

Appendix 3

Notes of Public meeting at Harefield Infant School, 15 July 2009 (7.30pm – 9.45pm)

Proposed amalgamation of Harefield Infant and Junior schools.

Chris Spencer, Director of Education and Children's Services, started with a presentation setting out the potential benefits of amalgamation and the concerns raised during the initial consultation. He said that as Director he had to consider the interest of schools and pupils across the borough and that his perspective would necessarily be different from that of parents and teachers who would legitimately be concerned mainly with their own school. The presentation was interspersed with questions throughout the evening.

Questions and comments

Why had the council not advertised the public meeting beyond the schools?

CS responded that the public meeting, although considered important by the council, did not form a mandatory part of the statutory consultation process.

When is the closing date for the consultation?

SH explained that the amalgamation proposal had three linked elements, as it was part of a prescribed process. The elements were:

Part 1 (A): To enlarge the premises of Harefield Junior School (closing date 28 July)

Part 1 (B): To lower the age range of Harefield Junior School from ages 7-11 to 3 to 11 (closing date 11 August).

Part 2: To close Harefield Infant School (closing date 11 August).

Several people raised concerns that the case put forward for amalgamation was generic and not specific to the Harefield schools. Indeed, many of the potential benefits were not seen to apply to this particular situation.

CS responded that the benefits of amalgamation applied to the Harefield schools in the sense that they were part of the broader schools community to which the benefits accrued. In addition, although benefits such as continuity of learning, headteacher recruitment and greater efficiency might not be immediately apparent given the excellent leadership and management currently in place, it was important to look to the future. A single headteacher post would improve future recruitment opportunities and by extension the continuity of learning and management for the future. CS also pointed out that whilst school budgets had enjoyed an increase of circa 6% for the last few years, the figure would only be 2% for the next few years. The pressures on public expenditure would mean that all public services, including schools,

would have to get used to doing more for less. Were all separate infant and junior schools to be amalgamated around £2m could be re-distributed to schools through the funding formula on the basis of fixed site savings alone. Any amalgamation would not benefit council budgets.

Concerns were raised that an amalgamation would lead to a budget cut for the schools and could not therefore be to their benefit. A concern was also expressed that Devolved Formula Capital would be lost if the schools amalgamated.

CS confirmed that it was the case in that an amalgamated school would no longer received both fixed site factors of £120,000. But he explained that this money would be redistributed to all schools through the schools funding formula (DSG) and that an amalgamated Harefield school would receive its share in the uplifted sum available for each Hillingdon pupil. He did accept that overall the school would lose some budget. He made the point that all through primary schools have the potential to be more efficient than separate infant and junior schools as they have only one headteacher, a unified staffing structure and can streamline management and procurement of services. Moreover, the second fixed site factor would remain in place for the first year after amalgamation and would then be phased out by 25% each year, resulting in the full loss of this factor only after five years. This would give any new school ample time to make the necessary budget adjustments. SH confirmed that Devolved Formula Capital is allocated on the basis of pupil numbers, not school blocks.

Concerns were expressed about the handling of the abortive appointments process for a new Infant headteacher. Why were the governors only informed at the last minute that they should not proceed to interview after the advert had been published?

CS responded that he had alerted the governors to the fact that, should they choose to advertise for the post, any potential candidates could be disappointed in the event of a statutory consultation on amalgamation.

Concerns were expressed about the timing of the amalgamation proposal. Why had it come at a time when the governing body would have been able to appoint an infant headteacher who could be mentored by the experienced junior headteacher? An amalgamation could then have been proposed when the junior head retired, with a headteacher in place ready to take on the whole school.

CS said this scenario is no different to the present situation. He felt that the same objections would be raised then as now.

Concerns were expressed that an amalgamated school could not operate as a single school whilst in two separate buildings and that any benefits of amalgamation would therefore be lost. Surely it would be better not to amalgamate in advance of a new building.

CS accepted that a newly built school would be the ideal. He said that whilst the infant school was quite high priority in terms of condition, there were enough schools with even higher priority needs to mean that a rebuild would not be possible in the next few years. But he said that the success of an amalgamated school was about leadership and management and not dependent on premises alone. He also said that it could be reasonable to argue the schools would be even higher priority if amalgamated.

Both schools have received excellent Ofsted reports. The sentiment that “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” was strongly expressed, together with a suggestion that other schools could use the Harefield schools as a model of how to manage good schools.

CS said that he was proud of standards and leadership and management at both schools and that neither was therefore an issue in proposing the amalgamation. The other potential benefits, however, remain.

A strong concern was expressed that the council was not being consistent in not proposing an amalgamation at the Newnham schools. What was different about the Newnham situation?

