

REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES: OUTCOME OF CONSULTATIONS ON OPTIONS PUT FORWARD FOR THE BROMBOROUGH AND EASTHAM PLANNING AREA

Executive Summary

- 1.0 This report advises the Cabinet of the outcomes of the consultation process which has taken place in the Bromborough and Eastham planning area, in respect of the options for consultation agreed at Cabinet on 14th December 2005. These options were presented as a result of the report to Cabinet of 20th October 2005, which set out, in some detail, the position regarding primary school pupil numbers and school place provision across the Authority. This report describes the responses to the various options put forward for discussion, including additional suggestions put forward during the consultation process, and makes recommendations with regard to statutory proposals in each area under review.

Background

2.0 Context Of The School Organisation Plan

Until March 2005, School Organisation Committees were required by law to have regard to the School Organisation Plan when considering statutory proposals for changes to schools' provision. The plan itself was approved on a regular basis by the School Organisation Committee. However the School Organisation Plan was one of seven statutory plans repealed by the Children Act 2004. Nevertheless the general analysis and principles which the School Organisation Committee set out in that plan for the consideration of statutory proposals remains an important context when considering this report.

2.1. DfES guidance on the School Organisation Plan states that

"The key purpose of the School Organisation Plan is to set out clearly how the Local Education Authority (LEA) plans to meet its statutory responsibility to secure sufficient education provision within its area in order to promote higher standards of attainment. It should be designed to help the key stakeholders – LEA, schools, promoters, parents and local communities, understand what school places are needed at present and in future, and how they are provided. Importantly it will be the starting point for the School Organisation Committee (SOC) for the area in considering statutory proposals for changes to schools".

- 2.2 As indicated above, the plan contains the policies and principles proposed by the LEA and agreed by the School Organisation Committee for the planning of school provision. These policies and principles are set out at Appendix 1 to the report. It will be seen that the intention (prior to the abolition of the requirement to consider the plan) was that any proposal should be considered within the context of the principles set out in paragraphs 3 to 5 of the Policies and Principles. There is an over-riding requirement that overall provision is effective and efficient, i.e. that there should be an appropriate balance between school places and the following principles/criteria:

- parental preference

- delivering the curriculum
- meeting statutory and desirable goals on class sizes
- maintaining or promoting diversity
- SEN
- standards
- accessibility
- (secondary schools only) post 16 provision
- contribution to the community.

Paragraph 4 of the Policies and Principles adds the issue of overall school size within the primary sector and paragraph 5 deals specifically with the objectives of the Diocesan authorities.

2.3 **View of the Wirral Schools Forum**

Members should note that the Schools Forum of 28.6.05 passed the following resolution:

“Resolved - That Wirral Schools Forum recognises that the local education authority has a duty to maintain and fund schools in an efficient and effective manner. This implies that the number of schools should reflect the pupil population and the needs of Wirral communities, which could mean the amalgamation or closure of schools for the efficiency and effectiveness of the service.”

2.4 Following the presentation of the most recent overall Primary School Place Provision report on 20th October 2005, Cabinet instructed that four Area Reviews be carried out : Bebington, Spital, Thornton Hough, and Bromborough including Eastham. These areas equate to the small planning areas in the Authority’s School Organisation Plan. The outcomes of these area reviews were reported to Cabinet on 14th December 2005 and a copy of the report is attached as Appendix 2.

2.5 Following consideration of that report, Cabinet agreed that no options would be brought forward for the Bebington, Spital and Thornton Hough small planning areas at this time, although numbers and place provision would be kept under review. A number of options for consultation were proposed in respect of the Bromborough and Eastham small planning area, which were:

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| A | Reduce capacity at Brookhurst Primary School |
| B | Close Bromborough Pool Primary School |
| C1 | Close St Mary’s CE (Controlled) Primary School |
| C2 | Close Millfields Primary School |
| C3 | Re-build St Mary’s CE in Eastham and Close Millfields Primary School |
| C4 | Amalgamate St Mary’s CE and Heygarth Primary Schools |
| C5 | Amalgamate Millfields Primary and Heygarth Primary at either site |
| C6 | Amalgamate Millfields, Heygarth and St Mary’s CE on a single site |
| D1 | Close Mendell Primary |
| D2 | Amalgamate Mendell Primary and Woodslee Primary on either site |
| D3 | Reduce admission number at Mendell Primary |

These options were approved for consultation.

- 2.6 These options were within the context set out by the Director of Education and Cultural Services, of the need to reduce the growing number of primary school surplus places and took account of Audit Commission guidance on surplus places against a continuing fall in the number of primary age pupils, and issues identified in the recent Joint Area Review. In addition to removing unnecessary surplus places, the options were intended to make more effective use of resources, take account of patterns of parental preference, reflect the additional challenges of maintaining small schools in an urban area and contribute to the wider standards agenda through the more efficient use of resources.
- 2.7 The Cabinet resolution of 14th December 2005 required consultation to be “full and wide ranging” on the agreed options for discussion. 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. This comprised:
 - (i) the full Consultation document sent to all schools in each area; local One-Stop shops, libraries and the Central Library; Wallasey Town Hall; the Hamilton Building (LEA Headquarters) and relevant Community Centres;
 - (ii) a review pack comprising all the relevant background information sent to all the locations in (i) above;
 - (iii) parents'/carers' consultation leaflets and comments forms to all parents/carers, via all schools named in the options;
 - (iv) standard letters to all the schools in the small planning areas, one format for schools named in the options and one for other schools in the small planning area.
 - 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 the standard letters to schools. 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 each of the schools named in options for closure or amalgamation. These meetings followed the same format, with a presentation on the overall position and the school specific position followed by, on average, 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, including Diocesan representatives where appropriate. 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 LEA documentation produced for the consultation has been shared with the Diocesan Bodies.
- 2.8 As was to be expected, each school community set out in the options and named for possible closure or amalgamation has made strong representations that these actions

should not take place in respect of their school. However, there has been an acceptance demonstrated at the meetings and in many of the other responses that the issue of surplus places does need to be addressed. The consultation process and the presentation of LEA, small planning area 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.

2.9 In addition to the detail set out below, further records of views put forward during the consultation period are attached as Appendices: see the list at the end of this report. 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.

Outcome of the Consultation

3.0 Further suggestions were made as part of the consultation process:

- Amalgamate Mendell Primary with either Woodslee Primary or Raeburn Primary, keeping the Mendell site as an Infant feeder school
- Expand St Mary's CE Primary existing building to take more children
- Amalgamate St Mary's CE Primary with Millfields Primary to make a new Church of England primary school
- Amalgamate or federate Bromborough Pool Primary with Woodslee Primary, keeping the Bromborough Pool site as an Infant annexe
- Amalgamate Bromborough Pool Primary with Mendell Primary

Further discussion of these suggestions is given with the related consultation options below.

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

- General understanding of the falling rolls situation and the need for change
- Effect of proposed housing 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
- 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 facilities, such as adult learning and breakfast clubs
- Relationship between school and community
- Proximity of green space
- Maintenance of denominational choice
- Keeping friends and siblings together

- Staff redeployment
- Continuity of school over several generations.

3.2 **Responses from the Anglican and Roman Catholic Diocese**

The Diocese of Chester and the Diocese of Shrewsbury are key partners along with the LEA in making provision for the education of children in Wirral. We have received a written submission from the Diocese of Chester which has been included within the report at Appendix 6. Cabinet is requested to give careful consideration to this response. Both Dioceses are represented separately on the School Organisation Committee and each has a vote on that Committee.

