

**SCHOOL ORGANISATION COMMITTEE OF CABINET
– 10th NOVEMBER 2022**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SHEET – PART I

Title of Report: Proposed Changes to the Link School

Author(s): Director of Children’s Services

Purpose of Report:

The purpose of this report is to seek a decision on proposals to increase the capacity of Sunderland’s Pupil Referral Unit (The Link School/ PRU); to establish satellite delivery sites in the Coalfields, Washington and South Sunderland areas; and to establish a Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) specialist provision at the potential Coalfields satellite provision.

Description of Decision: School Organisation Committee of Cabinet is asked to:

Note the responses to the pre-publication consultation and the responses received during the statutory representation period on the PRU re-organisation proposals

Consider the three related statutory proposals which are to:

- Enlarge and increase the capacity of Sunderland’s Pupil Referral Unit from 172 to 220 places with effect from 1st January 2023;
- Establish satellite sites for Sunderland’s Pupil Referral Unit in Hetton, Washington and South Sunderland; and
- Establish a resourced Social, Emotional and Mental Health Unit at Sunderland’s Pupil Referral Unit.

Under the provisions of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2013 the Authority may approve published proposals with or without modification, or may reject them. The Committee is requested to approve the three related proposals.

Is the decision consistent with the Budget/Policy Framework? Yes

If not, Council approval is required to change the Budget/Policy Framework

Suggested reason(s) for Decision:

The proposals contained within this paper have been identified as necessary to ensure that Sunderland City Council continues to effectively meet its statutory duty to ensure that there are enough local school places to meet demand.

The proposal to provide satellite provision sites for Sunderland’s PRU ensures that provision can be accessed within localities. This will reduce the need for young pupils, particularly those aged between 5 and 11 years of age, to travel to the city centre to access appropriate provision for their needs.

Assessment centre models within the satellites will increase the potential for a pupil's successful re-integration back to into their substantive school place while also facilitating greater cross key stage working with their substantive mainstream setting or, alternatively, lead to a more appropriate special school or provision placement.

The proposal to establish a SEMH provision in the Coalfields will ensure that provision is located and distributed across the city, with the current SEMH provision all based in the city centre. It will also provide much needed additional capacity in Sunderland resulting in fewer out of area or independent school placements.

Alternative options to be considered and recommended to be rejected:

- Retain current PRU site locations only – This would not enable pupils to access specialist provision within their home localities leading to extended travel time, high transport costs and greater potential for failed re-integration back into substantive school places following pupils' period in a resourced provision.
- Retain current levels of SEMH provision – As the city's mainstream SEHM provision is currently at capacity this will result in pupils being placed in out of area or independent places, resulting in increased travel time, a need to commission out of area residential places or placement at independent settings which would lead to pressure on the local High Needs Block.

Impacts analysed;

Equality Privacy Sustainability Crime and Disorder

Is the Decision consistent with the Council's co-operative values? Yes

Is this a "Key Decision" as defined in the Constitution? Yes

Is it included in the 28 day Notice of Decisions? Yes

PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE LINK SCHOOL

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek a decision on proposals to increase the capacity of Sunderland's Pupil Referral Unit (The Link School/ PRU); to establish satellite delivery sites in the Coalfields, Washington and South Sunderland areas; and to establish a Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) specialist provision at the potential Coalfields satellite provision.

2. Description of Decision

- 2.1 School Organisation Committee of Cabinet is asked to:

Note the responses to the pre-publication consultation and the responses received during the statutory representation period on the PRU re-organisation proposals.

Consider the three related statutory proposals which are to:

- Enlarge and increase the capacity of Sunderland's Pupil Referral Unit from 172 to 220 places with effect from 1st January 2023;
- Establish satellite sites for Sunderland's Pupil Referral Unit in Hetton, Washington and South Sunderland; and
- Establish a resourced Social, Emotional and Mental Health Unit at Sunderland's Pupil Referral Unit;

Under the provisions of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2013 the Authority may approve published proposals with or without modification, or may reject them. The Committee is requested to approve the three related proposals.

