

Report to: Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability

Date: 10 September 2024

By: Director of Children's Services

Title of report: Proposed amalgamation of West Rise Community Infant School and West Rise Junior School

Purpose of report: To seek Lead Member approval to publish a statutory proposal in respect of a proposal to amalgamate West Rise Community Infant School and West Rise Junior School and lower the new school's age range to 2 to 11.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Lead Member is recommended to:

- 1) approve publication of a statutory proposal in respect of a proposal to amalgamate West Rise Community Infant School and West Rise Junior School and lower the new school's age range to 2 to 11; and
 - 2) delegate authority to the Director of Children's Services to amend the proposal prior to its publication if required.
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1. Background

1.1 Primary education in East Sussex is largely arranged in all-through primary schools for children aged 4 to 11. In Eastbourne there is a mix of all-through primary schools as well as separate 4 to 7 infant schools and 7 to 11 junior schools. West Rise Community Infant School (4 to 7) and West Rise Junior School (7 to 11) are two such schools.

1.2 In agreement with the governors of West Rise Community Infant School and West Rise Junior School, East Sussex County Council (the Local Authority) recently consulted on a proposal to amalgamate the two schools to form a new all-through primary school. Linked to this, the Local Authority is also proposing to change the new school's age range to 2 to 11 which will enable it to take on the management of West Rise Nursery which currently operates as a governor-led nursery under a separate Ofsted registration.

2. Reasons for the proposal

2.1 West Rise Community Infant School and West Rise Junior School are two separate schools which share the same site. Each school has its own governing board and, until recently, had separate headteachers and worked independently. In July 2023, an Ofsted inspection of the junior school judged the quality of education and leadership and management as requires improvement.

2.2 Since January 2024, the schools have been working in partnership with one of the infant co-heads acting as headteacher across the two schools. This has resulted in similar approaches being used across the two schools which will benefit pupils' transition between the schools. This includes, for example, the same approach to the teaching of phonics and early reading across the schools. The Local Authority is keen to further support this partnership working through the formal amalgamation of the two schools. Governors of both schools want to sustain the improvements that are being made and ensure a strong future for the school community. It was, therefore, agreed that a consultation on the proposed amalgamation of the two schools should take place.

2.3 Currently, West Rise Nursery is run by the governors of West Rise Community Infant School under a different Ofsted registration, meaning it is run as a separate legal entity to the school. By changing its age range, the new all-through primary school would be able to formally take on the management of the nursery under the same Ofsted registration as the school.

3. Benefits of amalgamation and the impact on staff

3.1 One of the Local Authority's guiding principles to school organisation is to support the amalgamation of linked infant and junior schools to deliver the benefit of continuous provision from early years to the end of Key Stage 2. Amalgamation would bring about the following educational benefits:

- There would no longer be a need for families of children in Year 2 to have to apply for a place in the junior school from Year 3, thereby removing any uncertainty about transfer to a 'new' school at the end of Key Stage 1.
- A shared vision and ethos across the school.
- Continuity of experience for children - in teaching and learning, pupil care and development – under a single headteacher and staff.
- Greater ability to track progress between key stages.
- A more coherent delivery of the National Curriculum from Foundation Stage through to the end of Key Stage 2.
- Easier sharing of good practice across the whole school.
- Expertise within the whole school could be better targeted across the full age range.
- Professional development opportunities for staff within an all-through primary school environment.
- Greater flexibility in organising classes, deploying teaching and support staff, and using curriculum resources more effectively.
- Greater opportunities for staff recruitment.
- Consistent engagement with families across the school.

3.2 Staff would continue in their roles as the two schools become one all-through primary school. The proposed changes may present opportunities for staff who would have more opportunities for professional development and would be able to gain greater understanding and experience of working in a primary school environment. The employer will remain East Sussex County Council, so there will be no need for a transfer of employment to take place under the Transfer of Undertaking and Protection of Employment Regulations 2006 (as amended in 2014) (TUPE).

