

Thank you for your letter including your concerns and questions around the discussions being held for options for High Down Infant School and High Down Junior School to work towards Primary status.

As an introduction to our response, the discussions with the schools to date do not form a decision of any kind. There will be a formal consultation which gives you the opportunity to express concerns and opinions or to ask questions formally. Responses to this consultation will inform the final decision made by the Council's Executive Committee; therefore all responses will be taken into consideration and are therefore actively encouraged.

Consultation will commence in July (final date TBC), once preceding democratic and reporting processes have been completed. Therefore as any proposals are still subject to member approval and consultation, any reference to expansion or primary status below comes with this caveat.

I have below addressed each question in turn, summarising the key points of each question:

1) The High Downs Schools are the furthest schools from the areas of development near to the Marina, which sees the greatest increase in young families. Why have the high Downs Schools been chosen as the most suitable for expansion when there are four other schools closer to this particular area?

Firstly, with regards to the increased demand in pupil places, this is partly down to the increase in housing in Portishead, and also partly due to a significant increase in birth rates.

With regards to expansion of other Portishead Schools, this has been fully assessed. There are various identified constraints in increase of pupil numbers on several levels at the four schools you refer to, they are summarised below and further detail is provided in item seven;

- Land locked issues – and site access issues
- Site space issues
- Catholic Status restraints
- A lack of other suitable sites at an affordable cost

The below list shows additional places made between 2003 and 2011 to accommodate an increase in demand:

- Portishead Primary School was relocated in 2003 and enlarged from 315 places to 420 places;
- St Peter's C of E Primary School expanded from a 315 to a 420-place school in September 2005;
- High Down Infant increased in size from 225 to 270 places in September 2005;
- Trinity Anglican Methodist Primary School opened as a 210-place school in September 2008 and was enlarged to become a 420 place primary school from September 2011.

In terms of the long term planning of school places, prior to the coalition Government coming to power in May 2010, Council's were advised of capital funding in 3 year tranches. Whilst the coalition continues to review schools capital funding, Council's are now being advised of capital allocations on an annual basis only. This does not allow for effective forward planning.

Despite all of the above changes, it became apparent that the number of Year R applications for September 2012 in Portishead was likely to exceed the number of places available and in this respect arrangements are currently being made for additional Year R places to be established High Down Infant School.

Both Portishead Primary School and St Peter's C of E Primary School accepted additional pupils in September 2011. Trinity Anglican Methodist Primary School doubled in size last September. It was felt appropriate to consider extra places High Down Infant School for September 2012.

2) With an additional 210 children at the High Downs' Schools arriving at the Schools at the same time, how does this fit with the Council's Transport Strategy?

We are already working very closely with the Highways and Transport Team to ensure all measures which can be taken around Transport are taken, should the proposals go ahead.

The schools may also be able to look at initiatives such as staggered start and finish times which, if implemented would reduce the amount of traffic, but elongate the duration of the peak period. These are factors the schools will need to consider, together with their parents and neighbours.

What will the cost of funded transportation be to the tax-paying residents of North Somerset? The cost of funded transportation would depend on the number of pupils eligible for free school transport and the number of parents who choose to use this facility. Until the actual number of parents taking up the offer of transport is known, associated costs cannot be determined.

How likely will parents be prepared to allow their Primary aged school children travel in this way?

There are currently many families who use the home to school Transport. The service works effectively with a dedicated team of Officers managing all elements of the process.

3) North Somerset Council closed St Barnabus school three years ago, despite knowing at that point there was already a shortage of spaces, with the problem only getting bigger over the coming years. Why was the school not put into special measures, or more time and money spent improving the school, to make it more attractive to prospective parents? Once the School was closed, it was occupied in the main by Council Employees.

St Barnabus is now in use as a Children's Centre for families and for a variety of other community uses. The Governing Body of the school agreed that to continue to retain St Barnabas C of E Primary School without additional financial support would have been at the risk of the school being unable to maintain standards within such budgetary constraints. The needs of the pupils outweighed all other concerns.

At the time of closing St Barnabus C of E Primary School the future use of the buildings had not been secured. Parts of the site are overseen by Trustees; and the Diocese of Bath & Wells was required to seek permission from the Charity Commission as to its future use. It was possible that the part of the site overseen by the Trustees may have needed to be sold. At no time did a future use of the site influence or lead the decision for closure. It was felt that rather than close the site, to offer the continued use the buildings for children's services was a positive change following the sadness of the closure of the school.

4) With the expansion plans of an additional 210 children, together with the nursery provision, there will be in the region of 900 children on effectively one site. There is a real danger of children going missing without anybody realising.

