

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN THE ARMATHWAITE AND HIGH HESKET AREA

Notes of the Consultation Meetings held on Wednesday 2 March 2011 at High Hesket 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 Armathwaite and High Hesket Area two meetings were held at High Hesket 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 introduced herself and the other local authority officers present namely Andy Smart, county manager for school organisation, Tony Whittaker, school organisation team and Mike Tuer who took the notes. Stephanie Fearn represented the CE Diocese at the Staff and Governors meeting. Julie Scott, School Improvement Officer (SIO) for High Hesket School and Lis Fenwick senior school improvement officer for the area attended the second meeting.

Brenda Wile provided a few 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 Armathwaite School from 3 to 8 to 3 to 11. He then explained that the Authority had a duty to respond to parents wishes in relation to school organisation change. There have been a number of representations since Armathwaite School became a 'first' school in 1974 when its age range was reduced to enable pupils from a number of smaller schools that were closed to be accommodated. At that time it was decided to move the older pupils to High Hesket School as there were insufficient places at Armathwaite School.

Late last year the Authority received a number of letters from parents expressing a wish that the situation be changed at Culgaith School. Andy explained that Culgaith along with Armathwaite were the only two 'first schools' in Cumbria in that pupils transfer from there at the end of year 3 to Langwathby and High Hesket respectively, that is, after one year of Key Stage 2 of the National Curriculum. It was decided that as the Governors of Culgaith, a voluntary aided school, were proposing to consult it was the right time to consult on the same possibility at Armathwaite School. This recognised that we had received numerous similar requests from that school and its parents over a number of years. The two schools no longer fit into the current pattern of schools within the Authority in that all other schools in rural areas are all-through primary schools and only in some urban areas did separate infant and junior schools still exist.

He emphasised that the consultations were in no way a criticism of High Hesket 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 educational standards provided by both schools as both are recognised as very good. That said it was difficult for the Authority to know the full implications of any change and that is why we are here seeking your views.

The outcome of the consultations will be reported to the Cabinet on March 31 when they will be considered. It was explained that the notes of these meetings will form part of the response to the consultations when they are presented to the Cabinet. High Hesket School will be given the opportunity to see the notes in advance of that to ensure that they reflect fairly and reasonably the points made. Were a legal notice to be published the Cabinet would be required to make the final decision on its implementation. This would take place on 30 June 2011. The Cabinet would have the choice then of either approving or rejecting its implementation or suggesting a modification such as a change to the implementation date. The earliest any change could happen is September this year (2011).

Staff and governors meeting

A joint staff and governors meeting was attended by 18 members of staff and Governors including the head Margaret Taylor and the Chair of Governors Allastair Turnbull.

The first concern raised was the time set for the implementation and the final decision. By the end of June many of the transition meetings and activities with the pupils that are due to take place will have been undertaken. This is clearly not good for them if parents then decide not to transfer those children if the change were to take place this year. It was felt that the implementation was being rushed and a delay would be better for the children.

One Governor was concerned at the impact the consultations were having on the communities with the opposite views that were being put forward by the 'two' communities. Whatever the outcome it was said by the officers that the Authority would continue to support all the schools fairly and equitably.

Criticism was made at some of the wording included in the consultation document with particular reference to the statement 'High Hesket is likely to need to reduce its staffing levels'. It was suggested that it should have said 'will have to reduce staffing and there will need to be redundancies as a result of the reduction in pupil numbers'. It was stated that it would be impossible to retain the current staffing levels if the numbers projected were to happen.

It was put that the Authority should have asked all parents their views before responding to the wishes of a few. It was suggested that the consultation exercise was a waste of money at a time when large savings were being required of the Authority. It was explained that while the catalyst this time were the Culgaith parents, the Authority had received repeated requests from

Armathwaite to consider their school for full primary status. As explained earlier the Authority believed now was the correct time to consider the situation at Armathwaite as the Governors of Culgaith were consulting on the change at their school.

