

Workington Secondary Schools – Some of your questions answered

Questions/answers will be added to this section as they are raised through the consultation process.

1. Why are you suggesting these changes, and why now?

There have been discussions going back a number of years about bringing Southfield and Stainburn together to form a single secondary school for Workington. The intention was to build a new school to replace the existing schools as part of the government's Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme, but this was stopped in the summer of 2010 by the coalition government.

The county council had seen how the numbers of pupils applying to Southfield and Stainburn schools were falling with increasing numbers applying to other schools in the area that had places available, and felt that it would be appropriate to bring together the two community schools into one. However, without the funding that BSF was going to provide (around £20 million), the county council simply couldn't afford to construct a new building.

When, in 2012, the government launched a new buildings initiative, the Priority Schools Building Programme (PSBP), the county council again made a bid for the funding required to provide a replacement school for Southfield and Stainburn. This bid was approved, and during 2012 and 2013, the county council started to work with the government's Education Funding Agency (EFA) on some of the details; where the school might be located, how big it would be, and so on. All of that would have been subject to the required consultations. This project though was put on hold by the Department for Education (DfE) because of the impending creation of the Energy Coast University Technical College (ECUTC) and the potential effect on pupil levels in the Workington schools which meant that funding levels could not be determined by the EFA for a new school.

Alongside those discussions, Southfield and Stainburn began the process of becoming academies, working with an academy sponsor, Bright Tribe. It is the government which assesses and approves academy conversions, not the county council and, after long discussions throughout 2013, it became clear during the autumn term that whilst Stainburn was likely to be approved as an academy, Southfield was not. The county council attempted to support the conversion of both schools by offering to meet much of the deficit at Southfield, but the government had strong concerns about the longer term financial health of Southfield school.

The county council had been supportive of academy conversion for both schools, because we believed that this would result eventually in the creation of a single school in a new building. The county council could not support the conversion of only one of the schools, however, because we felt this might disadvantage Southfield pupils.

In November 2013 the schools were inspected by Ofsted, along with a number of others in the county, and they judged that both Southfield and Stainburn Schools required Special Measures.

Throughout all of this, the county council has supported educational standards at the schools as far as it was able to do so. The role of the Local Authority (LA) in relation to school improvement has changed over the last few years. The LA's

role now is to co-ordinate support for schools and challenge standards where required. It is recognised nationally that Headteachers and governors have the primary role in improving standards in their schools. The local authority can no longer “force” schools to do things although we do have some statutory powers. Until this point it was not appropriate that we used these powers in either Southfield or Stainburn Schools.

When schools are found to require Special Measures, the county council has to produce an action plan setting out what it will do to support better educational standards at the schools in receipt of this judgement. One of the options for consideration is closure, and another is for the schools to become sponsored academies. The county council is also able to change the management and leadership of schools in Special Measures and can take control of the schools’ budgets if it feels this is appropriate.

Any action the county council takes must be aimed at improving the education on offer. Because both schools are in special measures, and because it has been the county council’s long term goal to create a single secondary school to replace them, we believe that both existing schools should close. An alternative would have been to close one of the schools and place all pupils in the other, but that brings with it its own difficulties. The staff of the closing school would have been seen to be more at risk of losing their jobs than those in the continuing school, and there was always the potential for a ‘them and us’ conflict to develop. With this proposal one school in Special Measures would have been taking on the pupils from another in the same position, which would not have provided a new start for all, raising the standards of education available to the young people of Workington.

So, the county council, in discussion with DfE, felt that a new school was the best way forward. The law says that when a new school is required, the county council must offer potential academy sponsors the opportunity to come forward with their proposals on providing a new school; we have no choice in this.

2. How is it decided what changes will be made?

If the county council wants to close a school/s, it has to follow a set legal process. This begins with the consultation exercise, and the county council’s Cabinet must take into account the response to consultation when it decides what to do next.

The county council has to consult on the proposals it wants to see implemented, but that doesn’t mean a decision has already been taken. At the same time, ‘taking account of’ the consultation response doesn’t mean that the county council has to withdraw its proposals even if there is opposition. Again, this is in line with the legal arrangements set out for making changes to schools.

It’s important, though, that county councillors know what local people think about the proposals so that they can make a fully informed decision. If they do decide to proceed after the consultation, there will be formal proposals published, and a further opportunity for local people to make ‘representations’ – to say what they think – before a final decision is made.

