

DETERMINATION

Case reference: STP/000536

Proposals:

- 1. to establish a new community primary school in Grimston**
- 2. to discontinue Grimston Junior School, Church Hill and Pott Row First Schools**
- 3. to increase the age range and enlarge the premises of Ashwicken CE and Gayton CE First Schools**

Proposer: Norfolk County Council and the governing bodies of Ashwicken and Gayton CE First School

Date of Adjudicator's Determination: 25 March 2011

Determination

Under the powers conferred on me by the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the Regulations made thereunder, I hereby approve the proposals:

- 1. to establish a new community primary school in Grimston**
- 2. to discontinue Grimston Junior School, Church Hill and Pott Row First Schools**
- 3. to increase the age range and enlarge the premises of Ashwicken CE and Gayton CE First Schools**

The referral

1. On 5 January 2011 the Director of Children's Services for Norfolk County Council (the County Council) wrote to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) referring a proposal to establish a new Community Primary School in the village of Grimston, and a number of related proposals.

Jurisdiction

2. On 15 November 2010 the Secretary of State for Education wrote to the County Council granting consent under section 10 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (the Act) for the County Council to publish its own proposals for the establishment of a new maintained primary school without recourse to a competition. The same letter confirms that, in such circumstances, the Schools Adjudicator is the Decision Maker.

3. On 19 November 2010, having carried out appropriate preliminary consultations, the County Council formally published the proposal. The notice was in the form required by the Act.
4. The public notice also included a number of related proposals, namely:
 - a. the closure of Church Hill First School, Grimston, Pott Row First School, Pott Row, and Grimston Junior School.
 - b. A change in the age range of Ashwicken and Gayton CE First Schools, such that they both provide for the full primary school age-range.
5. The notice was jointly signed by the County Council and the Governors of Ashwicken and Gayton CE First Schools.
6. All parties agree that the proposals are related to each other, so that in determining the proposal to establish a new primary school in Grimston, it falls to me to determine all the proposals set out in the public notice.
7. I am satisfied that these proposals have been properly referred to me in accordance with Schedule 2 to the Act and with Schedule 3 to the Education (Prescribed Alterations) Regulations; and that, therefore, I have jurisdiction to determine these matters.

Procedures

8. In considering this matter I have had regard to all relevant legislation and statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State.
9. I have considered all the papers put before me including the following:
 - a. the records of the informal consultations conducted by the County Council prior to the publication of formal notices;
 - b. the agenda and supporting papers for the meetings of the County Council's Cabinet at which these matters were considered;
 - c. prescribed information from the proposer as set out in the relevant School Organisation Regulations;
 - d. supporting documents relating to the attainment of Norfolk pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 and the relationship between attainment and the organisation of the schools attended;
 - e. maps of the area showing schools and key routes;
 - f. drawings and associated documents relating to the building developments planned as part of these proposals;

- g. full and detailed submissions made by both objectors to and supporters of the proposals, including extensive information about the strengths of the schools as currently organised;
 - h. petitions submitted by objectors to various aspects of the proposals;
 - i. the most recent Ofsted inspection reports for the schools involved;
 - j. a DVD showing the work of Pott Row First School.
10. On 14 February I visited all the schools directly affected by the proposals, to view at first hand the accommodation and locality. On the same date I held two meetings. The first was attended by representatives of the governing bodies of the schools concerned, the County Council and the Norwich Diocesan Authority. The second was attended by members of the public, parents, governors and local Councillors. I have considered information and the representations put to me at those meetings and subsequently.

Background

11. Over the past twelve year Norfolk County Council has been reviewing school organisation in areas where the age range served by schools is not aligned with the Key Stages of the National Curriculum. In respect of primary schools, the County Council has adopted a policy preference for all-through primary schools, serving Foundation Stage and Key Stages 1 and 2 wherever practicable. The County Council has rightly judged that this is not a policy which can be implemented in a blanket way across the county, and has sought to examine its applicability in each of a number of reviews of local provision.
12. The proposals considered in this decision arise from one such review, covering the area served by the schools in what is referred to locally as the Grimston Cluster. The area is currently served by five schools:
- Ashwicken CE First School
 - Church Hill First School
 - Gayton CE First School
 - Pott Row First School
 - Grimston Junior School
13. In the current arrangement children attend one of the First Schools until they come to the end of Year 3, transferring to Grimston Junior School for the last three years of their primary education.
14. The numbers on roll at the schools ranges from 9 to 130.

Proposals

15. The County Council has proposed that three of these schools should become all-through primary schools serving children between the ages of four and eleven, and that the other two (Church Hill and Pott Row First Schools) should close.
16. In support of the proposals, the County Council and the governors of the schools to be expanded make the following principal points.
 - a. National and local evidence points to all-through primary schools as being more likely to secure high standards than separate schools for Key Stages 1 and 2.
 - b. This argument is strengthened in cases, such as this, where one of the schools serves only part of a Key Stage.
 - c. The reorganised system will be more cost-effective, as it will secure a closer alignment between pupil numbers and school places and will reduce management and premises-related costs.
 - d. The accommodation and position of Grimston Junior School make it a more appropriate base for the provision of extended school services than the two schools proposed for closure.
 - e. Although the closure of the First Schools at Church Hill and Pott Row will involve some families in longer journeys from home the school, the distances and routes involved are reasonable, and children attending the schools in Gayton and Ashwicken will have reduced journeys to school.

