

**Learning for the 21st century in the
Alsager, Congleton, Sandbach and
Haslington locality**

Sandbach primary schools:

**A response to Cheshire County Council
and alternative proposals for
primary schools in Sandbach**

July 2008

Prepared by Governors at Sandbach Community Primary School

Introduction

The educational community within Sandbach fully accepts the need for a review of school provision. A reduction in the projected number of surplus places is an inevitable consequence of that review. Decisions about the location of the Children's Centre and the use of surplus capacity also need to emerge as an outcome of this process. However we do not accept that the 'emerging options' for Sandbach in Cheshire County Council's June 2008 document are the best way forward. There is no evidence in the June 2008 document that the needs of children have been adequately considered in drawing up the proposals. Principle 5 of Cheshire County Council's TLC review process states that special protection and support will be given to vulnerable communities, rather than taking a simplistic view of school closure. When the needs of vulnerable children are carefully set out and properly considered, it is clear that the proposals have many serious shortfalls.

Projections for intake to Sandbach Community Primary School

In many towns in the UK, school intakes vary considerably over a period of time. School staffing changes, school reputations fluctuate, parental preferences change, housing developments change the local demographic, and so on. These and other factors can lead to major changes in school populations over short periods of time. For this reason any projection of future intakes to primary schools can only be tentative. On their own they do not provide a secure foundation on which to base decisions about school closures.

The proposal to close Sandbach Community Primary School appears to be based on the forecast for the percentage (not number) of surplus places in 2012 and the number of children who would be affected by that closure. No evidence of any other criteria being used is put forward. Clearly it is important to use accurate figures for these forecasts. We believe that the figure for Sandbach Community Primary School will be seriously inaccurate, based on the number of children known to be joining the school in September 2008. The school came out of special measures in June 2004, followed by two years of unsecured leadership when the headteacher was seconded out. The school now has secured leadership and is increasing admissions into Reception, suggesting that the trend used to make the current projection has altered.

We look forward to receiving the revised forecasts for the Sandbach and Haslington primary schools early in the autumn term. It will of course be helpful for Cheshire County Council to publish the forecasts for enrolment and surplus places for **all** the primary schools in Sandbach and Haslington, unlike the partial forecasts in the June 2008 document.

In itself the location of a Children's Centre would not be sufficient justification for keeping a school open. However Cheshire County Council does not appear to have taken into account the impact that the location of a Children's Centre would have on a school's intake. Those parents who have most contact with the Children's Centre will inevitably find that there are advantages in their children attending the school where the Children's Centre is located. This will have an impact on admissions to the school, and therefore on the projected number of surplus places. We see no evidence that the TLC review has taken this factor into account.

A Sainsbury's Homebase store will soon open, and new houses will be built, on the

parcel of land between Crewe Road and the A534, opposite Waitrose supermarket. This will generate an obvious need for new pedestrian crossings to ensure ready access to the town, especially across the busy A534. At present there are children in the catchment area for Sandbach Community Primary School who are isolated from the school by the latest section of the A534. This road is extremely busy, especially during the time of children going to and returning from school. It is not a safe road to cross on foot. We will be pressing for better pedestrian crossing arrangements in this area, which will improve access and make it more feasible for some children in the catchment area for Sandbach Community Primary School to attend the school.

The impact of closure of Sandbach Community Primary School

It was noted above that the needs of children should be paramount in making decisions about schooling. Currently Sandbach Community Primary School serves a community with a relatively high proportion of vulnerable and disadvantaged children. As a consequence the staff there have built up expertise in a wide range of aspects of education which are not typical of the other primary schools in Sandbach. These include multi-agency working, inclusion, behaviour management, Special Educational Needs and parenting support. The school has made a commitment to providing a learning mentor from its own budget and has made a Nurture Room available for both children and parents.

The school currently meets the **FULL** Extended School core offer and is particularly strong in the following areas:

- Swift and easy referral – evidence for this can be obtained through consulting the school nurses' team, Speech and Language Service, CAMHS, ADHD team, Anti-social Behaviour Co-ordinator, Social Care (particularly Family Workers at Sandbach Family Centre), LA Safeguarding Team and Police (including local PCSOs). The school currently works with each of these services to support a number of vulnerable children and their families.
- Parenting Support – the school delivers parenting classes, co-facilitated by the school's learning mentor and Cheshire Family Learning using Share Plus materials. The school's learning mentor is a trained parenting course facilitator. The school has recently run a course for the EIP; background to this can be obtained from the Locality Extended Schools Manager, Roger Billinge.

