

By: Director - Operations

To: School Organisation Advisory Board – 14 June 2007

Subject: PROPOSED AMALGAMATION OF ELLINGTON SCHOOL FOR GIRLS AND THE HERESON SCHOOL, RAMSGATE

Classification: Unrestricted

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Summary: This report seeks the views of the School Organisation Advisory Board on whether to go to public consultation on the proposal to amalgamate Ellington School for Girls and The Hereson School, Ramsgate with effect from 1 September 2008.

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## **Introduction**

1. (1) The overall long-term decline in pupil numbers in the secondary sector in Thanet is set to continue over the next few years. In January 2007 the net capacity of Thanet secondary schools was 9884. At that time there were 9207 pupils in Thanet secondary schools producing a surplus capacity of 677 pupils (6.8%). Over the next 7-8 years rolls will continue to fall as the significant and sustained drop in primary rolls feeds through into the secondary sector (see Appendix 1). By 2015-16 it is estimated that there will be 8179 pupils at secondary schools in Thanet producing a surplus capacity of 1705 (approximately 17.3%) across the district.

(2) In addition to the challenges of falling rolls, schools are facing the need to respond to the 14-19 agenda which places greater emphasis on innovative curriculum development, providing enhanced vocational provision, personalised learning and developing collaborative strategies to deliver a broader range of learning opportunities at a local level. In Thanet, the secondary schools have a good track record of collaboration and this is already delivering enhanced benefit for learners.

(3) Thanet has been identified as an early beneficiary from the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) Programme. This should deliver major capital investment in the physical infrastructure of secondary provision by 2010/11.

(4) Within the context of BSF, discussions have been taking place for some time with secondary headteachers in Thanet about the secondary provision which is required to meet the needs of the district over the long term. The plans which emerge from these discussions will need to inform submissions to the BSF programme and will also need to address the organisational challenges facing secondary schools, including the impact of falling rolls.

(5) This proposal seeks to reduce high school capacity in Ramsgate in line with the projected long-term need for the area and to consolidate high school provision on a single site enabling both boys and girls age 11-16 to have access to the excellent facilities which are soon to be available to Ellington School for Girls following the relocation of that school to the new Pysons Road site from June 2007.

## **Background**

2. (1) Roll projections based on historic patterns of pupil distribution and taking account of demographic factors and local development suggest a long-term need in Ramsgate for a 4FE high school intake in Ramsgate, or an annual intake of 120 pupils.

(2) Currently each of the two Ramsgate high schools has a nominal 4FE intake but is actually admitting significantly below its published Admissions Number (PAN) of 120 (see Appendix 2).

(3) Appendix 2 shows the year group roll data for both schools and the number of places allocated at each school for September 2007. Over the medium-long term neither school would be viable without a substantial and sustained increase in its annual intake. This is not a realistic prospect given the long-term roll projections for the district.

(4) Ellington school for Girls is being relocated onto a new purpose built site at Pysons Road. This has been delivered as part of a Private Finance Initiative (PFI). The new Ellington buildings provide first-class accommodation for up to 600 pupils (11-16) which would enable the school to admit an annual intake of 120 pupils (4FE). It is clear from the significant reduction in Year 7 admissions over the last two years and the continuing decline in secondary pupil numbers across Thanet that realistically neither Ellington nor The Hereson will be able to achieve or sustain this level of intake by themselves.

(5) Secondary schools of less than 4FE encounter significant challenges in organising and delivering the National Curriculum. If, as is predicted, both Ellington and The Hereson School were to become 2FE schools over the medium-long term they would no longer be viable educationally in their own right.

(6) Both Ellington and The Hereson are good schools with considerable strengths and strong community links. Realistically, the best way of securing sustainable good quality high school provision within Ramsgate over the long term is to amalgamate the schools retaining the strengths of each within a viable 4FE school, providing excellent facilities for all. The new site of Ellington School for Girls suitably adapted, offers the opportunity to realise this goal.

