

DETERMINATION

Case reference: STP000609

Proposals: To discontinue Loose Infant School and Loose Junior School, Maidstone, with effect from 31 August 2014 and establish a new community primary school with effect from 1 September 2014.

Proposer: Kent County Council

Date of decision: 27 June 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 Loose Infant School and Loose Junior School, Maidstone, with effect from 31 August 2014 and establish a new community primary school with effect from 1 September 2014.

The referral

1. On 3 June 2014 the Area Schools Organisation officer wrote to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) on behalf of Kent County Council, the local authority (the LA), applying for a decision on its proposals to discontinue (close) Loose Infant (the infant school) and Loose Junior (the junior school) Schools (the schools) with effect from 31 August 2014 and establish a new community primary school with effect from 1 September 2014.

Jurisdiction

2. On 14 March 2014 the LA's Education Cabinet Committee approved the publication of statutory notices to close the infant school and the junior school on 31 August 2014, and to open a new community primary school on 1 September 2014. On 3 May 2014, having carried out the appropriate consultation, the proposer formally published the proposals. The notice was in the form required by the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (the Act). I am satisfied that these proposals have been properly referred to me in accordance with Schedule 2 of the Act and that, therefore, I have jurisdiction to determine this matter.

Procedures

3. In considering this matter I have had regard to all relevant legislation and guidance.
4. I have considered all the papers put before me including the following:
 - a) the agenda and supporting papers for the meeting of the LA held on 14 March 2014;
 - b) prescribed information from the proposer as set out in the relevant School Organisation Regulations;
 - c) information on standards at the schools; and
 - d) Ofsted reports on both schools.

The Proposal

5. The proposal is to discontinue Loose Infant and Loose Junior Schools with effect from 31 August 2014 and establish a new community primary school with effect from 1 September 2014.
6. The proposer contends that the potential benefits of this proposal are:
 - consistent leadership and management will be provided across key stages through one head teacher and one governing body;
 - consistency of approach to learning policies, curriculum planning and behaviour management;
 - stability of staffing and improved staffing structures and opportunities for staff development ;
 - improved use of facilities;
 - monitoring of pupils' progress from 4 to 11 years of age will enable staff to build up a comprehensive profile of individual children and build consistently on their achievements; and
 - transition from year 2 to year 3 can be managed more effectively.

The Objection

7. No objections or comments were received in response to the statutory notice.

Background

8. The schools serve the Loose Ward in Maidstone. Both schools have three forms of entry. At the time of the proposals in March 2014 the infant school had 270 pupils on roll and the junior school had 368.

9. The schools have been federated since 2011. The two schools are on the same site and share the same governing body. The present executive head teacher is retiring and a new executive head teacher has been appointed.

10. The proposals are in line with the LA's policy set out in the Kent Commissioning Plan for Education Provision 2013-2018 which states " when the opportunity arises, the local authority will consider the possibility of either amalgamation of separate infant and junior schools into a single primary school; or federation of the schools"

Consideration of Factors

11. I have considered the proposal afresh taking into account the arguments put to me by the proposer and the relevant statutory guidance.

Standards

12. The most recent Ofsted inspection of the infant school, in June 2013, found the school 'required improvement'. The monitoring visit in November 2013 found that the school was taking effective action to bring about improvement. The inspection of the junior school, in May 2011, found the school to be 'good'.

13. The view of the LA on the current standards at the schools I summarise as follows:

Infant school:

- Early years outcomes are variable over time but consistently above national averages;
- In 2013 the proportion of pupils with a good level of development was significantly above national;
- Phonic outcomes were inadequate in 2012 but close to national averages in 2013;
- Attainment has been variable over time with a dip in attainment in 2012 writing;
- The proportion of pupils achieving level 2+ in tests at the end of key stage 1 in 2013 was significantly above average in reading, writing and mathematics;
- The proportion of pupils achieving level 3 in 2013 was above average in all subjects.