It was said that with the current numbers High Hesket School was able to provide separate single age classes for years 5 and 6. These were regarded as beneficial for the social and educational development of the pupils. They were regarded as more efficient and effective than classes with mixed age groups. If Armathwaite pupils did not attend in the future, it would not be possible to maintain that class organisation. It was felt mixed age groups were particularly difficult in smaller schools, which may spread over more than two year groups and where siblings of different ages find themselves in the same group.

The question was asked that if the Authority is to promote choice and diversity how could extending the age range at Armathwaite School promote that when it would create two smaller schools and the larger High Hesket would need to reduce the range of activities offered as a result? In reply to the question it was suggested that choice would be provided to those living in Armathwaite of an all-through community primary school. If they didn't want for that smaller school, like all other parents, they could opt for their children to attend a different school, such as High Hesket. That choice currently did not exist.

The staff stressed the benefits of the wide range of extra curricular activities offered at High Hesket School, where over 15 different lunch and after schools clubs took place on a regular basis. Plans were underway to provide wraparound care with breakfast and after school activities. It was believed that the smaller numbers of both pupils and staff resulting from not receiving Armathwaite pupils would inevitably lead to a reduction in the number of different activities offered with the viability of others brought into question. The benefits of these activities cannot be understated as they have a positive impact both in the classroom and in developing the children's life skills and confidence. The school, because of the numbers, are also able to offer separate residential experiences to both years 5 and 6.

In response to a question Andy explained that there was no weighting as such to the various factors the decision maker (Cabinet) is required to consider when looking at School Organisation proposals. He gave a number of examples of the factors that are considered when school organisation change are considered such as , the impact on transport, the carbon footprint, community cohesion, parents views and whether the education could be improved.

It was asked would there be any financial support available to the school to help them maintain the staffing levels? It was explained that given the potential speed of the proposal it may be possible to make a case to maintain the planned classes for next year during the summer term 2012 when the loss of income from the first cohort of children not transferring in would be first felt. However, beyond the transition years no extra support would be available.

A lot of money has been spent at High Hesket in recent years to increase the capacity of the school and cater for the numbers entering at both reception age and transferring from Armathwaite. The new Foundation stage facilities have also helped provide additional space. If the school lost the Armathwaite pupils it would create surplus places and there would be at least one empty classroom.

Concerns were expressed that the consultation process was unfair to High Hesket School. There was a belief that the school needed to defend itself, that it was already a done deal and that the document was biased in favour of Armathwaite and their wish to change their age range. It was believed that the Chair of Governors of Armathwaite, who was a County Councillor not only had a conflict of interest but easier access to information. In contrast the meeting was informed that the County Councillor for the Hesket area had been told it would be inappropriate for him to be involved in any way with the process even though he was elected to represent the residents of the area. It was mentioned at this point that it had been brought to our attention that Mr Smart knew a parent from Armathwaite and that discussions had taken place regarding the consultation and the volume of letters coming from High Hesket – it was felt very inappropriate that such discussions were taking place.

It was recognised that High Hesket was a very good school and had a lot of expertise with a number of teachers and the head taking the lead in sharing good practice and helping with training of staff in other schools. In addition a large number of students come into the school during their training. Reduced pupil numbers will put all of this in jeopardy, as there would be fewer opportunities available.

It was explained that a comprehensive summary of all the responses would be provided to the Cabinet when it looks at the outcome of the consultations. If there were consistent themes then these would be brought out. However, it was not weight of numbers that mattered it was the strength of the arguments. The Cabinet would receive a lot of different views and would need to consider them all when coming to a decision.

It was reported that the school council had been asked what they thought. Most of them had said they loved coming to High Hesket School and a lot liked coming on the bus. It was stated that if the bus did not bring the children there would be a lot more cars coming to the school at the start and end of the day adding to the congestion, increasing the dangers for the children and adding to the carbon footprint.

