around child care, better year round access to health professionals and improved school holiday activities was another priority amongst all parents for future development.
- 2.17 Many parents, staff and governors in the two secondary special schools believe that the cohorts of pupils could combine without great difficulty. A small number of people voiced concern over the loss of choice between secondary provision if the present two schools were combined.
- 2.18 There was strong support for improving post 16 opportunities which offered more choice for students in the sixth form and lead to a better transition into post school provision.

3.0 Financial and Staffing Implications

- 3.1 The proposed consultation and feasibility exercises will be undertaken by officers within the Children and Young Peoples Department, in conjunction with the special school headteachers and other relevant partners. The financial and staffing implications of any changes would be considered as part of this exercise.

4.0 Equal Opportunities Implications

- 4.1 The Local Authority is required to work with the LSC to ensure that good quality local provision is available for students with learning difficulties aged 16-19. In 2010 this duty transfers wholly to the Local Authority, who will then have responsibility for this group of learners from the age of 16-25.

5.0 Community Safety Implications

- 5.1 There are none arising out of this report

6.0 Local Agenda 21 Statement

- 6.1 There are none arising out of this report

7.0 Planning Implications

- 7.1 At this stage there are no implications from the recommendations

8.0 Anti Poverty implications

- 8.1 There are none arising out of this report

9.0 Social inclusion implications

- 9.1 It is considered more age appropriate to have a separate sixth form provision for pupils with complex learning difficulties. Any additional co-location of special school provision alongside a mainstream school or further education college would increase the opportunities for pupils

with learning difficulties to be included in learning experiences and social activities alongside their mainstream peers.

10.0 Local Member Support implications

10.1 Pupils from both of the secondary schools for pupils with complex learning difficulties come from all areas of the Wirral

11.0 Background Papers

None

12.0 Recommendations

That

(1) approval be given to undertake a feasibility exercise to identify the practical and financial implications of amalgamating Foxfield School and Meadowside School;

(2) approval be given for an extensive consultation exercise to be undertaken with pupils, parents and all other relevant stakeholders to gauge wider support for the amalgamation of Foxfield School and Meadowside School and the establishment of a single split site 11-19 provision for pupils with complex learning difficulties; and

(3) approval be given to undertake a detailed exploration with the Learning and Skills Council of the feasibility of developing a post 16 facility which is co-located with a local college.

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