

PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES IN NORTH CARLISLE

Notes of the Consultation Meetings held on Thursday 18 March 2010 at Rockcliffe School

Introduction

As part of the consultation process looking at primary school places in North Carlisle three meetings were held at Rockcliffe 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 David Hodgkiss, head of Rockcliffe School, introduced the panel of local authority officers comprising Andy Smart, County Manager for School Organisation (who chaired the meetings), David Salmon the school improvement partner for the school and Mike Tuer who took the notes.

At each meeting, Andy Smart on behalf of the County Council gave a brief introduction to the consultation letter on 'Primary School Places in North Carlisle'. Referring to the letter he gave some of the background leading to its distribution. He explained that generally throughout the Carlisle area births were starting to rise and these were starting to feed through into the primary schools. Other factors leading to the rise were the recession which generally manifests itself in more births and less mobility through the lack of movement in the housing market. The Authority has a duty to ensure that there are enough places to meet demand and wherever possible to meet parental preferences. Rockcliffe 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 number of places available. Currently there are 15 places available in reception each year. The number known to live in the area for entry to reception in September 2010 was 20 and the number of first preference applications was now 18. In the past there have been fluctuations that may have allowed more to be admitted one year to 'compensate' for an earlier small year group. There was also evidence that parents from further afield wished their children to be admitted to Rockcliffe School. Recent evidence indicates that there are likely to remain more applicants than places at the school which is almost certainly going to fill to the maximum of its existing capacity. In addition, in the future there are unlikely to be any places for any primary aged children moving into the area to obtain a place.

At the end of each short introduction Andy opened up the meeting to questions and comments.

Staff Meeting

This meeting was attended by nearly all the staff employed at the school. The difficulty of the existing arrangement of having the nursery mixed with the reception children was referred to. Having an additional class space or two

would enable the classes to be organised in such a way that it would relieve the current overcrowding in the early years classes. It was explained that additional classes could result in more children being admitted to the school. The indicated admission number, using the DCSF net capacity formula, would mean an admission number could be set anywhere in the range 15 to 24 depending on whether 1 or 2 class bases were added. If additional accommodation were added the Authority would expect an increase from the current level of 15.

Andy explained that the current pattern of applications showed that while some parents were applying for places at other schools as their first preference this is almost exactly balanced by those applying for a place from outside the catchment area. This meant that for future years, applications are likely to exceed places available and the school, which is already cramped and has difficulties with circulation, would fill up to its maximum capacity, i.e. more than currently on the roll.

Andy was careful to advise that even if extensions were supported locally there was no guarantee that they would be built. The next stage would be for the County Council Cabinet to agree to publish a legal notice. That gave a further opportunity for people to state their objections to any proposal. Any agreement to implement would also have to be conditional on obtaining planning permission. To obtain that would require a travel plan to be put in place that indicated any possible increase in traffic and how that was to be dealt with. In addition, the Authority would need to find the capital to fund any development.

Two architect's drawings that were done when the feasibility of extending the school was undertaken were shown to the staff by the head. It was stated that these were no more than indicative of what could be done. Whenever building projects are undertaken the whole of the school is looked at and ways of making other cost effective improvements discussed. It was suggested, for example, that the nursery needed appropriate toilets for the younger children. The nursery provision when it was established in 2004 utilised the existing facilities that were at the school with very limited structural change.

It was explained that the Authority were in discussions with the developers of the proposed Crindledyke housing estate. The proposals for expanding Rockcliffe School were in no way linked to it. The Authority believes, were that development to get the go ahead, the number of houses proposed would require a new school for around 210 pupils.

The staff were of the belief that 3 or 4 additional pupils each year would not in any significant way change the character of the school which was currently felt to be one of a large family. How to cope with dining with an additional 20+ pupils was seen as an issue that could be addressed through, for example, two sittings or changes to the current arrangements. Additional space, even if it meant additional pupils, was seen as a positive improvement. It would allow more flexibility to adjust the teaching group numbers and allow pupils to be given an education more matched to their individual needs. Additional pupils

would provide a bigger budget that enabled more staff to be employed giving more organisational flexibility.

The requirement to increase nursery hours from 12.5 to 15 in September 2010 was causing organisational difficulties which would be easier to address with more accommodation. It was stated that any extensions, if agreed, could not be built before September 2012 at the earliest. They would be permanent buildings and the aim during construction would be to keep disruption to a minimum.

