

Minutes of Consultation meeting re. Belleville expansion with Councillors, Parents, Governors and Staff 02.11.09

Chair: Sue Harries (SH), Chair of Governors

Council Officers Present:

Bruce Glockling (BG), BSF (Building Schools for the Future) Project Director

Adrian Butler (AB), Assistant Director (Planning and Resources)

Bernard Burke (BB), Principal Development Officer

Councillors on panel:

Councillor Tracey (CT)

Councillor Dawson (CD)

Meeting opened: 18.32

SH introduced herself and members of the panel introduced themselves, CT also indicated that there were other Ward Councillors in attendance. SH asked that questions and comments from the floor should be preceded by the person's name and whether they were parent/governor/member of staff.

AB shared the background of the proposal; that in the whole of South London there has been a 30% increase in the birth rate over the last 6 years. This is having an impact on school places in some parts of the Borough in particular (Putney, Balham, Tooting, Northcote) and there has been a rise from 4000 to 5200 primary places needed. The council has contacted 4 primary schools with a proposal to expand (Belleville being one of the four), as the schools and council need to work together to find places for the growing demand. As there is a lack of spare sites the council need to look at expanding existing schools.

AB outlined some of advantages of expansion for schools, namely:

- financial incentive (funding is linked to pupil numbers) and thus the increased funding could be used can be used for additional resources by the school.
- the building would be expanded and be brought up to modern standards.

AB outlined the disadvantages of expansion as the potential disruption during building works but he said that this could be minimised.

AB concluded by stating that there needs to be a balanced judgement as to whether the benefits outweigh the disadvantages and that this would be different for each school according to their particular circumstances.

BB and BG showed plans of the existing Belleville site and shared drawings of the possible expansion which came as a result of the feasibility study. They indicated that these were not plans but showed why the council felt that expansion was feasible. The drawings demonstrated the different phases of the build, including the steps that would be undertaken to minimise disruption. Two phases were identified and each phase would take around one year – due for full completion in 2013.

Phase 1 (an extension to one side of the building, over the area of school keeper's house, that matches the main building) to include:

- Nursery integrated into the main building
- Toilets on each floor
- 5 additional classrooms
- Additional office/storage/teaching areas
- Three lifts.

Minutes of Consultation meeting re. Belleville expansion with Councillors, Parents, Governors and Staff 02.11.09

Phase 2 (building in the area which currently houses the kitchen and temporary classrooms – previously the car park) to include:

- Demolition of current Nursery and space to be changed into playground space
- New kitchen
- Dining hall of 120 sq metres (extendable with a further 62 sq m.) which can be a multipurpose hall
- Classrooms on the first floor above the new hall.

The playground space would be slightly larger, the existing space is 2177 sq m and would increase to 2332 sq m.

A parent asked where the play space for nursery would be. Councillors replied that it would be included in the building plans.

A parent asked whether the increase in playground space is proportional to the increase in number of children. The councillors stated that it was not. They added that the existing playground space is not the correct ratio of space to children, but with careful management e.g. offset playtimes, the required amount of space could be achieved.

SH explained that the Governors had previously met, she introduced Brian Ledbetter (BL) as the Governor who had chaired the previous meeting, and explained that a series of questions had been generated to share with the councillors.

Governors Questions:

1. What are the reasons for increased demand in this area?
2. What is the likelihood of the Local Authority not honouring the promise?
3. What is the assurance on minimising student disruption during the build?
4. Have the Local Authority done a study of potential traffic implications?

The first question raised by governors was to identify the reasons behind the increase in demand in this area. AB explained that there has been an increase across the borough but there were areas of concentrated demand with Northcote ward being one of them. He added that the distance that new families live from the school has been reducing every year which is further evidence of increasing demand. He added that the school is popular and there is a 'pecking' order amongst schools and always would be even if there was increased quality in all schools. He said that they would not increase places in unpopular schools. The Local Authority (LA) is willing to invest £6million to the project, and so it needs to invest it in the right school to make sure the places are used.

A parent suggested that an increase in school size would lead to a decrease in the quality of the school and also its popularity. CT refuted this comment and did not accept that a bigger school is less effective or that it is automatic that a larger school is more unpopular. She stated that parents choose an outstanding school with its head and teachers.

