

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

Report of Executive Director Executive (Children and Public
Health)

to

Cabinet

on

2nd December 2020

Report prepared by:

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Outcomes of the informal consultation stage one of a potential amalgamation of Chalkwell Hall Infants School and Chalkwell Hall Junior School

People Scrutiny Committee

Executive Councillor: Councillor Anne Jones

Part 1 (Public Agenda Item)

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to feedback on the outcomes of the stage one informal consultation exercise regarding Chalkwell Hall Infant and Junior School potential amalgamation.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. **Cabinet is asked to decide not to proceed with the further stages of consultation on a potential amalgamation, and to allow the two maintained schools, Chalkwell Hall Infant School and Chalkwell Hall Junior School, to remain as separate entities.**
- 2.2. **Cabinet are asked to note that as and when circumstances change in the future, that they reserve the right to reconsider the benefits of a potential amalgamation at that time.**

3. Background

- 3.1. Chalkwell Hall Infants and Chalkwell Hall Junior schools are both Local Authority (LA) maintained schools, co-located on a single site, and both are currently judged by OFSTED as "good" (2017). The current numbers for the two schools are 360 and 480 respectively. The shared site is very compact, especially in the shared playground and external spaces.
- 3.2. Cabinet took the decision at their meeting on 15th September 2020 to proceed to consult on potential amalgamation of Chalkwell hall Infant School and Chalkwell Hall Junior School. This was as a result of the resignation of the previous Headteacher at the Junior School, and in line with its policy (2012) that indicates wherever possible, where separate infant and junior schools are co-located on the same site, they should be amalgamated.

- 3.3. As a result, Officers conducted the first required “informal” stage of consultation, which ran for four weeks, ending on 13th November 2020.
- 3.4. The consultation had to be conducted virtually as a result of the current pandemic. It consisted of an on line survey, a staff and governors virtual meeting and published information through the media.

4. Process for Consultation

- 4.1 The statutory consultation process is set out in a number of required stages:
- 4.2 This, the first stage, required consultation with the community and relevant parties in the local area. It had to contain sufficient information (as outlined in statutory guidance) for interested parties to be able to make a decision on whether to support the potential change or not.
- 4.3 Following the cabinet decision today, the schools could either continue as is with a separate infant and junior school and make no changes; or proceed to stage two. This requires the LA to publish a proposal to amalgamate the schools through a statutory notice, which would be followed by a further consultation period (stage three). The outcomes of that process, if required, are scheduled to be considered at February 2020 cabinet. Following stage three, if cabinet were to approve an amalgamation, the LA would make a decision (stage four) and to notify the Secretary of State.

5 Consultation Outcomes

- 5.1 The survey attracted 157 separate responses before the closing date. It asked three sequential questions:
- It asked the individual to identify their interest in the consultation
 - It asked them were they in favour or against the proposal
 - Depending upon their previous response, a follow up question provided a number of reasons for their decision, with the option to add free text.
- 5.2 In addition Officers held a virtual meeting for staff and governors from both schools on 6th November 2020, attended by 27 staff and governors.
- 5.3 The analysis of the survey outcomes is shown in the appendix. In summary, of the 157 respondents, 85 (54.1%) were **against** an amalgamation, 72 (45.95) were **for**. This was further broken down as follows:
- 5.3.1 84 were from parents who have one or more children at either of the schools, 45 were from staff, mainly from the Junior School.
- 5.3.2 Of the parents, 49 (58% were in favour, 35 (42%) were against.
- 5.3.3 Of the staff, 36 (85%) were against, 9 (15%) were in favour
- 5.4 Analysis of the reasons for their particular choice are seen in the appendix. In summary, those against felt that it would be a loss of the separate school ethos, that they wished to remain as two schools and the detrimental impact upon staff morale. Those in favour stated to a certain extent the opposite, that they would benefit from having a single ethos and the ability to share resources and expertise, but also that parents in Year Two would no longer have to reapply for a place in the Junior School for Year Three.
- 5.5 Of significance and relevance were the free text comments made by a number of respondents in the survey, and reinforced by the questions raised during the school session. Overwhelmingly, these comments raised concerns about a potential

amalgamation, compared to those offering possible benefits. There were several key themes emerging:

