

For Cabinet - 9 February 2004 - Appendix to Agenda Item 4

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
RESOURCES PANEL
WEDNESDAY 14 JANUARY 2004



SUBJECT: REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES IN NORTH EAST WATFORD – PHASE 2 : PROPOSAL FOR THE AMALGAMATION OF THREE SCHOOLS, GARSTON INFANT SCHOOL, LEA FARM JUNIOR SCHOOL AND MERIDEN PRIMARY SCHOOL TO CREATE ONE NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL ON THE LEA FARM/GARSTON SCHOOLS SITE

Report of the Director of Children, Schools and Families

Author: Sarah Vize, Area Planning Manager – South (01992 555863)

Executive Member: Robert Gordon
Local Members: Keith Crout, Audrey Oaten, Derek Scudder

1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1 To inform Members of the outcome of the public consultation exercise on the proposal for the amalgamation of Garston Infants, Lea Farm Junior and Meriden Primary Schools to create one new primary school on the Garston/Lea Farm schools site.
- 1.2 For the Panel to make a recommendation to Cabinet which will decide at its meeting on 26 January, whether or not to publish a statutory notice to close all three schools, and open a new 3 form of entry school on the Garston/Lea Farm School site.

2. Summary

- 2.1 Following an approach from the governing bodies of Garston and Lea Farm schools in 2001 and subsequent work on the need to reduce surplus places in the area, LEA officers worked with the three headteachers of the schools involved to devise a strategy suitable for future primary provision within this sub-area.
- 2.2 A public consultation document (attached as appendix 1) was issued during November, outlining the proposal to close Garston Infants, Lea Farm Junior and Meriden Primary School, and create a new 3 form of entry primary school on the Garston/Lea Farm schools site, with an implementation date of September 2005. The detailed results of this consultation are set out in this report.

2.3 The outcome of the public consultation process has shown the majority of staff and governors from Garston Infants and Lea Farm Junior who responded, are in favour of the proposal to provide a three form entry primary school on the Garston/Lea Farm site. Additionally a petition of 1,000 signatories has also indicated support for a new 3 form of entry school. A summary analysis of responses is included in section 5 of this report.

3.0 **Conclusions**

3.1 In order to inform the Cabinet debate and decision on the next step of this process, the publication of a statutory notice, the Panel members are invited to comment upon this proposal to create a single 3 form of entry primary school on the Garston/Lea Farm site.

3.2 Various points have been made suggesting the positioning of the new school on the Meriden site. Although this solution is possible, it would not be a viable option because:

- it would also not be possible to deliver this option for September 2005
- it would cause a high degree of disruption to the pupils of Meriden School whilst construction/adaptation of the building was taking place, because children would have to be decanted to mobile accommodation, and
- the site is significantly smaller than the Garston/Lea Farm site, and the ability to fit a 3 form of entry school on this site is marginal.

3.3 On the contrary, the Garston/Lea Farm proposal overcomes each of these issues.

4.0 **Background**

4.1 Throughout Hertfordshire primary school rolls are falling. The Office for National Statistics 2001 Census figures for the whole Watford demonstrate a decline in the 0-4 year age range and 5-9 year age range over the period from 2003 to 2020. Appendix 2 attached shows the detail of the decline, with 5,800 5-9 year olds in 2003, compared with 5,200 0-4 year olds in 2003. This is in line with the growth in surplus places as forecast in the north east Watford area.

4.2 Appendix 3 is a map and accompanying table of the whole of Watford and neighbouring Abbots Langley area, which shows the current number on roll in each primary school, together with capacity of each school.

4.3 Looking at the north east Watford planning area (planning area 21.2 on the attached map), there are currently 2,454 places in all the primary schools, in the reception year through to year 6. Currently about 598 places are empty (21%) and it is forecast that in six years

more than 700 will be surplus (28%). Such a large number of empty places cannot be sustained. Appendix 4 shows the forecast demand for the north east Watford area as a whole.

4.4 To manage the planned reduction in primary school places in north east Watford, the re-organisation proposals were launched in two separate phases to focus on each area in turn, providing proposals which were specific to the nature of each area, whilst ensuring the future viability of children's education within the new primary provision.

