

CABINET

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OUTCOMES OF OPTIONS APPRAISAL FOR THE SUFFICIENT SUPPLY OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES IN STROOD AND GILLINGHAM

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Mike O'Brien, Children's Services (Lead Member)
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Summary

The annual review of the School Organisation Plan 2011-16, presented to Cabinet on 30 September 2014, outlined the areas of emerging need in relation to the supply of school places across Medway. This report sets out the findings of the options appraisals for the nine different primary schools in Strood and Gillingham approved at the meeting and makes recommendations to ensure that the council complies with its statutory duty to provide sufficient primary school places to meet demand.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

1.1 Proposals that flow from the School Organisation Plan 2011-16 and its subsequent annual reviews are consistent with the School Organisation Plan Principles and with the Council Plan Priority of 'Children and young people having the best start in life'. The proposals will only be delivered through available funding, therefore this is a matter for Cabinet.

2. Background

2.1 In January 2008 Cabinet approved the School Organisation Plan Principles, which contained a set of planning principles to guide decision-making in a clear and consistent way so that the Council complies with its statutory duty to provide school places. The core of these principles ensures that any changes to schools are based upon improving schools and raising standards. In November 2011, the Cabinet approved the School Organisation Plan 2011-16 (SOP).

2.2 The School Organisation Plan is reviewed annually using the latest forecasting data to highlight emerging need where pressure upon available capacity is expected.

2.3 The annual review presented to Cabinet on 30 September 2014 highlighted two areas where demand for primary places is expected to exceed supply; these were Strood and Gillingham.

- 2.4 Under decision 162/2014 the Cabinet approved an appraisal of the options to provide sufficient additional primary school places in Strood and Gillingham. This report outlines the findings of the appraisal and makes recommendations to ensure the Council meets its statutory obligation to provide school places.
- 2.5 At the same meeting under decision 163/2014 Cabinet approved the options appraisal for secondary provision. This is now underway and will be the subject of a separate report to be presented to Cabinet at a later date during 2015.

3. Options

- 3.1 It was forecast that an additional 2 Forms of Entry (FE) would be required in Strood over time. The schools selected for consideration were Bligh Infant and Junior Schools, Elaine Primary Academy and St Nicholas Church of England Infant School.
- 3.2 A further 2 FE were forecast to be necessary in Gillingham; the schools identified for consideration as part of the options appraisal to provide 2 FE were Woodlands Academy, St Thomas of Canterbury RCP School, Thames View Primary School and Parkwood Infant and Junior Schools.

4. Advice and analysis

- 4.1 Options appraisals were completed for both areas in question. These were high-level appraisals, which looked at site restrictions and implications, risk analysis, the advantages and disadvantages of each and an indicative comparable funding requirement.
- 4.2 The Council's Early Years and School Challenge and Improvement teams were consulted as part of the appraisal and their views are taken into consideration.
- 4.3 Each of the schools included in the process were also consulted and their views considered.

Strood

- 4.4 The priority is to provide an additional 1FE by September 2016. The relocation of the social care team from the Elaine Centre provides a cost effective opportunity to expand Elaine Primary Academy by 1FE into the buildings, which share the site, within that timeframe. The options appraisal has highlighted that the required accommodation for a 3FE primary school with a nursery can be provided by remodelling and refurbishing the buildings and without the need for any major expansion. The indicative costings suggest that this option is the least expensive of all the options for Strood. The Williamson Trust, which sponsors the academy, is supportive of the expansion. It is therefore recommended that the first of the two FE required in Strood be provided here by September 2016.
- 4.5 The three further options to provide the second form of entry in Strood are;
- To expand St Nicholas CE Infant School to become a 2FE primary school
 - To expand Elaine further to become a 4FE primary academy
 - To expand Bligh Infant and Junior Schools to become 3FE

4.6 Current estimates suggest the second FE is most likely to be needed from September 2017. However, officers will need to keep this under review to ensure a sufficient supply of places is available to meet the demand.

4.7 St Nicholas CE Infant School

St Nicholas CE Infant School is an Ofsted rated 'outstanding' school, which is located centrally in Strood and is popular with parents. To successfully expand this school would require significant works and the most practical solution would be to demolish the current buildings and provide purpose built accommodation for a 2FE primary school.

