

PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES IN NORTH CARLISLE

Notes of the Consultation Meetings held on Tuesday 23 March 2010 at Kingmoor Infant School

Introduction

As part of the consultation process looking at primary school places in North Carlisle three meetings were held at Kingmoor Infant School; one with the staff, a second with the governors and a final one with parents and others with an interest in the school.

At the start of each meeting Brenda Wile, Head of Service introduced herself and the other local authority officers present namely Andy Smart, county manager for school organisation and Mike Tuer who took the notes. Wendy Smith the senior school improvement officer for the Carlisle area attended the staff and governors meetings. The local County Councillor, Alan Toole, attended the parents' 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 letter on the possibility of expanding the Kingmoor Infant and Junior Schools. Andy explained that we were starting to see a rise in the number of births year on year throughout the Carlisle area during the last two or three years. These would be feeding through into the primary schools soon. In addition, recessions quite often have the effect of increasing births and restricting mobility due to the lack of movement in the housing market which may have also affected the numbers. He explained that the Authority has a duty to ensure that there are enough places to meet demand and, wherever possible, to meet parental preferences. Kingmoor is an area that has been identified where numbers are growing in comparison to recent years. The number of children living in the catchment area, below school age, in each year group exceeds the 60 places available in the infant school. There is no indication that the number of births will not continue to increase year on year.

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

Staff Meeting

This meeting was attended by nearly all the staff employed at the school. The first area of discussion was around the loss of space were the existing buildings to be extended. Already the new nursery building had taken up considerable space. This had taken away the wild garden. The latest curriculum changes are emphasising how important using the outdoors in the learning process is. Congestion in the playground is already an issue causing concern, without adding a further 45 pupils. Having enough internal space was also an issue. In addition to the new classrooms, additional storage, cloakrooms and toilets would be required. There was already pressure on the

use of the hall which is at the minimum size that the DCSF recommends for 180 children and therefore would be too small for extra children.

The question was asked 'where are all the children going to come from to fill the additional classroom(s)?' The school will not fill from first preferences in September 2010. It was believed this would continue to be the position into the future. It was explained again that there were more pupils living in the area than the number of places available for them in future years. There is no easy way that the Authority can gauge future parental preferences, although it was accepted that any choice would become more restricted as surrounding schools filled up. There was still a general feeling that the school would never fill up were it to be expanded, even if the year on year pupil populations living in the area were to continue to increase. It was said that the numbers stated on allocation day do not end up entering the school the following September. It is thought those that were 'lost' may decide to enter private education after being allocated a place.

Concern was expressed that Councillors would not listen to the legitimate concerns of those that knew the school well, saying that they weren't listened to last time. It was suggested that the Councillors did listen in that the possible amalgamation of the schools was not proceeded with, in line with the majority view. Some who supported amalgamation at that time could now say they were not listened to.

The main concern was the welfare of the existing pupils. They were the ones that had to integrate, whether they moved from Belah on its closure or were already at Kingmoor Infant School. It was the same group that have 'borne the disturbance' caused by the building of the nursery and the Authority is proposing further disruption with another building project now and possibly during their time in the junior school assuming a phased build at the two schools.

The problem of access to the school at the end of a cul-de-sac was highlighted. If the school had been on a trip it was rarely possible to get a bus close to the school to ensure the safer disembarkation at a time when parents arrive to collect their children. It is chaotic, particularly at home time.

It was agreed that the content of the Cabinet report and the notes of the meetings would be shared with the head before they were finalised.

It was explained that one additional classroom would mean an indicated admission number of 70 and two class bases would be likely to lead to an admission number of 75. Legally classes in the infant phase have to be no more than 30 pupils with a single teacher. The decision of the independent appeals panel, which led to the admission of the additional pupils to the reception class last year, was seen as rather perverse in the light of that legal requirement. Concern was expressed that the additional pupils proposed to be admitted would result in the school having to organise with some mixed age classes. If the full numbers did not materialise it would put budgetary pressure on the school as an additional teacher would have to be employed when multiples of 30 were exceeded. There was a real wish for stability. It

was suggested that another school, such as Houghton, should be extended so that Kingmoor children are not disrupted again.