- The first phase is a review of Leavesden Green and Alban Wood schools, in the Leavesden/Woodside wards defined as the sub-area north and immediately south of the A405 (Alban Wood Infant and Nursery, Alban Wood Junior, Leavesden Green JMI and St Catherine of Siena RC JMI), and
- The second phase focuses on the primary provision in Garston, Lea Farm and Meriden areas, and the three schools serving these communities, defined as the sub-area to the east of the A412, and north of the A41 (Kingsway Infant, Kingsway Junior, Kingswood Nursery, Coates Way JMI and Nursery, Garston Infant, Lea Farm Junior and Meriden Primary).

4.5 In considering the future primary provision in this area, it has been noted that there is a demand for 2.5 form of entry and 3 form of entry is proposed to allow some flexibility, should more young families move into the area than forecast, and allow for parental preference.

Although the proposed provision may be distributed as a 2 form of entry school and a 1 form of entry school, with a school on either side of the railway line, as the demand is forecast to be 2.5 form of entry, the 1 form of entry school could be at risk of viability should parental demand for the school be insufficient to keep it virtually full. To provide two 1.5 form of entry primary schools, again on either side of the railway line, would be of a size which would create difficulty in managing the delivery of the curriculum without vertically arranging year groups, and one school may be less full and at risk of viability should there be less parental demand for it.

Therefore the proposal to provide one new 3 form of entry primary school, would provide a school able to serve the whole community, with a seamless education from age 4 through to 11, able to accommodate the forecast demand of 2.5 form of entry, of an educationally and financially viable size, and with the scope to accommodate a further half a form of entry, should demand arise.

4.6 Appendix 5 shows the actual total number of reception places available in north east Watford, the actual and forecast demand, together with the number of reception places following the proposed changes (phases 1 and 2).

4.7 Appendix 6 is a table showing the future provision within north east Watford following the proposed reduction in places in both phase 1 and 2. In 2005/6 surplus places would be 6.2% and 8.0% would be surplus in 2009/10.

5.0 Consultation process and analysis of the results of the consultation responses

5.1 Overview

5.2 In addition to the consultation document, parents have been able to view an illustrative drawing of the proposed development of the Garston/Lea Farm schools buildings, to create the new primary school.

5.3 Public meetings were held at Meriden School on 27 November 2003 and at Lea Farm Junior School on 2 December 2003. The public consultation period closed on 22 December 2003.

5.4 Copies of the responses to the consultation and minutes of the public meetings are available in the Members Room.

5.5 The following table is an analysis of the responses received during the consultation process:-

Phase 2 - Stakeholder Analysis (201 Responses)												
Category of Respondent	Responses											
	Amalgamation of Garston, Lea Farm & Meriden to form a 3 FE school			Future school should be 4-11 year primary			New school to be sited on current Garston/Lea Farm site			1 FE school not to be proposed due to educational & financial risks		
	Agree	Disagree	Total	Agree	Disagree	Total	Agree	Disagree	Total	Agree	Disagree	Total
Parent - Meriden Primary	4	75	83	30	35	83	0	76	83	17	39	83
Parent - Garston Infants	10	14	25	19	4	25	20	2	25	8	9	25
Parent - Lea Farm Junior	12	13	26	15	6	26	16	5	26	14	9	26
Parent - Another School in Watford	0	1	2	1	1	2	0	1	2	1	1	2
Parent - Other	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1
Governor - Meriden Primary	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1
Governor - Garston Infants	2	0	2	2	0	2	2	0	2	2	0	2
Governor - Lea Farm Junior	4	1	5	5	0	5	5	0	5	4	1	5
Staff - Meriden Primary	1	11	13	6	5	13	0	12	13	1	7	13
Staff - Garston Infants	4	4	8	5	2	8	7	1	8	3	4	8
Staff - Lea Farm Junior	3	3	6	4	2	6	5	1	6	3	3	6
Other - Meriden Primary	0	10	10	7	2	10	0	9	10	1	7	10
Other - Garston Infants	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	1	3
Other - Lea Farm Junior	1	3	5	2	1	5	1	3	5	1	2	5
Other - Another School in Watford	0	1	2	1	0	2	0	1	2	0	0	2
Other - Other	1	8	9	2	7	9	1	7	9	1	6	9
TOTALS	43	148	201	101	68	201	58	122	201	57	91	201

- 5.6 The overall response rate from parents whose children attend all the schools has been low, with only 51 from Garston/Lea Farm completing the response form, and 83 from Meriden parents.
- 5.7 From the total number of responses received, 21% were in favour of the proposal to amalgamate the three schools, of these 18% were from those connected with Garston Infants or Lea Farm Junior Schools, 2% from those connected with Meriden School and 1% with no specific connection.
- 5.8 The responses received also indicated that 28% agreed the proposed new school should be on the current Garston Infants/Lea Farm Junior site. Fifty per cent of respondees supported the principle that the future school should be a primary school covering the whole 4-11 primary age range, which is somewhat at odds with the resistance to amalgamation referred to above.