Diocese of Chester Education Service submission (comment)

- 3.3 The Diocesan Director of Education for the Chester Diocese explains that the main objective of that Diocese is the maintenance of a Church of England school in this area.
- 3.4 St Mary's is a Controlled school, not an Aided school. This means, that while retaining a religious dimension through its association with the church, its admissions are controlled by the LEA. The religious dimension of the school therefore relies to a large extent on its close association with its church.
- 3.5 It is understandable that the Diocese should be concerned if this consultation resulted in proposals which would mean there would no longer be a Church of England primary school in this area. The nearest Church of England primary schools to St Mary's CE (Controlled) Primary School are Little Sutton CE (Controlled) Primary School, Cheshire (2 miles), Willaston CE (Controlled) Primary School, Cheshire (2.5 miles) and St Andrew's CE (Aided) Primary in Bebington (3.5 miles).

4.0 **Commentary on Bromborough and Eastham options**

a) Commentary on agreed Cabinet options

The next section of the report comments on the agreed options, discussing individual schools separately where appropriate.

A Reduce capacity at Brookhurst Primary School

- 4.1 This option was included at the suggestion of the Governing body of Brookhurst Primary. Their letter to the Director is enclosed as Appendix 7. This school has 215 pupils on roll, but a large number of surplus places (85, 28%). Reducing the admission number and capacity of the school should maintain sufficient places for the current and projected children in the Brookhurst catchment zone. The school could still take out of zone applicants if vacancies remained. If the two classes currently housed in a mobile classroom were to be relocated into the main school, the two disused mobiles could be removed, reducing maintenance demands. If the Pre-school extends its lease to include an additional classroom, this would increase the school's income. Reducing the overall floor area of the school would not only reduce surplus places, but would allow the LEA to use its resources more effectively.

- 4.2 Standards at Key Stage 2 in 2005 for all core subjects were above the Wirral and national averages. The overall value added score (101.2) for 2005 shows pupils are making above the expected rate of progress. (see Appendix 4). Attendance at Brookhurst is above the Wirral average.
- 4.3 Reducing the admission number does not require publication of a statutory proposal under the School Organisation Regulations. The admission arrangements for 2007 have not yet been finalised. However, making an alteration after 15th April 2006 would require an in-year variation to be referred to the Adjudicator. As the new admission number would be lower than the existing number, a notice must also be published in a local paper advising parents of their right to object to the Adjudicator about the admission number.
- 4.4 Those who responded to consultation were largely in favour of this option. Some respondents were concerned that there had not been a meeting at the school for parents to find out more about this option. As this option did not involve closure or amalgamation, it was felt that a meeting would not be required. The headteacher raised a concern about the possibility of more than 30 children in the 2006 Foundation 2 entry causing organisational problems within the school due to the infant class size limit. This is not expected to be an issue, although the allocations for 2006 have not yet been finalised.

B Closure of Bromborough Pool Primary School

- 5.0 There are currently 50 pupils on roll at Bromborough Pool Primary School, about half the number there were 25 years ago (108). This is largely the result of falling population, although critically, 73% of the parents living within its catchment zone choose to send their children elsewhere, principally to Woodslee Primary. 45% of the children who were on roll at the school in summer 2005 came from outside the schools catchment zone. The school now has 35% (27) surplus places, and this is not projected to decrease significantly. Between 2000 and 2005, the school had the second highest net loss of pupils, as 10% of pupils who began at the school left to attend another local school before the end of primary phase. In 2003-2004, expenditure per pupil was £4,269 compared with the Wirral average of £2,737. This high cost was also identified by Ofsted, who said that the school provided only "satisfactory" value for money.
- 5.1 Standards at Key Stage 2 in 2005 for all core subjects were below the Wirral and national averages, except science at Level 4. The school had less than 10 pupils eligible for KS2 assessment in 2005 and the value added score is therefore not published in the performance tables. Attendance at the school is below the Wirral average.
- 5.2 Some respondents stated that the school had a balanced budget. The Authority funds its schools through the operation of its local funding formula. The formula is designed so as to ensure that sufficient resources are made available to schools for the pupils they have to teach. The formula ensures that, however small a school, it will have sufficient resources. One would not therefore expect any school, simply through smallness, to become financially unviable. What does happen is that small schools draw in a greater share of the resource per pupil from the total available for distributing among all schools.

Since the total sum available for spending on all our children does not increase if we choose as an Authority to organise our children in more schools than is necessary for the efficient and effective delivery of education, it follows that the maintenance of small schools, where this is not necessary, comes at the expense of all other children.

The key questions therefore in terms of use of resources are:

- i) How small does a school need to be within the context of Wirral before it would be considered as contributing to an ineffective use of resource?
- ii) Are there reasons in specific cases why individual schools although “small” by Wirral standards should continue to be maintained even though they are relatively expensive?

5.3 With regard to Wirral’s policy on small schools, the School Organisation Plan (agreed in 2003) contained the proposal that the LEA “should consider the implications of an increasing number of primary schools with less than one form of entry – 30 pupils and therefore primary schools with fewer than 210 pupils i.e. 7 x 30”. That review was carried out in great detail and with the involvement of a wide range of Headteachers, and culminated in the policy document “The Pursuit of Excellence”, extracts of which are included in Appendix 5. This policy adopted in 2004 suggests that a school should have at least 180 pupils in order to be viable. The DfES guidance says that “Schools with fewer than 150 pupils may be educationally and financially sustainable only through substantial subsidies via their local authorities funding formula” :

www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/fallingschoolrolls/schools/educational_decisions

One problematic issue which is discussed in some detail in Appendix 5 is the potential difficulty of mixed age teaching, especially across key stages.

- 5.4 With regard to organisational viability there can be no question that small schools face greater challenges. This of course does not mean that at any one time a particular small school cannot produce excellence through having outstanding teachers. Furthermore it is often the case when small schools are considered nationally that many small schools enjoy a number of advantages as a result of their location and are attractive to staff. In many parts of the country it is a clear necessity to maintain small schools because the alternative would be that children be transported, perhaps for a number of miles, to the nearest school. Authorities who have such schools receive additional funding from the government which enables them to spend more on these schools without it being at the expense of others, in order for them to be organisationally viable. Wirral does not receive this element of grant.
- 5.5 Our experience in Wirral, has been that while overall we have had remarkably few primary schools who have fallen into one of the Ofsted categories of concern, those that have done so have been among our smaller schools. We do not believe that this is coincidence: it arises because of the inevitable requirement on individual staff in small schools to take on wider burdens of responsibility and from the disproportionate impact which one weaker member of staff will have on the school as a whole.
- 5.6 Bromborough Pool Primary was placed in Special Measures in 2002, and has received a very considerable amount of support from the LEA over recent years in order to bring about improvements. A number of teachers have managed the school since the departure of the previous permanent headteacher. The result was that in the Ofsted inspection May 2005 Bromborough Pool Primary School was judged to be “a good school where pupils achieve well”, although standards were below average at

the age of eleven. The leadership and management were judged “very good”. However, the school’s capacity to maintain satisfactory standards is not yet proven.