A number of issues were raised concerning home to school transport. As had been stated in the consultation document it was hoped that as the process of choosing a school for next September's year 4 group was well advanced that free transport from Armathwaite to High Hesket would be retained for those that decided to transfer even if they could remain at Armathwaite were the suggested change be implemented in September 2011. There was one parent who had recently moved into the Armathwaite catchment area with 2 children. As the eldest had to attend High Hesket School and received free home to school transport she had also enrolled her youngest child at High Hesket

currently paying for a concessionary place in the expectation that when he reached year 4 he would have been entitled to free transport. This was somewhat unusual and would need to be looked at to see if there were others in a similar situation and whether it was possible to offer anything were the proposed change of age range at Armathwaite School agreed and the general home to school transport withdrawn.

It was stated that the move from the smaller Armathwaite School to the larger High Hesket School provided a good stepping stone to the later move to secondary school.

The officers were asked to find out who pays for any redundancies required as a result of school organisation changes such as the one proposed.

Concern was expressed at the loss of income that would have followed the pupils from Armathwaite. A lot of capital developments had taken place at the school recently and these would be under utilised as a result of the children not transferring from Armathwaite. The empty spaces would create a negative atmosphere and the vibrancy of having full classrooms would be lost. It was categorically stated by the officers that the Authority had not provided or promised any capital or other financial support to Armathwaite School to enable the change of age range to be implemented. In fact it was made very clear to the head and chair at an early stage of discussions that there would be no capital finance available were the suggested change to happen.

The concluding comment was that the impact on High Hesket School would be substantial.

Parents Meeting

Brenda Wile in her opening remarks, following introductions, emphasised that no decisions had been taken and that the Authority was 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 document as above. There were around 90 people present (parents, staff, governors and other local residents). And ex pupils.

The first speaker stated that the proposed change should not go ahead for a number of reasons. If it did it would mean that High Hesket would be unable to continue to have separate Years 5 and 6 as there would be insufficient pupils to justify or afford separate groups. These were considered to help provide a better transition to secondary school and that this benefit and choice would be lost. The reduced intake would result in mixed year groups and a reduction in the number of classes and staff. Fewer children and staff would lead to fewer out of school activities and because of the smaller numbers team games would be less viable and beneficial.

A number of subsequent speakers spoke of the advantages of separate Year 5 and 6 year groups, the benefits of larger numbers for out of school activities

and the benefits that the children have due to the influx of additional pupils into year 4 and how this is a good stepping stone to the transition to secondary schools. A number of young people who spoke and who had spent their primary education at High Hesket School echoed those sentiments. One stated it was easier to do the year 6 SATs when all the class were doing them and the teacher did not have to deal with younger pupils. The increase in the numbers enabled a wider choice of friends of the same age.

Addressing the issue of the separate years 5 and 6 Lis Fenwick, the Senior School Improvement Officer said there are many primary schools in Cumbria where the top two age groups are mixed and this is rarely detrimental to the children involved during their primary education and following the transition to secondary. There is currently a much greater emphasis on personalised learning and this is more important than whether they are taught in mixed age groups. There is no evidence to support the assertion that mixed age groups at this age are detrimental to children's development.

A parent of two children that had made the move from Armathwaite said that they did not want to move to High Hesket and while they have no complaints as to how they were treated felt they ought to have had the choice to stay. She said that the two schools are very different in their approach and they took time to adjust when they arrived at High Hesket.

One parent spoke of the difficulties her son had had making friends until the children from Armathwaite arrived. This afforded him a wider circle of peers and he developed markedly as a result.

A few parents of children that had made the move from Armathwaite commented that the move had helped their children's education and social development.

That said other parents of children who had made the move from Armathwaite said it was not always beneficial to the children moving. Instead many took some time to settle and would have preferred to have been given the opportunity afforded to parents of High Hesket children to complete their primary education at the same school. They believed that the benefits of continuity could not be underestimated. While the staff at High Hesket do their best to support the transition it is not the same as continuing in the same school, with the same ethos and teachers who know the children and who can easily talk things through with each other. If the Authority did not make the change then it would be acknowledging the continuation of an unfair system.