5.9 **Stakeholder Feedback**

- 5.10 A Governors' response on behalf of Garston Infants and Lea Farm Junior Schools was received. This supports the proposal to create a new three form of entry primary school on the Garston/Lea Farm site, recognises the proposed future school should be a primary school covering the whole 4-11 age range, and agrees that the Authority should not propose a one form of entry school. The Governors' response indicated their keenness to provide the best possible education for all families in the whole area, and to meet the priorities for children and staff during the transition period.
- 5.11 Because these Governing Bodies originally approached the Authority in 2001 to seek amalgamation, as a result of falling numbers within the area, the response from the Governors stresses the need to end the period of uncertainty.

In a letter to parents, the Chairman of Governors has encouraged them to support the proposal of a 3 form of entry school on the Garston/Lea Farm site. He also said that rather than support a 3 form of entry school on the Meriden site, they would wish to see a 1.5 form of entry school on Garston/Lea Farm.

- 5.12 A response has been received from Ethnic Minority Achievement (EMA) Centre, in support of the proposal.
- 5.13 The Headteacher of Meriden School has also written in response to the consultation, supporting the establishment of a three form entry

school, but whilst recognising the Garston/Lea Farm site is larger in terms of the existing building and site area, has raised concerns about the choice of site for the following reasons:

- the barrier of the railway line, and the potential reluctance of families living on the Meriden Estate to travel to the new school, and
- concerns over meeting the needs of disabled pupils if a two storey building is to be used and developed.

5.14 The Governing Body of Meriden School has submitted a formal response to the proposal, supporting the closure and subsequent amalgamation of all three schools into a new primary school, but only on the understanding that the new school would be positioned on the Meriden School site. This is based on their belief that the school successfully provides for children in the area, many of whose parents would be reluctant to travel the small additional journey to the new location, and that a new school should be housed in a completely single storey building. The governing body has also raised concerns about the use of the underpass, the general disruption to children's education, and the cost incurred in abandoning the recently established nursery building on the Meriden School site.

5.15 The Governing Body of Meriden School commissioned their own architect, who has produced a feasibility study to demonstrate how this school could be expanded to meet the needs of 630 pupils. This formed the basis of the response made on behalf of the governing body at the public meeting held at Meriden School.

5.16 A petition has been received from 1,000 signatories, supporting the proposal to close three schools to form one new primary school, but not on the Garston Infant/Lea Farm site but on the Meriden Site.

6.0 **Site and Premises issues**

6.1 Appendix 7 is an aerial photograph of the two existing sites. The Garston/Lea Farm combined site is 54% larger than the existing Meriden site, and has four access points onto to it, three of these being pedestrian routes. The Garston/Lea Farm site provides a large site on which to place a three form of entry primary school, with sufficient associated playing fields for the proposed 3 form of entry primary school.

6.2 **Travel to School**

6.3 Currently a greater number of children travel from east of the railway line to Garston/Lea Farm schools, than from west of the line to Meriden School. The railway line can be located on the map attached, running almost north to south and running over the Cow Lane subway.

6.4 By proposing one school on the Garston/Lea Farm site, parents who

live to the east of the railway line would be able to use the Cow Lane subway to walk to the new school.