Objections

17. By far the largest proportion of the opposition to the proposals relates to the proposed closure of Church Hill and Pott Row First Schools. In broad terms, the objectors make the following points.
 - a. The schools are effective and have a strong positive ethos and many distinctive features, most notably the strong family atmosphere and nurturing environment in both schools, and the "Forest School" designation secured by Pott Row.
 - b. The proposed replacement school would not have the advantages of a smaller school, most notably smaller class sizes and more personal attention.

- c. Objectors express considerable scepticism about the significance of school organisation for pupil attainment. It is argued that the evidence provided by the County Council on this point is unconvincing.
 - d. The proposed replacement is inconveniently located and would require children and families to undertake unreasonably long and dangerous walks to school and/or lead to increased vehicle traffic.
 - e. The building works proposed in order to implement the proposed change would be poor value for money, especially in view of the reliance on temporary accommodation in the short term.
 - f. The short-term use of some temporary accommodation proposed by the County Council will be a retrograde step, as the learning environment provided will be inferior to that in the schools proposed for closure.
 - g. The proposals represent a reduction in parental choice.
18. The small number of objections to the proposal to increase the age range of Ashwicken and Gayton CE First Schools refer to the following factors.
- a. Traffic congestion and parking difficulties at both schools.
 - b. Value for money, especially in respect of Ashwicken School most of whose pupils come from beyond the immediate area of the school.

Consideration of Factors

19. These proposals are interdependent: it is impossible to approve or reject any one of them without such a decision having a knock-on effect for the proposals as a whole. In this section I consider the proposals as a whole whilst giving specific consideration to the position of individual schools where appropriate.

Rural Schools

20. All of the schools proposed for closure in these proposals are designated rural schools. The guidance provided by the Secretary of State for Education for Decision Makers includes a presumption against closing rural schools. The presumption does not mean that such schools cannot be closed, but it does mean that Decision Makers have to be satisfied that there are strong reasons for setting the presumption aside in the particular circumstance of the proposal. I have carefully considered this aspect in the context of the issues identified in the guidance.

21. Whilst the closure of the First Schools in Pott Row and Church Hill will give rise to some additional vehicular traffic and/or involve some families in a longer walk to school, the proposed closure cannot be regarded as being likely to have a detrimental effect on the communities served by these schools. The proposed replacement primary school is about 700 metres from Pott Row First School and about a mile from Church Hill First School. The proposals secure a reasonably accessible local primary school for each the communities served by the schools proposed for closure.
22. I have concluded that it is appropriate to consider the proposed closures, notwithstanding the presumption.

Standards

23. The County Council has acknowledged that in broad terms children already do well in the schools affected by these proposals, and that the need to address poor standards does not apply in this case. Nonetheless, one of the principal reasons for the adoption of a policy of promoting all-through primary schools was the County Council's view, based on the evidence available to them at the time, that such an organisation was likely to lead to improved academic standards as reflected in children's performance in tests at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2. Whilst it is recognised that children's attainment in these tests is a function of a number of factors, most significantly the quality of the teaching they receive, the County Council has produced some persuasive local data relating to schools where its policy has been implemented. This view is strongly endorsed by the parents and governors of Grimston Junior, and of Ashwicken and Gayton First Schools.
24. Those who oppose the closure of Pott Row and Church Hill First Schools rightly point to the richness and quality of the work done in those schools. This view is supported by the most recent Ofsted reports on these schools.
25. The other arguments made by the County Council in support of its preferred form of primary school organisation relate to continuity of curriculum planning, consistency of approach and sustained relationships between family and school. They argue that the small school feel and sharp focus on the particular needs of the youngest pupils which can be a great strength of infant or first schools can be secured in primary schools with appropriate internal management.
26. On balance, I have accepted that, whilst there are many examples of successful infant, junior and first schools, the arguments in support of all-through primary schools do tend to support that form of organisation in these circumstances. I do not, however, consider that the proposals in this case could be supported on these grounds alone.
27. The two first schools named for closure are small; in one case very small. Although, under the present leadership these schools are performing well, such small schools are vulnerable to small changes in circumstances, such as a drop in pupil numbers, a change in staff or leadership. There is

considerable evidence to suggest that larger schools are more robust and in a stronger position to sustain success, and the County Council is right to consider options which deal with the vulnerability. These proposals contribute to securing higher standards in the longer term.

28. The schools which are the focus of this decision occupy a wide range of accommodation, including some very old buildings, some temporary accommodation and a building originally designed as a middle school. All the schools make good (in some instances ingenious) use of their premises. The County Council's proposals make fuller use of some of the better buildings and will lead to the provision of purpose designed modern school buildings. In the first instance it is intended that these will be of temporary construction, but the plans area for high quality purpose built temporary accommodation, and, although the full benefits of the changes will not be realised until permanent buildings can be provided, I consider that, the resultant set of buildings (in both the short and medium terms) is likely to be more efficient and to contribute to the achievement of high standards.