- 5.7 Some respondents suggested that new housing in the area could generate more children for the school. Riverside Housing in association with a private sector partner are proposing to build 28 family houses and 20 apartments aimed at retired people within the village. The Audit Commission says that 100 new houses generates approximately 4 pupils per year group. Twenty-eight family houses could reasonably be expected to produce 9-10 primary age children in total, although some of these would be families already living in the area. The proposed Redrow development on the Unilever site in Port Sunlight is in the early stages of planning, and could provide up to 190 two, three and four bedroom apartments and houses over the next four to five years. This potential development would be likely to be zoned to one of the neighbouring primary schools (Church Drive, Woodslee, Poulton Lancelyn) and is unlikely to provide many pupils to Bromborough Pool. It should also be remembered that families moving into new housing in Wirral will tend to be existing Wirral residents. If all the surplus places in the school were taken up by “new” children from elsewhere in Wirral, the issues faced by the school because of its small size and lack of facilities would remain, and the surplus places would simply transfer to another school.
- 5.8 The pre-school playgroup which formerly occupied part of the school has moved into the nearby church hall. Concerns have been raised that the pre-school would suffer if the school were to close. While some preschools are co-located in school buildings or on school sites, privately run pre-schools operate successfully across the Borough without any special tie or proximity to a particular school. The school runs an informal after school club which is valued by parents, and this provision would need to be considered in any school to which children might transfer.
- 5.9 Riverside Housing own the grade II listed Bromborough Pool Primary site, which the Council leases for a “peppercorn” rent of £10 per annum. The building has undergone improvements in recent years, including a staffroom extension, entrance improvements and the introduction of indoor toilets. However, the building is limited to the extensions that can be made, and staff work hard to overcome the limitations of facilities for learning which are not those which would be expected of a 21st century education.
- 5.10 All current and projected pupils from Bromborough Pool Primary could be accommodated at Woodslee Primary School without requiring any new classroom provision. Almost half of the children who live in the Bromborough Pool catchment zone already attend Woodslee Primary School, and there are 12 alternative primary schools within a 2 mile radius of the school. The catchment zone of Bromborough Pool would, in the main, be allocated to Woodslee Primary, with the exception of a small non-residential area in the south of the zone which could be allocated to Mendell Primary. Some parents were concerned that children may be forced to return to a school which they had left for various personal reasons. In the event of closure, parents who did not wish their child to attend Woodslee Primary would be asked to complete a preference form, and places allocated using the usual admission criteria, including availability of places.
- 5.11 Some consultees were of the opinion that due the small size of the school and the fact that the site is owned by Riverside, closure would not reduce surplus places significantly or redirect any money into the overall schools budget. Closure of Bromborough Pool would reduce surplus places by 2%, which would go some way to reducing the surplus place issue in this planning area (more so in combination with

other potential options). Excluding pupil-related components of the budget formula which follow the children to their destination, on 2003-2004 data £87,148 would be released into the overall schools budget annually which is equivalent to an additional £3.30 per primary pupil per annum.

- 5.12 The rising Wirral birth was raised during consultation. The Office for National Statistics provides an annual birth figure for the whole borough, which does indeed show a slight rise in the provisional birth figures for 2003 and 2004. ONS demographers have been expecting the birth rate per woman to stabilise at around 1.7 per woman, up from a low of 1.6 children per woman, and this may be the beginning of a period of stabilisation, albeit at a much lower level. However, the ONS also state that it is too soon to tell if this rise will be sustained.

Birth Year	ONS Birth figure	Difference from year before	Cumulative difference
1996	3809		
1997	3685	-124	-124
1998	3576	-109	-233
1999	3506	-70	-303
2000	3438	-68	-371
2001	3308	-130	-501
2002	3272	-36	-537
2003	3504	+232	-305
2004	3521	+17	-288

The Authority receives more detailed data from the ONS with address information. This enables accurate mapping of where children lived at the time of their birth. The number of Foundation 2 children attending all the Bromborough and Eastham schools in January 1996, when the last major alteration was made to school provision by amalgamating Mill Park Infants and Juniors, was 339. The total number of 2004 cohort births for F2 entry in 2009, living within the catchment areas of these schools was 246. Surplus places will remain an issue in this area for the foreseeable future.

- 5.13 The strong feeling at the meeting of stakeholders, and during the consultation period, was that the school formed a vital, historical part of the community of Bromborough Pool Village and should not be closed. There was a view that the criteria being applied by the Authority did not take sufficient account of the contribution made by the existence of the school to the sustainability of the community. It was suggested that the relatively high cost per pupil when compared with other schools should be mitigated in some way to reflect this contribution.
- 5.14 The contribution of small schools to parental choice, and the suggestion that larger schools might have large classes were other points raised by several respondents. Concerns were also raised about the possibility of children being forced to return to schools which they had previously left for various personal reasons, and about the option for amalgamation of Woodslee and Mendell at the Mendell site, which it was felt would significantly increase the distance some children would have to travel to school compared with amalgamation at the Woodslee site.
- 5.15 This option is recommended to proceed as a statutory proposal.

The C Options – Heygarth Primary, Millfields Primary and St Mary’s CE Primary

All the C options involve these three schools to varying degrees. To avoid repetition, each school will be commented on separately before the options for this part of the area are discussed.

St Mary's CE Primary School

- 6.0 There are currently (2006) 105 pupils on roll at St Mary's, which means there are now 9% (11) surplus places. It is too soon to say whether this will be sustained, but the numbers of children on roll at St Mary's are not predicted to increase significantly. St Mary's shares its catchment area with Heygarth Primary School, and receives 17% of the children from this joint zone. Between 2000 and 2005, there was a net loss of 5% of pupils who began at St Mary's to other local schools before the end of primary phase. The expenditure per pupil in 2003-2004 was £3,005, compared with the Wirral average of £2,737.
- 6.1 Standards at Key Stage 2 in 2005 for all core subjects were below the Wirral and national averages. The overall value added score (98.9) for 2005 shows pupils are not making the expected rate of progress. (see Appendix 4). Attendance at St Mary's is above the Wirral average.
- 6.2 A pre-school playgroup occupies several rooms within the school. This association has helped reduce surplus places "on paper", reducing the net capacity of the school from 131 in 2002 to the present value of 117. The pre-school was attended by 12 part-time three and four year olds in Autumn 2005. The school also runs a before and after school club.

Millfields Primary School

- 6.3 Millfields Primary has 139 pupils on roll (January 2006). While this is an increase on the previous year, it is too soon to say whether this will be a sustained pattern. The school retains 31% (62) surplus places. Almost half (45%) of parents living in the catchment zone choose an alternative community or CE primary school, and the pupil population overlaps with that of Heygarth Primary. Between 2000 and 2005, there was a net loss of 4% of pupils who began at Millfields to other local schools before the end of primary phase. The expenditure per pupil in 2003-2004 was £3,555, compared with the Wirral average of £2,737.
- 6.4 Standards at Key Stage 2 in 2005 for all core subjects were below the Wirral and national averages. The overall value added score (100.0) for 2005 shows that pupils are making the expected rate of progress (see Appendix 4). Attendance at Millfields is below the Wirral average.
- 6.5 Millfields has an LEA designated Nursery class, which in January 2006 had 24 pupils or 12 full-time equivalent (FTE). The school operates a before and after school club, and has an LEA designated Special Needs Class with 3 places for children with physical and medical disabilities.

Heygarth Primary School

- 6.6 In 2006, Heygarth Primary had 259 pupils on roll and consequently now has 20% (61) surplus places. The school shares its catchment zone with St Mary's CE Primary; Heygarth takes almost half of the pupils residing in its zone (47%). Raeburn takes 20% of pupils, and the pupil population overlaps with that of Millfields Primary. Between 2000 and 2005, there was a net loss of 5% of pupils who began at Heygarth to other local schools before the end of primary phase. The expenditure per pupil in 2003-2004 was £2,325 compared with the Wirral average of £2,737.

- 6.7 Standards at Key Stage 2 in 2005 for all core subjects were below the Wirral and national averages. The overall value added score (98.4) for 2005 shows that pupils are not making the expected rate of progress (see Appendix 4). Attendance at Heygarth is above the Wirral average.
- 6.8 Heygarth has an LEA designated Nursery class, which in January 2006 had 38 pupils or 19 FTE.

