

By: Director - Operations

To: School Organisation Advisory Board – 18 April 2007

Subject: BOUGHTON-UNDER-BLEAN METHODIST (VOLUNTARY CONTROLLED) PRIMARY SCHOOL AND DUNKIRK VILLAGE PRIMARY SCHOOL - PROPOSED AMALGAMATION

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report seeks the views of the School Organisation Advisory Board on the proposal to undertake a public consultation on the amalgamation of Dunkirk Village Primary School with Boughton-under-Blean Methodist (Voluntary Controlled) Primary School.

Introduction

1. (1) Dunkirk Village School is a small rural community school designated under Section 70 of the Education Act 2005 as a 'rural primary school'. The school is situated 4.4 miles outside Faversham, and is federated with Boughton-under-Blean Methodist (Voluntary Controlled) Primary School 1.2 miles away. Attached as Appendices 1 & 2 are maps showing the home locations of the pupils attending the schools in September 2006. Dunkirk has a published admission number of 15 and a net capacity of 105 while Boughton has a published admission number of 30 and a net capacity of 207.

(2) The schools draw their pupils from the communities of Boughton and Dunkirk and from further afield. Currently only 17% (21) of the pupils living locally choose to attend Dunkirk school. Boughton school attracts a higher percentage of local pupils, but still admits from Faversham and the surrounding villages. Both schools have pupils from a range of social backgrounds. Free school meals are claimed by 11.3% of pupils at Dunkirk and by 4.3% at Boughton. There are 59 pupils on roll at Dunkirk (January 2007) and therefore 44% surplus capacity. At Boughton there are 203 pupils on roll and therefore a surplus capacity of 1.93%. The September 2007 intake of Year R pupils is expected to be 22 at Boughton and only 1 at Dunkirk. There is early years provision on the site of each school. Two private providers run daily provision for 2-4 year olds at Boughton and at Dunkirk.

(3) The school is situated in Boughton and Courtenay Ward (the 3rd largest geographically in Kent). The ward has 293 0-4 year olds giving it the 24th lowest density of 0-4 year olds in the 283 wards in Kent. This is the most easterly ward in Swale and forms the entire boundary with the Canterbury District.

(4) In 2006 the two schools were federated led by one headteacher in the expectation that this would bring benefits to both schools and in particular support the smaller school (Dunkirk). There is evidence that the federation has led to important improvements, but it has not had the effect of encouraging more pupils to choose Dunkirk. The intake expected in Year R (1 child) will mean that next September the total roll at Dunkirk will be 47 at most.

(5) The schools are situated 1.2 miles apart and the nearest surrounding schools are also village schools (Graveney Primary School, Selling CE (VC) Primary School and Hernhill CE (VC) Primary School). Table 1 shows the distances from Dunkirk Village School to the other local schools.

Table 1: Distance from Dunkirk Village School to other local schools

Distance as the crow flies	School	Distance by road
Within 1 mile	None	
Within 2 miles	Boughton-under Blean Methodist (VC) Hernhill CE (VC) Primary School	1.2 miles 2.6 miles
Within 3 miles	Graveney Primary School Selling CE (VC) Primary School	4.3 miles 3.6 miles

(6) Table 2 shows the historic roll data for Dunkirk and Boughton schools over the last 6 years.

Table 2: Historic roll data (January count)

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Dunkirk	71	70	58	62	54	59
Boughton	195	202	201	190	192	203

(7) Table 3 shows the pupil numbers by Year group in Dunkirk and Boughton schools. In January 2007 Dunkirk had 59 pupils on roll (therefore 43.8% surplus capacity), and Boughton had 203 (1.93% surplus)

Table 3: Numbers in Dunkirk and Boughton schools as at January 2007

Year group	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Dunkirk	9	6	5	9	11	6	13	59
Boughton	30	24	30	31	28	31	29	203

(8) Appendix 3 lists primary schools located within 3 miles of Dunkirk, and shows actual rolls as of January 2007 and forecast rolls until January 2011. It should be noted that many of these children live closer to Canterbury than to Dunkirk, and parents choose to send their children to schools in Canterbury.

Background Information

2. (1) Dunkirk School has a capacity for 105 pupils but has had a low roll over recent years, and its standards have been a source of considerable concern to the Local Authority. The school was placed in the serious weaknesses category by Ofsted in May 2005. Both the leadership of the school and the quality of teaching have improved during the past two years. Pupil attainment on entry to the school is well below average and standards throughout the school have been low. Current staff continue to deal with the residual problems following the past inadequate teaching and poor leadership which led the school into serious weaknesses. Pupils are therefore still catching up with aspects of their learning. The federation with Boughton School has been of considerable benefit in effecting improvements in the quality of education provided for Dunkirk pupils but the impact of the falling roll means that only two classes will run for September 2007, despite considerable marketing. This will place at least three year groups in each class, and will adversely impact on the school's capacity to continue to improve its standards.

