

Committee: **Cabinet**

Date: **12 January 2005**

Title of Report: **The future for primary education in Rye**

By: **Director of Children's Services, Education and Libraries**

Purpose of Report: **To inform the Cabinet of the outcomes of consultation and feasibility work on options for change in the organisation of primary education in Rye, and to recommend a way forward.**

Recommendation:

The Cabinet is recommended:

- i. to note the responses received to the consultation paper;**
 - ii. to approve in principle a proposal that a new 1.5 form entry (c300 places) all through primary school be established on part of the playing field of Thomas Peacocke Community College (subject to the satisfactory resolution of the significant matters relating to planning consent, access, flood risk and the loss/replacement of playing fields), replacing Tilling Green Infant School and Freda Gardham Primary School;**
 - iii. to authorise the publication of statutory notices in accordance with the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the Education (School Organisation Proposals) (England) Regulations 1999 to implement this proposal should these matters have been satisfactorily resolved or, should this prove difficult, to request a further report;**
 - iv. to agree the disposal of the former Thomas Peacocke Lower School site, on terms approved by the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources and Director of Children's Services, Education and Libraries, which ensure that access over the site to the Thomas Peacocke playing fields will be provided, and the cost of the main road access being funded by the purchaser of the site and the timing of its completion being consistent with the proposed school building timetable; and**
 - v. to note that the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources will update Lead Members on the progress of negotiations with the prospective purchaser**
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1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 Funding for further work to investigate the feasibility of establishing a new school on the Thomas Peacocke Community College (TPCC) playing field site, including the cost of a flood risk assessment, can be found from within departmental resources.

1.2 The establishment of a new school on this site will release three County Council sites for disposal: the sites of the two existing primary schools and the former Thomas Peacocke Lower School site. Taking the estimated value of these sites into account, the estimated net cost of this project is £4.0m. The net costs of other options are set out in a separate confidential report; the preferred option is not the cheapest in strict financial terms. This project has been identified as one of the highest priorities in the Education service's submission for the five year capital programme commencing in 2005/06.

1.3 Freda Gardham is already experiencing significant budget difficulties as a result of falling pupil numbers, and Tilling Green is likely to encounter similar difficulties if the number of pupils admitted at 4+ does not recover significantly from the very low level experienced this year. The establishment of a single school is expected to create greater certainty in budget planning at the school level, and achieve a small revenue budget saving mainly due to the need for a lower level of teaching and learning protection in a larger school. However, there may be additional costs during a transitional period, relating in particular to support for any transitional plans that are necessary to ensure maintenance of standards, and possible redundancy costs. These would have to be absorbed within future 'passported' resources to schools.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 The review of primary schools in Rye has been necessitated by falling pupil numbers, and concerns that this may impair standards of education and care as staff and governors seek to manage declining budgets. The review has also provided an opportunity to consider how the organisation of schools in the town might best provide the circumstances in which joined up working with other agencies, in accordance with the intentions of the Children Act 2004, might best be achieved.

2.2 The consultation exercise has been short but concentrated. A description of the process and an analysis of the responses are provided in Appendix 1. It is disappointing that so few responses were received. Most responses have been from staff or governors of the two schools and TPCC, and it is clear that all three schools have considered very carefully the implications and the opportunities of change. From those responses that have been received, there is a clear acceptance that the current arrangements are unsustainable and that change is necessary. Opinions are divided about whether a new school should be established on the Freda Gardham site or on a site closer to TPCC.

2.3 Appendix 2 describes progress in investigating the feasibility and costs of the different options set out in the consultation paper. This Appendix includes a number of additional Annexes. Financial information regarding estimates and site values has been provided in the confidential report.

2.4 Particular factors in this review of site options and costs have been planning considerations, including access, flood risks and the town development boundary. A further factor has been the need to replace lost playing fields. Many parts of Rye are subject to significant flood risk, such that development on them cannot be permitted unless remedial measures are taken. There is a particular concern about the Freda Gardham site, where it has been established there is no real prospect of development other than through refurbishment of the existing buildings.