CS said that each situation was different, hence the Cabinet decision that amalgamation should be considered on a case-by-case basis. He said that his officers had dealt with the issue of whether there should be an amalgamation proposal for Newnham and he could not comment on the specifics of the situation. His officers advised him that it would not be appropriate in this case.

Concern was expressed that CS was being naïve in expecting any efficiencies gained from a future amalgamation to be re-invested in the schools budget.

CS responded that it was a legal requirement for any efficiencies to be ploughed back into the ring-fenced schools budget and that Members would therefore be unable to re-direct this money into other areas even if they wanted to. It is therefore not possible for the council to benefit financially from an amalgamation.

One participant said that it was outrageous for the council to be making points about value for money whilst at the same time advertising for two deputy director posts in Education and Children’s Services for £95-125,000.

CS responded that the council had been successful in making substantial efficiency savings over the last few years. The salary offered for the jobs was the going rate for jobs at this level and that where there were four jobs at this level when he arrived in Hillingdon, now there were only two.

If school amalgamations are now a council policy, what other amalgamations does the council have in mind?

There is no policy of wholesale amalgamation, with each case considered on its own merits when the opportunity arises. He said it would be wrong to name

schools without prior discussion with them and that anyway it was based on opportunities as they arose.

A question was asked as to why CS, as a governor of Harefield Academy, had never attended a governing body meeting.

CS responded that it was standard practice for the council to have a seat on academy governing bodies, but that it was rare for any authority to take up this seat. Since academies are managed directly from the academies division at the DCSF and not the Local Authority.

A question was asked as to whether in reality the council had much choice in relation to amalgamations. This person had heard that there were government targets on amalgamation and that there was therefore very little leeway in this matter.

CS responded that this was not the case.

Concerns were expressed that the views of people opposed to the proposal were not being listened to and that the director simply re-iterated the generic benefits of amalgamation rather than explaining how the Harefield schools in particular would benefit from such a proposal. Another comment was made that where the council had been able to put its proposal to all stakeholders, opponents of the proposal were not able present their views to stakeholders as a whole.

CS said that he had come to the school to talk to interested parties on several occasions and that his views simply differed to some of those expressed at these meetings. He also pointed out that this was simply a proposal and that the reason for having public consultation was precisely to hear the views being expressed by those present. He said that the views of the local community were being well represented, e.g. two councillors were present, one of whom is a Cabinet member. Indeed, the Cabinet member had facilitated a meeting between the governing body and the Leader, something that did not usually happen. In response to the last point, CS that the process had to be kicked off by someone putting a proposal on the table.

A parent commented that her daughter with physical special educational needs had not had a good experience at another borough school, but that she had had a very good experience at Harefield and was now at the same level as her peers.

CS said that this was about whether or not a school catered for the needs of pupils rather than whether a school was an all-through primary or a separate infant/junior school.

A concern was expressed that the amalgamation proposal was being rushed through in advance of a proper strategy. The comment was also made that reducing 66 separate infant and junior schools to 48 all through schools would

take a very long time, thus weakening the argument that amalgamations could eventually save £2m.

CS responded that he had been discussing this proposal with governors since November 2008. Amalgamations would have to be considered on a case-by-case basis as opportunities arose.

Concern was expressed that part of the consultation was being held during the school holidays.

CS said that it had been a difficult judgement about school holidays versus leaving the school in limbo for a longer period.

Concern was expressed that the infant headteacher was having to retire amid concerns over the future of the Harefield schools.

Chris said that he usually wrote to headteachers on their departure to express his thanks for their efforts. He said that it was important not to personalise the issue, instead focussing on the best interests of schools across the borough.

The view was expressed that no killer argument had been presented as to why the Harefield schools should be amalgamated.

CS noted the point and referred to previous answers.

Questions were asked about the process going forward and the nature of the final report on the amalgamation proposal. Would it represent the views expressed during consultation? Would the report be public? What happens at the actual Cabinet meeting – is there a presentation? Is there an appeals process?

CS said that after consultation had closed on all aspects of the proposals, a report would be presented to Cabinet on 24 September making a recommendation to members on the amalgamation proposal. SH said that an important part of the report would be a summary of consultation feedback and that the report would therefore not just represent one side of the argument. She added that the final report would be a public document. At the meeting itself, the relevant Cabinet Member introduces the report but there is no presentation. Members then make a decision, which may or may not endorse the recommendation in the report. There is an appeals process for specified people and in this case the schools adjudicator would make the final decision.

How many recommendations you have made on amalgamations have been rejected by Cabinet?

CS responded that this was the first amalgamation proposal he had put to Cabinet at Hillingdon Council.

The meeting was brought to a close at 9.45, with participants thanked for their attendance and interest.