

Planning primary school places

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council

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Reference:	WI019-02-2004 – Final
Date:	September 2004

Introduction

In common with many authorities, Wirral faces a growing problem of surplus places in the primary sector. It is conscious of the financial implications of this situation, in terms of the revenue and capital expenditure required to maintain extensive under-used space.

This review assessed three areas:

- the Authority's overall approach to planning primary school places
- the impact of its decisions on teaching and learning, on children and their families, and on the community as a whole, through an analysis of 5 primary schools
- the actual cost of maintaining surplus places, by analysing the budgets of 3 additional primary schools.

Main conclusions

The Authority has acknowledged that it cannot continue to rely on the strategies it has employed to date to tackle the increasing problem of surplus places in the primary sector, and that it must develop a different approach. It has actively engaged schools in an open debate about future primary provision, and is developing closer collaboration with Housing and Planning Departments as the issue of school place planning takes its place as part of the council's renewal strategy.

The forthcoming Area Reviews will provide the Authority with the opportunity to more closely match the supply of primary places to the forecasted demand, and thereby minimise the educational and financial problems caused by a high level of surplus places. If successful, this strategy will release a significant amount of funding that can be used to support the implementation of the Primary Curriculum entitlement, and benefit pupils across the borough.

In addition, the Reviews should enable Wirral to ensure that its own and partners' building assets are put to effective use in developing integrated local services for the borough's citizens.

The more holistic approach to dealing with surplus capacity and the need for better evaluation of the impact of rationalisation schemes will require the Education and Cultural Services Department to review the resources currently available for asset management planning.

Key findings and recommendations

Results

TABLE 1 - OVERALL ANALYSIS OF SURPLUS PLACES IN THE PRIMARY SECTOR

	Unfilled places at January 2003 - actual	Unfilled places at January 2008 - forecast	Increase in number of unfilled places	Percentage change
Community & Foundation	2598	5433	2835	109%
Aided Catholic	757	1188	431	57%
Aided C E	71	215	144	203%

Source: Wirral Education Authority School Organisation Plan 2003-2008

TABLE 2 - THE NUMBER OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITH MORE THAN 25%, OR 30, SURPLUS PLACES, AS AT JANUARY 2003

Community & Foundation	Aided Catholic	Aided CE	Total
39	11	1	51
= 52% of C&F primary schools	= 55% of RC primary schools	= 17% of CE primary schools	= 50% of all primary schools

Source: Wirral Education Authority School Organisation Plan 2003-2008

TABLE 3 - BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE INDICATOR 34A – PERCENTAGE OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITH 25%+ SURPLUS PLACES

2000/2001		2001/2002		2002/2003	
Wirral	National avg.	Wirral	National avg.	Wirral	National avg.
15.80	11.30	17.80	11.94	19.00	11.98

Source: Audit Commission

TABLE 4 - PRIMARY SURPLUS PLACES REMOVED

	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003	2003/2004 (forecast)	2004/2005 (forecast)
Through use of space for purposes other than school use	270	70	90	90	90
Through adaptation of general teaching areas to provide specialist ICT spaces	1319	210	120	60	
Through removal of temporary accommodation	150	210	300	120	180
Through published proposals to remove places (major schemes)		665	295		
Totals*	1739	1155	805	270	270

* excludes changes resulting from the move to the Net Capacity methodology in June 2003

Source: Wirral LEA

TABLE 5 - AUDIT COMMISSION SCHOOL SURVEY RESULTS - 2003

Survey question	Wirral LEA mean score	Mean rating	All participating LEAs mean score
D1: The effectiveness of your LEA's planning of school places	2.60	Between satisfactory and good	2.89
D2: the transparency of your LEA's asset management planning process	2.23	Between satisfactory and good	2.88

Note: 1 = very good, 2 = good, 3 = satisfactory

Source: Audit Commission School Survey 2003

Conclusions from the above tables:

- The Authority has identified the potential for significant growth in primary surplus places.
- The increase in the proportion of Wirral's primary schools with 25%+ surplus places has risen by more than 3 times the national average since 2000/2001.
- Wirral has been proactive in removing surplus places, but its own forecast for the places that can be removed through existing strategies would make little impression on the growth of surplus places over the coming years.
- The Audit Commission survey results for this area of responsibility are positive – however, less than 30% of schools responded to the survey.

