

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**CABINET
MONDAY 29 JANUARY 2001 AT 10.00 A.M.**

**EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
MONDAY 29 JANUARY 2001 AT 2.15 PM**

Agenda item no:

7

**PROPOSED CLOSURE OF NEVELLS ROAD NURSERY SCHOOL,
LETCHWORTH**

Report of Director of Education

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Executive Member:- Keith Emsall

1. Purpose of the report

1.1 To seek a decision whether or not to proceed with the proposal to close Nevells Road Nursery School, Letchworth.

2. Summary

2.1 The outcome of consultation (authorised by the former Education Committee in June 2000) on a proposal to close Nevells Road Nursery School is to be considered by the Children Schools & Families Select Committee on 24 January 2001. The Select Committee's comments will be made available to the Cabinet meeting.

2.2 The County Council has given consideration to the provision of nursery education in Letchworth over the last three years, which has resulted in the current proposal for the closure of Nevells Road Nursery School. This report outlines the response to consultation on the proposal.

2.3 The Nursery School has provided good quality nursery education over many years. It retains the loyalty of its existing parents and some other people in the town.

2.4 The demand for places at the Nursery School is now low and plans to extend its services were not considered viable by the governors. There is no need to maintain so many places in Letchworth and doing so has the potential for suppressing pupil numbers and budgets at every nursery class in Letchworth.

- 2.5 Maintaining the nursery school would not necessarily be an efficient use of resources i.e. sustaining a separate building far too large for the level of demand and the additional revenue costs of protecting the Nursery School's budget.
- 2.6 While limited new funding is available from the government to support initiatives at nursery schools Nevells Road School has already been successful in gaining government funding for integrated day-care provision but did not feel able use it.
- 2.7 Continued uncertainty over the future of Nevells Road Nursery School would not secure the interests of the children and parents of Letchworth.

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 If the Cabinet Executive Committee decide to proceed with the proposal to close the school, the Director of Education would need to be authorised to: publish statutory notices; give final approval to the proposals if no objections are received or to forward any objections received, together with his comments, to the Hertfordshire School Organisation Committee; and, subject to formal approval to the proposal, to declare the site surplus to requirements.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Education Committee in October 1997 requested that early years provision be reviewed on a district basis, to include consideration of the future of nursery schools. A framework was suggested including, among other things: whether there is a local need for the places in the nursery school; whether there are any primary schools wishing to have nursery classes; the potential for private sector development of day care provision; and the life expectancy/value of buildings/site.
- 1.2 North Herts was the first district to be reviewed and reported to the Education Committee in June 1998 and January 1999. The second report concentrated on Letchworth and resulted in a decision to consult on whether to close the Nursery School and open two new nursery classes at the schools which were then linked to it. St. Thomas More and Stonehill Schools (the only schools in Letchworth without nursery classes.)
- 1.3 The outcome of the consultation, which was held in early 1999, showed that over two-thirds of the respondents wanted the new nursery classes. The Nursery School wanted to continue to exist to provide choice and to develop day-care provision and there was local support for this. The Education Committee, on 21st April 1999, decided to open the nursery classes but to review the position at the Nursery School after a period of one year, to check pupil numbers and the success of day-care plans as proposed by the governors. The nursery classes at Stonehill and St Thomas More Schools opened in September 2000.
- 1.4 The Education Committee considered a review in June 2000, which identified that:
- No significant increase in demand is projected; and pupil numbers at the Nursery School have fallen.

Number of nursery places in Letchworth and take-up

Nursery places available		Nursery	places taken	up
Total no. available	508*	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Nursery school	70	actual	actual	allocation
Total without nursery school	438	407	411	325

**including the two new nursery classes at St Thomas More and Stonehill School*

Anticipated and actual number of children on roll at Nevells Road Nursery School (*anticipated figures given by the school in late Summer 2000*)

Term	Number of children (part-time) anticipated by the school at the end of the Summer term 2000	Actual
Autumn 2000	50	37
Spring 2001	30	Not known
Summer 2001	27	Not known
Autumn 2001	Not known until March 2001	Not known

- The governors' plans for integrated day-care have not been successful. Despite the hard work of the Governors and Day-care Management Committee the first bid to the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) for start-up costs was unsuccessful as it was considered to be unsustainable. A second, revised bid to NOF was successful but the Governors took a difficult decision not to pursue the opening of day-care provision as they considered it to be unviable.

1.5 The Education Committee decided to consult again on the closure of the Nursery School. The consultation ended on 30 November 2000 and a copy of the consultation document is attached as Appendix A. Officers attended meetings with the staff and governors of the Nursery School and a public meeting was held on 15 November 2000 which was chaired by the Executive Member (Schools) and at which there was a listening panel of County Councillors. A drop-in session for local residents was also held to answer site-related questions.

