

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET – 15TH JANUARY 2009

REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH AN ACADEMY AT BIRKENHEAD HIGH SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The proposal to establish an Academy at the current Independent Birkenhead High School for Girls is currently nearing the end of the formal feasibility stage. The steering group for the project has been consulting with various stakeholders regarding the scheme. A letter from the Cabinet member to the steering group is attached as Appendix A to this report. The Council has now to decide formally whether it supports the establishment of the project despite some of the reservations which have been expressed previously by officers and reiterated in the Cabinet member's letter. The Secretary of State will then make a decision on whether to proceed with the proposal or not. The "Expression of Interest" which sets out the vision and rationale for the Academy is attached at Annexe B. My initial response to that is at Annexe C. The proposed Academy's admission arrangements are enclosed at Annex (D). The balance of this report sets out the issues for the Cabinet to consider.

1.0 Background

1.1 The announcement of the proposal to establish an Academy at Birkenhead High School was made publicly by the then Minister for Schools, Lord Adonis to a conference in Autumn 2007. There had been no prior consultation with the Authority which was at that time embarking on the first stages of consulting with secondary schools in Wirral about the necessity to review provision across the borough in the light of falling rolls. Subsequent discussions both with the Department for Children Schools and Families and with the Office of the Schools Commissioner indicated that there was a strong expectation on their part that the proposal would come to fruition and the Academy in due course be approved. Following these discussions, where officers of the Authority had made clear the difficulties the proposal created for the production of a coherent strategy for educational provision across Birkenhead, the Schools Commissioner and the Minister asked for an independent review of the position which resulted in the "Gyte Report". This was the subject of a previous report to Cabinet in November.

2.0 Issues

2.1 It has appeared to officers since the initial announcement that there has been a paradox at the heart of the proposal which it has proved impossible to resolve entirely satisfactorily. The purpose of the Academies programme and the justification for the large investment of public funds both into the buildings and into the substantial revenue start up costs of Academies is that they represent a radical solution to deep seated and long term problems of inadequate schooling in areas of high deprivation. It would be the expectation that any Academy would be a key part of a determined attempt to drive up standards amongst communities where these had remained stubbornly low. In some senses the Birkenhead Academy may be thought to be well placed to make just such a contribution. It is situated within easy walking distance of

many of Wirral's (and indeed England's) most deprived young people. Clearly as a fee paying independent school it has not historically served such a community but it could be argued that its currently good facilities (which through Academy investment would become excellent), combined with its traditional ethos of high expectation might transform opportunities for a large number of deprived girls. The expression of interest for the Academy however makes clear that it is the intention of the Academy to continue to serve "a wider area", by which is meant the whole of Wirral and beyond. Furthermore the school has been concerned to emphasise that in drawing its pupils from a wider area, the addition of this provision at a time when the council is looking to rationalise overall education provision in Birkenhead would not impact significantly upon neighbouring schools. Indeed in meetings that took place involving representatives of the Authority and the Minister during the summer it was stressed that the school would not look to increase its numbers so that its impact on neighbouring schools would be minimal.

2.2 Admission Arrangements

The most significant development with regard to this proposal since the submission of the Expression of Interest has been the establishing of admission arrangements for the school. These arrangements are attached at Annexe D. The main features to note are as follows:-

The arrangements for admission into reception give priority, where there is oversubscription, to girls at the Academy's nursery (the first priority, as required by law, would be for Children in Care). This differs from the Authority's admission procedures and may have the effect of narrowing access to the Academy.

The admission number into Reception is 40. Pupils within the Academy at Year 6 would then continue into Year 7 ie. secondary phase. A further 60 pupils would be admitted at Year 7 making a total admission number for that year of 100. If oversubscribed the Academy would select 10% of the 60 pupils by reference to an aptitude in music, which is one of the Academy's proposed specialisms. All remaining places would be allocated according to a "fair banding" procedure. This would involve all applicants for places undertaking a test, places being allocated across the ability range in 5 bands. This is described in detail within Annexe D.

It is proposed to set the admission number for the Sixth Form at 100.

2.3 Expected Numbers

The latest number on roll we have from the school is 686 (across the age range ie including all pupils from foundation to sixth form). The Expression of Interest indicates that this will rise to 998.

