

## DETERMINATION

**Case reference:** STP/000550

**Proposals:** To discontinue Thorndown Community Infant School and Thorndown Community Junior School, both in St Ives, Cambridgeshire, on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2011 and to establish a new community primary school on the same sites on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2011.

**Proposer:** Cambridgeshire County Council

**Date of Decision:** 25 May 2011

### **Determination**

**Under the powers conferred on me in paragraph 8 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposal.**

### **The referral**

1. On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2011, Cambridgeshire County Council ('the Council') wrote to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator referring to its own proposals made under sections 10 and 15 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 ('the Act') for consideration under Schedule 2 to the Act. The proposals are to close Thorndown Community Infant School and Thorndown Community Junior School on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2011 and to establish a new 420 place community primary school ("the new School") for 4-11 year old boys and girls on the same sites on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2011. The proposed admission number for the new School is 60. The Council states that the aim of the proposal is to "*improve educational provision for the children the schools serve*", "*to help to raise standards further*", to enable resources to be used more effectively, and to provide "*better continuity and coherence in children's educational experience.*"

### **Jurisdiction**

2. The Council applied to the Secretary of State to publish its own proposal to establish the new School without holding a competition. The Secretary of State granted consent in a letter dated 8th March 2011. The Council then published a public notice, in the form required by the Act, on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2011. Following the six-week consultation period the Council received one (supportive) representation. The Council forwarded the information specified in the regulations to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator, with a letter dated 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2011.

3. I am satisfied that these proposals have been properly referred to me and that I have jurisdiction to determine them in accordance with Schedule 2 to the Act and Regulations made thereunder. I believe the proposals are linked and I will treat them as such.

### **Context**

4. The Council, in liaison with the governing bodies of both schools, has been considering the future of the schools and, specifically, how best to build on the increasingly close collaboration between them so as to further improve educational provision for the children the schools serve. The governing bodies of both schools support these proposals.

5. The Council refers to “*a long held policy preference for all-through primary schools.*” It has adopted this policy because it believes there are educational advantages to having children aged 4-11 educated in the same school. This policy, and this premise, is shared by many local authorities.

6. Thorndown Infants School provides 180 places for 4 – 7 year olds. In May 2011 there were 144 pupils on roll. Thorndown Junior School provides 240 places for 7-11 year olds. In May 2011 there were 166 pupils on roll. At the time of this determination there was a headteacher vacancy at the Infants School.

7. There are no formal objections to this proposal.

### **Procedures**

8. As required by the Act, I have considered the proposals afresh and have had full regard to the guidance given by the Secretary of State. I have also had regard to all relevant legislation.

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

- information and supporting papers relating to meetings held during preliminary consultation leading up to publication of the proposal;
- prescribed information from the proposer as set out in the relevant Regulations
- the letter from DfE dated 8<sup>th</sup> March 2011, in which the Secretary of State granted his consent to publish these proposals without a competition;
- the most recent Ofsted inspection reports on the two schools.

## Consideration of Factors

10 I have considered the relevant statutory guidance provided for Decision Makers by the Secretary of State. In light of this I have considered the following matters.

- Effect on standards and school improvement
- Type of school
- School characteristics
- Need for places
- Impact on community and travel
- Specific age group provision
- Funding and land
- SEN provision
- Views of interested parties

### **(i) Standards and school improvement**

11 The most recent Ofsted inspection reports on both schools found them to be good with outstanding features. The March 2010 Ofsted report on the Infants School found that pupils make good progress and, by the end of key stage 1, are achieving at above the national average. The November 2009 Ofsted report on the Junior School found end of key stage 2 achievement in English and science to be significantly above average. A follow up inspection of English in April 2011 found achievement in English to be “*broadly average*” with pupils making satisfactory progress. Leadership and management at both schools were judged to be good, as was the capacity to improve. In April 2011, 44% of primary schools in England were judged to be good, with a further 9% judged to be outstanding.

12 The main driver for these proposals is the Council’s belief that they will further improve standards and the quality of education provided. They envisage that this will be done by “*ensuring consistency of initiatives, policies and operational practices*”, “*greater co-ordination and sharing of resources*” and opportunities for “*better continuity and coherence in children’s educational experience.*” I agree with this view. Evidence about the quality of current provision at the schools, the good capacity to improve, and the support of both governing bodies provides me with confidence that the new School has the potential to provide a further boost to standards, especially in English.

**(ii) Type of school**

13 The Secretary of State has granted the Council consent to publish proposals to establish a community primary school without holding a competition. The governing bodies of both schools have expressed a view that the new school should have community school status. This is the same status as the existing schools.

**(iii) School characteristics**

14 The new School would offer 420 places with an admission number of 60, a school size which is commonly found and widely regarded as providing a good basis for an effective primary school. All existing pupils will automatically be offered places at the new School. As a community school, the new School will adopt the Council's admission arrangements which meet statutory requirements. The size of the new School has the potential to achieve a more effective use of resources.

