

MINUTES OF THE SCHOOL ORGANISATION COMMITTEE OF CABINET

Held remotely via MS Teams on THURSDAY 11 MARCH 2021 at 3.30pm

Present: -

Councillor Farthing in the Chair

Councillors G Miller and Williams.

In Attendance: -

Julienne Collinson (representing the Assistant Director of Law and Governance), Alan Rowan (Retained Education Functions Lead, Neighbourhoods) and Gillian Kelly (Governance Services).

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Stewart.

Minutes

1. RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 1 October 2020 be agreed as a correct record.

Proposed Enlargement and Lowering of the Age of Admission at Hetton Primary School

The Executive Director of Neighbourhoods submitted a report setting out proposals to enlarge Hetton Primary School and to lower the age of admission from four years old to two years old.

Hetton Primary School was a maintained primary school maintained by Sunderland City Council and was due to relocate to a new building on the current school site in September 2022. The current school accommodated 140 primary age children and was over capacity in four of the seven year groups. Each class offered 20 places,

however most year groups currently had between 20 and 27 children on roll. The school did not have the capacity or additional resources to support this ongoing oversubscription and did not currently have a nursery provision.

The development of additional housing in the Hetton area was anticipated to further increase demand for places and it was projected that over 100 primary school places would be required to meet the demand from new housing in the area. The expanded Hetton Primary School would have the facility to offer the required places at a suitably located setting while also ensuring that nursery capacity in the area remained sufficient.

In July 2020, the Cabinet had approved a proposal to commence the School Organisation processes required for the enlargement of and the lowering of the age of admission at Hetton Primary School. The school was developed with five classrooms and it now wished to offer one class per year group with an overall PAN of 210. The plans for the enlargement of the school would meet the needs of the children currently on roll and provide the flexibility to allow for future expansion.

The Retained Education Functions Lead advised that there was an increasing trend towards having nursery classes in schools and a shift in preference away from maintained nurseries. The provision of a nursery class at the expanded school responded to local trends and demands.

A pre-publication consultation was carried out between 30 November 2020 and 15 January 2021. The consultation contained the Council's proposal to both expand the existing capacity and lower the age of admission at the school. The following groups were consulted: -

- Parents of pupils attending Hetton Primary School
- Current staff
- Trade Union Representatives
- The wider local community

61.7% of 60 respondents agreed with the proposal to increase the capacity of the school and 53.3% of 73 respondents were in favour of the proposal to lower the age of admission.

The statutory proposals were published on 25 January 2021 and the statutory notice period ended on 17 February 2021. The statutory notice was published on the Council's website, the school's website, in the Sunderland Echo and was displayed at the entrance to the Hetton Primary School buildings.

There were 13 objections to the proposals, the majority of these noted a separate proposal which had been published on 23 February 2021 to discontinue Hetton-le-Hole Nursery School. It was highlighted that the two proposals were not interdependent and should it be decided to retain the provision at Hetton-le-Hole Nursery School, the proposal for the development of a nursery at Hetton Primary School would continue as a complementary provision for the local area.

Issues were also raised with regard to traffic in the area and it was advised that these would be considered as part of the full planning application which was to be

heard in the near future. Reference had been made to the quality of education offered by the school and it was noted that it had most recently been graded as 'Good' and therefore the expansion proposals did not have to be referred to the Department for Education.

Subject to the decision of the Committee and obtaining the required planning approval, it was anticipated that the works would commence on site in June/July 2021 with the build to be concluded in July 2022. The new school would then open in September 2022; should the nursery provision be established from September 2021 it would be delivered from the current main school buildings in the 2021/2022 academic year. The PAN of the school would be increased in September 2021 and temporary classrooms would be utilised to allow for all year groups to have their own designated area.

Councillor Williams noted that the birth rate in the area had been described as 'spiky' and queried if there was any reason for that pattern. The Retained Education Functions Lead explained that the birth rate had been erratic across the city for the past few years and it remained to be seen how Covid may have impacted on the rates.

Councillor Williams went on to ask about the proposed temporary classroom bases and it was confirmed that these would be bespoke units and linked to the school by a corridor.

With regard to the proposed class size of 30, Councillor Williams asked if there was confidence that this was achievable and the Retained Education Functions Lead stated that the school tended to grow as children moved through, for example Reception class in 2016 had 20 children and this year group had now expanded to 26 in 2021. The school was over its PAN in all year groups apart from current Reception and Year 6.

At this juncture, the Chair of the Committee invited individuals who had made representations on the proposal to address the Committee.

Clare Donoghue, a parent, had submitted an objection based on the current proposal to increase the number of children on roll and to lower the age range. Ms Donoghue acknowledged that there was a need for a new build in relation to the mainstream school, however while demand for Reception was still relatively low she felt that increasing the capacity would increase traffic on what was already considered a dangerous road when there was no need for the nursery provision. This would also increase the number of staff vehicles and there had been many issues raised about the traffic in the past.

