

## **A summary of the responses to the consultation 'Options for the future of the Dunmore Infant and Junior Schools'**

### **Introduction:**

1 This is an independent summary, commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council, the Local Authority (LA), of the responses to the consultation on the future of the Dunmore Infant and Junior Schools in Abingdon. It is intended to help inform both the different stakeholders, especially those who responded, and the Cabinet who are responsible for making a decision, in January 2007, on the next stage of the process. It is based on the documentation described in paragraph 6. In addition, a brief discussion was held with Ms Irene Kirkman, Assistant Head of Service - School Support Services, to provide context about the consultation and more detailed discussions with her personal assistant who prepared a spreadsheet summarising the main points of the often lengthy responses.

2 Dr Tony Eaude was commissioned just before the closing date for responses to summarise these, providing an objective viewpoint based on his experience of primary education and research methods. He was previously headteacher of SS. Mary and John First School, Oxford, before taking an M. Sc. in Educational Research Methodology and a D.Phil at the Department of Educational Studies, University of Oxford, where he is now a Research Fellow. He works as an independent research consultant and, while previously employed by the LA, is not an employee of that body, except as a supply teacher and on a consultancy basis. He does not live in Abingdon and has only a slight acquaintance with any of the schools involved. He was not involved in the consultation process before being commissioned to write this report.

### **Context, purpose and nature of the consultation:**

3 Dunmore Infant and Junior Schools are separate schools sharing a site in North Abingdon. The number of pupils in September 2006 has been given as 284 in the Infant School and 291 in the Junior School. The Infant School caters for children aged 3-7 and has enjoyed continuity of leadership for some eleven years. The school is held in high regard by parents and the Ofsted report in May 2004 considered it a good school. The Junior School, catering for children aged 7-11, was previously very well regarded and was a Beacon School in 2000. However, after a difficult period, including two changes of headteacher, the school was placed in Special Measures following an Ofsted inspection in October 2005 and the previous headteacher resigned with effect from 31<sup>st</sup> August 2006. A temporary headteacher from the Educational Effectiveness Service has been in place since September 2006, to try and ensure that the Special Measures are lifted as soon as possible, hopefully by July 2007. While the proposals in this consultation were presented only shortly after his arrival, it appears that progress towards this has been made.

4 It is understood that the Cabinet decided in September 2006 to consider different options for the future of the schools. A letter to parents was sent on 17<sup>th</sup> October, with a consultation paper following on 13<sup>th</sup> November, to 'offer informal consultation to all stakeholders on two options for the future of the two Dunmore Schools.' These were:

Option 1: to create an all through primary school in place of the separate Infant and Junior Schools (by closing both schools and opening a new school);

Option 2: to create an all-through 3-19 school by extending the age range of Fitzharrys School (which had 888 on roll in September 2006)

5 The consultation paper provided a contextual paragraph, a summary of the perceived advantages and concerns of each option, and nine key questions already raised, followed by the LA's response. One significant aspect was the LA's argument that the status quo was not an Option offered, largely because 'there is no guarantee that the leadership difficulties would not re-occur at the Junior School from September 2007, if the problems in recruiting an effective headteacher were to continue'; and that 'the infant-junior model is outdated ... and retains an unnecessary transition ... interrupting curriculum continuity.' The paper stated that a Children's Centre would be created with investment of some

£300,000 whichever Option were to be finally adopted and that the reasons behind both options presented were educational rather than financial.

Two public consultation meetings were held, at Dunmore Junior School on 21<sup>st</sup> November and at Fitzharrys School on 22<sup>nd</sup> November. Written responses were invited either on a response sheet or by email, by the closing date of 22<sup>nd</sup> December, a period of six weeks, so that the Cabinet meeting in January 2007 could make a further decision in the light of the consultation process.

**Nature and number of, and weighting given to, the responses:**

6 In addition to the consultation paper, and brief discussions to confirm various factual points, this summary draws only on:

- the notes taken by the LA at the two public meetings held;
- the written responses, both those using the official response form and others by separate letter or email, and replies from officers or members; and
- a two page statement by Cllr Michael Waine, the Cabinet Member for School Improvement, dated 8 December 2006.