**(iv) Need for places**

15 The admission number for the new school will be 60, the same as that for the existing schools. In May 2011 there were 110 surplus places at the schools. The Council believe there will be sufficient places to ensure that, for the foreseeable future, all parents who express a preference for a place for their child at the new School will be offered one. The Council is also aware that, in light of possible new housing developments, the match between the supply of, and demand for, places will need to be kept under review. I have no reason to disagree with the Council's analysis of the ability of the new School to meet foreseeable demand for primary school places.

**(v) Impact on community and travel**

16 The new School will serve the same communities as the existing schools and will be based on the current sites. The extended services available at the existing schools will continue to be provided at the new School. I have no evidence that these proposals will have any adverse impact on the community or that there are any new travel or access implications.

**(vi) Specific age provision**

17 The new School will serve the same age range as served by the existing schools.

**(vii) Funding and land**

18 The freehold of the land and buildings is held by the Council. The governing bodies of both schools have asked the Council to give urgent consideration to making additional resources available to support the

implementation of these proposals. In its consultation document, the Council states “*In the current financial climate, it is difficult to predict what capital money, if any, the County Council can make available to improve the buildings*”. As things stand in May 2011, these proposals, if approved, would be implemented without any additional resources. Whilst this would prevent the physical integration of the existing schools I note that they are only 50m apart and I do not believe this configuration need present any significant problems for the effective management of the new School.

19 Several respondents were concerned that these proposals were largely a “*cost-cutting exercise*”. There is no evidence that this is the case. However, the proposed amalgamation will allow the governing body of the new School to review the way in which existing resources are deployed. Although the new governing body has yet to be constituted, evidence from Ofsted inspection reports shows that the existing governing bodies fulfil their duties effectively. This, and Ofsted’s positive judgements about the capacity to improve in both schools, leads me to conclude that the new School will be well placed to ensure that the resources available to it are effectively deployed and that the strengths of the existing schools are built on rather than lost. A key part of the new governing body’s work will be to agree a new staffing structure which, in part, must address the concerns about how a split site school will be managed.

#### **(viii) Special Educational Needs**

20 The most recent Ofsted inspection reports of both schools judged provision for pupils with special educational needs to be good, with pupils with SEN making good progress with their learning. The new School can build on this good practice, the continuance of which is not put at risk by these proposals.

#### **(ix) Views of Interested Parties**

21 The Council conducted a consultation exercise about these proposals between 21<sup>st</sup> January and 18<sup>th</sup> February 2010. This included discussions with both governing bodies and meetings with staff, parents and the local community. A total of 75 written responses were received by the schools or the Council. The Council accept that feedback on the proposals “*was mixed*”. In broad terms, the majority of staff who responded did not agree with the proposals whilst “*parental and pupil*” responses were more evenly split. This feedback was considered by both governing bodies before they indicated their support for the proposals.

22 In general, the arguments for the benefits of a primary school were broadly accepted but respondents had various concerns about how these specific proposals would work in practice. The main themes which emerged were as follows.

- (i) The schools are currently working well and it is difficult to see how practice could be further improved. I believe that Ofsted inspection

evidence (see paragraph 11) shows there is further scope for improvement, albeit from a strong base. This is particularly the case in relation to English and in the opportunity to make the school outstanding.

- (ii) Whether, in light of local housing developments, the new school will be able meet future demand for places (see paragraph 15).
- (iii) A perception that the proposals are driven by a wish to cut costs rather than improve provision (see paragraph 19).
- (iv) The lack of any capital resources to better integrate the two buildings and provide facilities in which all staff and all pupils can meet (see paragraphs 18 and 19).
- (v) The danger that, in separate buildings, it will be difficult to create a shared ethos (see paragraphs 18 and 19).
- (vi) The fact that both existing schools have created a distinctive ethos in relation to the age group they serve and that this might be lost during amalgamation. Ofsted judgements about the quality of teaching, leadership and management and capacity to improve, plus the support of both governing bodies for these proposals, give me confidence that the new School will build on the strengths of existing schools rather than put them at risk.
- (vii) A concern about job security amongst some staff. The staffing structure of the new school will be a matter for the new Governing body. It is therefore impossible for the Council to give any concrete assurances about job security at this stage, but experience elsewhere suggests that amalgamations such as this rarely directly result in threats to job security.

## **Conclusion**

23 I have concluded that the arguments for these proposals are persuasive. I believe they offer the potential to further improve the quality of education and the effective use of resources. I am assured by the fact that they enjoy the support of both governing bodies, that they will involve little disruption to pupils learning, and will have no discernable negative impact on the local community. It is usually the case that proposals such as this are associated with capital resources that enable the physical integration of the new school being created. It is disappointing that such resources are not available in this case but Ofsted judgements about leadership and management, governance, and capacity to improve give me confidence that any associated challenges can be overcome. The consultation exercise was thorough and both governing bodies gave their support to these proposals in full knowledge of the consultation findings. This indicates to me that feedback

was properly considered and that the new governing body will respond to it appropriately.

24 Under the powers conferred on me in paragraph 8 of Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposal.

Dated: 25 May 2011

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: John Simpson