Strategy

The Authority has had an established strategy for managing the decline in pupil numbers over recent years, based upon five main elements:

- the move to the Net Capacity method of calculating school capacity
- encouraging schools to work with community bodies and the Early Years and Childcare Partnership to utilise surplus space
- adaptation of space for specialist purposes such as ICT, libraries, parent/care facilities
- the removal of temporary accommodation from school sites
- proposals for specific areas to reduce surplus capacity.

It has recognised that most of the places which could be taken out by this strategy now have been, and that a more fundamental approach must be developed to tackle the projected growth in primary school capacity. For each of the planning areas, it is intending to undertake Area Reviews that will consider pupil projections, Diocesan information, population profiles, and schools' performance & physical condition. This comprehensive approach should provide a well-informed view as to the most feasible options for removing unfilled places.

The School Organisation Plan makes clear its links with other elements of the local planning framework, including housing & neighbourhood renewal and the school improvement agenda.

The School Organisation Committee

The Committee has been well briefed by officers about the growing problem of surplus places in the primary sector, and is aware that the measures that have proved effective in the past will not be sufficient to tackle the problem.

The Chair of the Committee has a very clear view of the issues to be addressed, the timetable required for developing proposals, and the need to ensure that key stakeholders understand the rationale behind the strategy.

Partnerships

There is clear evidence of partners working effectively to manage the fall in pupil numbers:

- stronger collaboration between the Education & Cultural Services, Housing, and Planning Departments has been developed, largely as a consequence of the Housing Market Renewal Strategy (HMRS) and its impact on school place planning. 'Awaydays' between these Departments have been held to review the impact of policy decisions on schools. In addition, it is planned that the Director of Housing will address a forthcoming Primary Headteachers' conference on the subject of the HMRS
- the LEA has an open and transparent approach with its schools regarding surplus places – a recent forum actively engaged headteachers in discussions about the impact of falling rolls and HRMS, and this will be followed up at the next residential conference. In addition, the forum introduced the concept of a 'Primary Curriculum Entitlement' - headteachers are working with officers to develop a set of principles that aims to identify the essential elements of an effective primary school, including the resources required. It is clear that the LEA sees school organisation playing a key role in school improvement.

Although regular meetings are held with the Dioceses, the need for effective dialogue between the LEA and the Dioceses continues to be vital in the overall management of school places, particularly in light of the fact that 4 of the 10 schools with less than 150 pupils are in the Roman Catholic sector, and that 55% of Roman Catholic primary schools had more than 25%+, or 30, surplus places as at January 2003.

Recommendation

R1 Ensure continued dialogue with the Dioceses, and their close involvement in the Area Reviews, in order that they can contribute to the reduction in surplus places.

Resources

The Area Reviews will place a considerable demand upon officers, at a time when the 6 PFI schools are already taking a large proportion of the time available, and when the ECS Department is losing two key Asset Management Team staff members.

Recommendation

R2 Review the capacity of the Asset Management Team for supporting the Area Reviews and ensure it is appropriate.

Processes

Forecasting

Effective planning depends on accurate forecasting. The Audit Commission's view is that LEAs should aim to produce forecasts for one year ahead that are within 1 per cent either above or below the actual number, for both primary and secondary pupils.

The table below shows that Wirral's forecasts have achieved this level (or very near this level) of accuracy over the last 5 years.

		Primary pupil numbers	Secondary pupil numbers	
			Up to 16 years	16+
1999	Estimate	29146	20337	3128
	Actual	29051	20315	3156
	% variation	0.997	0.999	1.009
2000	Estimate	28395	20688	3317
	Actual	28422	20599	3228
	% variation	1.001	0.996	0.973
2001	Estimate	27807	21022	3015
	Actual	27847	20995	3186
	% variation	1.001	0.999	1.057
2002	Estimate	27227	21201	3210
	Actual	27351	21103	3217
	% variation	1.005	0.995	1.002
2003	Estimate	26405	21417	3277
	Actual	26543	21432	3301
	% variation	1.005	1.001	1.007
2004	Estimate	25726	21407	3343
	Actual	26032	21331	3369
	% variation	1.012	0.996	1.008

Source: Wirral LEA

The impact of rationalisation projects

There is a general understanding that improving the quality of schools' capital stock is likely to have an important influence on learning outcomes amongst pupils. In its research report for the Department for Education and Skills in 2003¹, PricewaterhouseCoopers identified some quantitative (albeit weak) and qualitative association between capital investment and pupil performance.