2. Response to the consultation

2.1 Over 70 people attended the public meeting. A full note of the meeting has been taken and a copy has been included in the correspondence folder in the Members' Rooms. The meeting was tape-recorded and the recordings can be borrowed from Benjamin Wright (01992 555897). No local residents attended the drop-in session.

2.2 There were 126 respondents to the consultation sending a total of 250 forms and letters, some of whom sent up to 6 responses. Copies of their letters/response forms have also been copied in the Members' Rooms. 4 respondents were in support of the proposed closure and 122 were against it. Of the 126 respondents, 49 people specifically stated that they were a parent of a child at the school.

2.3 The District Early Years Partnership, which comprises representatives of a wide variety of organisations concerned with early years development and childcare in the area, considered the consultation document and agreed, with regret, that under the circumstances closure would be the right decision.

2.4 The Governing Body and headteacher of the Nursery School responded to the consultation, copies of which are attached as Appendices B and C respectively.

3. The main issues raised and the response to them.

(i) Pupil numbers at the Nursery School have fallen due to the County Council's early years and admissions policies, the opening of the two new nursery classes at St. Thomas More and Stonehill Schools, and the threat of closure of the Nursery School.

- 3.1 The County Council has been proactive in the provision of nursery education. It has pursued its policy to provide a place for every child and to provide equality of opportunity. This has been applied across the county and therefore equally to all nursery schools.
- 3.2 Prior to 2000/2001 nursery schools were included in the primary directory and indicated, under each primary school entry, whether there was a nursery class at the school or whether there was a link to the local nursery school. Parents expressed a preference for a reception place and nursery education places were allocated at the nursery classes or nursery school indicated. Parents had a right to reject the allocated place and seek an alternative provision. Some parents preferred places at the local nursery school. In 2000/2001 the admission arrangements for reception and nursery education places were separated and links to primary schools disappeared.
- 3.3 Nursery classes and nursery schools have responded to the incremental introduction of two-term admissions to reception classes in primary schools by introducing a corresponding two-term admission to nursery for younger children.
- 3.4 The background to the opening of the two nursery classes at St. Thomas More and Stonehill Schools is described in paragraphs 1.1 – 1.3. They were the only two schools in the town without on-site nursery classes (places for their children had been linked to Nevells Road Nursery School). There was no nursery provision in a Roman Catholic school (an issue identified in the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan) and Stonehill School suffered through an inability to offer similar provision to neighbouring schools with on-site nursery classes. There were sufficient nursery education places available and so if these last two schools in the town were to have nursery classes, places for their children would not be needed at the nursery school.
- 3.5 The decision to open the new nursery classes and for the Nursery School to pursue its day-care plans was to respond to the clearly supported case for the remaining two schools to have on-site nursery provision. While it was understood that additional places were not necessary, the Education Committee wanted the nursery school to have the opportunity to demonstrate popular demand on the basis of choice (under the new separated admission arrangements) for nursery education in a different setting which would be even more attractive because of its

extended services. However, an increase in private sector day-care places made it more difficult for this approach to work.

- 3.6 The position is that pupil numbers at the nursery school have fallen and the planned additional day-care services have not started because the Governors considered them not to be viable. The majority of parents in Letchworth are taking up nursery education places at local primary schools.

(ii) Why close a school, which provides such high quality nursery education praised by Ofsted and others, and at a time when new government funds are available to support nursery schools?

- 3.7 The quality of the provision at Nevells Road has never been in question. The school has a good reputation for quality, which was confirmed in the last Ofsted inspection of the school, in 1997. The County Council took this into account in 1999 when taking the decision to allow the school to develop additional services and to provide a choice of quality settings despite the support for new nursery classes and the lack of need for sustaining more places than necessary. In the current scenario, where the majority of children are attending nursery classes and pupil numbers expected at the Nursery School by next Summer has fallen to 27 (i.e. one group of children in a building the size of the Nursery School) with no additional services provided as an added attraction, a closure proposal is not unreasonable. Maintaining too many nursery education places in Letchworth may lead to a suppression of pupil numbers and budgets at all County Council nursery provision in Letchworth with the potential of affecting quality.

- 3.8 Reference has been made to some research which has valued nursery schools over nursery classes. The introduction of the Foundation Stage and the associated universal quality standards and inspection routines ensures that all providers of nursery education will be expected to achieve high quality in the service they provide.

- 3.9 The new funding available from the government (£228,258 of which £166,387 is to be spent on capital works) is for one year only to support certain types of initiatives at nursery schools, including integrated day-care. Nursery schools have been invited to bid for funding for initiatives. Nevells Road School has already been successful in gaining funding from another government funding stream for integrated day-care (which did not require capital funding) but did not feel able use it.

