

Public Consultation Meeting on Proposal to Merge Calcot Junior School and Calcot Infant School

Held at Calcot Junior School

Monday, 20th September 2004

Minutes of Meeting

Independent Chair: John Tyzack, Chairman School Funding Forum, Chairman Enborne CE Primary School, Member of West Berkshire Governors' Forum
Attendees: Approx. 68 parents, staff, governors and members of the local community
Cllrs Brian Bedwell, Peter Argyle, Manohar Gopal
Ian Pearson, Head of Education Service
John Powell, Service Development Manager, Access

1. John Tyzack welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained its purpose, that it was a consultative meeting.
2. **West Berkshire Council's proposals**
Ian Pearson introduced himself and welcomed everyone. He explained that the meeting was part of a process and no decisions would be taken. He hoped everyone had had an opportunity to look at the consultation document in some way. Those present would be given an opportunity to hear key aspects of the consultation and ask questions. It had been hoped to hold the meeting in July but this had not been possible due to health and safety reasons and the consultation period had been extended to 30th September. He reminded everyone present that there were two other proposals being considered and that all three were totally independent of each other. This consultation applied only to the Calcot schools. One of the things that the DfES/Audit Commission were looking at was that LEAs were getting best value (planning schools in terms of pupil numbers). Surplus places was not utilising resources in the best way. The percentage across the whole of West Berkshire was calculated in a review conducted across all schools. Whilst there is a high percentage surplus in some village schools, three pairs of infant and junior schools were also found to have a high percentage and there appeared to be no reversal of the trend. There is a desire to maintain schools in the community in respect of village schools, since taking a school out of such a community would have a high impact. By considering merging infant and junior partners this would retain schools in local communities.

In respect of the Calcot schools, returns for 2001-2004 show a fall within the Junior school from 319 to 245 and in the Infant school a fall from 209 to 178. The capacities for the two schools are 336 (Junior) and 253 (Infant) which gives an overall surplus of 166 places.

Question: What is the class size planned for the new school?

Answer: 30.

Question: Surely the government are looking at class sizes of 25.

Answer: This does not mean all classes would be 30.

Question: Are nursery numbers included?

Answer: Numbers are not included in the calculations but the nursery would remain.

Clearly, the LEA are trying to provide good quality teaching across the whole range (3-11). The authority will aim to work closely with staff, governors and community.

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Question: I am confused about the class size proposed. Are there already classes of 30 within the Junior school?

Answer: There are already some classes of over 30 within the Junior School.

Question: There is an issue about the space required to teach in the combined school.

Answer: The 21 classes in the schools at the moment are not realistic. The plan would be to look at the number when planning the new school – 14-16 is the likely number.

The proposed merger is not only about looking at money savings.

The proposal is to have a two-form entry, approximately 60 pupils per year. Nursery numbers are not included in the calculations. There are no plans to change the age limit, secondary link, catchment area, physical facilities or the existing site.

Question: There are more children in the school at the moment than the proposed 420. This means that already the school would be full. How would the LEA propose to handle the excess?

Answer: When looking at plans for the new school this issue would be taken into account. Forecasts indicate 420 would be large enough.

The Process

Different meetings have been held with staff, governors, trade unions involved. This meeting aims to engage parents and the local community. At the end of the consultation process responses will be considered.

Officers will then make proposals in a report which will go to the Council's Executive Committee who will either agree or disagree. If the proposal is approved notices are published (two month period). During this time the public have a right to object. After this time the School Organisation Committee (an autonomous body formed of school representatives, church dioceses etc) will consider the proposal and objections and will make their decision. The proposal will then move to implementation if the Committee agrees. If it disagrees with the Council's decision the proposal will go to The Adjudicator who will consider everything and then make a decision.

Question: Can all the relevant dates be made available to everyone?

Answer: Yes.

No plans have yet been produced of what the new school will look like if the two schools merge. A headteacher will be appointed by a shadow governing body and together with a single staff will initially operate in the existing buildings. Ideas will be worked up by school, local community and West Berkshire Council on how to develop the existing site.

