



Leicester
City Council

**WARDS AFFECTED
ALL WARDS**

**FORWARD TIMETABLE OF CONSULTATION AND MEETINGS:
CABINET**

21 May 2001

REVIEW OF PRIMARY EDUCATION

Report of the Director of Education

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To propose a realignment of the original review of primary education to an approach which emphasises raising standards rather than changing structures, in particular to seek Members' approval to take forward work on a new pattern of admission to infant and primary schools and to defer for the time being any process of area review.

2. Summary

Background

- 2.1 In 1998 the Education Committee set in train a review of Primary Education. The review was originally conceived with a brief to examine a wide spectrum of issues relating primary and early years education. This included the provision of community education through primary schools, parental involvement, more effective management of the building stock, the removal of surplus places, a preference for all-through primary schools and the pattern of admissions to schools at 3+ and 4+.
- 2.2 Although these issues remain relevant, the original approach needs to be reframed in the light of the authority's new and clearly articulated focus on raising standards of teaching and learning in schools through a process of support and challenge rather than by changing structures. The Authority faces a big agenda driven both nationally and locally by government and by Ofsted to drive up standards in schools by improving the quality of teaching and learning. In the current context, an approach which focuses on raising standards of teaching and learning is better adapted to raising the levels of achievement than an approach which focuses primarily on structural change.
- 2.3 This report proposes deferring the broader scope of the original review, in particular the plan to undertake a rolling programme of area based reviews of the structure of primary education in the city. This would enable the service to focus more clearly on its primary purpose of supporting and challenging schools in addressing the pressing agenda to raise standards. It proposes taking a more progressive approach to the removal of surplus places and to the amalgamation of separate infant and junior schools for the time being. It does however propose taking forward work on the strand of the original review

which was to consider admission to school at 3+ and 4+ to address the educational disadvantage and consequent depressed attainments for summer born children which are compounded by the current arrangements.

Full-time Admission to Primary Education at 4+

- 2.4 Research shows that children born in the summer months suffer an educational disadvantage throughout statutory education, as they are chronologically and developmentally younger than their peers. The pattern of admission to school inherited from the former County Council which delays the admission of this group of children exacerbates that disadvantage. Review of the pattern of admission at 4+ provides an opportunity to contribute significantly to addressing that inequality. It also affords an opportunity to consider inequalities in the current distribution of nursery places in the city and to explore options which would enable resources to be targeted more effectively.
- 2.5 The Government Nursery Grant Scheme entitles parents in Leicester to a free part-time early years place from the beginning of the term after their child's 3rd birthday. The law only requires children to attend school full-time from the beginning of the term after their fifth birthday. Leicester has a long established tradition of providing good quality early years education which predates the nursery voucher and subsequent Nursery Grant Scheme. Any change needs to build on those successes. The Authority provides education for more pupils, and an earlier age, than most other LEAs. However the pattern of that provision, over and above the minimum entitlement, is uneven. In some areas of the City, children can access free full-time nursery education in school from the age of three and a half. In areas with limited school-based nursery provision, it is possible for summer born children to have no experience other than a part-time place in a playgroup from the age of 3 up to their 5th birthday.
- 2.6 There are 7 infant and primary schools which have 4+ units. Pupils are admitted to these schools full-time, in one year group, in the September after their fourth birthday. The remaining 63 schools have nursery classes which can provide for children from 3+. Each of these schools has its own policy for admitting children to the nursery class. Most children spend some time, normally part-time and in some instances full-time, in a school's nursery class from the age of 3+ before they are formally admitted full-time to the main school at 4+.
- 2.7 The inherited arrangements for formally admitting children to the main school are complex:
- Children born between 1 September and 31 December are admitted full-time into a reception class at the beginning of the Autumn term in which they are five.
 - Children born between 1 January and 30 April are admitted into a reception class at the beginning of the Spring term in which they are five.
 - Children born between 1 May and 31 August join the older children in their year group and are admitted into what has become a Year One class, at the beginning of the Autumn term after they are five.

