

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN THE CULGAITH AND LANGWATHBY AREA

Notes of the Consultation Meetings held on Monday 28 February 2011 at Culgaith School

Introduction

[These notes should not be read as a verbatim record of the meetings. They are designed to capture the issues raised so that elected members understand the views of consultees. Where several consultees have raised the same issue, this is not repeated in the notes]

As part of the consultation process looking at primary education in the Culgaith and Langwathby Area two meetings were held at Culgaith School, one with the staff and governors and a second with parents and others with an interest in the school.

At the start of each meeting Brenda Wile, Senior Commissioning Manager for School Organisation introduced herself and the other local authority officers present namely Andy Smart, county manager for school organisation and Mike Tuer who took the notes. Stephanie Fearn represented the CE Diocese at the Staff and Governors meeting. David Salmon, school improvement officer (SIO) for Culgaith School attended both meetings. He was accompanied by Lis Fenwick senior school improvement officer for the area and Julie Scott SIO for Langwathby School at the second meeting.

Brenda Wile gave some brief introductory comments before asking Andy Smart on behalf of the County Council to provide the context leading to the issue of the consultation document on the possibility of increasing the age range of Culgaith School from 3 to 8 to 3 to 11. Andy explained that Culgaith was one of only two 'first schools' in Cumbria in that pupils transfer from there at the end of year 3 to Langwathby (or other schools) after one year of Key Stage 2 of the National Curriculum. The two schools no longer fit into the current pattern of schools within the Authority in that nearly all schools in rural areas are all through primary schools and only in some urban areas did separate infant and junior schools still exist.

Andy explained that technically these consultations were being undertaken on behalf of the Governors of Culgaith School. As they were undertaking similar consultations on behalf of Armathwaite the Authority were taking the lead to help maintain consistency. However, it would be the Governors who would make the decision at the end of the consultation period whether or not to publish a legal notice to bring the suggested change about.

He emphasised that the consultations were in no way a criticism of Langwathby School who do a very good job at educating the pupils in their care. The two schools work closely together to ensure a smooth a transition as possible. This consultation is nothing to do with the educational standards provided by both schools as both are recognised as good.

He then explained that the Authority now had a duty to respond to parents wishes in relation to school organisation change. There have been a number of representations since the school became a first school in 1974 to change it back to a primary school. Late last year the Authority had received a number of letters from parents expressing a wish that the situation be changed at Culgaith School. These consultations were by way of a response to those wishes. He explained that when school organisation changes are proposed that they should happen as quickly as possible. For that reason it is suggested that the change should it happen would begin to be implemented in September this year (2011). In looking into that possibility it was incumbent on the Governors to consider all the responses received and balance the effects on Langwathby School against the potential benefits to Culgaith School's current and future pupils. While the Governors will make the decision whether or not to publish a notice to bring about the suggested change, the outcome of the consultations will be reported to the Cabinet when the results of the Armathwaite/High Hesket consultations are considered. Andy explained that the notes of these meetings will form part of the response to the consultations when it is reported to the Cabinet. Were a notice to be published the Cabinet would be required to make the final decision on its implementation. This is scheduled to take place on 30 June 2011. The Cabinet would have the choice of either approving or rejecting its implementation or suggesting a modification such as a change to the implementation date.

Andy went on to say that there were various methods of responding to the consultation, completion of the questionnaire in the consultation document, by letter to the freepost address, by e-mail to the school organisation team or by completion of the on-line questionnaire through the County Council website.

At the end of each introduction the meetings were opened up for questions and comments.

Staff and governors meeting

A joint staff and governors meeting was attended by 10 members of staff and Governors including the head Lynn Harrison and the Chair of Governors Sue Smith.

It was explained that the Governors would be expected to look at all the responses received to the consultation. While a summary of those received would be provided they ought to look at each individual response when considering their decision whether or not to publish a notice to propose a change to the age range of the school. They would have a duty of confidentiality in respect of who responded with which comments. In considering them it is not the volume of responses that should be taken into account rather the weight of the arguments. Most arguments put forward would have a counter argument. However, it is for the Governors to consider their decision on the basis of all the responses received. It was suggested that it would still be appropriate for the Governing Body to provide a written response to the consultations.

Parents and others should be encouraged to respond giving their opinions.

There was a suggestion from the Governing Body that they wished to know the outcome of the Armathwaite consultations before they made their decision as there was a wish that one school should not be left as the only 'first' school. It was explained that they were separate, albeit parallel, consultations and needed to be dealt with accordingly.