There was a general feeling by the staff that this opportunity should not be missed as capital resources in the future are likely to be even more difficult to find.

In conclusion, Andy encouraged staff to return the reply slips attached to the consultation letter. He reiterated that there were no guarantees and that it would be the County Council members who would make the decision.

In response to a final question, 'what would stop it?' Andy listed the following. The anticipated pupil numbers didn't come through, there were strong objections from others and particularly local residents, planning permission to build the extension was not granted and the Authority determined there were higher priorities for scarce capital resources.

Governors' Meeting

This meeting was attended by 9 out of the 12 school governors. In addition, Bert Thomas representing the CE Diocese was present for this meeting.

After his initial introductory remarks Andy opened the meeting for comments and questions. In response to an initial question it was explained that the number of out catchment applications generally balanced the number choosing alternative schools from within the area. As the number of children born in the area had increased to a level at or beyond the existing admission number in each year, the Authority had identified the school as one likely to need to refuse admission in future years if it was not expanded.

As a voluntary controlled school the Authority was the admission authority. The Governors said it was the Authority that was not allowing the Governors to accept the 18 first preference applications for entry in September 2010. It was explained that when there were fluctuating year groups it may have been possible to admit above the admission number one year to compensate for a smaller group admitted earlier. However, when it was likely that a school was to be oversubscribed every year it was not sensible for any school to admit above its published admission number. That would store up overcrowding problems in the future and increase the risk that admission appeals would be upheld.

There were real concerns expressed that extending the school by 2 or even 1 classroom would result in the school losing its rural character. To increase the

school by '64' additional places would have a marked effect on the school. A statement was made that the Authority wished to change Rockcliffe from a village school to a town school out in the village. It was explained that the Authority would only extend schools where there was a demonstrable need, and then only up to the limit of that need. Extending by two class bases was only one possibility. Currently the school is popular and parents wish to send their children there. The Authority needs to balance that against all the other demands.

Concern was expressed that the school was situated on a road between two bends and opposite a road to a small housing estate. To add potentially up to 50% more to the number of cars currently dropping off and picking up children was viewed as unthinkable.

While it was accepted that there would be sufficient outdoor recreational space if the school was expanded there was concern at the additional pressure on the other ancillary facilities such as toilets, cloakrooms and storage and that the hall would not be big enough. It was explained that those things could be looked at were an expansion agreed upon, as could the existing circulation issues. The design of the hall meant it would be very expensive to extend and was therefore unlikely to be added to. In addition, any extension would need to be fitted out and furniture provided.

There was considerable concern that the Authority wished to expand Rockcliffe to enable it to have sufficient space to accommodate children who were unable to get places elsewhere in the north Carlisle area. Larger numbers of out catchment pupils would mean they would not have affinity with the village and no links with the local church. One governor felt that if an expansion was agreed the Authority would wish to extend the catchment area to take in the edge of the city housing. It was stated that there were no plans to change the existing catchment area. That did not however preclude parents from out of the catchment area applying for a place at Rockcliffe School as is currently the case.

It was explained that the Cabinet has a duty to take into account responses to the consultation. That, however, is not the final arbiter as all pertinent facts would be looked at when making decisions.

In answer to the question 'why was Belah closed?', Andy explained that he understood that the standards had been poor for some time before its closure, that numbers had dropped from over 300 to 40 in a ten year period and it was not a viable school anymore. It was the right decision at the time it was taken and even with the increase in birth rates that has happened since it would still be the right decision.

Since it became clear in 2009 that the births were starting to rise year on year the Authority had identified the pressure points, undertaken some low level discussions with heads and undertaken initial feasibility work to determine whether it was possible to extend specific schools. For that reason Stanwix School was ruled out for expansion as there was no room to put in any

additional classrooms. The Authority was therefore consulting on the possible expansion of the Kingmoor Schools and Rockcliffe School where demand is likely to remain in excess of the published admission numbers. It was suggested that there are enough places to cope with the numbers living in Rockcliffe's catchment area and that it is at Kingmoor where the problem lies.

The Governors felt that it was better for them to maintain a good full school which the current pre-school numbers indicate rather than have 'surplus' accommodation to enable out catchment pupils to be admitted. There was some concern that they would have to maintain the additional accommodation even if the additional pupils didn't materialise putting extra strain on the school's budget.

In conclusion, the Governors were asked to respond to the consultation. It was suggested that they might wish to submit a response on behalf of the Governing Body.

