

Notes of meeting to discuss expansion of Windmill Primary School

A public meeting at the school on Thursday 20 September was attended by 101 people, mostly parents of children at the school, but also school staff/governors and local residents, including some parents of younger children.

The county council officer present set out the statutory process, and why it was proposed to expand the school, namely:

- Popularity: in 2012 the school attracted the most first preference applications of any school in the county, and would have been oversubscribed in-catchment if the admission number had been 60.
- Quality of education: the school is rated “good” by Ofsted.
- Rising demand for school places across the city, and also specifically in the Headington area.
- If Windmill does not expand, local children will have to go to a school further away, and more siblings will be unable to secure a place.
- The expansion of Windmill is part of the council’s city-wide growth planning, which has already seen 14 primary schools in the city expand permanently, with more expansions at different stages of investigation. New schools are also planned, with a Free School expected to open in 2013 and a new school included within the Barton housing development. The equivalent of 7 forms of entry have been added to city primary school capacity in the last 6 years.
- Sufficient school places in the right locations cannot all be provided through new schools, so expansions are a crucial part of the growth strategy. Without sufficient growth in the city, children would have to be transported to surrounding village schools.

Nearly all speakers expressed concern or opposition to the proposed expansion.

Concerns included:

The impact on educational experience for young children of being in a 3 form entry school.

Most comments were negative, including:

- The school would feel too crowded and intimidating for young children.
- How events such as sports days and school plays could be held with so many children.
- That extracurricular activities limited to a given number of pupils would have to turn away more children - examples given were that more children would be unable to join the choir, or go on off-site events.
- The importance of all children knowing each other, and the staff knowing all the children.
- The school is a good school now: are the things which make it good scalable?

A teacher from a 3 form entry school was present, and expressed the opinion that growth to 3 form entry is not harmful given careful management, design and organisation to overcome the challenges of a larger school. Another speaker commented on the additional resources that larger schools had, for example more staff meant more specialisms and experience to contribute to the school.

A parent with one child at the school and another younger one was concerned that if the school did *not* expand, their younger child might not gain a place, and she would then have children in 2 schools. She was concerned that her child would miss out on forming local friendship groups.

[A research summary prepared by Kingston Borough Council on whether 3fe or larger primary schools are detrimental to the quality of education has been forwarded to the Headteacher, and is available from the Kingston Borough Council website]

Accommodation issues

Concerns included:

- That there would be sufficient capital investment in the school.
- That the school should not have to make do with the “minimum” standards.
- A hall large enough for whole school assemblies.
- Accommodation to allow more children to attend the popular and successful parent-run after-school and breakfast clubs.
- Accommodation/facilities to support specialist activities such as music, sports and the Green Club.
- Outdoor play, including the difficulties caused in wet weather when children had limited access to the playing field.
- It was suggested that infant/junior sections might make the school feel less daunting to children.
- Possible conflicts of use, e.g. early years outdoor learning areas outside Key Stage classrooms.
- Any more building work would mean continued disruption for the school.
- Information on school premises standards was requested to allow parents to “benchmark” the school’s accommodation. [Links to the DfE Building Bulletin 99 and School Premises Regulations were added to the consultation website on 24 September.]

Other options for providing school places had not been properly explored.

- Several speakers considered that a new school in the Headington area would be better.
- Alternatively, other schools in the area, such as St Andrews, Bayards or Wood Farm, were suggested as being more suitable to expand.
- It was suggested that Free Schools would mean that expansion of existing schools was not needed.
- The local authority was criticised for not having a strategy to provide sufficient school places, and for not providing sufficient information on demographic need. [A direct link to the Pupil Place Plan was added to the consultation website on 24 September, with a note that it was currently being updated.]
- Questions were asked about what determined which schools were chosen to expand, for example whether Windmill was only chosen because it was a good and popular school.
- The local authority was criticised for selling off the neighbouring school site in 2003, instead of keeping it as school capacity.

- It was suggested that data on how many children currently at the school had younger siblings would be helpful in assessing how large the school needed to be.

Traffic

- The amount of traffic at school pick-up/drop-off times was a concern for parents and local residents.
- The need for a crossing patrol or other action was suggested.
- It was suggested that a school bus should be provided to bring pupils to the school.
- Doubt was expressed that an accurate baseline could be measured for the traffic assessment, given that numbers, and traffic, had grown over the last 2 years due to the "bulge" classes.
- Local parking options had been lost recently.
- A parent with a younger child pointed out that if the school did *not* expand, her child might not be able to gain a place as the school is attracting more than 60 in-catchment applications. She would then have to drive her child to another school, increasing traffic.

The consultation process

- Concern was raised that local parents of younger children did not know about the consultation, despite leaflets being circulated to local Early Years providers. [Early Years providers were again contacted during the following week, and the consultation is now promoted on the local news website.]
- It was questioned how the comments both at the meeting and through written representations would be reported to the Cabinet, and whether an impartial and comprehensive account would be provided.
- It was thought that parents did not have sufficient information about other options to be able to judge their relative merits.
- The headteacher was asked for her and the school's view. [The headteacher sent a letter to all parents on 25 September.]

Other comments

- That the school was originally asked to take intakes of 90 for two years only, and parents chose the school on that basis, but that the local authority was now trying to make this permanent.
- Whether conversion to academy status would enable the school to avoid being expanded.
- It was questioned whether a smaller increase in admission number – of 10 or 20 instead of 30 – would be easier for the school to cope with.
- It was suggested that, instead of growing immediately to an admission number of 90, a return to 60 for one or more years first would enable the school to adapt more gradually.
- It was noted that in 2012 around 10 catchment children and 7 siblings had joined the Reception class who would have been unsuccessful if the admission number had been 60. It was asked what the comparable statistics were for previous years. [This information was added to the consultation website on 27 September.]