

PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES IN NORTH CARLISLE

Notes of the Consultation Meetings held on Monday 22 March 2010 at Kingmoor Junior School

Introduction

As part of the consultation process looking at primary school places in North Carlisle three meetings were held at Kingmoor Junior 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, whose remit includes school organisation, introduced herself and the other local authority officers present comprising Andy Smart, county manager for school organisation, Wendy Smith the senior school improvement officer for the Carlisle area and Mike Tuer who took the notes.

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 primary places in north Carlisle and the possibility of expanding the Kingmoor Infant and Junior Schools. Andy explained that generally throughout the Carlisle area over the last two or three years births were starting to rise year on year and these would be feeding through into the primary schools soon. Other factors leading to the rise in the numbers in the area was the recession which quite often has the effect of increasing births and covering less mobility due to the lack of movement in the housing market. He explained that the Authority has a duty to ensure that 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 and that generally 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. In addition there is no guarantee, nor can there be with the current admissions regulations, that children attending the infant school will be able to obtain a place at Kingmoor Junior School. There is no indication that the number of births will not continue to increase year on year.

At the end of each introduction by Andy 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 data presented. There was some scepticism that the numbers were correct given the belief that at the last consultations which led to the closure of Belah School the Authority must have known that the numbers of births in the area were increasing. Andy explained that information on each child under the age 6 was provided annually by the Health Authority taken from the GP's register. This enables

the Authority to map where each child lives and a count of the numbers living in each catchment area is undertaken. At the time of the 'Belah' consultations the Authority were using the GPR data from 2006. This did not show any year on year increase in the births and indicated that the number of pupils living in the area at that time would be able to obtain places at the remaining schools were Belah to close. Since then we have had three more years of information which now shows year on year increases in the number of births/children living in the area which also indicates that migration into the area exceeds those moving out.

There was a belief that the decision on the closure of Belah had been taken before the consultations were undertaken and that was believed to be the situation again in that the expansion would take place whatever is said at these meetings. There was general agreement that even if the numbers from the GP registers were accepted as accurate there was no way of knowing how many parents would place the Kingmoor Infant School as their first preference. Currently there were only 53 first preferences for places at Kingmoor Infant School (49 from children living in the catchment area) for entry in September 2010 whereas there were 65 living in the area according to the GP's registers.

In response to a question it was stated that following the demolition of Belah School buildings it was not yet known what would happen to the land. At the Cabinet meeting when the demolition was agreed there was a possibility that was being explored that the land may be used for a 'health centre'. An opinion was expressed that it will be used to build more houses.

It was explained that there were no firm plans as to where additional classrooms would be added. Capita had done some low level feasibility work to determine whether or not it was possible to extend the existing premises. Those plans were based on the assumption that the existing premises would be extended rather than exploring the possibility of building up. While it was accepted that it may be more expensive, particularly allowing for disabled access, it may be preferable to build up rather than losing valuable recreation area. The possibility of additional facilities needed to cope with additional pupils would need to be looked at and discussed with the school were an expansion to be proposed. The earliest any new buildings could be available would be 2012. Whether or not expansion at the infant school would take place at the same time would need to be determined taking into account availability of capital, the need to minimise disruption and the possibility of economies of scale arising if all the building could all be undertaken at the same time. Clearly the pressure for places will be felt there first. It was stated later in the meeting that any extension to the schools would be new build and that the existing temporary classrooms would be removed.

The situation with the Crindledyke housing development was explained. At the moment there was no planning approval. The current proposal is for a development of 950 houses. All the indications are that, were the full development to go ahead, there were likely to be sufficient primary age pupils to fill a 1 form entry school (around 210 pupils). Discussions are underway

with a view to the developers providing a site and finance to build a school of that size. Concern was expressed that were such a school to be built it would be new and modern, not immediately full and therefore likely to attract pupils from the Kingmoor catchment area making the proposed extensions there redundant.

Discussions returned to the impact of additional pupils at the school. Already the hall, while appearing quite large, cannot cope with the number of children already there. There was a storage issue for the gym equipment which took up space. Already the school struggled to have sufficient time in the week to undertake all the activities in it. The afternoon playtime had been replaced with an extended lunchtime to enable 3 sittings rather than the 2 that were in place before the influx of the additional pupils following the closure of Belah School.