¹ 'Building better performance: an empirical assessment of the learning and other impacts of schools capital investment' (Research Report RR407), DfES 2003

For the Audit Commission's review in Wirral, it was agreed that we should focus on the area of North Birkenhead, where the decline in pupil numbers is sharpest. In particular, our work concentrated on five schools – four that had been subject to investment schemes to rationalise school buildings and the removal of significant numbers of surplus places, and one that had not had the benefit of such a scheme.

In order to assess the impact of these investment programmes, we reviewed elements of quantitative evidence, and also visited the schools to gather qualitative evidence.

The quantitative perspective

As three of the four rationalisation projects had been completed within the last 12 months, no trend data exists to suggest possible links between the investment and pupil progress.

In the fourth school, the rising attainment levels and the investment programme were, in the headteacher's view, clearly linked. The following table highlights the improvements in attainment achieved by this school since the start of the investment programme:

	In comparison with similar schools nationally			
	2000	2001	2002	2003
Free School Meals				
Key Stage 1 National Curriculum tests (average points)				
Reading	D	C	A	B
Writing	E	B	A	A
Mathematics	D	B	A	A
Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests (average points)				
English	D	B	B	C
Mathematics	E	D	B	B
Science	E	D	B	A
All subjects	E	C	B	A
Prior attainment				
English	C	B	B	B
Mathematics	D	D	B	A
Science	E	C	A	A
All subjects	D	C	B	A

Source: DFES PANDA report 2003

Whilst the improvements in attainment are clear, it is not possible to identify the impact of the investment programme alone.

Our review also included attendance data, inspection reports, and financial performance – no pattern emerged to suggest any measurable impact yet of the removal (or indeed, the continuing problem in one school) of surplus places.

The qualitative perspective

What was clear from our school visits, however, was the impact of investment in school buildings felt by staff and pupils alike.

Case study 1

The investment: 4 rationalisation schemes ranging from £270k-£400k, each designed to extend and improve certain buildings and demolish others. Between them, the schemes removed 450 surplus places.

The impact:

On staff and pupils

- The feeling of isolation from the 'main' building felt by some staff and pupils alike was eliminated, and a greater sense of unity created;
- Improved working and learning environments were created, enabling schools to better fulfil curriculum demands;
- Staff and children have learned to deal with the whole age range, rather than focusing on either 'infant' or 'junior';
- Pupil behaviour has improved, and older pupils are now much more caring towards younger ones;
- There is now a better transition from Key Stage 1 to 2, with a more effective use of expertise and materials;
- Sites are now far easier to manage from a cleaning and security point of view;
- Dedicated medical facilities and disabled access have been created in one school;
- Staff eventually got used to reduced space, though felt that their storage space had reduced considerably

On the community

- One of the schools is now finding more parents are encouraged to apply for places;
- There is now more active involvement in the schools from parents, with family numeracy and literacy programmes proving more popular;
- Schools' perceived value to their communities has increased – vandalism has reduced as a result of greater respect for the new premises; 'people are proud to be associated with the school' said one headteacher;
- One school has plans for the community use of the vacant land created by the scheme, with sports taster sessions envisaged.

On the school budget

- Reduction in repairs and maintenance expenditure and energy consumption are reported. One school reported annual reductions of £3-4k in vandalism costs, 30% in gas and electricity costs, and 29% in water bills.

Here are some examples of how pupils at one school assessed the impact of this investment:

I love our new school, because our classrooms used to be very dull, all paint falling on to the floor and very boring to learn in, but now it is very bright and colourful, a new sink, new carpet. Some classes have got ~~new~~ cloak rooms in the class. Now our school is very enjoyable to learn in!

