

Report To: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 29th October 2013

Lead Member / Officer: Councillor Eryl Williams, Lead Member for Education

Report Author: Head of Customers and Education Support

Title: Faith Based Provision

1. What is the report about?

The report is to inform Cabinet Members of the findings of the formal consultation for the future of Blessed Edward Jones and St Brigid's.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

A decision will be required by Cabinet to give approval to proceed to the next stage of consultation to create a new school to serve the existing schools of Blessed Edward Jones Catholic High School and St Brigid's.

3. What are the Recommendations?

The recommendation is:-

- (i) To note the findings of the formal consultation for the closure of Blessed Edward Jones Catholic High School and St Brigid's School and the opening of a new school;
- (ii) To confirm the commitment towards working in partnership with the Catholic and Church in Wales Diocesan Authorities to deliver a new faith based school;
- (iii) To agree to develop a proposal to enable formal consultation for the building of a new faith based school to replace the existing Blessed Edward Jones Catholic High School and St Brigid's provision.

4. Report details – Blessed Edward Jones and St Brigid's.

- 4.1 The Roman Catholic and Church in Wales Diocesan bodies, in partnership with the Council has undertaken formal consultation on the proposal to close Blessed Edward Jones Catholic High School and St Brigid's as of 31st August 2014 and to establish a new joint faith school to be based on the existing sites as of the 1st September 2014. The formal consultation occurred between the 3rd June and the 22nd July 2013. The consultation included a range of meetings for stakeholders and a questionnaire to gain the views of both children and young people and of parents. We received 307 letters, 48 e-mails, 389 general response forms and 489 children and young person's response forms.

Formal Consultation Findings

- 4.2 Of the 307 letters received, 269 were from parents and residents of the Rhyl area who have concerns over the location of the new school. In respect of e-mails the majority received were from parents and residents more closely associated with St Brigid's. From the 48 e-mails received 34 were entirely negative about the current proposal with 19 responses suggesting investment in the status quo. In these responses the overwhelming majority raised concerns over the two phased approach of operating as a single school over two sites prior to any agreement to proceed to a new school. In particular views were expressed that the main benefits of the overall proposal related to the second phase and that the proposals did not articulate clear benefits in respect of teaching and learning during the first phase.
- 4.3 The Response forms generated the largest response overall. From the 389 general form responses received, 91% were opposed to the proposal. Of those who answered the question as to whether they would send their child to the new dual site school:
- 65.5% responded that they don't know;
 - 13.8% responded that they would;
 - 20.7% stated that they wouldn't.
- 4.4 We had 489 responses from children and young people. In response to the question "How do you feel about St Brigid's and Blessed Edward Jones becoming 1 school in 2 parts?" pupils were asked to summarise their views and feelings. The analysis of these comments included the following points which were expressed within their overall response:
- 331 were opposed to the proposal
 - 79 were in favour of the proposal
 - 48 Neither in favour nor against the proposal/unsure
 - 37 Having two sites will be difficult/impossible
- 4.5 Following the conclusion of the consultation period the promoters have considered all of the comments received. This process has included careful consideration of the merits of proceeding with the proposal against whether to consider an alternative proposal to meet the long term vision of a new shared faith school.
- 4.6 The promoters are concerned as to: whether the proposed implementation is still achievable; the impact that any delays may have upon short and medium term sustainability for the two schools, particularly around leadership and management; and whether by proceeding to the second phase – building a new school, a shorter timescale can be achieved for implementing the overall vision for the project.
- 4.7 At present neither schools have a permanent Headteacher. The Headteacher at Blessed Edward Jones left for another post in early 2013 whilst the Headteacher of St Brigid's left in July 2013. This leaves both schools with Acting Headteachers. The anticipated timescales for implementing Phase 1

may result in both schools operating with Acting Headteachers until September 2014 or more realistically until September 2015 before a permanent Headteacher would be appointed upon the creation of a new school.