With 2 or 3 extra classrooms the school would have to adopt a system of mixed age teaching groups that were more difficult to organise, could lead to inequitable treatment of pupils between those in or not in such groups and was unpopular with parents.

Of particular concern was the possible loss of valuable recreation and outdoor teaching space taken up by new buildings. Already it was felt that there was insufficient play space to meet the needs of the existing numbers of pupils. The site was essentially 'landlocked' and the area not easily expanded.

It was suggested that the Authority should move Stanwix School to the Belah site and build a new school to cope with the existing and additional pupils into the area. In response it was indicated that to build a new 2FE school would cost in the region of £10m and even if the finance to build could be found, the parents of the Stanwix catchment area were almost 100% against moving their school to that site in the last consultations that led to the closure of Belah School.

Discussion then turned to the issue of why the new build should be at Kingmoor Schools and not at Blackford and Houghton where both schools wished to expand. It was explained that it was the Kingmoor Schools' catchment area where the pupils concerned live and the Authority wished to explore the possibilities of expanding there thus avoiding the need for parents to access schools outside their area. There were a few pupils already that were transported to other schools than those at Kingmoor because a place was not available there.

The issue of traffic congestion at both schools was raised. It was believed this could only become worse were there to be more children on the site. Already the traffic situation is very dangerous with the schools' entrances situated at the end of two cul-de-sacs. Access for emergency vehicles is almost impossible at the end of the school day and whenever there are activities at the school which parents attend, such as school concerts. It was stated that were planning permission to be sought there would need to be a traffic plan as to how extra cars would be dealt with. A suggestion was made that the

area of waste ground next to the school entrance could be obtained by the Authority and a 'turning circle/dropping off point' created.

The question was posed on the implications of a decision not to expand the Kingmoor Schools. If that were the outcome the Authority would be left with a situation whereby there would not be sufficient places to accommodate all the pupils in the area and it would need to transport those unable to obtain a place to a school where there were places available. It was also stated that there was no guarantee that everyone attending the infant school would obtain a place at the junior school. Certainly that will be the situation with the current reception class at the Infant School where there were more than 60 pupils (following successful appeals).

In conclusion it was stated that any extension at Kingmoor Junior School would need to 'mirror' any extension at the Infant School. If there were one extra class there would be a need for 2 at the Junior School, if there were 2 at the Infant School there would need to be 3 at the Junior School.

It was agreed that the head of the school would have an opportunity to see the draft Cabinet paper before it was finalised.

Governors' Meeting

This meeting was attended by 10 of the school governors.

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

The first concern raised was the issue of the loss of valuable hard play and recreational areas to build the proposed new classrooms. This was already 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.

How to plan staffing and the budget was a real issue. When the school is reasonably full with year groups of 60 pupils it is much easier to plan staffing levels and allocate the budget efficiently. If the school were to get pupil numbers between 60 and 75, which is what the numbers seem to indicate, it is much more difficult to staff and organise the school. In the first year there would be a particular problem even if there were a full complement of 75 pupils, there would effectively be a half class that needed staffed. It was accepted that while it may be possible to accurately state the number of pupils living in the catchment area of a school, it was not possible to say with any degree of certainty how many would choose the school as their first preference and accept a place at the school. It was stated in response that as the births have increased across the whole of the urban area of Carlisle and its surrounding fringe then it becomes more difficult to access alternative

schools and parents are more likely to end up being admitted to their catchment area school.

There was discussion around whether there was a real need to expand the Kingmoor Schools. It was felt that the whole of the Carlisle area should be looked at and the situation fully understood before any schools were extended. There was a need to clarify the potential pressure points and how they could be alleviated. The projections needed to be longer term and not just a reaction to a single year's difficulties. Certainly with only 53 first preferences for September 2010 reception entry out of 65 there is obvious mobility which needed to be considered notwithstanding any wish to encourage parents to attend their local schools and not use cars to access others further away.

It was explained that Belah School closed for many reasons and the large number of unfilled places there was a result of its other problems and not the main reason for closure. That said its closure had the effect of filling not only Stanwix and the Kingmoor Schools but also those such as Blackford and Houghton that have filled through the ripple effect of, for example, out catchment pupils obtaining places in those schools. Considerable discussion took place around the accuracy of the numbers provided. It was said that when the consultation that led to the closure of Belah School was undertaken statements made at that time on numbers falling appear to contradict those that were being presented now. Even though there was a time gap between the two sets of data there was still the belief that the county council should have known that the number of births was going to increase in and around the area. The governors requested details of the pupil numbers born in the area across all the north Carlisle Schools identified as Blackford, Houghton, Rockcliffe and Stanwix schools as well as the Kingmoor schools.