Advantages

- Would provide modern purpose built accommodation
- Would create a through primary provision
- School are supportive of expansion

Disadvantages

- Currently the land at the school is less than 40% of that recommended for a 2FE school
- The access arrangements would require addressing as the school is entered from the end of a narrow cul-de-sac, and the increase in traffic would likely cause an increase in congestion and resident dissatisfaction.
- Car parking would be an issue as currently the school has 6 spaces for staff for its 120 children. Expansion to 2FE would increase the roll to 420 children over time and with it the need for significant additional staff car parking to avoid further congestion in local roads around the site
- Temporary accommodation would be necessary to decant the pupils while the work was undertaken to build the new school and this is not only difficult logistically, but would increase the cost of the project.
- Indicative costings suggest that this option is significantly the most expensive of the three options.

4.8 Elaine Primary Academy

Elaine Primary Academy is recommended for the first of the 1FE expansions as set out in section 4.4. This section explores the merits of further expansion to 4FE, which would then require a project to extend the buildings to provide the necessary accommodation.

Advantages

- The good size site would support the additional expansion
- Access to the site is good with two entrances to the site on opposite sides of the campus
- No demolition is required
- No temporary accommodation would be necessary
- Some economies of scale would provide further cost effectiveness
- The Trust are supportive of the expansion
- Less expensive than separating projects between two schools

Disadvantages

- An expansion of this size would create a 4FE primary school, larger than any other in Medway

- This would double the number of children currently attending the school and consequently a significant increase in traffic during drop-off and pick-up times
- The size of the project may prolong the programme of works making deadlines difficult to meet
- The Council will not be able to bid for funding for this project should the opportunity arise as the school is an academy
- Elaine Primary Academy is rated as 'Requires Improvement' by Ofsted and there may be some opposition at the DfE to a 2 FE expansion when other 'good' schools are overlooked
- The opinion of the School Improvement team is that a 2FE expansion at Elaine under current standards would be unwise

4.9 Bligh Infant and Junior Schools

The Bligh schools are Ofsted rated good and are popular with parents. They share a good size site with sufficient access to both schools.

Advantages

- No major demolition required
- No temporary accommodation will be necessary
- The project can be phased in line with demand, with the infant school being expanded initially with the junior school required for three years later
- Access to the site is good
- Minimal disruption with building area isolated from the main school operation
- Would spread provision across Strood more evenly and reduce the traffic into the centre of Strood compared to the other options
- Creates a 3FE school as compared to the larger 4FE at Elaine
- Likely to be favoured by the DfE over a double expansion at Elaine
- Ability to apply for funding should an opportunity arise.

Disadvantages

- Initial indicative costings suggest that splitting the projects in Strood would be more expensive than a single 2FE expansion at Elaine by approximately £1.8m.

4.10 Based upon an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages set out above, it is recommended that the second FE to compliment the initial 1FE expansion at Elaine for September 2016 be approved as a phased expansion at Bligh infant and Junior Schools. It is most likely that the second FE will be required from September 2017.

4.11 St Nicholas is not recommended for expansion for the following reasons; difficulty with site access, the size of the site and the cost of expanding the school.

Gillingham

4.12 The priority is to provide an initial 1FE from September 2015. The relocation of the children's social care team from Woodlands Place provides an excellent opportunity for Woodlands Primary Academy to expand from a 2FE to 3FE primary school. The buildings are attached to the Woodlands Academy meaning

that a relatively straightforward expansion project can be effected. The Academy have advised the Council that they are willing to cover the cost of the expansion themselves on the understanding that the buildings are made available to them. The aim is to have an additional reception class available for the academic year commencing 1 September 2015. This will help to give some much-needed flexibility to the system in the Gillingham area. The academy will then expand year-by-year taking seven years to fill completely.

- 4.13 The options appraisal therefore addresses the additional 1FE needed in the Gillingham area and the three schools considered are;
- St Thomas of Canterbury RCP
 - Parkwood Infant and Junior Schools
 - Thames View Primary School

4.14 St Thomas of Canterbury RCP

This is a popular school in the Twydall area of Gillingham, which is rated as 'good' by Ofsted. The school occupies a good size site and is currently a 1FE primary school.

Advantages

- Popular school always oversubscribed in recent years
- Catholic Diocese are supportive of expansion
- The school are broadly supportive
- Would help to address the balance of faith places in Medway. There were 43 more first choices for Catholic primary schools in Medway for September 2014 than places available.
- Site would support a 2FE primary school

Disadvantages

- The school shares access in Romany Road with Twydall Primary School, which would mean that when the phased expansion is complete almost 1000 pupils would be arriving and leaving the site at similar times, which will create additional traffic and congestion issues
- The arrangement of the school would mean that some additional work would be required in the current buildings to assist with adjacencies and flow around the school

4.15 Parkwood Infant and Junior Schools

The Parkwood Schools are currently 3FE federated infant and junior schools, situated in separate buildings on the same site and rated 'good' by Ofsted. By joining the buildings and creating a central entrance and admin area, including staff room, head teachers office etc, it would create space within the current buildings for some remodelling to provide the classrooms needed to ensure sufficient capacity for 4FE. Some extension would be necessary, but this would be limited.