## **The Proposal**

3. (1) The proposal is to amalgamate Ellington School for Girls and The Hereson School by closing both schools and immediately opening a newly amalgamated school with effect from 1 September 2008, creating a new 4FE school with a PAN of 120 serving both boys and girls age 11-16.

(2) At the point of amalgamation in September 2008, there would be an estimated 783 pupils on the combined roll of both schools. The roll will reduce naturally over a 2-year period as the larger year groups at the top end of the school are replaced by smaller year groups coming in at Year 7.

(3) It is therefore proposed to manage the amalgamation in a phased and sensible way by adopting a 2-year transition period from 2008-2010. The new Year 7 plus years 8 and 9 at The Hereson would move onto the Ellington site in September 2008. The Hereson year groups 10 and 11 would stay on the existing Hereson site, thereby providing stability for the critical GCSE year groups. This would mean that the combined numbers on the new Ellington site would remain well within the physical capacity of the new accommodation.

## **Accommodation Issues**

4. (1) The availability of the new Ellington site at Pysons Road provides an opportunity to improve the quality of the learning environment for students of both schools while addressing the urgent implications of falling rolls.

(2) The new school would provide the capacity for a 4FE high school which is the projected long-term need. It is however, recognised that adaptations to the new buildings would be required to enable the school to cater for both boys and girls. Subject to the proposal being approved adaptations would be undertaken so that the new buildings could cater for a mixed intake from September 2008. A detailed feasibility study will be undertaken to ascertain exactly what work would need to be undertaken.

(3) If the proposal is not implemented Ellington School for Girls faces the prospect of an uncertain future with falling rolls, reduced funding, excess surplus capacity and difficulty in delivering the National Curriculum, which will threaten standards.

(4) Many of these challenges would also face The Hereson School. In terms of accommodation, without the prospect of relocating to the Ellington site The Hereson School would be dependent on securing funding through the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme in order to secure significantly better buildings and facilities. BSF funding will become available to Thanet secondary schools over the next 2-3 years. However, all BSF proposals are subject to rigorous internal and external scrutiny to ensure that they meet Value for Money (VFM) criteria. It is difficult to see how a robust VFM case could be established in the context of falling rolls with an uncertain future for The Hereson School. The school would not be viable long term as a stand alone 2FE institution.

## **Views of the Governing Bodies and Headteachers**

5. Both governing bodies have adopted a realistic and positive approach to the challenges facing the two schools. The headteachers have also recognised the potential benefits of amalgamation and have written to parents explaining the context of the early discussions which have taken place about the possibility of amalgamation and the timescale which could be followed.

## **Resource Implications**

### *Capital*

6. (1) Over the medium-long term the consolidation of high school provision in Ramsgate onto the Pysons Road site offers the most cost-effective solution to the challenges facing the locality. There would be a modest cost to adapt the existing site to cater for boys as well as girls. This cannot be quantified precisely in advance of a feasibility study.

(2) By 2010 when the consolidation onto Pysons Road is completed, The Hereson site could be released to realise a capital receipt.

### *Revenue*

(3) Amalgamation would reduce revenue costs over the medium-long term. The precise implications cannot be quantified in advance of decisions which would be taken by the interim governing body in relation to the staffing needs of the new school.

## *Human*

(4) A new staffing structure would be required for the newly amalgamated school and a single headteacher would need to be appointed. The precise implications for staff would depend on decisions to be taken by the interim governing body. However, the potential threat to job security comes from a continuing decline in pupil numbers rather than the prospect of amalgamation, as schools seek to manage the financial and staffing implications of reduced rolls.

## **Equalities**

7. (1) Neither school has large numbers of pupils from religious or ethnic minorities. Potentially, the significant implication for all pupils in terms of equality is the issue of perceived loss of single-sex high school provision.

