

Report to: Children Young People and Families Scrutiny Committee
Cabinet

Date: 14 January 2010
21 January 2010

Subject: Proposals for Future Educational Provision for Higher
Folds, Leigh

Report of: Executive Director of Children and Young People's
Services

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Purpose / summary: The purpose of this report is to:

- inform members of the options for future educational provision in Higher Folds, Leigh; and
- request Cabinet's permission to begin the statutory consultation process.

Alternative options considered and reason for selecting the one recommended: These are contained in section 3 of the report.

Recommendation / decision: The Scrutiny Committee is invited to give comment and make recommendations as appropriate.

It is recommended that Cabinet approve that stage 1 consultation take place on the proposal to bring together Higher Folds Primary School and St Gabriel's Catholic Primary School resulting in a 'Catholic school for the community' with effect from 1 September 2011.

Key Decision: This report does not involve a key decision. The decision made as a result of this report will be published within **48 hours** and cannot be actioned until **seven working days** have elapsed, i.e. before 2 February 2010

Risks / Implications:

Financial:	None
Staffing:	None
Policy:	None
Equal Opportunities - Has a Diversity Impact Assessment been conducted?	A full diversity impact assessment will be presented prior to Cabinet taking any final decision on the futures of both schools.
Wards affected:	Leigh East

Property Implications – Does the proposal involve a reduction, addition or change to the Council’s asset base or its occupation?

Yes

If yes, have the property implications been agreed with the Corporate Property Officer?

Yes

Does this proposal have significant implications for the Council and the local population?

A diversity impact assessment is not necessary at this stage, however, equality and diversity implications have been considered when producing this report.

Does this proposal involve a new policy or procedure or significant changes to an existing policy or procedure?

A diversity impact assessment is not necessary at this stage, however, equality and diversity implications have been considered when producing this report.

Has the Service Director - Borough Solicitor confirmed that the recommendations within this report are lawful and comply with the Council’s Constitution? **Yes**

Has the Service Director - Corporate Services confirmed that any expenditure referred to within this report is consistent with the Council’s budget? **Yes**

Are any of the recommendations within this report contrary to the Policy Framework of the Council? **No**

For Cabinet reports only :

Categorisation of the report:			
Discussion leading to a decision	x	Discussion	
Monitoring		Decision	
Sharing for corporate understanding		Information	

Tracking/Process:

	Consultation	Ward Members	Partners
Committee	Overview & Scrutiny	Cabinet	Council
14/01/2010		21/01/2010	

List of Background Papers in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972:

Title of document	Which meeting did it go to?	Date of meeting	Copy available from?
Wigan's Strategy for School Places and Buildings 2009-2010			Children and Young People's Services, Progress House, Westwood Park drive, Wigan, WN3 4HH

Proper Officer



Date

31st December 09

1 Background

- 1.1 There are currently two primary schools serving the distinct local community of Higher Folds, Leigh. These are Higher Folds Primary School (a community school) and St Gabriel's Catholic Primary School (a voluntary-aided school).
- 1.2 Both schools were initially one of form entry, that is each admitted 30 children into Reception class each year. In recent years, the number of children in the area has reduced considerably. The admission numbers have been reduced to 25 at Higher Folds and 20 at St Gabriel's and neither school is full. This has resulted in two relatively small schools in very close proximity to each other (0.57 miles).
- 1.3 In 2007 both the headteacher and deputy headteacher of Higher Folds resigned. There was concern that it would not be possible to recruit senior managers of the right calibre to such a small school. Following discussions, the governing bodies of Higher Folds and St Gabriel's, Liverpool Archdiocese and the local authority agreed that the schools should begin to work collaboratively and the headteacher of St Gabriel's become executive headteacher over the two schools on a temporary basis.
- 1.4 These collaborative arrangements have been in place since September 2007 and have included the sharing of good practice between staff, representatives from both governing bodies meeting together and the pupils of both schools coming together to share cultural and sporting experiences. All concerned believe that the collaboration has been successful and has benefitted both the schools and the community. It is now considered that a more permanent arrangement will enable the schools to consolidate and build upon the success achieved so far.