- 6.5 There is an agreement, dated 1967, between British Rail and Watford Borough Council, which places maintenance responsibility of the structure of the subway on British Rail (now with Network Rail), and puts responsibility for the surface, drainage and lighting of the footpath with Watford Borough Council. Hertfordshire Highways have inherited Watford Borough Council's liabilities under the agreement for maintaining the surface, drainage and lighting leading up to and inside the subway.
- 6.6 Preliminary work has been undertaken by Wormald Burrows Consultants in liaison with Hertfordshire Highways over the upgrading of the subway. It is proposed, because the underpass would have a significant increase in pedestrian traffic, that the footpath should be edged and relaid and the approach should have additional lighting. Within the subway, lighting and drainage would be improved. Initial estimates suggest this would cost £83,000, although detailed costings associated with increased lighting on the approach is awaited.
- 6.7 Concern has been raised over the potential increase in traffic congestion on the approach roads associated with parents taking children to the new school.
- 6.8 Initial findings from the traffic survey indicate approximately 78% of pupils live within 1 km of the existing schools. From these findings no significant change in the pattern of distribution has been identified with the proposed new school site. This indicates that with the position of the new school, a large number of children could potentially walk to school. This would need to be promoted as part of the School Travel Plan.
- 6.9 The traffic survey also highlighted that at the existing schools start and finish times, the subway is well used by a good mix of adults and children.
- 6.10 To promote walk to school travel, it is proposed to develop a walking bus routes initiative in this area as part of the School Travel Plan. In this way, the number of families seeking to travel by car to the new school would be kept to a minimum, and one walking bus route would be via the subway.
- 6.11 There is a concern from the Highways Authority about intensifying the usage of the subway. However, this needs to be balanced against increasing road traffic if there is less subway use as a result. Further work will be carried out between the Highways Authority and the Community Police on this matter. Initial feedback from the latter indicates that they do not have a problem with usage of the subway at the beginning or end of school day.

6.12 **Feasibility Study**

6.13 Detailed feasibility on the extension/adaptation of the existing Garston/Lea Farm buildings has produced a scheme which would provide a single storey extension to the rear of the existing building, and provide access to the two existing first floor areas through the construction of two external lift shafts.

6.14 Feasibility work has also looked at providing a three form of entry school on the Meriden site. Whilst a solution is possible, this would not be a feasible option because:

- it would cause a high degree of disruption to the pupils of Meriden School whilst construction/adaptation of the building was taking place, because children would have to be decanted to mobile accommodation,
- the site is significantly smaller than the Garston/Lea Farm site, and the ability to fit a 3 form of entry school on this site is marginal,
- it would also not be possible to deliver this option for September 2005.

6.15 The redevelopment of the existing Meriden School built area is likely to be acceptable in principle, bearing in mind that it constitutes brownfield land, and that government policy is to encourage the re-use of brownfield land in preference to greenfield sites.

6.16 **Extent of provision**

6.17 The proposed new school would have early years provision, with 40 nursery places and be geared to provide wrap around care for those families who wish to make use of this local facility. It is intended that the Lea Farm Pre-School who are based in temporary accommodation to the south of the proposed site, would continue to operate 9 sessions a week. Wrap around care could be introduced initially by offering a lunch club for those attending the nursery at the new school and this could be further developed to an after school club, but would be established in partnership with the governing body and headteacher of the new school. Initial feedback from the Early Years Partnership indicates the potential demand for an after school club for children who attend Lea Farm, Garston and Meriden Schools.

7. **Financial Implications**

7.1 **Revenue**

7.2 Appendix 8 attached shows the revenue implications (at 2003/04 prices) of the proposal.

7.3 Historically school amalgamations have resulted in savings in lump sum and premises funding in school budget shares.

However, it is anticipated that the DfES minimum funding guarantee will restrict the ability to make these savings, and thus to redirect these resources elsewhere in the schools budget, until the end of 2005/06.

- 7.4 The revenue implications including school budget share savings from 2006/07 are as follows:

	2004/05 £000	2005/06 £000	2006/07 £000	2007/08 £000	2008/09 £000	Long Term £000
Total	18	250	13	(83)	(119)	(133)

- 7.5 If the DfES minimum guarantee were extended beyond 2005/06 it might significantly restrict our ability to achieve the budget share savings. In such a situation we would make representations to the DfES about the application of the guarantee.

8.0 **Capital**

- 8.1 The capital cost of developing the Garston/Lea Farm buildings amounts to £3,728,000 and will be met by the value of the disposal of Meriden School site.
- 8.2 Work on the new build will start once necessary consents have been received during the 2004/5 financial year, and the new build is likely to be completed in August 2005.

Background information referred to by the author:

Public Consultation Document – Published November 2003