

**HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**CABINET**

**MONDAY 19 NOVEMBER 2001 AT 10.00 AM**

**EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

**MONDAY 19 NOVEMBER 2001 AT 2.15 PM**

Agenda Item No:

**2**

**SUBJECT: PROPOSAL FOR A NURSERY CLASS AT KNEBWORTH PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Report of the Director of Children, Schools and Families

Author:- Pauline Davis

01992 555865

Executive member:- Robert Gordon

Local Member:- Robert Ellis

**1. Purpose of report**

To seek a decision whether to publish statutory proposals for the provision of a 60 part-time place nursery class at Knebworth Primary School from September 2002.

**2. Summary**

- 2.1 In response to a consultation, the majority of respondents agreed with the proposal to provide of a nursery class at Knebworth Primary School. Some parents have concerns about the play area at the Primary School which might be displaced by the new nursery class building. They also have concerns about increased traffic congestion and admissions (priority for local children, transfer to reception class, etc.). The majority of respondents also agreed with opening the nursery class in September 2002.
- 2.2 The pre-schools, some respondents and the District Early Years Partnership remain concerned over the impact on the two remaining pre-schools and their short term financial viability.
- 2.3 The Children, Schools and Families Select Committee considered the outcome of the consultation at its meeting on 17 October 2001.

The Select Committee noted that:

- all consultation responses and tapes of public meetings were available in the Members' Room,

- Knebworth Primary School would take into account the health and safety concerns of parents in deciding whether to use a detached recreation space,
- the admission rules/process for nursery and primary schools would be explained to parents to prevent the assumption that a place in the nursery school guaranteed a place in the reception class.

The Select Committee agreed with the proposals outlined in the report.

### **3. Conclusion**

- 3.1 Provision needs to be realigned within Knebworth if local nursery age and younger children are to continue to be able to access provision within the village.
- 3.2 This could be achieved by the provision of a nursery class at Knebworth Primary School (which would be in line with the County Council's policy) with the remaining Pre-schools catering for the younger children.
- 3.3 The support for the provision of a nursery class at Knebworth Primary School from September 2002 is strong.
- 3.4 The short-term impact of a realignment on the two remaining pre-schools remains a concern to the pre-schools, the District Early Years and Childcare Partnership and some respondents. The actual impact would only be known once parents make their placement decisions and while past experience of such transitions generally have not resulted in the loss of provision, the position of the pre-schools would need to be carefully monitored.
- 3.5 Implementation of the nursery class building would be subject to the acquisition of capital funding and planning permission.
- 3.6 Members are asked to decide whether to publish statutory notices for the provision of a nursery class for 60 part-time places at Knebworth Primary School.
- 3.7 The Director of Children Schools and Families also would need to be authorised to determine the proposal if there are no objections or, if there are objections, to forward these to the School Organisation Committee, with comments.

## **1. Background**

- 1.1 Provision for nursery age children in Knebworth is currently made by three local private or voluntary providers: Knebworth Nursery School, Knebworth Pre-School and Stepping Stones Pre-School. The places are funded through government grant for two terms and County Council funding for a third term, through partnership agreements. The County Council has been happy to support this arrangement, which has worked well.
- 1.2 In June 2001 one of the three providers, Knebworth Nursery School, decided to close in December 2002 as its premises will no longer be available to it. At open meetings at the nursery school at that time, parents strongly requested that the County Council consider the provision of a nursery class at the local primary school. It was felt that it was appropriate for such a large village to have a nursery class attached to its Primary School and that this was the best long term solution for the village.
- 1.3 Knebworth Primary School offers 60 places at reception. It is a popular and well-subscribed school and is the largest primary school in the County without its own nursery class, or with places provided at other maintained nursery classes or school. Projections for the foreseeable future indicate that this level of places will continue to be needed. The existing Partnership agreements for younger children also support 60 places.
- 1.4 When the Nursery School closes the remaining two pre-schools will be unable to provide 60 places. If no other provision for this age range is made, the remaining local parents and children will be forced to travel outside the village to access provision. Similarly, this could apply to younger children.
- 1.5 The County Council's Nursery for All at Four policy aims to provide sufficient local places for three terms, part-time nursery education for all four year olds whose parents want it for their children. A guiding principle is that for most four year olds, nursery places would be in a nursery class of the school they would be attending from the age of rising five.
- 1.6 Arrangements for early years places in Knebworth could be realigned. The County Council could provide for nursery age children and the remaining Pre-Schools could adjust their provision to ensure that all younger age children are provided for.
- 1.7 On 7 August 2001, under delegated authority and in consultation with the Executive Member, a public consultation on a proposal to provide a nursery class at Knebworth Primary School was authorised. Over 700 documents were distributed locally, through the primary school and pre-schools, library, surgery, Parish Council, etc. The consultation ended on 4 October 2001 and a copy of the consultation document is attached as Appendix A. Officers had attended the earlier public meetings referred to in 1.2 above, and a public consultation meeting on 24 September 2001 at the Primary School. The meeting was chaired by County Councillor Bryan Hammond.