Question: What land will be lost to developers?

Answer: There are no plans to sell any land at all.

Question: How will the shadow governing body be formed?

Answer: There are guidelines available for different sized schools and the new body would be formed in line with these. The new school size would be the basis for formula of new governing body. IP suggested that perhaps the total number of the new governing body be created as a shadow body comprising perhaps 1/3 junior school, 1/3 infant school and 1/3 new people. This body would then bring the school to point of launch. After the launch of the new school a new governing body could be constituted.

Question: This is different from what was proposed at previous meetings when it had been suggested that there would be an outsider Chairman and the two existing bodies would form a shadow body.

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Answer: IP reiterated that he was making a suggestion and that there were no rules laid down on how a shadow governing body should be formed, other than the composition by category of governors.

Question: How long would there be building work after the merger.

Answer: Building work timeline would depend on what the plans were like. Work would be phased into the school year so as much work as possible was done in holidays and didn't get in the way of the school term. A feasibility study would take about six months with a probable build period of less than twelve months.

Question: How will one school on two sites work as far as morale is concerned for both staff and children. How will it work well for the children?

Answer: There will only be an interim period of disruption. This is an opportunity to produce exciting ideas to serve the children well.

Question: How will changes not affect the children at important times in their school life – KS1 and KS2 tests?

Answer: The aim would be to minimise disruption.

Question: Projected places for 2009 are 50 more than the proposed size of the new school. How will the proposal therefore be a benefit if there are more children? Where will they go, children of the same family at different schools.

Answer: School Organisation Plan figures which are quoted have consistently over-estimated numbers. The historical data quoted is accurate and the LEA believes that the over-estimation is 10-20% particularly in the case of falling rolls.

Question: Is it the plan to get rid of buildings and make one school bigger?

Answer: It would be sensible perhaps to move to one building, including the nursery. If this were to happen the one building would give an ideal opportunity to create a community resource.

Question: It would seem that changes are to be made then decisions of what to do made next regardless of cost. A merged school would be created then new premises planned.

Answer: The Council is thinking beyond the physical changes. It is proposed to create a new school in the community in partnership with the community, to produce a resource for the community and this is not possible without consultation.

Question: If forecasts are not to be trusted, how is it that Year 3 is already over 30?

Answer: JP reiterated that there was a 10-20% error in dealing with falling rolls. Of course there are 'blips' in the numbers. More work is being done to refine individual trends. However, it is not possible to guarantee any forecast however accurate.

Question: What will happen to the playing areas?

Answer: There is no reason why any area should be reduced though it may be reconfigured.

Staffing

The most valuable resource within a school is its staff. If proposal is agreed a shadow governing body would be formed. This body would be tasked with appointing the headteacher. The process is being agreed with teacher unions. Both existing headteachers would be invited to apply. If the new headteacher is appointed discussions would be held with the unsuccessful candidate about their future. The shadow governing body would then be advised by the headteacher designate on staff and numbers of classes etc. A deputy head would be appointed together with management posts being decided across curriculum specialisms/ages. Class based posts would also be decided. Looking to fitting existing staff into the new structure. The aim is to utilise existing staffs, recognising the worth of all staff as far as skills match and where they wish to work.

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Budgets

Revenue funding – formula funding dependent on pupil numbers, merged or not.
A development pot of money is available for the first three years of the new school's life.

Question: What will happen to a member of staff who enjoys working with junior/infant children only? At present there are two co-ordinators for subjects because there are two schools, what will happen when one co-ordinator is needed.

Answer: (from the floor) With a new school there will be a lot of opportunities for professional development because of the bigger age range.

Answer: More opportunity to take on other subjects maybe to enhance development.

Benefits

There is a proven ability for two schools to work as one. Most neighbouring schools are all through schools and very successful. It provides stability for the children – into the school at nursery stage all the way through to the end of KS2.

