

Sorn Village Hall
Wednesday March 11th 2015

Present:

Alan Ward, Acting Head of Service Schools
Carole McCulloch (Head Teacher, Sorn Primary)
Ian Burgoyne (Senior Manager, Opportunities for All)
Councillor Eoghann MacColl
12 parents and carers.

Mr Ward opened the meeting by introducing himself and other representatives from the council present. Paper copies of the power-point on the proposed merger were distributed to the audience and Mr. Ward went through the presentation. Audience members were invited to comment and respond.

A parent worried about pupils transitioning from old academies into new merged school asking about the strategic view of how they are going to move.

Mr. Ward described the transition process at St Joseph's Academy in 2008 where pupils moved from the old school into the new build after Easter break. Senior pupils settled in well; there had been a number of orientation visits prior to the opening of the new school – pupils were very excited at the prospect of moving into new environment. The new merged Knockroon Campus would be an August start – there would be opportunities for visits from both pupils and parents before moving.

A parent asked why not take the tactical view and look at a five year closing cycle where present pupils remain in the school up to S5 – so that there are no transitional issues.

Mr. Ward commented that pupils have been consulted and are keen on the idea of the two schools coming together. The suggestion would mean that the new campus wouldn't be fully used. It would also be difficult to create a sense of community with the three sites running consecutively – it would hard for pupils to share a sense of belonging to the one new school. By moving into a 3-5 year cycle the previous lines of demarcation would remain – we'd want to bring the two schools together. Mr Ward described his period as HT at St Joseph's and the very positive experience of bringing two primary schools together as St. Andrews Primary.

A parent said that you describe the campus as being Early Years to Primary and Secondary. Sorn is so small – it will be difficult for our children as they are being asked to integrate with pupils who may have gone through this whole process together. Sorn pupils will make up about 0.3% of the merged school's roll – you talk about primary school pupils being more involved with the academies but it doesn't take a new school to do that.

Mr Ward responded that all of the primary schools in the learning community will benefit from the new campus. There are a number of new initiatives already such as the 1+2 languages; the focus on girls in the STEM initiatives such as Primary Engineer. The new campus will have many more teaching staff and will be able to offer greater curricular choice and improved facilities to both primary and secondary pupils.

A parent was worried that the pupils at Auchinleck at the time of the move will bear the brunt and it will affect their studies.

Carole McCulloch (HT Sorn Primary) commented that the transitional arrangements would be started when the pupils were in Auchinleck – long before any move in date. She also commented that response from the Parent Council and Sorn pupils had been positive to the idea of a new merged secondary school.

Alan Ward confirmed that the merger of Barshare and Greenmill Primary schools could still go ahead even if the proposal to merge Auchinleck Academy and Cumnock Academy was not approved.

A parent asked for some clarification as to whether there would be the same integration of the 'named person' as there would be for a Sorn pupil moving to Auchinleck presently. Alan Ward confirmed that there would be the same integration with the new merged school and that guidance on the 'named person' was currently being produced. Mr. Ward went on to comment that information from birth to two year would be shared with early years to ensure smooth transitions through all the learning stages.

A parent asked about the meaning of the term 'delineated area'. Mr Ward explained that it was a line that covered all of the catchment areas of the two secondary schools. The parent went on to ask if Mr Ward was aware that the positioning of the new school means that Loudoun Academy is now the nearest secondary school to Sorn.

A parent asked about placing requests. She had filled in forms for Auchinleck Academy but wondered if it was now too late to request a place at Loudoun Academy. Mr Ward said that this was still possible but that any travel costs would have to be supported by parents.

A parent commented that the connection between Sorn Primary and Auchinleck Academy was a historical one and one the community understood even if Sorn would be nearer to Loudoun in the future.

Mr Ward emphasised that there would be no affect on the status of Sorn Primary if the merger proposal for the two academies went through. There would also be no change to the catchment area of the merged school due to distance – there is no way that closure of Sorn Primary would be contemplated.

A parent asked about the scenario of a pupil in transition year who was facing examinations and had built up a relationship with teachers – how is it fair that when the pupil moves into the newly merged school there's a good possibility that the young person would be taught by teachers who had no prior relationship?

Mr Ward commented that changing teachers on entering a new year group was part and parcel of life of every pupil's experience in secondary school. He described a number of ways that rapport could be built between pupils and teachers through activities such as social events and outdoor learning projects. Mr Ward agreed with the parent that high expectations for these pupils to attain to the very best of their abilities in SQA examinations would still be as important as building rapport.

A parent asked if attainment statistics were available for pupils who sat examinations during transitions to new schools. Mr Ward said that there had been research done on the relationship between class size and attainment but what makes the difference is the professional in front of the class – the standard of teaching and learning at the new merged school will be of the highest quality. Mr Ward commented that although class teachers may change from one year to another – the fact that pupils will remain under the auspices of the same guidance /pupil support teacher would ensure continuity.

A parent commented that the situation with Grange Academy could not be compared to the Auchinleck/Cumnock merger due to the animosity between young people in the two communities. Mr Ward referred to a story in the Cumnock Chronicle which had neglected to mention that many young people had written in to the paper in favour of the merger. Mr. Ward went on to say that, while the issue would not be disregarded, the focus was on getting the education right in the merged school. Given the size of the new school, there would be a full-time campus police officer but that the Head Teacher of the merged school would be the best available and would be put into place three months before the merger and tasked to bring the schools together successfully and insist on the highest standards of behaviour and good manners from pupils. Mr Ward continued that although there may be teething problems, it will be up to the school's Senior Management Team to promote a sense of good will and togetherness.

