

DETERMINATION

Case reference: STP/0605

Proposal: To discontinue Lawford Mead Community Infant & Nursery School and Lawford Mead Community Junior School, Chelmsford and establish a new community primary school in their place.

Proposer: Essex County Council

Date of decision: 22 April 2014

Determination

Under the powers conferred on me in paragraph 10 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposal to discontinue Lawford Mead Infant & Nursery School and Lawford Mead Junior School, two community schools, with effect from 31 August 2015; and to establish a new community primary school on 1 September 2015.

The referral

1. Essex County Council, the local authority (the LA), wrote to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (the OSA) on 13 March 2014 referring 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, Lawford Mead Infant & Nursery School (the infant school) and Lawford Mead Junior School (the junior school), (the schools) on 31 August 2015, and to establish a new community primary school for pupils aged 4 to 11 years, on the current site of the schools, on 1 September 2015.

Jurisdiction

2. Under Section 15 of the Act, local authorities may publish proposals to discontinue schools. Under section 11 (A3) a local authority may publish proposals for the discontinuance of an infant and junior school and the establishment of a new primary school to replace those schools. The admission authority is the LA and the Schools Adjudicator is the decision maker.

3. On 6 February 2014, having carried out the appropriate consultation the LA published statutory notices, in the form required by the Act, to discontinue the schools on 31 August 2015 and to establish a new community primary school on 1 September 2015. The notices were in the form required in Schedule 3 to the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) (England) Regulations 2007 (the Regulations). No representations were received and following the consultation period of six weeks, the LA forwarded the information specified in

sections 15 and 11 of the Act and regulations made thereunder, to the OSA for a decision.

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

Procedures

5. In considering this matter, I have had regard to all relevant legislation and guidance.

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

- the formal request by the LA for a decision from the OSA on the proposal, dated 13 March 2014;
- minutes of the governing body meeting of the infant school on 27 June 2013 and of the junior school on 3 July 2013 at which agreement to consult about the proposal to “amalgamate” the two schools was agreed;
- the consultation document dated September 2013;
- notice of the six week consultation in the Chelmsford Weekly News dated 12 September 2013;
- a copy of the analysis of responses to the consultation dated 22 October 2013;
- minutes of the decision made by the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning on 21 January 2014, to publish statutory notices;
- a copy of the statutory notice to discontinue the schools and to establish a new community primary school, dated 6 February 2014;
- letters of support for the proposal from the head teacher of the junior school dated 21 March 2014 and from the head teacher and chairman of governors of the infant school dated 25 March 2014; and
- the most recent Ofsted inspection reports for both schools.

The Background and the Proposal

7. As the school buildings of the two current schools are in very poor physical condition, early in 2013 the LA submitted a bid to the Education Funding Agency (the EFA), to enable the schools to be rebuilt within a single new building on the same site. In May 2013 the EFA informed the LA of the success of the bid and the capital costs of a new school building will be met through the Priority Schools Building Programme.

8. The governing bodies of both schools decided that to maximise the benefits of having a single building they would like to consider the views of the community on a proposal to discontinue the two schools and to create a single primary school, commonly referred to as an amalgamation, under the unified leadership of one head teacher and one governing body.

9. The LA is proposing that with effect from 31 August 2015, the schools are discontinued and that a primary school for children aged 4 to 11 is established to open on 1 September 2015. A new school building will accommodate 420 primary age pupils and a 26 full-time-equivalent place nursery. The school will have a published admission number of 60 for admissions to the reception year. The primary school and nursery would move to its new building, which is projected to be ready by October 2015.

Consideration of Factors

Standards of education

10. The governing bodies of the schools and the LA's officers believe that an amalgamation of the two schools would confer educational benefits including a consistent approach to policy and curriculum planning. Staff would have an opportunity to monitor the progress of pupils from 4 to 11 years of age and would be able to develop a comprehensive profile of the achievements of individual children. They would seek to provide continuity of approach across both key stages of education. In a single primary school there would be no duplication of resources which would provide better value for money.

11. The infant school was last inspected in March 2011, when it the overall effectiveness and capacity for sustained improvement were judged to be good. The report says, *"This is a good school. It is highly regarded by parents and carers for the way that the outstanding care, guidance and support offered to their children makes them feel so safe. The exceptional links between the school and home mean that parents and carers are very well informed about the school's work and know just how to help their children at home. Pupils enjoy their learning and achieve well because of the good teaching."*

12. The junior school was last inspected in February 2011 and was also judged to be good overall and to have good capacity for sustained improvement. The report says, *"The school provides a good education for all its pupils, enabling them to achieve well. Underpinning all its success is the exceptionally good provision for care, guidance and support, which means that the school is a happy, harmonious community where pupils get on well together and enjoy learning. The school provides particularly well for pupils with emotional or behavioural problems, or those whose circumstances make them vulnerable. It makes excellent use of outside agencies, and its own skilled staff, to ensure that these pupils feel safe and secure in school."*

13. My view is that replacing the separate schools with a single primary school has the potential to raise standards of education further, through the development of policies and procedures that secure continuity and consistency.