2 The Proposal: A Catholic school for the community

- 2.1 It is proposed to create one school for Higher Folds which will operate on a split site, using the existing two school buildings initially.
- 2.2 The proposed process to achieve this is to:
 - enlarge St Gabriel's Catholic Primary School so that it admits 45 pupils into each year group, and becomes a 'Catholic school for the community'; and
 - discontinue Higher Folds Primary School.
- 2.2 The concept of a 'Catholic school for the community' is new to the borough but Liverpool Archdiocese has experience of successfully establishing such schools in other local authorities.
- 2.3 The school would be a voluntary-aided Catholic school, but would welcome all children from the Higher Folds community, whatever their family's religion or beliefs. The admission arrangements for the school would reflect this by giving non-Catholic children from Higher Folds priority over Catholic children from other areas. All children attending Higher Folds or St Gabriel's when the proposals are implemented will be offered places at the enlarged school.

- 2.4 The governing bodies of both schools and Liverpool Archdiocese wholeheartedly support the proposal and see the change in terms of bringing the two schools and the whole community together.

3 Alternative options that have been considered

3.1 Do nothing and retain two schools.

- 3.1.1 This is not a viable option. The current collaborative arrangements are informal and temporary and may not continue in the long term, especially if there were a change in senior management.

- 3.1.2 The numbers of children in the area will not sustain two primary schools in the long term. Current numbers at the schools are:

School	R	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6	Total
Higher Folds	14	10	18	17	16	11	14	100
St Gabriel's	21	19	24	11	20	14	9	118
Total	35	29	42	28	36	25	23	218

The total projected first preferences for reception intake, based on known births and trends of parental preferences, are:

School year	Higher Folds	St Gabriel's	Total
2010/2011	13	28	41
2011/2012	11	23	34
2012/2013	13	28	41
2013/2014	12	26	38

It should be noted that there are a significant number of non-Catholic parents who express a preference for St Gabriel's.

- 3.1.3 If the two schools were to be retained, it is likely that one or both would quickly become unviable as low pupil numbers have an adverse effect on school budgets and schools' ability to employ a range of specialist staff to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum. This would impact on standards and the quality of education.

3.2 Enlarge Higher Folds Primary School and discontinue St Gabriel's Catholic Primary School.

- 3.2.1 Higher Folds has considerable levels of deprivation. Liverpool Archdiocese and the governing body of St Gabriel's would not support the closure of the school as they consider it extremely important to retain a school with a caring and inclusive Catholic ethos in the area.

- 3.2.2 St Gabriel's attracts a larger number of parental preferences than Higher Folds. Parental preference is one of the factors that decision makers on school organisation proposals must take into account.

- 3.2.3 The most recent Ofsted reports give St Gabriel's a rating of good for overall effectiveness and Higher Folds a rating of satisfactory.

3.2.3 The current collaborative arrangements are based on the headteacher of St Gabriel's acting as executive headteacher of the two schools. If St Gabriel's is enlarged this will provide stability of leadership during the implementation period.

3.3 Discontinue both existing schools and open one new primary school.

3.3.1 The establishment of a new school usually requires that we hold a new school competition and invite proposers to bid.

3.3.2 The competition process would take considerably longer than the consultation process to discontinue one school and enlarge the other and would mean that the proposals could only be implemented in 2012 rather than 2011, creating a further period of instability.

3.3.1 Experience nationally has shown that there is little interest from educational providers from outside the area in competitions to provide new primary schools. It is likely that Liverpool Archdiocese would be the only proposer for a school on Higher Folds as the Diocese wishes to retain a Catholic school in the area. The competition process would therefore make the process longer and more expensive, without necessarily producing a different result.

4 Next steps

4.1 It is proposed that stage 1 statutory consultation take place during February and March 2010. This will give parents, governors, school staff, the local community and other stakeholders the opportunity to obtain more information and to make comments on the proposal.

4.2 The results of stage 1 will be reported back to Cabinet who will decide whether to move on to the next stage of consultation.

5 Recommendations

5.1 It is recommended that Cabinet approve that stage 1 consultation take place on the proposal to bring together Higher Folds Primary School and St Gabriel's Catholic Primary School resulting in a 'Catholic school for the community' with effect from 1 September 2011 by:

- enlarging St Gabriel's Catholic Primary School to admit 45 pupils into each year group; and
- discontinuing Higher Folds Primary School.

6 Conclusion

6.1 The recommended option will enable the good practice and sharing of expertise that is already taking place at Higher Folds and St Gabriel's to continue on a permanent basis and ensure that the community can benefit from good quality, viable and secure primary school provision in the long term.