

Consultation on the proposed merger of Atkinson Road Nursery School with Atkinson Road Primary Academy

Atkinson Road Primary Academy and Atkinson Road Nursery School are on adjacent sites in the Benwell and Scotswood ward of Newcastle. Both schools were judged to be Good at their last Ofsted inspection.

Atkinson Road Nursery has a 104 places for 2-3 year olds and currently has 33 2-year olds and 59 3-year olds on roll.

Atkinson Road Primary is a 2 Form Entry (420 place) school for children aged 4–11 years and currently has 420 children on roll plus two ARCs (additionally-resourced centres) with 24 places for primary age children with special educational needs.

Background and rationale

A nursery school is a school with a Headteacher and teaching qualified staff which caters only for nursery aged children during school term times. There are currently five nursery schools in Newcastle providing early education for around 570 2 and 3/4 year olds (Jan 2017), though they individually vary in size from 40 to almost 200 children with a mixture of part- and full-time hours. In addition to nursery schools that specifically provide early years education, 52 of Newcastle's first and primary schools also offer nursery education to around 2,000 children.

Nursery schools nationally and locally are recognised as providing high-quality early years provision, more often in areas with high levels of disadvantage: *“it is widely accepted that progress in early years for children from low income backgrounds depends on attendance in the highest quality settings. The only early education provision that is at least as strong, or even stronger, in deprived areas compared with wealthier areas is nursery schools”* (Sir Michael Wilshaw HMCI, Ofsted, 2014).

Changes in national education policy and funding are making it increasingly challenging for nursery schools to continue to operate. In 2016, there were 406 state-funded nursery schools in England, a reduction of 71 since 2003. This means that more than 1 in 7 nursery schools have closed during this period. This has also been reflected in Newcastle, with two of the previous seven nursery schools having merged with primary schools.

Atkinson Road Nursery School has close working relationships with the Primary School and with Laidlaw Schools Trust. The schools were previously federated prior to Atkinson Road Primary School becoming an academy and joining the Laidlaw Schools Trust in June 2012.

Laidlaw Schools Trust, Newcastle City Council and the governing bodies of both schools agree that bringing the schools closer together and fully integrated within the Laidlaw Schools Trust provides the best solution for all parties by:

- Strengthening existing relationships and collaboration
- Ensuring continuity and support for local children and families
- Providing future financial sustainability
- Recognising and retaining the high-quality early years education expertise of the nursery school that will be a strength across the schools within LST

The proposal

As nursery schools cannot become academies, Atkinson Road Nursery School is not permitted to join LST as a separate school. It is, therefore, proposed to merge Atkinson Road Nursery and Primary Schools.

Legally there is not a direct process for the merger of two schools. To enable a merger, Newcastle City Council and Laidlaw Schools Trust are jointly proposing that the Nursery School should be technically closed and the lower age range of the Primary School extended to accommodate the nursery aged pupils. This would enable the two schools to work seamlessly and bring together all systems and staff. There would be one overall budget and one OFSTED inspection.

The employment status of staff would transfer from the Local Authority to Laidlaw Schools Trust. This would be carried out in a TUPE or TUPE-like process. There would be no detriment to terms and conditions of employment for any staff member as a result of the merger. LST would benefit from the skills, experience and expertise of the Nursery staff and would welcome them as colleagues in the Trust.

Parents and children would continue to have the same excellent experience in the Nursery provision as part of the Academy. The dedicated building would remain as the Nursery phase and accessed by users as it is now. For all intents and purposes this would be a seamless transition. Even closer co-operation with the Primary phase should ensure that the children benefit from knowing the Primary building, staff and pupils very well before they transfer to Key Stage 1 education.

The Nursery phase would come under the direction of the Academy School Principal, Mrs O'Neill. The current Nursery Head Teacher, Mrs Wynne, who is retiring this year, has very helpfully agreed to stay on until the merger takes place. The Nursery Governing Body would be disbanded but LST is keen to ensure that some of the Governors take up roles on the Academy Local Governing Body to ensure the Nursery is represented.

Outline of process and timeline

As stated above, there are two separate processes that the City Council and Laidlaw Schools Trust must follow to progress the proposed merger in line with relevant Acts of parliament, Regulations and Statutory guidance for maintained schools and academies.

In summary, this will involve the following five-stage statutory process for the closure of the nursery school:

- Stakeholder Consultation – No prescribed timescale
- Publication of statutory notice - 1 day
- Representation period - Must be 4 weeks
- Decision (by LA) - within 2 months of end of notice
- Implementation - as per statutory notice

Laidlaw Schools Trust must follow the Department for Education (DfE) advice for making significant changes to an open academy by making a business case to the DfE outlining the proposal, including its rationale, evidence of consultation and local support, financial and legal implications and alignment with the Local Authority's pupil place planning. Decisions are taken by the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) following advice from their Head Teacher Board.

These are being done together, as summarized below. We are inviting staff, parents of children at both schools and other interested parties to take part in the consultation, including meetings and the opportunity to ask any questions or discuss concerns. There is a response form that we would encourage you to complete as part of the consultation which will be available at <https://letstalknewcastle.co.uk/> or <http://www.atkinsonroadacademy.com/> or <http://www.atkinsonroad-nur.newcastle.sch.uk/website>

Please return the completed form to either Atkinson Road Nursery School or Atkinson Road Primary School or e-mail to arnconsultation@laidlaw-schools-trust.com by 4.00pm on Monday 10th July 2017

Following the stakeholder consultation, we will collate all responses for all decision-makers to determine whether to proceed to the next stage of the process, which would be a 4-week statutory notice period. After this is complete, final decisions would need to be made by the Regional Schools Commissioner (Department for Education), Laidlaw Schools Trust and Newcastle City Council.

Proposed timescales

Dates	Description / stage	Actions by
Jan - March 2017	Discuss and develop proposals	Newcastle City Council / Laidlaw Schools Trust / Atkinson Road Nursery School / Atkinson Road Primary School
April 2017	Cabinet paper and discussion	Newcastle City Council Cabinet
June - July 2017	Stakeholder Consultation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff • Parents • Other interested parties 	Newcastle City Council / Laidlaw Schools Trust / Atkinson Road Nursery School / Atkinson Road Primary School
July 2017	Review consultation feedback – decision to proceed or not	Newcastle City Council (delegated decision) / Laidlaw Schools Trust
September 2017	Statutory notice (4 weeks)	Newcastle City Council
October 2017	Decision	Laidlaw Schools Trust, RSC (advised by Head Teacher Board)
October/ November 2017	Decision	Newcastle City Council (Cabinet)
January 2018	Implementation	Newcastle City Council / Laidlaw Schools Trust