

Drongan Primary School
Monday March 16th 2015

Present:

Graham Short (Executive Director, Educational & Social Services)
Margaret Newall (Head Teacher, Drongan Primary School)
Ian Burgoyne (Senior Manager, Opportunities for All)
Councillor Moira Pirie
4 parents, 1 child and a staff member from Drongan Primary.

Mr Short opened the meeting by introducing himself and other representatives from the council present. He proceeded to go through some formal points about the consultation and asked that written contributions be submitted before 4pm on the 27th March 2015. He referred to the pro-forma on the back of the consultation document and reminded the audience that elected members were entitled to read consultation responses and that the process was completely transparent. He went on to give a number of milestones in the process including a timeline for the council's cabinet, Governance and Scrutiny committee and submission to the Scottish Ministers. Mr. Short emphasised that the proposal was very far from a 'done-deal' and would be subjected to intense scrutiny at all stages. Mr. Short reminded the audience that they could respond to all three current school consultations and that formal consultation arrangements were in place for children and young people.

Mr Short went on to describe the context of the current consultation and referred to the launch of a separate consultation in January 2014 which proposed the merger of Greenmill and Barshare Primary Schools and did not go ahead. Mr Short referred to the Scottish Government's injection of £15 million into the capital programme and how that had led to the current proposals. He then went on to talk about the 'allowing factors' and most notably the council's experience in 3-18 campus development at Doon campus, St. Joseph's campus and James Hamilton campus and the 5-18 provision at Grange campus with a special school. Mr Short then described the perceived advantages of the proposal and how it would allow education of all children whatever their needs; combine resources and staff expertise to benefit children and young people with additional support needs. The expertise in mainstream schools would be available to all pupils as well as specialist labs, PE halls and Home Economics facilities.

Mr. Short commented that school rolls in both Cumnock Academy and Auchinleck Academy were shrinking and were currently 25% less than even 3 or 4 years ago. The combined roll of the proposed merged school would be around 1600 and this would enable the Head Teacher of the secondary to manage the curriculum more effectively and provide a broader curriculum for pupils. Mr. Short described the current condition of the two buildings and commented that they would degrade over the next 3 to 4 years and asked the audience to think about their suitability for learning in the 21st Century without modern laboratory facilities or modern music, art or drama environments. Mr. Short also referred to mobility problems in both schools and their lack of a disability rated elevator. He commented that new schools are built on the same level and built to an acoustic specification to take into account children and young people who are hearing impaired. Mr Short went on to talk about the possible inclusion of a college input and business incubation unit as part of the proposed

merged school. He then referred to the innovative nature of the proposal where the campus will cater for 2-18 year olds with the possibility of both further education and employment opportunities.

Mr. Short then asked if there were any questions from the floor.

A parent worried about safety issues with children travelling to school and increased volume of traffic.

Mr Short responded that a traffic impact assessment would have to be completed to determine the feasibility of the proposal. Mr Short emphasised that although the planning process had not begun, it may be that due to its size, the present Cumnock Academy site could be a possible traffic hub. A number of entry routes would be required including direct vehicular access for those pupils with special needs.

A parent referred to the Grange Campus and the different entry points and asked if the proposed campus would be similar.

Mr Short said that this could be the case and that any design would be done in close consultation with staff, pupils, parents and people from the community. Mr Short went on to talk about the siting of the proposed campus and suggested that current thinking favoured a site nearer Cumnock Academy than Knockroon; Mr. Short acknowledged that discomfort about the siting of the proposed campus so near to a sewage works was an issue that had to be addressed.

A parent asked whether there would be safe walking routes to the proposed campus.

Mr Short responded that all routes to the school would need to be assessed as safe walking routes and that £1 million of the budget would be allocated to ensure appropriate adjustments are made if required. Mr. Short then went on to explain the council's policy on free and subsidised school transport.

A parent asked what would be done about the challenges faced due to the perceived historical rivalry between sectors of the two communities and how it could be prevented from spilling over into trouble at the proposed school.

Mr Short referred to the positive impact of the increasing participation in joint projects by pupils from both schools including the Business Enterprise and Skills Centre at Knockroon and the joint S6 Halloween Disco. He went on to say that both schools take the issue of misbehaviour very seriously and manage it effectively. Pupils would be involved in the design of the school, the school name, motto and badge and Mr. Short said that he was very optimistic that the transition would be managed successfully for pupils from both Auchinleck Academy and Cumnock Academy.

A parent asked about the size of the school and whether it would be able to cope if there was a future 'baby boom'

Mr. Short said that the school had to be built with spare capacity. He went on to say that for a number of reasons, precise school roll projection was difficult especially when placing requests and increased mobility of population are factored in.

A parent asked about the maintenance of the running track.

Mr. Short said that when the process gets to the planning stage Sport Scotland must be consulted and that there was a statutory obligation that there could be no diminution of sports facilities and that if the council takes out a facility, it has to be replicated within a reasonable area.

Mr Short referred to meetings with Rugby Park, Visions and Cumnock Juniors. He referred to a positive meeting with Visions. The company want to look at the next stage to be reassured that there is no conflict with their current provision.

A parent commented that it would be difficult to see how the Visions swimming pool could cope with so many pupils in the proposed new build and Mr. Short confirmed that the new campus would not have a pool. There followed some discussion about how swimming lessons could be scheduled given the customer base already using Visions. Although the Auchinleck pool would remain open, a parent thought that it would be impractical for young people from the proposed campus to travel there. A parent said that this could be overcome if swimming lessons were allocated a double period where travel time could be built in/.