Advantages

- The project would consist of a list of small to medium size packages of work which can be delivered via a phased rolling programme to reduce disruption to the school
- No temporary accommodation would be required

- Access to the school for parents and pupils would be less restrictive than at St Thomas of Canterbury
- The school are supportive of the expansion
- The schools are popular with parents

Disadvantages

- The phasing of the programme could result in a longer contract period
- There are a number of mature trees on the site that could impact upon the ability to extend in certain areas
- Not necessarily in the centre of the demand areas across the wider Gillingham area
- Initial indicative costings suggest that this is a slightly more expensive option than St Thomas Of Canterbury

4.16 Thames View Primary School

Thames View is a 2FE primary school situated in Rainham across two buildings on a shared site with a single vehicular access. The school is popular with local parents, but its current Ofsted rating is 'requires improvement'.

Advantages

- Good size site with sufficient outside space for a 3FE school
- Project could be phased with the infant school extended first with the juniors to follow as required
- Good access to site for construction vehicles
- More centrally located for demand than Parkwood

Disadvantages

- Some temporary accommodation could be required to minimise disruption
- Would create additional traffic on Bloors Lane, which is a busy road linking Rainham with Lower Twydall
- Indicative costings suggest that this would be a more expensive project than both St Thomas and Parkwood
- Existing boilers are oil fuelled and require upgrading. This would provide an opportunity to bring gas onto the site as currently there is none, but this would add cost to the project
- DfE may be less supportive to Thames View expanding given that its current rating does not meet with government guidelines of good or outstanding schools expanding.

4.17 Based upon an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages listed above, officer's recommendation is that Woodlands expands to establish the initial 1FE in the Woodlands Place buildings from September 2015.

4.18 The second FE could potentially be needed from September 2017, although officers will need to keep this under review to ensure that a sufficient supply of school places is available to meet demand. Whilst both have their benefits, St Thomas of Canterbury RCP is considered to be a better option than Parkwood Infant and Junior Schools due to the increased demand for denominational places and location in relation to overall demand.

4.19 At this stage Thames View should not be considered for expansion for the reasons stated above.

5. Risk management

| Risk | Description | Action to avoid or mitigate risk |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Council's statutory duty to provide sufficient good quality school places | If insufficient school places are made available to meet demand, the council would be failing to meet its obligations | Implement proposals to provide additional good quality places in the areas of demand |
| That insufficient funding is available to fund proposals to provide sufficient places | Basic need funding is limited and the extent of the emerging need may mean that unless additional funding can be sourced projects to provide places may not be able to be implemented | Explore options to fund projects including bidding for funding initiatives. Look at cost effective ways to supply places. |
| That the level of forecast pupils fails to materialise. | Should the expected numbers of pupils fail to materialise then any funding committed could have been better spent elsewhere | Continue to monitor births, migration and housing developments and accuracy of forecasting |

6. Consultation

- 6.1 Strategic discussions have taken place with the respective schools, dioceses and Trusts; their views have been included in officers' considerations of the options in section 4.
- 6.2 Wider statutory consultation is required for all approved options and Cabinet are requested to grant authority to commence these at the appropriate times as part of this report.
- 6.3 Diversity Impact Assessments have not been completed as part of the options appraisal. However, a DIA will be completed and included in any future reports around specific proposals going forward.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1 All projects approved and undertaken as a result of the 2014 review of the School Organisation Plan 2011-16 will be funded through the Children and Adults Capital Programme.
- 7.2 Where appropriate Developer Contributions will be sought from new housing schemes to assist with the provision of school places in areas of demographic growth.
- 7.3 Occasionally, additional funding sources and initiatives become available. Where possible the Council will seek to make use of these opportunities to reduce the demands upon the funding currently available.

- 7.4 It would not be unreasonable to assume that from 2017/18 onwards, Medway could expect further Basic Needs allocations of at least £2.0 million per annum and, at a national level, the Department for Education is likely to offer further opportunities to bid for targeted funds to deliver the basic need for school places, although there is no guarantee that bids will be successful.
- 7.5 Whilst all opportunities for future funding will be explored and every opportunity will be taken to seek cost effective solutions, there is a potential shortfall in available funding to provide sufficient primary school places to meet demand across Medway. Current estimates suggest a shortfall of around £5.3m for those projects due to be ready for September 2016 but this is not just a Medway problem with Local Authorities across the country forecasting similar shortfalls. Clearly the Council does not have the flexibility of resource to finance the consequences of pupil growth in this way and responsibility must be assumed by Government for a national problem and accordingly we will make a case for the additional funding required. Future need such as additional secondary places and any extra primary places that are required from 2017 will further widen the funding gap.

