

## SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL

## CABINET MEMBER FOR SCHOOLS AND LEARNING

DATE: 15 JANUARY 2014

LEAD OFFICER: NICK WILSON, STRATEGIC DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

SUBJECT: FINAL DETERMINATION OF A PROPOSAL TO CLOSE THE SPECIALIST CENTRE FOR SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION AT THE ECHELDFORD PRIMARY SCHOOL IN ASHFORD

**SUMMARY OF ISSUE:**

Following a statutory consultation process and public Notices issued by Surrey County Council, the Cabinet Member is asked to make a decision on the proposed closure of the Specialist Centre at The Echelford Primary School.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

It is recommended that the Cabinet Member for Schools and Learning gives due consideration to the proposed closure of the Specialist Speech, Language and Communications Needs (SLCN) Centre with effect from 31 January 2014

**REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Pending a final decision on the future of The Echelford Centre, and at the request of the Executive Head Teacher and Governing Body, there have been no admissions to the SLCN Centre since September 2013. Prior to this date there has been a legacy of unfilled places at the Centre. This is partly due to fewer SLCN pupils in Surrey requiring this sort of provision and partly due to operational difficulties. The Echelford School Governing Body has been unable to secure appropriate specialist teaching and leadership of the Centre after standards there were judged as being unsatisfactory by OFSTED. The proposed closure will enable the Executive Headteacher and Governing Body to concentrate on raising standards in the mainstream school which currently also requires special measures and has become an academy within the Lumen Learning Trust. More suitable and effective alternative provision has been identified for the six pupils formerly on roll at the Centre..

**DETAILS:****Business Case**

1. The Echelford Primary School is currently in an OFSTED category of concern as it needs to improve the quality of its educational offer to all pupils. The Head of the SLCN Centre resigned in 2012 and the Head Teacher of the school resigned in the spring of 2013. An Executive Head Teacher from another successful Surrey school has been appointed to oversee the rapid improvements required and the school has become a sponsored academy.
2. The Executive Head has had great difficulty in recruiting suitable specialist staff for the SLCN Centre, including a Head of Centre; and the roll dwindled to

only six pupils, four of whom are transported there from Hounslow Local Authority. The Centre was opened in 2006 with twelve places available but it has never been full. There is another SLCN Centre in the Spelthorne Borough at Spelthorne School and so the opportunity to expand this type of provision is available locally should the numbers of pupils requiring this kind of support rise in the near future.

3. A consultation with stakeholders was held according to Department for Education (DfE) guidelines and this included a meeting at the school for parents and other interested parties. A number of individual meetings have also been held with parents of children attending the centre and with Special Educational Needs officers of Hounslow Local Authority. The County Council received no strong opposition to the proposed closure of the Centre. The Executive Head Teacher and the Governing Body of The Echelford School initially requested this closure and are in full support of this proposal.

#### **CONSULTATION:**

4. The consultation period ran from Monday 10 June 2013 for a period of six weeks up to Friday 26 July 2013. This was publicised to parents of the children on roll in the mainstream school as well as to the parents and carers of children on roll at the Centre. A consultation document was drawn up outlining the reasons for the proposal and what alternative arrangements would be made for pupils requiring this kind of provision. This was sent to all stakeholders.
5. A public meeting was held at The Echelford School on 19 June at 5.30 pm. This was attended by approximately ten parents. Only one written consultation response was received from a parent of a child in Year 1 at the mainstream school who was intending to apply for a place in the SLCN Centre in 2015 when he transferred to Key Stage 2. The parent expressed her disappointment at the proposal to close the Centre. Other than this, there was no other written opposition to the proposal.
6. There was a further six week period of consultation during the publication of Notices in November 2013 and no further responses were received.
7. Parents of the six children attending the Centre in the 2012/13 academic year had individual consultations with Surrey County Council SEN officers and with Hounslow Officers, where appropriate, about alternative provision for their children. They were generally satisfied with the proposed alternative arrangements and consequently their children's Statements were revised to name other provision which the pupils moved into at the start of the new school year in September 2013. The Centre is therefore now empty.
8. The six week period for the publication of Statutory Notices ends on 16 December 2013. There have been no additional responses to this Notice to date of the submission of this report (4 December) which is required to meet the County Council's deadlines. The School Commissioning Officer will verbally update the Cabinet Member on the position at the January decision making meeting.

