

STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CARE

REORGANISATION OF EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH BEHAVIOUR, EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL DIFFICULTY (BESD)

The Council is considering making a proposal to close King Edwin School and to develop Westlands School as a single specialist centre for students with BESD. This paper explains the reasons for this proposal in a series of questions and answers.

How does the Council provide education for pupils with BESD?

Most children with this type of special need can have their needs fully met in a mainstream school. They may get additional support from suitably trained staff in the school. Mainstream schools can offer their students a wide curriculum with academic and vocational options and the opportunity to gain qualifications at the age of 16.

As well as their own staff, schools can call on advice from experts employed by the Council (such as Educational Psychologists, or specialist teachers). These people work closely with schools, parents, health services and social workers with the aim of changing the young person's behaviour and raising their educational and social skills.

For some young people the complexity of their needs is such that a short period of small group tuition is needed, either in a support unit in the school itself or in one of the Council's Pupil Referral Units. The aim is always to help the child return to full mainstream classes as soon as possible. However, for a very small number of youngsters a longer term and more intensive approach is needed, and after careful evaluation the student may be referred to a special school. Stockton-on-Tees has two special schools for pupils with BESD. Together they offer a total of 139 places for these students.

King Edwin School in Norton has 64 places for pupils aged 11 to 16. This school includes a 12-bed residential unit open from Monday to Thursday during school terms.

Westlands School in Thornaby provides 115 places for pupils aged 7 to 16. 40 of these places are for students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). These pupils will transfer from to Abbey Hill School Technology College when a new building is completed early in 2009. Westlands also has a 15-bed residential unit open from Monday to Thursday during school terms.

Why is any change necessary?

All children and young people deserve the best education we can provide for them. The quality of education depends on many different factors. One of the most important is having specialist staff who know how to meet the particular needs of the students in the school. Another is that the buildings are in good condition, secure, and suitable for purpose, with the right number, size and types of teaching spaces and other facilities. A third important factor is the number of students in the school. Very small schools cannot employ enough teaching staff to offer their students a wide range of curriculum options.

Over the next five years the curriculum in all secondary schools will change. Up to 17 different diploma courses will be introduced for students aged 14-19. The curriculum for students aged 11-14 will change too. At the same time the number of students in our secondary schools will fall by about 1,500. This will make it more difficult for smaller schools to provide all the curriculum options for their students.

Local authorities must review their services for children and young people with special educational needs regularly to make sure that the service is meeting the needs of those young people. Stockton Borough Council carried out a review in 2006-07. It concluded that the service for secondary students would be better if all students with the same type of need were taught in a single school. The first stage of the reorganisation is already going on. We are building a new block at Abbey Hill School so that all secondary-age students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) can be educated in one specialist centre for the borough. Students with ASD at Westlands School will transfer to Abbey Hill when the new block is completed. The proposal for King Edwin aims to do the same for students with BESD.

Because of falling student numbers, it is not likely that we will need more than 125 places for pupils of all ages with BESD. Bringing all these students into a single school would enable all of them to benefit from the specialist expertise of the best teachers. It would be possible to offer more curriculum options, and the larger numbers of students in each age group would give more flexibility in organising teaching groups to suit the needs of each student.

Why close King Edwin rather than Westlands?

There is not sufficient space in the King Edwin buildings to take all the students with BESD from Westlands School. The last time the King Edwin building was extended, archaeologists found many ancient burials on the site. If we proposed to extend King Edwin again, the archaeologists would want to excavate more of the site first. This could delay building, or even prevent it altogether. The King Edwin site is also quite difficult to reach by road. This is important because most students travel to special schools in taxis or minibuses. Westlands is a more accessible site, and the school will have empty space when the students with ASD move to Abbey Hill.

The buildings at King Edwin and Westlands are in sound condition but not up to the standards of more modern buildings. In the long term the Authority intends to build a new building for students with BESD. This could include a new residential unit with accommodation that would be available every day for 52 weeks of the year. The Westlands site would be ideal for this, near to the High Flyers Children's Centre and the Early Support Unit (for pre-school children with very complex needs).

When would King Edwin School be closed?

If this proposal is approved, the school would close at the end of August 2008.

How would this affect my child?

Every student on roll at a special school is there following an assessment of his or her individual needs recorded in a statement. That statement is reviewed annually with parents or carers to make sure that the student continues to receive the most suitable education. This may mean continuing at a special school, attending a pupil referral unit, returning to a mainstream school or college, or taking up a placement with a workplace training provider. Parents or carers are always involved in these decisions. Statements for all students on roll at King Edwin will be reviewed in the usual way over the coming weeks with the aim of finding the best outcome for each individual student. A place at special school will continue to be available for every student who requires it.

Students with BESD already at Westlands School would benefit from an increased number of students in each age group, bringing greater resources, more staff and a wider range of learning opportunities.

