

METROPOLITAN BOROUGH OF WIRRAL

CABINET - 27th JULY 2006

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES: OUTCOME OF CONSULTATIONS ON OPTION FOR MILLFIELDS AND ST MARY'S EASTHAM AND REVISION TO PHASE THREE

Executive Summary

- 1.0 This report advises Cabinet of the outcome of the extended consultation carried out by the Diocese of Chester in conjunction with the Authority in respect of the option to amalgamate St Mary's CE (Controlled) Primary School and Millfields Primary School at the Millfields site. This option arose from the initial consultation, and became the Council's preferred option, agreed by Cabinet on 16th March 2006. The Diocesan Board of Education have now formally rejected this proposed option. This report makes recommendations with regard to further actions in this area. A revision to the planning areas involved in Phase 3 of the Primary Places Review is also recommended.

Background

2.0 Primary Places Review – Phase 2

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.

- 2.1. 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, including reductions in the capacity of Mendell Primary School and Brookhurst Primary School.
- 2.2 On 16th March 2006, the outcome of this consultation was reported to Cabinet, including all new options raised. Cabinet decided that a new option, suggested during the consultation, to amalgamate St Mary's CE Primary School and Millfields Primary School to form a new Church of England school at the Millfields site should go forward for the publication of statutory notices. The minute of this meeting is attached as Appendix 1.
- 2.3 The procedure for amalgamating two schools is that both schools close, and a new school opens. The Authority can propose the closure of any school, however the creation of a new Controlled or Aided school can only be proposed by the appropriate Diocesan Authority.

- 2.4 Following legal advice, it was decided that consultation should be continued to allow consultees to express their opinions about the new option, led by the Diocese of Chester and facilitated by the Authority.
- (i) The Primary Places Review website was updated to advise visitors that they could respond via e-mail and the website feedback form;
 - (ii) comments forms were made available via both schools;
 - (iii) meetings were arranged for all interested stakeholders at Millfields Primary School and St Mary's CE (Controlled) Primary School (held in the Church).

2.5 Consultation meetings

These meetings were attended by parents, carers, staff, governors, ward members and various other interested persons. Directors from the Diocesan Board of Education were also present at each meeting. The consultation meetings were chaired by Mr J. Turnbull, Diocesan Director of Education, who gave a short introduction followed by approximately 90 minutes for audience comments and feedback. LA officers attended at the invitation of the Diocese to answer questions if requested by Mr Turnbull. The dates for the meetings were advertised via the website, in letters to parents, and a general notice was published in the local press.

- 2.6 Submissions have been received in various formats by both the Diocese of Chester and the Authority, and all relevant documents have been shared.

Outcome of the Consultation

- 3.0. 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
 - Maintenance of denominational choice

- Staff redeployment
- Continuity of school over several generations.

3.1 Millfields Primary School

Respondents related to Millfields Primary School were in favour of a Church of England School at the Millfields site and had no objections to an amalgamation. Some concerns were expressed about outcomes for staff. Respondents felt that this relatively deprived area could only benefit from greater access to a Christian ethos at the school and that community cohesion would be served by bringing together the whole Eastham community, divided as they are by a major road, into a single primary school.

3.2 St Mary's CE (Controlled) Primary School

Respondents related to St Mary's CE (Controlled) Primary School objected to the amalgamation of the two schools on the basis that the historic relationship and proximity between the existing school building and the church could not be maintained in a new CE school based at Millfields. Concerns were expressed about the distance to Millfields site, crossing the A41, and the potential effect of closure of the school on Eastham Village and the privately operated pre-school which is based at the school.

Responses from the Anglican Diocese

The Diocese of Chester is a key partner along with the LA in making provision for the education of children in Wirral. Following the conclusion of their extended consultation on 6th July 2006, the Diocesan Board of Education met to discuss the Council's proposed option to amalgamate the two schools. We have now received the decision from the Chester Diocesan Board of Education which has been included within the report as Appendix 2. The Diocese have rejected the Council's proposal to close the two schools and open a new Church of England school on the Millfields site. The reasons are set out in the response.

