

Future Schools Provision in the Crewkerne and Ilminster area

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Cabinet Member: Cllr Faye Purbrick – Cabinet Member for Education and Transformation

Division and Local Member:

Cllr Mike Best – Crewkerne

Cllr Linda Vijeh – Ilminster

Cllr Mark Keating – Coker

Cllr Adam Dance – South Petherton & Isle Moor

1. Summary

- 1.1.** The vision in the Children and Young People's Plan is for all Somerset children and young people to be safe, healthy, happy, ambitious and successful. A high-quality education can only be sustained in a school that has the financial means to provide excellent curriculum and teaching. In Crewkerne and Ilminster, quality is currently at risk due to low pupil numbers and consequent financial instability. There have been concerns about falling pupil numbers in the Crewkerne and Ilminster area and the resulting financial unsustainability in the three-tier school arrangements in the area for a decade or more. The current and forecast pupil numbers in the area means that change in the area is essential.

- 1.2.** An independent review in 2019 concluded that the current three-tier school system in the Crewkerne and Ilminster area is not viable. During this review, a public consultation was held between 12 June and 26 July 2019 on a range of options and the response to every option, including no change, was on balance negative.

On 21 October 2020, Cabinet approved a period of pre-publication consultation on a proposed two-tier model of education in Crewkerne and Ilminster. This consultation was held in November/December 2020.

On 18th January 2021 the lead Cabinet Member for Education and Transformation agreed to proceed to statutory consultation on a proposed two-tier model of education in Crewkerne and Ilminster. A final decision by Cabinet is scheduled to take place on 17 March 2021.

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1.** Members are asked to review and comment on the statutory proposal documentation as this will form the basis for the Cabinet Key Decision scheduled for 17 March 2021.

3. Background

- 3.1.** In the Crewkerne and Ilminster area, the reduction in pupil numbers is making the school system financially unsustainable. If no action is taken, then the financial pressures could have a highly detrimental effect on the quality of education that schools can offer. Quality of education is put at risk by the long-running and increasing, budgetary overspend at Wadham Upper School as a result of low pupil numbers. The Council previously wrote off accrued debt to the value of approximately £440k in 2012/13. Since that time the school has continued to accrue debt and on current projections is likely to reach approximately £1.8 million by the time these proposals would begin to take effect. Swanmead accrued a budgetary overspend (uncommitted revenue balance of approximately £86k) at the end of 2019/20. To date, the position of first schools in the area has been stable, but there are growing concerns about their future as small rural schools in an area where pupil numbers are low and numbers are not expected to increase significantly, taking into account planned housing developments. All the Local Authority maintained and voluntary controlled schools with primary aged pupils affected by these proposals are predicting overspends in the current or future years due to low pupil numbers with a consequent impact on reserves and deficits.

4. Consultations undertaken

- 4.1.** In September 2020, a single new two-tier model was developed in the light of feedback from earlier consultation in summer 2019. It was shared with locally elected members, staff, governors, and parents and carers at affected schools, trade unions, the Regional School Commissioner, Diocese of Bath and Wells and Bridgwater and Taunton College Trust. Feedback from this process informed the report presented to Cabinet on the 21 October 2020.
- 4.2.** The pre-publication consultation launched on the 12 November 2020 and ran until the 10 December 2020. The consultation documents were available on Somerset Consults.
- 4.3.** Due to the pandemic all consultation events were organised using Microsoft Teams Live Events. In total 7 individual school staff surgery events were staged. A further 4 public sessions were held and chaired by Cllr Faye Purbrick. The timings of the live events were different with the intention of giving those wishing to express and view or ask questions the opportunity to attend at a time to suit

them.