- 2.8 This pattern of provision needs to be set in the context of the whole range of early years settings in the City made through private, independent and voluntary providers as well as through projects such as Sure Start and indeed through the Social Services Department. There are 101 private and voluntary registered early years providers within the Nursery Grant scheme. Between them they provide free places for approximately 1200 three year olds and 400 four year olds each term. Government policy is to foster this diversity of early years provision, coordinated through the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP).
- 2.9 The local community groups which offer many of the City's early years settings, reflect the rich diversity of the ethnic, linguistic, faith and cultural communities of Leicester. They provide early years experience which reflect through their management committees, the needs, aspirations and values of the families and neighbourhoods which they serve. It would be essential to consider carefully the potential impact of any change within the school sector on these voluntary groups and on those settings which operate as small businesses. The Supporting Information sets out the relationship between school-based provision and the wide range of other settings in Leicester.

Consultation

- 2.10 During the summer term 2000 there was extensive consultation on three options for admitting children to school at 4+:
- (i) to maintain the current arrangements unchanged;
 - (ii) to maintain the current arrangements but to admit children with summer birthdays full-time, a term earlier than at present (i.e. into a reception class at Easter rather than into a Year One class the following September); and
 - (iii) to admit all pupils in a year group full-time in the September after their 4th birthday following the pattern of the existing schools with 4+ units.
- 2.11 62% of schools/settings/organizations favoured the third of these options. Parents were more equally balanced – 25% for Option 1, 24% for Option 2 and 34% for Option 3. The detailed analysis of the outcomes of consultation is attached as Annex A. The comments made by respondents in Annex A and the responses from the teacher associations (attached as Annex B) identify the complex issues associated with the current arrangements and with both options for change. The Supporting Information sets out in more detail the arguments for and against maintaining or extending school based provision for 3 and 4 year olds in the ways suggested by the teacher associations.
- 2.12 By admitting all pupils at 4+ at the same time, the third option would address inequalities in the current system and improve the provision available for the youngest children in each year group. It is proposed to undertake a study into the feasibility of introducing full-time admission at 4+ and as part of that exercise to explore a range of options for 3+ provision in schools. The educational arguments in favour of admission at 4+ are set out in the Supporting Information.

Implications for existing nursery provision in schools

- 2.13 The issues associated with progressing change in this area are complex and sometimes conflicting. The current distribution of nursery places is historical and uneven with a significant number of surplus places at individual schools. A Schedule setting out surplus nursery places is attached as Annex C.
- 2.14 Change to full-time admission at 4+ in September for all pupils would mean that more pupils would receive full-time education, at an earlier age than at present. Although there would be no change for children with birthdays in the Autumn term, children with birthdays in the Spring term would be entitled to full-time education a term earlier than at present. The youngest children, i.e. those with birthdays between 1 May and 31 August, would be entitled to full-time education a year earlier than at present.
- 2.15 As many of these children would be attending reception classes rather than nursery classes in school, such a change could impact significantly on the largely part-time nursery provision currently available in schools. The response from the teacher associations makes the point that this change could have the effect of reducing school-based nursery provision. They suggest that growth in the order of £1m would be necessary to maintain existing levels of school-based nursery provision and provide full-time education for all pupils at 4+. Any feasibility study would need to include costed models showing the impact on individual schools and for the service as a whole of the introduction of full-time admission to school at 4+. It would also need to set out a range of options for 3+ education in schools which would address the teacher association suggestions.
- 2.16 The scale of this change, coupled with unevenness in the current distribution of nursery provision in schools, would make it necessary to determine what pattern of 3+ provision the Authority wishes to make in a way which meets identified need, is fair, transparent and educationally sound. Any redistribution would need to take account the needs of the diverse communities in the City including pupils for whom English is an Additional Language and research which shows that there are advantages for pupils where settings are local and staff are able to communicate with children in their home language.
- 2.17 Redistribution of nursery provision on this basis could result in significant reductions in some areas of the City. As the schedule of surplus places shows, for a number of schools the removal of surplus nursery places alone, without any redistribution, could also have a significant impact on their budget. Nursery places are funded at £1441.90 irrespective of whether they are taken up. Individual schools could lose up to £130,000 if surplus places were removed. There would also be significant personnel implications arising from the removal of surplus places and any redistribution of nursery provision. This would need to be set in the context of projections for the next three years, which point to a slight reduction in the numbers of children being admitted to primary education. The Supporting Information sets out in more detail, the underlying issues and implications of reviewing the pattern of school based nursery provision which would be necessary were a single date of admission at 4+ to be introduced.