3. Current Position

- 3.1 In 2019 Sunderland Council amalgamated three local authority-maintained Pupil Referral Units. That resulted in the creation of a single school offering a 5 – 16 alternative provision with bases at two sites, with a site at the former Springwell Dene School accommodating pupils between 5 and 14 and the Pallion Centre accommodating pupils aged 15 and 16. The two sites have the capacity for 172 pupils.
- 3.2 In 2020 two pilot schemes were developed that established 'assessment centres' within two local schools. The assessment centres offer an additional 12 places at each site and aim to ensure appropriate placement of children in future settings.
- 3.3 Demand for places at the PRU currently exceeds capacity with 189 pupils registered for 172 places. There is currently a waiting list for places.
- 3.4 The city's core primary aged Alternative Provision (AP) offer is currently based within the vicinity of the city centre, either at the Springwell Dene site or via the current pilot

based out of Hudson Road Primary School. Most children accessing the provision from outside that area do so via home to school transport, with the travel to and from their placements by taxi or shared bus. This, in some cases, results in over 16 miles of travel each day for primary aged children.

- 3.5 Following consultation with Headteachers in the Coalfields area there was general agreement that a provision in the locality on an early intervention placement basis is needed, particularly considering the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on children's mental health, emotional well-being, increased anxiety, and lower school attendance.
- 3.6 An average of 8 primary aged children residing in the Coalfields over each of the 3 previous academic years received a statutory assessment for special educational needs whilst attending the Link School or because of intervention in the Link School. Currently there are pupils at the KS1 Link School who have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) and are placed at the Link School as there are no commissioned places available in specialist provision.

4.0 Proposals

- 4.1 To make provision more accessible and geographically appropriate for younger pupils within localities, the proposal is that a Key Stage 1 (KS1) and Key Stage 2 (KS2) unit is established in the Coalfields area of the city. In the first instance it is proposed that the unit provides alternative provision places to pupils between the age of 5 and 11. The alternative provision school places would include a focus on children with high levels of persistent absenteeism, school phobia and those at risk of becoming elective home educated.
- 4.2 Should the proposal proceed the unit will be managed within the city's core PRU provision, complementing the existing provision at the Springwell Dene and Pallion sites. There will be a requirement to increase the number of commissioned places, and, by association, the capacity of the PRU to facilitate this. It is proposed that the Coalfields Unit delivers 16 additional places for 5 to 11-year-olds.
- 4.3 It is also proposed that the units currently operating as pilot schemes based out of Oxclose Community Academy and Hudson Road Primary School are formalised as part of the City's permanent AP offer. This will result in the requirement for a further 24 additional places, with 12 places offered for children aged 5 to 11 and 12 places offered for children aged 11 to 16.
- 4.4 Should the above proposals be implemented this would result in an increase in the City's PRU capacity from 172 pupils. It is proposed that the total increase is to 220 pupils, enabling the PRU to utilise surplus capacity at the current Springwell Dene site which will become available following the development of a Coalfields provision and alternative placement of children at that setting who would normally access the Springwell Dene provision.
- 4.5 To resolve capacity requirements associated with oversubscription to the city's SEMH primary provision it is also proposed that the unit in the Coalfields includes a resourced SEMH provision for primary aged children with an EHCP who require a placement at a specialist behavioural setting. It is, again, proposed that this development is delivered by Sunderland's substantive PRU provider. It is proposed that 8 places are developed and offered. While it is anticipated that the development of this offer would enable appropriate pupils from the Coalfields to access a more

geographically appropriate provision this provision would not be limited to those residing in that area of the city.

- 4.6 A suitable site is required to deliver the Coalfields AP and resourced SEMH unit. The former Hetton le Hole Nursery building, vacant since Summer 2021, has been identified as a potential site for the provision. It is considered geographically appropriate for the children that would access the provision, remains an educational asset and is appropriately sized to accommodate the projected cohort of 24 pupils.
- 4.7 It is projected that, subject to the approval of the above proposals, the first admission to either the Coalfields KS1/KS2 satellite site or the proposed SEMH provision will be September 2023.

5.0 Outcomes

The proposal would secure the following outcomes:

5.1 Increased capacity within the local alternative provision sector

The proposal would result in a 48-place increase in local AP capacity across the three areas (Coalfields, Washington, and East Sunderland). The capacity in Washington and East Sunderland would support the permanent establishment of the Assessment Hub model in the city while the capacity allocated in the Coalfields would support the delivery of localised Key Stage 1 and 2 provision in that area.

5.2 Increased appropriateness of placements within the local alternative provision model and SEND

The proposal would formalise current pilot schemes in Washington and East Sunderland that focus on assessment and subsequent appropriate placement within commissioned places. The permanent delivery of that model ensures that pupils with additional behavioural requirements are placed in provision that best meets their needs and the receiving provision has a greater level of understanding and assessment information on how best to accommodate those pupils.