Options for future actions following Diocesan decision

The creation of a new Church of England Controlled school in this area cannot now go ahead as the proposer, the Diocese of Chester, feels unable to support this proposal. This means the Council's preferred option of amalgamating the two schools in order to create a new school cannot proceed. The Authority's duty to provide the most effective and efficient education for pupils in this area and Wirral as a whole remains, and there are several possible ways forward.

4.0 Consider original options

The original options for schools in this area were as follows:

- | | |
|----|--|
| 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

Cabinet could consider reinstating any of these options as they have been fully consulted upon. These options are commented on in detail in the Cabinet report of 16th March 2006 which is attached as Appendix 3. Some of these are discussed in more detail below in light of the Diocesan Board's decision.

4.1 C1 Closure of St Mary's CE Primary School

The Council cannot open a new Church of England school, but could still decide to propose the closure of a CE school. If this course of action were to be decided upon, statutory notices would be published. Representations are likely to be received and the proposal would go to the School Organisation Committee (SOC) for a decision. The Diocese of Chester state that they would oppose a proposal to close St Mary's CE Primary School. As the Diocese forms a voting group on the SOC, the proposal would therefore go to the Adjudicator for a decision.

The principal concern of the Adjudicator is raising educational standards. Standards and achievement at all three Eastham schools are below Wirral standards, but Value Added measures demonstrate that at present, pupils at Millfields Primary School make the most progress. The financial benefit to Wirral's schools of the closure of St Mary's CE Primary School through the budget funding formula would contribute generally to the raising of standards.

The Authority wishes to maintain diversity of parental preference of faith and community schools in this area. Closing St Mary's CE Primary School without providing alternative CE provision within a reasonable distance would run counter to this principle and would be highly unlikely to achieve approval from the Adjudicator. 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).

It is likely that the Adjudicator would reject a proposal for closure in this instance. This option is not recommended to proceed further.

4.2 Options C4 and C6 – options involving amalgamation of St Mary's with other schools

The Diocesan Board of Education's decision to oppose to the closure of St Mary's CE Primary was made in relation to the amalgamation of St Mary's CE with Millfields Primary School, not with Heygarth Primary School or all three schools. Further discussions would be necessary, however we have no reason to suppose at this stage that amalgamation with Heygarth or an amalgamation of all three schools would produce a different response from the Diocese.

These options are not recommended to proceed further.

4.3 Option C3 – Rebuild St Mary's CE in Eastham and Close Millfields

This is a variation on the preferred option of the Diocese of Chester, which is to rebuild St Mary's Primary School on the playing fields behind the school. This option was discussed in detail in my report of 16th March 2006, attached as Appendix 3. The reasons for recommending against this option set out in paragraphs 7.8 – 7.13 of this report still apply and this option is not recommended.

4.4 Return to area for future review

The Primary Places Review is intended as a rolling programme, so that this area will be reviewed again in due course.

Both St Mary's and Millfields are small schools, with numbers on roll below the level at which Wirral's policy "In Pursuit of Excellence" says that financial and management issues may become more problematic. There are signs of a slight upturn in the numbers on roll at Millfields Primary (139 pupils), and to a lesser extent at St Mary's CE Primary School (105 pupils), although it is too early to say whether these increases will be sustained. Heygarth Primary School has 259 pupils on roll with projections for a relatively stable roll around this level over the next five years.

Millfields Primary School and the adjacent Delamere Centre have been approved by Cabinet as the site for a Phase 2 Children's Centre, in order to reach the 30% most disadvantaged areas of Wirral. The aim is to improve outcomes for all young children, and in particular to close the gap between the outcome for the most disadvantaged children and others. Outcomes and options for children, families and their communities will be enhanced by increasing the availability of high quality integrated childcare and early learning, health and family support services.

The Council's architects can now begin to examine ways of using the existing accommodation which should remove some of the surplus places at Millfields Primary School, although the school itself will remain small and therefore vulnerable to the issues faced by all small schools. Phase 1 Children's Centres are now nearing completion. It is too soon to say how the presence of a Children's Centre at a school impacts on patterns of parental preference, but could reasonably be expected to improve the take-up of places and reduce losses to other neighbouring schools, due to greater parental/carer involvement with the school from an early stage.

This course of action is recommended.

5.0 **Revision to Primary Places Review Phase 3 areas**

In the Cabinet meeting of 16th March 2006, a report entitled PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES REVIEW - FUTURE PHASES OF AREA REVIEWS was submitted for Cabinet's decision in order to comply with the recommendations of the Joint Area Review to "Ensure that firm borough wide plans are made within this academic year for removing surplus school places".

