

Mr Mike Tuer
School Organisation Project Team
Cumbria County Council
Property Unit
18-19 Portland Square
CARLISLE CA1 1PE

14 June 2007

Dear Mr Tuer

RE: PLANNING PRIMARY EDUCATION FOR THE NORTH CARLISLE AREA

I am in receipt of your consultative document for primary reorganisation in the North Carlisle area and from the offset I must state my total opposition to all five options and I urge the County Council to abandon its ill-conceived proposals.

These proposals have created unnecessary uncertainty and anxiety with many parents, pupils and staff. I believe there is an option that would provide a comprehensive solution on educational grounds, spare capacity and finance. I have previously outlined my suggestion but it has fallen on the deaf ears of the County Council. I hope, even at this late stage, they can be more objective and consider it as an appropriate solution.

All these schools have a future. The pupil numbers of Stanwix and Kingmoor should remain the same. Belah should remain the same. Belah should be reduced in size to take out the surplus places and those buildings not required for educational use to be converted for community use, similar to Petteril Bank Primary School. This would obviate the need for temporary classrooms in the remaining schools and, as importantly, give each community its own focal point of a neighbourhood school.

I have visited all three primary schools and the general consensus with those I spoke to was to keep them all open. I would like to enhance the argument for this.

I firmly believe there is no need to make Kingmoor into a primary school. Whilst there obviously would be some staff savings, there would be considerable capital costs involved in joining the schools together e.g. the provision of a large assembly hall. Also, these are two very successful schools, so why risk the change?

The other effect on Kingmoor, were Belah to close, would be the creation of mixed-age classes; another retrograde step.

Having visited Stanwix School, I was very impressed with the structural improvements brought about by the recent £1.9 million of Government investment. Having waited so long for these improvements, it is totally unacceptable to consider “transferring” Stanwix, or should I really say closing it, and moving it to the Belah site. This, again, is an outstanding school. The closure of Belah would again mean mixed-age classes and no room for temporary classrooms. Given the already-mentioned substantial capital investment, it would be extreme folly to even consider relocating the school and would leave the Council open to severe criticism of their financial management.

Turning now to Belah School: I do accept that in the past there has been a problem regarding educational standards, although it is true to say it has never failed an OFSTED inspection. I also think that Cumbria County Council should bear the responsibility of ignoring these problems for too long. However, I understand that a recent inspection by the Council’s School Improvement Team has shown a marked improvement and you provide no evidence whatsoever to support your claim that “there is no capacity to sustain these improvements”. The surplus places in North Carlisle were addressed in my initial remarks, as the downsizing of Belah would achieve this and the other ancillary uses of the site e.g. a community centre, a police station and health provision would not only be assets to the local community but would also accrue rental income for the County Council. The examples I have quoted are not plucked from the air as I understand Carlisle City Council passed a resolution to explore community facilities, that the Police Authority would be keen for a small satellite station and that a health clinic would figure in development plans for outreach community services. I hope you can see the merits of this proposal and I would suggest that an approach be made to the Carlisle Housing Association to see if they also could assist in funding.

Additionally, Belah School has the only council-run nursery in the north of the city, serving a population of 10,000. In a recent OFSTED report, it was judged to be good. The proposal that “were Belah School to close the intention would be to replace its nursery in the school provision on the Kingmoor site” is totally unacceptable. This council-run nursery draws on families mainly on the Belah estate, it is an excellent facility and provides an essential and local service to the community. To talk of “intention” and “probable” in the context of replicating this service does not fill me with any confidence and does not reflect a policy that seeks to preserve the good service currently on offer.

To be honest, I find the criteria of educational standards and surplus places set by the County Council somewhat spurious as I have suggested alternatives that address these issues. One must then question other motives, and finance readily springs to mind. I really think that it is more about money than about education.

I was deeply concerned by comments made by County Councillor Philip Chappelhow, who is the lead member for Children's Services, when he commented on the need for a "capital receipt". This is superficially referred to on page 16 "Freed-up school sites" but it does not state that Capita as the Council's agent has already written, as I understand, to Carlisle City Council asking whether it would be possible to build houses on one of the school sites in North Carlisle. Indeed, his comments in the Evening News & Star of 16.02.03 that "the capital receipt received from the sale of Stanwix buildings threw a different light on the situation" seems to be at odds with educational need and surplus places. I have been told that Capita, on behalf of the County Council, have asked whether planning permission would be given for up to 50 residential properties of the Stanwix School site.

I have, in the past, heard of authorities selling off school playing fields, but never the school as well. This policy has ramifications beyond the reorganisation in Carlisle. Is it now the County Council's policy not to close schools for education reasons but for the value of the land they occupy? If this is the case, I think many rural schools could be under threat.

Finally, the most important aspect of any such reorganisation must be based on education value and achievement. If I thought that any of these proposals addressed these issues, I would support the one I considered to be of most benefit to the children of the area. Unfortunately, I think that this consultative procedure is somewhat of a sham and that decisions will be taken on other considerations.

However, I do hope that Cumbria County Council will have the integrity to admit that there is a sixth option which would give all schools a future. This option addresses the need for educational standards, the problem of spare capacity and finance. The Council will give a great disservice to the communities in North Carlisle if it does not proactively pursue these proposals.

Yours sincerely

ERIC MARTLEW MP
Member of Parliament for Carlisle

3 Chatsworth Square, Carlisle CA1 1HB. Tel: 01228 511395 Fax: 01228 819798
martlewe@parliament.uk