Parents' Meeting

Andy Smart, after his introduction 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 25 parents present. He went on to explain that there were no guarantees that even if expansion was supported that it would be implemented. It would be up to the elected members to make the decision taking into account the responses to the consultation which included the notes of these meetings and taking into account pressures for capital resources elsewhere in the county.

The reasons for the closure of Belah School were given again (as listed in the governors' meeting notes) in response to an assertion that it was a wrong decision and that the Authority were looking to expand Rockcliffe to rectify that mistake. It was further explained that the number of children born and moving into the North Carlisle area had increased since the closure had been agreed.

Parents were actively choosing Rockcliffe as the school they wished their children to be educated at. The Authority had a duty to respond to those wishes which, when coupled with the increased demand from year on year increases in the birth numbers, was the reason the Authority was considering putting extra places at Rockcliffe School. It was explained that even though additional births were now starting to raise numbers, in secondary schools they would continue to fall for the next 13/14 years before they started to recover. There was still no guarantee that they would get back to their current numbers. In contrast there are some primary schools like Rockcliffe where the number of admissions has been at or near the admission number and additional births were increasing the pressure on places. This means that in two or three years Rockcliffe is likely to be almost full in every year group as the low numbers currently in the junior classes are replaced by full year groups of 15 into reception each year.

Currently the Kingmoor Schools were being consulted on possible expansion along with Rockcliffe School. Similar consultations may take place elsewhere in Carlisle in the next 2 or 3 years. The Cabinet could choose to extend Rockcliffe and/or the Kingmoor Schools or decide not to expand any depending on the response to the consultations and the other conflicting pressures at the time the decision needs to be taken.

The issue of parking and the number of cars particularly at the start and end of the school day was seen as a particular problem that could only get worse with an increase in numbers.

Discussions took place around the fairness or otherwise of the admission regulations. There was a strong feeling from some that pupils should go to their catchment school. It was explained that the Authority could not keep places for people who might move into the area. It had to admit up to the admission number if there were applications. That was currently the case at Rockcliffe. One parent who had recently moved into the area had been unable to obtain a place at the school and her child was currently transported at the Authority's expense to Houghton School.

One parent asked 'how can you assure us that the proposed expansion of Rockcliffe was not a backdoor way of providing places for the proposed Crindledyke estate?' It was explained that the Authority was in discussion with the developers with a view to a new school being provided as part of the development. With up to 950 houses it is likely to generate enough primary age pupils for a full school of around 210 pupils. Clearly Rockcliffe School could not be expanded to accommodate that level of pupils. There is also no safe walking route from there so all the children would need to be transported from it. In response to the question 'how do we know how many pupils would come from the development?', it was suggested that the example of the recent Edenside development of around 100 houses could be looked at. There were currently 21 children from that estate attending Rockcliffe School, almost exactly the multiplier of around 0.2 primary age pupils per house the Authority are suggesting would come from housing developments planned elsewhere, including that at Crindledyke.

Concern was expressed that the school was built for the current admission numbers and to add on 1 or 2 classrooms would cause a shortage of other facilities and the hall would be too small. It was accepted it was not ideal when you add on classrooms to any existing school. There was little that could be done to expand the hall. However, the other non teaching facilities would be looked at when considering any project for expansion.

It was suggested that an expansion at Rockcliffe School would provide flexibility to meet some of the constraints the existing accommodation has. This was countered by an opinion that any expansion would result in the school losing its character and that if the numbers did not materialise the school would be left with surplus places and unable to afford to maintain it.

If this opportunity to expand was not taken the question was asked whether that would preclude investment in the future. It was not possible to answer that question, however it is almost inevitable that the current financial situation in the country will force some reduction in the amount of capital available to fund future building projects.

It was explained that the feasibility checks had found that it was not possible to expand Stanwix School on its current site nor did the numbers of pre-school pupils currently living in the stanwix catchment area warrant expansion there. When, at the consultations that led to the closure of Belah School, the suggestion that Stanwix School move to the Belah School site had been raised the idea was overwhelmingly rejected by parents.

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 the Staff meeting that most, if not all, could see the educational and other benefits of expanding Rockcliffe School and did not consider it a risk to the 'family feel' of the school. In contrast, most, if not all, of the governors considered expansion as a real threat to that ethos and could see few 'benefits'. The public meeting was more mixed with a lot of the parents supporting expansion, whereas it seemed others, including parent/governors and local resident(s), were against it for a number of reasons as summarised above.

MJT
22.03.10