## **2. Response to the consultation**

- 2.1 Over 40 people attended the public meeting. A full note of the issues raised at the meeting was taken and a copy has been included in the correspondence folder in the Members' Room. The meeting was tape-recorded and the recordings can be borrowed from Helen Twidle (01992 555897).
- 2.2 There were 115 respondents to the consultation. Copies of their letters/response forms/faxes have also been copied in the Members' Rooms.
- 2.3 92 (80%) people agreed that there should be a nursery class at the primary school, 11 (9.6%) disagreed and 12 (10.4%) did not know. Out of the 115 respondents, 77 people specifically stated that they were parents - most of this group had children either at one of the two pre-schools in the village or at the closing nursery school.
- 2.4 97 (84.3%) respondents indicated that September 2002 would be the best time to open the class, 4 people would prefer the nursery class to open in September 2003, 8 people stated as soon as possible or before the proposed date, and 2 stated December 2002/January 2003. One person was not concerned with the opening date as long as children in the pre-schools could complete their education there and one person did not respond to this question.
- 2.5 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 the proposal, for a start in September 2002. The Partnership was concerned about the potential impact on the remaining pre-schools (see para. 3.1) and existing day-care arrangements (see para. 3.4).
- 2.6 Knebworth Primary School responded to the consultation : a copy is attached as Appendix B.

## **3. The main issues raised by respondents and at the public meeting**

### **3.1 There would be a strain on the remaining two pre-schools in terms of sufficient places. The risk of less funding for the two remaining pre-schools that could consequently lead to their closure.**

The two remaining pre-schools will not be able to provide for all the anticipated number of nursery age children within the village. Children Act registration standards dictate the number of such children they can admit. In the absence of alternative provision, from 2002 some nursery age children would have to travel outside the village to access provision.

|                                      |     |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Expected demand for nursery places   | 60  |
| Maximum capacity for nursery places: |     |
| Knebworth Pre-School 26              | 52* |
| Stepping Stones 26                   |     |

*\* assuming that the Pre-schools' admissions criteria gave priority to admit local children.*

The pre-schools also provide for younger children. The demand for such places would be similar to that for nursery places, or slightly less. The pre-schools would not be able to provide for all local children unless they offered 10 sessions a week. One pre-school currently offers 8 sessions and an extension of sessions would mean the cessation of their existing toddler group.

Therefore, if all local children nursery age and younger children are to continue to access provision within the village some adjustments would have to be made. The County Council has responded to parental demand by consulting on a proposal to provide 60 part-time nursery places. This is consistent with the number of places at the Primary School and is in line with the County Council's policy to aim to provide nursery places for all children who want them at the school where children expect to attend from the age of rising five. In response to the consultation the support for a nursery class is very strong.

However, one of the pre-schools and four respondents disagreed with the proposal because of the potential consequences of a realignment for the two remaining pre-schools. They project, in a worst-case scenario i.e. if all nursery age children expected in their provision leave for the proposed nursery class, that their financial viability in the first year only of the transition could be jeopardised, potentially resulting in their closure. Some respondents, while agreeing with the nursery class proposal or indicating that they didn't know, shared that concern. This formed the basis of most of the suggestions for the nursery class to be opened in September 2003, allowing time for the intended introduction in April 2003 of grants for younger 3 year olds.

Although one pre-school indicated at the public meeting that over 50% of existing parents had indicated that they wished their child to remain in their provision, which should cushion the financial impact, parental actions and the financial position could not be guaranteed. The position of the Knebworth pre-schools would only be clear when parents make their placement choices. Previous experience within the County of similar adjustments to provision, when the County's Nursery for All at Four policy was introduced, generally did not result in the loss of provision. The situation in Knebworth therefore would need to be carefully monitored.

The North Herts Early Years and Childcare Partnership recognise the particular short-term problem in Knebworth and will raise the issue with the County Early Years and Childcare Partnership at its next meeting.

**3.2 The opening of a nursery class would mean insufficient space, particularly for recreational purposes, for the nursery children and the other pupils at the primary school. There were also health and safety concerns about the potential use of a detached site.**

The siting of a nursery class would not encroach upon any statutorily required team games playing field area, of which the school has more than a sufficient amount (by 0.139ha). Parents are concerned, however, that the siting of the class would reduce the amount of existing hard play area (which is not a statutory requirement).

The school has more hard play area than suggested in DfES guidance and a nursery class and playspace should not reduce it below the suggested level. The location of the nursery class has yet to be finally determined and the project team will be asked to take parents' concerns into account when doing so.