## **RISK MANAGEMENT AND IMPLICATIONS:**

9. There are no apparent educational risks involved in this proposed closure. However, if the closure is not approved there is the risk that the ongoing lack of specialist staff and experienced leadership in this Centre will impact negatively on the academy's ability to make a viable educational offer; and it is unlikely that the County Council or any parent would want to place their child there under these circumstances

## **Financial and Value for Money Implications**

10. The DfE currently fund £10,000 per place for special educational needs provision. The place budget at Echelford is £100,000 (ten places). There is also an additional £18,000 income recouped from other local authorities. There is a risk that by closing the unit the County Council loses this £100,000 place funding. The guidance states that where a local authority is reducing place numbers and requesting that it should retain the funding released due to a re-organisation of provision, the criteria will be, that the local authority has demonstrated that:
- they will be providing for the same (or additional) number of places through other provision; or
  - that the re-organisation will bring medium term benefits in terms of increased choice, better outcomes or cost effectiveness.
11. Surrey County Council would therefore have to make a case to the DfE to retain the place funding by demonstrating one of the above criteria for the change. However, if the Local Authority cannot place children in this Centre owing to its lack of specialist staff it is unlikely that the funding will be retained.
12. These arrangements for annual review of place funding by the DfE are new. If the place funding is lost, then Surrey could still be faced with the need to fund additional in-school support for pupils who would otherwise have been placed in the unit, without retaining the funding previously allocated to the unit. However, given the high vacancy level at the unit and the current numbers for re-providing are small (two Surrey resident children) the financial risk may not be significant, but nevertheless the risk remains.

## **Section 151 Officer Commentary**

13. The Section 151 Officer acknowledges that the school want the unit to close, so they can concentrate on other issues and that the unit usage is very low. However, there is a risk of the County Council losing the £100,000 place funding.

## **Legal Implications – Monitoring Officer**

14. The children that were attending the SLCN Centre at The Echelford each have a statement of special educational need which named The Echelford as the appropriate provision in part 4 of this document. Four of these statements are maintained by Hounslow Local Authority and two by Surrey County Council. As stated earlier in this report, emergency statement reviews have been undertaken by the relevant Authority with parents and carers and the statements have been amended accordingly. Parents will retain their statutory

right to appeal if they are dissatisfied with the new named educational provision.

#### **Equalities and Diversity**

15. All six pupils on roll have had suitable alternative educational provision made for them as part of this process in anticipation of the closure of this Centre. Four of the pupils are Hounslow residents and Hounslow Local Authority is therefore the responsible body in their cases. Negotiations between Surrey and Hounslow Officers have secured this provision in Hounslow in readiness for January 2014 or sooner. Of the two Surrey residents, one child will remain at The Echelford School to complete his primary education there with in class support. The other child has been allocated a place in an alternative Centre and started there in September 2013.
16. There are no specialist staff currently employed to work in the Centre therefore no staff will lose their permanent post if the Centre closes.
17. No group with any protected characteristics under Equalities legislation has been affected by this proposal as improved provision for the children with SENs has been made. The students are all covered by the general Equalities Impact Assessments (EIA) made by Surrey County Council in respect of its educational provision. No separate EIA has therefore been made.

#### **Corporate Parenting/Looked After Children implications**

18. All parents, including Corporate Parents, have been consulted about the general principle of closure of this centre and also the specific impact on their child's education. There have been no representations from the parents of Looked After children to suggest that the centre does not close.

#### **Safeguarding responsibilities for vulnerable children and adults implications**

19. Safeguarding considerations have been taken into account in the proposal to close this Centre. It is believed that without sufficiently trained and experienced staff in post and without relocating the Centre to a more suitable place in the school, there was, and continues to be, a slightly elevated safeguarding risk which the staff would have to mitigate.
20. The school has a Safeguarding policy in place which also covers the specialist Centre. Were the Centre not to close then a risk assessment would need to be undertaken and any operational recommendations would be implemented by the Executive Head and Governors.

#### **Climate change/carbon emissions implications**

21. Removal of the remaining pupils in this Centre has reduced the daily taxi journeys into Surrey being made by the four Hounslow children. The nearest SLCN Centre is located in Stanwell which is close to Ashford and will serve this area of the county in without any changes to its capacity at present. If it is necessary to expand the number of places on offer the Local Authority would look, in the first instance, to see if it is possible to make these available within Spelthorne Borough at this school, subject to a needs assessment.

**What happens next:**

23. The Cabinet Member is asked to determine, on the basis of the information given above, whether or not to close the specialist Speech, Language and Communications Centre at The Echelford School from 30 January 2014.

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**Contact Officers:**

Beverley Clarke, Joint Head of Additional and Special Educational Needs

01372 832593

Melanie Harris, Schools Commissioning Officer for NE Surrey 020 8541 9556

**Consulted:**

The School staff, parents of pupils on roll both at the school and at the Centre, Hounslow Local Authority, the local County Councillor

**Background Papers:**

The Consultation Document

The most recent OFSTED report on The Echelford Primary School (December 2012)

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report/provider/ELS/125071>

**Sources/background papers:**

OFSTED and HMI reports on The Echelford Primary School

The Section 8 Inspection (first Monitoring) report by HMI (February 2013)

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