There was a general issue over the possible development at Crindledyke. Were a new school to be built it might attract pupils from the Kingmoor area. If not, would the Authority wish to expand the Kingmoor Schools again to accommodate future increases in numbers?

Governors' Meeting

This meeting was attended by all of the school governors.

After introductions by Brenda Wile she invited Andy Smart to provide some context to consultations (as above) before the meeting was opened up for comments and questions.

One governor stated that if they were accountable for standards and strategic responsibility for the school, this can only be done through careful planning. Yet the Authority is proposing an extension that is against the wishes of all involved with the school. She asked 'how in that scenario could they remain accountable?' They couldn't be held accountable for the future standards if these changes are imposed on the school. There was a clear need to understand the respective roles in the process and subsequent responsibilities.

There was a strong feeling voiced that the school required some stability in the next few years. It was suggested that the fact that only 53 parents had put Kingmoor Infant School down as a first preference for next September was a consequence of that lack of stability. It may be for other reasons, such as, they may be following siblings who had not managed to obtain a place at Kingmoor Infant School in the last couple of years when it was oversubscribed. It was not known whether Stanwix School had any mixed-age classes at this time. Certainly Kingmoor Infant School would need to operate mixed-age classes if extra classroom(s) were built. This issue was revisited later in the meeting when a feeling was expressed that the children in the mixed age groups would not have the same equality of opportunity as those in single age classes. It was said that in reality the burden of making it work would fall on the staff.

It was stated that the Authority must have known that the numbers were going up at the time the last consultations were undertaken in 2007. This was not the case as the 2006 GP data that was being used at the time showed no indication that numbers of births were increasing. It was only in the last three years that a clear upward trend throughout the urban area of Carlisle and surrounding schools had shown itself with increased births year on year and some migration in. This was not the same throughout Cumbria where the rural areas are still experiencing a year on year decline in numbers living in their areas. Across Cumbria the overall numbers have remained at broadly the same level in the last five years. It has been a long term trend that parents will move into the area of, or apply for places in, schools which are perceived to be good schools. Having said that, even allowing for the large number of

houses built in the decade before the closure of Belah School, there was actually a decline in the number of primary age children in the north Carlisle area. This reflected the long term demographic trend. That trend, while indicating an upturn in births in Cumbria, did not give any hints at the extent of the increase that has been experienced in the area during the last three years.

Reference was made to the proposed Crindledyke estate and the number of new pupils that might generate. This has been projected to be around 200 pupils from the whole 950 houses planned. A recent example is the Edenside development at Cargo which has generated an additional 22 pupils at Rockcliffe School from the 96 houses. Clearly were all the Crindledyke proposed houses to be built, and that is far from certain as no planning permission has yet been granted, there would be enough pupils to fill a 1 form entry school. Where those pupils will move from is far from certain.

The loss of valuable hard play and recreational areas to build the proposed new classrooms was again raised. This was already considered limited and insufficient for the number of pupils without taking more for additional buildings and at the same time adding to the number of pupils at the school. It was suggested that any hard play area would need to be replaced but there was no easy answer to the overall loss of outdoor space.

The same issue of congestion on the road leading to the school entrance was again raised and the discussion followed a similar line to that at the staff meeting.

The Governors then considered how an extra 30 to 45 pupils would be accommodated without additional facilities and an extension to the school hall. It was accepted that it was never ideal to just add classrooms on to existing schools. Any design would need to look at the range of existing facilities and identify where there would be a shortage and how best to alleviate the issues within the budget available. This is always done by involving the head and other staff when projects are developed. There was a strong belief that however much was put into the design it couldn't be as good as the current arrangements. It might be that given the level of disruption in recent years and further disruption as a result of providing extensions, parents would look at it and self select to go elsewhere leaving the additional class base(s) underused. It was again stated that Councillors were unlikely to make a decision to expand if it looked like the facilities would be underused. While they do have the final decision it is unlikely that they would ignore the clearly held views of a large majority of people associated with the school. The Governors would be looking to the Authority to provide advice and guidance on how best to implement any extensions were there to be a decision to go ahead.

