

REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES: AREA REVIEWS OF NORTH BIRKENHEAD AND BEECHWOOD, CENTRAL BIRKENHEAD AND SOUTH BIRKENHEAD.

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report advises the Cabinet of progress on the Area Reviews which have commenced following the instruction from Cabinet at its meeting on 20th October 2004. The minute of that Cabinet is attached for Members' information as Appendix A to this report. The first stage of the Reviews has been to conduct a process where, on a confidential basis I have met with key stakeholders in each of the areas under review. These stakeholders included Ward Councillors as well as officers of the Diocese of Chester and Shrewsbury, headteachers and chairs of governors of school potentially affected by the Reviews. Following these confidential discussions I am now in a position to make recommendations for options to be given further consideration in the second stage of the process. These options are set out in appendices to this report. The balance of this report summarises these options, clarifies the process for their further consideration and comments briefly upon a number of the issues involved. In addition to the options set out in the appendices and described below there is considerable analytic and background material which was used as the basis for the identification of options, this is available for Members on request. A brief description of this material is included at Appendix B.

2.0 Central Birkenhead

- 2.1 The small planning area that we term "Central Birkenhead" in terms of the school organisation plan was included within the Area Reviews in order to ensure that we had looked coherently at provision across Birkenhead. In fact the schools within this planning area have sustained their pupil numbers relatively well and we do not foresee any significant reductions in the next five years in the area served by these schools. Nevertheless we have looked carefully at this planning area to confirm that there is, in my opinion, no need at this stage to proceed with consideration of options for change to this group of schools. If the position should change significantly at any point during the five year planning cycle of the School Organisation Plan then in line with the Cabinet resolution of the 20th October I would report separately to Cabinet. Otherwise, I will submit the area to be reviewed again in 2010.

3.0 North Birkenhead and Beechwood

- 3.1 The position in these two small planning areas which are being reviewed jointly because of their natural contiguity is very much more problematical. As set out in more detail in the appendices the level of surplus places across these areas is unacceptably high and projected to increase. It is my view therefore that some action must be taken to reduce provision either through closure(s) or amalgamation(s) of schools serving the areas. The appendices set out what I believe to be the practicable options. My conclusions are that action needs to be taken quickly in the western part of this area i.e. that including the Beechwood and Ballantyne estates and the North End of Birkenhead. That part of the area nearer to the town centre does

have significant surplus which must be carefully monitored, but I am not recommending at this stage that we proceed to the next stage of consultations for this part of the planning area. The current suggested options therefore affect schools serving the North End and the Beechwood / Ballantyne communities.

- 3.2 Within the areas focussed upon an important factor for planning any future provision is the very significant proportion of provision which is denominational. Schools particularly affected include the Catholic Aided schools at St Paul's and Holy Cross and the Church of England Controlled school at St Oswald's. Close co-operation between the LEA and both Dioceses is highly desirable in finding the optimum solutions for this area. For the sake of clarity it needs to be understood that the LEA has the power to make proposals in respect of Aided schools. However if these are not made with the co-operation and agreement of the relevant Diocesan authorities then the process for consideration of the proposals would be likely to lead to referral to the Schools' Adjudicator. In addition to the delay that this would cause it is clearly highly desirable to achieve agreement within the Authority among those responsible for planning provision as to what the best outcome should be. It is therefore important to continue to liaise with and share developments with Diocesan officials. The options for consideration set out in the appendices are as follows:-

3.3 Option A1 – The closure of Vyner Primary School and St Paul's Catholic Primary School

This option would mean ceasing to maintain these two schools. The zone and parish which they respectively serve would be "re-allocated" to other schools. Numbers at both schools are relatively small. There is sufficient capacity at surrounding schools for all children to be accommodated. In respect of St Paul's clearly there would be a greater distance to travel to the nearest Catholic primary school – either Holy Cross Catholic Primary School or St Peter's Catholic Primary School.

3.4 Option A2 – The closure of St Paul's Catholic Primary, and the amalgamation of Vyner Primary and St Oswalds C of E Primary

A variation to this first option would be to achieve the same end but through amalgamations rather than simple closures. Under this variation Vyner Primary School would amalgamate with St Oswald's C of E School on the current St Oswald's site. The amalgamated school under this proposal would be a Controlled Church of England School. In this option it needs to be understood that while St Oswald's is a Church of England School, it has Controlled status as opposed to Aided status. This means, among other things, that its admissions are controlled by the LEA not the governors and therefore the zoning system would operate. In the case of Catholic Aided schools the Bishop of Shrewsbury seeks to guarantee that any baptised Catholic child within any particular parish is promised a place at a specific Catholic school. In areas such as Birkenhead with traditionally high Catholic populations this has in the past generally meant that there will be a Catholic primary school fairly near to all Catholic homes. Clearly this is not always the case elsewhere in the borough or beyond.

3.5 Option B1 – Creation of a Joint Denominational School, amalgamation of Vyner Primary with Manor Primary

The third option seeks to address the mixed community / denominational provision in a more radical way. This option reduces the total number of schools by two but this

time through the amalgamation of St Paul's Catholic Aided Primary School and St Oswald's CE Controlled School into a single, joint denominational Aided School at the current St Oswalds site. Under this option, the community provision is restructured through the amalgamation of Vyner Primary School with Manor Primary School at the Manor site. Thus the area would be served by one denominational and one community school.

3.6 Option B2 – Creation of a Joint Denominational School and closure of Vyner Primary

In this option, the joint Denominational Aided school would be created at the current St Oswalds site as in option B1, however, Vyner Primary would simply be closed, as in option A1. The Community zones in the area would be re-allocated, and the area would be served by one denominational and one community school.

