

Durham Johnston Admissions – Briefing Note

History

1980s: Lansdowne Comprehensive School (Coxhoe) closed as pupil numbers declined. Durham County Council (DCC) as Local Education Authority (LEA) then provided busing arrangements for children from Coxhoe, Bowburn etc. to Durham Johnston (DJ) establishing 'associated transport arrangements' for those areas. Brandon was another such associated area.

At this time the admissions criteria (apart from specific medical issues) gave priority in order to (1) busing arrangements, (2) sibling links (3) distance.

Mid 1990s: Increases in family numbers in Shincliffe, Bowburn and Coxhoe plus sibling links put pressure on the distance criteria and one year a few families at the periphery in Neville's Cross (i.e. Farewell Hall, Merryoaks) were initially below the cut-off for places, but places were found on appeal or when allocated places were not taken up.

This raised great concerns among the Neville's Cross community and there were public meetings and discussions within the Governors aimed at avoiding the situation where children would be bused to another school when they could walk to DJ.

The then Labour Chair of the LEA, Councillor Brian Walker, took a politically brave decision to change the admissions criteria for the school to (1) children for whom DJ was the closest school (measured from the nearer of the two sites) (2) sibling link, (3) associated busing arrangements, (4) other distance.

A year or so later, following clear anomalies with the sibling link criterion, the DJ Governors obtained a further amendment so that the sibling link only operated for families within 6 miles from the school and also not via new entry sixth formers.

2005: Governors knew the new school was to happen and started asking the LEA to look at the admissions criteria as there was clearly going to be an issue. LEA officers were unwilling to start thinking about it as they did not think they could model what might happen(!)

2006-7: Governors continued to press the issue, and eventually some modelling took place, but the question of associated transport for the villages was not addressed in spite of considerable pressure by Governors on LEA officers.

2007-8: A group of Shincliffe parents became very active in lobbying the LEA on the issue, wanting to protect their position.

In the meantime the law changed and the government put in place a code of practice on 'fair admissions'. There is now a County Education Forum (consisting of governor and teaching representatives across the County) which has to be consulted on these issues and whose views have to be taken into account by DCC in determining its criteria.

The Forum was consulted and decides that to be fair, there should be a unified set of criteria across the county, even though DJ Governors tried to devise criteria for DJ that would both preserve the established village links as well as the closer community.

This then became an issue for the recent elections, and there were several meetings at County Hall after which the decision was made to go with the revised criteria (essentially back to pre-1995 for minor changes) along with instituting associated transport for the various villages.

It must be noted that the Director of Children's Services pointed out the risks to admissions from the closer community of formally associating transport to the villages and was unable formally to recommend those associations.

I should also state, that I have also been pointing out this risk whenever it has come to debate at County Hall and elsewhere.

The Risks

The risk is that pupil numbers in the associated transport and sibling link categories will dominate to the extent that the situation of the mid 1990s recurs.

There is good evidence that this risk is currently very small as there has been a considerable fall in pupil numbers across the County and across the Durham District area over the past 5 years or so.

This is evidenced by the sudden reduction of intake at Neville's Cross Primary School over that period (it was always full and over-subscribed with a 34 pupil intake at Reception, but around 5 years ago numbers dropped to the mid to low 20s, with one year being as low as 17. The intake for September 2008 is estimated at around 30). There appears as yet to have been little appreciable impact on the numbers as a result of the house building in the Neville's Cross area.

Nonetheless, the risk is there and the Neville's Cross community has a right to know in advance what the probabilities are of places being available for DJ. Up to now, DCC has been unwilling to give general guidance to groups of parents on the issue, although it is clearly capable of modelling the situation.

Actions

- (a) *Objections to the Adjudicator*: DCC advertised the 2009 criteria on 1 May 2008 and there is a six week period for objections to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator who appears to have the power to make any decision/changes to the criteria that he likes if the objection is deemed to be well-founded.

<http://www.schoolsadjudicator.gov.uk/object1.cfm>

- (b) *Sibling Links*: the sibling link criterion has reverted to its old form. I have put in an argued case that DCC should adopt the restricted version across the county. This is too late for 2009 entry, but I have asked for it to be put before the Forum for the next round and also that I be allowed to present the case personally to the Forum.

Councillor Nigel Martin