



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

DETERMINATION

Case reference: STP000601

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

Proposer: London Borough of Hounslow

Date of decision: 10 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 Alexandra Infant and Nursery School and Alexandra Junior School with effect from 31 August 2014 and establish a new community primary school with effect from 1 September 2014.

The referral

1. On 24 February 2014, the Head of Place Planning wrote to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) on behalf of the London Borough of Hounslow, the local authority, (the LA), applying for a decision on its proposals to discontinue (close) Alexandra Infant and Nursery (the infant school) and Alexandra 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 3 December 2013, the LA's Cabinet 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 10 January 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:
 - the agenda and supporting papers for the meeting of the LA held on 3 December 2013;
 - prescribed information from the proposer as set out in the relevant School Organisation Regulations;
 - copies of objections received after publication of the proposals;
 - the proposer's response to the objections and comments received;
 - the views and information submitted by the objectors;
 - comments made by the proposer in response to the objection; and
 - Ofsted reports on both schools.
5. On 25 March 2014 I visited the schools directly affected by the proposal, to view at first hand the accommodation and locality. On the same day I held at the junior school, a meeting attended by representatives of the infant school, the junior school and the LA. I have considered information and the representations put to me at that meeting and subsequently.

The Proposal

6. The proposal is to discontinue Alexandra Infant and Nursery and Alexandra Junior Schools with effect from 31 August 2014 and establish a new community primary school with effect from 1 September 2014.
7. 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 policy and planning across key stages will be ensured;
 - 'tracking' of pupils' learning and achievement will be strengthened;
 - staff retention and recruitment opportunities will be increased;
 - economies of scale will improve cost effectiveness;
 - the relationship between pupils, parents and the school can build over a longer period of time, allowing the school to understand better the needs of each pupil;

- transition from year 2 to year 3 can be managed more effectively; and
- parents only have to apply for primary school before reception and do not need to reapply for a year 3 place.

The Objection

8. The objectors argue in favour of single phase schools.

- “Separate infant school, focusing on high quality early years and Key Stage 1 education, enables staff to work closely together; receive training appropriate to this year group; concentrate on earlier years of a child’s education ; and ensure best quality experiences and teaching
- Amalgamating would detract from parental choice and diversity. Some parents have intentionally chosen a small single phase school.
- Some staff prefer to work in a small, single phase school. There is a risk that the schools could lose good quality staff if this is no longer possible.
- Some children benefit from transition between infant and junior school as the experience can help to prepare them for the move to secondary school.
- Friendly, nurturing and caring environment presently offered by the schools, by virtue of their size, could be compromised. Very positive ethos of the schools and good liaison between staff, parents and the community may change. May not be possible for the head teacher and staff to know all pupils individually. Large school may be too over-powering for some children and have negative effect on confidence and learning.”

9. Objectors further argue about the difficulties that may be caused by the process of amalgamation.

- “Managing the amalgamation process would create additional work for staff.
- Financial gains resulting from amalgamation are too small to justify detrimental effect on pupils’ education that is perceived would result. Concerns that adequate financial support is provided to support an amalgamation.
- The period of transition, scale of initiatives to implement and inevitable uncertainty leading up to an amalgamation could have detrimental effect on the very high quality of education provided by the infant and junior schools and these standards may be difficult to maintain if the schools amalgamate.”

Background

10. The schools are in the Central Hounslow planning area of the LA that has 17 primary schools of which 13 are all through primary schools, two are infant and two are junior schools. Both the schools are larger than the national average size, each taking three forms of entry, that is, 90 pupils per year group.
11. The schools occupy a single building on one site. The schools have a shared entrance and reception area and some joint use rooms, for example reprographics and a music/drama studio of enviable proportions. The schools have, in addition to classrooms, several group work and shared areas to enable individual, group and whole class learning. The two halls are adjacent and can become a single large hall by opening the concertina doors that separate them.
12. The infant school head teacher resigned with effect from 31 August 2013 and an interim head teacher was appointed. The head teacher of the junior school also resigned at the same time and an interim head teacher for that school was appointed from February 2013. Neither school therefore has a substantive head teacher.
13. Since 2007 the LA has had a policy of considering the amalgamation of infant and junior schools when the headship of either an infant or junior school falls vacant. It reports that it does so if the following criteria are met: there is a vacancy in the headship of one of the schools; the site can be effectively managed as one school; and the buildings can be adapted to meet the needs of an amalgamated school at an acceptable cost.
14. Having been notified of the resignation of the head teachers, the LA began a process of consultation to close both schools and form a new primary school to bring about amalgamation. The consultation ran from 9 September to 18 October 2013.
15. On 3 December 2013 the LA's Cabinet considered the results of the consultation and decided to continue the process by publishing statutory notices to close the existing schools on 31 August 2014 and establish the new primary school on 1 September 2014. The statutory notice was published 10 January 2014. Nine responses were received following the publication of the notice; five against and four in favour of the proposal.

