

Cabinet

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Item**6**

Public

Paper**C****PROPOSAL TO AMALGAMATE CLUNBURY CE (VOLUNTARY AIDED) AND LYDBURY NORTH CE (VOLUNTARY AIDED) SCHOOLS – REPORT ON FORMATIVE CONSULTATION****Responsible Officer** Carol Tiddy
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Summary

On 30 January 2008, Cabinet commissioned formative (pre-statutory) consultation on the amalgamation of Clunbury and Lydbury North schools. This report sets out the outcomes from the consultation, the recommendation of the Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services and asks Members to consider whether to proceed with formal proposals.

Recommendations

Recommendations are that Cabinet:

- (1) notes the outcomes from the formative consultation;
- (2) decides whether to proceed to formal statutory proposals to close Clunbury and Lydbury North Schools and invite the Diocese of Hereford to publish proposals to open a new Foundation school with religious character with 120 places to serve the combined catchment area in line with the recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services.

1. Background

On 30 January 2008, Cabinet considered a report on the future organisation of primary schools. At the meeting, Cabinet resolved to consult with eight pairs of schools on school organisation change. This decision was subsequently confirmed, following call in, by the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel on 20 February. The consultation period ran from 11 March to 2 May. A number of strategies were used to inform stakeholders and collect views and the outcomes are attached to this report. As this consultation is at the formative stage of the process, there were no predetermined outcomes, and the consultation documents made it clear that all options would be considered, including the option of making no changes. The consultation document also noted that the process was not a referendum, but a chance to inform the consideration of elected Members.

Cabinet is asked to decide whether to proceed with formal proposals to amalgamate the schools, and, if so, what form the proposals should take.

2. Proposals

Consultation took place on three options for possible routes to amalgamation, as well as whether amalgamation was appropriate. These were:

- expansion of Clunbury School with consequent closure of Lydbury North School;
- expansion of Lydbury North School with consequent closure of Clunbury School;
- opening a new school following closure of both existing schools.

In addition, the consultation sought views on the character of the amalgamated school.

Other options were sought as part of the consultation.

3. Consultation

A consultation document was prepared and distributed to all parents, governors and staff of the schools (see Appendix 1). A special section of the Council's website provided more information. Officers, accompanied by senior Members, have held consultation meetings with each school included in the proposals, and the minutes of the meetings for Clunbury and Lydbury North schools are attached at Appendices 2a and 2b. Responses to the consultation were sought by post, e-mail, via the Customer Service Centre and via the Council's website. A file containing all responses received is available to Members.

Eighty two individual letters have been received. There are also eighteen individually signed but duplicated letters from the community of Lydbury North School. Comments in the one hundred letters include support for or opposition to the proposed amalgamations, transport issues, the level of savings to be made and suggested alternatives. The high majority of responses related to Lydbury North request no further action. General comments on aspects raised in the letters are dealt with below whilst individual comments or concerns and the responses to these can be found in Appendix 3.

Lydbury North Governors unanimously agreed that they would continue to strongly oppose the proposed amalgamation with Clunbury School. They could find no educational reasons for such an amalgamation. This position is echoed by many other community representations.

Cabinet members visited Clunbury School and Lydbury North School on 29 April.

4. Key Issues and Factors for Consideration

The key issues regarding whether or not to proceed to formal proposals, and if so what form the proposals should take, are set out in the paragraphs below. The key issues are: the effect on standards of education, effect on local communities, effect on equal opportunities and community cohesion, effect on diversity of provision, financial implications and effect on staffing.

Amalgamation of two smaller schools into a slightly larger, albeit one that would still be one that would still be a relatively small school, can have significant benefits. This section sets out some of those benefits.

- 4.1 Slightly larger schools have more staff resources, allowing staff the opportunity to specialise to a greater degree and share more specialist knowledge, to the benefit of the pupils and the curriculum.

- 4.2 When results are corrected for intake, larger schools in Shropshire add slightly more value to the education of both mainstream pupils and children with special educational needs.
- 4.3 Slightly larger schools can have more types of specialist accommodation, while smaller schools tend to have to make the same space, often a general classroom, do more than one job.
- 4.4 Slightly larger schools can cope more easily with short term changes in pupil numbers (e.g. small year groups), so that they don't have to repeatedly employ then lay-off staff short term on short term contracts.
- 4.5 Slightly larger schools can maintain a wider range of out of school activities, including sports teams.
- 4.6 Slightly larger schools attract more investment in buildings and services because the costs per pupil are lower than in a small school.
- 4.7 Slightly larger schools allow pupils to interact with a wider range of peers. This is an advantage both socially and in academic and sporting terms where pupils of all abilities can challenge themselves to compete with pupils of the same age and approximate ability.

5. Effect on Standards of Attainment

Standards of attainment at the existing schools are recognised by Ofsted and Shropshire County Council as "good". However, both schools have issues in terms of building suitability. This limits the range of activities and resources which can be made available.