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

I love our new school because it is painted a blue colour, while the old times it was boring yellow. We ^{now} have a new playtime activity out in the grounds and before it was bare! In the classrooms we have new sinks and new white boards. Also we have warm and cosy! We have an new classroom called Cosy Corner.

At another school, the pupils assessed the advantages and disadvantages of the investment:

Our School

I like being in the same school as the little children but in this new building the cloakrooms are too small and were too far away from everything. In the old school it was more cosy and the classrooms were bigger. Even so, the toilets in the new building are more modern and nicer to be in.

The disadvantages in my opinion of this school are; the cloak rooms are too crowded, some of the classrooms are too small for the amount of people in a class, the distance of the staffroom and the classroom is a long way to walk, there are tables outside the classroom which are sometimes hard to get round especially at home time.

In my opinion, the advantages are; there is a decent sized play field, a good sized hall, the corridors are wide, the classrooms are a good layout and all areas are easily accessible.

At a third school, pupils were asked to depict the features they would wish to see in their ideal school, and how their own school, pre-refurbishment, compared with this ideal:





The children were then asked to rate their refurbished school on a scale of 1-10, where 10 represented their ideal school:

School scale

10 - The best school ever. What I want in my school.

7/8 Manor Primary - The computer room is warmer and cooler
 The walls are a nice colour
 Easier to get around the classrooms and the school. We do not have to go outside anymore to get from one building to the other.
 Double-glazing keeps the warmth in.
 No cracks in the walls
 The toilets are cleaner
 There are no leaks
 It always clean
 We've got good games to play
 We've got elevators for disabled people.
 We have water fountains so if we're thirsty we can get a drink.
 The carpets are a nice colour
 More space in the classroom
 I think the walls are cool because they are colourful.
 When the light shines through the windows the walls stand out
 The lilac walls make the room look and feel warmer
 I like the carpets because they are colourful and soft and we don't have to sit on hard surfaces
 There are a few activities outside.

0 - The worst school ever.

Year 5

Case study 2

The school was the subject of a bid 2 years ago to the DfES for the consolidation of junior and infants departments. The LEA's bid was unsuccessful. The school is currently operating at an occupancy of less than 61%.

The impact of the school's situation:

On staff and pupils:

- Staff redundancies had to be considered for the first time last year
- Organisational and management difficulties are caused by there being only 11 pupils in Year 1

On the school's budget:

- The school has the continuing expense of maintaining and staffing two buildings, and finds it difficult to plan its repair and maintenance expenditure in light of the uncertainty surrounding the school's future

As the headteacher of this school puts it: *"One of the main topics of conversation in the staffrooms is the urgent need to bring together into one building the infant and junior departments. As time goes on, and we hear no news about rationalisation, I can sense staff moral slipping".*

Also: 'we would really value some expert help and advice on how best to make maximum and innovative use of the space that would be available (through rationalisation)."

Sale/re-use of sites

The release of land caused by rationalisation schemes such as those above provides the council with the opportunity to consider how the wider community can benefit most from its sale or re-use. It has been the council's policy to take any proceeds from land sales as capital receipts, but it has recently allocated £300k from such a sale to go towards the relocation costs for Mount Primary – this approach is to be welcomed.

Project evaluation

Despite the fact that the capital programme for 2003/2004 was £15m, there is little evidence of formal assessment of the impact of this investment – the LEA acknowledges this represents a gap in its process.

However, the project approach adopted by the Authority reflects many of the other key steps identified in the 'School Works' model, which has been recognised as a national model by the DfES². Indeed, schools value the effective working relationship they have with officers during building projects and spoke very positively about the extent to which schools' design objectives and concerns were taken account of by the LEA.

The schools visited would welcome the opportunity to discuss with officers how the investment has benefited staff, pupils and the community. And there is a strong desire among headteachers to share their own experiences of building projects as well as to learn from others – the LEA is in an ideal position to facilitate this learning.

The DfES is encouraging post-building evaluation; in its Asset Management Appraisal Guidance for 2004/2005, it states 'we would expect post-project evaluation to include the completion of performance questionnaires by the end-user (normally the school), and for the assessments to be fed back into the authority's capital planning and design processes'³.