The notes of the public meetings indicate that 34 people spoke on 21<sup>st</sup> November, including one response taken after the meeting, and 39 on 22<sup>nd</sup> November, including four responses taken after the meeting. At least eight people spoke at both meetings. The names of some of those who spoke were not recorded, though almost all of those who gave their names also returned written responses.

Of the written responses, there were:

- 145 using the response form, each from an individual, or couple, with it appearing that, in some cases, both parents made separate responses and, in others, a joint one; and
- 103 by letter or email, many of which resulted in an exchange of information, views and further comments. Of these, six were on behalf of groups, four representing individual schools, including Fitzharrys, one a group of primary heads and Chairs of Governors in Abingdon and one a group called Dunmore Futures. The content of these is summarised in paragraph 14. Neither of the Governing Bodies of the Dunmore Schools submitted a written response, but it is understood that they support the views expressed in the Dunmore Futures responses.

Dunmore Futures submitted a report the substance of which ran to twenty-nine pages, in addition to three pages of summary and contents. There were also five appendices, of which one on the existing state sector all age schools in the UK and one on the text of a petition provide information not otherwise available, as the others consisted of a transcript of one of the public meetings, the text of the consultation paper and the presentation made by LA officers at the public meetings. While the Dunmore Futures paper does not indicate the group's membership, it states that it was formed from volunteers at a meeting of around 100 parents early in November. More significantly, it claims that parents' views have been formally assessed through a poll held by the governing bodies of both Dunmore Infant and Junior Schools. The paper was also accompanied by a petition reported to have some 1600 signatures, calling, in summary, for Option 2 to be withdrawn and other Options to be more fully explored. The author of this paper has not been able to verify this information independently, but the results given are taken at face value.

There were therefore a total of 248 written responses, with many involving a series of comments and responses. It is understood that the spreadsheet summary of the responses and this paper will be available to the public via the County Council website and that the paper copies of the responses will be available in the Members' Room at County Hall.

7 Respondents were asked to indicate in what role they were responding, with the categories in the chart below (apart from Group), which in many cases overlap, so that one individual might, for instance, be a parent at two schools, a prospective parent and an 'other', and almost certainly a resident

of Abingdon. Therefore, the chart shows the prime category/ies for each respondent, based on being an Abingdon resident or Other being discounted where another category is given, and both or all being counted where more than one of other categories is given. With these provisos, the number of responses was as follows:

Parent Dunmore Infant:	82	Parent Dunmore Junior:	89
Parent Fitzharrys:	24	Governor/Teacher Infant:	4
Governor/Teacher Junior:	5	Governor/Teacher Fitzharrys	0 (but one Group)
Prospective parent:	11	Partnership headteacher, governor or parent	9
Abingdon resident	24	Other	22
Not known	11	Group	6

8 The overlap of these categories, the nature of the responses and the numbers not expressing a clear preference makes any simple quantification potentially misleading. Many people clearly had more than one role and may have contributed at one or both meetings, individually in writing and as part of a group response. In particular, it is inconceivable that there was not a substantial overlap of people responding individually and as part of the Dunmore Futures paper. This is not to diminish the value of any response, but to highlight that simply counting responses is inappropriate. Moreover, while the views of different stakeholders are an important part of the decision-making process, it is likely to be appropriate for the LA to give greater weighting to particularly cogent arguments. So, for instance, the argument of someone with specific expertise or a group is likely to carry more weight than that of a local resident with no special knowledge of the schools.

A further difficulty of interpretation results from responses being invited only on Options 1 and 2. Although a very clear preference emerged for Option 1, if only these two were to be considered, many respondents presented other possible Options, discussed later in this paper. However, the responses cannot be seen to indicate a view of all stakeholders on all possible Options given that those responding were neither presented with arguments, or invited to indicate a preference, for or against Options other than 1 and 2.

### **Content of responses:**

9 This section summarises, in paragraph 10, the criticisms made about the nature and timing of the consultation, in paragraphs 11-13 the content of the responses according to key themes and in paragraphs 14-16 the substance of the preferences expressed on all possible Options. It will be appreciated that a summary such as this cannot reflect all the views set out in over five hundred pages, but is intended to highlight the main trends.