A parent asked why other schools were not being improved. CT replied that a lot of work goes into improving less successful schools and there are currently 21 outstanding schools in Wandsworth. The placement of some of these schools is not in the areas of growth and some are not physically able to expand (e.g. because of restrictions about the height of buildings in that area).

Minutes of Consultation meeting re. Belleville expansion with Councillors, Parents, Governors and Staff 02.11.09

A parent expressed concern over when the construction would take place and how could it be ensured the children were kept safe. The councillors explained that any construction area would be kept separate from the school, any workers on site would be Criminal Records Bureau checked, as much as possible would be undertaken in holiday time and that the LA had much experience of management of builds in schools.

A parent asked whether a new school should be built if the demographics were such an issue. CT responded by stating the council are currently developing the Springfield hospital site into a school and a further property. She intimated that there is a problem in the Northcote area as there is no land available to build a new school on and children need to live within 300m to get into Belleville when the two largest schools in the borough are already in the area. She explained that the Bolingbroke Hospital site is not an option, as it is not owned by the council and would be too expensive to buy and convert.

A parent asked if expansion of Belleville School would ever satisfy the need for places in the local area. Councillors responded that it is possible to map the birth rate and the types of houses in the area to make projections of demand. It is not possible to calculate how many people will choose private education, who will move away and the demographic of who would subsequently move in, but the projections showed that expansion to one extra form of entry would satisfy the demand. CT suggested that governors may wish to consider whether to continue with the same sibling policy for those pupils who are admitted in older year groups as their siblings use some of the Reception places available.

A parent expressed concern that schools are suffering with loss of pupils as children were leaving to come to Belleville. AB explained that the council cannot dictate to parents which schools they choose and that is why they need to ensure there are enough places to satisfy local demand, which includes the expansion of popular schools.

The second question raised by the Governors was to ask about the likelihood of the local authority not honouring its (financial) promise particularly as there may be a change of government before the project is completed. AB explained the process:

- Initial consultation to obtain views

If decision taken to proceed:

- Publish official proposal 'notice' - Funding has to be guaranteed at this point to continue.

A parent governor asked when the funding would be committed. The councillors responded that as yet the funding has not been released from the Government although the bid had been sent by LA in July but that it should be resolved before a decision needs to be made for the 2010 intake.

The Governors' third question regarded assurance on minimising disruption to pupils during the build. The councillors explained that it was high on their agenda to minimise disruption and any build would be precisely managed. They would build in areas with the least effect on the children i.e. adjacent to the existing school building. They would work with the school, head and governors to have the least effect possible. They would use as much of the holiday period as possible especially for the most disruptive, i.e. demolition, parts of the build. They stated that it could be viewed as an opportunity for curriculum enrichment e.g. the sustainability agenda. It was also confirmed that building and teaching/play/work spaces would be separated and that teaching without disruption would be the priority.

Minutes of Consultation meeting re. Belleville expansion with Councillors, Parents, Governors and Staff 02.11.09

A parent asked about loss of playground space during the building period. It was reiterated that the size of playground would increase overall and that there would be no loss at any time.

A parent asked about where the building equipment/compound would be. Councillors responded that they would make use of periphery areas and minimise effects of this but that the detail of this would be considered during the next stage when considering a final design.

A parent asked whether expansion would lead to a decrease in playground space per head. Councillors responded that it would, eventually, but that Belleville does not meet the guidance now and won't in the future. They added that it is possible to phase playtimes in different ways to overcome this. Headteacher John Grove (JG) stated that offsetting playtimes is an option and can actually increase the amount of space per head by having fewer children in the same space e.g. Key Stages 1 and 2 at different times. He added that the school had taken photos of the playground across the school day and it is at its busiest at the start and end of the school day, and that this will be reviewed internally and at upcoming parent forums. JG added that he observed over 60 adults on the playgrounds after the children had gone in and that this issue would need to be addressed differently to the use of space at play and lunchtimes. JG stated that when he first arrived there were offset playtimes, however due to timetabling, the length of teaching periods for the 'Literacy and Numeracy Hour' curriculum in place at that time, best use of specialist teaching staff at that time, it was changed to all of the school sharing playtimes. He added that there are good reasons for and against offset playtimes, it is an organisational issue, and as a school there is constant reviewing of the timetabling.