The Health and Safety of the Children at any school is always paramount. Any increase in pupil numbers will result in a proportionate increase in teaching and non teaching staff therefore the adult pupil ratio will be planned according to the number of pupils on roll. The schools may also consider other strategies to manage the movement of children with measures such as staggering School start and finish times to reduce the number of children leaving the sites at key times. There will be many other considerations and solutions the Schools can investigate and implement to ensure the continued safety of the children. This work will evolve over time.

5) In addition to the chaos actually on the site, as a local resident, I am extremely concerned about the effect on the area in terms of parking and road safety. This is already a problem in the streets surrounding the schools, so again, having an additional 200 more vehicles looking to park will only exacerbate this problem, and will increase the risk of accidents, possible involving children and / or parents attempting to cross already busy and congested roads.

We are aware of the parking and travel issues in the area, and are working very closely with the Highways and Transport team to ensure all measures which can be taken around Transport, are taken, should the proposals go ahead.

We anticipate, over time, more places at the schools will provide more opportunity for local children to attend their local school. Thereby increasing the opportunities for more parents to walk their children to school and thereby reducing the amount of traffic approaching the schools at peak times.

As noted earlier, the schools may also be able to look at initiatives such as staggered start and finish times which, if implemented would further reduce the amount of traffic, but then elongate the duration of the peak period. These are factors the schools will need to consider, together with their parents and neighbours.

This is an area which will require a great deal of work by both the Council and the Schools together during the process. The schools already work together on a joint Travel Plan; we will be supporting them in evolving this and communicating strongly with parents.

6) Why are parents only being informed about the possibility of the schools expanding now, when the initial consultations with the school were started in September 2011, with the consultation document being published in January 2012?

I believe the document you refer to here is the '*Consultation Draft Education Provision in North Somerset, A Commissioning Strategy 2012 to 2015*' which was issued for consultation in January of this year. This is not the consultation document for any changes to the High Down Schools.

The consultation for Primary status will commence (subject to member approval) in July (final date TBC) once the preceding democratic procedures have been satisfied. The consultation period is six weeks.

Why have parents not been told of the consultation dates?

The consultation dates have not been passed on to parents to date as they have not yet been determined. The process must follow that member scrutiny and approval must take place before any discussions can be taken to public consultation. Therefore, officers cannot presume proposals will be approved by members, and therefore cannot set consultation dates in advance of approval. We have however provisionally booked two consultation meeting dates to give parents as much opportunity as possible to attend, should they take place.

The first and only meetings are being held on the last week of term, so parents are assuming consultation will commence then, which is bad timing for parents.

Again, subject to member approval, we anticipate Consultation will commence in July. The consultation period will run for six weeks of term time. Therefore it will likely commence two to three weeks prior to the end of term, and continue for three to four weeks from the start of September. The consultation document will be made available to all stakeholders prior to the meetings in July.

A great deal of building work will be carried out, which, as well as causing massive disruption to the children at the schools, and the local residents, will take a considerable length of time.

We carry out a great deal of construction projects within our Service. In our experience, building works bring very little disruption. The Contractors we use, on a long standing relationship basis, work closely with school representatives to decide some of the work elements around the school needs, this system works extremely effectively. Our main contractors are also part of the Considerate Constructors scheme which monitors contractors against a code of practice.

We also recognise the interest of the children in the building works. There are huge curriculum based opportunities for children with a building works on a school site. Our main contractors carry out events with children and staff to make the most of these opportunities.

The infant school carried out a major building project back in 2005. This provided extra classrooms, an extended nursery and an extension to the office and entrance area. The school used the build to stimulate the curriculum and the high standards of the school were maintained during this period.

This suggests that, as the plan is for the changes to take effect from September 2013, the decision has already been made and the consultation process is just an exercise being carried out because it legally has to be. What are the chances of the decision being overturned, regardless of public opinion?

As mentioned above, no decision has been made. Member scrutiny and approval to consult has not yet been granted. Consultation is carried out as a structured process to ensure the matter is assessed from all perspectives adequately, the process also goes through several stages to ensure all correct information and opinions are captured. Public opinion in this process is vital, and accounted for when the decision is taken through the stages of analysis. Works towards any building needs will commence early on in the process, this element of planning is carried out by the Council at risk.

7) The report mentioned above referred to the Old Portishead Primary site not being a viable option in view of the £800k cost involved. I would question how this compares to the cost of expanding the High Down Schools, along with the transport costs, and the cost of rebranding the schools.

The sum aforementioned would be the anticipated cost to buy the site. Over and above this, there would be the cost of building a new school which would be significant. This cost would therefore be significantly more than remodelling works and that could be afforded in the current climate, where significant capital and revenue cuts have been made nationally.