- 4.8 Whilst the provisional performance results in 2013 for Level 2 (GCSE) from Blessed Edward Jones have shown improvements, there are concerns that declining results at St Brigid's over the last three years has begun to emerge as a trend rather than a blip. Performance at Level 2 (GCSE) whilst still being the highest in the County has declined for the second year running. For A Level performance St Brigid's has dropped from being the highest performer at A* to C grade in 2010 to the position of third out of six within the County. Whilst it is still the highest performer for pupils achieving A* to A grades, for those pupils achieving A* grade its performance is the lowest of the 6 schools and is below the Denbighshire and Wales average. Clearly there is a need for Education Services to work very closely with both schools to implement the required support in advance of any structural changes to the school.
- 4.9 On balance the promoters have considered whether the achievement of the first phase (operating as a single school on two sites), was essential to achieve the wider vision of the project, (operating as a single school on a single site). Predominantly the potential risks could be seen to outweigh the benefits which were essentially around organisation and management within the schools. The emerging view is that the main aim of the project, a single school on a single site would not be significantly compromised by a revised approach. It is possible that benefits could actually occur from acceleration to Phase 2 and with the necessary support there will be fewer changes in the interim, offering more stability and only one big change rather than two changes, one after the other.

The Way Forward

- 4.10 To move forward the Diocesan authorities, in partnership with the Council, would seek to develop a proposal for a single site school. The initial view, that both schools by themselves remaining in isolation are not sustainable long term, still holds strong. Also all promoters strongly hold the view that simply investing in the status quo would not represent value for money. Therefore it is important at this stage for all promoters to reaffirm this position. From a Denbighshire perspective the need to maintain a faith secondary school presence is still considered as a priority.
- 4.11 In discussions with the Diocesan authorities it is clear that clarity is required regarding what is faith education within Denbighshire. At present Blessed Edward Jones comes under the jurisdiction of the Wrexham Catholic Diocese and delivers a Catholic Education including receiving Section 50 Inspections which report on religious education, collective worship, the spiritual, moral, social and cultural education of the children and the school's ethos. St Brigid's is currently a school which is designated as a school whose religious character is Roman Catholic. However the school is under the control of the St Brigid's Trust and is not formally recognised by the Catholic Diocesan Authority nor is

it subject to a Section 50 Inspection. The designation of a religious character does not determine whether or not the school is a Roman Catholic Church school according to canon law.

- 4.12 In addition, expanding the size of existing schools would have implications for the overall strategic direction of the delivery of secondary education in Denbighshire. Welsh Government guidance states *“it should not normally be necessary to provide additional places at schools when there are others of the same type with surplus places within reasonable distance”*. In such a scenario it is difficult to develop a strategic argument for retaining both schools and expanding St Brigid’s without considering the potential negative impact on Blessed Edward Jones and Denbigh High School which could occur.
- 4.13 It is also important to consider the potential wider implications which may arise from any revised approach to the overall aims of the project (i.e. delivering a new school on one site to replace two existing schools in a poor condition) upon other projects within the overall Modernising Education Programme. Any increase in costs for this project could lead to the need to identify an associated reduction in scale to the other projects to be supported by the 21st Century Schools Programme and any potential projects which have been identified to be funded locally by Denbighshire as part of the Corporate Plan. This could also have implications for future reviews of primary provision to meet growing demand particularly in the North of the County.
- 4.14 The initial focus on discussions would be to confirm the proposed age range, size and location of the new school. These discussions will also include full consideration of the options for how the demand for primary age faith education would fit with the Secondary provision.
- 4.15 There would also be a need to submit to the Welsh Government the Strategic Outline Case (SOC) for the new school to enable the Council to secure an approval “in principle” for the funding for the new school. The purpose of the SOC will be to demonstrate, to the Welsh Government as the funding partner for 21st Century Schools, that the proposal has a clear strategic fit in that investment will further the aims and objectives of the organisation and a clear rationale for making the investment in respect of the case for change. The SOC will need to consider all options, ranging from the “do minimum” i.e. maintain status quo and leave to deteriorate; “preferred way forward” i.e. perceived best available option and “real alternative(s)” i.e. more and / or less ambitious and different approach. The SOC will therefore be required to demonstrate why the preferred way forward will deliver the required changes to ensure a sustainable provision for faith secondary provision by condensing investment into one site and would be likely to cost less than the level of investment to upgrade both sites both from a capital perspective in the short term and from a revenue perspective long term.
- 4.16 Following the agreement of the discussions outlined in paragraph 4.14 the SOC will be prepared and submitted to the Welsh Government for their consideration. It is anticipated that this will occur during the Spring of 2014. An approval of the SOC by the Welsh Government would allow a grant letter

