

STATUTORY PROPOSALS TO AMALGAMATE HAREFIELD INFANT AND JUNIOR SCHOOLS

Cabinet Member	Councillor David Simmonds
Cabinet Portfolio	Education & Children's Services
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Papers with report	Appendix 1 - Complete statutory proposals Appendix 2 – Additional information on responses to statutory consultation Appendix 3 - Notes of Public Meeting

HEADLINE INFORMATION

Purpose of report	To consider proposals to close Harefield Infant School, and to enlarge and lower the age-range of Harefield Junior School, in order to create a single Harefield Primary School.
Contribution to our plans and strategies	Development and improvement of education in our schools (Council Plan 2007/10)
Financial Cost	None
Relevant Policy Overview Committee	Education & Children's Services
Ward(s) affected	Harefield

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet agree:

- 1. To reject Statutory Proposals to amalgamate Harefield Infant and Junior Schools at this time. (The proposals would involve closing Harefield Infant School, and lowering the age-range and enlarging the premises of Harefield Junior School, with effect from April 1st 2010).**
- 2. That amalgamation be reconsidered at a later date should more suitable circumstances arise.**

INFORMATION

Reasons for recommendation

In 2007, School Organisation Committees were abolished and the council took on the role of decision maker for Statutory Proposals involving school organisation. Proposals to amalgamate

Harefield Infant and Junior Schools are presented here to the full Cabinet (rather than to the Cabinet Member) because objections were received during the statutory consultation process.

The proposals under consideration follow on from a decision taken by Cabinet in March 2009 that the council adopt a policy of amalgamating infant and junior schools where appropriate opportunities arise, but on a case by case basis.

Statutory consultation with key stakeholders was conducted from July 1st 2009 to August 11th 2009. The consultation attracted several points of objection. Details of the consultation are contained in the main body of this report and in Appendix 2. Whilst it is felt that all points of objection can be addressed, it is also appropriate to be sensitive to the views of local stakeholders. At the initial consultation stage, one view expressed by stakeholders was that this was not the best time to proceed with amalgamation. Should circumstances change, the proposals could be brought forward again at a later date.

Alternative options considered / risk management

When considering these Statutory Proposals, the decision options for the Cabinet are to:

- a) Reject the proposals
- b) Approve the proposals
- c) Approve the proposals with a modification (e.g. modify the proposed implementation date)
- d) Approve the proposals subject to meeting a specific condition (e.g. planning permission)

For the reasons set out above, officers recommend option (a) at this time. However, in view of the potential longer-term benefits of amalgamations, it is also recommended that the matter be reconsidered should more suitable circumstances arise.

If the council cannot make a decision within 2 months of the consultation period ending, i.e. by October 11th 2009, then the proposals will need to be referred to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator for a decision. However, it is recommended that the council determine the proposal in order to bring the matter to a conclusion as quickly as possible.

Comments of Policy Overview Committee(s)

None at this stage.

Supporting Information

1. Potential Benefits of amalgamation

1.1 The principal objectives and potential benefits of amalgamating infant and junior schools were identified in the report to Cabinet on March 19th 2009. In summary these were the potential for

- financial savings
- improvements to the continuity and progression of learning between the ages of 5 and 11
- improvements to the consistency of approaches to inclusion and well being
- efficient use of human and educational resources
- Overcoming some problems with Headteacher / staff recruitment
- improvements parental / family involvement
- benefits in curriculum delivery

- enhancement of staff expertise and experience, through accessing the whole primary curriculum
- creating a single school ethos, benefiting pupils, staff, parents and carers
- improvements to School Governor recruitment

1.2 The March 19th Cabinet report also noted that with regard to education standards, it was hard to find definitive evidence of the impact of amalgamation on pupil attainment. In general, evidence suggested that children leaving all-through primary schools have performed equally as well as children attending separate infant and junior schools. The conclusion was that a change in school management structure should not be detrimental to educational standards, and that it is widely accepted that the key to success following any major organisational change is how such a change is effectively managed, and the quality and commitment of the staff.

2. Consultation

2.1 The Local Authority conducted initial consultation between March 13th and April 17th 2009. That consultation attracted several hundred responses (including petitions) with a majority against the proposals, although a significant minority also responded that amalgamation would be acceptable under certain conditions. The results of that initial consultation are summarised within the Complete Proposals document **Appendix 1**.

