

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: Burfield Academy and Phoenix Academy

Purpose of report: To consider the local authority's response to Step Academy Trust's consultation on a proposal to amalgamate Burfield Academy and Phoenix Academy.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Lead Member is recommended to approve an updated response from the local authority to Step Academy Trust's consultation on the proposed amalgamation of Burfield Academy and Phoenix Academy, to include the points set out in paragraph 3.2.

1. Background

1.1 Burfield Academy and Phoenix Academy are both located in Hailsham and are part of Step Academy Trust. Each school has a published admission number (PAN) of 30 and capacity for 210 children from Reception to Year 6. Burfield Academy also has nursery provision for three- and four-year-olds.

1.2 Step Academy Trust commenced a consultation in April 2024 on the proposed amalgamation of Burfield Academy and Phoenix Academy on the Marshfoot Lane site. As an Academy school the Trust is responsible for proposing this change and consulting with the local community and stakeholders before applying to the Department for Education for approval. The Department for Education is the decision maker. East Sussex County Council (the Local Authority) is required to be consulted on the proposal.

1.3 At the Lead Member meeting on 23 May 2024 a report on Step Academy Trust's consultation was considered which contained a recommendation to approve a response from the local authority to the consultation. The full report for the May meeting can be viewed at Appendix 1.

1.4 At the meeting on 23 May 2024, and as recorded in the minutes of the meeting, *the Lead Member RESOLVED:*

- 1) *to approve the local authority responding to Step Academy Trust's consultation on the amalgamation of Burfield Academy and Phoenix Academy, confirming that it does not object to the proposal.*
- 2) *to acknowledge that the final decision is not for the local authority who are consultees.*
- 3) *that the regional school commissioner and the DfE be asked to take account of the strong feelings of the parents and pupils of Burfield and Phoenix academies as detailed in the emails and petitions submitted; and*
- 4) *to request that any decision by the DfE takes fully into account the emerging Wealden Local plan and current housing provisions already granted.*

1.5 Since the meeting in May 2024, the Local Authority has updated the pupil forecasts for the county, including for Hailsham. This report seeks Lead Member approval to update the Local Authority's response to Step Academy Trust's proposal in light of the new data and forecasts.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 As set out in the report to Lead Member on 23 May 2024, at the January census there were 147 surplus places at Burfield and Phoenix Academies, which equates to 38% of current operational capacity. Overall, in Hailsham and surrounding area, there were 204 surplus places (9%) based on current organisational capacity. If measured against the physical capacity of schools in the area, the number of surplus places jumps to 384, or 16% of capacity. Both figures exceed the 5% recommended by the National Audit Office in its report on Capital Funding for new school places published in 2013.

2.2 The Local Authority understands from Step Academy Trust that the new amalgamated school on the Marshfoot Lane site would be a one form entry school with a PAN of 30 with nursery provision. The trust has confirmed that all existing children on roll at Burfield Academy and Phoenix Academy would be offered a place at the new amalgamated school. In the short term this would require additional temporary capacity which is already in place on the Marshfoot Lane site due to the current co-location arrangement. As smaller Reception cohorts began to replace existing larger cohorts, the temporary capacity would be removed until the new amalgamated school had capacity for 30 children in each year group and 210 overall

2.3 Should the proposed amalgamation of Burfield Academy and Phoenix Academy be approved by the Department for Education, there would be a reduction of 210 primary places in Hailsham and surrounding area. This will take the overall capacity of Reception Year places in the town to 315 and the total capacity of all primary school places to 2,205 in the longer term once the additional capacity at Phoenix is removed.

2.4 Based on the updated pupil forecasts which will be published in in the School organisation Plan 2024 to 2028 in the autumn, there would be two years where Reception Year places would be marginally tight and there would be a reduction in the number of surplus primary school places across the town over the three years.

Table 1: Forecast Reception and primary numbers in Hailsham and surrounding area

Forecast reception numbers	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
Reception numbers across all schools	319	302	315
Reduced PAN across all schools	315	315	315
Surplus/shortfall (-)	-4	13	0
Total primary numbers across all schools	2150	2178	2231
Capacity across all schools (includes additional temporary capacity to ensure all existing Burfield Children can be accommodated at Phoenix)	2265	2265	2265
Surplus/shortfall (-)	115	87	34

Source: ESCC Forecasts for the School Organisation Plan 2024 to 2028

2.5 The Draft Wealden Local Plan envisages over 4,000 additional units of new housing in the Hailsham and Hellingly area over the period to 2039/40. When the temporary accommodation at the merged school is removed and overall capacity of pupil places in the town is reduced to 2205, the Local Authority therefore may see from 2028/29 onwards, a reduction in the number of surplus places.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 In conclusion, the proposed amalgamation of the two schools, and the subsequent reduction in capacity in the area, will mean that there is some increased pressure on pupil places across the area. The Local Authority also recognises that Step Academy Trust's proposal will mean that instead of two schools with low numbers there will be one school with pupil numbers close to their PAN. This is likely to provide educational benefits to pupils due to the Trust being able to provide and sustain a greater breadth of curriculum, pupil support and extra curricula opportunities.

3.2 It is recommended that the Local Authority's response to the consultation is updated to note:

- The new pupil forecasts;
- The change in national policy on mandatory housing targets which may lead to additional pressure on school places in the Wealden District Council area; and
- That the Department for Education remains the decision-maker

This will ensure that the Department for Education is fully informed when making their decision on Step Academy Trust's proposal.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

Councillor Gerard Fox

Councillor Steve Murphy