

<b>Item No.</b> 5	<b>Classification:</b> Open	<b>Date:</b> 22 February 2024	<b>Meeting Name:</b> Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission
<b>Report title:</b>		Bird in Bush Primary School Amalgamation	
<b>Ward(s) or groups affected:</b>		All	
<b>From:</b>		Richard Hunter, Principal Advisor, Education, Learning and Achievement	

## PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. The purpose of this item is to outline the rationale, challenges and successes of the creation of Bird in Bush Primary School, through the amalgamation of Cobourg and Camelot Primary Schools in September 2023, on the Camelot Primary School site.

## RECOMMENDATION(S)

2. Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission note this report.

## BACKGROUND

### Keeping Education Strong

3. In December 2022, Cabinet considered a report 'Keeping Education Strong: Strategy for future proofing primary schools and protecting the quality of education in Southwark'. This outlined a strategy to address falling rolls which cabinet approved. This anticipated the proposal to amalgamate Cobourg and Camelot Primary Schools which became an important part of that strategy.
4. In June 2023 cabinet considered a further update on this strategy, 'Keeping Education Strong Recommendations'. The recommendations in this strategy were approved.
5. In January 2023 London Councils published a report highlighting the continuing concerns about school capacity in inner London and the continuing trajectory of falling schools rolls<sup>1</sup>.

### Amalgamation rationale

6. On September 1<sup>st</sup> 2023 Bird in Bush Primary School opened on the Camelot Primary School site through the amalgamation of Cobourg Primary School with Camelot Primary School. Cobourg Primary School in effect closed on this date.
7. The amalgamation was planned because of the general reasons set out above that informed Keeping Education Strong and noted by the London Councils Report.

<sup>1</sup> [London Councils - Managing falling schools rolls \(2024\).pdf](#)

8. Furthermore, and specifically relating to Cobourg Primary School, there were a number of reasons that particularly identified it for closure. There was graded a “Requires Improvement” (RI) school by Ofsted (March 2022), its second consecutive RI judgement. This is indicative of an experience for pupils that was not good and unable to improve.
9. There was also had a budget deficit due to a steeply declining pupil roll. A school with a RI grading will find it harder to attract pupils in a school’s system that prioritises parental choice.
10. Cobourg Primary School had experienced a prolonged spell of leadership and management turbulence.
11. In June 2022 an Interim Executive Board of Governors (IEB) was installed at Cobourg, when its governing body was dissolved by the local authority’s due to serious concerns around the quality of education at the school.
12. Camelot Primary School was chosen as an amalgamation option as, at the request of the local authority, its highly experienced headteacher had been supporting Cobourg Primary School to manage its difficulties at all levels. Furthermore and significantly, Camelot Primary School itself was vulnerable to the impact of falling rolls. Therefore amalgamation gave both schools the opportunity to continue as one financially sustainable school, with strong leadership and governance.

### **Amalgamation process**

13. The amalgamation was able to progress rapidly because the IEB and the Camelot Primary School governing body shared personnel and were committed to making the plan work for both schools.
14. The Executive Headteacher, James Robinson, was able to work closely with both schools’ staff teams and enable a consistent vision to be implemented and shared with both communities.
15. The IEB, Camelot Primary School’s governing Body and the Executive Headteacher had the full support of the local authority and DfE officers.
16. The planned amalgamation was able to be accommodated by the Council’s internal governance processes i.e. Cabinet decision making processes.
17. Financial support from the Council was made available to the families of both schools to ease the pressures of costs e.g. of new uniforms and book bags.
18. Local schools were able to accommodate families who opted not to relocate to the Camelot site.

## **Lessons learned**

19. All considerations of schools closures and amalgamations bring with them individual situations and characteristics that require a bespoke response and learning approach to ensure lessons learned can be taken and applied to future situations as far as possible and applicable. The main lessons about this amalgamation are set out below.
20. It is important to ensure that there are dedicated local authority resources (financial, advisory, project management personnel) allocated to a proposed plan to effectively manage. This ensures that advice is timely and accurate, key timelines and milestones are understood and effectively planned for, technical questions are answered, and a heavy workload is removed from governors.
21. There is a need to ensure alignment with as many conflicting timeframes as possible e.g. staff notice periods, Council constitutional and governance timeframes, admissions timetables and the academic/ financial/ calendar years' constraints. Therefore, "buy in" remains strong from all stakeholders and financial risks are reduced for the Council e.g. possible pay in lieu of notice for some staff.
22. It is important to as early as possible, keep all stakeholders' communications open, timely and transparent.
23. It is important to ensure that families are supported to make the transition from a closing school as easy as possible – knowledge of where vacancies exist, distances to new schools, assistance with SEND information so that inclusion is effective and financial support for families, especially those whose children will transfer to a secondary school in the next year.

## **Successful outcomes**

24. The amalgamation plan aligned with the planned Council strategy to manage the financial impact on schools caused by Southwark's falling rolls, "Keeping Education Strong". It removed Cobourg's one form of entry (30 pupils) and the rolls of local schools increased.
25. The two schools and communities amalgamated successfully and effectively, with the majority of Cobourg's pupils transferring to the Camelot site - more than 120 pupils. All classes in Bird in Bush Primary School are full or almost at that point. Each child attracts central government funding of around £6,000.00.
26. Bird in Bush Primary is operating with an in year financial surplus. The former schools' deficits has been removed (over £100,000.00+).
27. Staff with permanent contracts from Cobourg Primary were accommodated at Bird in Bush Primary.

28. Bird in Bush Primary School is a unified, harmonious learning environment thanks to the hard work of the staff and families of both schools and good strategic steer from the governing body.
29. The focus of the school's leadership team is now once again focused on the quality of education for its learners whatever their needs, rather than the distraction of the amalgamation process, or else sufficient pupils to make the school viable and ensure a high quality education for all children. The healthy state of the budget means that more options are available to leaders.

### **Celebrating success**

30. The amalgamation to form Bird in Bush School is a fairly recent event. We are only now at the stage of beginning to evaluate its success following the completion of one and a half terms.
31. The establishment of Bird in Bush Primary School is a huge success for the communities by stakeholders involved in achieving it.
32. Bird in Bush is appropriately referred to by local authority officers as a successful example of how to achieve an effective closure and reopening of a school. It is however important to recognise its particular characteristics and the learning from the process.
33. There has been acknowledgement by the local authority of the immense work of the headteacher, his staff and the governing body of Camelot and now Bird in Bush Primary School. All indicators suggest that pupil numbers will remain high, the longer lasting positive impacts of amalgamation can be celebrated. Reception first choice application preferences are close to 30, which at this point in the year is promising as the school could be at capacity in September 2024.
34. There was a feeling that the highly emotive feelings around Cobourg's closure should be sensitively managed, given the difficulties the school had experienced. Thus the start of Bird in Bush Primary school was without fanfare and the process of quietly establishing the new school to enable it to create the conditions to thrive was allowed to take place. Now that the positive impacts are being seen as sustainable thought is being given to celebrate "one year on". This piece of work needs to be undertaken in partnership with the school's stakeholders.