It was stated that Culgaith, along with Armathwaite, were the odd ones out and now was the time to change that as strong viable schools could be created with the stable pupil numbers projected. It was believed that the children made good progress at Culgaith School and there was the potential for a backward step to be taken as the pupils adjusted to a new school. The Culgaith children would also need to transfer into already established peer groups. Having a choice of not having to move was what was being requested. That is currently denied to Culgaith area parents.

Concerns had been expressed that the school would have to teach all pupils in one class group covering all four year groups of key stage 2. There were a lot of small rural schools around Cumbria where this was the norm and there could be arguments put for and against such an arrangement.

The Chair of Governors commented that parents are obviously worried about 'the here and now', and how the change might affect their children. She was concerned with the longer term as well, pointing out that whenever a change was made it would cause anxieties among existing parents, but the Governors needed to look beyond the transition years into the future when considering what to do following the consultations. She felt it was logical to make this change and there was a need to step back from the 'emotional response' of current parents, albeit that their views are important and will need to be considered carefully..

It was accepted that there will be a short term impact particularly on Langwathby School. That said the transition over three years allowed a smoother, planned change with less disruption to Langwathby School. There would be no transfer back from Langwathby to Culgaith, if parents wished, to years 5 and 6 in September 2011, assuming the start of the change was agreed to begin at that date. There was still the possibility of in year transfers from one school to another, if a child didn't settle, using the existing procedures but only to established year groups.

There was concern that the children currently in Year 3 would remain the oldest pupils in Culgaith School during the suggested three years of the transition. Governors and staff recognised that this may be an issue for some parents, but were keen to emphasise that the school would consider the needs of these pupils individually and provide appropriate support.

It was noted that Culgaith School would have to fund the additional pupils that did not transfer to Langwathby until April 2012. Conversely Langwathby would be funded on its existing numbers on roll and not suffer any budget reduction until then. It was accepted that through time Langwathby School would lose the funding for the pupils that did not transfer. That said Culgaith is likely to

see a reduction in its additional funding allowance (small schools allowance). Any 'savings' from that reduction would be recycled within the overall 'schools budget'. The question of an upward change of age range will continue to be raised and whenever it happened it would have the effect of reducing Langwathby's budget and, as a result, the number of staff employed.

There will be some reduction in transport costs, as well as the carbon footprint, as a consequence of the suggested change. This will provide some long term savings to the home to school transport budget.

It was stated that closure was not being considered as an option at this time as there were sufficient numbers projected to provide strong viable schools into the future, and there remains a presumption against the closure of rural schools.

There was a statement made that whether or not the change went through the school would still wish to work together with the surrounding schools, including Langwathby, to enhance the learning experience for all their pupils. That said it was believed that the Culgaith community would be enriched by retaining its older pupils in the area in which they live.

Were the suggested change to happen the Published Admission Number of Culgaith would be reduced from 14 to 8. This would mean that in future admissions should be restricted to that number. As a voluntary aided school the Governing Body is the admission authority and as such it would be up to it whether or not it would wish to exceed that number in any one year. The indications from the GP Register information are that there will be sufficient places to enable any future applications, from within the catchment area, to be accommodated.

It has been suggested that there was some benefit in moving to a larger school before a second move to a large secondary school. The two Penrith Schools are used to dealing with numbers coming from a large number of very small schools and as such work on making the transition as smooth as possible. If parents believe that it is important to have experience of a larger primary school before the move to secondary school happens they could if they so choose move their children at an appropriate time to a larger primary school like Langwathby. The real issue is that Culgaith parents are denied that choice and have to move their children at what they see as an inappropriate time in their children's education.

Parents' Meeting

Brenda Wile in her opening remarks, following introductions, emphasised that no decisions had been taken and that the Authority were keen to hear the thoughts of the local community. Andy Smart introducing the consultation document said that there had already been a meeting with the staff and governors and it was now the chance for parents to express their views. There were around 50 people present (parents, staff, governors and other local residents).

One parent with children at Culgaith School stated that it was an excellent opportunity for the community to secure the future of the school within the community. Numbers of children in the area were healthier than they were the last time the schools were consulted on the issue in 1999. They are also looking more stable into the future. It was more than possible to create two thriving primary schools from the pupils available. If the change is not made now the issue will keep coming back until it is resolved, as the current arrangement is clearly out of step with the rest of the Authority.