The options for this area will be commented on in the next section.

C1 Closure of St Mary's CE (Controlled) Primary School

- 7.0 All current and projected St Mary's pupils could be accommodated at other local schools. No alterations to catchment areas would be required, as St Mary's shares its catchment with Heygarth Primary. Dependant on the pattern of parental preference in the event of closure, an additional classroom may be required at Raeburn Primary School.
- 7.1 The St Mary's building is owned by trustees, while the school playing field is owned by the Authority. Closure of St Mary's would reduce surplus places in the Bromborough and Eastham area by 3%. Excluding pupil-related components of the budget formula which follow the children to their destination, on 2003-2004 data £83,868 would be released into the overall schools budget annually which is equivalent to an additional £3.20 per primary pupil per annum.
- 7.2 Consultees related to St Mary's felt strongly that parents should have a choice of a Church of England school in this area. Many respondents felt that closure of the school building would have a detrimental effect on the community and historic village of Eastham, although a significant proportion were in favour of moving to a new building nearby, and a minority suggested relocating to the Millfields site. Respondents raised the value placed on an educational choice of small schools and small classes and the good connections with the pre-school, church and local community.
- 7.3 Closing the school would mean that there would be no Church of England provision in this planning area, the nearest Church of England primary schools to St Mary's being Little Sutton CE (Controlled) Primary School, Cheshire (2 miles), Willaston CE (Controlled) Primary School, Cheshire (2.5 miles) and St Andrew's CE (Aided) Primary in Bebington (3.5 miles). Closure of the school, without replacement, is unlikely to be supported by the Diocese of Chester, and is not recommended to proceed as a statutory proposal.

C2 Closure of Millfields Primary School

- 7.4 Existing and projected Millfields pupils could be accommodated at local schools. The catchment zones for the area would be redrawn in order to balance pupil numbers between the remaining schools in the area, and the Millfields zone would join the combined Heygarth and St Mary's zone. In the event of closure, dependant on parental preferences, a new classroom may be required at Raeburn Primary.
- 7.5 Millfields building and site are owned by the Authority, and alternative uses could be considered, including the possibility of siting a Children's Centre there, tying in with facilities already provided at the nearby Delamere community centre. Excluding pupil-related components of the budget formula which follow the children to their destination, on 2003-2004 data £111,874 would be released into the overall schools budget annually which is equivalent to an additional £4.30 per primary pupil per annum.

- 7.6 Consultees felt that the school had excellent links with the Mill Park community through extended services for children and adults in this relatively deprived area, and that the buildings and site had scope for alternative use and expansion if required. There were strong concerns about the perceived lack of other community facilities on the estate and the consequent importance of the school to the community in general. Concerns were expressed about the ability of alternative local schools to cope with children with various special needs, and the travel distances to other schools.
- 7.7 A Children's centre is to be sited in this Ward due to social and economic deprivation factors, and Millfields is a good site for this project. It is likely that the facilities the Children's Centre provides would stabilise the current number on roll, and tie in with the school's existing close links with the local community. Close regular monitoring would be required. The option to close Millfields Primary is not recommended as a statutory proposal.

C3 Re-build St Mary's CE in Eastham and Close Millfields Primary School

- 7.8 Closure of Millfields has been discussed under paragraphs 7.4 to 7.6 above. Rebuilding St Mary's as a 210 place primary school in Eastham would be subject to a suitable site becoming available and obtaining planning permissions; it is likely to cost in the region of £3-4 million pounds, excluding any site purchase costs. Eastham Village is a conservation and green belt area. If the school were to become a CE Aided school, which would require a proposal for a change in status, the cost of construction could potentially be covered by a Targeted Capital Bid made jointly by the Diocese of Chester and the Authority.
- 7.9 Replacing the existing St Mary's CE building would be an opportunity to build a modern school to current building regulations, with the facilities to deliver a modern curriculum. It would not be sensible to build a school for any less than 210 pupils, or one form of entry. As the existing school had just 105 pupils on roll in January 2006, the remaining places would have to be filled from existing pupils at other schools in the area, including former Millfields pupils, otherwise further surplus would be created.
- 7.10 The replacement St Mary's school building would serve the combined catchment zones of St Mary's/Heygarth and Millfields alongside Heygarth Primary, although there would be minor alterations at the border with the catchment area of Raeburn Primary. All pupils currently residing in the Millfields zone would be "in-zone" for both Heygarth Primary, and the enlarged St Mary's CE Primary. If St Mary's became an Aided school, the governors would determine the admissions policy and could decide not to have a catchment zone.
- 7.11 There would be considerable expenditure in building a larger, replacement CE school in Eastham, and the preference of parents from Millfields in the event of closure is likely to be Heygarth Primary, based on current patterns. However, a new school building tends to be attractive to parents, which may cause surplus places to increase at other schools in the area. This should be weighed against the benefits of providing a new school suitable for a 21st Century education.
- 7.12 While the majority of St Mary's respondents stressed the historical importance of maintaining a school in the existing building, some were in favour of a modern rebuilt CE school. Millfields respondents and a minority of St Mary's respondents felt that to build a new school would be a waste of money, and that a new CE school would be better sited at Millfields, either by amalgamation, or by change in status.
- 7.13 This option is costly, unlikely to reduce surplus places and would mean that the Children's Centre at Millfields would no longer be co-located within a school. It is not recommended to proceed to a statutory proposal.

C4 Amalgamate St Mary's CE and Heygarth Primary Schools

- 7.14 Amalgamating these two schools would involve the closure of both, followed by the creation of a new school at the Heygarth site, with a combined number on roll of around 360 pupils. The Heygarth site can be adapted to accommodate the pupils of both schools by carrying out internal alterations. All existing St Mary's and Heygarth pupils would be guaranteed places at the new school, although in the event of amalgamation, undoubtedly some parents would choose to transfer elsewhere.
- 7.15 The catchment zone of St Mary's is the same as that for Heygarth Primary, and the pupil populations overlap. This option means that former St Mary's pupils would transfer to a larger CE primary school, which for some, but not all, would be at a greater distance. This option would maintain parental choice of a Church of England school in this area, and within the parish, with existing close links to local churches.
- 7.16 In this option, Millfields Primary School would be retained on the Mill Park site and monitored as part of the rolling programme of reviews. The Children's Centre for this ward could be co-located at Millfields to further reduce surplus places. It should be noted that if numbers at Millfields continue to fall in future, this school could remain vulnerable to issues faced by small schools.
- 7.17 St Mary's respondents expressed concerns about locating a CE school further away from the church. It should be noted that Heygarth is within the same parish. Concerns were also raised about children crossing the A41, although it is clear from the pupil "dot map" analysis that a large number already cross this road, in both directions. Respondents did not express any issues with the principle of Heygarth becoming a Church of England school. Consultees from Heygarth felt that the falling roll at the school would be resolved by the appointment of a permanent headteacher, and both sets of respondents expressed concerns about class sizes in any amalgamated school.
- 7.18 There is a common misconception that large schools in terms of total number on roll necessarily have large classes. In fact, a larger school has a greater disposable income, and can afford additional teaching staff and support assistants in order to operate classes of the same size or indeed smaller than those in small schools where a greater proportion of the budget is spent on fixed costs.
- 7.19 During consultation, a further option emerged, related to option C4, which would reduce the surplus places in this area, whilst maintaining a Church of England school in this planning area. This option involves **Amalgamating St Mary's CE and Millfields Primary Schools** at the Millfields site.
- 7.20 Both option variants would reduce surplus places, and would allow a larger number of children access to the facilities required for a 21st century education, in a Church of England school with existing and continuing strong links with the parish. All existing St Mary's pupils would be guaranteed a place at the new CE school, although in the event of amalgamation some parents may choose to transfer their children elsewhere. The capacity of Millfields Primary can be raised to 250 places by building two new classrooms, or by converting the existing ICT suite and building a single new classroom. This project could be carried out in conjunction with building works related to the creation of the proposed Children's Centre at Millfields.
- 7.21 If, as the Authority believes, parental choice of a Church of England Primary school should be retained in this part of Wirral, option C4 and the suggested Millfields option would both maintain this choice. The question then becomes one of location. Both Millfields and Heygarth sites could accommodate all the existing pupils from the St Mary's site, with alterations to the existing buildings. All three schools are within the same parish.

