

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

School Organisation Committee – 2 February 2006

Report of the Director of Children's Services

The Primary Schools Review – Overview of Principles

Purpose

1. The purpose of the Report is to bring together in a single document the key principles of the Primary Schools Review.

Background

2. At the meeting of the School Organisation Committee on 26 January 2006, there was significant discussion of the Primary Schools Review as a whole and the principles on which the review has been carried out and proposals made. The issues raised have been the subject of public reports to the School Organisation Committee, the Cabinet, and the Select Committee for Lifelong Learning. This report is intended to provide a straightforward summary in a form convenient to the School Organisation Committee.
3. This report does *not* attempt to set out the history of the Primary Schools Review; neither does it deal with individual schools except as exemplars.

Demography

4. The birth rate in the Borough fell from 4,116 in 1990 to 3,344 in 2003; a drop of more than 18% (see Appendix 1). Projections produced by the Office of National Statistics show the birth rate stabilising at around 3,300 for the next 20 years.
5. There is no evidence that families with children are moving into the Borough in significant net numbers, or that parents in other local authorities are sending their children to Dudley in greater numbers than hitherto.
6. The Black Country Study, presently the subject of public consultation, proposes that measures be taken to decrease and reverse the net outward migration from the Black Country over a period of 30 years. However, these measures will take considerable time to have any impact on the statutory

school age population in the Borough. It is unlikely that there will be a significant impact before 2015.

Funding

7. The total number of pupils in Dudley primary schools will decline by about 2,358 by September 2010. At the standard unit cost for Dudley of £3,329, this will result in a loss of grant of £7.8 million at 2005/06 prices. This loss of grant will occur whatever the configuration of primary schools.
8. Discussions of 'cuts' or 'savings' are misplaced; the Primary Schools Review is designed to better match the number of primary places in Dudley schools to the number of children who will need those places.

If no action were taken, and the number of surplus places continues to increase, the consequences will be serious. In practice the reduction in funding would not be evenly spread across all schools, but if it were, it would result in a loss in income for every primary school of almost 10%. This would mean a loss to every primary school of between £50k and £190k.-

9. The cost per pupil in small primary schools is significantly greater than the average (see Appendix 2), and these costs can only be met from the Dedicated Schools Grant, that is, by reducing the budgets of larger schools.
10. In practice, some schools will suffer minimal loss of pupils and others a much greater loss. This would result in several undesirable effects. First, there would be many more 'small' schools, each of which would be allocated extra funding from the larger schools to maintain an effective curriculum. Second, extrapolating current trends, there would be several very small schools with fewer than 100 pupils. Thirdly, with such an excess of surplus places there would be the probability of considerable instability year-on-year as patterns of preference changed and intake levels varied.

School Planning

11. The Primary Schools Review concluded that, unless action were taken, there would be 5,000 surplus primary places in Dudley primary schools by 2010.
12. The proposals agreed by the Cabinet on 17 November 2005 allow a prudent margin of 1,600 places across the Borough (equivalent to between seven and eight one-form entry primary schools). This margin will allow for any

unexpected growth in the birth rate (for which there will be four years warning), any increased inward migration, and any decreased outward migration.

Principles

13. The principles adopted following consultation were that the Primary School Review should be undertaken so as to:
 - address the surplus places problem in Dudley primary schools and the consequent impact on primary school budgets;
 - create a pattern of primary school provision in which all schools are sustainable educationally and financially;
 - ensure there are sufficient primary school places in each part of the Borough to meet demand; and
 - enable the change to be managed with minimum disruption.
14. It was also widely agreed during the consultation and by the Cabinet that the changes should be implemented decisively, without long-drawn-out periods of uncertainty.
15. In addition to the principles above, a range of other criteria were used to assess potential proposals: Consideration was given to:
 - the potential for the delivery of integrated services and the extended rôles of schools in their community;
 - the need to develop and maintain community cohesion;
 - the balance between places in community schools, Church of England schools, and Roman Catholic schools.
 - the implementation of the Special Educational Needs Strategy;
 - the physical access to school buildings; and
 - the quality of school buildings.

The principles in practice

16. In developing proposals the starting point was the need to reduce surplus places with minimum disruption.
17. This starting point led directly to the consideration of proposals to reduce the planned admissions numbers of a substantial number of schools. As reductions took effect over a period of years then vacated accommodation could be used for other purposes, from the implementation of the SEN Strategy to developing extended community facilities.
18. The starting point also led to a consideration of proposals to close only the smallest schools. These schools had the highest unit costs, and were at the greatest risk of further reduction in pupil numbers between now and 2010. However, the deciding factor was that fewer pupils would be directly affected by closing a small school than by closing a large school.
19. In one case only, it was decided, in partnership with the Diocese of Worcester, that closing two Church of England schools and opening one new Church of England school would have significant advantages in enabling investment in new school buildings.
20. Potential proposals were then scrutinised against the other criteria set out above, specifically:
 - the availability of places in other local schools;
 - the balance between community, Church of England and Roman Catholic places;
 - the need to develop and maintain community cohesion; and
 - the quality of school buildings.
21. The *availability of places in other local schools* was assessed through distance measures and the pattern of admissions. 'Safe Routes to Schools' were considered in order to ensure that walking routes were both safe and not unnecessarily lengthy. In several cases some building work is proposed in local schools to ensure that places are available in high quality accommodation.
22. The *balance between community, Church of England and Roman Catholic places* was assessed on a Borough-wide basis as smaller areas are not practicable.

23. The *need to develop and maintain community cohesion* was considered carefully. Having small and fragile schools serving a community is itself unlikely to develop community cohesion. And where there are other local schools serving the same communities this was taken into consideration. However, there are specific communities served at present by a small school where there is no reasonably local school with places; an example is Caslon Primary School.
24. The *quality of school buildings* was considered carefully. All schools have spent significant capital funding on improving their fabric over the last few years. However, the proposals will result in a net reduction in the amount of old and unsuitable school accommodation and in the backlog of condition issues.
25. The initial phase of consultation on the proposals revealed a number of differing views on the various possibilities, and a range of alternative proposals were put forward. These were all considered carefully. Unfortunately, most of the alternative proposals were impractical in that they went against one or more of the principles. Examples were:
- closing a larger school and dispersing its pupils, rather than a small school; (This would not minimise disruption.)
 - closing a popular school; A popular school in DfES terms is defined as regularly oversubscribed and is full or over capacity; (This would not minimise disruption, would not develop community cohesion, and goes against DfES policy.)
 - reducing the size of many schools, and/or avoiding any growth in popular schools. (This would not minimise disruption, would not develop community cohesion, would not result in a pattern of financially and educationally viable schools, and goes against DfES policy.)

Proposal

26. It is proposed that the School Organisation Committee consider the report as part of the context of the decision-making process on the Primary Schools Review.

Finance

27. The report concerns issues relating to the financing of schools which are dealt with above.

Law

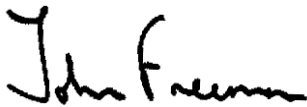
28. Statutory requirements relating to school organisation are set out in the main reports.

Equalities

29. The Primary Schools Review has been undertaken throughout with the need to ensure that the needs of all individuals and communities are met.

Children

30. The impact on children and young people has been considered throughout the Primary Schools Review. One of the key principles is to minimise disruption, and where there is necessary disruption the Directorate will work to minimise its impact on individuals and communities. But it is in the best interests of children and young people across the Borough for primary schools to be effective, efficient and sustainable, and it is the purpose of the Primary Schools Review to secure this outcome.



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Background documents

Primary School Review documents