2.5 For the reasons set out in Appendix 2, options 3 (new school on the Freda Gardham site) and 5 (two smaller schools, one in Rye and one in Camber) cannot be recommended for further consideration. Option 1, 'Do nothing', has received no support in the consultation. Options 2 (a single school in a refurbished Freda Gardham) and Option 4 (a new school on a new site) remain for consideration. For Option 4, two feasible sites have been identified, the former Thomas Peacocke Lower School site, and part of the TPCC playing field.

2.6 It is recommended that Option 4 offers the best prospect of providing future generations in Rye with a quality learning environment in which they can succeed. Furthermore, it is recommended that the playing field should be the preferred site. This site provides direct opportunities for joint working between the school and TPCC and offers greater flexibility to develop over time co-located uses with other agencies, including the proposed Children's Centre. The issues relating to access and flood risk are similar for both sites. It has to be recognised that, as the site lies outside the town development boundary, it will be necessary to demonstrate clearly why no other suitable site is available. This must be considered a significant planning issue, which may result in the proposal being called in for decision by the Secretary of State, adding to the timescale for decision making and implementation, and taking decisions outside the Council's control. We would wish to argue, however, that need on this site can be demonstrated by reference to the unsuitability of other sites and the community benefit which will be derived from a new school on this site.

2.7 A further factor in determining between sites has to be cost, and hence value for money for the Council Tax payer. Either location for Option 4 involves significantly greater net cost than Option 2. However, there is also a net cost difference in the order of £2.1m between the playing field and the Lower School sites under Option 4, assuming a significant cost for purchase of access rights (in respect of the Thomas Peacocke Lower School option) or providing there is no additional cost falling on the Council for land acquisition or main access road construction, compared with current assumptions. It could not be demonstrated that the Lower School site option offers value for money, as it achieves less benefit in educational terms at significantly greater cost than the playing field site. This would be difficult to justify, given the other pressures on the Council's capital programme.

2.8 The only feasible alternative to Option 4 (other than the 'do nothing' option) is Option 2, the establishment of a single school for Rye in a refurbished Freda Gardham building. This option, while less costly, offers a less likely prospect of securing the overall improvements in Rye that the review is seeking to achieve and, should it prove necessary to consider reverting to this option, a further report will be made.

2.9 An offer has been received for purchase of the Lower School site. In view of the conclusions set out above, and taking into account more detailed information set out in the confidential paper, the Cabinet is recommended to authorise completion of this disposal, subject to satisfactory resolution of the issues relating to the provision and timing of road access. An update will be provided at the meeting.

3. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendations

3.1 The consultation has demonstrated that there is local recognition of the need for change in the organisation of primary education in Rye. It is recommended that the Cabinet approves in principle the proposal that Tilling Green Infant School and Freda Gardham Primary School should be closed (target date 31 August 2007), and that a new 1.5 form entry all through primary school should be established, subject to satisfactory resolution of issues relating to planning, access, flood risk and the replacement of playing fields. It is also recommended that the preferred site – subject to similar considerations being met – should be part of the TPCC playing field, and that the Cabinet should, therefore, authorise completion of the disposal of the Lower School site, provided that agreement can be reached on the provision and timing of road access.

3.2 The Cabinet does need to note, however that there remain significant issues to resolve, not only in relation to planning consent and environmental issues, but also to government policy on disposal of playing fields. As the proposed site is outside the development boundary, it would normally be called in by the Secretary of State, unless it is accepted that the proposal falls within the terms of Policy CF1 in the Rother Local Plan, which permits such development in certain circumstances related to community benefit and local support. These issues inevitably lengthen the time required to implement the preferred option successfully, and in respect of planning consent and the disposal of playing fields final decisions may be outside the County Council's control.

3.3 The reason for the recommendations is that they offer the best prospect of providing future generations in Rye with a quality learning environment in which they can succeed.

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