The responses indicate that both the whole process, and how the consultation was handled, proved exceedingly contentious and roused very strong feelings. It is not the role of this report to verify the accuracy of, support or condemn the views expressed, although comments on some of these perceived shortcomings are made in later paragraphs. Rather, they are highlighted so that the LA can respond as it deems appropriate. However, it is worthy of note that officers and elected members responded to a substantial range of queries during the consultation, in the face of considerable, and often personal, criticism.

10 The LA was strongly criticised on several counts, notably:

a) the perceived lack of previous support for the Junior School to avoid it going into Special Measures, although no substantive evidence for this is provided, and the claim is denied by the LA who report that a considerable level of support was offered and that this can be demonstrated;

- b) the nature of the consultation, in that it was stated that the process:
- i) lacked transparency, for instance in the failure to make available all relevant documents, notably the briefing on 1 September 2006 to the Children, Young People and Family members of the Cabinet, and to involve the governors of both Dunmore Schools adequately;
  - ii) had been handled insensitively in terms of how the staff, especially the head of the Infant School, had been informed, and unfairly in that she would have had to apply for the headship in Option 1, but the head of Fitzharrys would not in Option 2;
  - iii) had not adequately considered the wider implications for educational provision in the whole of Abingdon;
  - iv) had given insufficient rationale and evidence both in the consultation paper and at the meetings for the two Options put forward; and
  - v) been too narrow in offering only two Options, with the views expressed, very strongly, that either would undermine the perceived success of the Infant School and, slightly less strongly, that the LA favoured Option 2, a view refuted in Cllr Waine's statement.
- c) the timing of the consultation, in that there was wide support for the view that:
- i) the length of time between the announcement and the issuing of detailed proposals had led to considerable concern in the local community and that the timing meant that since the date for parents to choose their child's next school fell during the consultation period, this had, at the least, made the choice of school especially hard and, in the view of several respondents, contributed to a loss of confidence in the Junior School and consequent reduction in applications; and
  - ii) the LA wished to rush into a decision so that whatever proposal is finally decided upon can be in place for September 2007.

A significant minority claimed that these shortcomings had led to a considerable worry on the part of both parents and children and that those in 10 c) especially had resulted in a substantial number of children being moved to other schools - over 50 being claimed in the Dunmore Futures paper, with 44 being the official figure given by the LA in late December 2006.

There was also some scepticism from a small minority of respondents that financial considerations, including the chance to sell off parts of the site for development, were not a factor in the decision to put forward the Options suggested.

11 This paragraph summarises the views expressed on the accuracy of the LA's view of the context. There was strong support for the LA's view that the Infant School is effective and for the caring approach and the standards achieved, and especially for the headteacher. However, there was a widespread perception that the two Options had been presented so that she would not have a major role in whatever outcome is finally decided upon.

In relation to the LA's view of the Junior School, the views were more varied. There was agreement that it had recently gone through difficult times, without a consistent picture of the reasons why. The LA's view that the school could not be turned around sufficiently rapidly was challenged, with strong support for the head, also commended by Ofsted and HMI, that the current temporary headteacher had given in the short time in which he had been in post. This gave many respondents to believe that the Special Measures could be lifted rapidly, with the hope expressed that this would enable the recruitment of a headteacher able to ensure the longer-term success of the Junior School. The Dunmore Futures paper provided detailed evidence comparing the attainment statistics with other schools locally and nationally, arguing from this that these were broadly comparable with local schools and that the school's difficulty was not as substantial or as long term as indicated in the consultation paper.

The comments in relation to Fitzharrys were mixed, though there was a substantial consensus against the appropriateness of Option 2. However, while it is difficult to disentangle the criticisms of large

schools, as such, being inappropriate for young children and those related to Fitzharrys, an attempt to do so is made in paragraph 15.

12 This paragraph summarises the main expressions of principle in relation to the most desirable outcome. Most responses supported the importance of:

- providing continuity, to minimise disruption for both staff and children and ensure the long-term popularity of the Dunmore Schools, though the LA's argument of the importance of reducing the number of transitions between schools was less widely accepted;
- ensuring that there should be appropriate leadership skills, especially for Key Stage 2, in order to improve the standards of attainment, with the proviso about the Junior School discussed in paragraph 11.
- maintaining the standards of both attainment and pastoral care in Key Stage 1 and younger, with concerns about pastoral care relating especially to the size of school, whatever the outcome, and the possible loss of the Infant School's caring ethos.

