

DETERMINATION

Case reference: STP/000540

Proposal: To discontinue Knowles Infant School and Knowles Junior School with effect from 31 August 2012 and to establish a new community primary school with effect from 1 September 2012

Proposer: Milton Keynes Council

Date of decision: 30 March 2011

Determination

Under powers conferred on me in Paragraph 8 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposal to discontinue Knowles Infant School and Knowles Junior School with effect from 31 August 2012 and to establish a new community primary school on the two existing sites with effect from 1 September 2012.

The referral

1. On 1 March 2011 Milton Keynes Council ('the Council') wrote to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator ("the OSA") referring to their own proposal made under sections 15 and 10 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, Knowles Infant School and Knowles Junior School ("the Schools") on 31 August 2012 and to establish a new community primary school on the existing site on 1 September 2012.

Jurisdiction

2. This proposal for a new community primary school would normally trigger the publication of a notice inviting proposals from promoters interested in providing a new school. However, the Council sought consent from the Secretary of State to publish its own proposal without holding a competition. The Secretary of State granted consent by letter dated 15 November 2010 and the Council, having carried out the appropriate consultation, published a public notice in the form required by the Act, on 13 January 2011. Following the six week consultation period the Council forwarded the information specified in sections 10 and 15 of the Act and regulations made there under, to the OSA.

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

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
 - Policy document "*Milton Keynes World Class Primary Programme*"
 - Years R, 1 and 2 actual pupil admissions to the Schools over the last 4 years
 - Pupil projections for all schools within 2 miles and a map of the locality;
 - Consultation Paper on the proposal
 - Minutes of public meetings with staff, parents and governors;
 - Minutes of the meetings of the Governing Bodies of the schools confirming their agreement to the proposal
 - Notes of meetings held with parents, governors and staff of the schools
 - A copy of the statutory notice as published in the local press
 - Minutes of the Children and Young People's Select Committee meetings on 15 June and 20 July
 - Cabinet minutes and decision sheets of the meetings on 27 July and 21 December 2010
 - Proposed admission arrangements for September 2012
 - Trend data for Milton Keynes Council for Key Stages 1 and 2
 - Most recent Ofsted reports for both schools

The Proposal

6. The proposal is to discontinue two linked schools, Knowles Infant and Knowles Junior School and to establish a new community primary school on the same shared site. The school organisation proposals have been made as part of the Milton Keynes World Class Primary Programme which is designed to enable every child to reach his or her full potential through the introduction of a new model of school improvement. The programme seeks to support all schools to move forward, but has a clear focus on securing an improvement in targeted schools. One of the five priorities of the programme is a primary re-organisation programme aimed at reducing the number of junior and infant schools to secure sufficient primary school places at effective schools in the right locations for the expanding population.

7. The Council states that reform to the primary education system is, in its view, fundamental to its aim of improving educational attainment. The proposed reorganisation also supports the Neighbourhood Regeneration Strategy by contributing to its ambition to arrest the cycle of neighbourhood decline and thus transform the future life prospects of residents.

8. At its meeting on 27 July 2010, the Cabinet gave approval for the commencement of the formal consultation and statutory processes related to the proposed school organisation changes. It subsequently agreed on 21 December 2010 that a statutory notice be published for the closure of Knowles Infant School and Knowles Junior School on 31 August 2012 and opening of a new primary school in their place on the existing sites of Knowles Infant and Junior Schools on 1 September 2012.

Views on the proposals

9. The initial consultation about future options for the Schools took place the summer of 2009 and a majority of responses were in favour of retaining 2 separate schools and appointing a permanent headteacher to the Junior School. This was linked to the timing of the proposed re-organisation and concern that the proposed timescale for an amalgamation would be too short.

10. The Council then worked with both schools to determine a more suitable timeframe within which to consider a reorganisation and agreed that a second consultation should be undertaken in June 2010. The Council distributed over 600 consultation documents which proposed an amalgamation with effect from September 2012. Only 36 responses (5.6%) were received and of this small group, a majority were not in favour of the proposal. Concerns were expressed about the need to retain the outstanding quality of education currently provided in one of the schools and about how the two separate buildings might be adapted to ensure that the new school operated as a single community.

11. However as both head teachers and governing bodies had by then given their full support, the Cabinet decided to proceed and published statutory notices on 12 January 2011. By the end of the public notice period the Council had received no formal objections to the proposal.