The final decision on the closure of the two schools is made by the county council’s Cabinet; as with the arrangements above, this is part of the arrangements that we must follow. But the decision on who will be the sponsor for the new academy rests with the government, and not Cumbria County Council.

The county council will consider all of the academy proposals sent in, and is able to recommend a preferred sponsor to the government, but the final decision is not ours to make.

3. Where would the new school be situated?

Initially, we think that both existing sites may have to be used. For the new building, site investigations need to be undertaken on both sites prior to a final decision.

4. Why not leave the pupils in the existing schools until the new academy is built?

The county council will need to discuss detailed arrangements for the initial pre-opening period with the academy sponsor. It may be possible to use the two existing buildings until a new one is constructed, though it may be difficult to manage in terms of specialist staffing, for example. At the moment we cannot be sure.

5. What will happen to the 6th Form?

The new school will have a sixth form. It is expected that this will be fully integrated into the new building rather than provided in a stand-alone centre as with the previous joint sixth form located on the Moorclose site.

6. How long will this all take?

Consultation on closure will last for 6 weeks, and at the same time the county council has invited potential academy sponsors to come forward with their proposals for a new school. The potential sponsors will be informed that the new school will only go ahead if the decision is made to close Southfield and Stainburn schools. We expect that by July a decision on this will have been taken if the County Council Cabinet decides to pursue such a change following consultation. We hope that an academy sponsor will be selected by the secretary of state in a similar timeframe.

The proposal at present is for the academy to open in existing buildings on 1 January 2015, and the new build will then be constructed. This is a substantial building project, and it is possible that a new school building will not be completed until September 2017.

7. How will the children cope with the disruption?

Many academy sponsors have substantial experience of setting up new schools, and will have a good understanding of the disruption that can occur at a time of change. The county council will work very closely with the sponsor to make sure any disruption is kept to a minimum. Whilst we want to bring about changes and improvements quickly, we do recognise that the education of pupils already attending the two schools is absolutely paramount, and we will do everything we can to make sure that through this period of change, they are supported to reach their full educational potential.

8. What happened to Bright Tribe creating an Academy to replace the two schools?

Bright Tribe had been working for over a year with both Southfield and Stainburn in preparation for becoming their academy sponsor. Difficulties with the Southfield conversion and, subsequently, the Ofsted judgements on the two schools have halted that process. Bright Tribe will, of course, be able to express an interest in becoming the new academy sponsor and their proposal will be considered alongside any others received by the county council and government.

9. What happens if the sponsor is taken over or fails in some way?

In the very unlikely event that the academy trust was dissolved for some reason, the government would take appropriate steps to ensure continuity, and if necessary look for a replacement sponsor.

10. Will the admissions rules change?

The School Admissions Code that came into force in February 2012 applies to all maintained schools and Academies when setting their admission arrangements. The academy would be responsible for establishing its own admissions policy, and that may be different from the current county council policy which applies to Southfield and Stainburn. This has long been the case for many schools. St Joseph's, for example, already has its own admissions policy, as do all Catholic schools in the county, and all academies. These schools can't 'cherry-pick' pupils and disadvantage others through their policies, though, and we would expect that the academy would cater for all local children seeking a place.

11. What is the status of the headteachers?

Both Headteachers have now stepped down from their posts and the county council has appointed Lorryne Hughes, currently Headteacher at William Howard School in Brampton, to the position of Executive Headteacher. Mrs Hughes will manage the schools through the consultation process around potential closure and conversion to a single academy and put in place measures to quickly improve standards. The process is also now underway to appoint two new interim Heads of School who will manage the day-to-day business of each school under the overall leadership of Mrs Hughes.

12. How will the school be managed in the interim?

We have taken immediate steps to strengthen leadership, management and governance at both schools as part of our Statement of Action. Details of these arrangements will be released as soon as they are finalised.

13. Why has the council allowed the schools' performance to deteriorate in this way? Why is it only taking action now?

Schools themselves are responsible and accountable for their own performance. Unless a school is placed in Special Measures, as is the case here, the Local Authority can only advise them and make recommendations; schools can choose whether they act on that advice or not. The Local Authority can issue Warning Notices to schools where there are concerns about standards or leadership, however, the LA did not feel it would be helpful to do so in these cases. The

schools already had an intended sponsor working with them and it would not have been appropriate for the LA to become involved with the work they were doing. With the schools now in Special Measures new powers are available to the LA to intervene directly.