4.0 South Birkenhead

4.1 Again as in the North Birkenhead / Beechwood planning areas my conclusions are that change is required. As set out in the appendices, surpluses are unacceptably high, affecting two schools particularly sharply. While Housing Market Renewal is expected to bring improvement in the area, discussions with colleagues in the Regeneration Department indicate that there is unlikely to be a significant net growth in pupil numbers which would obviate the need for re-organisation. In this area however, the position is less complicated in respect of denominational schools. The one Catholic primary school in the area, St Anne's Catholic Aided Primary, has relatively stable pupil numbers both at present and in the forecast position and I would not see it as being affected by any of the options for change. The proposed options therefore are confined to the community schools serving the area.

4.2 Option A – To close The Dell Primary School

In a number of ways The Dell Primary School stands out as the most vulnerable school serving this area. It is not helped by its geographical location immediately adjacent to the by-pass and has suffered from a large migration of pupils from within its allocated zone to surrounding schools. Almost as many pupils from within The Dell's zone attend Grove Street Primary School as attend The Dell. Grove Street has been able comfortably to accommodate these pupils in addition to those pupils from within its own zone as a result of generally falling rolls within the area. A further significant group of pupils from within The Dell's zone attend Rock Ferry Primary School which again has been able to accommodate these with little difficulty. The result is that The Dell has a high level of surplus places and this is not expected to reduce significantly. If this option were chosen by itself then that would make a contribution to reducing surplus places in the area, although the overall level would still be uncomfortably high. The consequences of closure would be a re-allocation of The Dell's current zone between Grove Street and Rock Ferry Primary School. As has already been observed, many of the children concerned already attend these schools. Under this option it is proposed to relocate provision for the BIP programme BEST team and the Nurture group, both of which are currently located on The Dell premises, to Well Lane Primary. This would have the effect of reducing surplus capacity at Well Lane and would align better with the proposed Children's Centre. It is further proposed that the opportunity would be taken to improve provision generally at Well Lane Primary.

4.3 Option B – To close Well Lane Primary School and The Dell Primary School

This option proposes the closure of Well Lane Primary School in addition to The Dell Primary School. If this option was agreed then again there would need to be significant adjustments of zones. This would affect other schools including Bedford Drive and Mersey Park as well as Rock Ferry and Grove Street. This is more complicated than option A. Nevertheless it is a viable option in combination with appropriate improvements where required to receiving schools to ensure that accommodation is of a high standard. It would allow provision to be made for the right number of children expected.

4.4 Option C – To close Well Lane Primary School and The Dell Primary School, and build a new school south of Bedford Road

The third option which has been suggested would be to create one new single form of entry school on a suitable site south of Bedford Road. A potential site has been identified at the Conway Playing Fields, Knowsley Road. Well Lane Primary and The Dell Primary would be closed, and their zones re-allocated to neighbouring schools. A zone for the new school would be created from existing school zones. This option would clearly limit the reduction of surplus places that could be achieved. It also needs to be understood that a new school is always very attractive to potential parents and therefore would be likely to fill (thus the zone becomes highly significant). This would clearly have an impact upon neighbouring schools, including Grove Street Primary, Rock Ferry Primary, and Bedford Drive Primary. The area is under consultation by the Housing Market Renewal Initiative, and this option may be seen as contributing positively to regeneration. However, the capital cost of building a new school would be relatively high, and Conway Playing Fields are designated as Urban Greenspace (GR2) in the Unitary Development Plan. This means that equivalent replacement Greenspace would need to be provided locally.

5.0 **Next Steps**

5.1 If the Cabinet is minded to approve any or all of these options for further consideration the next stage is to move to open consultation. This would involve publishing the options within the areas and inviting comments and suggestions from as wide a range of stakeholders as can be practicably achieved. Most critically this would involve the parents of children in the schools potentially affected. Public meetings would therefore be held where views can be expressed directly to myself and the Cabinet Member. We would also invite written comments. The outcome of these consultations would then be reported back to Cabinet for further consideration, as would any further proposals that had emerged during the process and the consultation

6.0 **Financial and Staffing Implications**

6.1 There are none arising as a result of this report. If options are approved for consultation, there will be further detailed reports which will set out all the implications.

7.0 **Equal Opportunities Implications**

7.1 It is essential to plan school provision across the Authority so that it is both efficient and effective in the interests of all pupils. Consultations on the options set out in this report will need to address very carefully the impact of any preferred options on pupils that are served by the schools concerned.

8.0 **Human Rights Implications**

8.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

9.0 **Local Agenda 21 Statement**

9.1 The provision of efficient and effective education is a vital part of serving local communities. Inefficient use of resources is wasteful both in educational and physical resource terms.

10.0 **Community Safety Implications**

10.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

11.0 **Planning Implications**

11.1 There are none arising directly from this report. Any proposals which may arise out of the consultations recommended in this report would be subject to the usual planning processes.

12.0 **Local Member Support Implications**

12.1. The schools specifically mentioned in the report and appendices, and the Wards in which they are situated, which are: Bidston and St James; Claughton; Birkenhead and Tranmere; Rock Ferry and Bebington.

13.0 **Background Papers**

13.1 Surplus Place Returns;
DfES guidance on Surplus Place Removal;
School Organisation Plan;
Pupil and capacity data held by LEA.

14.0 **Recommendations**

14.1 That consultations be undertaken regarding the options for reducing primary school provision in North Birkenhead and Beechwood and South Birkenhead as set out in this report.

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