

End of Feasibility Study Report

10 July 2023

Introduction

The Council carried out a feasibility study between March and June 2023, to identify potential options for reducing the number of primary schools in the Oldmachar Associated Schools Group (ASG). A summary of the brief for the feasibility study is included at Appendix A, below. To help inform the outcomes of the feasibility study, comments and feedback were invited from pupils, parents, staff, community groups and all other stakeholders, on the options available, and the potential impact of these options on individual schools and communities.

This paper provides a summary of the feedback received from stakeholders, and the key themes which have emerged from the feasibility study. The detailed findings of the feasibility study will be presented in an outline business case, which will be submitted to the Education and Children's Services Committee in September, with a recommendation on a preferred option to be taken forwards.

Feasibility Study Summary

The study involved a detailed review of the existing school sites within the ASG, to gather data on each school's circumstances, including building layout, condition, accessibility, overall size of the site, and how spaces are currently being used. This information was used to assess which sites could potentially be used to accommodate a merged school, either within the existing building or by constructing a new, larger building on the site.

Alongside this, school roll forecast data for each school was studied to gain an understanding of the size of building and site which would be required, if schools were to be merged together on each of the sites. This work helped to identify a number of potentially viable options for merging specific schools together on specific sites, and also helped to determine which options would not be viable, and which could therefore be discounted.

Analysis of the information gathered during the feasibility study will continue through the summer, with each of the viable options being assessed in further detail. Updated school roll forecast information is expected to become available during this time and will be fed into the process. The viable options will be presented in the outline business case, which will set out the advantages and disadvantages, and any cost implications of each option, before finally recommending a preferred option to be taken forwards.

Feedback from Stakeholders

The feedback submitted by stakeholders throughout the feasibility study has been invaluable, and has been used to help shape the direction of the study and in assessing how viable each option is likely to be. The key messages from stakeholders which have helped to influence the study have included:

- The need to maintain reasonable walking distances from home to school, if a school is to be closed
- The need to avoid the remaining schools becoming overcrowded, if a school is to be closed
- The importance of maintaining additional space in schools for children with additional support needs
- The need to consider the likely impact of the Grandhome housing development on the demand for school places in the Oldmachar ASG

Emerging Priorities

Taking into account the information gathered from the site investigations, the analysis of school roll data, and the important messages from stakeholder feedback, the following key priorities have emerged, and will be used to inform the development of the outline business case over the coming weeks:

- Layout and configuration of existing school buildings
In carrying out the school site investigations and when discussing the features of the existing buildings with school staff and managers, it has become clear that the design and layout of classrooms in some of the buildings in the ASG can present challenges, as the positioning of dividing walls and the requirement

to keep corridor areas clear can limit the space available for learning and teaching. These constraints have been given careful consideration when assessing the viability of individual sites to accommodate a merged school, as it is recognised that adding more pupils to some of these spaces may present further challenges.

- Maintaining sufficient space for ASN provision

Similarly to the above, it is recognised that adding more pupils into an existing building may put pressure on breakout spaces, which are needed for a range of purposes, including for use by children with additional support needs. It is likely therefore that in most cases where an existing building has been identified as having the potential to accommodate a merged school, because there is excess unused classroom space in the building, some minor works may also be required, to ensure there are sufficient facilities for breakout activities for the higher number of pupils.

- The impact of Grandhome

Whilst additional school provision is likely to be required in the longer term to provide capacity for the planned housing at Grandhome, it is recognised that in the shorter term the new housing development may have an impact on the available space within existing schools in the Oldmachar ASG. The updated school roll forecasts will be used to re-assess likely demand from the new development, and any recommendations on a preferred option within the outline business case will take this into account.

Next Steps

Work is now under way to create an outline business case, which will use the findings from the feasibility study to consider each of the viable options in detail. A preferred option will also be identified. The outline business case will be presented to the Education and Children's Services Committee on 12th September, when elected members will consider whether to go ahead with the identified preferred option. Any recommendation to consider closing an individual school will require the Council to first carry out a full public consultation on the proposal, before a decision can be taken on whether the closure should go ahead.

Below is a summary of the Feasibility Study Brief. This outlines the objectives of the project, the options to be considered, and what information the final Feasibility Study Report needs to provide:

Project Objectives

To be sure that the feasibility study can meet the requirements set out in the School Estate Plan, the options identified in the study should be aimed at achieving the following:

- A reduction in the number of primary schools operating within the Oldmachar ASG
- An overall revenue saving in terms of building running costs
- A positive impact on reducing carbon emissions and on the Council's net-zero ambitions
- The remaining primary schools to be maintained at between 80% and 95% occupancy for at least 6 years following implementation, as determined by the most recently available school roll forecast data
- All remaining schools to be below 2 miles' safe walking distance from all homes within the catchment area

Options to be included in the Feasibility Study (not exhaustive)

To achieve the objectives outlined above, the following options will be considered in the Feasibility Study. Within each of the options below there will be several sub-options, which consider the various combinations of schools which could potentially be merged, closed or replaced:

- Option 1 – Close one school, and re-align catchment areas to provide pupils from that school with places at the remaining schools
- Option 2 - Merge two schools together, to form one new school in an existing building, and close the other building
- Option 3 - Merge two or three schools, to form one new school in a new building to be constructed, and close the existing buildings

Additional options may be identified and added to this list as the feasibility study progresses.

Questions to be considered by the Feasibility Study

The feasibility study will address the following key questions, and a final report will be provided at the end of the study which sets out the answers to these questions:

- What are the benefits / dis-benefits of potentially closing each school site?
 - Consider costs / savings, benefits / dis-benefits of closing each site
 - Consider impact on carbon emissions and contribution to the Council's net-zero ambitions
 - How could the existing catchment areas be realigned to maintain reasonable safe walking distances to school?
- Which would be the optimal site to be retained and to 'host' a merger with another school?
 - Consider running costs, carbon emissions, accessibility, sustainable travel
 - Requirements for improvement / refurbishment of buildings
 - Consider forecast pupil rolls and capacity of existing sites to accommodate future pupil numbers
 - Consider benefits / dis-benefits of merging each combination of schools
- Which would be the optimal site for a demolition and rebuild to 'host' a merger of 2 or more schools?
 - Consider size of sites and requirements for a building to accommodate 2 or 3 existing schools
 - Consider impact on carbon emissions and contribution to the Council's net-zero ambitions
 - Likelihood of planning consent
 - Costs vs savings of replacement building
 - Likely timescales for demolition and construction
 - Likely temporary arrangements for accommodating pupils during demolition and construction