In relation to numbers of children on roll, Ms Donoghue said that it was hard to predict birth rates and numbers of children going into pre-school and queried the capacity to maintain standards for two and three year olds when there was not already a provision there and the school was taking in larger numbers. She was concerned as to how the nursery class would be filled and made financially sustainable.

Ms Donoghue explained that she was an Early Years Lead in a different school and in her experience, two-year olds needed something completely different in terms of staff skills and expertise and questioned how the quality of education could be ensured. She noted that parents were able to have children at Hetton Lyons Primary School from birth all the way through primary education but a family with children both under and over the age of two would still have two drop offs if their older child attended nursery at Hetton Primary and this would not assist working parents.

With the current pandemic situation, Ms Donoghue raised the issue of protecting an additional bubble of children within the school and the ongoing costs of maintaining staff numbers.

The Retained Education Functions Lead stated that the traffic issues would be picked up by the Highways section as part of the main planning application. A full drop-off system would be implemented and parking was to be increased as part of the new build to mitigate issues. Together for Children would support the team at the school in developing the nursery provision and there were resources available to support the headteacher and staff. The nursery would be built to a size relative to the flexibility which was being put into the new building to allow future expansion.

Ailsa Higgins, Headteacher of Hetton Lyons Nursery School, explained that her school had always worked closely with Hetton Primary but her concerns were around the impact of lowering the age range and how this could affect the sustainability of Hetton Lyons Nursery. The potential high numbers of children in the nursery provision was concerning. She accepted that it would be beneficial for parents with a child attending primary school to have one drop off if they had another child attending the nursery but felt that 78 pupils was very high.

The Reception class was only for 30 children so all nursery children would not be able to move through to Reception. She felt that there needed to be an explanation of where the numbers came from and what consideration had been given to the impact on other early years providers in the area.

The Retained Education Functions Lead highlighted that not every three-year-old would go straight to Reception so not all children from the nursery would transition. It was the intention to have a sustainable nursery and the flexibility in the planned build meant that it would be of relative size to the rest of the school and would also be futureproofed for further development in the area. The school envisaged that there would be a smaller nursery class in 2022 and there would not be 78 children attending from year one.

Councillor Michael Hopper, Hetton Town Council, told the Committee that he had objected to the proposal on the grounds of highway safety. He was of the opinion that local people would welcome the new building for Hetton Primary School but not the expansion.

In relation to the designated drop off point, there could be up to 300 drop offs and this and the school entrance would become congested. There was further housing development planned in the area which could significantly increase traffic. There had been traffic calming measures discussed for North Road and Moorsley Road was

being used as a cut through. The school was in a dangerous location and he queried whether there had been any discussion about actually moving the school building. Councillor Hopper could not support the increase in numbers and lowering the age range of the school.

The Retained Education Functions Lead confirmed that the local authority would be working with the school on a home to school transport plan and were mindful to the fact that the school was the nearest to the new North Road development and would be a walkable distance for families living there and in fact work to reduce the number of people travelling to school by car.

Efforts had been made in the design of the new building to work in more car parking and drop offs as part of the footprint. There had been significant input from the Council's engineers as part of the development of the plans and it was felt that these changes would reduce traffic and would be picked up as part of the planning process.

The Chair conveyed her support for traffic management measures on North Road which were in line with the Council's aims to be carbon neutral and to encourage walking and cycling.

Ruth Williamson, Headteacher of Hetton-le-Hole Nursery School, communicated the response of the Governing Body of the Nursery School to the Committee. The objections did not relate to the provision of the new primary school but the lowering of the age of admission. It was their contention that the proposal for the new nursery unit should not and could not be considered in isolation as it impacted directly on all of the existing provision in the local area and was predicted for on the assumption of a closure of a maintained nursery school, Hetton-le-Hole Nursery. It was believed that this was contrary to the DfE guidance which was to take a presumption against the closure of a maintained nursery school.

There were clear criteria which should be applied when considering provision of one nursery and the closure of an existing provision. The local authority had been clear that this was not an amalgamation. There was no guarantee of likely quality or quantity of the new provision and no evidence that the new provision would be more accessible or convenient for parents. Data for Hetton-le-Hole Nursery School provided a very high benchmark and the new provision had no track record and existing data for Hetton Primary did not allow any such assumption to be made. The 'all thorough' approach which was being advocated could only benefit a small number of children.

Arguments in relation to the financial viability of Hetton-le-Hole Nursery could be challenged in a local authority where nursery provision was in surplus not deficit. Irrespective of this, the financial impact extended beyond Hetton-le-Hole Nursery.

There had been little or no joined up thinking for local nursery provision, and it was assumed that planned developments from the pre-Covid period would still take place. Existing nursery provision was not currently at capacity and the plans assumed a very different economic environment to what was now being seen. Existing housing developments were also close to Eppleton and East Rainton

primary schools and there was no guarantee that parents would choose to enrol their children at Hetton Primary.

