

DETERMINATION

Case reference: STP/000578

Proposal: To discontinue Wilthorpe Infant School and Wilthorpe Junior School on 31 December 2012; and to establish a new community primary school with effect from 1 January 2013,

Proposer: Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council

Date of decision: 28 June 2012

Determination

Under powers conferred on me by paragraph 8 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposals to discontinue Wilthorpe Infant School and Wilthorpe Junior School with effect from 31 December 2012 and to establish a new community school on the two existing sites with effect from 1 January 2013.

The referral

1. On 14 May 2012 Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council (the Council) wrote to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator referring to its own proposal made under sections 15 and 11 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (the Act) for consideration under Schedule 2 to the Act. The proposal is to close two community schools, Wilthorpe Infant School and Wilthorpe Junior School (the Schools) on 31 December 2012 and to establish a new community primary school on the two existing sites on 1 January 2013.

Jurisdiction

2. On 16 March 2012, the Council as the proposer, having carried out the appropriate consultation, formally published the proposal. The public notice was in the form required by sections 15 and 11 of the Act, and included the proposals for the closure of the existing schools on 31 December 2012 and for the establishment of the proposed new school from 1 January 2013. Following the six week consultation period the Council forwarded the information specified in the Act and regulations.

3. I am satisfied that this proposal has been properly referred to me in accordance with Schedule 2 of the Act and Regulations made thereunder and that; therefore, I have the jurisdiction to determine these matters.

Procedures

4. I have considered this proposal as required by the Act and have had full regard to the guidance provided by the Secretary of State and to all relevant legislation and guidance.

5. I have considered all the papers put before me including the following:

- prescribed information from the Council as set out in the relevant School Organisation Regulations;
- minutes of the Cabinet meeting on 12 October 2011 and 14 March 2012;
- minutes of the Council meeting on 3 November 2011 ;
- the consultation document on the proposal and minutes of public meetings with staff, parents and governors;
- correspondence from the Schools;
- a copy of the statutory notice as published in the local press;
- proposed admission arrangements from 1 January 2013;
- trend data for the Council for Key Stages 1 and 2; and
- the most recent Ofsted reports for both schools.

6. I have also considered information received during a visit to the Schools on 21 June 2012 which I made in order to view the split sites and to discuss the implications of managing these as a single school, with the headteachers and governors. It also enabled me to finalise a number of issues and to expedite my decision.

The proposal

7. The Council has proposed that these community schools, Wilthorpe Infant School for pupils aged 4-7 years and Wilthorpe Junior School for pupils aged 7-11 years should close on 31 December 2012, and be replaced by the establishment of a new community primary school in the premises of the closing schools. The new school will provide 26 full time equivalent nursery places and 420 primary phase places for children aged 3 to 11 years of age.

Background

8. The Council has been carrying out a policy of reorganisations to replace separate infant and junior schools for over 25 years with the dual aims of achieving the educational benefits of single primary phase schools and of reducing surplus capacity where it existed, at the time. These two schools are the last remaining separate infant and junior schools in the borough and the creation of a primary school in Wilthorpe would successfully complete the policy initiative. The timing of this particular proposal is linked to the impending retirement of the headteacher of the junior school in the summer of 2012.

9. At its meeting on 2 October 2011, the Cabinet made a formal recommendation to the Council for the commencement of the statutory processes related to this school organisation proposal and the Council agreed to the recommendation on 3 November 2011. A consultation on these proposals between 6 December 2011 and 20 January 2012 included meetings for stakeholders including parents, governors and staff. A number of local individuals and groups were also consulted.

10. At its meeting on 14 March 2012, the Cabinet considered a report outlining the views expressed during the statutory consultation period and gave approval for a public notice to be published and for the commencement of the formal consultation.

11. On 16 March 2012 the Council published notices in accordance with the provisions of the Act, for the closure of the Schools, on 31 December 2012 and the establishment of a new community primary school on 1 January 2013 to serve children between the ages of 3 and 11 in the premises of the closing schools. The Council has reported that no objections had been received by the end of the formal Public Notice period.

Views on the proposals

12. The Council's view is that children's learning at these two very good schools would be further enhanced in a primary phase school by strategic planning across both key stages to consolidate policies and provision for each subject area. There would be continuity of learning over the transition period from Key stage 1 to 2 which would avoid the dip in pupils' performance that has been well documented at national level, as young children transfer between separate infant and junior schools. It would be possible to maximise the use of resources provided by the increased flexibility of a larger staff team engaged in cross key stage teaching. There would be of benefits to the children and to staff from the longer term partnership with pupils and parents.

13. Parents were advised that the proposal had been brought forward by the governing bodies of both schools. They enquired about the number of schools that operated on split sites and were advised that there was another primary school in the borough on a split site. The headteacher would manage pupils' movement between sites; although it was envisaged that there would be few occasions when pupils transferred between sites during the school day.

