

School Organisation Consultation

Proposed Amalgamation of The Acorns Infant and Brockham Primary Schools

Date:	Wednesday 03 March 2010
Venue:	The Acorns Infant School, Betchworth
Chair:	Melanie Harris, Local Education Officer, Surrey County Council
Present:	<p>Mark Burton, School Place Planning Manager, Surrey County Council Richard Evans, Principal Primary Consultant, VTplc Ann Butters, Assistant Local Education Officer, Surrey County Council (notes)</p> <p>Paula Morgan, Governor, The Acorns School Paul Reitchel, Governor, The Acorns School Liz Griffiths, Governor, Brockham School Nick Caddick, Governor, Brockham School Wendy Postles, Governor, Brockham School</p> <p>Audience of approximately 40 people</p>

No.	Item
1.	Welcome and Introductions from Melanie Harris, Local Education Officer
2.	<p>Presentation by Mark Burton, School Place Planning Manager</p> <p>The Local Authority, in partnership with the governing bodies of The Acorns Infant and Brockham Primary schools, has launched a consultation on a proposal to amalgamate the two schools to become a split-site primary school (operating across the three existing bases) with effect from September 2010.</p> <p>The proposal is that Brockham School would expand on 01 September 2010, and The Acorns Infant School would close on 31 August 2010. All Infant and Junior children currently on roll at the two schools would automatically be on roll at the amalgamated school.</p> <p>It is proposed that the PAN of the new school would be 60 at Infant, with no separate PAN at Junior. There would be 30 Infant places at the Brockham site, 15 Infant places at the Betchworth site, and 15 Infant places at the Leigh site. All Key Stage 2 children would be educated at the Brockham site. The PAN is subject to consultation and further discussion.</p> <p>The Local Authority has analysed projected future numbers of children at the schools. A significant proportion of children come to the schools for outside the immediate area, and equally some local children attend other schools further afield. The numbers of pupils fluctuate from year to year, and the trend is variable. Future Infant numbers are projected to rise slightly but this includes children from outside the area. There have</p>

	<p>been reorganisations of primary education in Dorking and Reigate, with the aim of stabilising and rationalising pupil numbers in those areas. The net effect of this means that there is a need for slightly fewer places in the Brockham/ Betchworth/ Leigh areas.</p> <p>If the amalgamation goes ahead, parents would apply for a place at the new Primary school. The Head and governors would draw up a policy to decide how places across the three bases would be allocated. Parents may express a preference for one of the sites, but if there is not an even spread of preferences then the Head and governors would allocate places according to the policy.</p> <p>The proposal to amalgamate has been made at this time because the Head of Brockham School is retiring at the end of the summer term, and there is no permanent Headteacher for The Acorns School. It is Surrey policy (see <i>Education Organisation Plan 2010-2019</i>, on SCC website) to consider amalgamating infant/ junior/ primary schools where the majority of children transfer from one to the other.</p> <p>The timescale for the process is as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26/03/2010 – End of public consultation period. A report analysing the responses will then be prepared and presented to the SCC Cabinet Member. • 07/04/2010 – Cabinet Member (Mr Peter Martin) decides whether to authorise publication of Statutory Notices. If published, this period of the consultation would then last for a further six weeks. • 02/06/2010 – Cabinet Member decides whether the amalgamation should take place. • 02/06/2010 – Leader of the Council (Dr Andrew Povey) makes the final decision. <p>The Local Authority had three options regarding the process to be followed:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Close both schools and have a competition regarding opening of the new school. b) Close Infant school and expand Primary. c) Close Primary school and expand Infant. <p>The Authority chose not to opt for a) as this would be a lengthier process and it was judged that there was unlikely to be significant interest from private individuals, trusts etc. in competing to run the new school.</p> <p>All parents and stakeholders should have received a copy of the consultation booklet. They are invited to complete the form at the back, giving their views about the proposal. The closing date for responses is Friday 26 March 2010. The form can be posted back to County Hall, or returned to the schools who will forward them on.</p>
<p>3.</p>	<p>Presentation by Richard Evans, Principal Primary Consultant</p> <p>Mr Evans explained that, in addition to being the Principal Primary Consultant for Surrey, he is also the School Improvement Partner for both The Acorns and Brockham schools. This involves visiting the schools regularly, meeting with the Heads and staff and giving advice and support. Mr Evans explained that he was previously the Headteacher of an amalgamated Primary school, and has therefore had practical experience of the issues involved.</p> <p>Mr Evans noted that both schools are currently doing fine work and providing a good experience for the pupils. Mrs Steel is doing an excellent job as Interim Headteacher at The Acorns, but she will be required to return to her own school in due course. It can be difficult to recruit Heads for Infant schools, but nevertheless the Local Authority is committed to maintaining small and rural schools as they offer a number of important benefits. Therefore, the Local Authority is making this proposal to secure the long term</p>