2.2 After considering all responses to the initial consultation, the council decided to proceed to a wider statutory consultation exercise. This took place between July 1st and August 11th 2009 and included a public meeting held at Harefield Infant School on Wednesday July 15th. The results of the statutory consultation exercise are summarised below, with further detail in **Appendix 2**. Some respondents sent more than one response and these generally covered more than one point. Hence the frequency of comments shown in Table 1 is greater than the number of respondents. The notes of the Public Meeting are attached as **Appendix 3**.

2.3 Summary of statutory consultation:

- 9 responses from parents, or residents of Harefield
- 3 responses from Harefield Infant & Junior Schools' Governing Body
- 3 responses from Harefield Infant & Junior Schools' parent-governors
- 2 responses from the local parish church
- 2 responses from Harefield Infant or Junior School staff
- There were 353 signatories to a Governing Body petition organised by a school governor. (This petition has also been sent to the Cabinet Member for Education & Children's Services for consideration). The petitioners opposed "the forced amalgamation of Harefield Infant School and Harefield Junior School"

Results

- Total responses (individual and petitions): 372
- Fully supportive of proposals: 0 (0%)
- Against proposals: 372 (100%)

2.4 Table 1 below summarises the key points made during the statutory consultation by grouping them into related topics, and provides the Local Authority's response to each general topic of objection. Further details of responses received are contained within Appendix 2.

Table 1

Point of objection	Frequency	Response
Petition objecting to proposals (see paragraph 2.3 above)	353 signatories	Potential benefits of amalgamation as set out below and at Appendix 2.
Proposed amalgamation is driven only by a desire to achieve efficiency savings.	19 comments	<p>The potential for efficiency savings is not the sole driver for amalgamation, as indicated in the pre-consultation letter. Potential amalgamation advantages include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuity of learning and ethos between the ages of 5 and 11, thus avoiding a potential performance dip on transfer between separate schools • Consistent approaches to inclusion and well-being • Easier headteacher /staff recruitment in the future • Greater opportunities for staff development across the full primary phase <p>Efficiency, however, has to be a factor in considering school configuration in the future. Where schools have seen growth of around 6% in funding in the last few years, budgets will rise by little more than 2% for the next few years. This means that the schools community will need to deliver more for less. If all current infant and junior schools were to be amalgamated, over £2m could be re-distributed to school budgets across the borough through the release of the fixed element of schools' budgets alone. There are, of course, no plans to do this in every case but rather as opportunities arise at individual schools.</p> <p>It is important to note that any efficiency savings achieved do not benefit the council in any way as they must be re-distributed to school budgets across the borough.</p>
Perceived benefits / efficiency savings overstated e.g. because the buildings are separate	35 comments	The efficiency savings are based on the reduction in the fixed factor sum reflecting the reduced staffing costs in the future e.g. loss of a headteacher post, Unified management could lead to other potential efficiencies e.g. procurement.
An amalgamation would jeopardise standards	27 comments	It is hard to find definitive evidence of the impact of amalgamation on attainment. The research evidence which does exist suggests that there is a dip in performance at key school transition points and that there is little evidence that school size

Point of objection	Frequency	Response
		<p>impacts on attainment.</p> <p>In terms of the Hillingdon context, there has only been one school amalgamation in recent years, Cowley St Lawrence CE Primary. Performance did improve post-amalgamation, though this is clearly only a sample of one. An analysis of CVA from KS1 to KS2 at Hillingdon junior and primary schools in 2007 and 2008 shows higher scores for children attending primary schools.</p> <p>Both the local and national research evidence suggests that, at worst, an amalgamation is not likely to adversely affect standards.</p>
<p>Consultation/local views: Given the opposition expressed to the proposals by different sections of the community e.g. governors, parents, some other schools, why is the council proceeding with the proposals? Are stakeholder views being ignored?</p>	<p>16 comments</p>	<p>The local authority is committed to comprehensive and meaningful consultation with stakeholders. The points made in the initial consultation were considered in coming to the decision to proceed to the next stage. The statutory consultation (representation stage) provided an opportunity for comment by the wider community. The role of the council is to determine the proposals, weighing both consultation feedback and the advantages and disadvantages of the proposals.</p>
<p>The schools will lose out financially because of the amalgamation</p>	<p>10 comments</p>	<p>This concern relates to the fact that if the schools were to amalgamate, the single school would only attract one fixed factor sum of £121,000 rather than the two that the schools currently receive. The removal of this second fixed factor, however, merely reflects the fact that the cost base of a single school is lower than that of two separate schools e.g. only one headteacher and the potential for combined support staff and procurement efficiencies. Unified management could lead to other potential efficiencies e.g. procurement. Because the fixed site factor is phased out over 5 years, there is time for the necessary budgetary adjustments to be made.</p>
<p>A concern that many of the benefits of a potential amalgamation would be negated by the lack of a single building. Would the amalgamation not be better when a single building can be provided?</p>	<p>7 comments</p>	<p>Clearly a single building would be the ideal for an amalgamated school. The infant school building is a "system build" construction and does have condition issues and will be considered as part of the council's capital programme. The council's view is, however, that a single building is not essential to a successful amalgamation given the proximity of the buildings. Many schools do not operate within a single building.</p>