The establishment of a Coalfields KS1/ KS2 satellite AP setting would ensure the youngest pupils that access commissioned places at the PRU would be able to do so in a location more appropriate to their needs. Increased appropriateness in this context includes a provision setting that reduces the requirement for excessive daily transport, that increases the option for attendance at both an AP setting and a substantive school placement and that ensures the cohort is taught with an age-appropriate peer group.

However, while the Coalfields site will provide a pupil's predominant AP placement there will be pupil movement between the satellite sites and the PRU's main delivery site in Springwell. This will enable all pupils attending the provision to access specialist materials and other educational resources at those sites as required by their established learning plans.

5.3 Reduced central administrative costs

The development of a Coalfields KS1/ KS2 satellite and Behavioural Unit for pupils in receipt of an EHCP will enable pupils to access provision within their locality. It is anticipated that most of the pupils attending the provisions will be resident in the

Coalfields or that travel to the Coalfields satellite will be less than the travel time to the main KS1/KS2 delivery site in Sunderland City Centre. This will result in efficiencies to the Home to School transport budget.

The establishment of an 8 place SEMH provision would, as above, reduce home to school transport requirements for those pupils with an EHCP and for whom the provision would be suitable. Currently primary aged pupils accessing SEMH provision do so at North View Academy in West Sunderland.

When local places are at capacity, as they have been since 2020/21, out of area provision or independent places are sought as an alternative. The creation of additional, local SEMH places, as well as additional AP places, would result in savings to the local High Needs Funding Block when compared to independent and out of area provision. Further information on potential savings is included in paragraph 12.2.

It is also considered that, in addition to increasing the appropriateness of provision to children in localities, the refurbishment of the Hetton site would result in a lower capital expenditure than, for example, the extension of the existing Springwell site. The proposal would therefore result in both long-term revenue savings and short-term capital savings.

6.0 Statutory Requirements

- 6.1 The proposals included within this paper are subject to the requirements of the applicable school organisation legislation, which required publication of notice of the proposed alterations below.

Enlargement / Increase in Capacity

- 6.2 The proposal will result in an increase from 172 places to 220 places at the city's PRU. As the proposal expands the capacity of the provision by in excess of 30 places and 25% of the current capacity this element of the proposal is subject to completion of the relevant statutory process

Expansion onto an Additional Site (Or Satellite Site)

- 6.3 The proposal will result in the expansion of the existing provision from the current two sites (Pallion and Springwell) to five sites (to include Hudson Road Primary School, Oxclose Community Academy, and the former Hetton le Hole Nursery School).
- 6.4 Operationally the provision will be managed under the PRU's existing leadership systems including the existing Management Committee and Senior Leadership. Pupils will have designated host sites but will, as required, have access to resources from any of the PRU's five delivery sites. Staffing will also be shared across the five sites. It is therefore an expansion of existing provision as opposed to the development of a new provision.

Establish a Special Educational Needs (SEN) Provision

- 6.5 The proposal seeks to establish an 8 place SEMH SEN provision. This would be a provision that is reserved for pupils with Special Educational Needs and falls outside the scope of the PRU's current offer. As with the increase in capacity and expansion

onto a satellite site the establishment of a SEN provision within a mainstream setting is subject to school organisation requirements as set out in the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and related Regulations.

7. Current Position

Consultation

7.1 In June 2022 Cabinet approved a proposal to commence the School Organisation processes required to make changes to the Link School.

7.2 A pre-publication consultation exercise took place between 28 June and 22 September 2022. The pre-publication consultation contained the Council's proposal to make the changes to the Link School as outlined in Section 6 of this paper.

7.3 Consultation was carried out with the following groups

- Parents of pupils attending the Link School
- Current staff
- Local schools and nurseries
- Trade Union Representatives

In total the Council received 73 responses. All but one supported the Council's proposals. Responses are collated as Appendix 1 of this report.

7.4 The Council published notification of statutory proposals to make changes to the Link School. The four-week statutory notice period ended 25th October 2022. Statutory notices were published in the following places:

- Sunderland City Council's website
- The Link School (PRU) website
- The Sunderland Echo

7.5 In addition to the publication of notices the following groups were consulted with as part of this process:

- Parents of pupils attending the PRU provision
- Current staff
- Unions
- All Schools in the city

7.6 Notification of proposed changes was also provided to the Department for Education, as is required when seeking to establish a satellite site. The Council did not receive any responses to the notices. The notice and full statutory proposals document are attached at Appendix 2 and 3 respectively.