One Governor expressed a view that as Stanwix School was nearly always oversubscribed, it should be expanded. There was a general feeling that Kingmoor had suffered enough disruption in recent years. Not only had it been required to take in the former Belah School pupils it experienced disruption throughout the building of the new nursery unit which had impacted directly on both of the Kingmoor Schools. The Governors were clear that they did not wish to see the school expanded. Their view was that it was very difficult to perceive how disturbing the existing two full classes a year to provide mixed age groups of different numbers could be made to work, not only to maintain but to improve the current good educational provision. There was an acceptance that doing nothing may lead to a small number of parents being unable to obtain a place and needing to be transported to an alternative school.

The same concerns expressed at the staff meeting were reiterated by the Governors in respect of the proposed housing development and effect of any new school at Crindledyke. It was stated that there was little chance of the county council providing a school of less than 1 form entry (30 pupils per year group) and would need to be confident that such a school would be well

populated. This is calculated to be the likely pupil yield from the number of new houses planned for the Crindledyke area.

There was a concern that if the school were forced to expand that the disruption and the need to organise with mixed age classes could act as a deterrent to parents and the numbers needed to fill the new accommodation would not materialise. The Governors asked for guarantees that, were they required to expand, the Authority would mitigate the worst effects of the proposed extensions by providing sufficient funding to address the many issues arising from such a decision. The Governors felt they were being asked to 'gamble' that sufficient resources and support would be provided to implement any changes. There was no certainty that the numbers living in the area would end up at Kingmoor Junior School and as a result they were not prepared to support a change which would cause severe disruption and organisational difficulties into the future.

Parents' Meeting

Brenda Wile provided initial introductions. In her opening remarks she emphasised that careful 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 after his introduction to the consultation letter, summarised above, explained 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 40 parents (and local residents) present. Alan Toole, the local 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 to those present Andy explained that it was very important that we heard what parents felt about the possibility of expanding the Kingmoor Schools.

One parent who had recently moved to the area from Manchester expressed concern that 35 pupils per class were not unusual as there were insufficient places. What guarantee was there that expansion here would not result in something similar? In response it was said that one of the reasons for the proposed expansion was to ensure there was sufficient space to enable schools to arrange in classes of no more than 30. This was a legal maximum per class for infant age classes and was the expectation of the Authority for those in junior schools. Any change in admission numbers would reflect that with an increase to 70 if one class base were added and to 75 if two.

The concern of congestion around the entrances to both schools was a very significant issue. It was noted that not only was there the usual beginning and end of day congestion but there had been the addition of the construction traffic during the building of the nursery over the last year. There was no wish from the residents in the surrounding areas to have further construction traffic inflicted on them if more building were to be required. As above it was explained the need to undertake a travel plan to accompany any planning

application. Every effort is always made to mitigate the effects of building projects at schools.

The question of the loss of outdoor play areas and outdoor teaching areas was raised. There was real concern that the already confined space would become more so if an extension was built and that this would result in more accidents as children were required to play in a smaller area. The loss of space was a recurring issue throughout the meeting and was raised by a number of later speakers. Examples of the effect increased numbers had on the hall, library, and other school facilities were given. These were already under pressure and it was difficult to see how additional children could be fitted in. Later in the meeting, when the loss of space was again discussed, it was explained that some very high level feasibility work into possible options for expanding the number of classrooms on the site had been done. This was undertaken to show that it was possible to expand the buildings and did not involve detailed architectural drawings. The Authority would not go to the expense of producing such plans in advance of any decision to expand not only because of the cost involved but also the Authority in such circumstances could be accused of having made the decision in advance of the consultations. It was agreed to place copies of the feasibility plans on the website in advance of the closure date for responses.

It was stated that not every child that was currently attending the infant school would be guaranteed a place at the junior school. This was part of the admissions process and there was no way that places could be reserved for them under the current admissions policy. Were there to be more places in each school this may help to make it more likely that there is a place available to transfer into at the Junior School.