Point of objection	Frequency	Response
The advantages of a potential amalgamation have not been sufficiently explained in the case of Harefield Infant and Junior schools.	5 comments	<p>The reasons for amalgamation cited above apply in most contexts, the main differentiating factor in some schools being a need to boost standards. There is no standards issue at the Harefield schools.</p> <p>Looking at the local context, Harefield Infant and Junior schools already have a joint governing body and therefore one of the major potential obstacles to amalgamation is already overcome. Their buildings, although separate, are contiguous. Although Harefield Infant is not currently suffering the headteacher recruitment problems common in infant schools across the country, there is no guarantee that this will be the case in the next few years when the headteacher at the junior school retires. Amalgamation also benefits the wider school community as the same amount of money can be divided among a smaller number of schools.</p>

3. Conclusion

3.1 The decision to pursue school amalgamations taken by the council in March 2009 stated that where it is possible to amalgamate infant and junior schools, the local authority will generally consider the overall benefits of amalgamation outweigh the reasons for maintaining the status quo. That decision also stated that where circumstances permit, any opportunity for amalgamating infant and junior schools should be investigated and pursued.

3.2 As with the initial consultation, the formal statutory consultation has attracted strong opposition. Whilst the Local Authority is of the opinion the potential advantages to be gained from unified management and greater efficiency will generally outweigh any disadvantages, it is also taking into account the views of stakeholders in not proceeding with amalgamation at this time.

Financial Implications

Schools that amalgamate can achieve savings through efficiencies (e.g. staff costs), which would offset budget reductions in formulaic allocations and could result in an improved financial position for the amalgamated school.

However, it should be noted that no savings achieved from amalgamation are retained by the Local Authority. Any additional funding made available through the amalgamation forms part of the ring-fenced Dedicated Schools Grant and therefore must be used to support the Schools budget generally.

EFFECT ON RESIDENTS, SERVICE USERS & COMMUNITIES

What will be the effect of the recommendation?

It is not expected that any detrimental effects will arise as a direct result of not proceeding with this particular amalgamation at this time. However, nor would potential benefits (both in relation to Harefield schools and wider benefits) be realised.

Consultation Required

A statutory consultation process has been followed. This included initial consultation with stakeholders during spring 2009, followed by publication of Statutory Proposals on July 1st 2009. In preparing the statutory consultation, officers worked closely with the DCSF to ensure that all legal requirements were met. In addition, the Local Authority held a Public Meeting on July 15th 2009 at Harefield Infant School to provide a further opportunity for stakeholders to make their views known. All local schools, residents, neighbouring Local Authorities, school staff, and parents of children at the school have been given the opportunity to comment.

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Corporate Finance

As stated in the financial implications, infant and junior schools that amalgamate can achieve efficiency savings through staff costs and improved management processes. Any savings may either be for the benefit of the amalgamated school or for schools in general, depending on any consequential impact on the local schools funding formula. Any savings made available through the amalgamation forms part of the ring-fenced Dedicated Schools Grant and therefore must be used to support the schools budget generally.

Legal

This report confirms that the legal process and timescales relating to the consultation process have been complied with and sets out the reasons for recommending approval of the proposals. The School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations etc) (England) Regulations 2007 as amended designates the Local Authority as a 'Decision Maker' who must consider and determine the proposals within 2 months of the end of the representation period. Article 7.08 paragraph 24 of the Council Constitution provides for decisions to determine school organisation proposals where objections have been received shall be taken collectively by the Cabinet.

Corporate Property

Amalgamation of infant and junior schools into one organisation under the banner of 'primary school' could lead to asset reorganisation and possibly drive out unwanted or underused parts of school sites. For example, where there is currently duplication of services or uses, following amalgamation there may be vacant rooms or parts of buildings which could be used by other Council services or let to outside bodies such as children's nurseries to derive revenue income. Separate playing field use could be compressed onto one field and surplus space could be sold (subject to the Secretary of State's consent) for a capital receipt to fund school building developments.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Appendix 1 - Complete Proposals

Appendix 2 – Additional Information on responses to statutory Consultation

Appendix 3 - Notes of Public Meeting held on July 15th 2009