It also suggests an option being to expand St Peter's school as there is '*an area of land on the.... site that could be used to deliver extra accommodation/be sold to create a capital receipt*'. Whilst the effect on the surrounding residential area seems to be enough for this option to be disregarded, this does not seem to have been a consideration on the High Down site.

Much consideration and analysis goes into any proposal made. It has been assessed that an expansion of St Peter's would be extremely difficult to gain approval from the planning authority; the whole site is surrounded by residential properties. Also, in terms of access to the site at St Peters' the only road leading to St Peters is a cul-de-sac. In these terms, the High Down schools are considered more viable to accommodate the additional need for places.

There is also a suggestion that the Clifton Diocese have supported the idea of an expansion on the St Joseph's site, but this seems to have been disregarded without further investigation or discussion.

At North Somerset we are continuously working in collaboration with the Diocese and options are continuously assessed. Unfortunately, an expansion to St Josephs' would not necessarily solve the current demand needs within Portishead. Voluntary Aided schools such as St Josephs' manage their own admissions, and being a Catholic School, catholic status is high on the admissions criteria for such schools. Therefore, in such a situation, the school would take in more pupils, but not necessarily from Portishead, but rather Catholics further afield.

As for Trinity school, I understand the developers have fulfilled in building and expanding the school to the size it is now, but most parents are outraged that this school, is nowhere near the size to accommodate the required children.

As noted above, Trinity Anglican Methodist Primary School opened by the Diocese of Bath and Wells as a 210-place school in September 2008 and was enlarged to become a 420

place primary school from September 2011. The council funded the expansion of Trinity School to become a 420 place primary school.

8) In addition to the more suitable sites being in existence, there are a high number of office buildings around the Marina area, with parking, which are empty, and it would not take a huge amount of time or money for some of these to be converted to a school building, so why is this option not being considered as an alternative?

The Marina land and offices are not currently under the ownership of North Somerset Council, therefore, should the Council wish to undertake this, the land/buildings would need to be purchased from a party willing to sell, which would be at the cost of commercial / residential land. Further capital would need to be used to make such buildings and the surrounding land suitable for Education. As noted earlier, the Council do not have the sort of money such a proposal would require.

9) As it stands, one of the existing High Down schools was given an 'Outstanding' rating by Ofsted whilst the other was given a 'Satisfactory' rating. It is Obvious parents looking for school places will always choose the outstanding school over the satisfactory school. This will result in a school being full of children whose parents did not choose the school. Having two competing schools on the same site is completely impractical.

No matter where schools are located, there will always be some parents whose children do not attend the school of their first choice.

We do not see that these changes should bring about competition between the two schools, but rather that it should encourage the schools to work together to continuously improve standards of both schools. The two schools currently have a very close existing relationship and work very successfully together in many respects. To help them move towards Primary status, the schools will need to work even closer together to make these changes a great success.

Through the North Somerset Future Schools Service, we can encourage and support schools in enhancing and extending their levels of working together to a specified end. For example, the two schools would be able to support one another during the change process i.e. sharing expertise and resources in working with different age ranges.

In the same respect, we would expect the schools to continue working very closely together once they had both reached Primary Status. There are a number of different formal and informal ways in which the schools may choose to work together. The Future Schools Service has already worked very closely with a group of three schools moving to Primary Status together using an informal partnership model to help then support one another through the process. This has proven a great success.

The name High Down has always applied to both schools, but presumably neither school would be able to retain the name (so also the reputation of the school) which would mean further costs being involved to the Council and parents who will potentially have to purchase new uniforms when the changes take effect.

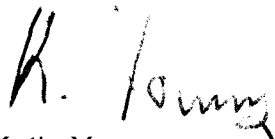
The decision making around changes to names will be made by the Governing Bodies of the two schools. The schools may also choose to involve the children and parents in this decision making process. Equally, with matters such as uniform, the schools will be very conscious of parents not having to make additional payments, and therefore will likely consider a variety of options and again, consult with parents.

10) With approximately 30 babies born a month in Portishead, this equates to 360 a year. Even if the plans to extend the High Down schools, goes ahead, there will still only be 330 Reception year places in the town. Where will the extra 30 children go when they are due to start school? These figures do not allow for movement in and out of the area which is likely to make the number higher.

It is correct the Reception spaces within Portishead would total at 330 if these changes are implemented. Our research shows Portishead birth rates currently stand at around 270 births per year. We also need to factor in movement in, out and within the town. The work completed to date on these projections indicates 330 spaces should be sufficient for the foreseeable future. As figures change on a regular basis, we continuously reassess the needs of the town, and will continue to do so.

Finally, I hope this has answered your questions fully, please do not hesitate to contact me for any further information should you require it.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Young', written in a cursive style.

Katie Young

Capital Projects Relationships Manager – Planning & Access