(2) Some parents would undoubtedly argue for the maintenance of single-sex provision in the interests of diversity and choice. However, this potential demand has to be considered within the context of pupil numbers, cost effective use of resources and educational viability. Within this context there is no realistic option for maintaining autonomous single-sex high school provision in Ramsgate.

(3) In terms of the impact on educational standards, research findings are both variable and inconclusive. There is no definitive evidence that single-sex schools achieve better results overall than schools catering for both boys and girls.

(4) Nevertheless, there is some evidence that some pupils do better in some subject areas when single-sex teaching is available. Moreover, the issues of choice and diversity must be addressed. Within the context of a mixed annual intake of c.120 pupils it would be possible to organise the curriculum in a way which retained both diversity and flexibility enabling single-sex teaching where appropriate according to the professional judgement of the headteacher. Although this must remain a management issue for the school itself, the local authority would strongly support and encourage this development.

## **Transport and Environmental Impact including Community**

8. (1) The dot maps attached at Appendices 3 and 4 demonstrate that the two schools serve virtually the same geographic catchment. The Pysons Road site is approximately 1.3 miles from The Hereson site and 1.5 miles from the former Ellington site. A newly amalgamated school would continue to serve the same community, maintaining viable high school provision within Ramsgate for local people.

### *Transport and Environmental Implications*

(2) The overall number of pupils who would be located on the new Pysons Road site would be no more than was originally envisaged for the Ellington Girls School, that is 4FE, approximately 600 pupils.

(3) The Hereson School is actually closer to the new site than the existing Ellington School. Initial consultations with the Highways and Transport Integration Unit suggest that there would be minimal implications for non-public service transport. Over the 2-year transition period it may be necessary to consider the rescheduling of existing bus services to accommodate the phased migration away from The Hereson School to the Pysons Road site. Given the close proximity and modest number of pupils it is anticipated that these arrangements would be both manageable and unproblematic. Further detailed work is planned subject to public consultation proceeding.

## **School Improvement Implications**

9. (1) Both schools have had positive Ofsted inspections within the last twelve months and both schools perform well above the national average in value-added terms which takes account of pupil progress through the secondary phase of education.

(2) Bringing the two schools together would create a school which is viable and sustainable in educational terms. The risk to standards is in not proceeding and allowing the two schools to wither on the vine as numbers and funding reduce, leading to consequential cuts in staffing, reduced organisational flexibility and ultimately severe restrictions on curriculum delivery and the quality of provision.

## **Secondary Strategy**

10. (1) The proposal is entirely compatible with the main tenets of the Kent Secondary Strategy, the key elements of which are published within the Kent School Organisation Plan. The overall aim of the Secondary Strategy as set out in the plan is to “transform secondary education, to enable schools to develop according to their individual ethos, special character and areas of specialist expertise”.

(2) A key element of the plan is the development and implementation of a strategy for 14-19, whereby schools will offer a broader range of subject choice embracing vocational options and equipping young people with the skills and knowledge needed for continuation of their learning, employment and adult life. Without consolidation of high school provision in Ramsgate, Ellington and The Hereson schools would find it impossible to deliver the varied curriculum offer required by the strategy, as rolls continue to decline and organisational and curriculum flexibility become increasingly restricted.

(3) Ellington School for Girls has recently secured accreditation as a specialist school in the Humanities. This accreditation takes effect from September 2007. The accreditation is transferable to the new school which would therefore be well placed to build on and develop existing strengths, enriching diversity and choice at a local level.

(4) The Hereson School has a special unit currently catering for 9 pupils with specific learning difficulties. Special units attached to mainstream schools are currently the subject of a separate County-wide review. However, subject to the outcome of that review there is no reason why the newly amalgamated school could not retain the existing specialist provision potentially catering for both boys and girls.

(5) The consolidation of high school provision in Ramsgate within a viable 4FE school would over the medium-long term improve the potential for recruitment and retention of staff, given that staffing structures may be planned on the basis of relatively stable pupil numbers rather than the management of decline on a year by year basis.

