

Report To: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 20th November 2012

Lead Member / Officer: Lead Member for Education

Report Author: Head of Customers and Education Support

Title: Review of primary school provision in the Ruthin area

1. What is the report about?

This report is to brief Members on the potential for a review of primary school provision in the Ruthin area.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

To brief Members on the main issues facing primary schools in the Ruthin area and to outline the proposed approach to the review, including outline capital implications.

3. What are the Recommendations?

To approve the review of primary school provision in the Ruthin area and the commencement of informal public consultation in February 2013.

4. Report details.

The educational performance of pupils in Denbighshire has continued to improve in recent years. However, there remains room to improve and provide the best possible education provision for pupils so they can fulfil their potential.

The school environment can affect pupil attendance and performance, and many schools in Denbighshire are in need of improvement and modernisation. The Council is committed to delivering significant improvements to our schools and school facilities so that we can transform the learning environment to support education.

As part of this commitment, it is necessary to review school provision. The area review will focus on the following objectives:

- Ensuring the sustainability of high quality education provision;
- Improving the quality of school buildings and facilities;
- Providing the right number of places, of the right type in the right location;

The authority is committed to reviewing primary school provision on an area basis, recognising the fact that changes to individual schools will impact on neighbouring schools. To date, the authority has completed reviews of primary school provision in the Prestatyn, Dee Valley East (Llangollen) and Edeyrnion (Dee Valley West) areas. The reviews have resulted in a number of changes to school provision, including

school closures, mergers and federations and have secured significant investment in those areas to improve school facilities.

Officers are recommending that the next review of primary school provision takes place in the Ruthin area, for the reasons outlined in this report.

Schools to be considered within the review area

There are 11 schools considered to be within the Ruthin area – Ysgol Borthyn, Ysgol Bro Fammau, Ysgol Clocaenog, Ysgol Cyffylliog, Ysgol Gellifor, Ysgol Llanbedr, Ysgol Llanfair D.C, Ysgol Pentrecelyn, Ysgol Pen Barras, Ysgol Rhewl and Rhos Street School.

Reasons for reviewing school provision in the Ruthin area

4.1 Standards of education

Overall education standards within the area are good with the majority of the schools receiving positive Estyn inspections in recent years. However there are a number of issues that will impact on schools ability to sustain and improve the quality of education provision in the future.

Headteacher recruitment is both a national and local issue with smaller schools in particular finding it difficult to recruit permanent headteachers. Two schools within the Ruthin review area currently have acting headteachers. The lack of a permanent headteacher can impact on leadership and management of a school and represents a risk to the delivery of education and to standards within a school.

4.2 Sustainability of schools & high quality education provision

There are a number of challenges facing schools in the Ruthin area that will impact on the sustainability of schools and the sustainability of high quality educational provision in the area. These include size, location, condition of school buildings & facilities, suitability of sites, dependence on mobile classrooms, surplus places and headteacher recruitment.

Whilst the existing facilities in the area allow for the delivery of the basic curriculum entitlement, in many instances the current environment restricts the potential to deliver the innovative curriculum required for 21st century learning.

Estyn reports published in the period 2008 to 2012 for Ruthin schools have commented on limitations observed on school sites in the Ruthin area. These include:- school buildings being spread out, with numerous classes in demountable classrooms; sharing facilities limiting the choices available to make full use of the resources on site; the use of one classroom as a dining room causing some disruption to learning; and the lack of parking spaces, particularly for dropping pupils off or picking them up.

Research undertaken illustrates clear links between student academic achievement and the quality of the physical environment. Issues such as the buildings impact on student behaviour and esteem can have positive impacts on attainment. Aside from the improvements in attainment, evidence shows improvements in the level of

attention, more on task behaviours observed and a decrease in disruptive behaviour occurs. There are also improvements in self esteem for learners and teachers, improvements in mood and motivation and fewer instances of lateness and absenteeism.

4.3 Condition of school buildings & facilities

The Council is committed to improving the quality of school buildings and facilities. All schools included within this review area are in need of investment to improve the quality of school buildings and facilities available. Across the 11 schools there is currently a maintenance backlog of approximately £1.48 million. This figure is based on the maintenance of existing buildings and does not cover any improvements to facilities.

4.4 Suitability of school sites

There are issues with a number of school sites within the review area. A number of sites are considered too small when compared against BB98 space requirements, while many are land-locked with no potential to increase the size of the site. In particular, there are a number of issues around the suitability of the current shared site between Ysgol Pen Barras and Rhos Street School in Ruthin town.