Another parent speaking in favour of the change said she wanted it to happen this year before it was too late for her child. She stated she believed it was in the best educational interests of her daughter and will get the best out of her. The school provides a good education. The children would continue to be able to walk or cycle to school instead of being put on a bus. It is inevitable that children take time to settle when they move schools. It was difficult enough for them to adjust at 11 when they go to secondary school without having to go through a similar upheaval at age 8. It is also difficult for parents to get to know another school that is some distance from where they live. It is particularly difficult for parents with children in both schools to support both equitably. Three years is a relatively short time for parents to associate with a school and for the staff to get to know the families and their children's needs. Continuity is inevitably more difficult if a child has to move schools.

It had been suggested that children from small schools have difficulty when they transfer to secondary schools and the move to Langwathby is seen as a stepping stone. This assertion was not agreed as it was clear that the two Penrith secondary schools and Appleby Grammar School were well used to receiving children from small primary schools. It was later stated that there were no plans to change the catchment areas of the secondary schools.

The points made above were echoed by a succession of subsequent speakers, most of whom had children at Culgaith School. Others spoke through their experience of the move and said that it had not been an easy experience for their children. Another said that while her own child had gained through the experience she would have preferred to have had the choice. The wish from the parents of Culgaith to have the choice was a recurring theme throughout the meeting. One parent new to the area found it strange to have to send her children to separate schools to continue their primary school education.

One parent was concerned at the length of time her child would need to spend on a bus going to Langwathby. Currently the journey takes around 5 minutes to get to Culgaith. That increases to between 30 and 40 minutes by the time the bus reaches Langwathby School. It was stated that there would be a small saving to the transport budget by not having to provide transport to Langwathby, for pupils in the Culgaith catchment area, if the change were to go ahead. It was accepted that there will be an effect on the Langwathby budget as they would no longer receive the income from the children that transfer from Culgaith if the change happens. This effect is one of the factors that needed to be considered when the proposed change is considered.

Other factors that will need to be considered will include the impact on education and community cohesion. It was said that when considering the responses it will not be volume that matters it will be the relative weight of the arguments and views put forward. It is that that the Governors will need to give careful consideration to. If they decide to publish a notice then Cabinet will need to make a similar assessment balancing the issues for and against a change before determining whether or not to agree its implementation.

The Governors of Culgaith School were informed before it was decided that the consultations would go ahead that there was no capital available to improve or extend the buildings at Culgaith School. The governors were of the opinion that with the current capacity of 56 they could comfortably accommodate the two classes required (covering key stage 1 and key stage 2 respectively), if all the parents in the catchment area were to opt to send their children to the school in the future. The nursery would continue to be catered for separately in the room in its current location.

No concerns were expressed at the possibility that children currently in year 3 would remain the oldest pupils in the school for four years assuming the change went ahead in September 2011. Instead the parents of the children that were likely to stay saw this as a positive for their children. It was felt that all the children get the opportunity to 'star' and take 'responsibility' and shine in school activities in a smaller school. Having children of all primary ages enables the school to work and participate on an equal basis with its surrounding schools.

It was explained that the budget for staff development will in future be devolved to the schools and it was up to the Governors how much of this was used for that purpose.

One speaker suggested that as a lot of the transition work had been planned and parents had made the choice of school for their children to be transferred to then it would be sensible to delay the change for a year. It was said that if the change goes ahead in September 2011 those parents with year 3 children would have the choice whether they move their children or not.

Concern was expressed at the possible class organisation through the transition as there would be a need to split the classes across key stages. While the class organisation was up to the head and governors to determine the school would continue to focus on the needs of individual children to provide the support they need.

One speaker said that amalgamation should have been an option as Langwathby School was large enough to take all the children in the area. It was explained that while he was free to suggest that it was not an option that was being considered in this consultation. As stated above, one of the reasons that it was not being considered was that the numbers in the area were sufficient to provide for two viable primary schools. Others said that closing the school would take the heart out of the community and work against community cohesion. The school was a very important asset to the area and in any case there was still the presumption against the closure of

rural primary schools. The existing projections using the GP register data indicate that a proposed published admission number of 8 would allow any child living in the catchment area a strong chance of obtaining a reception place at the school. As an aided school the Governors make the decision on admissions and there are no indications that there will not be sufficient places in the future if the number were reduced to 8.

Further discussion took place around the existing and long term projections of pupil numbers and the possible effect of future house building. It was stated that there could be no guarantee that at a future date that a new classroom would not need to be built at Culgaith School if numbers increased. Equally there could be no guarantee that the Authority would not need to look at a possible change in the future if the numbers fell sufficiently to make the school unviable.

It was said that Skirwith, within the Culgaith catchment area was a divided community as families often send their children to Langwathby to avoid the transfer at age 8.

It was clear that a large majority of those present supported the proposed change of age range at Culgaith School.

MJT
March 2011