(6) Securing the viability of local high school provision for the long-term also supports the notion of developing community schools serving local people and being responsive to local need.

## **The Education and Inspection Act 2006**

11. The School Organisation and Inspection Act 2006 introduces a number of new provisions and regulations which affect the decision making process and the potential

timescale for securing a decision in relation to school organisation proposals. The key elements of the Act which impact upon this proposal are:

- (a) Kent School Organisation Committee (KSOC) is abolished w.e.f. 25 May 2007.
- (b) Any proposal to establish a new school requires the promoter (in this case KCC) to publish a competition proposal – effectively an invitation to any interested parties to run the new school. This notice has to run publicly for 4 months to determine whether or not any other provider is able and willing to assume this role.
- (c) The Local Authority can apply to the Secretary of State for an exemption to the need to go to external competition.
- (d) Before the Local Authority publishes a statutory proposal for the establishment of a new community school it has to apply to the Secretary of State for permission to do so.
- (e) Where the Local Authority is itself the promoter of a proposal to establish a new community school, the final determination has to be made by the independent Schools Adjudicator.

## Timetable

12. (1) Given the need to address the issue of falling rolls as a matter of urgency and taking account of the availability of the new Ellington school building, there is a need to move ahead as quickly as possible with this proposal. It is proposed therefore to submit an application for exemption from the need to go to external competition. Depending on whether such an exemption is granted there would be two possible timetables for moving the proposal forward. These are set out below:

SOAB (1)	14 June
Public Consultation begins	15 June
Application for Exemption from Competition Regulations submitted to Secretary of State	25 May
Public Meeting	2 July
Public Consultation ends	27 July
Decision by Secretary of State on Exemption from Competition	End of July
SOAB (2)	5 September

If exemption from competition is granted the following timetable would apply:

Cabinet Member Decision to issue Public Notice subject to S.O.S. approval	September 2007
Application to Secretary of State for approval To Publish Proposal for a New School	September 2007
Public Notice Issued	7 September 2007
Public Notice Expires	19 October 2007
Referral to External Adjudicator	By End October 2007
Adjudicator Determines Proposal	By End November 2007

If exemption is not granted re: the competition regulations then the timetable would be:

Cabinet Member Decision to Proceed to Competition	September 2007
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First Competition Notice Published (subject to Cabinet Members agreement)	28 September 2007
Competition Notice Expires	28 January 2008
Responses to the competition notice evaluated against the published specification	February 2008

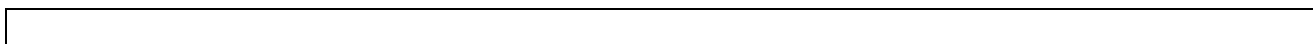
*Arrangements have yet to be agreed for evaluating proposals received in response to the competition notice. Further guidance is awaited.*

Second competition notice published Including all proposals submitted in response to the first notice and any KCC proposal – subject to KCC Members agreement.	Early March – Mid April 2008 (6 weeks)
Referral to adjudicator	Mid April 2008
Outcome of adjudication	By Early June 2008

Clearly if the exemption from competition is not granted, a final decision cannot realistically be anticipated until late May/early June 2008. This would mean that the implementation date for the amalgamation would have to be postponed to September 2009. This would therefore be the published date in the first competition notice.

## **Conclusion**

13. The proposed amalgamation of Ellington School for Girls and The Hereson School would secure high quality, sustainable high school provision for the local community over the long-term. All pupils would have access to high quality facilities and the new school would have the critical mass of human and financial resources to offer a diverse range of flexible learning opportunities responsive to local need. Within a single amalgamated school it would be entirely possible to retain elements of single-sex provision where appropriate. The new school would therefore build on the strengths and traditions of the two existing schools while offering first class facilities and opportunities for local learners.



14. Members of SOAB are asked to express their views on moving to public consultation on the proposed amalgamation of Ellington School for Girls and The Hereson School in accordance with the proposal and timescale set out in this report.

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Background Documents:

*None*