

Commentary on objections to and comments on the Statutory Proposals to discontinue Hitchmead Foundation School and make a prescribed alteration to Sunnyside School

There were a total of 10 objections to the proposals and one letter of support. These are attached as Appendix C to this report.

In general, the objections can be categorised into four groupings being:

1. Principles underpinning the proposals
2. The validity of the consultation previously undertaken
3. Practical issues regarding the “transitional phase”
4. Financing (particularly Capital)

Many of the main objections are also covered by the letter of support from the Governors of Sunnyside School.

1. Principles underpinning the proposals

A small number of those objecting to the proposals also raised concerns previously expressed in the original consultations regarding the reduction in parental choice if the proposals are approved and the issue over admissions to the school i.e. whether these have been a cause of the reducing numbers at Hitchmead school. These were covered in the previous (December 2009) Executive report which Members considered ahead of resolving to publish the Statutory Notices.

It is worth noting however that the majority of those objecting to the current proposals did not object to the principles underpinning them.

2. Consultation previously undertaken and the links with the specific proposals as set out in the Statutory Notices.

The majority of the concerns relate to the more general wording used during the earlier consultations and the specific legal wording of the Notices, in particular the use of the term “merger” within the earlier consultations.

The fact that “merger” requires the closure of one school had been clearly stated throughout the process, as reflected in the options set out in the consultation document of September 2009 and in the Public Meetings that took place. It was clearly distinct from the alternative option set out in the consultation document which related to the closure of both schools and the creation of a new school, an option which was rejected as not being in the best interests of all concerned.

Legally, therefore the proposals require the continuance of Sunnyside School particularly in terms of Governance etc and the closure of Hitchmead and discontinuance of its Governing body from 31 August 2010.

In all cases however, it had always been stated that the success of any transition would be reliant upon the schools working together and this is also reflected in the letter from the Governors of Sunnyside School.

3. Practical issues regarding the “transitional phase”

The majority of concerns relate to the practical issues over the ability of the staff, parents and Governors of Hitchmead school to have an influence over the transitional issues which will and have arisen and their ability to have a say in the future of the new school through its future governance arrangements.

These were discussed at an early joint meeting of the two schools’ governors and arrangements were made for a temporary working group to be established made up with equal representation from the two schools and which would work on a number of key policy issues. At the time it was made clear that the group could have no legal standing in that the decision had not been made to approve or reject the proposals, but that it made sense to undertake preparatory work ahead of the final decision being made.

As can be seen from the letter from Sunnyside School, the governors have, in principle, agreed recommendations from the group that, if the proposals are approved, the school should have a new identity, including name, uniform etc. Furthermore, Sunnyside School has also agreed, in principle, to amend its Instruments of Governance from 1 September 2010 to extend their membership and to “ring-fence” the additional places in order that Governors from the existing Hitchmead School can become governors of the enlarged school.

I believe that this form of partnership working is what both schools had in mind when considering the original proposals, albeit that only one of the schools is a continuing school.

4. Financing (particularly capital)

Some of the concerns raised have related to the availability or otherwise of funding to ensure the success of the proposals. Nevertheless, some have also raised the question over the lack of funding for a complete new build for a replacement school.

In all the consultations and in the previous report to Executive, it had been made clear that capital funding for a complete replacement school would not be available, hence the proposal to continue to use the existing two sets of buildings. However, it was also recognised that there would be a need for some

immediate improvements to the current Hitchmead buildings to address key accessibility issues.

At a meeting held with the two schools, two sets of improvements were identified as being required and these are also referred to in the main body of the report. The issues over the security of the Hitchmead site were recognised as being an improvement which should be addressed by the schools through the use of Devolved Formula Capital which would be available to both schools in full at the start of the financial year. It was also recognised that some improvements were required to improve the external accessibility of the site and buildings and that additional changing facilities would be required. This is proposed to be funded from the Schools Access Initiative funding which was approved by Executive as part of the 2010/11 capital programme.