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 letter by saying that there had already been meetings with the staff and governors and it was now an opportunity for parents to express a view. There were around 60 present (parents and other local residents). Alan Toole, the County Councillor for the area, was also present to listen to what was being said. As he was a member of the County Council Planning Committee he explained that he was constrained as to what he could say. In opening the meeting for questions and comments Andy emphasised the importance of hearing what parents felt about the possibilities of expanding the Kingmoor Schools.

The data on the numbers that were provided at the time the of consultations that led to the closure of Belah School were again challenged. It was explained that in 2006 (the latest GP data that was available and used in the consultations) there was no indication that numbers of births were rising in Carlisle and in particular in the North Carlisle area. At the time it was stated that there were also enough places to accommodate all the pupils living in the area at that time. Since 2007 the GPR data has shown a year on year rise in births in the Carlisle urban area. This is not the case across the whole of Cumbria where any possible upturn in the number of births has yet to be seen. It was further explained that the Authority received sufficient details of every child registered with a GP with an address in Cumbria to enable it to map where each child lives. By aggregating the numbers using the existing school catchment areas this has allowed the Authority to be very confident it knows the catchment area in which each child lives. It was suggested it may be more accurate to use the data held by health visitors who would know when any child moved. It was explained that this was precisely the data that was previously used before the Authority had obtained access to the GP register information. The health visitors' data had proved unreliable in that it was not consistent across the whole area and often duplicated children when they moved from one area to another. In contrast, it is only possible to register with one GP at a time. That said, the great imponderable was to know whether or not parents were going to apply for a place at their local school. It was suggested that market research of parents with pre school children might provide a better indication of that. The validity of the data both during the Belah consultations and that presented now was a theme that was returned to a number of times throughout the meeting.

A City Councillor asked a number of questions on behalf of some of his constituents that could not be present. The first was on the number of children that were currently bussed to another school because they had not been able to acquire a place at the Kingmoor Schools? It was said the exact number was not to hand but was believed to be no more than a few.

Why were parents told that numbers were declining at the time of the last consultation and now they were being told they were going up? The answer to this question is covered in the paragraphs above.

Why not redraft the catchment areas so that Stanwix School has more pupils in its area? He explained that it was felt that Stanwix had 'got away' without

any disruption. It was suggested that part of the rural area currently within the Kingmoor catchment area could be placed within the Blackford and Houghton catchment areas. It was said that it was not necessarily the case that Stanwix had not been affected, as the school is accommodating extra pupils that were admitted in September 2009 following appeals without the benefit yet of additional accommodation. As to redrawing the catchment areas, this would not solve the problem of the overall growth in pupil numbers nor allow for parents exercising their right to express a preference as to which school their children should attend.

If the projected numbers do not come through how could the school afford to pay for an additional teacher without a detrimental affect on other areas? This was more difficult to address. However, if it was believed that if this were the case, then it is unlikely that the Authority would invest in new classrooms in the first place. Later it was suggested that the number of pupils allocated places at Kingmoor Infant School nearly always reduced before they started school. This was put down to some parents opting for private education or obtaining places at other schools after the allocations had been made.

The Councillor's final question was if the decision was taken to build additional classrooms, where would they be built? It was felt that whatever the answer the school would lose valuable outdoor play and recreation areas which are already cramped for the current number of pupils. It was explained that no firm decisions had been taken on that issue as it would pre-empt the outcome of the consultations. However, some early feasibility drawings were done to identify whether or not there was any room where they could possibly be built and to provide an early indication of the possible cost. They did not necessarily represent the best possibilities. That is something that would be discussed with the schools if a decision is made to proceed to expand them. It was agreed that these early feasibility plans will be put on the County Council web site for people to look at.

The question of planning on the basis of the figures was returned to. It was suggested that some longer term projections be undertaken and that some research of where parents with pre school age children intend to send their children to school might be undertaken. It was felt that there was currently insufficient information to make an appropriate decision. It was agreed to provide some long term demographics on the web site for those that were interested. While these could be provided on a County wide basis they became less reliable the smaller the area involved and it may not be available at such a small area as north Carlisle. Whatever the outcome it was suggested that any future school buildings needed to provide flexible spaces that could be used for a variety of uses and not just 'classroom teaching'.