The Retained Education Functions Lead explained that he had worked closely with Hetton-le-Hetton Nursery School regarding their own provision but the proposals for Hetton Primary School were separate to this. It was envisaged that all providers would work together as a community provision for parents to have a wide range of options and flexibility. It was not assumed that the nursery would have 78 children or take children away from other settings; parents could choose to have their children together in one setting. Projections showed that there could be 70 primary age children living on the new North Road development within 0.7 miles of Hetton Primary School and this would fill the additional PAN.

Councillor Williams asked about the surplus which Ms Williamson had alluded to and the Retained Education Functions Lead commented that the Reception intake at Hetton Primary had tended to be lower whereas Hetton Lyons was oversubscribed and Eppleton was heading in that direction. Surplus places at Hetton Primary were taken up by families moving into the area.

Nicola Hill, Headteacher of Hetton Primary School spoke to express support for the proposal. She stated that when she arrived at the school in April 2017 there were 127 children on roll and all of the classes were mixed. Children were taught in the five teaching spaces available and there were now 156 children attending and all available space was being utilised. She added that 13 children had transferred to the school during lockdown.

The staff and parents at the school were very excited by the prospect of a new school building. It had been a rigorous process to develop the proposal and there were many benefits to be gained including a seamless transition between pre-school to Reception and for younger siblings to be seen as part of the school family.

The flexible use rooms in the new build could be utilised for many groups such as baby clinics and parent classes. The new build would improve car parking and drop off facilities, therefore reducing congestion on the main road.

The school had been Ofsted rated as 'Good' since 2008 and most recently in 2019. Ms Hill assured the Committee that the children attending Hetton Primary had strong skills and the right attitude towards lifelong learning. Year 6 had been predicted to obtain 82% combined in Reading, Writing and Maths in 2020. All staff worked extremely hard to ensure children made progress and provision was amended to meet the needs of every child in a school where cohorts could vary considerably from year to year.

Several members of staff had experience in nursery teaching, including in establishing new provisions. Typically children came into the school with lower than expected starting points, particularly for communication and language. Hetton Primary provided a nurturing environment where as many opportunities as possible were given for children to be the best that they could be.

The new build was two storey, younger children would not be in the upstairs part of the building and security doors would mean that nursery pupils could not access the

teaching areas designated for the older children. The school was very excited and ambitious for the future in the new building.

Having fully considered the report, the statutory proposals and all of the representations made, the Committee: -

2. RESOLVED that: -

- (i) the statutory proposal to enlarge the premises of Hetton Primary School, Moorsley Road, Hetton, DH5 9ND, which will increase the capacity from 140 places to 210 places with effect from 1 September 2021 be approved; and
- (ii) the statutory proposal for the age range of Hetton Primary School, Moorsley Road, Hetton, DH5 9ND to be lowered from 4-11 years of age to 2-11 years of age with effect from 1 September 2021 be approved.

Proposed Increase in the Number of Pupils at Sunningdale Primary School

The Executive Director of Neighbourhoods submitted a report setting out a proposal to increase the number of primary school aged pupils at Sunningdale Primary School from 108 to 120.

Sunningdale Primary School was a maintained special primary school which provided education for children aged between two and 11 with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD), Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) and Physical Disabilities (PD). The school was currently rated as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted and was designated as a teaching school.

The school building was constructed in the 1950s and over time, the cohort of children had changed and also the ability of the building to meet the needs of the children attending the school. The average class size at the school should be six to eight pupils however it was currently operating with between nine and 11 pupils per class. A number of the classrooms within the current build were smaller than the recommended physical size for six pupils.

In March 2019, the Cabinet had approved a proposal to relocate the school to a new site and in July 2020 the School Organisation processes for the enlargement of the school were commenced. A pre-publication consultation took place between 12 October 2020 and 27 November 2020 on the proposal to increase the number of pupils at the school and the proposed relocation. It was highlighted that as the new school would be within two miles of the current Sunningdale Primary School, no statutory proposals were required by the relevant School Organisation Regulations to facilitate the relocation of the buildings. The following groups were consulted: -

- Parents of pupils attending Sunningdale Primary School
- Current staff
- The wider community
- Neighbouring local authority areas with children currently placed at the school

40 responses were received to the pre-publication consultation with 89% agreeing with the proposal to increase the capacity and 73% in favour of the relocation of the school.

The statutory notice was published on 25 January 2021 and appeared on the Council website, the school's website, in the Sunderland Echo and was displayed at the entrances of the school building. The statutory notice period ended on 21 February 2021 and there were no responses received.

Councillor Williams asked if increasing the capacity of the school to 120 would actually be enough. The Retained Education Functions Lead commented that it was difficult to judge but the proposal was considering the needs of the children attending the school and that a lot of the facilities on the site were not directly class based. The footprint and ability of the school to accommodate 120 children felt manageable.

Councillor Williams went on to enquire if the majority of places at the school were commissioned in the city and it was confirmed that the pupils mainly came from the Sunderland area.

Having considered the proposal, it was: -

3. RESOLVED that the statutory proposal to increase the number of pupils at Sunningdale Primary School, currently located at Shaftoe Road, Sunderland, SR3 4HA from 108 places to 120 places with effect from 1 September 2022 be approved.

(Signed) L FARTHING
Chair