- 7.22 As in option C4, the Eastham area would retain a community school and a CE school. The current catchment areas of Heygarth/St Mary's and Millfields could be combined into a single catchment zone, so that pupils living in the single zone would be entitled to a place either at the community school at Heygarth, or the new CE school at Millfields.
- 7.23 Respondents from Millfields and from St Mary's both raised the possibility of Millfields as a site for a CE primary school. Concerns relating to retention of a school on the Mill Park estate, given in paras 7.4 to 7.7 of this report, should be allayed by this option.
- 7.24 The option to amalgamate St Mary's CE Primary and Millfields Primary to form a new CE Controlled school on the Millfields site is recommended to proceed to statutory proposals.

C5 Amalgamate Millfields and Heygarth Primary Schools on either site

- 7.25 This amalgamation would create a single school with around 390 pupils on roll. This could be accomplished by carrying out internal alterations at Heygarth, or by carrying out internal alterations and creating four new build classrooms at Millfields. Catchment zones would be altered to add the Millfields zone to the Heygarth/St Mary's zone, and adjustments would also be made at the Heygarth/Raeburn boundary in order to balance the number of pupils between the schools.
- 7.26 The pupil populations of the two schools overlap, and the distances involved are not large. Respondents were concerned about the volume of traffic at the beginning and end of the school day, particularly as South Wirral High school is also in this area. The proximity of Heygarth to Raeburn means that a combined school sited at Heygarth would not allow a great deal of catchment alteration, otherwise the situation would occur where children living next to Heygarth were not zoned to that school. Siting the combined school at Millfields would allow for separation between the two remaining community schools at this area.
- 7.27 Respondents were also concerned that the Mill Park estate should have a school within the community, particularly due to its social deprivation in relation to other parts of the planning area, and that closure of the school would cause acceleration of the perceived decline of the estate. This option is not recommended to proceed to statutory proposals.

C6 Amalgamate all three schools on a single site

- 7.28 This amalgamation would create a 480-520 place school on a single site. Extending either Millfields or Heygarth would be likely to cost £1-£3 million, while building a new school of this size is likely to cost £6-£8 million, subject to a suitable site becoming available, planning permissions and additional site purchase costs.
- 7.29 Respondents generally felt that the resulting school would be too large, too expensive and that it would increase traffic and pollution. This option is not recommended to continue to statutory proposals.

Other options raised during Consultation for these schools

Expand St Mary's CE Primary existing building, or build another building, to take more children

- 7.30 The building which St Mary's currently occupies is a Victorian school on a tightly confined site with little further scope for expansion or internal alteration to create more space.
- 7.31 It has been suggested that the original school could become an infant building, with a separate junior block on the playing field behind the school. The Authority endeavours wherever possible to join separate infant and junior buildings together, and this would seem a retrograde step. Expanding St Mary's building without concurrently reducing primary provision elsewhere could also cause more surplus places to develop, either at this or other local schools.
- 7.32 This suggestion would not remove any surplus places, is not physically possible given the constraints of the existing building, and is not recommended for further consultation.

The D Options – Mendell Primary and Woodslee Primary

Mendell Primary

- 8.0 Mendell Primary has 146 pupils on roll in 2006 and consequently now has 39% (94) surplus places. Almost 60% (134) of the children residing in its zone attend other schools, principally Raeburn (27%, 62) and Woodslee (17%, 38). 44% (71) of children on roll in summer 2005 came from outside Mendell's catchment area. The school has had the highest net loss of pupils between 2000 and 2005 – 23% of pupils who began at the school left for another local school before the end of primary phase. The expenditure per pupil in 2003-2004 was £2,916 compared with the Wirral average of £2,737.
- 8.1 Standards at Key Stage 2 in 2005 for all core subjects were below the Wirral and national averages. The overall value added score (99.3) for 2005 shows that pupils are making the expected rate of progress (see Appendix 4). Attendance at Mendell was average for the Wirral.
- 8.2 Mendell has an LEA designated Nursery class, which in January 2006 had 33 pupils or 16.5 FTE. The school operates before and after-school clubs.

Woodslee Primary

- 8.3 In 2006, Woodslee Primary had 273 pupils on roll, with 16% (50) surplus places. The school receives 63% (151) of the pupils living in its catchment zone. Of the remainder, the majority attend either Mendell Primary (15%, 37) or Poulton Lancelyn Primary (11%, 27). 44% (119) of the pupils on roll in summer 2005 came from outside Woodslee's catchment area, including 20% (54) from the catchment area of Bromborough Pool Primary. Between 2000 and 2005 there was a net loss of 2% of pupils who began at the school to other local schools before the end of primary phase. The expenditure per pupil in 2003-2004 was £2,750 compared with the Wirral average of £2,737.
- 8.4 Standards at Key Stage 2 in 2005 for all core subjects were above the Wirral and national averages. The overall value added score (101.9) shows that pupils are making above the expected rate of progress (see Appendix 4). Attendance at Woodslee was above the Wirral average.
- 8.5 Woodslee has an LEA designated Nursery class, which in January 2006 had 41 pupils or 20.5 FTE. There is a special needs unit for 8 places for children with autistic spectrum disorder and the school operates before and after school clubs.

D1 Closure of Mendell Primary

- 8.6 In this option, Mendell Primary would close, the catchment zone would be divided between the neighbouring schools, Woodslee and Raeburn Primary. It is likely that two new classrooms would be required at Raeburn Primary.
- 8.7 Respondents stressed the importance of the school's before and after-school clubs to working parents, and raised concerns about larger classes sizes in other schools. The effect of closure on special needs and physically disabled pupils was also raised as a concern. Increased traffic at neighbouring schools was cited as a concern.
- 8.8 This option is not recommended to continue to a statutory proposal.

D2 Amalgamation of Mendell Primary and Woodslee Primary on either site

- 8.9 This option would potentially create a combined school of around 420 pupils, two forms of entry. The new school would have a catchment area formed from the catchment zones of the two original schools, although some rezoning would take place at the boundary with Raeburn Primary. The pupil populations of the two schools overlap.
- 8.10 Both existing buildings are fully disabled accessible. The expenditure required to accommodate all the children from both schools at a single site would be greater at Mendell than at Woodslee. Woodslee has recently benefited from a £600,000 HORSAs kitchen/dining replacement.
- 8.11 Many respondents from both schools were concerned about increased traffic on Croft Avenue if the two schools were amalgamated at Woodslee's site, particularly at the beginning and end of the school day. Mendell respondents felt that the Mendell site had better access and parking.
- 8.12 Respondents from Woodslee also raised concerns about the effect of amalgamation on the most vulnerable children, those in the Autistic Spectrum special needs unit. Respondents from both schools were concerned about the possibility of class sizes increasing in the larger amalgamated school.
- 8.13 This option is not recommended to continue to a statutory proposal.