The school meets the requirement in the Cheshire Children and Young Person Plan 06-09 to implement Common Assessment Framework, to shift the focus of services from dealing with the consequences of problems in children's lives to preventing things from going wrong in the first place. The school has two staff trained to use the CAF. One CAF is in place and a second is being completed. Staff at the school act as the Lead Professional. The use of the common assessment framework has strengthened the school's work with other agencies and specialist support services.

This expertise will be lost if the school is closed and the children redistributed to other local primary schools. **We see no evidence that the question of whether their needs will be met through being redistributed to other primary schools has been considered as part of the TLC review.** The Headteachers from both Sandbach high schools are quite explicit in stating that this will not be in their

schools' best interests, and that children who are currently managed very effectively in their primary years are more likely to become disaffected or unable to cope in the secondary school. Since parents from Sandbach Community Primary School tend to be less mobile than those from other primary schools in Sandbach, access to these other schools may not be easy and problems with children's attendance are therefore likely to increase.

Relocation of the maintained nursery at Sandbach Community Primary School is also undesirable. Many of the parents of children at the nursery do not have their own transport, and would not find it easy for their children to attend a nursery at Offley Primary School. The likely consequence is that the number of children attending a nursery from the catchment area for Sandbach Community Primary School will decrease, leading to vulnerable children being further disadvantaged.

Location of the Children's Centre

It is important to separate the issue of the location of the Children's Centre from the question of potential school closure.

Co-location of the Children's Centre in a primary school is an advantage, if the relevant criteria are met, but this is not essential. Local authorities are charged with the duty of reaching the most disadvantaged families and children through Children's Centres, and the criteria for determining the location of the Children's Centre are clear and explicit. **These criteria would not be met by locating the Children's Centre at Offley Primary School.** Local authority officers confirm this. The proposal put forward in the June 2008 document, that the Children's Centre be located at Offley Primary School, is therefore not a viable proposal. **The only primary school in Sandbach where the criteria for locating the Children's Centre can be met is Sandbach Community Primary School.** Again, local authority officers confirm this. Some of the reasons for this are set out below.

- The SureStart Children's Centres Planning and Performance Management Guidance states that Children's Centres must reach the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families at greatest risk of social exclusion. Within Sandbach the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families live within pram-pushing distance of Sandbach Community Primary School. Evidence to support this includes the school's relatively high percentage of SEN and Free School Meals, compared to other schools in the locality. Headteachers from all the schools in the Sandbach and Haslington EIP have informed the Lead Officer and Ric Turnock of their view, that the most vulnerable and needy families are those in the catchment of Sandbach Community Primary School.
- The Children's Centre must reach the most excluded groups who are most at risk of achieving poor outcomes. Many families attending Sandbach Community Primary School belong to those excluded groups, i.e. lone parents, parents with a learning difficulty or mental health problem, those experiencing domestic violence or misusing drugs, families of offenders, and so on. Similarly Children's Centres are expected to offer strong outreach and home visiting. Families must be sought out and offered services. Being located within the community where many of these excluded groups live will enable this to happen more readily.

- The SureStart Children's Centres Planning and Performance Management Guidance strongly encourages the continuing use of maintained nurseries as a base for the development of Children's Centres, when they are already located in the most disadvantaged areas. Sandbach Community Primary School is the only school in Sandbach and Haslington with a maintained nursery, and it is located in the most disadvantaged area.
- The SureStart Children's Centres Planning and Performance Management Guidance advises local authorities to consider opportunities to co-locate children's centres with primary schools, and offer integrated care and learning from a single setting. Sandbach Community Primary School is a natural focus for the most disadvantaged community. This co-location would improve transition arrangements for children starting school. The school already exemplifies good practice in extended school and integrated services. This could be built on, in accordance with DCSF guidance that Children's Centres and integrated services should be built on current good practice rather than starting from scratch.
- In terms of deprivation, families in the catchment of Sandbach Community Primary School are comparable to the 30% most deprived areas. There is an expectation from DCSF that they should receive a similar range and intensity of services as centres in disadvantaged areas. If the school is closed, children will be redistributed to a number of other schools, making it even more difficult to achieve this than if children were in the location of the Children's Centre.
- Locating the Children's Centre in a more affluent area is inappropriate. Evidence from SureStart's national evaluation indicates that the most vulnerable can be prevented from accessing Centres if they are dominated by 'cliques' from more advantaged groups. The location proposed in the June 2008 document is in a relatively affluent area. This is likely to present barriers to access which would reduce the effectiveness of the local programme.
- Local authorities now have a statutory duty to work with NHS and Jobcentre Plus partners. Sandbach Community Primary School is ideally located to work closely with Ashfields Health Centre. Families in the school's catchment are those who would benefit most from the service of Jobcentre Plus, to improve the outcomes for the most disadvantaged children and reduce inequalities in outcomes.