Pupil Numbers and Admissions

14. There are currently 205 pupils on roll at the infant school, of which 43 are in the nursery; and there are 200 on the roll of the junior school. A new community school would offer 420 places for 4 to 11 year olds, with 60 places in each year group. The school would continue to offer early years provision for 26 full-time - equivalent places, that is, for up to 52 children.

15. The intention is that pupils already attending the infant or the junior school will be able to transfer automatically to the new community primary school, unless parents decide to seek a place at a different school. As a community primary school, the LA would be the admission authority and determine admission arrangements (the arrangements), as it does for the existing schools. It is not anticipated that the arrangements would change for the primary school; and there would be priority for siblings of pupils already at the school and for children within the catchment area. I am satisfied that the places are needed.

Community Cohesion and Travel to School

16. The impact of the closure of the two schools on the community is expected to be minimal, since it is envisaged that the majority of pupils would transfer onto the roll of the new community primary school. The LA says that new school will retain the ethos and values of its predecessor schools and will continue to develop a commitment to equality of opportunity for all pupils, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, learning ability, religious or social background or attainment, including special needs and disabilities. The current commitment to inclusion will continue within the new primary school, for example by ensuring that transition between key stages 1 and 2 is seamless for all pupils. The intention is to develop a revised curriculum that is innovative and robust; and which prepares children to take their place in an ethnically diverse and interdependent society.

17. As the children will travel to the same site, it is envisaged that they will continue to use the same patterns of transport to school that they currently have.

Premises and Costs

18. The project budget currently estimated at £3.75m will be met by the EFA. As the current site will be used, and as accessibility to the site and buildings is good, the LA does not anticipate any additional premises costs associated with the proposal. As community schools, the LA owns the present school site and these proposals, if approved, would not alter that ownership. The tenure of the site on which the new school would be built is freehold.

19. When the new school is established, the existing buildings would no longer be required and will be removed. It is anticipated that the necessary planning permission will be obtained on 13 May 2014.

20. The LA has in place transitional financial arrangements for schools that are closed and a new school opened in their place. The new primary school would receive funding of £175,000 in 2015/16 and £255,000 in 2016/17. The LA has sought permission from the Department for Education to vary the transitional arrangements for amalgamations, so that the primary school would receive two lump sums each year, for the first two academic years. This funding is contained within the resources of the Individual Schools Budget and is funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant. I am satisfied that the LA has secured the required capital and revenue funding.

Extended Services

21. Currently the schools offer a wide range of activities including sports clubs and music tuition. Pupils from both schools have access to the breakfast club. There are parenting classes and family learning opportunities and families can gain swift

access to targeted, specialist services from the local multi-agency team. The schools host the Madrassa School on Saturdays, provide a base for the football association and make provision for first aid courses. The governing bodies of both schools try to ensure that the children, families and the wider school community benefit from existing provision. They have considered the potential of opening up the site and facilities to all stakeholders, once the new primary school has been built.

Consultation

22. The consultation on this proposal was carried out between 12 September 2013 and 21 October 2013. The consultation document was sent to all parents, staff, governors and other stakeholders and partners prior to the beginning of the consultation process. Consultation meetings were advertised in the local press for parents and the community. Meetings were held with staff and union representatives and with governors. The pupils were consulted at both schools through the junior school council and with each Infant class. Eighteen responses were received and all but one were in favour of the proposal. I am therefore satisfied that the consultation process met requirements.

Conclusion

23. The overwhelming majority of responses to the consultation support the proposal to amalgamate the two schools. The LA's proposal to discontinue the schools, which are in poor physical condition and to establish a new community primary school with grant funding, has the potential to support further improvements at these two good schools for the reasons detailed above. The capacity of the new school will enable all pupils in the schools to transfer smoothly and will also provide additional capacity for any increased future demand for places from new housing. The governing bodies have expressed a firm intention to increase the range of community and extended services at the school. I am satisfied that I should approve this proposal.

Determination

24. Under the powers conferred on me in paragraph 10 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposal to discontinue Lawford Mead Infant & Nursery School and Lawford Mead Junior School, two community schools, with effect from 31 August 2015; and to establish a new community primary school on 1 September 2015.

Dated: 22 April 2014

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Mrs Carol Parsons