However, as will become apparent, there remains considerable debate about the best solution and how best to achieve this.

13 The question of the timescale for whatever solution is finally decided upon is a significant complicating factor. On the one hand, there was a widespread recognition that the final outcome should be settled reasonably quickly so that uncertainty, and any consequent loss of staff morale, parental confidence and pupil numbers, can be minimised. However, the LA was criticised for rushing into the whole process (quite apart from the questions about the timing of the consultation), without giving time for the temporary headteacher to enable the Junior School to move out of Special Measures, and for not recognising the need for a long period of preparation for any of the outcomes. On the other hand, it was recognised that the long-term success of any solution depends on a sustained, and preferably rapid, improvement in Key Stage 2, especially in the leadership capacity, though as indicated in paragraph 11, there was disagreement on the LA's concern about the likelihood of this.

14 Of the group responses, two were from the governing bodies of local schools, one primary, one secondary, the main concern being the impact on other schools in Abingdon of either Option, but especially Option 2. A meeting with the headteacher and two governors of John Mason School expressed a similar concern, but also others about the lack of investment in building in Abingdon schools, the financial implications, the short timescale proposed and the lack of openness about all possible Options. A meeting of the heads and Chairs of Governors of nine primary schools, including both Dunmore Infant and Junior Schools, was critical of the communication and consultation process, highlighted the need for a strategy on pupil transfers and called for Option 2 to be withdrawn, calling for 'a careful evaluation of the situation ... followed by a clearly defined stepped plan to bring the two (Dunmore) schools together.' A response from the headteacher and Chair of Governors of Fitzharrys asked for Option 2 to be withdrawn, while expressing a continuing wish to help secure high quality teaching and learning at Dunmore. Particular concerns were on the proposed timescale of creating a new school by September 2007, the financial implications, especially the need for capital funding, and how the consultation process had been managed and presented, leading to Fitzharrys being cast in a bad light. Dunmore Futures called for Option 2 to be withdrawn and for the LA to provide the necessary detail and time to assess with the governing bodies the risks and benefits of extending the age range of the Infant School to age 11, of Option 1 and of federating the Junior and Infant Schools, an idea explained in paragraph 16 which Dunmore Futures considered to have many advantages.

A concern raised in the response from the John Mason School, and the Dunmore Futures paper, that Option 2 would oblige the LA to offer Fitzharrys for possible Foundation status appears to be inaccurate, since the LA has indicated that this would not be required.

15 This paragraph summarises the views on the two options given. There was a very strong preponderance of responses against Option 2, the extension of the age range of Fitzharrys to become a 3-19 school, for four main types of reason:

- a) the risks of such an untried innovation outweighing possible benefits.
- b) the nature of such a school, *per se*, especially that its large size would entail the loss of the personal relationships much valued especially in the Infant School, and that the behaviour of adolescents would make such a school inappropriate for young children;
- c) the nature of Fitzharrys School, in part because there was concern about the pupils' behaviour, in part because of the lack of leadership skills appropriate for children of primary school age, and in part because there was little confidence that Fitzharrys has improved sufficiently to be able successfully to 'create an innovative and integrated model of provision from 3-19', with most of the highlighted gains, such as improved provision for more able and gifted children, thought to be achievable with other Options; and
- d) the wider picture of educational provision in Abingdon and beyond, in that this:
  - does not reflect the preferred pathway for most Dunmore parents, of whom only a minority sent their children to Fitzharrys, the figure for 2006 presented by the Dunmore Futures group and verified by the LA being 36%; and
  - would create within Abingdon, and Oxfordshire, an entirely new age-range of school, affecting all secondary schools in the town and likely to destabilise the existing good partnerships.

Some respondents, notably the Dunmore Futures group, had contacted one or more of the all-through schools set up elsewhere in England and claimed that where such an age range had been tried this had proved difficult, especially in terms of the example set to young children by older pupils. It was also said that experience suggested that such amalgamations needed a long period of preparation and worked best when all the partner schools joined from a position of strength. A few responses expressed concern that the proposal was linked to the Government's proposals relating to academy status, despite the LA's assurance that this was not the case.