- 4.4. During the pre-publication consultation 286 members of the public joined the public sessions and 379 responses to the consultation questionnaire were submitted. The consultation outcomes report is attached [here](#).
- 4.5. On 18 January 2021, having reviewed the findings from the pre-publication consultation and finding that no changes to the proposals were required that would be significant enough to necessitate returning to Cabinet, the Cabinet Member for Education and Transformation agreed to publish statutory proposals on a proposed two tier model.
- 4.6. The [statutory proposal](#) was published on the 27th January 2021. A statutory notice was also published in the Chard and Ilminster News on the same day. Following the publication of the Statutory Proposal a four-week representation period followed which ended on 24 February at 5pm. The statutory proposal document outlines the process followed during the review, the criteria used, and the reasons for favouring the proposal over other options.
- 4.7. During the statutory consultation period, efforts were made to reach several groups of people and organisations whose opinions were not necessarily received during the informal consultation. Town and Parish councils, business groups in Crewkerne and Ilminster and faith organisations in the area were specifically contacted. The Family Intervention Service promoted the consultation to families that they are working with in the area. All staff at schools in the area have been offered a discussion with County Council officers. As of 22 February 2021 (two days until the end of the consultation period) **530** responses to the statutory consultation had been received.
- 4.8. During both periods of consultation, the process followed the Gunning principles of effective consultation. Namely, that:
 - *Consultation was when proposals are still at a formative stage.* In this consultation process a final decision has not been made, or predetermined. A decision will not be taken until Cabinet in March and at both stages of consultation, any alternative proposals brought forward were reviewed and assessed to determine whether they provided a more viable and beneficial option.
 - *That there is enough information for consultees to give 'intelligent consideration' of proposals.* This consultation process was designed to facilitate intelligent consideration. This was the reason for consulting on a single model, after consulting on multiple models and before publishing statutory proposals. The intent was to enable the community to fully scrutinise the option from all angles, and to give the County Council the option of changing the model should significant obstacles, or viable

alternative, have emerged in November 2020. As a result of this in depth inquiry, the statutory proposal document provides a very detailed picture that is intended to respond to issues and questions raised by the community.

- *There is adequate time for consideration and response.* The consultation process began in 2019. During the summer of 2019 a range of options were published on the council website for six weeks alongside face to face consultation activity in local schools. Starting in September 2020, informal engagement on a single model started with school leaders and senior stakeholders. The proposal was shared informally with parents, staff and governors in affected schools during the week commencing 5 October 2020. The Cabinet made the decision to consult on 21 October and a formal consultation was launched online and in the press on 12 November. Feedback has been received through the online consultation form, during virtual engagement sessions, by post and in letters sent to County Council staff, elected members and the local MP. All representations have been taken into account, including all those submitted in advance of the launch of the formal consultation. The period from 5 October to 11 December is ten weeks. There was a previously a six-week consultation period in 2019. If a decision to proceed to the publication of statutory notices is taken, this will involve a further four-week consultation period. In total, this would be twenty weeks of consultation activity on this matter before any decision to proceed might take place. What is required by statute is four weeks, and the government standard expects at most sixteen weeks.
- *'Conscientious consideration' must be given to the consultation responses before a decision is made.* At each stage of the consultation process, time and effort was invested in reviewing the outcomes of the consultation and determining next steps. 'Pause points' were built into the process and were done transparently. The decision to move to statutory proposals took into account a wide range of issues, concerns, question and alternative proposals arising from a wide range of sources, including the consultation proper, public questions, letters to the County Council and direct engagement with affected schools.

5. Implications

- 5.1.** The responses to this consultation demonstrated significant opposition to the proposals, as well as a smaller, but still significant level of support. The proportion of respondents broadly opposed to proposals ranged from around

49% and 74%, and those broadly in favour ranged from around 19% to 39%.

- 5.2.** Within the area, the need for change has been recognised and the possibility of reorganisation has been under active consideration for over ten years. In this time, active steps were taken by the local authority to develop a consensus, including providing funding to schools to develop alternative models. These steps did not result in a viable model that secured widespread support. The clearest outcome of the 2019 consultation was that the community is divided on this topic, and there is no model of reorganisation that secures widespread support. Neither did the option of leaving things unchanged secure widespread support.
- 5.3.** The local authority has a statutory duty under sections 13, 13A and 14 of the Education Act 1996 to secure the efficiency of education, to promote high standards and to ensure sufficiency of school places. Where the quality of education is at risk from no change, a solution must be pursued even if there is no single option that secures widespread support.
- 5.4.** These proposals represent significant changes within these communities and have attracted significant local interest. As part of the democratic process, review and challenge by the Scrutiny Committee can help provide assurance that all avenues and views have been considered before a decision is taken.

6. Background papers

- 6.1.**
- 1) [Decision report following Autumn 2020 consultation](#)
 - 2) [Autumn 2020 consultation outcomes report](#)
 - 3) [Autumn 2020 consultation responses document](#)
 - 4) [Statutory Proposal Document](#)
 - 5) [Outcomes of 2019 consultation](#)
 - 6) [Final class structure projections](#)