Question: Linda McCulloch-Smith believed that there was a unique relationship between the two schools. Was there a need to change?

Chair of Junior School stated that twenty years ago Calcot was an all through school and had to split into two because it became too big. So we're just going round in a circle.

Answer: IP agreed that things had moved on. There were now significant number of all through schools with numbers up to 500+ across the country.

Question: Two schools in Reading were in the process of merging and because of building work the process was chaotic. How would it be guaranteed that the same would not happen in Calcot?

Answer: There have been very successful merging of schools.

Benefits - A single point of entry – no need to reapply for school at 7 – more stability for children, no upheaval into a new school. The transfer of information, consistent support, consistency of teaching, assessments, and pupil welfare would be benefits gained from single all through primary school. There would be reduced duplication of effort – one governing body. National data suggests that all through schools can improve standards. In addition there could be opportunities as an extended school where facilities can be accessed beyond the school day/term, family learning with access to facilities all year, out of school clubs, sport facilities. There is really no limit to ideas/opportunities to be achieved.

3. Questions from the Floor

The Chairman asked if it could be agreed that there could be a longer consultation period with the deadline being extended to 15th October. This would enable those not able to come to the meeting to have an opportunity to read the minutes. This was agreed.

Question: Concern was expressed about the children already in school. The questioner could see no benefits for these children although there may be some for the future.

Answer: The proposal is to merge two schools into one at a particular point in time, ideally at the beginning of an academic year. The school would operate in two buildings with a single staff structure whilst looking at consolidating vision with local community and new governing body. The existing children and parents would have the opportunity to help achieve the vision for the future. Many of the proposed benefits could come sooner than later.

Question: I don't understand the additional revenue stream for the first three years.

Answer: The single school's outgoings will be less than the sum of the two schools so an extra 'pot' is allocated.

Question: Cost cutting will be detrimental to children's education.

Answer: This is not a savings exercise – other benefits would be delivered. As far as possible non-teaching and teaching staff will be no different to the existing position.

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Question: What disruption will there be and what strategies will be put in place?

Answer: The authority doesn't dictate to the school about how something has to be done. Building work on school sites is not unusual. It needs to be planned to minimise disruption and in conversation with the school.

Question: Are you planning to increase the size of one school? Will there be increased space for parking etc.?

Answer: Vehicular/pedestrian access will be studied creatively and the size of parking area at the infant site will be taken into account. It would make sense to extend one or other building.

Question: What ways are there of making views known?

Answer: Response form can be returned to Avonbank House by post or email. Letters can be written. Write to local councillor. The school can speak on behalf of themselves, staff, parents or any defined group. The Executive meeting at which the proposal will be considered is a public meeting. Parents/staff can write to Mollie Lock as Portfolio Member for Children and Young People. The key is to get any response in by 15th October.

Question: With enhanced facilities, is the school going to become over-subscribed and can a place be guaranteed for every child living in the catchment area?

Answer: It cannot be guaranteed that every child gets a place because it can't be predicted how many applications will come in from outside the area. Raise this as a concern within your response. In line with admissions policy, catchment area children would be allocated places first.

A reminder what the options are:

The status quo and leave everything as it is.

Support the proposal

Put forward another option – a bigger school?

Question: Having recently moved into the area with four young children, I am a little suspicious about the short time span. You say the other building is to become a community resource, but if the junior school is then going to be increased in size to accommodate the new school there is going to be less space overall.

Answer: The footprint of the new building would probably be not very much bigger than the existing building and very little space would be lost. It would also be sensible to bring the nursery next to the infant provision to share resources.

Question: How can the audience make a judgement on comparing two existing buildings with one which doesn't even exist as a plan and not knowing anything about it? How can effect on the children be known?

Answer: The authority wants to work on a purpose designed building together with the school and local community, All through schools can improve learning.

4. The chairman in closing the meeting reminded everyone that there were a number of ways in which parents/staff/members of the local community could put their views, as detailed by Mr Pearson above.