

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN THE CULGAITH AND LANGWATHBY AREA

Notes of the Consultation Meetings held on Tuesday 1 March 2011 at Langwathby 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 Langwathby 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 and Julie Scott SIO for Langwathby School were present 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 technically these consultations were being undertaken on behalf of the Governors of Culgaith School. The Authority was taking the lead to help maintain consistency. However, it would be the Governors of Culgaith School 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.

Andy explained that Culgaith was one of only two 'first schools' in Cumbria in that pupils are required to transfer from 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. Nearly all schools in rural areas in Cumbria are all through primary schools and only in some urban areas did separate infant and junior schools exist.

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 as smooth a transition as possible. This consultation is nothing to do with the existing educational standards provided by the two schools as both are recognised as good.

He explained that towards the end of last year the Authority had received a number of letters from parents at Culgaith who wished to see a full primary school there. 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. These consultations were by way of a response to those wishes.

He then went on to outline the possible timetable following the consultations. Responses had to be returned to reach us by 16 March 2011. Culgaith School Governors were to meet on 28 March to look at the responses and determine whether or not to publish a legal notice. If it is published there would be a six week period during which representations could be submitted. Cabinet would make a final decision on the proposal at their meeting on 30 June. 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.

The suggestion is that the start of the implementation would begin in September 2011 when no transfer to Langwathby would occur and a year 4 be created at Culgaith School. No pupils that had previously transferred to Langwathby would be allowed to return at that date as there would be no year 5 until September 2012 and no year 6 until 2013.

It is the intention to report the outcome of the consultations to the Cabinet when the results of the Armathwaite/High Hesket consultations are considered at the end of March. Andy explained that the notes of these meetings will form part of the response to the consultations when it is reported to the Cabinet.

Andy went on to say that responses to the consultation could be made in a number of ways, by 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 'Your Say' part of its 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 15 members of staff and Governors including the head Lesley Birtwell and the Chair of Governors Andy Dyer.

Concern was expressed that the consultation paper was biased in favour of the suggested change at Culgaith and did not explicitly explain the effect of the change on Langwathby School. The speaker believed this did not comply with the Central Government's code of practice applicable to consultations. The implication in the original Cabinet report that this was of little impact to Langwathby was misleading to those deciding whether or not to consult. A

number of speakers came back to the theme that both the Cabinet paper and the consultation did not present a balanced picture. It was felt that some of the language was emotive such as saying that the children were 'forced to move'. In defence it was suggested that the parents had no choice to move at age 8 and because the choice to stay at Culgaith did not exist they were therefore forced to move schools.

It was suggested that the financial section was not strictly accurate as it made no reference to the additional schools allowance which is likely to decrease if Culgaith's numbers increased. The basic premise remained the same in that the same amount of money per pupil would be retained by Culgaith into their budget as would be lost from Langwathby's. This would occur retrospectively in that no money would be gained or lost until April 2012 if the change is approved from September 2011 as the 2011-12 school's budget is set using January 2011 numbers on roll. That said it was believed the loss of budget will inevitably mean a reduction in the number of staff at Langwathby School.

The County's evidence base for the belief that children find it unsettling to move schools was questioned and it was suggested that the schools evidence base suggests otherwise. It was asked whether the county had followed up on these concerns and the outcome. It was felt the reality was different in that they may be a little anxious but many actually looked forward to going to a 'bigger primary school' and this was not the reality after a very short time. A parent governor stated that they believed their children had settled well following their transfer from Culgaith School. It was wrong that the good education both in and out of the classroom at Langwathby should be put at risk by the requests of a few parents who wished to change the situation at Culgaith. While it may seem a bit 'quirky' the current system works for the benefit of all the children. Both schools are good at what they do. It was felt that providing the best possible education should be the prime consideration. By way of a response it was said it could equally be argued that having the children settled in one school for the whole of their primary education was less disruptive than moving them.

It was suggested that parents are not always in the best position to determine what is considered a 'good education' as they have limited knowledge of other schools. The consultation document points them in the direction of the OFSTED reports if parents wished to know more about the 'other' school before responding.

It was explained again that the Authority had a duty to respond to requests for change and that it was in line with the Authority's long term preference for all through primary schools. The letters were just the latest of a number of such requests from parents over a number of years.

