

Responses to consultation

A Parent's submission.

Both Bewley Infant & Junior schools are very good Schools. This is supported by Ofsted reports for both schools in 2004 & 2007.

In 2007 Ofsted said of Bewley Infant School:

This is a good school. The caring ethos which is effectively promoted by all staff is evident from the moment you enter the school. Standards overall are above average by the time pupils leave the school at the end of Year 2. This represents good achievement from starting points that are lower than what is typical for this age. A rich, vibrant and interesting curriculum, good teaching and the encouragement of the staff are key factors in helping pupils to make good progress. The school has good capacity to improve further.

In 2007 Ofsted said of Bewley Junior School

Bewley Junior School is a good school which is strongly supported by parents. It has an excellent staff [and] a very caring and nurturing environment'. Achievement is good because of the positive attitudes of pupils to their learning, the good curriculum and teaching and the high levels of care they receive.

I believe, by amalgamating the schools, making them into one much bigger school, will cause the loss of the close, personal, and caring pastoral ethos present in both Infant & Junior schools. This being one of the many strengths of both the Separate Infant and Junior Schools. Being small with a small age range gives pupils in the infant & Junior schools a sense of security and well being. This being one of the prerequisite for independent learning and reaching ones full potential.

The Bewley Infant and Junior schools are very different but complementary. They work well together making the transition from Infant to Junior School an experience the vast majority of pupils look forward to and undergo painlessly. Most children see it as a milestone to pass and celebrate. The Transition is a lesson in life skills. Throughout their education and working life they need to be able to cope with change, whether it be home to nursery, infant to junior, Junior to secondary, secondary to further education or work. The more often change happens the easier it becomes to cope with.

The change between infant and junior school brings with it another lesson in life skills. Children have to learn a new set of rules and standards. They have to get use to a whole new set of teachers not just change a single teacher. Some children will benefit from a fresh start with teachers and pupils unknown to each other.

Bigger schools are less personal and the envisaged primary school will have by definition, the sum of the infant & junior school's challenging children. Challenging children generally cause greater disruption if they are present in greater numbers. In addition, a school larger in numbers of pupils, area and age range affords more opportunity for disruption. This disruption hampers progress and achievement. Therefore, I do not feel confident that the high educational standards of both Bewley Infant & Junior schools can be upheld in a new larger less personal Primary school. I fear the standards will actually fall.

The staff in Bewley Infant & Junior schools are specialist in their own age ranges and have made a positive decision to work in a small close knit infant or Junior school. Staff may feel uncomfortable or unhappy in a larger school with more pupils, a larger staff and greater age

range. This change in working conditions, is something staff have no control over. The disruption due to the building work, the uncertainty associated with all teachers starting a new school, at the same time and the competition for positions and responsibilities could have a detrimental affect their performance.

Children are likely to suffer noise, dust & visually distractions and disruptions during the new build. This will depress achievement.

By amalgamating Bewley Infant and Junior school Stockton Council are depriving the people of Billingham of any choice in relation to the type of 4-11 school they could choose for their children. Bewley is the only Infant & Junior School left in the Stockton Borough. Choice is healthy and one of the aims of government policy.

At the Parents consultation meeting the council tried to tell us that with less money, fewer staff but a new building they would deliver an equal or even better Education than at present. This of course defies logic, unless the schools have been underperforming and that is certainly not the case.

The chief advisor for Stockton Borough Council put forward weak or spurious arguments for a Primary School rather than a separate infant & Junior Schools. These are outlined in the Council's consultation document to parents. Each argument was unpacked, knocked down or countered from the floor.

The "Building Works Manager" explained that 3 million pounds was now available to build a New Bewley Primary School. My feelings and that expressed by others from the floor was that they could keep the money if we could keep Bewley Infant & Junior schools.

It appears, when all the flannel is cleared away, that the Council want to amalgamate Bewley Infant & Junior schools solely for the following reasons:

- To take the opportunity to use money from central Government to replace two old school buildings with a single newer extended building;
- To save on the maintenance on an old building;
- To save on the salary of a Headteacher, teachers, support staff & caretaker;
- To use the opportunity of a retiring Headteacher, to amalgamate the infant & Junior schools to bring it in line with the rest of the Borough;

In my opinion there is no good or compelling educational reason to amalgamate the two schools.

It seems to be about taking the opportunity to get a single extended building and to save money. Parents like me are more concerned about what goes on in the School building, not what it looks like.

I want a new Headteacher appointed to enable the maintenance of the close, personal, and caring pastoral ethos of both schools. The buildings may have seen better days but there is nothing wrong with the education which goes on inside. So I and other parents, do not want to break with a winning formula. Leave us with Bewley Infant and Junior Schools to ensure standards are preserved and improved at Bewley Infant & Junior School.