The issue of congestion around the entrances to both schools was of particular interest to a number of residents that attended the meeting. They were concerned that they had not received copies of the consultation letters as in their opinion any extension of the schools had an effect on their living environment not only through the nuisance of wrongly parked cars and the congestion at the start and end of the day but also the additional inconvenience and dangers associated with site traffic during construction

work. As there were clearly strong feelings on this issue, it was agreed to distribute the consultation letter to all houses in the catchment area to enable residents to have an opportunity to provide their views.

Considerable discussion took place around the loss of outdoor space that would be taken up by any new buildings. Similar points were made by a number of speakers on this issue and also on the problems of fitting additional pupils into the existing infrastructure. Many of the reasons stated in the earlier meetings as above, were repeated, and there was a strong view that the loss of outdoor space would have a negative impact on the school and the children.

Discussion then took place around what would happen if the expansion of the schools did not take place. In response it was said that the Authority had a duty to provide places somewhere. Were there not enough places in the catchment school to accommodate all those living in its area wishing to go to it, then those that were unable to obtain a place would need to be transported to a school where there was a place available. As numbers grew in each age group as indicated by the latest GPR statistics, it would be more likely that that situation would become the norm rather than the exception and, as the surrounding schools are filling up, the need to transport pupils even further could be the position. It was because of that possibility that these consultations were taking place as the catchment area pressure of pupil numbers was manifesting itself more in the Kingmoor area than in the areas of the other schools in north Carlisle. It was for that reason that the possibility of expanding both Blackford and Houghton Schools was not currently under consideration. Both of those schools rely on parents from out catchment schools to travel to them to fill their existing places.

There was real concern that the education of those currently attending the Kingmoor Schools would be further disturbed by yet more changes and building work. It was also stated by a number of speakers that moving to mixed age classes and other pressures on the school infrastructure cannot result in an improved educational opportunity. It was suggested that the mixed age groups and larger numbers could manifest itself in increased incidences of bullying. The change to mixed age classes may also act as a deterrent to some parents applying resulting in less take up of places as currently projected. There was concern that this had already started with only 53 first preferences for admission to Kingmoor Infant School in September 2010 (with 65 living in the catchment area). At the time of the meeting it was not known where those 'missing' children had applied for. It was clearly stated that there were never likely to be enough additional pupils to sustain a new school on the Belah site. To justify a new build school the Authority would expect sufficient additional pupils to appropriately populate a one form entry school (30 pupils a year).

It was suggested that the portfolio holder with responsibility for Education should have been present to hear the views. The decision to close Belah School was, in the opinion of the contributor, wrong and he called for a public apology from the members that had taken that decision. It was recognised that the local County Councillor had strongly supported the campaigners

against Belah School's closure and he had not been listened to by his colleagues.

The issue that the school may not be able to afford additional staff were only a small number above 60 to come into the school was raised. As a consequence it was felt the school would organise with more than 30 pupils in each class. It was explained that in the infant phase no class could be above 30 pupils with a single teacher. The classes would need to be adjusted with mixed age groups to meet that requirement.

Many of the issues summarised above were referred to by successive speakers. The position of the proposed Crindledyke housing development was raised. The current status of that proposal and the possibilities of a new school and its effect on the Kingmoor Schools were reiterated for the benefit of those that had not attended earlier meetings.

In response to a question it was confirmed that those children that had transferred from the former Belah School at the date of its closure would be guaranteed a place at the Kingmoor Schools for the duration of their primary education.

One parent expressed the view that there was no safe way to transport very young children to alternative schools. Putting a young child in a taxi was not in her opinion appropriate.

It was confirmed that when any new buildings were designed then the needs of pupils with special needs has to be considered and built into the plans.

Reference was made to a petition that was being gathered against the extension of the two schools. It was suggested that this be submitted as part of the response to the consultation. Those present were encouraged to complete the response slips and let us know their views.

Conclusion

It was clear from all three meetings that there were real concerns at the effect of any expansion at the Kingmoor Schools. A show of hands at the end of the parents' meeting indicated that nobody was in favour of expanding either of the Kingmoor Schools. One or two said they were unable to vote as the full details of possible future numbers and the plans for the development were not available.

MJT
26.03.10