A parent asked that if the merger of the primary schools could go ahead without a merger of the secondary schools could the reverse happen. Mr. Ward commented that the Barshare/Greenmill was the continuation of an existing consultation process from 15 months previously and that agreement could not be reached for a site even though the merger had been agreed. The status quo is a perfectly possible option but there will be maintenance issues to ensure Greenmill can function as a modern school. A refurbishment would not give the same value for money as a new build and it wouldn't be the case that the £63.5 million funding for the new campus would be re-allocated.

A parent asked what would happen to the two secondary schools if the merger did not go ahead.

Mr Ward commented that the schools would continue on existing capital maintenance programmes and alternatives might have to be looked at due to the numbers of young people attending at both schools. Mr Ward emphasised that the merger presented a fantastic opportunity to bring both further education and business enterprise projects to the new campus especially as many secondary school pupils are now looking at a mix of academic and vocational courses.

A parent commented on a young person on the autistic spectrum benefitting from learning opportunities at Clydebank College; Mr Ward said that the possibility of having a college resource within the new campus would mean that all pupils could benefit from increased choice without having to travel , lessening the impact on academic studies in school.

A parent wondered whether the upcoming UK election would have any impact on the decision to proceed as it could be seen as political. Mr Ward commented that the East Ayrshire Council cabinet was made up of politicians from a mix of parties and that at the heart of the proposal were the educational benefits of the merged campus and a really powerful vision of what could happen in 2018.

A parent commented on the initial saving of 1.2 million if the new campus is built – he continued that we currently have two well-performing secondary schools and what raises attainment is purpose and motivation not the building. Mr. Ward said that statistics do show a positive impact on attainment in both St Joseph's and Grange Academy since their move to new buildings. Mr Ward went on to say that the new working environment and access to improved and modern facilities would also benefit teaching staff.

A parent asked if each of the present secondary schools would be able to provide pupils with access to a wide range of subjects without shuttling them back and forward. Mr Ward said that with a roll of over 1500 pupils, the merged school would be able to offer a far broader range of subjects. Presently Head Teachers have to grapple with whether they can offer subjects if numbers are low – there is no cast iron guarantee that every subject requested will run in the merged school but there is a much greater chance than at present in the two secondary schools.

A parent asked if there were any examples of merged secondary schools in East Ayrshire, Mr Ward said that there were not but there were numerous examples from all over Scotland that could be accessed on the Internet. Mr Ward also said that visits can be organised to St Joseph's and Grange Academy so that parents can see how campus schools operate in the authority.

A parent asked if assurance could be given that in the five years spent building the new campus, pupils attending Auchinleck and Cumnock would not be overlooked. Mr Ward gave his assurance of this and talked about the current painting programme at Auchinleck – he went on to clarify that there is a minimum level off maintenance that must be adhered to and that repairs would be done. It might be difficult to justify something like a new heating system costing 2.5 million if pupils were scheduled to move to a new merged school but all proper maintenance would be done.

A parent asked if the leisure facilities at Auchinleck Academy would be kept; Mr. Ward said that although the proposal was at a very early stage, it would be the buildings around the leisure facility that would be demolished if approval is granted. Another parent wanted to know if the new campus school would have a swimming pool to which Mr Ward said that there was a pool at the Visions Leisure Centre adjacent to the new campus and this could possibly be where pupils would have swimming lessons – at no cost to parents.

Mr Ward went on to talk about enhanced sport facilities which would be part of any new campus. Meetings had been held with community groups, the local rugby club and Cumnock Juniors to get a sense of what people are looking for. Although no decisions have been made, the intention is to enhance the sport and recreation facilities that are already in place. The new secondary would have two full size state-of- the- art games halls; the primary would have a games hall and outdoor learning areas. Part of the £63.5 million allocation would be spent on ensuring safe journeys to school through additional crossing points, widened pavements etc.

A parent asked about the proximity to the sewage works and whether this had been seen as an issue as it was said to stink in hot weather. Mr. Ward emphasised again that the proposal was at very early stages and nothing has been decided on where the new building would actually be situated. The proposal is still some months away from the planning stage when thorough environmental testing would be undertaken.

A parent asked about the timeline for decisions on the proposal. Mr Ward commented that the council would reach a decision in June and, if the proposal is agreed, this would then go to the Scottish Government before any go-ahead could be given. It would be the end of August 2015 before the council would be able to progress with the proposal.

Mr Ward encouraged as many people as possible to take part in the consultation process by responding by post or email.

A parent asked whether any other sites had been looked at given the possible investment involved. Mr. Ward said that the site had to be owned by the council so that every penny would go on the campus and not on buying the land. Also there was no council owned site within the delineated area big enough for the campus and the area that had been chosen was one consistently referred to as appropriate by local parents and other members of the community.

Mr. Ward said that, it was thought that almost all transport would be routed via the existing Cumnock campus with buses travelling down the bypass. A traffic impact assessment would have to be done but the size of the Cumnock Academy site would mean a really sophisticated traffic management solution could be applied. Where possible and appropriate, travelling to school by bicycle or foot would be encouraged. Mr Ward continued that the vast majority of pupils would be transported as they are more than 3 miles from the campus. A parent reiterated that the proximity of Loudoun Academy meant that the catchment area for the new campus would now be illogical.

The meeting ended at 2030.