Value for Money

29. Many objectors refer to the £3.8 million estimated costs of providing permanent buildings required for these proposals, and argue that this represents poor value for money.

30. In my view, whether or not these proposals are approved, all but one of the schools affected by these proposals occupy buildings which require remodelling and modernization. Whilst the buildings have been generally well maintained and are effectively used, they were not designed for a modern curriculum. It will be necessary to effect significant improvements to these buildings even if the organisation remains unchanged. It is, therefore, inappropriate to ascribe to the reorganisation all the costs of the permanent building work which the County Council has identified as being required. Indeed, by reducing the number of schools in the area, the County Council will reduce the costs of securing the necessary improvements overall.

31. The costs which are directly ascribable to the reorganisation are those associated with the provision of temporary accommodation at two schools and the adaptations to make available specialist facilities for the youngest children at the proposed Grimston Primary School. These are estimated by the County Council at £240,000.

32. Against this cost must be set the revenue savings arising from the closure of two schools, the reductions in home to school transport costs incurred by the County Council, and the benefits in terms of improvements in accommodation at Ashwicken and Gayton CE First Schools.

33. I note that one effect of these proposals would be to reduce the proportion of surplus places in the area from the current 18% to a projected 6% by 2015, despite an anticipated reduction in the number of children to be accommodated.
34. Taking these factors together, I judge that the proposals represent satisfactory value for money.

Travel to School

35. In the present arrangement families living in Pott Row and the Church Hill areas have relatively easy access to their respective nearest first schools. These families would have a longer journey to school if these schools are replaced by the proposed new Grimston Primary. The youngest children would need to be accompanied to school and doubtless many would be taken by car. There would therefore be some inconvenience for families and some additional car journeys.
36. Children attending Ashwicken and Gayton First Schools currently have to travel to Grimston when they reach Year 4, most using transport provided by the County Council. The proposals would remove the need for these journeys, but the increased numbers of children at these schools is likely to lead to a small increase in the number of car journeys to and from these schools.
37. The overall numbers of traffic movements remains relatively low and none of the journeys from home to school is excessive. There are some concerns about traffic management in the vicinity of the Gayton and Ashwicken schools which will require careful attention, but these are highways matters which do not have a direct bearing on this decision.

Views of Interested Parties

38. The views of interested parties have been thoroughly canvassed by the County Council during the informal consultation. I have been provided with extensive material setting out the views of a large number of local people. The principal factors are summarised in paragraphs 16 to 18 above. I have sought to take all this into account, but, as required by the guidance, have paid particular attention to the views of the people directly affected by proposals.
39. The proposals are supported by:
- a. the governors of Ashwicken and Gayton CE First Schools and of Grimston Junior School;
 - b. the Diocese of Norwich Board of Education;
 - c. Gayton Parish Council;
 - d. Leziate Parish Council

41. The proposals (in full or in part) are opposed by:
- a. the governors of Church Hill and Pott Row First Schools
 - b. the Association of Teachers and Lecturers
 - c. the local Member of Parliament.
42. Wider parental and community opinion on the proposals is sharply divided between those opposing the closure of Pott Row and Church Hill First Schools on the one hand, and those supporting the establishment of a Grimston Primary School (and the associated closures) and the expansion of the age ranges of Ashwicken and Gayton CE First Schools on the other.
43. The strength of feeling on the two sides of the argument is very clear, but the arguments are finely balanced. Whilst I have considered the substantive points made in the relevant sections of this decision, this is not a case where a clear consensus of respondents is in itself a factor to be taken into account.
44. It is clear that the County Council went to some lengths during the informal consultation stage to find a proposal which would address the issues it had identified and win the support of all the schools and the communities they serve.
45. The alternatives proposed by the governors of the two First Schools named for closure – the creation of a primary school at Church Hill and an infant school at Pott Row - are superficially attractive and I am sure the current leadership of these schools would make every effort to make a success of such schools, but both schools would be small and vulnerable, and their presence would undermine the viability of the proposed Grimston Primary School.

Conclusion

46. I have concluded that it is appropriate to approve the proposals made by the County Council and the governors of Ashwicken and Gayton CE First Schools. I acknowledge the evident qualities of the two schools whose closure is required to enable this reorganisation to take place. Nonetheless, I judge that the new arrangements are likely to contribute to the long-term sustainability of primary provision in the area and to facilitate further improvements in children's learning and consequently higher standards.

Determination

47. Under the powers conferred on me by the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the Regulations made thereunder, I hereby approve the proposals:

1. to establish a new community primary school in Grimston
2. to discontinue Grimston Junior School, Church Hill and Pott Row First Schools
3. to increase the age range and enlarge the premises of Ashwicken CE and Gayton CE First Schools

Date: 25 March 2011-03-25

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Andrew Baxter