² School Works – a secondary school design initiative' can be found at www.school-works.org/nationalModel.asp

³ AMP Appraisal Guidance 2004/05 – DfES

And there is little doubt that funding bids will be facilitated by effective evaluation system. In its report on PFI in schools, the Audit Commission states:

'The newness of PFI schools means that there is no research available to assess any effects yet on the educational outcomes of children who attend them. But it was certainly the case that the majority of users of both PFI and traditionally funded schools in the Audit Commission sample believed there was a link between environment, pupil behaviour and 'productivity'. *The requirement for business cases under PFI should therefore encompass a more explicit link between buildings and educational performance – and, commendably, current bidding guidance from the DfES states that expressions of interest from potential PFI providers should demonstrate this link, and that this is one of the criteria on which bids will be assessed for provisional approval.*⁴

Recommendation

R3 Ensure that post-project evaluation becomes an integral part of the process; an example of a questionnaire can be found on the DfES web page at www.teachernet.gov.uk/amps.

Alternative use of buildings

Encouraging schools to find alternative uses for surplus space by working in partnership with community bodies and other partners has been one of the elements of the LEA's approach to managing the decline in pupil numbers.

There is now clear direction from central government for a more integrated approach to service delivery, and the potential for school sites to be the base for a range of community services is being explored by the Authority.

In order for the Authority to assess the scope for developing and supporting improved, more co-ordinated local services, it must have good 'intelligence' about the uses to which its own building assets, and those of its partners, are being put – currently, Education & Cultural Services do not collate such information about the alternative uses of school buildings.

Recommendation

R4 Gather intelligence centrally about the use being made of schools' use of surplus space. This information can be mapped and used to help plan co-ordinated service delivery.

The cost of surplus places

The Audit Commission benchmark for the level of primary surplus places is 10%. In January 2003, the level in Wirral exceeded this by 1.34%, or 400 places – this equates to just under 2 one-form-entry primary schools. By 2008, the authority is forecasting that, if appropriate action is not taken, nearly one quarter of primary places will be unfilled – the level of surplus places would be some 12.63% (or 3783 places) above the Audit Commission benchmark, and equivalent to 18 one-form-entry primary schools.

Wirral's School Organisation Plan recognises that the revenue and capital expenditure associated with maintaining such extensive under-used space would be considered unacceptable.

In order to determine what funding would, in theory, become available for re-investing into primary education in Wirral if surplus capacity were restricted to 10% in 2008, we analysed the budgets of 3 schools whose occupancy in January 2003 ranged from 63% to 80%. We identified

⁴ 'PFI in schools' – Audit Commission, January 2003

those elements of each school's budget that were 'fixed' and related to the physical existence of the school (i.e. that were not dependent on the pupils themselves).

The following table shows the breakdown of budget figures:

TABLE 6 - THE 'FIXED' ELEMENTS OF 3 SCHOOLS' BUDGETS			
2003-2004	SCHOOL A	SCHOOL B	SCHOOL C
Savings			
BUDGET			
Lump Sum	55095	55095	55095
Premises	23922	31698	26606
ESTABLISHMENT			
Headteacher	57363	51857	56037
Deputy Headteacher (Difference between Leadership & M6)	16012	12534	12534
Administrative	11640	11980	10539
Cleaning	7706	11224	13480
Caretaking	20572	16258	16405
PREMISES			
Repairs & Maintenance	2000	4000	4000
Grounds Maintenance	1449	74	2855
Utilities	9200	9480	11350
Rates	10111	8555	9444
less INCOME			
PTA	0	0	0
TOTAL SAVING	215070	212755	218345
% of total school budget*	40.8%	40.4%	43.1%

*excludes School Standards Grant and Standards Funds

The average total saving from the figures above is £215,390; if this saving is multiplied by the 18 primary schools that the Authority is forecasting it would have over and above the 10% surplus capacity benchmark in 2008, then a potential theoretical saving of £3.9m is reached – this would represent an additional £167 that could be invested into the Primary Curriculum entitlement, which would benefit every primary pupil.

Way forward

The Audit Commission will meet with the Education and Cultural Service Department's Senior Management Team to discuss these findings and recommendations, how they might be shared with key stakeholder groups, and how an action plan would be drawn up.

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