A parent gave her opinion that Reception this year was already too busy and too big and her child had had a negative experience resulting in the increased size of Reception; this was in contrast to her older children's previous experience of Reception. A different parent stated her child was also in the increased Reception intake and that the whole experience had been just as positive as her older children's experiences.

A response was heard to JG's comment that most crowded time of the day was due to the number of parents, stating that this made parents feel unwelcome and that it was important to allow parents the time and space for positive relationships with staff. JG clarified the school's position of welcoming parents and consistently promoting and insisting on staff presence at the beginning and end of each day to ensure time for parents to speak with teachers and senior members of staff. He reiterated that the start of the day on the upper playground would be reviewed.

The councillors were asked by the Governors if they had completed a study of the traffic implications. The council responded that they hadn't as yet but would be expected to produce a transport and green travel plan as part of the planning application. They added that the places would be in a local school for local children, and the increase in traffic would not be proportional to the increase in children.

A parent asked why illustrations of what the building would look like were not available and that he felt the images presented were unclear. Councillors responded that these are the early days of the process, such images would be available but it is not possible to provide

Minutes of Consultation meeting re. Belleville expansion with Councillors, Parents, Governors and Staff 02.11.09

full details of exactly how it would be at this point. CT added that they would not pay for an expensive representation when it is still not known if the proposal is going ahead.

A parent raised her concern over the lack of lollipop person outside of Belleville. The council stated that they were doing everything possible to recruit although this is proving to be very difficult.

A parent asked to be given details of the design, the budget and the full proposal. Councillors responded that this is an initial consultation, when a statutory notice is published consultation continues and at that point the specifics of the design, the budget and planning of the build are formulated.

A parent commented that there had been insufficient information available to parents resulting in a climate of distrust; they needed more information and sufficient time to respond to the proposal and were worried that decisions would be made without full consultation. Councillors responded by stating that detailed plans and designs would not be drawn up until they know it is going ahead. CT explained that the proposed expansion of Belleville is part of a borough-wide strategy. She sought to reassure parents that Wandsworth have completed many builds before and realise the importance of it to the school community. They have appointed their own design team, project managers etc. who understand educational settings and can deliver a build in an educational establishment. Whilst realising the short-term difficulties for the school and current parents, the council were committed to looking ahead strategically to the need of future local parents.

A parent asked how they would be consulted if expansion went ahead. The council assured parents that they would be consulted, and that they are now looking longer term to make these decisions earlier. One parent commented that it would be more likely that parents would support the expansion if it was explained what would be in it for them, that this had not been done and that the meeting had only been called as a result of many parents' concern as shown by a petition.

A parent asked about how next year's Reception parents are being informed. CT said that Ward Councillors needed to reflect on this issue.

A parent commented that there was evidence that increased school size reduces standards of a school and requested evidence for the positive effect of increased size. CT explained that she had initially expressed reservations about the proposed increase but confirmed that it would not go ahead if it was going to compromise academic excellence and was that there was much evidence to support that this would not happen.

A parent wanted to know who made the final decision. AB fed back on the process and identified 2 concerns of parents, namely:

- 1 That the LA had made up their minds already
- 2 That the parents had not been asked in time

He explained that it is a process of dialogue and that initially there needs to be a proposal in order to get responses to it. From the proposal, responses could be gathered and then ideas could be better formulated. He confirmed that ideas were not set and that this is an initial dialogue.

Minutes of Consultation meeting re. Belleville expansion with Councillors, Parents, Governors and Staff 02.11.09

A parent asked how the final decision would be made. Councillors responded that feedback on the suggestion is gathered and at this point it may be dropped, it may go to further consultation or it may be approved and a published proposal notice is produced. Ultimately, the decision would be taken by the councillors.

A parent asked if governors could veto decisions. Councillors responded that the governors need to be able confident that they can manage the size of the expanded school and staff need to be confident that it would not adversely effect standards. The council committee would need assurance of this from both groups, but neither group had given any indication either way as yet. They added that there are 14 or 15 primary schools in the country that have over 800 pupils. JG added that he has a visit to a primary school with 946 pupils planned for the following week and that there are outstanding schools with over 800 pupils. He said that he would continue to visit large successful schools, whether the expansion went ahead or not, to develop best practice at Belleville.

