

**HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES
SELECT COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY 28 MARCH, 2001 AT 10.30AM**

Agenda Item No:

3

**POSSIBLE AMALGAMATION OF THUMBSWOOD INFANT AND
BLACKTHORN JUNIOR SCHOOLS, WELWYN GARDEN CITY**

Report of the Director of Education

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Local Member: D L Kerr

1. Purpose of report

1.1 To consider the outcome of consultations on the possible amalgamation of Thumbswood Infant and Blackthorn Junior Schools.

2. Summary

2.1 The report follows the consultation on the possible amalgamation of the two schools. The consultation ended on 23 February 2001.

2.2 The governing bodies of the two schools, acting jointly, requested that Hertfordshire County Council to consult about amalgamation.

2.3 There were 54 responses to the consultation, with nearly 60% of them in favour of amalgamation. 18% were against and the remainder did not agree or disagree with the proposal.

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 There are good reasons why schools benefit from amalgamation. These include easier and more effective opportunities for curricular planning across all age groups; more opportunities for interaction between staff and children of all ages; greater breadth of staff experience; increased opportunities for staff development; easier transition for children from infant school to junior school, and budget flexibility. There are also annual financial savings to be gained in the longer term.
- 3.2 Many of the benefits have been identified in the response to the consultation. In addition, however, there are clearly concerns expressed by those who responded to the consultation, regarding school uniforms, the loss of a Head teacher and the distance between the infant and junior buildings.
- 3.3 In the light of this, the Governing Bodies of the two schools have voted in favour of the amalgamation proceeding.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Governing Bodies of Thumbswood Infant and Blackthorn Junior Schools voted on 19 July 2000 to request the Director of Education undertake consultation with parents and staff about the possible amalgamation of the Infant and Junior Schools to create one primary school.
- 1.2 On 17 November 2000, the Executive Member (Schools) agreed to the Governors' request to undertake consultation.
- 1.3 A consultation document was subsequently produced and distributed to all parents of children at both schools. Copies were also sent to the Governors and staff of the two schools and to the County Council's usual list of consultees. A copy of this forms Appendix A to this report.
- 1.4 Officers attended meetings of the Governing Bodies and of the staff at the two schools. A consultation meeting, at which a listening panel of members was present was also held for parents and the local community on 24 January 2001. About 40 people attended the meeting. A tape recording was made and is available from Benjamin Wright on 01992 555897. Notes of meeting, correspondence and consultant form returns have been copied into folders in the Members' Rooms.

2. Response to the Consultation

- 2.1 The level of response to the consultation is shown below:

Total number of respondents:	54	%
For amalgamation	32	59.3
Against amalgamation	10	18.5
Don't know	11	20.4
Not indicated	1	1.9

- 2.2 Respondents' relationship to the schools are:

Total number of respondents:	54	%
Thumbswood Infant	28	51.9
Blackthorn Junior	15	27.8
Both Schools	11	20.4
Not indicated	0	0

3. LEA Policy

- 3.1 It is the LEA's policy to support amalgamations on the following educational grounds:

More effective curricular planning across all age groups
Opportunities for interaction between staff and children of all ages
Greater breadth of staff experience
Increased opportunities for staff development
Easier transition for children from infant school to junior school
Budget flexibility

- 3.2 Schools are supported where they wish to amalgamate, but are not forced to do so if they do not.

4. Breakdown of responses

Governors' responses

- 4.1 The Governing Bodies have formally considered and voted in favour of amalgamating the schools. In addition, 4 Governors responded individually to the consultation. 3 were in favour of amalgamation and 1 didn't know.