There was concern that neither the first Cabinet paper nor the consultation document had spelt out in detail the effect of the reduction in funding on the staffing and class organisation at Langwathby School. It would not save money as the school would still have to maintain additional 'surplus places' and this would be an inefficient use of resources. The loss of the Culgaith children would increase the number of surplus places at Langwathby. The

projections indicated that there were increasing numbers of surplus places in the surrounding schools and Culgaith pupil numbers were amongst those going down. It was suggested that this proposal was being put forward as a way of 'saving' Culgaith School from closure. In contrast it was later suggested that if the change of status were granted it would not be that long before Culgaith would be looking to build another class base, adding to the surplus places. Culgaith was also seen as a community with an ageing population with few new houses, affordable or otherwise, planned for the future. By way of a response the meeting were informed that reducing surplus places is much less of an issue for the Department For Education (DFE) than it used to be and it was considered more important to respond to parents' wishes. It was stated that the Governors of Culgaith had been told at an early stage of the process that there would be no capital resources for additional classrooms to support their proposed change.

It was noted that the majority of children were transported to the school from the surrounding villages and it was not just those children that lived in Culgaith. It was confirmed that Cabinet when making the decision, if that were to be in favour of a change of age range, be asked to honour a commitment of transport to Langwathby for those children currently in year 3 that decide to transfer to Langwathby on in September, and those parents who chose Langwathby from outside the catchment area and who would normally have been entitled to free transport from year 4 onwards.

It was suggested that parents moving into the area would have checked on the schools and known that their child would have to move from Culgaith at age 8 if they attended there. It was not unusual for parents moving into the area with more than one child to send them all to Langwathby to avoid another school move. By reducing the roll at Langwathby it was taking away the choice of parents to send their children to a large rural primary school. It was felt that Culgaith would be too small and need to teach all four year groups of key stage 2 in the same group were the change approved.

It was felt that it was too late to make the change to be effective from this September. The many transition activities and meetings that are planned for the Culgaith children will have been completed by the time a final decision would be made on 30 June 2011. If the change were to happen it would be much better for the children and planning at the schools that it be delayed for a year. Having the change in September this year could potentially split up the current Culgaith year 3 cohort. It was reported that parents of year 3 children, that had spoken the previous evening at Culgaith, were anxious that it did happen this September otherwise it would be too late for their children.

It was said that reducing the budget at Langwathby will not only impact on the number of classes but also affect the number of extra curricular activities the school is able to offer. It would no longer be possible for example to offer two residential courses, one educational and the other outdoor, each year as there would be insufficient numbers. Likewise with the number of performances (school plays and concerts) each year, each pupil is given the opportunity to take a lead role.

The staff felt that the transfer to Langwathby helped the children when they came to move to secondary school when they would be part of a larger group.

The staff and governors were reminded that responses needed to be received on or before 16 March 2011.

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. Notes were being taken of everything that was said and those would be relayed back to the Cabinet who would make any decision on the way forward following the consultations. Andy Smart then introduced the consultation paper by saying that there had already been a meeting with the staff and governors and it was now an opportunity for parents to express a view. There were around 70 people present (including parents, staff, governors and other local residents).

The first speaker felt that Langwathby School had been set on the back foot from when they first they heard about the suggested change especially when that was followed by an unbalanced consultation document. He was incensed that the school was being forced to defend itself. In response it was emphasised that the consultations were in no way a criticism of the education provided at Langwathby School. The intention of the document was to set out in a balanced and factual way the situation and the proposal whether or not there should be a change of age range at Culgaith School. The officers had no vested interest in the outcome and were there to listen to the views put forward.

Concern was expressed that the document did not provide a range of options which were believed required in the Central Government's code of practice for consultations. The speaker believed it should have set out other options such as the closure of Culgaith School or changing it into an infant school. There were already a number of surplus places at Langwathby and this proposal would lead to an increase in them. In reply it was suggested that the guidance on school organisation is contradictory in places. There is much greater emphasis now on local provision in local communities than on reducing surplus places. Not transferring the pupils from Culgaith will also fill up the spare space at that school.