8. Next Steps

8.1 Subject to approval of the proposals included under Section 6 the Council will implement the increase in capacity at the Link School and the formalisation of units at Hudson Road Primary School and Oxclose Community Academy in January 2023.

- 8.2 Capital works will be procured to refurbish the former Hetton le Hole Nursery site with a view to work commencing in January 2023 to facilitate admissions to the PRU provision and SEMH provision at the site commencing in advance of the 2023/24 academic year.

9. Reasons for the Decision

- 9.1 The proposals contained within this paper have been identified as necessary to ensure that Sunderland City Council continues to effectively meet its statutory duty to ensure that there are enough local school places to meet demand.
- 9.2 The proposal to provide satellite provision sites for Sunderland's PRU ensures that provision can be accessed within localities. This will reduce the need for young pupils, particularly those aged between 5 and 11 years of age, to travel to the city centre to access appropriate provision for their needs.
- 9.3 Assessment centre models within the satellites will increase the potential for a pupil's successful re-integration back to into their substantive school place while also facilitating greater cross key stage working with their substantive mainstream setting or, alternatively, lead to a more appropriate special school or provision placement.
- 9.4 The proposal to establish a SEMH provision in the Coalfields will ensure that provision is located and distributed across the city, with the current SEMH provision all based in the city centre. It will also provide much needed additional capacity in Sunderland resulting in fewer out of area or independent school placements.

10. Alternative Options

Retain current PRU site locations only – This would not enable pupils to access specialist provision within their home localities leading to extended travel time, high transport costs and greater potential for failed re-integration back into substantive school places following pupils' period in a resourced provision.

Retain current levels of SEMH provision – As the city's mainstream SEMH provision is currently at capacity this will result in pupils being placed in out of area or independent places, resulting in increased travel time, a need to commission out of area residential places or placement at independent settings which would lead to pressure on the local High Needs Block.

11. Impact Analysis

Equalities – Proposals contained within this document have been subject to staff and union consultation. All decisions have been undertaken in a fair, equitable and transparent manner, and will not affect those groups who have protected characteristics under the general equality duty. The Equalities Assessment is attached as Appendix 4.

Sustainability – This project will ensure the continuation of PRU provision in the city. It will result in appropriate provision continuing, with enhancement, for those who require it within their own localities

12. Other Relevant Considerations / Consultations

12.1 Co-operative values – At Annual Council in May 2015, it was resolved that the following statement be included in the Constitution to reflect the values of the “Co-operative Council”.

“Sunderland City Council is a co-operative council and in being so will act ethically in all its actions while adhering to and actively promoting its co-operative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. These values will underpin its decision making and actions.”

12.2 Financial implications –

The capital costs associated with the redevelopment of the former Hetton le Hole Nursery building are anticipated to be £0.5m to £0.6m. These will be funded from available School’s Basic Need Capital funding within the current approved Capital Programme.

Cost of 8 SEMH places (EHCP) in the proposed resourced provision would be £10,660 per place plus top up with a total funding requirement of £137,280 (£17,160 per place)

During the 2021/22 academic year there were 7 young people with an EHCP that attended the Link School and who went on to access Ashbrooke School at an average cost of £0.054m per year due to the lack of commissioned places at special schools. The total cost to accommodate that number of pupils at an independent setting over five years is estimated at £1.890m. Should those pupils instead have been accommodated in the provision, as outlined in this proposal, this would represent a cost-avoidance to the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant of £1.289m over five years. The average cost avoided per pupil over the five-year period is £0.257m without any other administrative savings for example reductions in home to school transport included.

12.3 Legal Implications

Throughout the process, from informal consultation to the publication of the statutory proposals, the Council has complied with the requirements of the applicable legislation (the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2013) and has also adhered to the Department for Education’s Statutory Guidance – [Making Significant Changes \(‘Prescribed Alterations’\) to Maintained Schools, October 2018](#).

13. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Pre-Publication Consultation Outcomes

Appendix 2 – Statutory Notice for Proposal to Make Changes to the Link School

Appendix 3 – Full Proposal – Changes to the Link School

Appendix 4 – Equalities Assessment

10. Background Papers

9th June 2022 Cabinet report – PUPIL REFERRAL UNIT – SCHOOL ORGANISATION PROPOSALS AND PROCUREMENT OF CAPITAL WORKS