Bringing the two schools together would enable the schools to build on the undoubted strengths of the existing schools and to provide additional opportunities for children. This will include both access to a wider range of specialisms amongst staff and improved physical resources. The strengths which could be brought together would include the outstanding behaviour of pupils in both schools, the strong achievement of pupils in both schools, including the above average achievement of pupils in Clunbury and the high quality personal development of learners, including the outstanding spiritual, moral and cultural development of learners at Clunbury.

6. Effect on the Local Community and the Environment

Investment in the buildings of a combined school would probably lead to a small net reduction in carbon emissions, even allowing for some additional traffic, and an overall increase in community facilities. The location of a school in one of the villages with a school would inevitably mean uneven access to the school's facilities between the two villages. However, both villages have village halls, so neither village would be without any facilities. Lydbury North has a shop in the village. It should also be noted that many of the pupils already travel to the site of their current school from elsewhere in the catchment area or beyond, including Bishop's Castle.

Officers have discussed, visited and reviewed a number of potential sites for building a new school. An options appraisal for a number of potential sites is attached as appendix 4. It should be noted that this appraisal has not been discussed with land owners and any conclusions drawn are subject to both successful negotiation with the landowner and to obtaining planning permission. Whichever site was selected, there would be need to take into

account traffic management to ensure that children and parents were able to access the site safely.

The options appraisal suggests that, subject to negotiations with the land owner and planning considerations, the new school could be based around the existing Clunbury school, making use of newly purchased or leased land to extend the current play areas. There are a number of possible alternative sites in Lydbury North, including at least two viable sites. However, Lydbury North village is close to other schools in Bishop's Castle, Norbury and Wistanstow. Setting up a new, larger school in the area might affect the future viability of these other schools, and if the school became oversubscribed by pupil in the catchment areas of these schools it could be difficult for pupils from the southern end of the current Clunbury catchment to access places at a school in Lydbury North.

7. Effects on Equal Opportunities and Community Cohesion

Combining the two schools would mean that children would interact with a wider range of peers and would meet children from a wider geographical range at an earlier age. This will prepare them for later stages of their education where they will interact with increasingly diverse groups. Children with special educational needs will benefit from interaction with a wider range of ability and improved opportunities for staff support and specialisation.

8. Effect on Diversity of Provision

Clunbury and Lydbury North schools are both Voluntary Aided schools with Church of England religious character. There is no reason from the consultation why the new school should not have the same religious character. However, the governors of Voluntary Aided schools have to contribute 10% to the cost of any capital works. If the new school were to be a Foundation school this would retain many of the advantages of a Voluntary Aided school but avoid the need for a contribution to capital works.

9. Financial Implications

The total budget for the two schools in the financial year 2010/11 (the first full year after the proposed date of implementation) is £411,900. The budget for a combined school would be £332,170, a saving of £79,730. This is an efficiency saving as a result of one headteacher and having fewer tasks completed twice, and will not affect the quality of education or the resources available. Investment in the buildings could also lead to reduced running costs, freeing more money for expenditure on staff and resources.

10. Effect on Staffing

Only Clunbury School currently has a permanent headteacher. One headteacher's post would be made redundant in an amalgamation. If one school were to be expanded and the other closed, then, as a result of the agreements with trade unions, the one permanent headteacher would become the headteacher of the new school. Should both schools close, then the temporary governing body for the new school would recruit a headteacher for the new school.

Other staff from both schools would be transferred to the new school. If the new school were to have a Foundation or Voluntary Aided character, the temporary Governing Body would be the employer. TUPE type arrangements would apply, and the terms and conditions of many categories of staff, including teachers, are set by national agreement. The staffing structure of the new school would be a matter for the temporary Governing Body to decide. All or almost all staff would be allocated posts within the new structure on the basis of their experience and interests, in consultation with the head teacher designate and the Governing Body.

Staffing protocols have been agreed with the trade unions representing school staff. Assistance would be given by Shropshire County Council to any member of staff who could not be accommodated in the new staffing structure, for example where amalgamation coincided with a reduction in pupil numbers.

11. Consideration of Alternatives and Conclusion

11.1 Make no change

Making no change would have three main effects on education in the area.

- (i) Although there would eventually be some investment in the condition of the buildings, many of the known inadequacies with the suitability of the buildings could not be addressed because of the restricted nature of the sites and existing buildings.
- (ii) Each school would continue with a small staff, each of whom would be under pressure as a result of the need to keep up to date with a large part of the curriculum. This would limit the access of pupils to staff with different specialisms. There would be less support, and less non-teaching time, for management.
- (iii) The revenue savings set out above would not be achieved, with a consequent effect on all schools in Shropshire. As the Dedicated Schools Grant comes under greater pressure, there would be difficulties in maintaining even the current staffing structure.

