

CABINET

Wednesday, 11 July 2012
(10:07 - 10:21 am)

Present: Councillor L A Smith (Chair), Councillor R Gill (Deputy Chair), Councillor C Geddes and Councillor J R White

Also Present: Councillor S Tarry

Apologies: Councillor J L Alexander, Councillor H J Collins, Councillor M A McCarthy, Councillor L A Reason, Councillor P T Waker and Councillor M M Worby

18. Declaration of Members' Interests

Councillor Smith declared a personal interest in relation to item 4 (Proposed Amalgamation of William Ford Church of England (Voluntary Aided) Junior School and Village Infant School) as his children attended the schools.

19. Minutes (26 June 2012)

The minutes of the meeting on 26 June 2012 were confirmed as correct.

20. Proposed Amalgamation of William Ford Church of England (Voluntary Aided) Junior School and Village Infant School

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Education presented a report on the proposal for the amalgamation of William Ford Church of England Junior School and Village Infant School to form an all-through Church of England Primary School with effect from 1 September 2012 (2012/13 academic year).

The Cabinet Member referred to the Council's amalgamation policy in respect of infant and junior schools and explained that in light of the decision made by the Headteacher of Village Infant School to retire at the end of August 2012, discussions were initiated several months back with the Diocese of Chelmsford and the Governing Bodies of William Ford Church of England Junior School and Village Infant School regarding options for the amalgamation of the two schools which were on adjoining sites and were already considered as "linked schools" for infant to junior admissions purposes. In the light of support from the Diocese and Governing Bodies to the principles of amalgamation, a preferred option was developed which would involve the formal closure of Village Infant School with effect from 31 August 2012 and the creation of a new voluntary-aided Church of England Primary School with effect from 1 September 2012. The Cabinet Member commented on the "Outstanding" judgement that William Ford Church of England Junior School had received following its latest OFSTED inspection in July 2010.

The implications of the amalgamation would include enlarging the premises of the existing Junior School by including the buildings previously used by the Infant school, making an alteration to the current Junior School by lowering the age range of the pupils there from 7 to 11 years to age 3 to 11 years, increasing

admission numbers from 81 to 90 each year throughout and adding nursery provision, with all pupils on the school roll of the Infant and Junior schools as at the end of the Autumn Term 2012 transferring on to the roll of the Primary School. The amalgamation would also involve staff at Village Infants School transferring to the newly formed Primary School under TUPE regulations.

The Cabinet Member referred to the main areas of concern that had been expressed during the statutory consultation on the proposal, principally by staff and parents of children at Village Infants School, which were set out in paragraph 4.7 of the report and he advised that he and the Corporate Director of Children's Services had attended several meetings to address those concerns.

The Corporate Director of Children's Services elaborated on the concerns expressed by the members of staff at Village Infants School regarding the amalgamation with a voluntary-aided faith school. The Corporate Director explained that there would be no need to make redundancies and that the Council would support any member of staff not wishing to transfer to the newly formed Church of England Primary School to find a similar position at another community school within the Borough. With regard to parents' concerns regarding the admissions criteria for the new Primary School, the Corporate Director advised that the William Ford Church of England Junior School Governing Body and Diocese of Chelmsford had agreed that the admissions policy for the proposed new Primary School would stipulate a 10% cap on the number of admissions of children from outside of the Borough who qualified through being a parishioner at Dagenham Parish Church, in order to ensure that the new Primary School continued the commitment to serve its local community, irrespective of faith. With regard to the concerns relating to the potential loss of specialist infant and early years experience provided at Village Infants School, the Corporate Director explained that the amalgamation would not erode the specialist features but would, in fact, create opportunities to share and enhance that provision across the new Primary School setting.

The Corporate Director clarified that should the Cabinet agree the recommendations for the amalgamation, the William Ford Church of England Junior School Governing Body would be required to implement the proposal and if it did not ultimately wish to proceed it would be required to either (a) issue a proposal to be relieved of the duty to implement or (b) appeal to the Schools Adjudicator. The Cabinet noted that the William Ford Church of England Junior School Governing Body was to meet on Tuesday 17 July to decide on the matter. The Corporate Director also pointed out that there were no issues associated with the proposed amalgamation which would adversely affect the education of children.

The Leader of the Council advised that in making its decision, the Cabinet must take into account the response to the consultation and the statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State for Education, in particular the effect on raising standards and school improvement, diversity issues and how the proposal would help every child reach his or her full potential and the right of every child to a school place. The Council's duties under the Equality Act 2010 and in particular section 149, as outlined at paragraph 6.13 of the report, must also be considered.

The Leader also referred to some of the further advantages associated with the merging of infant and junior schools, citing the benefit in terms of school

admissions of the sibling criteria being applicable to primary schools across the infant and junior age ranges, the potential efficiencies to be achieved in non-teaching areas which could be redirected to the classroom and the obvious benefit to parents of having a consistent school uniform throughout the primary years.

The Leader expressed his disappointment at some of the comments, and the language used to convey those comments, that had been made by a small number of staff at Village Infants School towards the amalgamation and towards the Diocese of Chelmsford in particular, together with the threat of strike action in the lead up to the end of the current school year if the plans for the amalgamation were approved, which had caused distress for many parents. The Leader referred to the positive discussions that had taken place with representatives of the non-teaching Unions and restated his belief that the proposed amalgamation represented the best interests of all concerned. The Cabinet Member for Customer Services and Human Resources added that whilst he acknowledged the concerns of those staff who did not support the amalgamation he felt that the threat of strike action was very disproportionate, a view which was shared by the Cabinet Member for Finance and Education who reiterated the benefits that would be achieved through the amalgamation with an OFSTED-rated “outstanding” school.

Having considered the report and taken into account the statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State for Education and the relevant equality considerations (as referred to above), Cabinet **agreed**:

- (i) The amalgamation of William Ford Church of England Junior School and Village Infant School to become an all-through Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School with effect from 1 September 2012, by the closure of the existing infant school and expanding the age range of the existing Church of England voluntary aided junior school;
- (ii) To grant a lease for a peppercorn rent of the amalgamated site together with the adjoining access road and school house shown on drawing number LBBD/GIS/002 attached at Appendix B to the report, to the Trustees of William Ford School, for the purposes of ensuring that the through school could operate on one site; and
- (iii) To delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Children Services, in consultation with the Corporate Director of Finance and Resources and the Divisional Director of Legal and Democratic Services, to agree terms and conclude the necessary legal agreements to facilitate the amalgamation of the two schools.