Mr. Short referred to the Hydrotherapy pool at Hillside and how a new pool at the proposed campus would be of the same standard as the one situated in Willowbank School.

A parent commented on the public use of the proposed site and Mr. Short agreed that it was an area used by the community. The running track was seen as an important part of the development and there was some discussion about the possibility of extending the current 4 lane facility to 8 lanes to enable it to be competition ready.

A parent asked about changing arrangements at Visions and discussion followed on the difficulties of pupils and members of the public being in the facility at the same time. A parent said that the current facilities at Auchinleck needed to be maintained. Mr Short said that the proposal was both ambitious and exciting and that the people of the community would be part of developing an agreed strategy should the proposal go ahead.

A parent asked about pupils from the feeder primaries accessing the new campus.

Mr. Short said that as there were a number of 3-18 campuses in East Ayrshire, the issue was already alive and that more thought had to be given to how best to cater for the other associated primaries, especially if they are some distance from the campus itself. Mr Short talked about joint curricular planning to look at much more ambitious ways for primary pupils to benefit from the proposed campus, possibly beginning transition earlier in the primary school (from P4 onwards). Mr Short also talked about the benefits of staff from the campus working in associated schools.

A parent asked how the new campus would impact on pupils from Drongan Primary as there would clearly be funding issues with transporting primary pupils to the new campus. Mr Short agreed that resources were certainly limited but referred to the allocation of a science lab at Grange Academy as part of primary/secondary liaison as an example of how arrangements are already working.

There followed some discussion about the possibility of an FE input in the proposed campus and how this could benefit pupils. Mr Short talked about the current situation where pupils move

between schools for some Advanced Higher provision and how this need would be dramatically lessened in a larger merged school where the diverse needs of pupils can be more easily met.

Mr. Short went on to describe facilities at a number of new-build Scottish secondary schools including a CCTV camera used to demonstrate cooking techniques in HE lessons.

A parent commented that this worried her as it took away the pupil/teacher relationship; Mr. Short agreed that distance learning should only complement and supplement that relationship.

A parent asked about teacher numbers in the new campus. Mr. Short said that teacher numbers were agreed nationally but presently schools have sometimes struggled in attracting people in to teach certain subjects and it would be expected that a state-of-the-art campus would help this situation. A parent asked about the effect on class size and Mr. Short commented that there needn't be any effect as class sizes were up to the Head Teacher – Mr. Short went on to say that just because the proposed merged school is bigger, this won't mean that class sizes necessarily increase.

A parent worried that in a school of 1600, teachers wouldn't have time to get to know pupils individually. Mr Short responded by saying that although the combined roll was higher there were a number of schools in Scotland with over 2000 pupils and pupil/teacher relationships had been maintained in these establishments.

A parent said that bigger isn't always better and the proposal is all about saving money; the parent continued that the way to get jobs was to raise attainment not build better facilities.

Mr. Short said that saving money was not the reason for the proposal and that the proposal offers children and young people in the area something that is better than at present both through improved facilities and a broader curriculum.

A parent asked if there would be additional funding for Continuing Professional Development for teachers who are working between primary and secondary schools. Mr. Short referred to the considerable investment already put into staff CPD but agreed this may be an area that could be re-prioritised.

Mr. Short confirmed that this would be a merger of 2 schools and not the closure of Auchinleck Academy as both schools will contribute at least 40% of the total roll. He went on to say that the Head Teacher post would be advertised and current incumbents were welcome to apply. There was some discussion about the prospect of job losses if the proposal went ahead; Mr. Short confirmed that the rationalisation would be managed to ensure there would be no compulsory redundancies.

A parent asked if the proposal didn't go through and both schools remained open whether current facilities would be upgraded.

Mr. Short commented that there was no guarantee of that as the £63.5 million was allocated to this project with the bulk of funding raised through borrowing. He went on to say that the council would be under no obligation to upgrade the facilities as there are many other competing priorities.

A parent asked whether a rolling transition would be possible and mentioned the experience of St Conval's. Mr Short said that although this might be a possibility, it would be difficult to manage effectively.

A parent asked how meal breaks would be organised given the numbers of pupils. Mr. Short described arrangements in other campus schools and talked about how school design had moved on from the 'street' idea of lunch areas to designated areas which are 'broken up' around the school. A parent asked if secondary pupils would be allowed to leave the campus at lunchtime; Mr. Short said that because some children will go home for lunch it would be difficult to see how this could be stopped. A parent commented that with the new facilities on offer it would be hoped that pupils would actually prefer to stay on campus during lunch especially with the excellent quality of school meals available to them.

Mr. Short went on to recap on the consultation process and the timeline for the consultation. He confirmed that there would be a definite decision on the proposal by the end of August 2015 after which the authority are able to start implementing the decision by drawing up designs, starting a tendering process and beginning formal planning applications. Mr. Short emphasised that people's comments will be an important part of the decision process but that people should be aware that the consultation is not a 'referendum' but about the merits of the case. He went on to say that if parents have concerns about the size of the school, then statements have to be made on how these concerns are going to be addressed. Mr. Short commented that local people can discuss the proposals with their elected representatives and re-emphasised that the proposal is very far from a 'done- deal'

The meeting ended at 2045.