11.2 Expand Lydbury North School with consequent closure of Clunbury School.

The new school would be a C of E Voluntary Aided school. Lydbury School is on a restricted site. The main school building is inadequate and there is no hall suitable for KS2 PE. It is just feasible to extend the school to include a fourth full size teaching space, but this would reduce further the play space available on the site to below acceptable levels. There would be no direct access to a playing field and pupils would still have to walk to the village hall for PE. There is no parking for the school. As there is no permanent head teacher of Lydbury North School, the headteacher of Clunbury School would be the head of the expanded school. The Governing Body would be an expansion of the Lydbury North Governing Body to include representatives from the Clunbury School community.

11.3 Expand Clunbury School with consequent closure of Lydbury North School.

The new school would be a C of E Voluntary Aided school. Clunbury School's site is small, but the school has access to a large if sloping field behind the school. There is restricted access, but a new car park means that there is some off road access for unloading. Although there are currently 90 places in three classes, additional accommodation would have to be provided. This would probably have to be provided on existing play areas, meaning that additional land would have to be acquired to create new hard play. Access to the school through the village is tight, but not a difficulty for normal school use vehicles. The current headteacher of Clunbury School would be the head of the expanded school. The Governing Body would be an expansion of the Governing Body of Clunbury School to include some members of Lydbury North School community.

11.4 Open a new school following closure of both existing schools

The new school would be a C of E Foundation School sponsored by the Diocese of Hereford. The governing body would have responsibility for staffing and admissions. The school would have a church ethos. The nature of the school would be similar to a Voluntary Aided school, but without the need for the Governors to contribute 10% to capital works. The school if based at Clunbury would be in a mix of new and refurbished buildings, addressing many of the concerns about the quality of the learning and teaching accommodation, including outdoor areas. It would also be possible to address parking and other site safety concerns.

11.5 Federation

The Governing Body of another school (Onny) suggested a wider area federation including both Clunbury and Lydbury North schools. This option would mean that each school would continue on its existing site. This would lose many of the benefits set out in section 4 above, and would have many of the problems set out in section 11.1 above. However, because federation can mean that Governing Bodies have discretion over the deployment of staff and financial resources between schools, some of the concerns about access to specialisms and support for management could be addressed. Onny is eleven miles from Lydbury North and eight miles from Clunbury. Lydbury North and Clunbury are only four and a half miles apart.

Neither Clunbury or Lydbury North schools have advocated federation with Onny School.

11.6 Infant pupils on one site, whilst Juniors should be on the other site

A further proposal from a member of the public proposed that infant pupils should be on one site, whilst junior pupils should be accommodated on the other. This approach would create an additional transition between infant and junior schooling. Creation of an additional educational transition would not enhance outcomes for children. The approach would also be inconsistent with Council policy on all-through primary education.

12. Recommendation of the Acting Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services

Following analysis of the available evidence including all the responses made during the consultation, due consideration of all the alternatives and their effects on the attainment of pupils, the environment and the community, it is recommended that Cabinet proceed to consult on formal proposals to close both schools and invite the Diocese of Hereford to propose to open a new Church of England Foundation school on the Clunbury School site.

13. Next Steps

If Cabinet accept the recommendation of the Acting Director for Children and Young People's Services to amalgamate the schools by closing both schools and creating a new school, the next step would be to for the Diocese of Hereford to contact the Secretary of state to request permission to publish proposals to establish the new school and the Council to publish notices to close both the existing schools.

Publication of proposals would be followed by a six week consultation period during which comments would be invited from interested parties. It is intended to bring a report back to Cabinet on this phase of consultation on 22 July 2008 but this is dependent on a speedy response from the Secretary of State. Should the Secretary of State require it, the Council could be instructed to conduct a competition to commission the new school.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Primary School Organisation – Report to Cabinet 30 January 2008

Human Rights Act Appraisal

Children have a right to education. However, there is no right to a place within a specific maintained school. A proposed closure or amalgamation of a school does not, therefore, affect an individual pupil or parent's human rights.

Environmental Appraisal

The recommended proposal would mean a minor improvement in the effect on the environment as the new and refurbished accommodation would be more efficient than that in use currently.

Risk Management Appraisal

Changes to the organisation of schools must be carefully managed to achieve the full benefits, or there is a risk that the disruptive effects of change will outweigh the benefits to be gained.

Community / Consultations Appraisal

Formative consultation already undertaken is detailed in the report. Full community consultation would be undertaken as required by Statute if the decision is taken to proceed to formal proposals.

Cabinet Member

Cllr. Ann Hartley

Local Member

All

Appendices

- 1 Consultation document
- 2a Notes of meeting with Governors
- 2b Notes of meeting with Parents and Other Members of the Community
- 3 Key points from responses and commentary by officers
- 4 Option appraisal for alternative sites