2006/7

Phase 3

Heswall

Pensby/Thingwall

Greasby

Upton

Wallasey North

Wallasey South

2007/8

Phase 4

Leasowe

Moreton

Woodchurch

Noctorum

Hoylake/Meols

West Kirby

5.1 These Phases were agreed by Cabinet. The minute is attached as Appendix 4.

Since this decision was taken, in May 2006, Castleway Primary School in the Leasowe small planning area has been placed in the Ofsted category of Special Measures.

5.2 The future of Castleway Primary School must be considered carefully within the context of the local area and surrounding schools, and it would seem prudent to move the Leasowe planning area into Phase 3 of the Primary Places Review. There are two other schools within the Leasowe small planning area – Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Primary School and Leasowe Primary School.

Staffing Implications

6.0 There are none arising directly from this report.

Financial Implications

7.0 There are none arising directly from this report.

Equal Opportunities Implications

8.0 There are none arising directly from this report.

Human Rights Implications

9.0 There are none arising directly from this report.

Local Agenda 21 Statement

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

Community Safety Implications

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

Planning Implications

12.0 The relationship between housing development policy and school place provision is a factor in considering surplus place removal.

12.1 Construction of any new classroom or Children's Centre provision would be subject to the usual planning permissions.

Local Member Support Implications

13.0 Primary place planning and potential surplus place removal have relevance to all Wards.

13.1 The following Wards are affected directly: Eastham, and Leasowe and Moreton East.

Background Papers

14.0 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.

15.0 Appendices

Appendix 1 – Cabinet Minute, REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES (PHASE 2), 16th March 2006

Appendix 2 - Diocesan Board of Education's response to Consultation

Appendix 3 – Cabinet report REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES (PHASE 2), 16th March 2006

Appendix 4 – Cabinet Minute, PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES REVIEW – FUTURE PHASES OF AREA REVIEWS, 16th March 2006

16.0 Recommendations

That

- (1) the Bromborough and Eastham planning area be monitored carefully and examined again in a future phase of the Primary Places Review; and
- (2) the Leasowe small planning area be moved from Phase 4 of the Primary Places Review into Phase 3.

Howard Cooper

Director of Children's Services

Minutes - Cabinet - 27 July 2006

Present
Chair S Foulkes

Councillors George Davies, PL Davies, JE Green, PJ Hackett, SE Kelly, M McLaughlin, RK Moon, Mrs LA Rennie

Apologies J Hale

Minute 63 - CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND LIFELONG LEARNING: REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES: OUTCOME OF CONSULTATIONS ON OPTION FOR MILLFIELDS AND ST MARY'S EASTHAM AND REVISION TO PHASE THREE

The Director of Children's Services presented a report which advised Cabinet of the outcome of the extended consultation carried out by the Diocese of Chester in conjunction with the Authority in respect of the option to amalgamate St Mary's CE (Controlled) Primary School and Millfields Primary School at the Millfields site. The option arose from the initial consultation, and became the Council's preferred option, agreed by Cabinet on 16th March 2006. The Diocesan Board of Education had now formally rejected the proposed option. The Director of Children's Services made recommendations with regard to further actions in the area. A revision to the planning areas involved in Phase 3 of the Primary Places Review was also recommended.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning expressed disappointment in not being able to make progress in removing surplus places in Eastham. Councillor Phil Davies also paid tribute to Gail Webb who was attending her last Cabinet meeting and thanked her for her many years of service to the Authority.

The Leader of the Conservative Group concurred with the comments of the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning and expressed dissatisfaction at the recent ruling of the Schools Adjudicator. Councillor Green also paid tribute to the work Gail Webb had undertaken.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group suggested that previous decisions should not influence future reviews and that all reviews of school places should be based on professional advice.

Resolved – That:

(1) the Bromborough and Eastham planning area be monitored carefully and examined again in a future phase of the Primary Places Review; and

(2) the Leasowe small planning area be moved from Phase 4 of the Primary Places Review into Phase 3.

Footnote :

Councillor Jeff Green declared a personal interest in this matter - see Minute 58 above.