

Appendix 1

Stage One Consultation Summary – Feedback on a proposal to close Cherry Trees School

20th October

The Proposal

Following advice from Tower Hamlets Local Authority, the governors of Cherry Trees School, have been pre-publication consulting on a proposal to close Cherry Trees School, from September 2021.

A review, and full consultation of, the Local Authority Special Educational Needs Strategy, recommended moving to different models of provision, which would better support academic attainment, and the inclusion of children in mainstream provision, whenever possible. In the Summer Term 2020 a primary SEMH implementation plan was shared with schools and they were invited to comment and to put forward expressions of interest for proposed new provision. The strategy particularly recommends improvements in links to quality mainstream provision, access to the full primary curriculum and a strategy approach which fully includes girls with SEMH needs.

Cherry Trees School is a special school, catering for primary age boys with social, emotional and mental health needs aged 3 to 11 and is part of the educational provision of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The school is located at 68, Campbell Road, London E3 4EA.

In September 2019 OFSTED considered the school to be inadequate in its provision of suitable education. The school is also in financial difficulty, despite receiving an income (2018/19) of £54,000 per pupil.

Cherry Trees School is an SEMH Primary Boys School. All the pupils have EHC Plans and because of this, individual work to discuss the children's needs as part of their Annual Reviews has been underway over the last year. The families of children attending Cherry Trees School have received individual support to consider how best to improve educational provision for their children. Including support for their children's transition to better provision, through reviews of Education, Health and Care Plans. Christine McInnes, Divisional Director Education and Partnership, met with parents and staff in March 2020, to ensure they were aware of the proposals.

As well as this individualised support, Cherry Trees Governing Board, in consultation with Tower Hamlets Children's Services agreed to commence the statutory pre-consultation process for the school to close by the end of August 2021.

This report provides a summary of the stage one consultation responses. It has been compiled by Dr Helen Jenner, an independent consultant. As well as summarising responses the report also makes suggestions on next steps for the school staff, governors and Local Authority to consider, to ensure they are responding to any concerns, issues and ideas raised by respondents.

Frequently Asked Questions produced from the responses is below. Copies of written responses are available at the school, and should be retained for 12 months.

Pre-Consultation activities

A formal consultation document was produced and shared with staff, parents and other stakeholders. Comments and feedback were invited, on the document, between 14th September and 19th October 2020.

The document detailed the following opportunities for staff, parents and carers to share their views.

1. A response form (or any other written format) to record their views which could be posted to the school, hand delivered or emailed to

office@cherrytrees.org

2. A box was provided in the reception of Cherry Trees School where anyone could leave comments, response forms and any questions.

3. Individual meetings were held with parents. Additionally, some parents were also contacted by the Home-School liaison team, who checked whether they wanted to meet to discuss the consultation document.

4. A meeting for staff was held on September 30th with zoom access for staff who could not attend in person. There was also the opportunity for staff to feedback to Helen Jenner via zoom, on October 1st.

5. Two open zoom sessions were available for any stakeholder (parents, staff community, other schools etc.) on October 1st at 3pm and 6pm.

6. School staff created appropriate ways of consulting with children on their views as part of their ongoing teaching.

Written responses

11 written responses were received

3 responses did not indicate the background of the respondent

3 were from parents/foster carers

1 current staff member

2 were from ex-staff members

1 ex – carer

1 local resident

All written respondents were not in support of the proposal to close the school and to relocate children to schools that will better meet their needs.

5 respondents confirmed they had seen the SEN Strategy, and 2 further responses

indicated familiarity with the document. 4 respondents stated they had not seen the SEN Strategy. Whilst there is recognition of some of the issues identified in the strategy, some people felt it was written by people who did not understand children's needs, or recognize the work of Cherry Trees School and that it may not have been sufficiently widely consulted on. Some people were concerned that no alternative SEMH provision had been established, which could potentially lead to high cost placements in independent provision. The need to meet the needs of girls and provide a continuum of provision was recognised. Some people felt that a Primary PRU would be the answer.

Respondents raised a number of individual questions which are addressed in the attached Frequently asked Questions Document.

Governors, staff and the Local Authority should consider and respond to these questions and then make the document available to all stakeholders along with this Feedback Summary.

Key Issues raised during the consultation.

The FAQ document gives a more detailed summary of the issues and concerns of respondents, this section seeks to highlight the key aspects from the responses.

Several respondents expressed their appreciation for Cherry Trees staff and recommended that they be closely involved with transition plans, including the potential of moving to new provisions alongside the children.

Most respondents were keen to ensure the best possible transition for children currently attending Cherry Trees, and to secure new provision that was at least as good as the support they currently receive. It will be important for everyone to work together to ensure EHC Plans are fully able to be delivered at new provisions.

Staff and parents are concerned that new provision for each child has not yet been established. The school leadership has been working with parents, local authorities, and other providers to ensure strong placements are available. The recent announcement of provision at Ben Jonson, supported by Bowden House needs to be widely communicated and discussed with the parents of all children for whom it would be appropriate. Some respondents remain concerned that there may not be sufficient SEMH Primary provision in the Borough.

Parents and staff are not fully aware of the progress in expressions of interest for an integrated, higher-functioning, ASD provision in the Borough, linked to a mainstream primary school. Further communication with staff and parents about this would be helpful.

A number of respondents raised concern about leadership, management and governance of the school over the last couple of years and whether an alternative route might have been possible. Circulating the SEN Strategy and SEMH implementation plan may help stakeholders to recognize that the decision is part of a strategic plan, not simply a reaction to an OFSTED report, although this would undoubtedly have exacerbated the challenges. At this stage in the Local Authority strategy and the school's history it does not seem appropriate or helpful to re-examine the past, I understand that the matters raised have been discussed previously.

Staff are clearly anxious to support the children during transition but also concerned about their position, and exactly what the redundancy offer is. This should be fully explained in the FAQ response.

This section is a summary of the issues raised. The range of issues have been collated using a standard coding methodology. More detailed issues are discussed in the FAQ.

Overall Recommendation

Responses show that there are still a number of concerns from all groups. None of the issues raised would present a reason not to progress to statutory notice, but further communication with all stakeholders will be important to aid understanding of strategy and ensure that parents, staff and children feel well supported.

Early visits to potential new provision would greatly re-assure families.

Each young person should have a clear transition plan before the Local Authority is able to take a final decision on whether, and when Cherry Trees School should close. This will be essential for ensuring the LA meets its statutory SEN duties.

A formal school re-organisation staffing consultation process should be put in place, in preparation for consultation from March 10th if the decision is taken to close the school. In the meantime, staff should continue to be offered opportunities for training and secondment or redeployment, where appropriate. Management decisions to support these opportunities must continue to prioritise the needs of the boys and support for their transition.

Given that alternative provision will be available within the Tower Hamlets Primary SEMH provision I can see no reason why statutory notices should not be posted.