14. Given PSBP funding was approved in May 2012 why has there been this delay in beginning a project?

Because of the uncertainty created by the development of the Energy Coast University Technology College and its potential impact on pupil numbers, as well as the discussion around the potential for both schools to become academies, greater clarity was needed before any detailed preparations could be made for the new building. The costs of school buildings are substantial, and the government was never going to support the construction of a school that was too big (or too small and that would have to be expanded very soon after opening) until the detail had been agreed. The DfE is now content to support the process that the council has initiated.

15. Workington has been let down over recent years, what makes this different?

It is well known that the council has tried hard to secure a new school for Workington but, for reasons largely out of our control, these efforts have not come to fruition. This time the situation is different. Funding for a new school is already agreed and the Department for Education supports the process we have initiated. We do appreciate, though, that people may feel let down, and we understand why people are angry and frustrated that it has taken the schools to be placed in special measures before it looks like the county council has taken any action. As set out at Question 1, above, there are lots of different influences and factors that can impact on the county council's plans, but we are very confident that this time we will be able to deliver a new school for Workington.

16. Why is the Stainburn site more suitable?

It has not been decided which of the two sites will be ultimately used for the construction of the new building. Further site investigation needs to be carried out and the findings analysed before this is determined. The Education Funding Agency who will be providing the funding on behalf of the DfE have asked the county council to begin this work.

17. What is the status of Bright Tribe's involvement with the schools?

Bright Tribe has been working closely with both schools over the last year with a view to them converting to academy status. Bright Tribe will now be able to submit a proposal to become the sponsor of the new academy, along with any other providers who are interested in the opportunity. Their bid will be assessed on its merits alongside all others. The final decision will be made by the Secretary of State.

18. Why is the new school opening in the middle of a school year?

We think it's important that the changes happen as soon as possible. Because of the processes we have to follow to bring about the changes, we can't complete

the change any more quickly than December 2014. We appreciate this is not ideal, but want a new sponsor to be able to start the work of improving standards as soon as possible, rather than wait an extra two terms until the start of September 2015. Disruption will be minimal and well-managed by the successful sponsor who will be working closely with the schools and the county council in the term prior to the new school opening.

19. Why was the publication of the Ofsted reports delayed for Stainburn and Southfield when St Joseph's was released within the normal 3 weeks?

The Southfield governors, as is their right, questioned the findings of their Ofsted report when it was presented to them in late November. The county council was aware at that stage of the likely outcome of both that and the Stainburn report, and the DfE agreed to delay the publication of both reports until the issues raised by Southfield had been investigated.

Had the reports been published at different times, the county council would not have been in a position to set out its plans; there would have been a delay of several weeks between Stainburn parents and pupils receiving the news that their school required Special Measures, and the county council being able to say what it wanted to do to make changes. This period of 'limbo' would, not have been helpful.

20. How has the council suddenly got 'newly gained powers' to close the schools and how come they are so quick now in reacting to the Ofsted reports?

A school which has been judged by Ofsted to require significant improvement either 'Serious Weaknesses' or 'Special Measures' will be "eligible for intervention" under the 2006 Education Act. Where schools are eligible for intervention, local authorities may exercise their powers to: require the governing body to enter into specified arrangements with a view to improving the performance of the school for example; appoint additional governors; suspend the delegated budget of the school; appoint an Interim Executive Board.

Once the Ofsted report is published, the county council has 10 working days to submit its Statement of Action which sets out how it will support the required improvements in standards.

21. How can a school with 100% GCSE pass rate results be failing?

The 100% of pupils getting GCSEs is not the standard measure that is recognised nationally for the success of a school. This measure is the percentage of students who achieve five or more GCSE passes **including English and maths**, all of which must be at grade C or above. The percentage of students achieving this measure at Southfield was 53% and for Stainburn 47%, compared to the national average of 60%. The county council has provided support at both schools. The schools have been in receipt of an increased level of support from the county council since 2007. This has involved work with middle leadership, governors, specific subject leaders and teachers. This is in addition to supporting or assessing the schools' improvement planning and self-evaluation alongside the school leadership teams. Support has also included the observation of teaching and reflection on the standards of students' work. There have been formal, regular meetings in each school, at least termly, where the leadership, including representatives of the governing body, met with the county council to assess the progress made and how areas for improvement are being addressed.