Submission from a parent of 2 children one at Bewley Infant and one at Bewley Junior School (name given but removed for publication).

Two joint meetings have been held for parents of children attending these schools.

Meeting at Bewley Junior School on 2 July 2009

About 12 parents attended along with both headteachers and a number of governors. Three officers of the local authority attended: John Hegarty (Planning & Policy Development Officer), Caroline Sutton (Chief Education Adviser) and Tony Beckwith (Head of Support Services).

Mr Hegarty described the statutory process of consultation and decision-making. He stated that amalgamation would involve closing the two existing schools and establishing a new primary school. He described the statutory process of consultation and decision-making, including the need to apply for consent from the Secretary of State to avoid a competition for a new school, and the need to refer a proposal to an independent adjudicator for a final decision. He drew attention to the statutory guidance that must be taken into account by decision-makers.

Ms Sutton described the purpose of the Primary Capital Programme: to improve the buildings of around half of all primary schools in order to support a transformation in ways of teaching and learning. She referred to the Rose Review proposing changes to the primary curriculum with increased emphasis on independent learning. She explained that the Council's preference for primary schools rather than separate infant and junior schools was based on the greater curriculum breadth for children and the broader career opportunities for staff in primary schools. Amalgamation would remove the transition between schools at age seven.

Mr Beckwith (the Council's lead officer for the Primary Capital Programme) explained that about £40 million was expected over a 14-year term, with the largest allocation confirmed for 2010-11. The Council's Strategy for Change setting out the criteria for prioritising schools and naming those schools earmarked for early investment had been approved by the government and published on the Council website. The buildings at both Bewley Infant School and Bewley Junior School were in need of investment due to their age and condition, but many other schools in the borough had similar needs. As separate schools neither would rank sufficiently highly against the PCP funding criteria to receive early investment. If amalgamated as a primary school they would qualify for funding in 2010-11 because buildings on two separate sites were unsuitable for use as a single school.

Comments and questions were invited.

One parent had distributed a written statement to the meeting and spoke at some length. He made clear his belief that a decision to amalgamate had already been made and that the views of parents would not make any difference. In his opinion previous consultations had not been reported fairly by Council officers. (Mr Hegarty pointed out that the Council had not proceeded with a proposal to amalgamate the Bewley schools in 2006 when consultation had shown no support for amalgamation across separate sites). This parent made several other points:

- There is no reason to change two successful schools
- Transition at age 7 helps children prepare for transition at 11 and is particularly good for challenging children who can make a new start
- A headteacher in a primary school cannot be as effective as separate headteachers for infant and junior stages
- The greater workload imposed on staff in separate schools is good for them
- A primary school would have a significantly reduced budget compared with the separate schools.

Question: Would building work have a disruptive impact on children's education?

Answer: The layout of the site, the selection of a contractor, and the management of the project will all aim to ensure safety above all and minimise disruption to education as far as possible. Recent school building projects have shown that a new build can be a valuable education resource to support children's learning.

Question: Would any facilities such as playgrounds, classrooms or fields be lost?

Answer: At the end of construction a primary school would have all the indoor and outdoor spaces necessary to meet the regulations for the number of children in the school. During construction it would be necessary to provide temporary replacements for any facilities that were taken up by the building site.

Comment: These are good schools and there is no reason to change them. (This view was stated by several parents and by two children present at the meeting).

Comment: Children enjoy the transition between schools at age seven. They see it as part of growing up.

Comment: I am concerned that small children may be bullied in a large primary school.

Comment: A primary school with 420 children (plus nursery) would be too large.

Question: Can the Primary Capital money be spent on the two schools separately?

Answer: £40 million will not go far among 60 schools. The Council must prioritise. The Bewley schools need investment but so do many other schools. A single building would represent the best value for public money.

Question: Would children in a primary school lose contact with staff who know them?

Answer: A primary school would have almost all the same staff as the existing infant and junior schools.

Comment: A primary school would be better for children, giving them contact with a wider range of staff and greater resources for a positive impact on their learning.

Question: How can we be sure that a primary school would be as successful as the separate schools?

Answer: The key is good leadership. School governing bodies appoint headteachers. The local authority supports them and would make sure that the person appointed was able to take the school forward and continue raising standards.

Question: How much weight do the views of parents carry? Will this meeting make any difference?

Answer: All the views expressed in consultation must be taken into account by the decision-maker. The outcome of consultation would be made public before the Council's Cabinet met to consider publishing a formal proposal.

Question: Would a primary school have a smaller budget and fewer staff?