12. The Council's view, expressed in a report to Cabinet in December 2010 was that proposals to amalgamate these schools were brought forward because evidence suggests that amalgamating infant and junior schools enhances provision by providing the opportunity for sharing resources, staff expertise, and facilities and enables schools to deliver an enriched pupil offer.

13. The Council contends that the potential benefits of this proposal to amalgamate two linked schools are that this change will extend the breadth and quality of education; widen the impact of the strongest leaders, teachers and governors and widen opportunities for collaborative professional development.

Consideration of the Factors

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

Standards

15. The most recent inspection reports provide an assessment of provision and standards at the Schools. Knowles Infant School was inspected in January 2009 and judged to be an outstandingly effective school. Standards are above both local authority and national averages.

16. Knowles Junior School had a full inspection in June 2008 and was judged to provide only a satisfactory standard of education but a subsequent monitoring visit made in June 2010 noted that good progress had been made towards meeting the key issues for action, following the interim appointments made to cover both headship and deputy headship vacancies. The report commented on the good partnership working that had been developing with the Infant school.

17. The Council states its firm belief that the reorganisation will improve outcomes for the pupils from both schools as a direct result of improved educational transition. In the proposed new school pupils would be able to progress smoothly through the different stages of education. Whole school planning would provide a single structure from 4 to 11 years of age. Working relationships with families would be longer and therefore provide greater continuity.

18. The Council considers that amalgamating these two schools will enable governors to manage resources more flexibly across all age ranges and thereby obtain better value for money. It would also provide a broader range of opportunities for professional development as staff would be able to maintain and enhance their specialist knowledge. The broader range of expertise could facilitate whole school curriculum development and enable co-ordination of planning and monitoring of pupil progression.

19. I am persuaded that high quality leadership, combined with the retention of a majority of staff from the current schools will enable the construction of a single coherent curriculum plan which would ensure that the proposed new primary school would be well placed to secure the further improvement in standards that both parents and the Council wish to achieve.

Need for Places

20. The proposal is for a new 420 place community primary school for boys and girls aged between 4 and 11 years of age, with a published admission number of 60. The current schools each offer 60 places into their entry classes.

21. As the existing schools are both community schools and the proposal is for a community primary school, the proposed change would have no effect on the diversity of provision. An amalgamation would not affect the number of places available and the proposed change would therefore not impact on meeting parental preferences.

22. Admission arrangements for the new school will continue to be those applying to community primary schools in Milton Keynes. The 'defined area' for admissions to the new school will be the same as that currently covered by the Schools.

23. Although both Schools are currently undersubscribed, pupil projections for the locality indicate increased demand in coming years that can be met within the 420 places available. Overall therefore, I am persuaded that the number and type of places are required

Community and Travel Implications

24. 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, community organisations and agencies.

25. Pupils at the schools will continue to travel to the same two sites to the new school and it is therefore evident to me that there would be no change in the current travel arrangements for those children attending the new school compared with travel to the existing schools.

Finance

26. Capital costs for the required adaptations to the current buildings will be met from the Milton Keynes Council Capital Programme. Improvements are planned to both School buildings and to external areas. I note from a Council report the availability of the capital funding and the approval to use it for the proposed amalgamation. A resource allocation and spend approval of £100k in 2010/11 for adaptations/alterations in relation to the Knowles Primary School Amalgamation has been confirmed and it is intended that adaptations will provide specialist teaching and administration facilities.

27. I am satisfied that the appropriate capital and revenue resources would be provided to secure a successful amalgamation of the two schools and the provision of a new primary school.

Conclusion

28. It is expected that the majority of staff would transfer to the new school and there is clear evidence that the two schools have been developing a good working partnership. Standards in the Infant school are already outstanding and there is clear proof of an improving trend in the Junior School.

29. The school would be located on the same site providing continuity of relationships for both pupils and parents. The new primary school has the potential to make better provision for the pupils and raise standards further.

30. In coming to my decision I have taken full account of the documentation and information which I regard to be relevant. On the basis of

the evidence submitted to me I am persuaded that there would be potential benefits for pupils, their parents/carers and for the local community.

31. 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

37. Under powers conferred on me in Paragraph 8 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposal to discontinue Knowles Infant School and Knowles Junior School with effect from 31 August 2012 and to establish a new community primary school on the two existing sites with effect from 1 September 2012.

Dated: 30 March 2011

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Carol Parsons