These meetings have been established for some time in both schools, following the previous Ofsted inspections. Both schools have worked with the county council on reviews of particular areas of their work. Officers have also participated in the joint work both schools have undertaken with other schools to support this partnership.

It is the judgement of the county council that the support given has been appreciated by both schools, as noted in one of the Ofsted reports.

The full Ofsted report is available at

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report>

22. Is this whole process down to politics and money?

No, but they do play a part on a national scale. The coalition government is keen to see more academies established and believe they provide the best way of improving standards. Government legislation has been created to force local authorities seeking a new school to find academy sponsors.

The county council has no strong view either way on the comparative abilities of academy and non-academy schools to provide the highest of standards; some of the country's most successful schools are not academies, and some are. The council works well with the vast majority of academies in Cumbria. What is important is that children get the best opportunities and achieve the best results possible as we know that these are fundamental in providing a firm foundation for success for young people as they move to their adult lives. We believe that good teaching, good leadership and a good curriculum make the difference to a school's performance.

This is not about the county council saving money. The county council will have to cover any school budget deficits if/when they close; deficits do not transfer to the new academy. The education budget is also ring-fenced, so even if the costs in a single school were lower than they currently are, this would only result in comparatively more money being available to other schools in the county; there would be no direct benefit to the county council. In the longer term, the county council will make 'savings' because it will not have to cover the costs of any maintenance required at the two existing buildings. Again, though, this is capital funding which will be used for other projects, so there is no direct saving to the county council.

23. How are the same mistakes being made all over again (RRC&M academies)?

The academy programme has progressed significantly since the early academy model was introduced, and some academies are now amongst the most successful schools nationwide. There are many academies in Cumbria which are thriving.

24. The schools were already moving towards a merger in an orderly fashion, why has the council over-riden those plans?

Whilst it appeared that the result of that work would be a single, new-build school to replace the existing schools, the county council was happy to support the ongoing discussions. We have stepped in now because Ofsted has judged that standards at both schools are not good enough, the schools are now subject to special measures and, as only Stainburn could convert to become an academy, the PSBP funding secured by the county council was at risk. The money was at

risk because the schools had been accepted into the PSBP programme on condition that they were brought together into one school – if one school could convert and the other not there would be no clear process by which this could happen. Equally this would have left the council in a position where it would have had to close Southfield alone. This would not have been the right decision for the community.

25. Is this another route to privatising education?

The county council fully supports state education provided in ‘maintained’ Community schools such as Southfield and Stainburn, but this cannot be at the expense of providing the best standards and accessing funding for new school buildings when it becomes available. Academy sponsors often are from the private sector, but not always (for example, the Church of England is an approved sponsor, as are other schools’ academy trusts). Academies are still ‘maintained’, meaning they continue to be funded via public money and they are not private fee paying schools.

26. How will throwing money at the situation by building a new school help? Do we not need to look at the leadership and ineffective teaching?

Leadership and teaching will all be improved. The county council has already taken steps to strengthen management arrangements. The funding for a new building will come from the government, not the county council. Without it, condition surveys identified that significant work would be needed to maintain both schools in a wind and watertight condition.

27. Why is there a consultation taking place on 20 January when the decision has already been made? Even if there were thousands of objections, would this change their decision?

It’s important that county councillors know what local people think about the proposals so that they can make a fully informed decision. If they do decide to proceed after the consultation, there will be formal proposals published, and a further opportunity for local people to make ‘representations’ – to say what they think – before a final decision is made.

The consultation is about a proposal to close two schools and to potentially open a new academy to replace the current schools. The decision has not been made. The county council’s Cabinet is required to ‘take account of’ the consultation responses.

28. Why is this being rushed?

We think the changes need to happen as soon as possible in order to ensure a quality education is provided to the young people of Workington. In order to open a new academy, even in existing buildings, on 1 January 2015, we need to start the process now. Others have suggested that the county council has been too slow to act, and there are clearly a range of views on what should happen and when.