3.3 No existing member of staff would be required to change their contract of employment by working across both schools. The proposed change would not constitute a break in service or affect staff terms and conditions in any way. The Local Authority knows the process of bringing two schools together as one can be unsettling for staff. As with any process of change, the interests of staff must be considered carefully, and all staff, and their unions would be consulted in accordance with the Council's Managing Change policies. The Local Authority's Human Resources team would work closely with school staff throughout the transition.

4. Consultation

4.1 In accordance with the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013 (the Regulations), the local authority consulted on the proposed amalgamation and change of age range between 15 April and 24 May 2024. The Local Authority consulted with the school community, local schools and early years providers and other key stakeholders. Consultation meetings were held for staff and parents and carers on 22 April 2024.

4.2 By the end of the consultation period, 55 responses had been received via the Local Authority's consultation hub.

4.3 In response to question 1 'Do you support the proposal to amalgamate West Rise Community Infant School and West Rise Junior School?':

- 76% support the proposal
- 9% do not support the proposal
- 15% were undecided

4.4 In response to question 2 'Do you support the proposal to lower the school's age range to take on the management of West Rise Nursery under one Ofsted registration?':

- 82% support the proposal
- 9% do not support the proposal
- 9% were undecided

4.5 Question 3 asked 'Please let us know how the proposed changes would directly impact on you and your family'. 34 respondents answered this question, of which at least 18 could be said to be directly affected by the proposals. 6 respondents either stated that they would not be impacted or recorded 'n/a' as their answer. The remaining 10 who answered this question did not state if they were or were not directly affected.

4.6 The main concern raised by respondents related to the potential impact on the school's budget. This is addressed in section 5 below. A consultation analysis report which includes all responses received, can be viewed in the Cabinet and Members' rooms at County Hall.

5. School budget

5.1 School budgets are largely based on pupil numbers. However, as well as other factors that make up the funding formula for schools is a lump sum for all primary schools regardless of their size. West Rise Community Infant School and West Rise Junior School currently receive lump sum funding as separate schools. Should the amalgamation proceed the new 'all-through' primary school would eventually receive one lump sum. Funding protection would be applied to enable the school to achieve the economies of scale from being one larger primary school. The Local Authority's initial proposal was to amalgamate the two schools on 1 January 2025. However, having listened to concerns raised by governors at the consultation meeting on 22 April about the timing of the funding protection, the Local Authority is now proposing that the schools should amalgamate on 1 May 2025. Assuming there are no changes to funding arrangements governing amalgamations, and the lump sum figure stays at the current rate, the following funding protection would be applied.

- Following amalgamation, the new school would keep the two lump sums for the remainder of the 2025/26 financial year: £268,800.
- In the 2026/27 financial year the school would receive 85% of the two lump sums: £228,480.
- In the 2027/28 financial year the school would receive one lump sum: £134,400.

5.2 It is important to balance the financial implications of amalgamation with the practical benefits set out above. The amalgamation of the two schools would lead to one larger budget across a single school and lead to cost savings in certain areas.

6. Establishing the new school

6.1 To establish one 'all-through' primary school with nursery provision, the Local Authority proposes to close West Rise Junior School on 30 April 2025 (this is known as a technical closure) and change the age range at West Rise Community Infant School from 4 to 7 to 2 to 11 from 1 May 2025. In doing so, the school would likely change its name to West Rise Primary School and would continue to operate across the existing site and premises.

7. Conclusion and reasons for recommendation

7.1 The proposal to amalgamate West Rise Community Infant School and West Rise Junior School builds on the improvements being made through the partnership working between the two schools and aligns with one of the guiding principles to school organisation in East Sussex.

7.2 The Local Authority believes that the longer-term future for education in the local area can best be achieved through amalgamating the two schools into one all-through primary school, operating on the same site, and for that reason, the Lead Member is recommended to:

- 1) approve publication of a statutory proposal in respect of a proposal to amalgamate West Rise Community Infant School and West Rise Junior School and lower the new school's age range to 2 to 11; and
- 2) delegate authority to the Director of Children's Services to amend the proposal prior to its publication if required.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

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