D3 Reduce admission number at Mendell Primary

- 8.14 This option involves the location of a pre-school playgroup within the school, removing some surplus places in combination with a reduction in the admission number from 2007. The number on roll at the school would then be monitored closely, and reviewed again if necessary.
- 8.15 Respondents universally welcomed this option, which would keep Mendell open, but were divided as to whether this option would give the school's roll time to recover, or whether it was merely a question of delaying the inevitable. There may be scope to house other services within the building, although if the roll at the school continues to fall, it may be necessary to review the school again within a few years. A subsequent closure could be viewed as a waste of money.
- 8.16 This option is recommended to continue as a proposal. As with the option to reduce capacity at Brookhurst, the admission numbers for 2007 are not yet finalised, and are due to be agreed by Cabinet in April. After this date, it would be necessary to send an in-year variation to the Schools Adjudicator, and publish a notice in a local paper inviting parents to send objections.

Other suggestions raised during consultation for these schools

Amalgamate Mendell Primary with either Woodslee Primary or Raeburn Primary, keeping the Mendell site as an Infant feeder school

- 8.17 The intention of this suggestion is that Mendell's building should be retained as a satellite site for either Woodslee or Mendell, the children then transferring to the main school at the end of Key Stage 1.
- 8.18 Primary schools can operate over a split site, but this is not ideal and is better suited to large sparsely populated areas, where a "hub" school will have one or more satellites. It is not far to travel between these three schools, as the pupil population overlap demonstrates. Although split site schools can be managed, it would not be an ideal situation for teaching and learning.
- 8.19 This suggestion would not remove any surplus places and is not recommended for further consultation.

Amalgamate or federate Bromborough Pool Primary with Woodslee Primary, keeping the Bromborough Pool site as an Infant annexe

- 8.20 This suggestion is subject to the same issues raised in 8.18-8.20 regarding split site operation. Federation has to be proposed by governing bodies. Federation retains both sites, either under different headteachers and governing bodies, or under the same headteacher and governing body.
- 8.21 This option would not reduce surplus places, and would resolve some, but not all, of the issues faced by Bromborough Pool as a small school. It is not recommended for further consultation.

Amalgamate Bromborough Pool Primary with Mendell Primary

- 8.22 This suggestion was made with the intention of amalgamating the two smallest schools in this area, with the largest number of surplus places, creating a single school at the Mendel site of around 200 pupils.
- 8.23 Although the two catchment zones of these schools run alongside one another, either side of the A41, the pupil populations of the two schools do not overlap to any significant degree. Respondents from Bromborough Pool were concerned about the distance to the Mendell site in the event of amalgamation, and are unlikely to transfer to this school if this amalgamation was proposed. This suggestion is not recommended for further consultation.

Enlarge provision at Raeburn Primary

- 8.24 This suggestion was made by the governing body of Raeburn Primary School in order to bring the school to two full forms of entry.
- 8.25 Expanding this popular school without decreasing provision elsewhere in the planning area would cause surplus places to increase at neighbouring schools. This suggestion is not recommended for further consultation at this time.

Implications of the Review Process for Pupils

Admission Arrangements: present and future pupils

- 9.0 The closure and/or amalgamation of primary schools will have implications for the Authority's admission arrangements. The DFES have advised that there is no requirement to consult separately on any changes to admission arrangements as long as full details are provided to parents in the statutory public notices on the proposed alterations to the school provision. This would include details on how the Authority would propose to manage the transfer of pupils to alternative schools, and also deal with applications from parents living in the areas concerned for places in Foundation 2.

Re-zoning of areas

- 9.1 In the event of any reorganisation, school catchment areas would have to be reviewed. In the case of an amalgamation it might be assumed that the catchment areas of the schools involved could simply be merged but it is more likely that we would take the opportunity to consider any other necessary adjustments. In the case of a school closure, zones of neighbouring schools would have to be re-drawn . Changes would need to take into account consideration of home address in relation to nearest appropriate schools, the new capacity of schools in the area, and other factors such as planned housing development.

In relation to the potential transfer of existing pupils to alternative schools, the Authority would invite parents to indicate a preference. If their preference was for a placement in a community or controlled school, then the Authority would seek to meet that preference, within the admission criteria set out in the Authority's booklets for parents.

Pupils with Special Educational Needs

- 9.2 If any pupil has a Statement of Special Educational Needs then the Statement will be amended to reflect the new school, and the provision specified in the Statement will be delivered appropriately. Any pupils who are currently placed in designated special provision such as a Special Needs Class would be transferred to an alternative placement according to parental preference. For all those pupils on the SEN register who are affected, the Authority would deploy an element of any savings to provide enhanced support at their new school. Details of how such a scheme may operate would need to be developed.

Staffing Implications

10.0 Amalgamation

An amalgamation requires both schools to close, and a new school to open. A 'shadow' governing body is established, and decides on the appropriate staff structure. Posts are ring-fenced initially to staff from both schools, and appointments made. Options such as early voluntary retirement would be made available, if appropriate, after consultation with staff. Staff who are not appointed to the new school would be placed in the redeployment scheme, with the exception of headteachers.

10.1 Closure of Schools

If a school closes, staff would technically be redundant. However, the neighbouring schools to which pupils relocate will require additional staff, and redundant staff would have priority at these, and other schools, under Wirral's redeployment scheme.

10.2 Redeployment

Wirral has an excellent record in the field of redeployment of staff, teaching and non-teaching. When posts are advertised in Wirral, prior and preferential consideration is given to staff on the redeployment list.

Financial Implications

- 11.0 The recommendations contained in this report have capital implications in respect of the re-location of current pupils and the re-allocation of future pupils to schools. The level of capital required will depend upon the final, approved proposals and will require further, detailed development work. An amount of £100,000 is included in the

approved 2005/06 Schools Capital Programme for “scheme development resulting from area reviews” (Cabinet 30.3.05), which will allow schemes to be drawn up, costed and tendered, with any balance contributing to build costs. The balance of the capital build costs would need to be drawn from the following sources: DfES Modernisation Grant, council capital including capital receipts from the disposal of surplus assets, Prudential Borrowing and capital forming part of other national initiatives. It is a requirement that funding is clearly identified when proposals are put to School Organisation Committee for approval.

- 11.1 The recommendations contained in this report include the closure and amalgamation of schools, which in turn will produce revenue savings, to the benefit of other schools as the funding is re-distributed. In the short term the LEA could be required to fund any staff severance costs following closures and amalgamation but they may be partly or entirely offset by savings.

Equal Opportunities Implications

- 12.0 There are none arising out of this report.

Human Rights Implications

- 13.0 There are none arising directly from this report.

Local Agenda 21 Statement

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

Community Safety Implications

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

Planning Implications

- 16.0 The relationship between housing development policy and school place provision is a factor in considering surplus place removal.
- 16.1 Construction of any new classroom provision would be subject to the usual planning permissions.

Local Member Support Implications

- 17.0 Primary place planning and potential surplus place removal have relevance to all Wards.
- 17.1 The current consultation affects the following Wards directly: Bromborough and Eastham.

Background Papers

- 18.0 Audit Commission Report: Planning School Places in Wirral September 2004.
School Organisation Plan.

LEA document "Pursuit of Excellence: Primary Education in Wirral".
School pupil number returns, January 2006 (PLASC return to DfES).
School Net Capacity Calculation, July 2005, to DfES requirements.
Consultation Documents for Bromborough and Eastham.

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

19.0 **Appendices**

See list attached.

Summary

20.0 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 Bromborough and Eastham, and more equitable spending for the benefit of all Wirral's pupils, from the savings made.