(2) Boughton School has capacity for 207 pupils and is a popular school, usually filling to capacity. As a voluntary controlled school it works within a Christian ethos with a Methodist presence on the governing body. The school has made substantial improvements in its standards and in pupil achievement. The leadership and management, including governance is strong. The headteacher is also headteacher of Dunkirk, since federation. Parents have confidence in the school and positive views about it. The school currently has a large building project which will remove mobile accommodation in favour of new permanent buildings. This work is due for completion in February 2008. The falling primary intakes in the area are likely to impact on Boughton, and the Year R numbers are set to drop in September 2007.

(3) The federation formed between Dunkirk and Boughton had the main aim of raising the quality of education provided for the children at both schools. Although progress has been made there are ongoing concerns about the long-term viability of Dunkirk. In particular, recruitment and retention of high quality staff remains an issue. The reduction to two classes will also hinder progress.

(4) The federated governing body has unanimously agreed to ask the Local Authority to consult on amalgamation of the two schools on the Boughton site. Boughton School is undergoing a modernisation programme to remove 5 mobile classrooms and replace them with permanent build. Governors wish to launch the updated and modernised buildings by offering the facilities to all children in the federation from April 2008. Governors recognise the strengths of both schools in the federation but believe the children attending Dunkirk School do not receive the same quality of educational experience as the children at Boughton because:

(a) the continued fall in pupil numbers means that Dunkirk can only support two classes from September 2007. Children will therefore be taught in mixed age classes covering at least three year groups, and across Key Stages.

(b) the accommodation although improved cannot compare with the facilities at Boughton.

(c) Dunkirk Village School continues to find it very difficult to recruit and retain staff with the necessary skills and expertise to work in a mixed age environment.

(d) many children at Dunkirk need additional support which requires the regular movement of staff and pupils from one site to the other.

(5) Governors are anxious to provide equality of treatment for all pupils within the federation and believe that this will only be possible by locating everyone at Boughton.

(6) A meeting has been held with parents from both schools in the federation to discuss the plans for renovation at Boughton and to put forward the governors' ideas for the future. Governors wish to launch the updated and modernised Boughton School and offer the facilities to all children in the federation from April 2008. Parents welcomed the opportunity to discuss the governors' wish to amalgamate and there was broad agreement with the idea.

School Buildings

Dunkirk School

3. (1) The school occupies a largely Victorian building with some small extensions dating from the 1960s. There are two mobile classrooms in good condition. The former School House has been occupied by the school to provide additional storage and office accommodation. The overall condition of the school is fair but parts lack heating and suffer damp problems. The slate roof was renewed in 2003. There has been internal and some external decoration. Landlord expenditure has also recently been incurred on external repairs, damp-proofing and a fire exit. This has addressed the most serious health and safety problems but more expenditure would be required to bring the premises up to a good standard.

(2) The accommodation does not meet the demands of a primary setting. For example, the former School House is wired for domestic use and parts are unheated. Generally heating is poor and a complete central heating system is required throughout the school. There are ongoing damp problems and these can only be completely resolved with improved heating. The hall is two former classrooms and is unsuitable for delivering the PE curriculum. The general classroom in the main building is undersized and the only good sized rooms are the two mobile classrooms. All of the administrative accommodation is undersized and unsuitable. The school is not Disability Discrimination Act compliant and would be difficult to adapt, especially the former School House. Probably the only way of way tackling all of the problems would be to convert the School House for storage, adapt most of the current school for administration and extend with permanent classrooms.

(3) The site is owned by KCC and is a good size for a small school (0.8ha) and includes an adequate playing field (0.5ha). Access from the main road (former A2) is restricted and there is little parking on site. No discussions with planners have taken place but it is considered likely that consent for residential conversion of the old premises would be possible and a capital receipt in the region of £500k could be achieved. There might also be scope for residential redevelopment of the tarpaved area, so a larger receipt might be possible. The title has been investigated and there appears to be a reverter on part of the site. The original vendors have not been traced but there is a covenant on some of the land that it should be used for a school for the poor of Dunkirk. This needs further investigation to see if proceeds of the sale could be used for other educational provision in the area. There are also ongoing discussions about possible alternative educational use of the site.

Boughton

(4) Currently the school occupies an Edwardian main building with classroom extensions dating from the 1960's. There are 5 temporary hutted and mobile classrooms. With the planned modernisation programme the accommodation will be significantly improved. Appendix 4 (a-c) shows the projected improvements.