- 5.5.1 That the two schools were judged to be good at their previous inspections in 2017, and there would be little or no benefit to this should they amalgamate;
- 5.5.2 Critically, very many respondents made reference to the impact of the pandemic currently on staff and pupils, and questioned why the LA would wish to proceed at this time. They cited an inevitable impact upon staff moral and would have a negative impact. This featured strongly in the staff meeting but also in the survey responses;
- 5.5.3 A potential new all through Primary School would be 850 pupils in size, making it one of the largest in the borough. Comments related to pupils being “lost” in such a large population and not being know well by staff;
- 5.5.4 There was a clear view that currently each separate school offers age appropriate provision for KS1 and KS2, which is suited to the pupils;
- 5.5.5 There were comments regarding the financial impact of the proposal.

6 Commentary

6.1 Overall, on balance, the consultation outcome was **against** amalgamation. Whilst it is noted that the responses for the community were slightly more in favour, a significant minority were also against. The staff and governors were very strongly against an amalgamation. There was no clear mandate to proceed at this time.

6.2 Rationale for the recommendation:

- 6.2.1 The possible benefits of an all through Primary School compared to separate Infant and Juniors Schools were set out in the original cabinet paper. However, it was made clear that these benefits would only be evident over the medium and longer term, and that even in “normal” times, the potential disruption on staff and the impact on pupils can be marked and prolonged. The impact of the current pandemic on all schools is profound.
- 6.2.2 In previous amalgamations within Southend, one of the two schools were considerably weaker than the other, and the amalgamation was determined in order to improve outcomes for all pupils. This is not the case at Chalkwell, where both schools are currently a strong “good”, there is no natural stronger school who would take the lead.
- 6.2.3 Given the current context, this disruption would be considerable, and impede the normal transition to a single school as a result of the pandemic conditions, for example, staff training and induction. In addition, both schools have separate but parallel initiatives running alongside, such as the recruitment of a substantive Headteacher in the case of the Junior School (or if cabinet decide, for an all through Primary School); whilst the infants are current consulting upon a Pupil Admission Number (PAN) reduction and managing the replacement and building of three classroom spaces.

7 Other Options

7.1 The two schools could remain separate entities with their own separate DfE numbers and separate governing bodies as currently constituted.

7.2 They could amalgamate.

8 Reasons for Recommendations

- 8.1** For the reasons stated above (6.2), and reflected in the majority (55%) against potential amalgamation, cabinet are asked to recognise that the context, timing and disruption that would be caused by a protracted amalgamation process and transition would outweigh the longer term benefits of an all through Primary School.
- 8.2** It should be noted that given the outcome, there were none the less a significant minority who were in favour of amalgamation. In addition, there were a number of responses from staff employed at the schools, which had some impact on the overall outcome.
- 8.3** Therefore, cabinet are asked to reserve the right to **review and revisit** that decision as an when the context changes, for example a subsequent change in leadership at either of the two schools. The preference remains for an all through primary model, but the current context would make that detrimental to outcomes for pupils.
- 8.4** Secondly, in several of the free text comments and comments within the staff session, reference was made to the collaborative and positive working relationship and practices between the two schools. Should cabinet support the recommendation, officers will continue to work with the two schools and their governing bodies to support and enhance these positive working relationships going forwards.

9 Corporate Implications

Contribution to the Southend 2050 Road Map

Even as separate entities, the schools will continue to support the ambition of opportunity and prosperity that our children are school and life ready and young people are ready for further education, training or employment.

Financial Implications

Some of the immediate benefits and disadvantages of amalgamation will now no longer be relevant. Savings that potentially may have been accrued through staff efficiency will be offset by the continuation of the single school core budget allocation.

Legal Implications

The consultation has complied fully with statutory requirements.

People Implications

All staff, parents and the local area have had the opportunity to contribute to the consultation and have their views considered.

Property Implications

Both schools are Local authority maintained schools and as such there is no change to the ownership of the school buildings.

Consultation

The local authority (as the admission authority for community schools) have undertaken this consultation in line with statutory duties where an amalgamation is considered.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

The consultation was carried out in line with the Equality Act 2010, ensuring that there is no discrimination to any of the protected characteristics.

Risk Assessment

No longer appropriate should cabinet support the recommendation.

Value for Money

As above

Community Safety Implications

None envisaged.

Environmental Impact

None envisaged

10 Background Papers**10.1** Summary of the consultation responses