A parent asked whether the parent governor vacancy would affect any governor voting. SH responded that there is no parent governor vacancy but that there is one community governor vacancy at the moment.

A parent asked whether the Bolingbroke Hospital site had been considered for secondary provision. Councillors responded that the site is not owned by the council and that there is currently £300m being spent, as part of Building Schools for the Future programme, on the secondary sector.

A parent asked how local residents were to be given information. The councillors responded that they would be consulted if the proposal reached the planning stage. They added that they would expect that the demand for extra places would be greater from those outside of the school community than it is inside. Last years admissions showed that it is as localised as a demand within SW11 6__ postcodes and that urgent steps had needed to be taken for the 2009 intake.

JG raised the point that there was evidence that large schools can have advantages and disadvantages, that there would be pressure on space but there would also be a significant build. He listed some of the logistical advantages for the school:

- Integrated nursery
- Access for pupils with mobility problems i.e. lifts
- 50% larger hall
- More hall space that can be used for extra curricular clubs
- Increased numbers of toilets per person
- Financial security – this can be used to increase office staff, non-class based teachers, specialist teachers
- More teaching spaces
- Increased office space

He added that there would be one year to get ready for the changes that would take place.

A parent raised that his child was only able to get a place in Reception in 2009 because of the extra form – he lives 450m away from the school and had been 15th on the waiting list - and was happy to be able to send his child to the local school and be part of the local community.

Minutes of Consultation meeting re. Belleville expansion with Councillors, Parents, Governors and Staff 02.11.09

He also asked how decisions would be made about how the school building expands. BB stated that there had been limited consultation with staff and governors about the feasibility study but that there would be dialogue with the whole school community about what they wanted from the new school building. He acknowledged pressure at the start and end of the day and said that the design process would take such issues into account e.g. large hall for lunch etc.

A community governor raised that the school had less than 500 pupils in 1995 and was not as good a school. She also pointed out that there had already been significant refurbishment of the building (i.e. making classrooms 50% bigger, a new roof, new windows) whilst the children were in school and that it had been handled remarkably well. She expressed confidence that JG and the staff could manage the change and that they would also put pressure on the council to make sure it is successful.

A parent governor asked if there were any opportunities to address current physical deficiencies within the school (e.g. refurbishment of toilets, play space) by the council if the expansion did not go ahead. Councillors stated that there would not be but schools have devolved capital that can be used if they want to carry out their own refurbishments. They stated that the council have a statutory duty to provide places for children; resources and investments would only be spent on schools that expand, as the council need to provide more places.

A parent asked about funding and if there was a finite time for its availability. The councillors responded by saying more funding is needed across London and they expect money to flow over the next 3-4 years as there are not enough primary school places available.

A suggestion was made that the school website could be used as a forum that all can access. SH acknowledged the Governors had not been easily accessible and that they are going to set up a Governor@ Belleville website.

A Belleville parent and a parent from Wix School expressed that they felt that there was an imbalance between supply and demand with other schools. It was asked what would happen if the council gave the proposed £6m for Belleville to other schools, whether other schools in the Borough being ignored and that if there was investment in those schools their remaining places would fill. CT responded by saying the buildings didn't make a school but the people in it e.g. the head, staff and parents. She stated that there have been a number of schools in the borough that have been turned around through investment and hard work on the part of the LA and the school's staff. She added that the council has previously had a policy of investing in the less popular/successful schools and despite this there are still places available. She said that they are looking to invest in schools that parents want to choose.

A parent asked if the feasibility study could be shared. Councillors responded that it would be made available.

A parent asked if different ways to find space had been considered. AB stated that if the proposal continued, more information would be made available and they would look into a variety of options for the expansion to increase space e.g. roof terraces, later in the process. He added that an expanded building would be designed for maximum benefit.

Minutes of Consultation meeting re. Belleville expansion with Councillors, Parents, Governors and Staff 02.11.09

JG responded to an earlier comment about Belleville's popularity, stating that Belleville had not always been popular and it wouldn't necessarily always be a popular school. He shared that:

In 2000 there were 500 children in the school and it was judged unsatisfactory by the LA.