(5) The refurbishment of two Key Stage 1 classrooms and the replacement of temporary accommodation by a new build extension will provide four additional Key Stage 2 classrooms and a reception classroom with a covered play area. Each classroom will be equipped with interactive whiteboards, storage, wet area, reading area and a shared external teaching space.

(6) The proposed reorganisation of the administration area within the Edwardian building will include a formal reception area for greeting parents and visitors on entry, a headteacher's office, a group meeting area, resource and stationery storage and staff and disabled washrooms. Additionally there will be a care suite which will make the school fully Disability Discrimination Act compliant.

The Proposal

4. (1) The proposal is to locate pupils from both schools on the Boughton site, and in future to provide a 1 form entry school to serve the local community of Boughton and Dunkirk. In 2007-08 the year groups will be of different sizes to accommodate both school rolls as follows:

Year R	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
23	39	30	35	40	39	37

These year groups will be organised to ensure that no Key Stage 1 pupils are taught in a class of more than 30, and that where possible smaller classes are created. This will call for some temporary accommodation during this phase, but from September 2008 the intake will be at 30 pupils. This will remove 105 places from the locality in line with the Primary Strategy recommendation number 27.

(2) The decision of the governors to request amalgamation of the two schools has been taken in the light of the falling roll and at Dunkirk the realisation that the school cannot sustain or improve the necessary quality of education for its pupils. The Local Authority staff all of whom have worked closely with the school, support this conclusion. Amalgamation on the Boughton site will mean closure of Dunkirk School and temporary accommodation at Boughton during the passage of current pupils through the school. The plans will ensure that class sizes are appropriate.

(3) There is a presumption against closure of any rural school, unless it can be demonstrated, amongst other things, that the school does not provide a good education for its pupils and that its community does not support it. In the case of Dunkirk Primary the governors have concluded that despite all the efforts made, they cannot ensure that the school will be able to offer an appropriate experience for its children. The school has not yet been removed from the serious weaknesses category.

(4) There has been a school in the village for many years, but there are no longer local children to sustain the roll. The total number (from ages 4-11 years) likely to attend in September is 47, of which a substantial number live nearer Boughton than Dunkirk. If the school were to remain open it could not sustain more than two classes.

(5) There are no extended school facilities at Dunkirk. All attempts to establish these have failed because of low numbers. Amalgamation would mean that Dunkirk families could access provision at the new school.

(6) The proposal to amalgamate the schools is in line with Kent's Primary Strategy. If it continues Dunkirk School will be financially unviable and the quality of education it can offer will be unacceptable.

Views of the Governing Body

5. The governors have all accepted that Dunkirk school cannot offer its pupils an appropriate education. They propose amalgamation because they believe that to continue with two separate schools would not be in the best interests of the children, and have reached this decision after very careful and thorough consideration of all the issues. They are especially concerned about the disparity of provision across the two schools in the federation.

Views of the Local Member

6. Mr A Bowles, the local Member, is aware of the issues and although he always regrets the possibility of a school closure, feels it is important to focus on the best interests of those pupils currently in Dunkirk as well as those in the local area as a whole.

Views of the Parish Councils

7. The headteacher has had initial discussions with the chair of Dunkirk Parish Council and with the whole of Boughton Parish Council. Both meetings were positive and the parish councils will be formally consulted as part of the process.

Views of the Cluster Board

8. The Rural Swale Cluster Board is fully supportive of the proposal to amalgamate Boughton-under-Blean Primary with Dunkirk Village School. Amalgamation will ensure parity of education provision and long term security of school places for children of both local communities.

Views of the Methodist visitor

9. The Methodist regional representative is initially positive and will meet with national representatives to discuss the proposal.

Resource Implications

Capital

10. (1) The sale of the Dunkirk site could realise a capital receipt of £500k. See section 3 (3).

Revenue

(2) The average annual cost of funding a pupil at Dunkirk Primary School is £3,885 against a Kent average of £2,819 (2006/7).

(3) The average annual cost of funding a pupil at Boughton-under-Blean Primary School is £2,550 against a Kent average of £2,819 (2006/7).

(4) The proposed amalgamation would be eligible for support from the re-organisation fund. This is one off funding made up of the following:

- Protection of Caretaking time 2 X £5,554 = £11,108
- Curriculum protection (£2,514 + £44,712) X 2 = £94,452
- One off lump sum £6,700.
- Plus £2,700 per planned class in each curriculum year group.

The purpose of the grant is to help manage the transition of the schools.

(5) By amalgamating the two schools the budget would be reduced by £70,000 per annum. This will need to be offset against a reduction in revenue costs generated from efficiency savings and a reduction in maintenance costs.