future of the schools.

Mr Evans outlined some potential advantages of the all-through Primary model:

- Larger schools are likely to be more attractive to potential candidates for Headship and teaching posts, due to the wider range of opportunities for development. A larger school offers greater flexibility, and more opportunity to develop specialisms.
- Continuity of provision, teaching, assessment and expectations. One Headteacher, one governing body and one set of staff throughout the child's seven years of primary education. Staff get to know the children and their families very well.
- Common ethos, aims, policies and procedures.
- No need for children to transfer to a new school at Key Stage 2. Parents would not have to undertake the application process for a Key Stage 2 place, but are still free to do so if they would like to obtain a place at a different school.
- Easier to track children's progress from year to year.
- Opportunities to improve transition between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Staff can work more closely together and ensure that any potential difficulties are addressed quickly.
- Opportunities for staff to work more closely together across Key Stages to design the curriculum and ensure that it is seamless. Staff can plan joint events, and can work across Key Stages to moderate pupil's work.
- Opportunities to offer a wider variety of clubs and activities for the children.
- Staff may be more attracted to working at an all-through Primary school as they may have more opportunities to develop and work with children of all ages.
- Flexibility in the deployment of staff, budget and resources. Economies of scale.
- A larger school can cope with fluctuations in pupil numbers, leading to greater long term security.
- Shared workload and greater opportunities for team working.

4. Comments and questions from the audience

Have all local schools and nurseries received copies of the consultation document?
Yes.

Would the new expanded school still be called Brockham Primary? It might be better to have a new name to emphasise equality between the two existing schools.

This would be a matter for the governors to decide. A Temporary Governing Body (TGB) has been put together, with membership from the governing bodies of both The Acorns and Brockham schools. It is the role of the TGB to work with the Local Authority during the consultation process. The TGB is also working on the recruitment of a Headteacher for the new school. If the amalgamation is not approved, the recruitment process would be halted, and potential candidates have been made aware of this. If the amalgamation is approved, the TGB would work on the development of the new school including decisions about the name, the uniform etc.

Why can't the two schools carry on as they are? If all respondents to the consultation say that they are happy with the status quo, will the Local Authority listen?

This is a genuine consultation process, and the Local Authority is keen to hear from stakeholders. The Cabinet Member will make a decision based on a careful evaluation of the educational advantages and disadvantages, taking into account local views.

If this is a genuine consultation, why has the post of Headteacher for the new school already been advertised?

As the Headteacher of Brockham School is retiring, and the Headteacher of The Acorns is at the school on an Interim basis, the situation is quite complex. The TGB has had to advertise for a Head of a new school, as the timing is very tight and there is a deadline that existing Heads must meet to hand in their resignation. The candidates are all being made aware of the consultation process, and that the amalgamation may not go ahead. If the amalgamation does not go ahead, then some of the candidates may wish to consider applying for a post at Brockham or The Acorns.

Can parents choose a different school for Key Stage 2 if they wish? Will their applications be considered less favourably because they already have a secured place at the new school?

All applications for school places are dealt with according to the published admissions criteria (siblings, home-school distance etc). Parents who already have a secured Key Stage 2 place will not be treated less favourably. However, parents won't automatically be sent an application form, so they will need to obtain one from the Local Authority or apply online.

Would the start and finish times of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 pupils at the new school be staggered to ensure that parents could easily collect children from different sites?

The details would be for the Headteacher and governing body to decide, but certainly they would want to ensure that start and finish times were convenient for parents.

