

Proposal to Expand Wheelock Primary School

As I am unable to attend the Cabinet meeting on 4th February, I would like to forward a response to the final report to the Portfolio holder and would be grateful if this could be put before the Portfolio holder.

Firstly, much has been made by the Local Authority of parental preference and they have cited this as the driving force behind this initiative. I would like to point out that the questionnaires completed by parents indicated that an overwhelming 75% of parents who responded were opposed to the proposal. Importantly, a significant 40% of parents at Wheelock school were opposed to the proposal. At the latest drop in session, this opposition was reinforced. Of those parents expressing a view, 66% were opposed to the proposal and even 30% of parents at Wheelock school opposed the proposal. I would also mention that from the questionnaires it can be seen that 100% of residents local to Wheelock school opposed the proposal. Parental preference extends not only to those with reception children but to those with children at all age groups and the data indicates that their preference is overwhelmingly opposed to the proposal.

Secondly, I would like to examine paragraph 3:7 of the final report in conjunction with Appendix 3. It has always been the contention of the other local schools that if Wheelock school expands both in PAN and in size by 4 classrooms, there will be a potential negative impact on them by way of in year movement. Paragraph 3:7 suggests that the impact will be the same whether Wheelock school or Offley school were expanded but this is slightly misleading. If the proposal goes ahead as planned, Wheelock will formally have a PAN of 45 from September 2014 but in reality, they will be able to accommodate 45 reception pupils in 2013 by virtue of the mobile classroom and we are advised that the building works which will start as soon as possible will be completed by April 2014 latest. In contrast, Offley School is suggesting that they accommodate additional pupils within their existing structure until 2015 at which time 2 additional classes would be needed. It is suggested that in the interim the current spate of housing developments would be finalised and the impact of any changes from the potential withdrawal of school transport would be known, allowing the Local Authority time to develop a longer term strategy. It is in this crucial interim period, when the situation is in a state of flux, that there is potential for in year movement and the positions of the two schools are very different. The Local Authority state that any increase in PAN would be phased and they will mitigate against in year movement by refusing applications, but they cannot legislate for the decisions of the Appeal Panel.

For Example: Supposing in 2014, a child in year 4 (currently year 3) wishes to move from a local school to Wheelock. The application is refused and goes to appeal. This is an in year appeal therefore will be dealt with individually by the panel and they will not need to consider oversubscription criteria or infant class size rules. The panel will consider the following:

1. Capacity in relation to numbers on role: In Wheelock School's case, the capacity would be 210 or more based on the new classrooms however the actual numbers on roll would be significantly less as this is an expanding school.
2. The class sizes and school organisation: The panel would observe that as Wheelock school was formally a 1FE, most of the class sizes are 30 or slightly above as the intake would have been restricted by the infant class size rules and the previous organisation. This is in contrast to other schools in the area where mixed classes operate and classes can be up to 35.
3. Pupils with special needs: The panel concentrates on those pupils with SA+ or above and compares the numbers to national averages. I anticipate that due to Wheelock school's catchment area, their SEN numbers are not above national averages.

4. Accommodation: The panel would observe that Wheelock has 4 new classrooms, an extended hall, new group rooms, extended staffroom, toilet facilities and play area. These would not be full.
5. Educational standards: There is a presumption that a school with an outstanding grade at OFSTED will be more capable than most at meeting extra challenges.
6. Staffing: The numbers of Staff are compared to national averages. I presume the staffing levels are not below national averages particularly as funding was made available for an extra teacher and teaching assistant as part of the proposals.

In conclusion, the panel would look to see if placing one more pupil in year 4, thereby increasing the class number to 32, within an expanding school with ample accommodation would be prejudicial. I would suggest they may feel Wheelock school would be well able to cope.

In contrast, Offley School has a different story as it was downsized as a result of TLC. It has a historical PAN of 60 but has 6 classes at KS1 and only 6 classes at KS2. This has necessitated large mixed classes at KS2. In terms of capacity and accommodation, the panel would note that the school lost 2 classrooms in 2010. No building is due until 2015 at the earliest. The school has a PAN of 45 which is commensurate with the number of classrooms but in reality has 344 on role due to the historic PAN. Although, it is suggested in Appendix 3 there would be possible spaces in year 4 and above, this does not reflect reality. The classes are currently mixed and therefore the class already has 34 pupils. Other classes have similar numbers. The panel may well take the view that an extra pupil may well be prejudicial.

Many of the schools have stated that the loss of only 1 or 2 pupils through in year movement would be disastrous. There is potential for Wheelock to accommodate an extra 3 pupils in year 4 alone, just to be in the same position as the year 4 numbers at Offley. The same can be said of many of its other classes. Therefore, the impact of in year movement would be different in relation to the two schools. The proposal to place additional pupils at Offley until 2015 rather than expand Wheelock Primary school would provide more security for other schools in the locality and the threat posed by in year movement would be significantly reduced.

Please can the Portfolio Holder confirm that she has taken into account the overwhelming preference expressed by parents that Wheelock Primary School should not be expanded at this stage and the concerns expressed by all other schools and governors in the locality of the potential threat to their schools by in year movement should the expansion proceed as requested?