Consideration of Factors

16. I have considered the proposal taking careful account both of the arguments put to me by the proposer and those who have objected and of the statutory guidance that applies when making such a decision.

Standards

17. The most recent Ofsted inspection of the infant school, in June 2009, found the school to be 'good'. The inspection of the junior school, in November 2013, found the school 'required improvement'. At a monitoring

visit in January 2014, Ofsted found that the school was taking effective action to address the issues raised during the inspection.

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

Attainment at the junior school compares favourably with attainment of pupils nationally. In 2011 the school was judged satisfactory, since when there has been a steady improvement in pupils' attainment. Attainment at the end of key stage 2 in reading, writing and maths combined now stands at one per cent below that achieved nationally.

The infant school is an established good school with results at the end of key stage 1 that are significantly above those achieved nationally. The vast majority of year groups do better than national counterparts and pupils' progress is good to outstanding. Senior leadership is strong and ambitious, with clear ideas about how to improve the school further robustly articulated in the school development plan, despite the leaders being in acting positions.

19. The LA is of the view that amalgamation is means of securing sustained improvement in both schools through consistent leadership, professional practice and management systems.
20. In addition it has adopted a process of setting up a temporary governing body when proposals are published. In this case the temporary governing body was formed 24 March 2014. Also it has offered support to the leadership team and governing body throughout the process, tailored to their specific needs.
21. The objectors argue that standards will be affected, at least in the short term, by the disruption that they believe will follow from amalgamation and that attention will be diverted from the infant school to the junior school with a possible drop in standards in the early years.
22. The LA argues that *"Teachers working with the older age groups would be able to develop a clearer understanding of the early stages of children's learning and development and those working in the infant phase can acquire a stronger grasp of children's educational journeys. As a general rule, there is evidence to suggest that larger all-through primaries find it easier to recruit and retain staff because they are able to offer greater opportunities for career development. Research evidence shows that pupils' progress is slowed by the move between Key Stages. Good transfer and transition arrangements can eradicate this. "*
23. Those in favour of the proposal argue that research supports all through primary schools as providing better provision for pupils, that single policies of teaching and learning and the combined expertise of staff will lead to a rise in standards.

24. Although I accept that there could be an impact on standards in the short term as the attention of school leaders may be taken up in managing the process of amalgamation, I do not consider it inevitable. The objectors have not produced evidence that day-to-day teaching will necessarily be affected, if managed effectively by the leadership team and school staff. I note further that the LA has indicated that appropriate support will be provided to the leadership team and governing body throughout the transition process, tailored to their specific needs.
25. With regard to the concerns raised by objectors that many new demands are being made upon schools, for example demands of the new curriculum, my view is that the pooling of both schools' staff expertise should lead to better development of that and single, consistent policies of teaching and learning would help its implementation. I note also that neither school has a substantive head teacher; both schools therefore face a period of turbulence to some degree when a head teacher is, or head teachers are, appointed.
26. Furthermore, I saw no evidence that the proposed new school would not maintain staff expertise or focus on individual phases. I consider the organisation of and delivery of the curriculum phases that is foundation stage, key stage 1 and key stage 2 to be as manageable in a primary school as they are in single infant and junior schools.
27. For the reasons above I am satisfied that overall impact on standards at the school of amalgamation would be beneficial rather than detrimental.

Need for places

28. The proposal provides for an all-through primary school that would offer 78 part-time (39 fulltime-equivalent) nursery places for 3 and 4 year olds and 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 admission as they do at present.
29. The LA has provided information which demonstrates the need to continue with the places available in the schools, as it shows the continuing pressure on school places in Central Hounslow. The data provided shows a shortfall in school places until 2029 /30. I am satisfied therefore that these school places are required.

Finance

30. There is no capital funding attached to this project. The LA asserts that the proposal for amalgamation is being made because of educational reasons, not financial reasons.