Answer: If amalgamation had already taken place, the primary school budget for the current year (£1.3 million) would be about £69,000 less than the combined budgets of the two separate schools. This is a real reduction, but the school would actually be better off. Governors would not need to pay two headteachers, two school clerks, two caretakers and two sets of cleaning and kitchen staff. Future budgets would depend on pupil numbers, as they do for all schools. The governing body, not the Council, would decide how many staff to employ.

One of the secondary schools in Billingham held an induction meeting for prospective Year 7 parents on the same evening. This may have influenced the low turnout at this consultation meeting. A request was made that a second parents' meeting be arranged.

Meeting at Bewley Infant School on 14 July 2009

This was the second meeting arranged as requested on 2 July. About 38 people attended including parents, governors and staff. John Hegarty attended to represent the local authority.

The two headteachers had chosen not to express their own views at the first meeting for parents, but they were aware that many parents were unsure of what amalgamation might mean, and they believed that statements from the headteachers would be helpful.

The headteacher of Bewley Infant School made a personal statement. She repeated her passionate belief in infant education but recognised that this was a minority view both locally and nationally. Change was inevitable at her school as she intended to retire within the next few years and she would not want her own views to impose any burden on her successor. The opportunity of significant investment in new building funded by the Primary Capital Programme should be welcomed as the same level of funding might not be available beyond the next two years.

The headteacher of Bewley Junior School also made a personal statement. He had been opposed to amalgamation in 2006 when the proposal was a primary school on two sites. He now supported amalgamation in a single building. With considerable experience in both primary and junior schools, he had no philosophical preference for either system. Much depended at any school on the quality of leadership, staff and governors. He was confident that the Bewley schools under the existing staff would become a very good primary school and that outcomes for children would be beneficial. He described a visit to a recently completed new-build primary school in Stockton. He had been reassured to hear the headteacher there outline the high level of involvement of staff, governors and pupils in the design process. He was confident that with a similar level of involvement at Bewley, a new primary school would meet the aspirations of parents, governors and staff.

Comments and questions were invited.

Question: When would the primary school open?

Answer: September 2011.

Question: Would building work have any impact on children?

Answer: Children's interests will always come first. The layout of the site, the selection of a contractor, and the management of the project will all aim to ensure safety above all and minimise disruption to education as far as possible. Parents will be kept informed at all stages. A new build can be a valuable education resource.

Question: What impact would amalgamation have on the jobs of school staff?

Answer: The main impact is likely to be on kitchen staff (who are employed by the local authority and could be redeployed to other schools). Some turnover of staff in the next two years is likely anyway. Headteachers and governing bodies are already planning for the possible changes. If amalgamation is agreed, a temporary governing body will be set up to make all appointments. All posts at the new school would be ring-fenced to existing staff in the first instance.

Question: Would an amalgamated school have fewer staff or less money?

Answer: All school budgets are based on pupil numbers. The governing body would set a staffing structure within the budget available. If pupil numbers remain as they are there is no reason for any reduction in teaching staff.

Comment: The interests of children must come before the interests of staff.

Question: Would the teacher-pupil ratio remain the same?

Answer: That would depend on pupil numbers and the available budget, regardless of whether the schools amalgamated or not.

Question: Parents sense a special atmosphere in the infant school. How can we be sure that this will remain in a primary school?

Answer: The atmosphere is created by the staff, not the building, and the primary school would have essentially the same staff as the separate schools. The schools are already working closely together to converge their curriculum planning and get children used to the idea of change.

Question: Would any land on the present school sites be sold?

Answer: It is likely that all the existing land would be needed to meet regulations governing playing field areas, and to provide improved car parking and safe access routes.

Question: What size would the new school be?

Answer: It would have 420 full-time places and 39 full-time equivalent nursery places. Pupil capacity would be almost exactly the same as the existing schools combined.

Question: Can such a large school retain the sense of intimacy that small schools create?

Answer: 420 places is not unusually large for a primary school. Primary schools tend to have a natural division between Key Stages 1 and 2 (infant and junior age groups), but there are other ways of managing a primary school to create a family atmosphere.

Comment: Amalgamation would remove the need for a formal admissions process between infant and junior schools.

Comment: There is a feeling that change is coming with the impending retirement of the infant school headteacher.

Comment: There is no guarantee that the separate infant school would continue to be as effective under a new headteacher.

Comment: It will be important to retain the strength of the foundation stage.

Comment: A primary school with the existing staff and with children able to keep the same friendship groups should not create any difficulties for children.

Comment (from a governor): These are two good schools with good headteachers and good staff. They and the governing bodies will work hard to ensure that no child's education will be disadvantaged if amalgamation takes place.

