

ADDENDUM - LGA report on the proposals of the Isle of Wight Council for rationalising primary schools to raise achievement for all.

9 SEPTEMBER 2024

SCHOOL PLACE PLANNING

This additional paper supports an earlier report written in August/September 2024 and published in October 2024. It is an additional commentary on the further proposals to consult on the re-organisation of primary schools on the Isle of Wight as published by the Isle of Wight Council in September 2024.

Summary

The council's proposals to consult on the possible closure of a small number (6) of primary schools whilst enhancing the Island's provision of SEND provision seems both sensible, measured and based on the needs of the Island and the communities it serves. It appears to be driven by pragmatism in that it is attempting to address some chronic severe issues whilst making best use of limited public resources. Whilst some have suggested it is possibly too limited in the number of school places being consulted for removal and that are in scope at this stage, it is believed that this number is probably appropriate in that it is based on the existing scope of the Council's powers to close only maintained schools and enables some further scope for future reorganisation that is designed to minimise disruption. This last point acknowledges the Council's attempt to mitigate cost (establishing temporary classrooms or incurring additional transport costs) and the disruption to existing pupils and their families by not consulting on closing schools that have a significant KS2 population at this point but instead waiting until such time as possibly much lower numbers filter through.

Commentary

The proposals encapsulated in the report are based on an intelligent analysis and balancing of the needs of the Island and its communities now and for the foreseeable future. It is clear that much work has been done to ensure minimal negative impact to any particular group, community or individual. At the same time the proposals appear to be fair and free from ideological¹ interests.

The proposals to develop SEND provision are commendable and to be welcomed as they are clearly linked to the engagement that the council has had with families coupled with its analysis of the unusually high numbers of children that are educated otherwise than at school or whose parents have elected to educate them at home as

¹ We noted a comment on the Isle of Wight County Press that there is a suggestion that there was some political and vested interference on the choice of schools, we cannot comment on this due to our lack of evidence.

a result of dissatisfaction with their school². It also responds appropriately to the significant pressures being placed on the High Needs Block of the Council's Dedicated Schools Grant.

The scale of the proposals seem to seek to minimise disruption or environmental impact whilst maximising the ability of the Island's school system to meet the challenges that it is facing. However, the proposals outlined, if realised in full following the consultation, would see a reduction of 1,365 primary school places on the Island overall. Given the comments above the key question that remains as to whether the proposals at this stage go far enough. The Island currently has (based on October 2023 school census data) 1,898 unfilled school places and that by September 2027, it is forecast the number of unfilled primary school places will have increased to 3,056. It appears that the Council is completely cognisant of this and is appropriately balancing the disruption to individual children and families, the negative impact on communities and the increased costs of additional transport and temporary arrangements such as additional buildings with the long term benefits of reducing capacity.

The proposals and the documents indicate a very strong rationale for the principal action proposed (that is a limited closure of a small number of schools and some reduction of PAN) which is based on good use of available data and feedback from the Island's headteacher and governor community whilst addressing and minimising disruption.

It is right that the council is expecting the DfE to be a proactive partner and this should be communicated directly to the department clearly. It is very difficult for the LA to affect the scale of change that is required by itself. One case in point is the conflict between the Council's powers and its duties. Whilst it has a duty to provide sufficient school places it does not have the power to close academies. The DfE should therefore engage with the Council in this respect.

The breadth and depth of consultation is commendable but it is likely that some stakeholders will still feel aggrieved especially where their viewpoint is one that has not been realised fully in the proposals.

The factors affecting decision making as listed by the council are appropriate and the methodology used is sound and one could imagine becoming an exemplar for other areas to use moving forward.

An area that could be strengthened in the plans is the rationale for the proposals linked to economic recovery and reducing poverty. It would be sensible to make a closer link between the needs of the local economy moving into the future, the need to strengthen the workforce and improve skills and thus directly support the economic regeneration of the Island by being a very attractive place for skilled workforce to relocate to along with employers as well as ensuring stronger pathways into well paid employment on the Island in a more diverse range of higher paid employment sectors.

² Many parents positively chose to educate their children at home for valid philosophical reasons but the Island has a higher proportion of those parents who feel they have to chose this route because they are dissatisfied with school provision than is the case nationally.

Similarly, the process could be strengthened if more explicit linkages to educational improvement were made. There are undoubted linkages but these are insufficiently clear in the most recent report.

It is not possible to comment on the benefits and merits of the closure of the individual schools in this analysis of the council's proposals as those proposals, rightly must be subject to scrutiny by the Isle of Wight decision makers, those people who know the communities and schools in question in detail.

Recommendation

The Council is urged to accept and adopt the proposals contained in the report as presented to Cabinet on 12 September and move to a consultation phase, mindful of the mitigation of any negative impact on individuals, communities and the environment. To require the engagement of the DfE in relation to the Academy based estate and to work with the Dioceses to ensure the strongest possible links with the school improvement strategy, SEND strategy and economic regeneration strategy.