14. Parents wanted to know whether potential sites for a single school had been considered and were advised that an analysis of sites had confirmed that the site of the current junior school, which is extensive, would be ideal for a new school building, if and when funding became available. The two schools serve a densely populated area of the Borough and there are no alternative sites on which a new school could be built. In addition there is no funding available in the School's Capital Programme to fund either a large extension or a new school.

15. Parents noted that both schools are currently performing well and enquired whether this was because they operate as separate schools and are able to concentrate on one key stage of education. The Council acknowledged the leadership of the two headteachers and expressed the view that the proposal would ensure that the primary school would become 'securely outstanding'. Minutes of the parents' meeting indicate that it was felt that it would be difficult for one headteacher to manage both sites. The Council advised parents that the senior leadership team would provide adequate management of both sites.

16. Staff enquired about a new staffing structure and were advised that although there might be future changes, initially all staff would transfer on 1 January 2013 and given the increasing projections for the number of pupils it was likely that the new school would require more rather than fewer staff. It was confirmed that any changes would be made in consultation with staff. Concern was expressed about the increased workload for a single headteacher running a school across two sites. The Council advised staff that should the proposal not be agreed then a new headteacher would be appointed to the junior school and there would be no guarantee that the current working relationship between the schools would continue. This comment referred back to the time before the appointment of the current infant school headteacher when there was far less partnership working between the Schools.

17. Staff questioned the adequacy of funding required to operate over two sites and were advised by the Council that the formula for school funding had an in-built mechanism to cover the costs of running a split site school which would add two thousand pounds to the budget. However, it has since become apparent that this split site factor is only applied to schools with separate sites that are more than a mile apart and that the new school would not qualify for this funding.

18. Governors also raised concerns about the financial implications of the proposal and asked for reassurance that the budget for the new school would be equal to the total of the existing school budgets. The headteacher of the infants' school reported back to governors on a joint exercise with the Council to project the new school budget and this had indicated a significant reduction. It was felt that the split site element would be insufficient to cover the costs involved in operating on two sites. Clarification from the Council indicates that the projected reduction merely reflects the change to a single headteacher. In addition to this, there would be a readjustment to the budget to allow for factors related to support services, for example, finance and payroll support, which in schools that are amalgamated, would be 'recycled' to all schools including Wilthorpe through the age weighted pupil unit value in future years.

19. Council officers acknowledged that governors and headteachers from both schools continued to express concerns about the lack of additional funding which they feel is needed to provide senior management presence on

both sites. The Council advised governors that with increasing primary school pupil projections it was likely that there would be additional funding in future years. It was noted during my visit that the infant school has already agreed to admit a 'one off' bulge year into Year R in September of this year to assist the Council to provide sufficient places and that there would be additional funding from the budget formula, which might offset the projected reduction to the revenue budget. The Council explained to staff that a split site primary school would automatically become a priority for future capital funding to create a single site school although it was stressed that this would be unlikely for some considerable time.

20. The initial proposal had been to open the new school on 1 September 2012 but during informal consultations, the governing bodies of both schools raised concerns about the proposed timetable and they suggested an alternative opening date of 1 January 2013. The Council responded to their concern by changing the implementation date to 1 January 2013 and governors were advised that temporary arrangements would have to be made to cover the autumn term headship of the junior school. However, the junior school's headteacher has since agreed to postpone his retirement until December 2012 to provide continuity.

21. Governors fully support this proposal as in their view it will provide continuity of teaching and learning which will consolidate the high quality of education provision across the whole primary range. They note that the development into an all-through school will remove parental anxiety about gaining admission to the juniors. Governors are also positive about the additional opportunities to have middle leaders within a new expanded staffing structure and together with the headteachers they expect this to aid future recruitment. Following the informal consultation meeting the governing bodies issued a joint statement in support of the proposal and the head teachers in both schools have given their full backing to the proposed re-organisation.

Consideration of the Factors

22. I have considered the proposal and have taken careful account of the guidance provided by the Secretary of State.

Standards

23. Trend data from the Council indicate that there have been variable trends of improvement in other schools in the borough that have been amalgamated since 2005. However, the Council has not linked this proposal to the need to address poor performance or low standards of achievement. Indeed the most recent inspection reports which provide an assessment of provision and standards at the Schools indicate that the infant school provides a good and improving quality of education and that the junior school continues to provide an outstanding quality of education.

24. The Council believes that having an all-through primary school will enable the new school to develop a single curriculum model to bring

coherence and continuity to the teaching and learning process. It will also improve assessment and tracking of pupils' progress as a single system is introduced across all age groups; and the dip in performance which can occur as children transfer between separate schools will be preventable. Parents will be able to benefit from knowing the staff who teach both key stages and by being familiar with whole school procedures and policies. Teaching staff will be able to plan together to secure pupils' progress from Reception to Year 6.