It was later suggested that an amalgamation of the two schools should have been put forward as an option. It was explained that any option that was put forward as a response to the consultations would be provided to the Culgaith Governors who if they believe it is worthy of consideration can come back to consult on those possibilities. There was a duty on those suggesting school organisation changes to put forward a clear and easily understood choice and not a range of possibilities.

It was suggested that the population in Culgaith was maturing and as indicated by the projections of pupils for Culgaith School there will be fewer pupils in the future and it will eventually become a 'one class' school.

It was put that there should have been more engagement with the communities before the consultation document was issued with the aim of coming up with an option most people would be happy with. In reply it was suggested that having heard what had been said the day before at Culgaith and today at the staff and governors meeting it was unlikely that such a consensus position could have been achieved. The whole point of consultations was to gather the views of those with an interest and who might be affected by any change.

Reference was made to local planning policies and that Langwathby is a key centre for future growth. It was said that the Authority needed to take plans such as those into consideration in its long term planning. The officers explained that the Authority is an active partner in the development of local development frameworks and were aware of potential areas of housing development. The school organisation team also receive copies of every housing planning application and is given an opportunity to put its case to developers for contributions for educational facilities where there are insufficient places.

Concern was expressed at the timescales in that arrangements were well advanced for the move in September 2011 and transition arrangements were planned for the summer term.

It was stated that the funding lost through the pupils not transferring would have drastic consequences at Langwathby School. This negative impact was not provided in the consultation document. At the same time the advantages of such a change on Culgaith School were clearly stated.

A question was asked, what criteria do the Cabinet as decision makers use when determining the outcome of school organisation changes? It was explained that the Department for Education (DFE) issued guidance to decision makers which highlights a range of criteria that needs to be considered and it clearly states these will vary, depending on the type and circumstances of the proposals. The criteria include the effect on transport, community cohesion as well as the effect on education amongst others. Referring to educational standards the senior improvement officer stated that it was their role to support, challenge and monitor the education in schools to help maintain standards. There was always a risk to education when any school organisation change takes place it is up to the schools with the support of the school improvement officers to minimise that risk. It was confirmed that the School Improvement Officers would be involved in contributing to the Cabinet report.

It was felt that some Culgaith parents wanted the convenience of a village school without considering the negative aspects on other schools such as classes covering multiple year groups. It was reported that a large majority of small schools, in the region of 80%, are rated as either outstanding or good by

OFSTED. Size did not seem to impact on whether schools were rated good or otherwise. It was stated that it was helpful for children to move to a larger primary school as a stepping stone to the much larger secondary schools.

Considerable passion and anger was conveyed giving the belief that the suggested change will have a marked negative effect on Langwathby School and that there was no confidence that a rational decision would be reached. Concern was expressed by a number of speakers on the effect on Langwathby School and that it was a small number of Culgaith parents that wanted this change compared with the many that didn't. Instead the decision would be political and based on ideology. It was stated by way of a reply that the Authority has supported the concept of all through primary schools for a long time. The views expressed would be reported back in the notes of the meetings and through other responses that are received. The Cabinet reports will be a public document and published on the web-site. The officers have a duty to represent the views expressed as faithfully as possible. In addition the school will be sent the notes in advance of their publication as part of the Cabinet Report for their comments.

The meeting was informed that the decision to consult was taken by the governors of Culgaith School with the support of the Authority following representations that had been received in 2010. However, this was not a new issue and representations had been made from the Armathwaite as well as the Culgaith community over a number of years. The area school organisation group for the area, comprising a wide range of people with an interest in education, has often said that the anomalous situation here at Culgaith and Armathwaite should be changed.

One parent whose children had gone through the system said that they had benefited from the experience. This was supported by other parents.

It was said that a small school with 27 children in key stage 2 covering four year groups cannot be as efficient and as effective as classes with only two year groups or a single year group. It was felt that the children's well-being should be at the heart of this and it cannot be better for them to be stuck in a small primary school.

Concern was expressed that they felt unable to make representations to their local member as she had a conflict of interest as chair of governors at Armathwaite School, where a similar change is being consulted on. It was confirmed that the addresses of Cabinet members were on the County Council website and there was nothing to prevent letters being sent directly to them.

It was clear that the majority of people present supported the status quo as they were concerned about the effect the change would have on Langwathby School and their children.

MJT
March 2011