Having moved to Surrey from a different Local Authority, I have had experience of reorganisations in other areas. Can the Local Authority confirm that there is no intention to close the Betchworth and Leigh sites in the longer term? Is there room to expand the Brockham site to accommodate the whole school?

Surrey County Council recognises the value and importance of smaller rural schools and is committed to retaining them where possible. Also, there is no funding available to consolidate the school on one site, and given the national economic situation, no funding for such a project is expected in the foreseeable future. The Acorns Betchworth site is owned by a trust, not the Local Authority, so disposing of it would not be straightforward. The Brockham site would certainly not be big enough to accommodate the whole amalgamated school. For all of these reasons, parents can be confident that the Leigh and Betchworth sites will continue to be used to deliver education in the foreseeable future.

Approximately one quarter of pupils from Charlwood Village Infant School transfer to Brockham School each year for Key Stage 2. If there is no separate Junior PAN at the amalgamated school, parents may be less likely to apply for places at Charlwood Infant and the future of the school may be jeopardised.

The Local Authority appears to be underestimating the potential impact of the amalgamation on Charlwood and Newdigate Infant Schools, and the anxiety for parents at those schools. Parents sent their children to these schools with expectations that they may be able to secure a Key Stage 2 place at Brockham. Some parents already have older children at Brockham.

In response to the concerns about Charlwood and Newdigate, the Local Authority confirms that it is keen to retain smaller rural schools and does not want to remove

provision. The Temporary Governing Body and the Local Authority recognise the genuine concerns and are currently discussing the possibility of an interim arrangement to address the concerns of existing parents. The details of this are still being agreed.

Parents and children need certainty. It is helpful that discussions are taking place about possible interim arrangements, but this is too vague to reassure parents now.

The Temporary Governing Body consists of governors from Acorns and Brockham schools, who represent the whole community. They have the interests of all local children at heart. Parents and other stakeholders with concerns about the impact on Charlwood and Newdigate need to feed back their concerns as part of the consultation process.

Is this proposal driven by a desire to cut costs?

No. Each pupil brings a fixed amount of funding (called Key Stage Weighted Pupil Unit) and this is the same amount for every school. Having a larger number of children on roll means that schools can make economies of scale once the basic costs have been met. The TGB has scrutinised the funding models very carefully and has challenged the Local Authority where necessary to ensure that the amalgamation would not financially disadvantage the schools. There is very little difference (approximately £200) between the funding for the separate schools and the funding for the amalgamated school. The Temporary Governing Body are committed to three key points:

1. That none of the three existing sites will close as a result of the amalgamation.
2. That the schools will not be financially disadvantaged as a result of the amalgamation.
3. That the PAN of the school is sufficient to ensure its long term viability.

If a child has been offered a place at either of the schools for September 2010 entry, is this still a firm offer regardless of the outcome of the consultation?

Yes.

How would children be transported between the sites?

We recognise that operating as a split site school offers some challenges, so the Head and governors would work hard to devise systems and procedures to address this. It would be important for children to benefit from the resources at the different sites where possible. The TGB is in negotiation with the Local Authority on transport issues.

It is difficult for parents to make up their minds about the proposal, as the new Head hasn't been appointed yet and a huge amount will depend on their style and leadership.

The TGB will work very hard to ensure that the right Headteacher is appointed. Governors are very aware of the skills and qualities that the Head will need. A key job for the new Head will be to draw the three sites together as one school with a common identity whilst also retaining the local variations that make them special.

As a parent, I chose The Acorns School because of its unique, village, caring ethos. Parents don't all want the same kind of school. We don't want to lose the unique characters of the existing schools.

Governors are committed to ensuring that the best aspects of the existing schools will be preserved. The TGB is made up of a mix of governors from the existing schools, who know the schools very well.

	<p><u>It will be very important for governors and the Local Authority not to underestimate the potential “culture clashes” between the three bases. Many parents will be resistant to change and integration. There are two different Friends groups for the two Acorns bases.</u></p> <p>Governors will be very mindful of these concerns and it is important for parents to be open about their worries so that they can be addressed. The TGB will be discussing with the Friends Groups directly how they can best support and work with the new school.</p>
	<p>The meeting closed at approximately 5.45pm.</p>