| | £000's | £000's |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|----------------|
| Anticipated cost to complete the projects in readiness for September 2015 and 2016 (Expansions at Cuxton, Hundred of Hoo, 1FE at Elaine from this report, and Saxon Way) | | 11,750 |
| Current 2014-15 Programme Budget | 34,334 | |
| Commitments against the 2014-15 budget | 32,408 | |
| Uncommitted 2014-15 budget | | (1,926) |
| Estimated Developer contributions due (No guarantee of when these will be received) | | (3,728) |
| Capital Receipts | | (750) |
| Anticipated Shortfall on the Capital Programme projects for September 2016 | | 5,346 |
| Bid for additional funding from Education Funding Agency | | (5,346) |
| | | 0 |

- 7.6 To help mitigate the anticipated shortfall shown in the table above and reluctance by Government to fund the required expansion, the named projects within the table could be phased over a number of years in line with demand and available funding. Further opportunities to fill the funding gap may arise in the form of targeted funding bids and future developer contributions, although at this time there is no certainty of when or if these may become available.
- 7.7 The table in section 7.5 takes no account of the second phases recommended within this report i.e. expansions at St Thomas of Canterbury RCP and Bligh Infant and Junior Schools, which will most likely be required for September 2017. Nor does it take account of the relocation and expansion of Rivermead, or the expected secondary provision requirement for 2017 onwards.
- 7.8 A reasonable minimum funding requirement assumption for those projects outlined in section 7.7 would likely fall in the region of £12-15m.

- 7.9 It can be reasonably expected that further developer contributions, recently requested, but subject to planning approval, will be received during the coming 3-5 years.
- 7.10 The use of current buildings, recently vacated, such as the Elaine Centre and Woodlands Place has provided the opportunity to reduce expenditure, in turn reducing the amount of shortfall highlighted in the funding.

8 Legal implications

- 8.1 The Council has the power under sections 18 and 19 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to make “prescribed alterations” to a maintained school. The procedure for making prescribed alterations is set out in ‘School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2013.
- 8.2 From 24 January 2014 there is no longer a prescribed ‘pre-publication’ (informal) consultation period for prescribed alterations, there is however a strong expectation on Local Authorities to consult interested parties in developing their proposals prior to publication of the formal proposals as part of their duty under public law to act rationally and take into account all relevant considerations. Specific proposals brought forward from this report will be subject to these consultation processes.

9. Recommendations

Strood

- 9.1 The Cabinet is asked to approve the expansion by 1FE at Elaine Primary Academy, in partnership with the Williamson Trust and utilising the vacant Elaine Centre to provide additional places for September 2016.
- 9.2 The Cabinet is asked to approve that the second FE in Strood be provided at Bligh Infant and Junior Schools. However, should Elaine’s Ofsted rating improve to ‘good’ prior to any costs being incurred at Bligh, then consideration, via a report back to Cabinet, should be given as to whether to expand Elaine further.
- 9.3 The Cabinet is asked to approve the immediate commencement of the detailed design process for the initial 1FE at Elaine within the Elaine Centre for September 2016 and then for the next preferred option (Bligh Infant and Junior Schools) to be expanded at the appropriate time.

Gillingham

- 9.4 The Cabinet is asked to approve the expansion by 1FE at Woodlands Primary Academy, utilising the Woodlands Place buildings to provide some of the additional places needed by September 2015.
- 9.5 The Cabinet is asked to approve St Thomas of Canterbury RCP as the preferred second option in Gillingham, and to approve the commencement of the detailed design for this option at the appropriate time.

9.6 Cabinet is asked to give authority to the Director of Children and Adults Services, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services (Lead Member) to commence, at the appropriate time, the statutory processes required for each of the maintained schools to expand. Where an academy is approved as suitable for expansion it will be for the Academy Trust to effect their own consultation. However, the local authority would be expected to support these processes where necessary and as requested.

10. Suggested reasons for decision(s)

10.1 By approving the progression of the recommendations in section 9, the Cabinet is ensuring that the Council meets its statutory duty to ensure sufficient good school places.

10.2 By granting authority to commence the required statutory consultation processes the Cabinet is ensuring that the Council complies with its statutory duty to follow the appropriate consultation process when proposing changes to school organisation.

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Background papers

2014 Review of School Organisation Plan 2011-16
<http://democracy.medway.gov.uk/mgconvert2pdf.aspx?id=25072>