Would there be any change in transport arrangements for pupils?

Most pupils who attend special schools are entitled to free transport from home to school. If this proposal is approved, transport from students' homes to Westlands School will still be provided in minibuses or taxis as appropriate to the needs of each individual pupil.

How would closure affect students in the residential facility at King Edwin?

The residential units at King Edwin and Westland schools both operate in the same way. A small number of students stay at the school during the week and return to their homes for weekends and holidays. Students who currently stay in the residential unit at King Edwin will be able to do exactly the same at Westlands.

In the longer term the Authority wants to improve residential facilities and operate them 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year. Some students with complex needs need residential care every day of the year. They have to attend schools outside the region, often hundreds of miles away from their families, because suitable facilities do not exist in Stockton-on-Tees. The Authority would like to build a new residential unit with accommodation that would be available every day for 52 weeks of the year. It could be used by pupils of all our special schools. It could provide respite care for other children with learning difficulty or disability, to give their parents or carers a break. It could also accommodate some of the children who now have to attend residential schools outside the region. The Westlands site would be ideal for this, near to the High Flyers Children's Centre and the Early Support Unit (for pre-school children with very complex needs).

What would happen to staff if King Edwin School closes?

If a school closes, all jobs at that school will no longer exist but new jobs may be created at other schools. The Council will always try to help staff to get another job if that is what they want, but the Council does not appoint school staff – school governors do that – so the Council cannot guarantee jobs for everyone. We will work with school governors, individual staff members and their unions and professional associations to try to find new jobs for all who want them. If re-deployment is not possible, the Council will be responsible for any redundancy costs.

Is the Council planning to sell the King Edwin site?

This proposal is about providing the best possible education for a vulnerable group of young people. It is not about cutting costs and it is not about raising money by selling land for housing. If King Edwin School closes it may be possible to sell the part of the site where the buildings stand. Because of the ancient burials under the site it is difficult to be sure how much building might be possible, or when it might happen.

It is very unlikely that any building would be allowed on the school playing fields. Under Section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 no part of any school playing field can be sold or used for building without the written consent of the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families. The government has set a target for school children to spend at least two hours a week on PE or sport. In the longer term the target will be raised to five hours a week. These targets cannot be met without proper facilities including playing fields. Consent to sell a school playing field is given only where a local authority can prove that the field is not needed or wanted by any other school, sports club or community group in the area. Even where consent is given, Sport England will object to any planning application to build on a playing field unless a new sports field is created to replace it.

Who will decide whether King Edwin School will close?

The Council's Cabinet will make a final decision probably in June or July.

Has the decision already been made?

No. The Council must follow a procedure laid down by law in Section 15 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. There are four stages:

1. Consultation. The Authority must consult everyone likely to be affected by the closure. This will include parents and carers, school staff and governors, neighbouring local authorities and health authorities in the area. We must explain the reasons for the closure proposal and give people an opportunity to comment and ask questions. **This is where we are now.** This paper is part of the consultation stage.

2. Publication

The Council's Cabinet will consider the responses to consultation (probably at a meeting in April). They may decide to issue a Public Notice, in a newspaper and at the school, with a formal proposal to close the school, or they may decide to change or abandon the proposal. A Public Notice has to set out how anyone may comment in writing if they wish, the address to write to, and the final date for comments.

3. Representations

If a Public Notice is published there will then be two months in which anyone can comment in writing.

4. Decision

The final decision will be made by the Council's Cabinet. Cabinet is made up of eight members of the Council, four from each of the two largest parties. Members of Cabinet must consider all the comments received during the two-month representation period, and must take account of statutory guidance from the Secretary of State for Children, Education and Families. This guidance is available to read and download at www.dfes.gov.uk/schoolorg. All Cabinet meetings are open to the public. The Cabinet decision will be final. There is no appeal procedure.

Your chance to comment on this proposal

If you wish to comment on this proposal or ask any questions about it, you may write to:

Corporate Director (Ref: JH)
Children, Education and Social Care
Municipal Buildings
Stockton-on-Tees
TS18 1LD.

You may send comments by email to: john.hegarty@stockton.gov.uk. It would be helpful if written comments were received by 21st March, but any comments received up to the end of March will be taken into account.

There will be a meeting at the school **at 5pm on Monday 10th March** for any parents or carers who would like to ask questions or give an opinion about this proposal.

A separate meeting will be arranged for school staff. Representatives of staff unions and associations will receive a copy of this paper and will be invited to that meeting.

What happens next

All the views expressed in the consultation meetings and any written messages will be reported to the Council's Cabinet in April. That report will be published on the Council website about a week before the meeting. Cabinet must take account of those views before deciding whether to publish a Statutory Public Notice if it intends to proceed with the proposed closure of the school. If that is their decision in April, the Public Notice will give everyone another chance to comment before a final decision is made in June or July.