

North & West Bath Area Review

A review by the Education, Youth, Culture & Leisure Overview & Scrutiny Panel
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COUNCIL EXECUTIVE

Aim of review

The aims of these primary school reviews which are being carried out by the Education, Youth, Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel across all school clusters are the removal of surplus places, improving the funding per pupil across the Local Education Authority, and thereby improving the overall quality of the education environment to achieve a better education for all pupils in Bath and North East Somerset.

General

The Panel were unanimously of the opinion that only minor re-organisation of the primary schools within the North and West cluster area was necessary and achievable in the medium term and needed serious consideration.

The panel has gathered a great deal of evidence, undertaken visits, listened to contributions and studied current statistics and future trends. The underlying factor recognised by the panel is that current surplus places in the cluster are 76 (September 04 against an actual take up of 1035). Two schools in the cluster are arranged as 'All through' Primary schools, and the others are an Infant School and separate Junior school on adjacent sites.

Trends show a levelling or a small reduction in the numbers of primary school age children in the coming years. It was noted that within 4 years the situation and trend may then be different. The Panel made a general observation that there was no significant additional housing planned in the area in the immediate future which might impact on the predicted numbers of children in the cluster.

They wished it noted that their recommendations implied no reflection on the quality of the education provided in the schools which was uniformly good and they recognised the schools' commitment to high educational standards.

On the issue of school amalgamation, the panel has consistently made the following general recommendations to the Council Executive:

- The Panel's view was that amalgamation of schools should only be recommended where it would improve the educational provision and standards within the area.
- Amalgamation should not be undertaken purely as an act of policy.
- There should be a proven tangible benefit to any amalgamation.
- There should be a willingness from the school and governors for any amalgamation.
- The Panel felt that all-through primary schools were preferable for a number of educational and social reasons.

- In particular, all through Primary schools simplify continuity and progression between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Staff are able to take part in planning the curriculum and assessment procedures from YR to Y6. They can take curriculum leadership for a subject right through the school and with more staff; each member of staff has to take responsibility for fewer subjects. The role of the SENCO can be developed as a whole school responsibility, supporting parents and children from entry to the school through to Secondary transfer. All staff from YR to Y6 will be involved in training and over time staff can teach in both Infant and Junior classes if this is appropriate to improve the quality of teaching. With a great deal of hard work, very effective liaison can be achieved between separate Infant and Junior Schools, but an all through Primary School can more easily achieve these advantages.
- The panel noted that the provision of any new building for amalgamation would need to attract capital funding to meet essential requirements.

The Panel made the following specific recommendations with regard to the individual schools:

The recommendations below would be subject to statutory consultation.

1. St Mary's Catholic VA Primary School

The school has had a consistent intake over recent years and is generally oversubscribed with 92% of pupils being baptised Catholics, serving the BA1 area. The school is a single form entry with 7 classes and a capacity of 210 pupils.

The buildings are in good condition and adequate for the school, although the administration accommodation is undersized.

The play area is only 53% of the ideal recommended size. Perhaps the grassed area could benefit from a re-think, possibly using artificial grass to fully utilise space available. The school could consider using devolved capital to enhance this area.

Panel Recommendations

The Panel highly recommend to the Executive Member for Education in consultation with the Executive Member for Transportation, that a pedestrian crossing be placed across Penn Hill Road to enable the children to cross safely to the recreation ground. This would also benefit local residents.

The Panel do not consider that the school needs any re-organisation or changes.

2. Weston All Saints Cof E VC Primary School

This is a creative and inclusive school which has excellent links with the wider community through its adult volunteers and the partnership with Bath Spa University. The Panel particularly noted the hearing-impaired resource base and the strength of the performing and expressive arts.

The school has averaged 350 pupils over the past 5 years, which gives flexibility for class size groupings. The Standard Number is 364 (actual size being 378) and the school is run as a 2-form entry. There are no plans to reduce current numbers.