Junior School, for the results of tests at the end of key stage 2:

- Attainment in individual subjects has been variable over time but generally in line with national averages;

- Combined attainment, that is attainment in all subjects tested, fell below national averages in 2013, due to attainment in mathematics, but is predicted to be back in line this year;
- Level 5 attainment was in line with national averages and above in writing;
- The proportion of pupils making expected and above expected progress is below national averages;
- Rates of progress are now improving.

14. The LA's experience of successful amalgamations has been that high standards are promoted because of strong leadership and governance and consistency of approach to learning policies, curriculum planning and behaviour.

15. There is already a single governing body; there is an executive head teacher and head of school for each school. The current executive head teacher is retiring but her successor has been appointed.

16. I am satisfied that the factors identified by the LA, the existing partnerships arising from the federation and the preparation for effective leadership and management of the schools should lead to improvement in standards if the schools are amalgamated.

Need for places

17. The proposal provides for an all-through primary school that would offer 90 places (630 places in total) from reception to year 6. There would be exactly the same number of places available in the new school as currently available in the two separate schools and thus would provide for all pupils from the infant and the junior school. No pupils would be displaced. Parents would have the advantage of moving from the infant to the junior stage without application for year 3 admissions as they do at present.

18. The LA's long term primary age population forecast shows that Maidstone needed 11,900 places in 2011 and will need 12,600 places in 2016, demonstrating the need to continue with the places available in the schools. I am satisfied therefore that these school places are required.

Finance

19. There is no capital funding attached to this project. The LA asserts that the proposals can be implemented without the need for significant capital expenditure as the new primary school would operate as an all-through primary school on the existing schools' sites.

Traffic and Travel

20. No change in site or location is involved in these proposals; there should therefore be no impact on present travel arrangements or traffic conditions. I am

satisfied that there will be no impact on current traffic and travel arrangements as a result of these proposals.

Special Educational Needs

21. The LA states that no changes will result from these proposals to the provision for children with special educational needs in the schools. The view of the LA is that bringing together staff of both schools will enhance the quality of education through the sharing of skills and expertise in the new single school. I have no reason to doubt this.

Consultation and the view of interested parties

22. The LA carried out a public consultation from 10 January to 26 February 2014.

23. Consultation on the proposed amalgamation took the form of a consultation document issued to all parents, staff, and governors of both schools and other interested parties. The document included a response form, details of the public meetings and information on how to respond by email.

24. Responses to the consultation were clearly shown in the supporting papers. Of the 1000 copies that were issued there were 37 responses to the consultation. These responses included 22 parents' responses (all in favour). There were eight responses from staff (seven in favour and one undecided). Four governors responded and were in favour; the junior school council responded also in favour and one other interested party was undecided.

25. I consider that the LA undertook an appropriate consultation with the required parties, meeting all necessary statutory obligations. It has provided clear minutes of the meetings and the individual comments made. I see from the minutes of meetings that the LA sought to explain the advantages and address any concerns raised.

26. I note that the number of responses from parents was comparatively small and all were in favour of the proposals.

27. The governing body of the schools met on 11 December 2013 to consider the proposal to amalgamate and unanimously agreed they should; they confirmed their decision at the meeting on 9 March 2014 where they also agreed the proposals for the formation of the new governing body.

28. The consultation was carried out within the required timescale. I consider this consultation appropriate and that it met all requirements.

29. I have considered whether I should visit the school to meet with the parties. There were no responses to the statutory consultation and of the 37 responses to the initial consultation, none was against the proposal. I have therefore concluded that there would be little purpose to such a visit.

Conclusion

30. I note that the school has been federated under a single head teacher and single governing body for some time. Ofsted finds one school to be 'good' and the other to be making effective progress. There will be no impact on the number of places available and the LA has identified significant ways in which standards should continue to rise at the school if this proposal is agreed. I therefore conclude that that I should approve the proposal for these reasons and those given above.

Determination

31. Under the powers conferred on me in Paragraph 10 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposals to discontinue Loose Infant School and Loose Junior School, Maidstone, with effect from 31 August 2014 and establish a new community primary school with effect from 1 September 2014.

Dated: 27 June 2014

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Jill Pullen