(iii) The nursery school provides a range of knowledge and expertise, for children with special educational needs, for parents and other professionals.

3.10 The nursery school has worked well with children with special educational needs but all nursery education providers are expected to provide high quality support to such children. Nursery classes also provide high levels of support for parents and there is no reason why the parenting course established at Nevells Road Nursery School could not be held in alternative provision. The increased levels of training and networking introduced through the Foundation Stage, together with the County Council's support services, will provide support for professionals in the area.

(iv) The nursery school's central location and site provides advantages not available elsewhere.

3.11 The nursery school is in the centre of Letchworth and most children attending it are not from the immediate area. They travel from different parts of the town with journeys of varying length. Local provision would be more sustainable.

3.12 The nursery school has made good use of the building and grounds but the building is now much larger than is necessary for the current and projected number of children. It has four classrooms but only one classroom would be necessary for the 27 children expected in the Summer.

4. Staffing implications

- 4.1 Should the school close, all staff would be at risk of redundancy. Staff over the age of 50 would have the opportunity to retire early and benefit from redundancy and pension payments, if eligible. The County Council has a redeployment scheme and every effort would be made to support any member of staff wishing to find alternative employment in Hertfordshire schools.

5. Financial Implications

Revenue

- 5.1 There will be revenue implications whether the school remains open or not.
- 5.2 If the school remains open with the projected low numbers of pupils, i.e. 27, the funding formula for Hertfordshire schools would provide additional funding over and above that which 27 children would generate. This is because the school would receive protection funding because of the sharp reduction in pupil numbers. Assuming that the budgetary protection arrangements are amended to limit cash reductions between years to 3% (as proposed in the report on School Funding Arrangements) this additional funding would amount to approximately £65,000 in the first year with the estimates being that in time this could total £250,000 over eight years. This element of the funding formula is in place to protect schools who experience particular difficulties with pupil numbers, so that the education of no child suffers.
- 5.3 Even if budgetary protection were excluded from the analysis, the budget share per pupil (excluding factors for special educational needs and school meals which vary from school to school) for 27 places at Nevells Road Nursery School would be the highest of any nursery school in the county. As an indicator of the relative cost, and making certain assumptions in the financial analysis, this amounts to £770 more than the average budget share per pupil across all other Hertfordshire nursery schools.
- 5.4 If the school was to close, the worst case scenario in relation to staffing costs (assuming that no member of staff seeks and obtains alternative employment) would be one-off costs for redundancy and lump sums of approximately £65,000 with ongoing annual pension costs of approximately £5,400 in the first year, £12,700 for the next four years, and £9,800 thereafter.
- 5.5 The closure of Nevells Road Nursery School, and the incorporation of the provision within the nursery classes of local primary schools, would result in an annual saving of approximately £30,000 in school budget shares. There would also be a saving of the amount of the protection funding (described in paragraph 5.2) relating to the period after closure.

Capital

- 5.6 The nursery school building has a limited life expectancy.
- 5.7 Should the school close, the County Council will consider possible alternative service uses. If the site is not required for such uses it would be expected to be disposed of. The value of the site is currently estimated at £550,000 based upon the District Local Plan policies and a successful planning application for residential development. It may be advisable to submit a planning application within the near future to establish the development potential of the land.
- 5.8 The disposal of the site would also be subject to the Secretary of State's consent under Section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 The County Council has given careful consideration to the provision of nursery education in Letchworth over the last three years, which has resulted in the current proposal for the closure of Nevells Road Nursery School.
- 6.2 The Nursery School has provided good quality nursery education over many years. It retains the loyalty of its existing parents and some other people in the town.
- 6.3 The demand for places at the Nursery School is now low and plans to extend its services were not considered viable by the governors. There is no need to maintain so many places in Letchworth and doing so has the potential for suppressing pupil numbers and budgets at every nursery class in Letchworth.
- 6.4 Maintaining the nursery school would not necessarily be an efficient use of resources i.e. sustaining a separate building far too large for the level of demand and the additional revenue costs of protecting the Nursery School's budget.
- 6.5 While limited new funding is available from the government to support initiatives at nursery schools, Nevells Road School has already been successful in gaining government funding for integrated day-care provision but did not feel able use it.
- 6.6 Continued uncertainty over the future of Nevells Road Nursery School would not secure the interests of the children and parents of Letchworth.

Background information referred to by the author whilst compiling this report

Letter and forms received in response to the consultation.

Notes of the public meeting.

If you wish to know more about the issues covered in this report please contact the author, telephone no. 01992 555865.