4.5 Mobile classrooms

The Council is committed to the removal of mobile accommodation from schools and where needed replacing them with permanent buildings. As of January 2012, 679 primary school places in Denbighshire were provided through mobile accommodation, equivalent to 7.9% of total primary school places within the County.

The 11 schools included in the Ruthin area have 258 places provided in mobile accommodation, equivalent to 21.3% of primary school places in the area. Mobile accommodation within the Ruthin area, as of January 2012 accounted for 38% of all primary school places provided through mobile accommodation in Denbighshire. See Appendix A for further details.

4.6 Surplus places

The Welsh Government has set every authority in Wales a target of reducing surplus places (empty places) in schools to 10%. As of January 2012, Denbighshire had 1454 surplus places in primary schools, equivalent to 16.9%.

Currently, based on September 2012 data, the 11 schools included in the Ruthin area have 279 surplus places, equivalent to 23.0%. See Appendix B for further details.

Based on September 2012 data, the authority would need to reduce the number of school places within the Ruthin area by 185 full-time places to meet the 10% surplus places target across the area.

4.7 Pupil numbers, distribution & projections

The Council has a responsibility to organise its schools to ensure that we have the right number of school places, of the right type, in the right location. In order to do this, the Council must take account of current & historical pupil numbers, pupil projections and the distribution of pupils across the area.

The situation in the Ruthin area is complicated with 11 schools serving a wide geographical area. A large proportion of pupils within the area are educated in the 3 Ruthin town schools, with the remaining pupils educated in the 8 rural schools. The situation is complicated further by the fact that a number of pupils choose not to attend their nearest suitable school.

The way forward

Should approval be granted to commence the review, an initial meeting will be held with Headteachers, Chairs of Governors and local Councillors for the review area. This meeting will be part of a four week process to help shape the informal consultation document and ensure the accuracy of any information contained within the document. Following on from this period, it is anticipated that an informal consultation period will commence in February 2013.

The informal consultation period will focus on the case for change within the area, the priorities to be addressed and on agreeing a phased approach to carrying out formal consultations on any emerging proposals.

Due to the number of schools within the review area, it is likely that a phased approach will be adopted for the review to ensure that the authority has the capacity to conduct a thorough consultation and to implement any proposals emerging from the review.

As a result of the need for significant capital investment to improve school facilities in the area and the need to reduce surplus places across Denbighshire in line with Welsh Government expectations to 10%, the authority does not consider retaining the status quo as a viable option.

The review will result in significant change to the current configuration of schools across the area. It is likely that proposals emerging following the informal consultation will include school closures, mergers and the creation of area schools. These changes would facilitate significant capital investment in the area to provide improved school buildings and facilities through a combination of new builds, extensions and refurbishments.

Timescales

Any changes to school provision will involve lengthy public consultation and may result in the publication of statutory proposals. School organisation proposals will generally be implemented following a 12-24 month period depending on the nature of each proposal. Construction projects emerging from the review would take between 12-36 months to complete depending on the size of the project.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

The review and any recommendations emerging from the review process will support the proposed Corporate Priority of 'Improving school buildings and standards for all'.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

The initial costs involved will be associated with the consultation exercise, namely the printing and posting of documents to stakeholders and any hire costs for venues etc.

Proposals emerging from the review, particularly those involving improvements to the quality of school buildings and facilities will have significant capital implications which would need to be considered and approved before being progressed.

7. What consultations have been carried out?

No consultation has been carried out to date. Should Cabinet approve the proposed review, a thorough consultation process would be carried out in line with Welsh Government recommendations and statutory procedures.

Any consultation carried out would be in line with previous area review arrangements and would include informal, formal and statutory consultation with pupils, parents, staff, Headteachers, governors, Councillors and the local communities.

8. Chief Finance Officer Statement

There are only minor costs associated with the review process and these will be met from within existing budgets. The proposals emerging from the reviews will have significant financial implications.

As the Ruthin area review is not part of the Council's 21st Century Schools Band A proposals, the Council will have to fund 100% of the capital costs associated with any proposals. It is anticipated that proposals will be considered for funding through the allocation provided within the Corporate Plan and from savings generated from the review.

9. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

There is a strong possibility that the review and any proposals arising from the review could result in adverse publicity for the Council. To minimise this risk the Council will seek to ensure clear communication with all stakeholders.

There is a possibility that the Council could raise expectations with regard to new school buildings and facilities through initiating the review, which it may not be able to deliver in the current financial climate. To minimise this risk the Council will seek to agree that a set amount of capital finance is set aside to implement the recommendations of the review.

10. Power to make the Decision

s29 School Standard and Framework Act 1998.

Modernising Education Policy Framework (approved by Cabinet January 2009)