One person asked 'why not expand Blackford and Houghton Schools, which would welcome expansion, instead of concentrating on the Kingmoor Schools?'. It was explained that the Carlisle Local Committee were provided with details of the pressure points in the whole of the urban area of Carlisle and in the surrounding fringe schools. They had asked officers to concentrate on the area where the September 2009 admissions process had provided the most difficulties, ie North Carlisle. It was accepted that may not happen every year and indeed the indications for September 2010 admission to reception do not appear to indicate that there will be a problem in this area. The issue of financial instability was aired. There was a real concern that if the school was expanded and only, say, 67 applied then the school would need to organise that year group with two classes above 30. In response, it was said that if the Authority were to go to the expense of building additional classrooms it would expect them to be filled. The issue of having to organise with mixed age classes, and the potential inequalities of opportunity, was also an issue that was raised by a number of speakers.

The closure of Belah was again referred to and the data on numbers that was provided at that time. It was explained that in 2006 (the latest GP data that was available and used in the consultations) there was real no indication that numbers of births were rising in Carlisle unlike in other areas of the country.

There were also enough places to accommodate all the pupils living in the area at that time. Since then the GPR data has shown a year on year rise in births in the Carlisle urban area. That is also the situation in other towns in the County such as Penrith and Whitehaven. At the same time numbers of births were still falling each year in most rural areas. Across the whole of Cumbria the numbers of births have remained fairly stable at around 5000 each year in each of the last 5 years. It is only when you break down the numbers into smaller areas like north Carlisle that the disparities become more apparent. There appears to be a clear trend upward in Carlisle. This was backed up by one speaker who having researched the subject said that the number of women of child-bearing age in Carlisle was higher than the national average. This led to another concern that if expansion took place now, the Authority would come back in a few years to try to expand the school even more.

One campaigner against the closure of Belah School said that the idea of opening a small 'eco-school' on the Belah site that was suggested at that time should be resurrected instead of expanding the Kingmoor Schools. The most optimistic projections the county council has for growth in primary numbers in North Carlisle, with the current housing stock, show that there is no possibility of having sufficient pupils to maintain a viable school, notwithstanding the substantial cost of building a new school. She went on to claim that the decision to close Belah had already been taken before the consultations were started, and questioned what guarantee parents have that the concerns of those present against the expansion of the schools would be taken seriously and listened to. In response it was said that many of the respondents to the last consultation had been listened to in that the possibility of amalgamating the Kingmoor Schools did not happen as a majority of those consulted thought it was the wrong time. The very large majority against the move of Stanwix School to the Belah site also got their preference. Clearly where there are differences of opinion the Councillors elected to make decisions had to weight up all the evidence presented and not everybody would 'get their way'.

It was stated that the Authority ought to be undertaking some long term strategic planning before building at any school in the area. The City Council's housing growth plans at the northern edge of the city, along with the Crindledyke housing estate proposals, need to be factored in. It was explained that no planning approval had been granted for the proposed Crindledyke estate. The Authority was in discussions with the developers to build a new 1 form entry school were the development to go ahead.

Concern was expressed that more building at the Kingmoor sites would lead to disruption to the education of the same children that had been disrupted when Belah School closed. They had also 'suffered' over the last year during the building of the nursery. Real safety issues had occurred with the movement of contractor's vehicles when young children were in the vicinity.

It was suggested that it might be possible to look at the catchment areas to alleviate the pressure from those living in it e.g. moving the 'Newfield area' into Stanwix School's catchment area. It was explained that already parents can express a preference as to which school their children should attend. The

effect of growing numbers of children year on year where there are insufficient places is that pupils would need to be transported to a school where there are places available. It was stated that when the Belah site was covered in houses it would add to the problem of growing numbers. This is likely to affect those on the periphery of any catchment area and when neighbouring schools are also full, which is fast becoming the case at all the schools in the area, then the need to transport pupils further becomes likely. No figures were to hand as to how many children this affects but it was believed to be no more than a handful. The most likely children to be affected this way are children not living in the area at the time applications for admission to school are made.

It was explained that the outcome of the consultations would be reported back to the Cabinet, probably at its meeting planned for 11 May 2010. That meeting would determine whether or not to publish any 'notices' to expand the school.

Conclusion

It was clear from all three meetings that there were real concerns at the effect of any expansion at the Kingmoor Schools. There was almost total opposition to it happening and a belief that expansion posed a real risk that the 'good' education that the pupils already received would be jeopardised. Nobody could see how it would be possible to improve educational opportunities were any expansion to go ahead.

MJT
25.03.10