to be issued for the estimated “Funding envelope” for the project. Any such award would be subject to the further development of the outline and full business case. It is anticipated that this would be progressed prior to the publication of any further consultation proposals.

- 4.17 Upon the completion of this work the Council in partnership with the Diocesan Authorities would be able to consider whether to commence formal consultation on a preferred proposal for the new school. It is anticipated that this consultation would occur during the Summer of 2014. This revised approach would allow this consultation to take place 12 months sooner than initially anticipated. Therefore, subject to confirmation of funding streams, the revised approach could lead to the new school building being delivered within a shorter time period, possibly by September 2018.
- 4.18 This approach has been supported by both Diocesan Authorities.
- 4.19 During this interim period, and prior to the opening of a new school there will be a need to ensure that full support can be provided to Blessed Edward Jones and St Brigid’s to ensure stability. This will include providing appropriate support and guidance in partnership with the Wrexham Diocese and St Brigid’s Trust. It is important to note that during this period although the St Asaph Church in Wales Diocese would not have direct involvement in the management of both schools, they would be expected to play a significant role in the planning for the new school.

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

The proposal supports the priority of “Improving performance in education and the quality of our school buildings” and has been highlighted as a workstream as follows:

“We will continue to review school provision across the County to ensure that we provide the right number of school places, of the right type, in the right location.”

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

Should the recommendation be approved there will be a need to undertake feasibility work on the potential sites and then the preferred site. This work will be undertaken by staff from Finance and Assets. The costs for this work will be met from the existing allocations for 21st Century Schools and Modernising Education within the Council’s Capital Programme.

7. What are the main conclusions of the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) undertaken on the decision? The completed EqIA template should be attached as an appendix to the report.

- 7.1 The EqIA undertaken on the proposal suggested that there would be minimal impact in respect of the first phase of the proposal. The development of a joint faith provision could be seen to promote greater inclusion and provide an

improved educational offer (Anglican Secondary education) which has not previously been available within Denbighshire. A revised EqIA will be required and developed as part of the revised proposal.

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

Full consultation has been undertaken with all stakeholders and the findings from the Formal Consultation period are summarised in the main body of the report.

The proposals within the report are supported by both Dioceses. The Diocese of Wrexham deeply regrets that St Brigid's will not travel with us in respect of the proposals for a joint shared faith school in Denbighshire. With that significant regret noted, the Diocese of Wrexham supports a move directly to Phase 2, but only with a full commitment to:

- Maximise the NOR of the proposed shared school
- Achieving consensus on the preferred location
- A full consideration of both Primary and Post 16 options; and
- A clear understanding of the LA's strategy for St Brigid's, which explicitly cannot be one that undermines the development and eventual establishment of a new shared faith school

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

The cost of the formal consultation is not thought to be significant and should be contained within existing resources. The outcome may ultimately lead to significant capital investment by the council as part of the 21st Century Schools Programme which is included in the Corporate Plan. The consultation will inform the detailed business case which will be subject to the council's approval process for all capital expenditure.

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

There is a strong possibility that the proposal could result in adverse publicity for the Council and in adverse public comments.

To minimise this risk the Council will seek to ensure clear communication with all stakeholders.

11 Power to make the Decision

School Standards and Organisations (Wales) Act 2013
Modernising Education Policy Framework (approved by Cabinet January 2009)