25. The new school would continue to operate on two sites and therefore make additional demands on the time of the headteacher. The intention is to retain two separate departments, each with its own senior managers, so there would be no requirement for large scale staff movement between the two sites during the school day. Staff meetings, curriculum planning and professional development could be scheduled on either site after the school day has finished.

26. Whilst there are many examples nationally of successful infant and junior schools I accept that the proposed reorganisation of provision has the potential to contribute to the raising of standards, particularly through the opportunities for more sustained parental involvement and the sharing of expertise among teachers and other staff across the age-range to be served by the proposed schools. I am therefore persuaded that a new primary school would be well placed to secure the further improvement in standards that the Council wishes to achieve.

Need for Places

27. Wilthorpe Infant School and Children's Centre has a net capacity of 176, a published admission number (PAN) of 60 and 173 children on roll on 1 January 2012. The Children's Centre is located within the premises of the infant school is managed by the governing body. It provides childcare for children from birth to 5 years of age. The infant school also has nursery provision for 26 full time equivalent places and both these early years settings will remain unchanged by this proposal.

28. Wilthorpe Junior School has a net capacity of 240, a PAN of 60 and there were 182 children on roll on 1 January 2012. The proposal is for a new 420 place community primary school for boys and girls aged between 3 and 11 years of age, serving the community of Wilthorpe with a PAN of 60 from 1 January 2013. If the proposal goes ahead, the new school will open in the accommodation being used currently by the Schools.

29. As in many areas of the country, the Council has seen recent growth in the demand for primary places. The projected intake for 2012 is 376, rising in subsequent years to 385 and 396. The Council anticipates that this trend will continue and I am persuaded that the number and type of places are required.

Community and Travel Implications

30. The new primary school would continue to serve the same community and would contribute to community cohesion by consolidating existing links and providing a single point of contact for parents. It would provide capacity to develop a single strategy for the extended school agenda by integrating children's services.

31. As the pupils would continue to travel to the same two sites there would be no change to the current travel arrangements for those children attending the new school. Should the children need to transfer between the two sites for any lessons or activities the School will need to develop procedures to secure the safety of pupils and staff.

Finance

32. The Council owns the freehold for both School sites and proposes that the new school will operate in the premises of the closing schools. The Council has been clear from the outset of the consultation that it is not in a position to provide additional capital resources to fund building adaptations. However, it has confirmed that schools on split sites would have priority in a future capital programme to create a single site school, should funding become available, but this seems unlikely to be the case for some considerable time.

33. The Council is experiencing sustained pressure to provide sufficient primary places. Given the significant space available on the junior site and the willingness of the governors to expand provision; there will be further potential through internal reorganisation and use of the current sites to provide much needed primary capacity for the area. This in turn would provide more income for the school in the future.

34. The intention is that all buildings and resources of the separate schools will transfer to the new school and that the combined net position of the revenue budgets of the Schools (surplus or deficit), at the point of closure (following closedown of their accounts at the end of the financial year), would accrue to the new school at the beginning of the following financial year. The proposed organisation of provision will enable the headteacher and the governing body of the new school to manage resources more flexibly and therefore more in the most cost-effective manner.

35. Having visited the schools and discussed matters with governors, the headteachers and the Council, I agree that the buildings are adequate for the purposes of the new schools and that the proposals do not depend on capital expenditure by the School. However, the Council has subsequently confirmed that it will provide £25,000 of capital funding to help with the reorganisation of the two schools across the split sites and it will be for the new school headteacher and the governing body to decide how this might best be utilised.

36. I am satisfied that appropriate resources will be available to secure a successful amalgamation of the two schools and the provision of a new primary school.

Conclusion

37. In line with its policy to raise primary phase standards the Council has successfully implemented a number of similar re-organisations. Additional advisory support has been organised so that there is added capacity to tackle all aspects of an amalgamation. I am therefore confident that both the Schools and the Council have the capacity to ensure that this proposal is successfully implemented.

38. The new School would be located on the same sites providing continuity of relationships for both pupils and parents and has the potential to make better provision for the pupils and to raise standards. There is local support for the proposals and the strong likelihood that they will contribute to improved standards and to the more efficient use of resources.

39. In coming to my decision I have taken full account of the documentation and information which I regard to be relevant and on the basis of the evidence submitted to me I am persuaded that there would be benefits for pupils and their families. I have therefore concluded that the proposal to close the two existing schools and to establish a new community primary school on the same site should proceed as proposed.

Determination

40. Under powers conferred on me by paragraph 8 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposals to discontinue Wilthorpe Infant School and Wilthorpe Junior School with effect from 31 December 2012 and to establish a new community school on the two existing sites with effect from 1 January 2013

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Carol Parsons

Dated: 28 June 2011