An overwhelming majority of clearly expressed preferences were opposed to Option 2. The written responses showed 98 expressing a preference to Option 1, and 116 opposed to Option 2, of whom 4 also opposed Option 1, and only two preferring Option 2, though the argument that this would provide greater continuity for children with special educational needs showed a little more support. This broadly reflects the results of the first part of the governors' poll, as presented by the Dunmore Futures group, that 337 parents (97% of those voting) preferred Option 1 to Option 2 (9 votes, which is 3% of those voting). However, since four other Options were also suggested, as discussed in the next paragraph, any conclusion as to any overall preferred Option must first consider these.

16 Although only two Options were put forward for consultation, the responses suggested four other possible Options, extending the Infant School, status quo, a federation and creating a 7-19 school.

Despite this not being presented as an Option, twelve written responses were in favour of (and two against) achieving **an all-through primary school by extending the age range of the Infant School**, rather than by closure of both schools. The three main reasons were support for the ethos and leadership of the head of the Infant School, the avoidance of all staff having to re-apply for their jobs and that this would enable the provision to be consistent with other primary school provision in Abingdon, recognising that the last of these is also an argument for Option 1.

**Maintaining the status quo** of separate Infant and Junior Schools attracted support from thirty written responses (and opposition from one), despite not being presented as an Option, and indeed initially excluded by the LA, a point reiterated by Cllr Waine in his statement in indicating the LA's preference for an all-through primary school if Option 2 were to be abandoned. The main reason given is that the perceived success of the Infant School should not be undermined.

Although there were only two responses in favour of **a federation**, this may have been because it was considered only at a late stage during the consultation process. Since one was from the Dunmore Futures group, this may reasonably be accorded a greater significance than an individual response. In this context, this would imply the continuation of the Infant and Junior Schools as separate but under the control of a single governing body, with a view to further discussion in the future as to the merits of different options, dependent largely on the ability of the Junior School to move out of Special Measures reasonably soon and recruit a suitable headteacher. The main reason given is that such an approach could be set up rapidly and reversibly, enabling stability to be maintained and providing a breathing space so that a more considered decision can be made.

One response suggested that **the Infant School should be retained and the age range of Fitzharrys extended to cover the 7-19 age range**. The logic given is to retain the Infant School but to gain the perceived benefits of Option 2. While respondents have not had the chance to consider this Option, the arguments presented against Option 2 suggest that this would be strongly opposed, since most would still stand, apart from the (strongly expressed) one about the loss of the distinctive ethos and approach of the Infant School.

The second part of the governors' poll, as reported by Dunmore Futures, asked parents to choose between Options 1 and 2, the status quo Option and any other Option (to be specified). The votes cast again showed minimal support for Option 2 (8 votes/ 2%), a minority for any other Option (26 votes/ 8%) and relatively similar numbers for Option 1 (159 votes/ 47%) and status quo (144/ 43%).

### Summary:

17 This section summarises the main conclusion which may be drawn from the responses. However, it should be re-iterated that this is to provide a brief summary for all stakeholders and to inform further discussions, especially those of the Cabinet, and is not in the nature of any recommendation.

The overwhelming majority of the responses were strongly opposed to Option 2, the extension of the age range of Fitzharrys, for reasons set out in paragraph 15, and retaining the Infant School and extending Fitzharrys to a 7-19 school would seem unlikely to find much support.

Recognising the strong opposition expressed to Option 2, and in the light of Cllr Waive's written assurance that this will not be proceeded with in the light of local opposition, two remaining overall Options are supported by substantial groups of stakeholders, namely:

- the creation of an all through primary school, either by adopting Option 1, the closure of both Infant and Junior Schools and opening a new Primary school, or (with less support) by extending the range of the Infant School to include Key Stage 2; and
- the maintenance of the status quo.

A third Option, without many responses in terms of numbers, but backed by the Dunmore Futures group, is that of forming a federation, to give a breathing space to find the best way to achieve the best sustainable solution to ensure high quality educational provision for primary age children on the Dunmore site.

Bearing in mind the considerations in paragraph 8, simply seeing which response secures the most support is unlikely to be an appropriate way of making such a decision. The clear preference of most respondents was that the arguments for and against all Options to be considered should be supported by well-researched evidence and clearly and openly debated, with a greater involvement of governors, especially, and parents.

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January 2007