

STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CARE

REORGANISATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BILLINGHAM

The Council is considering making a proposal to change the organisation of secondary schools in Billingham. The proposal would merge Northfield School with Billingham Campus School to create a single Northfield school operating on two sites. This paper explains the reasons for the proposal in a series of questions and answers.

Why is any change necessary?

The number of students in the three Billingham secondary schools will decline by more than 500 over the next five years. We know this because numbers in the primary schools in Billingham have already fallen by more than 500. Those smaller year groups are now moving from primary to secondary school. The professional statisticians at the Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit (JSU) have projected that the three secondary schools in Billingham will have a total of 2,156 students in 2013. The three schools now have 3,026 places – over 800 more than we will need. At present more than 300 students attending Billingham schools live in Stockton. In 2012-13 new school buildings will open in Stockton under Building Schools for the Future. It is likely that fewer students will make the choice to travel from Stockton to Billingham then. Billingham may need only around 2,000 secondary places.

Did the Council reorganise Billingham primary schools when their pupil numbers fell?

Between 2003 and 2008 we reduced the number of places in Billingham primary schools by almost 700. Roseberry Infant and Junior schools were amalgamated but no other schools were closed. The Council tries to avoid closing primary schools because of the impact on very young children. Instead we have made many of the primary schools smaller. Some schools (Oakdene and Billingham South, for example) have lost well over 100 children. In primary schools children generally spend most of their time in one classroom with the same teacher covering most of the curriculum. When pupil numbers fall, the headteacher and governors may need to reduce the number of staff and reorganise children into fewer classes.

Why not do the same with secondary schools?

It is more difficult for secondary schools to cope with falling student numbers because they work in a different way. Most of their teaching staff are subject specialists, and students will typically learn with several different teachers every week, often moving around the school for lessons in specialist rooms. Every school's budget is based on the number of pupils on roll. A secondary school needs to be able to employ enough specialist teachers to offer a full range of curriculum options. If student numbers fall significantly the governors may find it extremely difficult to carry out their statutory duty to deliver all the subjects of the national curriculum.

It would be possible to have three secondary schools with 750 places each in Billingham. That would reduce Northfield by 370 places and St Michael's by 125. That would mean taking a total of 495 places out of these two schools – places that parents want for their children. The Council does not believe that this would be right. If Northfield and St Michael's were both full in 2013, fewer than 200 places would be needed at Campus. A secondary school of that size could not be staffed to offer a full curriculum.

Has the Council ignored the wishes of parents?

Last year we consulted on possible options for Building Schools for the Future in Billingham. The results were analysed by an independent company. Almost four out of ten preferred keeping three schools, two out of ten favoured two schools, and the rest were neutral. A majority of the people who attended public meetings said they wanted to keep three schools.

The choices actually made by Billingham parents tell a slightly different story. In recent years all the available Year 7 places at St Michael's and Northfield School have been filled (and a number of applications have been unsuccessful). Applications for places at Campus School have fallen steadily. This year only 116 of the 206 Year 7 places at Campus have been filled. The Council and the government believe that Northfield and St Michael's will remain popular and Campus School will continue to suffer most of the impact of the fall in student numbers.

What happened to the idea of a federation?

The government suggested that Campus and Northfield could work together in a federation within a Trust, but stay as separate schools under a single governing body. Federations of schools are created by the governing bodies of the schools themselves (they cannot be created by local authorities) and the governing bodies could decide to end the federation at any time. A Trust is an outside body that would take over ownership of the buildings and land of both schools and would become the employer of school staff. The Government considers a Trust essential because this is a long-term arrangement that cannot be dissolved easily.

We have looked very carefully at the federation idea and concluded that it would not be feasible in Billingham. The main reason for this is the fall in student numbers. Even in a federation, Campus is likely to have too few students to be viable. We are also concerned that by becoming a Trust school Northfield (and its important sports facilities) could lose its links with the Council and the local community. We would prefer Northfield to remain a community school. It would continue to be managed by its governing body, its land and buildings would stay in Council ownership, and its staff would not have to be employed by a Trust.

What is being proposed now?

We are now proposing that Campus and Northfield should become one school operating on two sites for at least the next five years. Students and staff at Campus would stay on their present site but they would become part of Northfield School. In 2014 we expect BSF funding to become available for renewing the schools in Billingham. By that time student numbers at the combined school will be around 1,400. We will replace the older parts of Northfield School with new and modern buildings so that all students and staff will be able to work at the Thames Road site. It is likely that student numbers at Northfield will fall to around 1,200 by 2016. We will also build a new St Michael's School on the Campus site incorporating the present Campus technology block built in 2006. When all this work is complete all Billingham students will have access to a place at one of two popular and successful schools in largely new and modern buildings.

To do this the Council needs to publish a formal proposal to close Campus School and enlarge Northfield School to include all the students currently at both schools. The enlarged Northfield School would initially have 1,800 places, with 1,120 at Thames Road and 680 at Marsh House Avenue (the present Campus site).

How would this affect students at the two schools?