31. The objectors have raised concerns about financial matters, for example that:
- under a combined budget funding might be insufficient to retain some teaching and learning responsibility allowances;
 - a combined school would require a new staffing structure for example changes in management, site management and office staff with financial implications for salaries; and
 - job losses might arise
32. The LA agreed that some funding will be lost as the combined schools would lose a £110,000 lump sum for establishment costs. However, if the school amalgamated during a financial year, in this case in September, both schools would keep the lump sum. In addition, following representation to the Department for Education, it was agreed that in the second year of amalgamation schools could receive 85 per cent of the combined lump sum, £187000.
33. Those in favour of the proposals believed that economies could be made, for example with single contracts for the provision of services and on staffing costs where duplication could be avoided, for example one head teacher rather than two.
34. During my visit, I formed the view that the building design, with already shared areas and proximity of others, particularly in the reception and administrative areas, lends itself to function as a primary school without capital expenditure and that savings may be made as a consequence, if not immediately, then in the medium term.
35. During this visit I asked the LA if there had been redundancies at any other of the amalgamated schools and was told there were not; the LA subsequently confirmed there had been no forced redundancies, but there had been two voluntary redundancies. I note from the infant school governing body minutes and the meeting that I held that teacher retention and recruitment is a matter of concern to both schools; as the proposed primary school would retain the greater part of its budget I saw no evidence that amalgamation is so likely to cause forced redundancies.
36. I am satisfied therefore that there is no requirement for capital funding for this project, that the building lends itself to become an all through primary school thus making economies possible. I consider that the formation of the temporary governing body will help allay some fears about staff organisation as they can start to respond to concerns raised.

Traffic and Travel

37. 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 note however that there was only one parent at a consultation meeting in the junior school and traffic was a question raised. It was noted that

congestion and parking are unlikely to be affected by the amalgamation as the school was not increasing capacity. I am satisfied that there will be no impact on current traffic and travel arrangements as a result of these proposals.

Special Educational Needs

38. The LA states that no changes will result from these proposals to the provision for children with special educational needs in the schools and that the inclusive practices of the currently separate schools will be continued as a fundamental aspect of creating the new single school. I have no reason to doubt this.

Consultation and the view of interested parties

39. Consultation on the proposed amalgamation took the form of :

- A consultation document with questionnaire response sheet issued to all parents, staff and governors of both schools. The document was also made available on the LA's website for inviting comments. The document contained a useful list of frequently asked questions and answers.
- A series of meetings held at both schools. Senior officers attended 10 separate meetings with parents, staff and governors of both schools. The issues surrounding the potential amalgamation were discussed and the views of those present were recorded.

40. Responses to the consultation were clearly shown in the supporting papers. There were 115 responses to the consultation. These responses included 71 parents' responses (17 parents from the Infant School, 38 from the Junior School and 16 from parents with children at both schools). There were 34 responses from staff (16 from infants, 17 from the Junior School and 1 staff member from both), 6 governor responses were received (1 from infants, 3 from juniors and 2 from governors at both schools). Four other parent responses were received from parents with children at other Hounslow primary schools.

41. Of the 115 responses, 70 responses (61 per cent) supported the proposal to amalgamate the schools, with 44 of these strongly agreeing with the proposal. Of the responses, 41 strongly disagreed with the proposal and 4 offered no view. The consultation meetings at the schools attracted 59 parents (across six meetings), 56 staff and 21 governors.

42. There were nine responses to the statutory notice, five against the proposal and four in favour. Of those against the proposal, concerns fell into two categories shown in objections above; the loss of focus and ethos in the infant school and the disruption of amalgamation.

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

44. I note from the number of responses from parents was comparatively small and of those the majority was in favour of the proposals.

45. I note that objections in the main came from staff and governors at the infant school. This is understandable; their view was that the infant school was more stable with higher standards and an ethos of care for the younger children that may be lost.

46. I see that neither school has a head teacher; it is inevitable then there would be some period of change when a head teacher or head teachers are appointed. I consider that the LA has sought to support this process of change, for example by the appointment of a shadow governing body so that concerns raised, particularly about day-to-day matters can be addressed.

47. I have concluded that the advantages of the proposals to amalgamate the schools outweigh the disadvantages.

Conclusion

48. The schools are sited in the same building, so, while I acknowledge there will be a reduction in funding, there should be efficiencies and economies of scale possible in the one school.

49. A single leadership team will better manage continuity of learning, this linked to the greater flexibility provided by a larger budget should provide for increased staffing opportunities for example, professional development, undertaking additional responsibilities and working across more than one key stage.

50. I accept that the ethos of the individual schools, particularly the infant school, is valued by the staff and community but the commitment to improve the education of all the children was evident from all parties when I visited and I see no reason why the ethos should not be maintained and extended throughout a primary school. I consider that what is valuable in both schools need not be lost but that those attributes can be developed and increased in a single new school.

51. I therefore conclude that, for the reasons above, I should approve the proposals to discontinue Alexandra Infant and Nursery School and Alexandra Junior School and establish a new community primary school.

Determination

52. 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 Alexandra Infant and Nursery School and Alexandra Junior School with effect from 31 August 2104 and establish a new community primary school with effect from 1 September 2014.

Dated: 10 April 2014

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Miss Jill Pullen