Human

(6) At Boughton there are 10.7 full time equivalent teaching staff, including the executive headteacher, 230 hours of Learning Support Assistant time and the equivalent of 3 clerical and cleaning staff. At Dunkirk there are 3.6 full time equivalent teaching staff, 53 hours of Learning Support Assistant time and the equivalent of 1 clerical and cleaning staff. Both schools share a Family Liaison Officer. The amalgamation would involve the assimilation of Dunkirk staff on the Boughton site. If any staff are unable to move the Local Authority will be responsible for redundancy costs.

Equality issues

11. (1) Of the 59 pupils at Dunkirk 29% are on the Special Needs Register (with 1.6% statemented). At Boughton 23.3% are registered as having Special Educational Needs with 0.6% statemented.

(2) The facilities at Boughton will be much better than those at Dunkirk, and there is therefore disparity of education provision across the federation. This would be remedied by location of all pupils at Boughton.

(3) If Dunkirk was to remain open, there will need to be a reduction to two classes in September 07. Learning in a mixed age class with at least 3 year groups will place Dunkirk pupils at a disadvantage against pupils at Boughton. Again, integrating all children on the Boughton site will remove this unequal opportunity.

(4) The additional needs of many pupils at Dunkirk can be better met through high quality support located at Boughton. Currently both pupils and staff need to move between the sites to access this specialist support.

Transport and Environmental Impact including Community Implications

12. (1) Boughton School has negotiated with the Parish Council extension of parental parking facilities using the village hall car park. As part of the modernisation project for the school, additional parking provision is being made available. This will reduce street congestion.

(2) The school has an existing Travel Plan which includes proposals for a walking bus. The amalgamation will require revision of this Plan to take account of the needs of Dunkirk pupils.

(3) Dunkirk has poor parking provision and the road on which the school is situated is kerbed only on one side. Access to the school is potentially hazardous because the school is sited on the crest of a hill. There are no traffic calming measures in place.

(4) Children driven to Dunkirk will be better served by the facilities at Boughton with safe drop-off and collection points. There are few Dunkirk children who walk to school, and for these pupils the new school will put measures in place through the revised Travel Plan to ensure safe access to the school. The road is kerbed and the journey involves one potential road crossing. The road crossing patrol available at Dunkirk can be re-sited at the bottom of the hill. There is also a road crossing patrol at Boughton School. In addition pupils and parents can access a regular timetabled bus service which stops outside Dunkirk School.

(5) A proportion (60%) of Dunkirk pupils attend the school from more distant home locations. There are school places available in these localities should parents prefer not to continue to travel.

(6) The community use of the two schools is as follows:

- (a) At Boughton there is a thriving extended school facility including breakfast and after school care. The school is also used for a range of community activities.
- (b) At Dunkirk there is no regular community use of the school.
- (c) Because there is little community use of the school the impact of closure on the local community will not be severe, although of course both parents and governors regret that the school has declined to its current situation.

School Improvement Implications

13. (1) The federation has led to improvements in leadership, management and standards at Dunkirk School, though the school is still in the 'Serious Weaknesses' category. There are ongoing concerns about the capacity of the school to deliver and sustain the necessary improvement in standards.

(2) Amalgamation on the Boughton site will improve the education experience of Dunkirk pupils and enable the provision of a high quality learning environment for the children of both communities. If Dunkirk School were to remain open the school will continue to be vulnerable because of the declining roll, the staffing recruitment and retention difficulties and the inadequate physical provision relative to Boughton School.

Links to the Primary Strategy

14. The Local Authority is required to ensure that schools are financially viable and delivering a good standard of education. Kent County Council recognises that small rural schools can have a significant role in their communities. Closure of such a school through amalgamation would only be proposed if the school could not fulfil its function. The level of surplus capacity in primary schools in the area makes it very unlikely that Dunkirk School can attract sufficient pupils in the future to make it sustainable. For the current cohort of pupils, the school cannot provide an acceptable standard of education. This proposal is in line with the Kent Primary Strategy recommendations 17, 18, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, and 29.

Proposed Timetable

15. Should public consultation be agreed, the proposed timetable is as follows:

Publication of consultation document	7 May 2007
Public meeting	W/c 21 May 2007
Last date for responses	11 June 2007
Report to School Organisation Advisory Board	11 July 2007
Cabinet Member decision	July 2007
Issue public notice	6 September 2007
End of period for statutory objections	18 October 2007
Decision by Kent County Council	November 2007
Adjudication (if required)	December 2007
Amalgamation with effect from	April 2008

16. The views of the School Organisation Advisory Board are sought on the proposal to undertake a public consultation on the amalgamation of Dunkirk Primary School with Boughton-under-Blean Primary School with effect from April 2008.

Alison Osborne
Area Education Officer
(Canterbury & Swale)
Tel: (01227) 772992

The Local Member is Mr A Bowles.

Background Documents:

None

Other Sources of Information:

Kent Primary Strategy 2006