In 2002 there were 524 children in the school and it was judged good by OfSTED.

In 2007 there were 621 children in the school and it was judged outstanding by OfSTED.

In 2009 there were 675 children in the school and it was judged to have 'inspirational leadership' by Her Majesty's Inspector of schools.

A Ward Councillor reiterated that South West London has had a huge birth-rate rise and has the highest density of young families. He added that the demographic had changed and that to build on success is the first strategy, and to remember that this is an early stage in the consultation.

A parent queried the managerial capacity of the staff to manage the change and asked what would happen if JG left. Councillors responded that a large four-form entry school would be very attractive for a headteacher, it could offer a promotion for an experienced head and be seen as an exciting opportunity by other heads.

A parent asked about academic and pastoral care. JG stated that the school has already grown by over 150 pupils since he arrived, the expansion would grow the school by 30 pupils a year, and each time the school would have a year to prepare. If it did expand it would be a slow expansion - the challenge for the school is not knowing what is going to happen, particularly with Open Days forthcoming.

A parent asked about plans to improve less successful schools and the alternative schools for expansion. Councillors responded that they would look in the immediate area around Belleville to expand if the proposal was turned down and if that was not successful they would look at schools further away to provide the places. They added that the location of the school is very important and cited an example of a very good school which had an extra 30 places added, but parents still did not send their children there, that even if a school improves it is not necessarily attractive to parents. They reiterated that there is demand in a very localised area around the school, and stated that it is easier to suggest that other schools should be improved when your child already has a place in the school of your choice.

A parent queried how local the Reception intake actually was in 2009. JG responded that the 30 extra spaces became available some time after the initial school offers had gone out, and that when a place was offered to those on the waiting list some parents declined as they had already made a financial and/or emotional commitment to a different school. Therefore, the distance of the intake was increased whereas if all 120 places had been offered at the same time it would have been even closer.

A parent asked whether sibling places could be limited to those who live locally as older mobile pupils take up some of the Reception places. CT reiterated that governors should consider this issue.

A parent asked if Honeywell had been approached. Councillors stated that they had not approached Honeywell about expansion as the school is a foundation school and as such

Minutes of Consultation meeting re. Belleville expansion with Councillors, Parents, Governors and Staff 02.11.09

they are in charge of their own admissions policy whereas Belleville is a community school.

A parent claimed that other schools had also been approached to expand but that they had turned down the proposal. AB clarified that the three other schools that had been approached had agreed to expansion and had moved onto the second stage of publishing a notice. He added that no other schools had been approached so far but a further 20 will be written to regarding expansion.

A parent suggested that the demand for places could be as a result of the current economic downturn and that with economic recovery parents would choose the private sector as a first choice. A parent asked why the council were not investing in all schools. The council explained that they already do invest in schools as all schools receive devolved capital to spend as they choose. He added that the extra money available is for expansion and has to be spent on providing additional places. He reiterated the need for places due to the demographics in this particular ward and that a solution is needed in this area.

A parent asked what happens next before decisions are made. AB explained the next steps after the meeting:

- Information to be put on the school's website (including the steps of the process)
- Notes of the meeting sent to councillors for consideration and discussion
- Issues raised from the meeting to be addressed (also via school website)
- Governors to discuss outcomes of this meeting
- Governors to come to a view on the expansion
- Consultation will remain open for some time (dates to go on school website)
- Continued dialogue with parents

The dates the council initially set have been extended, after requests from the school and parents, and will do so again if need be, although it is felt that a decision needs to be made by January 2010 at the latest.

A parent asked whether temporary solutions would become permanent without consultation. Councillors clarified that there has to be a published statutory notice in order to permanently increase school places.

A parent asked whether the 2010 intake would be a temporary 4th form or part of the permanent expansion. Councillors responded that the intake next year is not necessarily part of the discussion regarding expansion, and can be a separate decision.

SH stated that Governors would be happy to meet with parents and that they had met three times in the last six weeks to discuss this issue.

A parent suggested that a vote be taken by the people in the audience. A vote was not taken.

Meeting closed 20:45