3.0 Wider Implications for school provision in Birkenhead

3.1 The implications for other schools arising from the establishment of the Academy depend upon how many parents seek to gain places at the Academy (both at primary and secondary level) and where those parents live. While it is the schools plan to continue to draw from a wide geographical distribution, and the initial applications for such places in the current round would seem to broadly reflect that ambition, it seems likely that in future the school will increasingly serve girls who live nearer to the site. This view is based upon the variety of options available to parents across Wirral,

including a number of good schools which include single sex as well as co-educational schools, grammar schools and all ability schools. Whilst it is impossible to predict the future with certainty it would seem to be wise to assume that in due course the school, if it succeeds, will draw pupils increasingly from Birkenhead. We therefore need to take account of that in planning for the future of Birkenhead provision generally.

3.2 Primary Schools

We are currently embarking upon round 5 of the rolling review of primary provision. All areas of the borough have been covered in rounds 1-4 and we have now returned to look again at what may be broadly described as "Birkenhead east of the motorway". It will be difficult to take account in this review of any impact the Academy may have. Current numbers within the primary part of Birkenhead High School were, at the time of the Expression of Interest, 209 pupils in total (excluding nursery) ranging from 45 pupils in Year 6, to 17 in Reception. Anecdotal evidence from some nearby primary schools indicates that there has been some modest transfer of pupils into the school by parents anticipating the approval of the Academy.

3.3 Secondary Schools

The Expression of Interest shows that there were 334 pupils at 11-16 within the school ranging from 55 in Year 7 to 71 in Year 11. Members will be aware that the Council is currently reviewing secondary provision in Birkenhead and clearly the establishment of the Academy is a significant factor to be taken into account in determining the future shape of provision.

There are two key issues: overall numbers and the gender balance. If the assumption is made that a revamped, improved overall secondary estate in Birkenhead would be sufficiently attractive to retain all Birkenhead children who were seeking places in non-catholic all ability schools, then it would be reasonable to plan for a requirement of 27 forms of entry. Assuming an approximately equal divide of boys and girls, we therefore need places for 14½ forms of entry each. The Council is already committed to rebuilding Woodchurch High School as its One School Pathfinder. This is currently planned to provide for 9 forms of entry. The school has a slight imbalance between the sexes with more boys than girls – but not greatly so. Prenton High School has been extensively rebuilt and remodelled and now provides excellent facilities and is proving most attractive to parents. It provides 5 forms of entry for girls.

If the Council proceeds to create a new school, as a further Academy, and closes Park High School and Rock Ferry High School and if such an Academy were to be planned, for say, 5 FE and if Birkenhead High School were estimated to provide 2-3 FE of places for Birkenhead Girls that would leave an estimated 6 forms of entry for Ridgeway High School. However if Woodchurch remained reasonably balanced in terms of gender and both Prenton and Birkenhead Girls took between them 8/9 FE then that would only leave around 1-2 forms of entry for girls to be shared between the new Academy and Ridgeway. This is a critical issue for consideration both within the secondary review of Birkenhead and in deciding how to respond to the Birkenhead High Academy proposal.

4.0 **Financial and Staffing Implications**

The Birkenhead High Academy will be funded centrally by Government. The Council has already agreed that if the proposal is approved it will be willing to procure the building works, as required under the Partnership for Schools procurement framework, subject to there being no financial risk to the Council (Cabinet 26th June Minute 82).

5.0 Staffing Implications

There are none as a direct consequence of this report.

6.0 Equal Opportunities Implications

The issues around potential gender imbalance are described in the body of the report.

7.0 Community Safety Implications

There are none.

8.0 Local Agenda 21 Implications

Surplus places constitute a waste of resources

9.0 Planning Implications

Any building proposals will be subject to the usual planning consents.

10.0 Anti-poverty Implications/ Social Inclusion Implications

The Academy proposal is designed to counter educational disadvantage in deprived communities. The extent to which this proposal contributes to that is considered in the report.

11.0 Local Member Support Implications

All wards are affected – particularly those in Birkenhead

12.0 Background Papers

Correspondence, DCSF Website.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Cabinet's views are requested as to its formal response to the proposal to establish an Academy at Birkenhead High School.

Howard Cooper
Director of Children's Services