Area Review Process – Policy Implications

- 2.18 A report to Education Committee in 1999 proposed a structural review of primary education on an area basis. Given the context set out in the introduction to this report, for the time being it is proposed to address outstanding issues through existing processes, wherever possible. Four further factors support the case for deferring further work in this area:
- the DfEE will issue shortly new guidelines for assessing school capacities;
 - the effects of changes in admission numbers as a result of the Key Stage 1 Class Size Plan;
 - the effects of changing first-time admission arrangements; and
 - the effects of amalgamations where a reduction in number is part of the proposal.
- 2.19 The Supporting Information sets out in more detail the current level and distribution of surplus places in primary schools (excluding nursery classes). The Authority will at some point need to justify to the DfEE maintaining primary schools with high levels of surplus accommodation. Surplus places are monitored carefully and it may in the future be necessary to consider options to address the issue. However, to do so in the light of research into the implications of the other anticipated changes will provide a more secure basis for any subsequent action.

Amalgamations

- 2.20 The primary review stated a preference for moving to a pattern of provision of all-through primary schools rather than separate infant and junior schools. This was originally conceived as a part of the area review process. It is proposed now to consider amalgamations when opportunities arise, such as at the request of governing bodies, or where it is prompted by headteacher vacancies. Although this approach is likely to reduce the rate and number of amalgamations, it is consonant with an approach to raising standards which focuses primarily on teaching and learning, rather than on structure.

3. Recommendations

3.1 The Cabinet is asked:

- (i) to note the outcome of consultation about first-time admission arrangements;
- (ii) to agree to further work to investigate the feasibility of introducing a single date for first-time admissions at 4+ and to model a range of options for school-based provision at 3+;
- (iii) to agree to receive a further report on the outcome of the feasibility study and associated research;
- (iii) to agree to the establishment of a steering group of key stakeholders for both areas of work;
- (iv) to agree to defer the area review process and instead to take forward amalgamations where it is enabled by headteacher vacancies or at the request of governing bodies;

- (v) to agree to contract with an external provider to progress this work during the summer and autumn terms;

4. Financial and Legal Implications

- 4.1 The estimated cost of establishing a small time limited project team is £15000. These costs can be met from within the existing Education revenue budget for supporting reviews.
- 4.2 At this stage it is difficult to identify the financial implications of the developments proposed in this report. They would form an essential element of the proposed feasibility study. In principle the introduction of a single date of admission at 4+ and the consequent redistribution of nursery provision could be managed in a way which was cost neutral to the revenue budget in the longer term, by reallocating the resources currently deployed in those areas. This would have the effect of have the effect of increasing the level of provision made for pupils at 4+ at the cost of reducing provision in schools for pupils at 3+.
- 4.3 It would be necessary for elected members to consider at a future date whether they wished any changes to made as part of an overall expansion of school based nursery provision, or whether there were other priorities for resources released by the removal of surplus nursery places. Schools and parents would be understandably concerned if any changes were perceived to be driven by financial rather than educational priorities.
- 4.4 A significant realignment of nursery provision in schools could give rise to a need for some schools to reduce staffing and for others to increase. The removal of surplus nursery places alone could have a major effect on individual school budgets. In the context of locally managed schools, this could lead to costs associated with redundancy or early retirement. It is possible that in a small number of schools it might be necessary to provide additional accommodation to enable the admission of all pupils full-time at 4+ or to undertake internal remodeling to reflect the changed use of teaching spaces
- 4.5 The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 provides the statutory framework for changes to a LEA's admission arrangements and the amalgamation of schools. (Guy Goodman, Assistant Head of Legal Services – ext 7054)

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