The overall site area at Knebworth Primary School falls below guideline levels by approx. 0.2 ha. This is not unusual for schools and the guidelines are non-statutory. The County Council has the option of making land in its ownership, in Watton Road in Knebworth which is currently leased to the Parish Council as recreation space, available for the school's use. The school would take parental concerns about health and safety seriously when deciding whether, when and how to make use of that facility.

**3.3 There would be parking problems and increased traffic congestion in the village due to the rise in the number of parents dropping off or picking up their children.**

In common with many other schools in Hertfordshire, the school suffers from traffic congestion at peak times. The school is aware that certain measures will be required to help mitigate the potential increase in traffic arising from the nursery and is, therefore, committed to producing a School Travel Plan - such a plan aims to encourage all parents to walk their children to and from school rather than relying on the car. However, many nursery aged children will have older siblings in the school and so may not generate additional journeys at peak times.

**3.4 There should be a third pre-school in the village, not just provision for nursery age children. Could an alternative site be found - either in Old Knebworth or a site away from the primary school?**

The closing nursery school has said that it tried to re-locate within the village without success. No other provider has come forward. In these circumstances, unless the County Council provides a nursery class, local children may be forced to travel outside the village for nursery and pre-school provision. The County Council has no policy or remit to provide for younger children : indeed, the government expects this to be provided by the voluntary or private sector. To make such provision at the Primary School would require additional building (which would increase costs) and take up more land. While the current day-care at the nursery school would end upon its closure, other providers (including the primary school) could be encouraged to provide part-time extended care.

**3.5 Admissions : would priority be given to Knebworth residents for places at the nursery class? Will pre-school children who will eventually be attending the primary school be guaranteed a place in the nursery class? Will I still have choice?**

The nursery class would be subject to the County Council's published admissions rules for nursery provision. This includes rules for siblings and distance. The processes for admissions for nursery and reception places are completely separate. Parents would still have choice over where to place their children.

**4. Staffing implications**

- 4.1 A nursery class for 60 part-time children would require a qualified nursery teacher and nursery nurse, and an additional classroom support person.

**5. Financial Implications**

- 5.1 **Revenue :** The increase in Knebworth Primary School's budget share to fund the 60 place nursery class would be approximately £75,000. It is anticipated that the children attending the new nursery class would otherwise have attended one of the Knebworth pre-schools (or an HCC nursery class elsewhere). Therefore, there would be savings in funding this other provision of approximately £70,000.
- 5.2 **Capital :** A mobile building (with a classroom space, cloaks, wet play, kitchen, storage and toilet areas, together with hard and soft play areas) for this school is currently estimated at £190,600 including fees and furniture and equipment, at 2002/3 prices. This forms a priority bid on the 2002/3 major capital programme. Implementation also would be subject to the acquisition of planning permission.

**6. Conclusions**

- 6.1 The current provision for nursery age and younger children in Knebworth is changing. If local children are to continue to be able to access provision within the village some realignment will be required.
- 6.2 The County Council's Nursery for All at Four policy aims to provide sufficient local part-time nursery education places at nursery classes of a school a child would attend at rising five.
- 6.3 A realignment could be achieved by the provision of a nursery class at Knebworth Primary School, in line with current policy, with the remaining pre-schools catering for the younger children.
- 6.4 The County Council has responded to parental demand by consulting on a proposal to provide 60 part-time places for nursery age children at Knebworth Primary School. The majority of respondents to the consultation agree with the proposal.

- 6.5 Some parents have concerns about the play area at the Primary School which might be displaced by the new nursery class building. They also have concerns about admissions and increased traffic congestion. The majority of parents also agree with opening the class in September 2002.
- 6.6 The remaining two Pre-schools would be affected by a realignment, if they lose many of their nursery age children and provide for more younger children. There is some disagreement and concern for the pre-schools because of the potential short-term financial implications for them, during the first year of this transition. They would prefer the nursery class to open in September 2003 to avoid the worst implications.
- 6.7 Past experience of such transitions does not show generally that it results in the loss of provision and a delay in opening a nursery class would mean some children having to travel outside the village. The actual impact on the two remaining pre-schools would only be known once parents make their placement decisions and the position of the pre-schools therefore would need to be carefully monitored.
- 6.8 Implementation of a nursery class within the timescale proposed would be subject to the acquisition of capital resources and planning permission. If capital is not approved for 2002/03 or planning permission proves difficult, implementation would be delayed and the pre schools would meet, in part, the need for four year old provision.
- 6.9 The Executive Committee is asked to decide whether to publish statutory notices for the provision of a nursery class at Knebworth Primary School and to authorise the Director of Children School and Families to determine the proposal if no objections are received, or to forward objections to the School Organisation Committee, with comments.