

DETERMINATION

Case reference: STP/000545

Referral body: Liverpool City Council

Proposal: To discontinue Woolton Infant School and Woolton Junior School, Liverpool and establish a new 4-11 community Primary School in their place.

Date of decision: 13 June 2011

Determination

Under the powers conferred on me in Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposal to discontinue Woolton Infant School and Woolton Junior School, Liverpool and establish a new community Primary School in their place.

The referral

1. Liverpool City Council ("the Council") wrote to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator in April 2011 referring its statutory proposal to discontinue Woolton Infant School and Woolton Junior School and establish a new community primary school on the site of the existing schools from 1st September 2011. The new school will cater for the pupils currently served by the two existing schools, and these proposals are related. I will consider them as such.

Jurisdiction

2. The law requires that a competition should normally be held in connection with the establishment of a new school. However, the Council sought and obtained (in an email letter undated but received on 21st February) the consent of the Secretary of State to publish its own proposal without holding a competition. A condition of such consent is that the proposal should be determined by an adjudicator rather than by the Council itself.
3. On 1st March 2011, the Council published notices to discontinue Woolton Infant School and Woolton Junior School and to establish a new Community Primary School. The notices were in the necessary form as required in Schedule 5 to the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) (England) Regulations 2007 (the "Regulations"). No representations were received. Following the consultation period of six weeks, the Council referred the matter to the Schools Adjudicator, and provided supporting documentation.
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 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:
 - documents detailing the proposals;
 - a copy of the statutory notice;
 - an e-mail consent letter from the Secretary of State received on 21st February;
 - the summary of the statutory consultation on the proposals;
 - related papers submitted to the council's Cabinet and
 - the most recent Ofsted inspection reports for both schools.

The Proposal

7. The proposal is to amalgamate Woolton Infant and Woolton Junior Schools to create a single primary school in their place. This would be a 4-11 mixed primary school providing 630 places. There are currently 502 pupils on the combined roll, not including nursery pupils. The current combined net capacity of the two schools is 630 places. There are 26 FTE nursery places.
8. The proposed new school would have an admission number of 90 and three forms of entry. This would replicate the number of places currently offered at the two existing schools, that is to say 630. The 26 FTE nursery places would also be replicated. The proposal is that the existing schools should close on August 31st 2011 and the new school should open on the two existing sites on September 1st 2011. All the pupils on roll at the two existing schools at the time of proposed discontinuance would be offered a place at the new primary school to be established in the existing buildings. This would be able to accommodate all the pupils on roll.
9. The proposed new school would occupy the existing site.

Consideration of Factors

Background

10. The Council believes that all-through primary schools offer substantial benefits to children, staff and parents. Consequently its school organisation policy states that "where separate infant and junior schools share a site, and where numbers on roll permit, the Authority will facilitate the creation of an all through primary as and when the opportunity presents itself". The Infant School currently has an acting head teacher and the head teacher of the Junior School has resigned with effect from the end of the current academic year. This creates an opportunity for the Council to implement its policy and move to an all-through primary school under a

new head teacher. In addition, the Council is currently conducting a phased strategic review of its primary school provision. Woolton Infants and Woolton Juniors are in the current phase of the review and the proposal to join the two schools has been brought forward, ahead of proposals for the rest of the phase, with the agreement of both governing bodies.

Standards of Education at the School

11. Woolton Infants School was last inspected in May 2009, when it was judged to be good. The report says, "Pupils achieve well and by the end of Year 2, reach standards that are exceptionally and consistently high".
12. Woolton Junior School was last inspected in April 2008 when it was judged to be satisfactory. Improvements in standards were noted and they were assessed as broadly average in English, mathematics and science by the end of Year 6. Achievement was deemed satisfactory and the school was judged to have good capacity to improve further.
13. The Council believes that, with its support, the proposed amalgamation would result in the sharing and dissemination of the good practice embedded in the Infant School, whilst building upon the solid practice embedded in the Junior School. It is of the view that all-through primary schools both ease the transition between Key Stages 1 and 2 and enable planning and management of the curriculum for continuous and cumulative learning. Consistent assessment methods can be implemented and teaching and support staff can be deployed according to their strengths across the whole school. The Council holds that all these factors support raised standards and will result in the creation of a high attaining school.

The School Roll and Pupil Projections

14. The two existing schools have a combined roll of 502 (excluding nursery pupils). With an overall net capacity of 630 places, they are therefore running at around 80 % of capacity. However, pupil numbers are projected to rise over the next four years to around 560 leaving a much reduced surplus of eleven per cent.
15. The proposed new school would have 630 places. Based on the current projections it would therefore have a surplus of eleven per cent. The Council believes that the proposal would enable it to create a high attaining school that would attract increased numbers of aspirational parents, some of whom currently move their children to schools farther away from their homes at the end of KS1.

