

Crewkerne and Ilminster area schools review

Children and Families Scrutiny Committee - 3 March 2021



Improving
LIVES

Objectives for today

- Purpose of Scrutiny is to review and challenge the process and identify recommendations that can support improvement.
- No decisions can be made today – that is not the role of the Committee.
- A final decision will be taken by Cabinet on 17 March 2021.
- As we finalise the paper for Cabinet, Scrutiny can help this be well-considered through the reflection here today.
- Recommendations from the Committee about implementation would also be very welcome – if a decision is made to progress, implementation would need to happen quickly.





What is the vision for education?

We have heard a lot of passion for schools in the area, and some of the priorities expressed are for a system that has:

- **Stability** – small rural schools are a strength, but they need stability so they can focus on education.
- **Innovation** – if it is decided that change must happen, there is real desire to make the most of it and be innovative and ambitious for children.
- **Cooperation** – Schools have good relationships, which have been put under strain. The hope is that the future will be one where schools can come together again.



Why propose changes at all?

- The birth rate has been falling and there are fewer families with children in Somerset than in the past.
- Three tier areas work well... when pupil numbers are high enough.
- Too few pupils leads to increasing costs, a detrimental effect on the curriculum delivered and worse outcomes for children.
- Kings of Wessex and Frome College have over 1,000 pupils compared to under 500 at Wadham.
- Wadham's budgetary overspend is projected to reach £1.8 million by 2022. However, there is also deficit in one middle school and first schools are currently projecting budgetary issues.
- Historically, Somerset County Council has cleared this school debt, which only solved the issue in the short-term. This cannot continue.

What would be the benefits of the proposal?

- We are absolutely committed to **ensuring every child and young person in Somerset receives the best quality education**. That is always at the heart of our decision-making.
- Pupil numbers in the area are too low to sustain the way schools are currently organised, so these proposals are focussed on **providing schools with a sustainable future**.
- First schools are subject to a lot of year-to-year variation in pupil numbers. This aims to reduce this and to provide **more stable finances** in the future. Proposals would also provide financial security for new primary schools during the transition.



What would be the benefits of the proposal?

- The overall cost over twenty years is estimated to be at most £6.1 million. At the current rate of increase, the cost of no change would be £8 million. However, these proposals would also negate the need for a new school building saving £5 million. So overall, these proposals would **release £7.9 million over 20 years*** to re-invest in education.
- Accompanying these proposals would be a significant investment of **£5.1 million for building condition** works for schools in the area.
- Additional costs in terms of transport to Wadham would secure a later bus so that Ilminster pupils could **access extracurricular activities**. This was raised as a significant issue in the first consultation.

*Unadjusted for inflation



Issue has been apparent for over ten years

- Financial problems with the current three-tier system in the area emerged over ten years ago.
- Local schools were funded to devise a new model for school organisation. This did not result in any productive outcome.
- In 2019, Somerset County Council commissioned an external review which found that the system was unsustainable in its current form.
- A range of options was consulted on between 12 June and 26 July 2019 and every option, including no change, had a negative response.
- On 21 October 2020, Cabinet approved a period of pre-publication consultation on a proposed two-tier model which was held in November/December 2020.
- A statutory proposal was published for consultation on 27 January 2021.



Current proposal and alternatives

Current proposal is that **three-tier becomes a two-tier system:**

- Wadham becomes a secondary school.
- Maiden Beech, Ashlands, St Bartholemew's, Merriott and Haselbury Plunknett become primary schools.
- Swanmead and Greenfylde amalgamate and become a primary school.
- Misterton closes.

We have explored many **alternative options:**

- Upper and middle schools join the same Multi Academy Trust (MAT).
- All first schools become primaries (retain Misterton).
- Middle schools become secondaries (close Wadham).
- Different allocations of pupils within Crewkerne.
- Infant/junior arrangement for St Bartholomew's and Maiden Beech.

However, our assessment shows that none of these are viable. We believe that the current proposal would lead to the best outcomes.



Statutory Consultation – themes emerging

Respondent Group	Total in Crewkerne and Ilminster	Number of responses to Statutory Consultation February 2021
Pupils	2,000	348 parents/carers
School staff	350	152 school staff
Population	20,000	111 'other'

- The responses in the autumn 2020 consultation were approximately **1/3 in favour to 2/3 opposed (68%)**. The balance of support and opposition remained broadly unchanged. However, teacher and governors now have **higher levels of positive** responses.
- Under the headline figures a wide range of responses have been gathered over **five years of consultation** - it is evident that there is **no favourable option** securing widespread support.



Themes emerging from consultation on Statutory Proposals

The most commonly expressed views were:

- Some people prefer the three-tier system.
- Consultation during Covid-19 is challenging.
- There should be a way to preserve specialist teaching in year 5 and 6.
- There should be a secondary school in Ilminster.
- There may be problems associated with admission numbers for new primaries during a transition period.

We are reflecting on what modifications to the proposal might be appropriate to respond to these messages from the consultation.