21.0 **Recommendations**

A) I recommend that statutory proposals be published in respect of 1, 2 and 3 below:

1 Closure of Bromborough Pool Primary School

2 Closure of St Mary's CE Primary and Millfields Primary School

3 Open a new CE Controlled Primary school on the Millfields site

B) That I be authorised to take all necessary steps to publish these proposals, ensure the prescribed procedures are followed, including proposals for the re-zoning of schools, in furtherance of the proposals.

With regard to Brookhurst and Mendell Primary Schools, Cabinet will consider reductions in admission number at its meeting in April 2006.

Howard Cooper
Director of Education & Cultural Services

List of Appendices

Appendix	Description
1	Extract from School Organisation Plan: Policies and Principles
2	Cabinet Report and resolution from 14 th December 2005
<i>Consultation</i>	
3a	Analysis of Consultation
3b	Summary of responses
<i>Standards</i>	
4a	Standards – KS2 data; Value Added
4b	Standards – Extracts from Ofsted reports
<i>Issues concerned with size and viability</i>	
5a	Extract from “ In Pursuit of Excellence”, written by Wirral Headteachers and the Primary Team, School Effectiveness
5b	Extract from “Small Schools: How well are they doing?” (Ofsted 2000)
5c	Size and viability in Bromborough and Eastham
<i>Diocesan issues</i>	
6	Response submission, Anglican Diocese of Chester
<i>Brookhurst</i>	
7	Governing body’s letter to Director of Education and Cultural Services

Minutes - Cabinet - 16 March 2006

Present

Chair S Foulkes

Councillors George Davies, PL Davies, JE Green, PJ Hackett, J Hale, RK Moon,
Mrs LA Rennie

Apologies SE Kelly, M McLaughlin

Minute 514 - CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND LIFELONG LEARNING: REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES (PHASE 2)

Further to minute 383 (14/12/05) and following the extensive consultation exercise in relation to primary school places in the Bromborough and Eastham Small Planning Area, the Director of Education and Cultural Services advised the Cabinet of the consultation process, the outcome of that consultation, during which detailed and strong views had been expressed, and his recommendations with regard to statutory proposals. The various views in respect of each school involved in the review were included in his report.

A decision was required to authorise publication of the statutory proposals. The matter involved a key decision and had been included in the Council's Forward Plan.

The various options put forward for consultation were as follows:

- A Reduce capacity at Brookhurst Primary School
- B Close Bromborough Pool Primary School
- C1 Close St Mary's CE (Controlled) Primary School
- C2 Close Millfields Primary School
- C3 Re-build St Mary's CE in Eastham and Close Millfields Primary School
- C4 Amalgamate St Mary's CE and Heygarth Primary Schools
- C5 Amalgamate Millfields Primary and Heygarth Primary at either site
- C6 Amalgamate Millfields, Heygarth and St Mary's CE on a single site
- D1 Close Mendell Primary
- D2 Amalgamate Mendell Primary and Woodslee Primary on either site
- D3 Reduce admission number at Mendell Primary

All of the options had to be considered within the context of the need to reduce the growing number of primary school surplus places and account taken of Audit Commission guidance on surplus places against a continuing fall in the number of primary age pupils, together with issues identified in the recent Joint Area Review. In addition to removing unnecessary surplus places, the options were intended to make more effective use of resources, to take account of patterns of parental preference, reflect the additional challenges of maintaining small schools in an urban area and contribute to the wider standards agenda through the more efficient use of resources. He reminded the Cabinet of the policy adopted in 2004 which suggested that a primary school should have at least 180 pupils in order to be viable. In addition, DfES guidance stated that "schools with fewer than 150 pupils may be educationally and financially sustainable only through substantial subsidies via their local authorities funding formula".

Additional suggestions had been put forward during the consultation process:

- Amalgamate Mendell Primary with either Woodslee Primary or Raeburn Primary, keeping the Mendell site as an Infant feeder school
- Expand St Mary's CE Primary existing building to take more children
- Amalgamate St Mary's CE Primary with Millfields Primary to make a new Church of England primary school

- Amalgamate or federate Bromborough Pool Primary with Woodslee Primary, keeping the Bromborough Pool site as an Infant annex
- Amalgamate Bromborough Pool Primary with Mendell Primary.

The Director's report outlined the arguments for and against each option, and he explained to the Cabinet the reasons for his conclusions, as follows:

- (a) To close Bromborough Pool Primary School - the full rationale was set out in part 5 of the report. There were currently 50 pupils on roll at the school, about half the number there had been 25 years ago (108). That was largely the result of falling population, although, critically, 73% of the parents living within its catchment zone currently chose to send their children elsewhere, principally to Woodslee Primary. 45% of the children who were on roll at the school in summer 2005 had come from outside the school's catchment zone. The school currently had 35% (27) surplus places, and the number of pupils in 2010 was 44. In 2003/04, expenditure per pupil had been £4,269 compared with the Wirral average of £2,737. The high cost had also been identified by Ofsted, which had said that the school provided only "satisfactory" value for money. The Director had recognised that the school had a unique position as part of a heritage village, and strong views had been put on that point, but on balance its remaining open could not be justified in terms of the efficient use of resources. He was confident that the pupils at the school could be accommodated in other schools in the area.
- (b) To close St Mary's CE Primary and Millfields Primary Schools - a variety of options had been considered for those two schools and for Heygarth Primary, and the following factors had been taken into consideration:
- (i) There were currently 105 pupils on roll at St Mary's, which meant there were 9% (11) surplus places. Although it was too soon to say whether that would be sustained, the numbers of children on roll at St Mary's were not predicted to increase significantly, and the projected number for 2010 was 93. St Mary's shared its catchment area with Heygarth Primary School, and received 17% of the children from the joint zone. The expenditure per pupil in 2003/04 had been £3,005, compared with the Wirral average of £2,737.
- (ii) Millfields Primary had 139 pupils on roll in January 2006. While that was an increase on the previous year, it was too soon to say whether that would be sustained. The school retained 31% (62) surplus places. Almost half (45%) of parents living in the catchment zone choose an alternative community or CE primary school, and the pupil population overlapped with that of Heygarth Primary. The expenditure per pupil in 2003/04 had been £3,555.
- (iii) In January 2006 Heygarth Primary had 259 pupils on roll and consequently had 20% (61) surplus places. The school shared its catchment zone with St Mary's CE Primary and almost half of the pupils residing in its zone (47%). Raeburn Primary took 20% of pupils, and the pupil population overlapped with that of Millfields Primary. The expenditure per pupil in 2003/04 had been £2,325 compared with the Wirral average of £2,737.

The conclusion was that the authority could not maintain three schools with that area, and the possibility of having only one was thought to be a feasible option. However, on balance, and recognising the wish of the Chester Diocesan Board of Education's wish that a Church of England presence be maintained in the area, it was recommended that there be two schools and that the best locations, taking account of where the pupils currently lived, were those of Millfields (see (c) below) and Heygarth.

(c) To open a new CE Controlled Primary School on the Millfields site - that would reduce surplus places, and would allow a larger number of children access to the facilities required for a 21st century education, in a Church of England school with existing and continuing strong links with the parish. All existing St Mary's pupils would be guaranteed a place at the new CE school, although in the event of amalgamation some parents were likely to choose to transfer their children elsewhere. The Director believed that parental choice of a Church of England Primary school should be retained in that part of Wirral, and amalgamation of St Mary's with either Millfields or Heygarth would maintain that choice. Both Millfields and Heygarth sites could accommodate all the existing pupils from the St Mary's site, with alterations to the existing buildings, and all three schools were within the same parish. Based on the views expressed in the consultation, his recommendation was for the amalgamation of St Mary's with Millfields. The capacity of Millfields could be raised to 250 places by building two new classrooms, or by converting the existing ICT suite and building a single new classroom. The project could be carried out in conjunction with building works related to the creation of the proposed Children's Centre at Millfields (see minute 516 below).