Consultation

16. The council carried out a wide ranging and exemplary consultation about the proposal. This included meetings with staff, parents, pupils and the two governing bodies. Trade union representatives were able to attend staff consultation meetings and pupils were consulted through the schools' councils.

17. Initially the staff of the Infant School opposed the amalgamation. They raised concerns about size, standards, safety, speed, particularly in relation to the recruitment of a new head teacher, staffing issues and finance. The Trade Unions echoed concerns about size and job losses. Following the Director's response to these concerns, the infant school staff moderated their stance and wrote thanking officers for the time and effort spent responding to their concerns and suggesting ways in which the amalgamation could be successful and how the ethos, standards and success of the Infant School could be maintained in a new primary school.
18. The Governing Body of the Infant School then noted that the response to the issues raised by the Infant School staff was comprehensive and that it wished to proceed with the amalgamation.
19. The Governing Body of the Junior School also agreed to support the amalgamation. It raised some concerns about the timescale to have a new head teacher in place and the need for building works to create a single staff room, a suitable front office, a main hall and a new school path.
20. The Year Six Junior School Council response was favourable overall whilst noting some potential pitfalls. Their letter said;

“Overall most of the people/children asked thought the proposal was built on good ground (most people agreed). Some people thought it was a bad idea because they thought it would be unorganised and chaotic. But, on the other hand, some children thought it was a good idea as the school would be able to invest in more academic equipment and would have a bigger staff force under one head teacher.”
21. In response to the issues about time scales and process raised in the consultation, the Council explained that it intended to establish a change management group of experienced officers to work with the governing bodies in planning and managing the process. A shadow Governing Body would be set up and this would manage the recruitment process for a new head teacher and then work jointly with her/him to develop a new staffing structure.
22. The change management group has since been set up and a temporary Governing Body is in place. A head teacher designate has accepted the post of head teacher.
23. With regard to the size of the proposed new school, the Council stated that there are many very successful and popular 3 form entry schools across the country. On staffing issues, they made it clear that they could not guarantee no job losses but that the majority of staff would just transfer across to the new school.

Buildings

24. The Council commissioned a survey of site suitability for amalgamation. The shadow Governing Body together with the head teacher designate have now prioritised those internal works essential for September 2011. Other necessary works would then be phased.

Finance

25. A sum of £300,000 has been proposed to fund these works and the proposal will go to Cabinet for approval on June 3rd.
26. If the proposals are approved, the schools would receive one lump sum premises allocation instead of two (a reduction of approximately £55000) and would receive an additional amalgamation funding of approximately £56000. Both figures are for twelve months and amalgamation funding would only run for 19 months. So for the first two years the difference would be negligible, but in subsequent years there would be a drop of approximately £56,000.

School links and Community Cohesion

27. The current Infant and Junior Schools already work together to provide the full core offer of extended services. The intention is that the proposed new school would maintain and increase the quality and scope of provision for the local community that is currently provided by both schools separately. The school would continue to participate in local projects that enhance the quality of local life such as the "Village in Bloom" project. Both predecessor schools have a tradition of active engagement in a learning network and neighbourhood. The proposed new school would continue to work closely with other local primary schools, high schools, colleges and training providers.
28. It is anticipated that the creation of a high performing primary school on the current site would result in fewer families moving their children to schools outside the immediate area, thus enhancing community cohesion.
29. Within a one mile radius of the School, there is a community primary school, two Catholic primary schools and a Church of England school. This proposal therefore takes account of the need to continue to accommodate parental preference by offering choice and diversity.

Conclusion

30. The proposed amalgamation is in line with the Council's overall policy and is an opportune response to the current staffing situation at head teacher level in both schools. I agree that it has the potential to boost improvement, through greater curriculum continuity and better access to facilities and services. Both governing bodies and almost all those who responded to the consultation now support the proposal.
31. It is encouraging that processes are moving forward apace and that a head teacher designate has been appointed. I understand that, assuming the proposed funding is agreed, essential building works are due to start in the school summer holidays.
32. However the proposed new school is very large. Meticulous and creative planning will be needed to ensure that small children in particular feel and are safe and that families are confident in sending their children to such a sizeable school.

33. In line with its policies, the Council has successfully implemented a number of similar mergers over the last few years. I am therefore confident that it has the capacity to ensure that this proposal is carried through well.

Determination

34. Under the powers conferred on me in Schedule 2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006, I hereby approve the proposal to discontinue Woolton Infant School and Woolton Junior School and establish a new community primary school on the site of the existing schools from 1st September 2011.

Dated: 13 June 2011

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Janet Mokades