The Infant school buildings are now over 30 years old and in need of refurbishment. Property Services are looking at that issue as part of a feasibility study. The Junior building is approaching 50 years old and is in a deteriorating condition which will require significant investment in the short to medium term.

The building feasibility study is currently considering the options of 360 or 420 pupil school. No decision has been taken yet and the Panel considers it advisable to wait until the study is complete. The Panel recognises that the eventual size of a combined Newbridge school (see below) would need to be taken into consideration when deciding the final size for WASPS, since a 'working' surplus needs to be maintained in the cluster.

The Panel noted that the School is on a very large site. The feasibility study should consider the scope for selling part of the site for residential development (possibly including a public green space) and using the receipts towards the new build as required.

Recommendations

- The Panel felt strongly that the Junior block should be rebuilt as soon as possible. They noted the amount of 'management time' involved in running the Junior school building as a result of the structural faults
- The preferred location would be at the Infant end of the site. Refurbishment of the Infant block should also be considered.
- To achieve this, there should be an urgent examination of the priorities for capital funding, although the Panel acknowledge the difficult pressures this creates for the Executive.
- It is recognised that the feasibility study is also looking at other sources of funding and officers are looking whether the current building condition attracts any special funding.

The panel also noted that there are currently no substantial housing developments planned for the Weston area which could affect the intake of WASPS.

No re-organisation changes need to be considered.

3. Newbridge St John's CofE VC Infants School and Newbridge Junior School (Community)

Newbridge St Johns Church of England Infants School

The current numbers on roll are 195 (maximum size being 216 pupils) with a standard number of 70. There are 7 classes, 5 being organised as single age classes and 2 as mixed age classes (recp/yr1, and yr1/yr2).

A majority of the governors would like to consult with a view to amalgamation with the Junior School. If an amalgamation were to take place the accommodation could be remodelled to provide good space for 180 infant places. Linking the buildings would be practical and would promote the feeling of unity within the new school.

Panel members noted the good use of artificial grass around the perimeter of the tarmac play area, extending the usable area.

Newbridge Junior School (Community)

The current numbers on role are 272 (actual size being 300 pupils), with a standard number of 75, arranged in a mix of 12 classrooms. This results in mixed year/age groups as a 2½ form entry.

A majority of the governors would like to consult with a view to amalgamation with the Infants school. The existing temporary classrooms have the potential to be freed up through remodelling following amalgamation, and could be used for peripatetic teaching and after-school clubs. Linking the buildings would be practical and would promote the feeling of unity of the new school.

The governors would like to amalgamate the school into a 2 form entry primary school with an overall capacity of 420 pupils. This will remove mixed-year classes which are unpopular with many parents and which create organisational difficulties.

As a general observation, the Panel recognised that both schools achieved good educational standards

Recommendations

- Panel supports the amalgamation of the 2 schools on the grounds of their proximity and the clear support from both governing bodies.
- The panel encourages the LEA in conjunction with the governors to consult with parents and the local community about the proposal.
- The panel recognise that one is a VC school and the other a community school – this should be addressed during the consultation and the legal position should be explained. The overall balance of VC/VA and community schools in Bath needs to be taken into account and together with the choices parents currently make within this cluster.
- The issue of the ownership of the land should be examined, including the 'wild garden' in front of the junior school.
- Creating a shared staff and administration area, uniform entrance and covered walkway along a main outdoor route would create unity for an amalgamated school. The most appropriate use of the current duplicated areas should also be considered.
- With regard to the site access, there should be an improvement in security during school hours. The issue of the access road and the right of way should be addressed.
- Finally, the Panel wished the Executive Member to consider using the savings from any amalgamation of these school premises for reinvestment in schools to help the backlog of maintenance and building improvement works. This

was not currently Council policy, but the Panel felt it should be strongly considered within this review.

The Panel noted that any school which is built in the future to serve the new development at Western Riverside could have an impact upon the Newbridge schools in this cluster and that the LEA should take note of this.

Councillor Andrew Furse

Chair of the Education, Youth, Culture and Leisure Overview & Scrutiny Panel

14th March 2005