Meeting of the governing body of Bewley Infant School on 10 June 2009

John Hegarty (JH) attended on behalf of the local authority. He stated that amalgamation would involve closing the two existing schools and establishing a new primary school. He described the statutory process of consultation and decision-making, including the need to apply for consent to avoid a competition for a new school, the need to refer a proposal to an adjudicator for decision, and the statutory guidance that must be taken into account by decision-makers.

Consultation in 2006 had shown no support for amalgamation in the existing buildings across the two sites, and no firm proposal was put forward at that time. The idea now being put forward is for a primary school in a single, largely new building incorporating the best parts of one of the present buildings. This would be funded from the Primary Capital Programme (PCP) at an estimated cost of £3 million. The Bewley schools as separate schools would not normally rank highly against the PCP funding criteria and could not expect funding in the early years of the programme. The schools would qualify for funding in 2010-11 as a primary school due to the unsuitable nature of the buildings on two separate sites.

The mood of the meeting was largely positive towards amalgamation, although the headteacher and some other staff members retain a personal preference for a separate infant school. The two schools have worked increasingly closely together in recent years in the belief that amalgamation is likely at some stage. Joint policies are in place in several curriculum areas. The prospect of a single, largely new building is welcomed.

One area of concern is traffic management to create safe access to the site. A full survey of present traffic movement will be required. There was also concern over the impact on jobs at the schools. As well as two headteachers and two secretaries, the schools have separate kitchens and there are two sets of caretaking and cleaning staff. Among teaching staff there is some concern that expertise with the younger age groups might be lost in a primary school. JH explained the processes for appointing a temporary governing body to determine staffing arrangements for a new school, and the ring-fencing arrangements usually put in place to safeguard existing employees. One governor said that experience at another school had not given him great confidence in temporary governing bodies.

Governors will await with interest the responses from parents.

Meeting of the governing body of Bewley Junior School on 25 June 2009

John Hegarty (JH) attended on behalf of the local authority. He stated that amalgamation would involve closing the two existing schools and establishing a new primary school. He described the statutory process of consultation and decision-making, including the need to apply for consent to avoid a competition for a new school, the need to refer a proposal to an adjudicator for decision, and the statutory guidance that must be taken into account by decision-makers.

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Governors welcomed the idea of a new building. Detailed information about the design and location of a new building would be helpful. JH explained that no design work could begin until surveys of the existing buildings and ground conditions had been completed. It would

not represent best value for the local authority to commission this technical work before support for the principle of amalgamation had been established. Governors and staff of both schools would be involved in developing the initial design brief and subsequent detailed drawings. He advised governors to consider visiting one of two new primary school buildings recently completed in the borough. As well as seeing for themselves the quality of building provided for these schools, governors would be able to discuss with headteachers the very high degree of involvement of school staff and governors in the development of those designs from initial brief to final specification.

There was some concern that major building work on site would cause disruption to at least one of the schools.

Some governors felt that there was no need to change two successful schools, and it was impossible to be confident that an amalgamated primary school would provide better opportunities for children. There was also concern over the position of existing staff. JH explained the processes for appointing a temporary governing body to determine staffing arrangements for a new school, and the ring-fencing arrangements usually put in place to safeguard existing employees. The headteacher pointed out that the date of amalgamation in September 2011 allowed two years for planning any changes.

Joint staff meeting at Bewley Infant School on 30 June 2009

Three officers of the local authority attended this meeting: John Hegarty (JH), Planning & Policy Development Officer, Caroline Sutton (CS), Chief Adviser, and Anne Rix (AR), Human Resources Officer. About 30 staff members attended along with two representatives from professional associations. JH stated that amalgamation would involve closing the two existing schools and establishing a new primary school. He described the statutory process of consultation and decision-making, including the need to apply for consent to avoid a competition for a new school, the need to refer a proposal to an adjudicator for decision, and the statutory guidance that must be taken into account by decision-makers. He also outlined the process of appointing a temporary governing body to determine staffing arrangements for a new school, and the ring-fencing arrangements usually put in place to safeguard existing employees.

CS described the transformational agenda behind the Primary Capital Programme and suggested ways in which a new building would facilitate change. She referred to the Rose Review, developments in the primary curriculum towards more independent learning, and the greater opportunities available to staff in a primary school.

Concerns at this meeting centred on the position of staff members, the number of posts likely to be available at a new primary school, and the prospects for individuals currently holding TLR responsibilities. AR emphasised the role of the temporary governing body in making all appointments. She stated that the local authority could not guarantee no redundancies. The authority has developed a staffing protocol for these situations and would urge the temporary governing body to apply it. Salary safeguarding would be available for up to three years for any individual whose post might be downgraded.