Staff responses

- 4.2 The following response from staff employed at the two schools was received:

STAFF at:	Thumbswood	Blackthorn	Total
For amalgamation	2	4	6
Against amalgamation	0	6	6
Don't know	0	1	1
Not indicated	0	1	1
Total	2	12	14

Parental responses

- 4.3 The following response from parents at the two schools was received:

PARENTS at:	Thumbswood	Blackthorn	Both	Total
For amalgamation	10	8	8	26
Against amalgamation	1	2	0	3
Don't know	2	5	3	10
Not indicated	0	0	0	0
Total	13	15	11	39

5. Issues raised in meetings and correspondence

The following main issues have been raised by respondents to the consultation exercise and at the consultation meeting:

- The implications for the schools of not amalgamating in relation to the future size of pupil rolls
- The logistics of operating an amalgamated school in the existing Thumbswood and Blackthorn buildings
- The impact of operating with a single Headteacher (albeit with a restructured management team covering both buildings) and whether this would affect the establishment of an effective discipline policy and the management of pupil behaviour
- The need to provide appropriate new staffroom facilities;
- Scope for building works using the £100,000 guideline for capital expenditure (see section 7.5)
- A view that the current two schools operated successfully and should not therefore be reorganised
- Financial flexibility in a larger school.

The two governing bodies were able to consider the issues raised in the consultation prior to making their recommendation to proceed to the County Council. In particular, governors focussed on the operational concerns relating to the two buildings and the associated staff concerns relating to pupil behaviour.

6. Timing and organisational implications

6.1 Should the decision be taken to proceed with the amalgamation the timescale could be:

- Statutory Notices published: early May 2001
- End of Statutory Notice period: early July 2001
- If there are no objections, the Director of Education would determine the proposal: July 2001
- If there are objections, the School Organisation Committee would need to meet to consider the proposal: late July 2001
- If it is decided to amalgamate the schools, the new school would open in: January 2002

6.2 This timescale responds to the Governing Bodies' request that if the County Council decides to proceed with amalgamation, implementation is as soon as reasonably possible to minimise the period of uncertainty and to allow the two schools to start to work together.

7. Financial implications

Revenue

- 7.1 Under the arrangements for funding amalgamated schools, the new school would receive additional funding to ease the transition from two schools to one. The new school would, therefore, be funded as the equivalent of two schools for the first two years from the date of the amalgamation. In the third year, it would receive 50% of the difference between the funding of one and two schools. In the fourth and subsequent years after the date of amalgamation there would be no additional funding and the school would be funded as one school.
- 7.2 The balances, both surpluses and deficits, of the existing schools would transfer to the new primary school on amalgamation.
- 7.3 The combined budget of both schools is currently £641,212 (this excludes [a] any adjustments made to the budget due to changes in pupil numbers; and [b] any protection funding given where a fall in pupil numbers has led to a year on year drop of 5% in the school budget). The budget of any school is worked out on the basis of a School Funding Formula that takes into account the size of the school and the number of children on roll. This means that the budget can fluctuate from year to year as the numbers of children go up or down.
- 7.4 The table below gives the budget available to the new school following amalgamation. The base budget figure assumes that there will be no change to the School Funding Formula, and is based on projected pupil numbers for the schools.

Financial Year		Base budget (£)	Transition funding (£)	Total (£)
2001/02	1 st year amalgamation	633,598	13,601	647,199
2002/03	2 nd year following amalgamation	568,440	54,404	622,843
2003/04	3 rd year following amalgamation	564,185	47,603	611,789
2004/05	4 th year following amalgamation	570,273	21,666	591,940
2005/06	5 th year following amalgamation	594,221	0	594,221

7.5 Capital

It is current practice to provide capital support for amalgamations between two primary schools to a level of about £100,000 and a funding contribution at this level has been discussed with the governing bodies. The Education (CSF) budget contains an annual provision to cover the capital costs of primary amalgamations.

At this stage the actual works required have not been finalised and require further discussion with the governing bodies.

8. Conclusion

The Select Committee's views on the governors' request to proceed with this amalgamation proposal will be reported to the Cabinet and Executive Committee when they meet on 23 April, 2001.