(d) To reduce the capacity at

- (i) Brookhurst Primary School, which currently had 85 (28%) surplus places;
- (ii) Mendell Primary School, which currently had 94 (39%) surplus places.

With the permission of the Cabinet, a number of persons connected with the schools in question addressed the meeting.

(i) Brenda Dunn, Chair of Governors of St Mary's CE Primary School, stated that parents, staff and governors believed that the size of the school was the main factor influencing the Director's recommendation and that the LEA looked unfavourably on small schools. She referred to comments attributed to the Prime Minister, that more small schools were needed because they were beneficial to the children involved. The number on roll at St Mary's was increasing, owing to its popularity (albeit that the planned admissions number had been lowered from 20 to 15, against the wishes of the governors). There had in fact been 26 applications for admission from September 2005, of which 23 had been accepted. There were currently 30 pre-school children associated with the school, and it was understood that all of their parents intended to apply for St Mary's - 16 were expected in 2006 and 20 in 2007. In view of that trend, those concerned with the school challenged the view that there would only be 93 pupils by 2010.

Currently, the school had only 9% of surplus places and the school did not receive any additional funding that took account of its size. The school had always remained within budget. It was seen as a nurturing and friendly school, and those children with special needs received appropriate support. It was believed that children would flourish better in a smaller school - that was why parents made the definite choice not to send their children elsewhere within the locality. Another important issue was the school's heritage - it was 153 years old and had continued because it was valued. It would not be in the best interests to site the school away from the St Mary's Church - its ties would be loosened and the current ability to undertake frequent educational visits to the church would be impaired. The governors felt it was possible to expand the existing premises, provided there was the will within the Local Authority.

(ii) John Weise, Chair of Governors of Millfields Primary School, stated that closure of the school in its existing form would have a profound impact. The school provided a good

quality of education and standards and had received a favourable Ofsted report. The school was in a Super Output Area, with more than 50% of pupils in receipt of free school meals. However, the school met the needs of the area - it was regarded as the heartbeat of the community - and had received an inclusion award. He reminded the Cabinet that Millfields was the site proposed for one of the next round of children's centres.

- (iii) Graham Sherwood, Chair of Governors of Bromborough Pool Primary School, began by thanking the LEA for its help over the past few years, which had been a difficult period for the school. As a result, standards had improved considerably, resulting in a recent favourable Ofsted report. He was concerned that the Director was now saying that the number on roll did not make the school sustainable. He felt, however, that the school could be maintained with 70-75 pupils on roll. The Riverside Housing Association was ready to commence a large development of the village, which would increase the number of household with children. It would also be possible for the school to take some pupils from the other side of the A41. He therefore urged the Cabinet not to be hasty in closing the school - Bromborough Pool was a special village and the school was essential to maintaining its character.
- (iv) Hugh Owen, Divisional Director of Riverside Housing, pointed out that the Director had acknowledged their special interest in Bromborough Pool. Riverside Housing owned much of the village, including the freehold of the school. He was not putting forward a case on educational grounds, but believed that the closure of the school would have an irreversible impact on the sustainability of Bromborough Pool Village as a whole. It was therefore an additional factor that needed to be taken into account. Bromborough Pool was the UK's first model industrial village (pre-dating Port Sunlight) and had remained intact with many typical village facilities. Following its declaration as a conservation area in the 1980's it had improved considerably. The school had always been a key institution within the village and was seen as bridging the historical past and a sustainable future for the village. It had strong links with other organisations and companies in the area. English Heritage, the Civic Society and the local Member of Parliament supported the views of parents and residents of the village.
- (v) Russell Buckley, of the Bromborough Primary Action Committee, stated that he had written to the Secretary of State (Ruth Kelly) to let her know how well his daughter was doing at the school under the new management arrangements. The Secretary of State had responded and said that she was pleased to read of her success at the school. He therefore urged the Council to recognise the school's worth also.

In response, the Director emphasised that the issue was one of falling rolls. That was a particular point that had been raised by the District Auditor as needing to be addressed as a matter of urgency. However, there was also a recognition of the quality of education provided, and he believed that under the new proposals that would not be diminished. In addition, other schools would benefit from the redistribution of resources, of which some schools were consuming a disproportionate share. In relation to the proposals affecting St Mary's, he believed that the Millfields and Heygarth sites provided the best locations to serve the needs of all of the pupils in that area.

Councillor Mrs Rennie felt that there was a case for having education delivered by smaller schools and that the social factors associated with both Bromborough Pool and St Mary's needed to be taken into consideration. The Director responded that proposals for new housing within the vicinity of Bromborough Pool were unlikely, according to statistical evidence, to provide a sufficient number of additional pupils to make Bromborough Pool Primary School sustainable. Councillor Moon also felt that the educational and social

arguments were finely balanced and there were strong arguments for ensuring that Bromborough Pool remained as a sustainable community. However, the Council needed to reconcile that with how it deployed its resources.

The Cabinet member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning stated that he had been involved in all of the consultation meetings and had been impressed by parents' loyalty to the schools involved. However, the Authority faced a major problem with the falling birth rate and its impact on the number of surplus places in primary schools. The Council had already agreed to the closure of larger schools (The Dell and St Pauls RC Primary) than those currently under consideration. The Council had received advice from primary school headteachers on the organisation of schools that had fewer than 180 pupils, and it was felt that there were good educational reasons for closure. There did not appear to be any chance that Bromborough Pool Primary School could significantly increase its intake of pupils, and 73% of parents in the area were currently sending their children to other schools, where there was sufficient alternative provision. St Mary's, with 105 pupils on roll, was also a cause for concern. The need to maintain parents' choice was recognised in the proposal that a new Church of England Primary School be established. He did not think it was feasible to build a new school in that area because it could draw in pupils from other areas. In conclusion, he felt that Council was being consistent in applying the same factors as it had when reviewing areas of Birkenhead.

Summarising the discussion, the Chair accepted that the Cabinet did not face a pleasant task in deciding the future of schools, but falling rolls was an issue that covered the whole of the Borough. It was imperative that the Council maximised the resources that were available for each pupil. The Council was determined to ensure that meeting educational needs remained the highest priority within the overall exercise.

The Director of Education and Cultural Services explained that, following the Cabinet's decision, statutory notices of the proposals would be published and responses would be put before the School Organisation Committee. If there was no unanimous decision at that committee in respect of any of the schools involved, the matter would be referred to the Schools Adjudicator. The aim was to implement the proposals for the academic year commencing September 2007.

On a motion by the Cabinet member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning, duly seconded, it was

Resolved (7:0) -

(1) That statutory proposals be published in respect of (a), (b) and (c) below:

(a) Closure of Bromborough Pool Primary School

(b) Closure of St Mary's CE Primary and Millfields Primary School

(c) Opening a new CE Controlled Primary School on the Millfields site

(2) That the Director of Education and Cultural Services be authorised to take all necessary steps to publish these proposals, ensure the prescribed procedures are followed, and including proposals for the re-zoning of schools, in furtherance of the proposals.

(3) That, with regard to Brookhurst and Mendell Primary Schools, the Cabinet consider reductions in admission numbers at its meeting in April 2006.

Footnote :

Councillor Green, having declared a personal interest in this matter, withdrew from the meeting while it was being considered.