Sandbach Community Primary School therefore has the key components to build on to develop a high performing and effective Children's Centre, such as good provision of extended and integrated services, a good track record of improving outcomes for children and their families, a maintained nursery, a strong inclusive and socially welcoming ethos, good partnership working within the EIP, and current use of CAF.

Guidance from central government about the location of SureStart Children's Centres is clear. Location of the Children's Centre at Offley Primary School would not be consistent with this guidance and would appear to put the local authority in breach of its statutory duty. Although location of the Children's Centre at Offley Primary School is described in the June 2008 document as an 'emerging option', it is not a credible option. When setting up a SureStart Children's Centre the local authority is **required** to consult key partners and relevant groups, and to locate the

Children's Centre in the area of most significant disadvantage. The only acceptable option is to locate the Children's Centre in the immediate vicinity of Sandbach Community Primary School. This could be co-located within Sandbach Community Primary School. Alternatively, if Sandbach Community Primary School were to close, the local authority will need to find suitable premises in the immediate vicinity of Sandbach Community Primary School.

Alternative proposals

- All primary schools in Sandbach to remain open
- Location of Offley Primary School into a single building
- Adjustment of current PAN where necessary, to ensure that all schools are viable and have manageable admission numbers
- Use of surplus capacity in primary schools, as set out below:

1. A 14-19 Education Centre

Currently there is no agreement amongst the relevant high schools that there is any need for a 14-19 Education Centre, or where it should be located. However, if a 14-19 Education Centre is to be provided in the borough, then Offley Primary School would provide a location where traffic from schools to the east of Sandbach could reach it, without having to go through the town centre. The premises required would become available when the location of Offley Primary School into a single building is complete.

2. A Children's Centre

Premises can be made available for the location of a Children's Centre at Sandbach Community Primary School, without any requirement for extensive building work. The advantages of locating the Children's Centre here are set out above.

3. EIP shared provision

There is already a need for some shared provision within the Sandbach EIP, such as Speech & Language Therapy, Educational Welfare provision and Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services. Currently the EIP within Sandbach is viewed as functioning well. The desire within the EIP is to increase the amount of work across the EIP through collaborative arrangements requiring shared provision, and so enable the needs of children to be met more effectively. Clearly shared provision requires some sort of base from which to operate. This could be made available in any of the Sandbach primary schools with surplus capacity, and would not all have to be in a single location.

4. Early years provision

The June 2008 document identifies a need for an increase in free early years education places for 3 and 4 year olds in Sandbach. Future developments in Sandbach, including new housing, the development of a Science Park and the location of the new East Cheshire Council Offices at Westfields, are likely to increase this demand. Additional early years provision could be made available in any of the Sandbach primary schools with surplus capacity, and would not all have to be in a single location. [It is worth noting that the closure of Sandbach Community Primary School will actually reduce the amount of early years provision, even if the maintained nursery in the school is relocated].

Democratic accountability

At present Cheshire County Council officers are charged with making decisions about schooling through the TLC review. We respect the integrity of those officers involved in making difficult decisions. However Cheshire County Council will be dissolved in April 2009, and its officers will have no further responsibility for their actions. From April 2009 nobody will be accountable for decisions made by Cheshire County Council.

By contrast, the new East Cheshire Council will be accountable for decisions which they have not made. Recent developments in Bollington indicate clearly that the two authorities will not necessarily come to the same conclusions about possible school closures in East Cheshire.

It would be **entirely undemocratic** for Cheshire County Council to go ahead with decisions about school closures before April 2009. The newly elected, democratically accountable officers at East Cheshire Council are the only ones who should make this decision.

Some local authority officers give freely of their time to serve as school governors. This provides a valuable service to the community, but inevitably creates the possibility of a conflict of interest when difficult decisions are being made about the future of schooling in Sandbach. We would welcome an assurance from Cheshire County Council's lead officer for TLC, that nobody with a personal interest in the proposals for schooling in Sandbach has been or will be involved in helping to construct those proposals.