There should be no immediate impact on students. All the students now at Campus – and those applying for Year 7 places in 2009 – can be based on that site for the whole of their secondary education. Students applying for places at the enlarged Northfield after 2009 would be able to say which site they prefer. When BSF money becomes available for Billingham (probably not before 2014) we will replace the older parts of the Northfield buildings at Thames Road with new and modern buildings. It will be important to make sure that the building work at Northfield disrupts the education of students as little as possible. While building is going on, it may be necessary to move some students temporarily from Thames Road to Marsh House Avenue (the present Campus site). If this happens the details of who moves and for how long will be determined by the school, not by the Council. It might, for example, be one or more complete year groups so that students would move with the students and staff they know.

Why make changes now? Why not wait until 2014?

These changes are part of our overall strategy for Building Schools for the Future. In December we must submit the second part of our BSF Strategy for Change setting out clearly what we plan to do in Billingham. We believe that in the long term there can be only two secondary schools in Billingham. There is a real danger that as student numbers fall, more parents may opt for Northfield or St Michael's, and Campus will become unviable. Staff may leave and the governors will not be able to replace them from a reducing budget. The Council cannot allow that to happen. A merger with Northfield next year would protect students and staff in the medium term and allow governors to manage the necessary changes over the next five years.

Would there be an impact on travel distances to school?

There would be no impact while the two sites were in operation. We would expect that students could still choose to attend the Campus site if that is closer to home. When Northfield eventually takes all students onto the Thames Road site it would mean longer journeys for students from the eastern part of Billingham, but many students from those areas already travel to Northfield.

How would this impact on standards at the two schools?

The local authority has a statutory duty to promote high standards of attainment in all schools. When Campus School was placed in special measures by Ofsted last year we took immediate action to support the school in raising standards. This support will continue for as long as it is needed. An Ofsted monitoring visit in March 2008 found that satisfactory progress was being made at Campus. Northfield is a successful school with good results at Key Stage 3 (age 14) and at GCSE. The Authority will increase its support to ensure that standards are maintained and improved on both sites.

How would this affect school staff?

The Campus site would continue to operate as part of Northfield School, and the site would continue to need staff for at least another five years. We would expect most staff members at Campus to continue working at the same site. In the longer term it will not be possible to retain all staff members there as student numbers fall. Staff at community schools are Council employees and the Council has a duty to support them. There are likely to be opportunities at other schools. Some individuals may be looking to retire. There will be five years to plan the necessary changes. The Council does not appoint school staff and cannot guarantee jobs for everyone, but 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.

Would there be any impact on St Michael's?

Our BSF strategy includes a new building for St Michael's on the Campus site. The Council will discuss with the diocese and the governing body the appropriate size for that building, taking account of demand for places from Catholic and non-Catholic families. At present St Michael's has about 70% Catholic and 30% non-Catholic students, and the school and diocese have indicated their preference to keep those proportions in the new school.

How do you know the student number projections are accurate?

These are not Council figures: the JSU is an independent body. Their forecasts have been astonishingly accurate in the past. In 1997 they forecast that we would have 11,924 students in the borough's secondary schools in 2007. The actual figure was 11,899 – only 25 out. The projections are based on the number of children already in our primary schools and on the numbers born in the past three years. The statisticians make adjustments for the effect of planned house building and for previous patterns of migration in and out of the area. The money we will receive for Building Schools for the Future is based on the same JSU projections. The Council has nothing to gain from under-estimating student numbers. The government has approved these projections as part of our BSF Strategy for Change Part 1.

Is this proposal really about saving money for the Council?

This proposal would not save any money for the Council. The education budget is a fixed amount based on the number of pupils in our schools. It will be the same amount whether Campus and Northfield are one school or two. The education budget is shared among schools according to a formula that has been agreed with schools. In the long term there would be some savings if Northfield moved to a single site. The money saved would stay in the education budget and would be shared so that all our secondary schools would benefit.

Has the decision to close Campus 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. We must consult everyone likely to be affected by the closure. This will include parents and carers, students, school staff and governors, the dioceses and neighbouring local authorities. 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. We will also arrange some public drop-in sessions in Billingham so that anyone can ask questions or express opinions about this proposal.

2. Publication

The Council's Cabinet will consider the responses to consultation in November. They may decide to issue a Statutory Public Notice 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 six weeks in which anyone can comment in writing.

4. Decision

The final decision will be made by the Corporate Director for Children, Education and Social Care (Jane Humphreys) and the Council's Cabinet Member for Children and Young People (Councillor Alex Cunningham). They must consider all the comments received during the 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. Their 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:

Lionel Danby, BSF Project Director
Bayheath House
Prince Regent Street
Stockton-on-Tees
TS18 1DF.

You may also send comments by email to: BSF@stockton.gov.uk. All comments received up to 17 October will be taken into account.

What happens next

All the views expressed at the drop-ins and any written messages will be reported to the Council's Cabinet in November. 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 proposal. If that is their decision in November, the Public Notice will give everyone another chance to comment before a final decision is made in December.