

The Governing Body of Offley Primary School (“GBOPS”) sets out below its comments in regard to your proposal for the expansion of Wheelock Primary School (“the proposal”).

GBOPS is of the opinion that:

- i) the consultation process is fundamentally flawed;
- ii) the proposal is unnecessary in the short term, and
- iii) the proposal utilises a level of spend that is unjustifiable at this point in time.

Consultation process

The School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2007 (“TSOR”)

Paragraph 27 of Part 2 of Schedule 5 of TSOR requires that the local education authority must, before they publish any proposals, consult the governing body, teachers and other staff of any other school that may be affected by the proposals together with any other interested party and any other persons whom the authority thinks are appropriate. GBOPS believes that Cheshire East Council (“CEC”) has paid lip service to the consultation process with views of other stakeholders not being sought until the process for the expansion is, to all extent and purposes, a ‘done deal’.

GBOPS understands that proposed drawings for the extension of Wheelock have been provided to parents of pupils at the school and parents have been led to believe that there is certainty that the proposal will go ahead. The Chair of Governors has confirmed that the plans are ready to be submitted. GBOPS considers that this is inappropriate at this stage of the consultation process. Other inconsistencies have been identified in information provided to the Wheelock School Chair of Governors and Headteachers of other Sandbach primary schools.

Essentially, GBOPS and the overwhelming majority of Headteachers of Sandbach primary schools believe they have not had the opportunity to present the impact of the proposals on themselves or to suggest alternative solutions, for example, their capacity to increase PAN, changes to school catchment areas etc.

Paragraph 11 of Part 1 of Schedule 5 of TSOR states that a list of persons who were consulted, minutes of all public consultation meetings and the views of the persons consulted are included in or provided in relation to proposals. Specifically, the requirement for meetings to be minuted has not been fulfilled. GBOPS requested that minutes were taken of meetings held on 30 October 2012 and 9 November 2012 but, in both instances, this was refused.

Equality Impact Assessment (“EIA”)

GBOPS believes that the EIA has not been properly considered for the following reasons:

- a) Headteachers in schools in Sandbach are identified as the main stakeholders in relation to the proposal but they haven’t been sufficiently consulted as noted above;
- b) Inadequate consideration has been given to the potential impact of the proposal on the sustainability of other schools in Sandbach. The proposed significant extension to Wheelock offers four empty teaching bases, increasing the scope for/providing “...flexibility to allow for mid-year entrants”. This allows for inter-school movement leading to possible re-organisations within affected schools resulting in fewer but larger classes, redundancies and a reduction in services, for example SEN;
- c) The EIA states that the proposal will not have any effect on good relations between the Council and the Community and that it will engender a positive reaction from the local community. GBOPS believes that the proposal will have a negative effect on the community because of the sustainability issues set out in (b) above;
- d) Sandbach primary schools currently have a strong working relationship. The proposal will inevitably increase competition between the schools affecting community cohesion, and
- e) The EIA does not expect that any further analysis or intelligence will be required to support decision making. GBOPS and the governing bodies of the other primary schools in Sandbach, with the exception of Wheelock, are of the opinion that the EIA does not reflect the risks to other schools which have been identified through the consultation process. They request that an impact assessment on other schools in Sandbach is carried out.

Draft School Organisation Framework (“Framework”)

The Framework maintains that “The Local Authority recognises that an effective working relationship with schools is an essential prerequisite for discharging its statutory responsibilities in terms of ensuring the provision of school places...” GBOPS is of the opinion that the working relationship between CEC and the overriding majority of the schools in Sandbach has been diminished by the failings of the consultation process.

Short term vs longer term requirements

CEC has indicated that there is a requirement for additional places in Sandbach primary schools for September 2013 however no reliable data has been provided to support this. Should this assumption bear out, other schools in the locality are able to accommodate additional pupils either by utilising surplus places (Elworth Hall, Haslington Primary) or by increasing PANs at schools which wouldn’t need to expand their accommodation immediately (St John’s, Offley Primary). In the latter instance, St John’s could move to a 1FE school and Offley Primary to a 2FE form of entry.

One of the key priorities of CEC set out in the Framework is to provide primary schools with single aged classes wherever possible. Increasing Wheelock from a 1FE school to a 1.5FE school explicitly disregards this policy and GBOPS believes this significantly undermines the CEC's commitment to the Framework.

It has been widely publicised that a number of developers have applied for planning permission to build a significant number of houses in several locations throughout Sandbach. The planning applications are at various stages and the outcomes of them will not all be known within the incredibly short proposal timeframe. It is likely that the proportion of pupils in each catchment will change over the next twelve months and the requirement for places at each of the Sandbach primary schools will need to be reconsidered.

Justification of capital spend

The capital cost of the proposal is not insignificant at £1.8 million. Given the current uncertainty over the extent of the increase in the number of houses in Sandbach over the short to medium term, GBOPS challenges CEC to provide evidence that the proposal caters for the longer term population changes in the area and hence is justifiable.

Summary and recommendation

GBOPS, and the governing bodies of other Sandbach primary schools, firmly believes that the current proposal is premature, short-sighted and ill-considered and that a desk-top, tick-box approach has been taken with regard to the consultation process.

The Sandbach primary schools have met to discuss alternative options. The preferred option is that, in the short term, the September 2013 intake is accommodated within existing classroom space. The consensus of opinion is that the current proposal is put on hold whilst a transparent and open exercise is carried out over the next twelve months, engaging Sandbach primary Headteachers and other education professionals, with regard to 2014 and beyond. Within this timeline there will be greater clarity on the quantum and location of new houses in the area which will allow for a sustainable plan based on full knowledge of relevant facts and information, including up to date census data.