Many parents and former pupils spoke with enthusiasm about the many good things that happen at High Hesket School such as the links with Tanzania as well as their respect for the good, hard working staff. There was also the opportunity to offer two residential opportunities because there were sufficient pupils of a similar age. There was a strong feeling that the good things and opportunities would be lost were there to be fewer pupils.

One parent who had moved her children from a smaller school to High Hesket among other reasons because of its size, felt it was a backwards step to

provide smaller schools where more than two year groups would be taught by the same teacher. Another stated that she had recently moved from a large primary school and at High Hesket her son was a person that was known to everybody and not an anonymous 'number' and had made friends both in and out of school.

Concern was expressed that the recent capital developments that have taken place at High Hesket School would be wasted money as classrooms would remain empty if they did not receive the pupils from Armathwaite. There was also concern that there would be a loss of vibrancy in the school with empty classrooms. In addition the school would have to heat and maintain those empty spaces with a reducing income. In response to a question it was confirmed that the Governors of Armathwaite School had been told that there was no capital money available to build additional accommodation there. There were no plans to provide any additional support to Armathwaite School to implement the change were it to be agreed. It was agreed that the proposed change would lead to an increase in the number of surplus places at High Hesket School. That said the Government were placing less emphasis on surplus places and more on responding to parents wishes on how and where they wish their children to be educated.

One parent was saddened that the local County Councillor was not present to hear the views of his constituents.

One speaker stated that the documentation gave the impression that it was a 'done deal' and heavily weighted towards option A (i.e. changing the age range at Armathwaite). Little consideration had been presented on the effect on High Hesket School. There would be a loss of effectiveness and efficiency resulting from the loss of pupils and the Authority should leave alone what is a very successful school that provides a very good education for its pupils. There was concern that other options were not being considered at the same time such as either closure of Armathwaite School or changing it to become an infant school. It was confirmed that if people want this they could suggest them and the decision makers would be informed accordingly. If the Cabinet believed that another option was worthy of consideration then it was possible it could suggest that it be considered in another consultation exercise.

Currently the children from the Armathwaite area travel in a bus. While there may be a small saving in transport costs there is likely to be an increase in the number of parents transporting their children to the school by car if the bus service is stopped, thus increasing the carbon footprint. There is already major congestion with cars, especially at home time, causing a traffic hazard to the children without adding to it. It will also increase the number of cars taking children to Armathwaite School which is situated on a bad bend at the top of a steep hill without pavements.

Concern was expressed several times at the speed of the proposal. It was felt to be much more sensible to delay the change for a year if the change were to go ahead. Children would be well into the transitional activities before a decision is made. This is not good for them whether or not they eventually make the move. It was confirmed that they would be given the choice and a

case be made for them to receive the free home to school transport that they would have anticipated when they had to apply to transfer. It was stated that it was possible to make the change even at that late stage of the year. The Authority would continue to support both schools whatever the outcome.

It was felt that the whole consultation was a waste of money at a time when savings were being made. They were two schools that had worked well since 1974 and there was no need to change them. Again it was stated that the Authority had a duty to respond to requests from parents for change. The Authority has received repeated requests over the years to change the situation at Armathwaite and if it did not change this time then it anticipates getting more into the future. Those representations cannot be ignored forever. It was said that the change would create two small schools that would require additional financial support. It was explained that it was highly unlikely that High Hesket would receive any additional support for small numbers as that is triggered only when a school has 80 or fewer pupils. In contrast the level of additional 'small schools' support provided to Armathwaite would reduce if pupil numbers increased. That said the High Hesket budget would reduce as pupils did not transfer and Armathwaite retained the amount of money that is used to educate the child, i.e. the Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU).

Concern was expressed that High Hesket School would have to lose high quality staff as numbers reduced. Even if they were to attract more children into reception they would be lost before the numbers increased again. There was also an additional cost of redundancy payments.

Conclusion

It was clear from both meetings that there were real concerns at the effect of the suggested change of age range at Armathwaite School on High Hesket School.

MJT
21 March 2011