

By: Director - Operations

To: School Organisation Advisory Board – 10 January 2008

Subject: THE PROPOSED RELOCATION OF PORTAL HOUSE SCHOOL,
DOVER TO THE SITE OF THE FORMER NEWINGTON INFANT
SCHOOL, THANET.

Classification: Unrestricted.

Summary: This report proposes the relocation of Portal House Special school in Dover to the site of the former Newington Infants School in Thanet. The report seeks the views of the School Organisation Advisory Board on undertaking a public consultation on the possible relocation of the school.

Introduction

1. (1) As part of the review and reorganisation of special schools in Kent, Portal House School in Dover was re-designated from a 9-13 residential school catering for 45 children with emotional and behavioural difficulties to an 11-16 school making day provision for 60 pupils with Behaviour, Emotional and Social Developments Needs.

(2) The school is currently located on a compact site in the village of St Margaret's-at-Cliffe near Dover, very close to St Margaret's-at-Cliffe Primary School. Portal House School has enjoyed a harmonious and constructive relationship with the neighbouring primary school over many years. However, the existing accommodation at Portal House is unsuitable for its secondary age designation and the increase in the overall size of the school from 45 – 60 students.

(3) Funding is available through the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme to provide new purpose built accommodation. However, the existing site is unsuitable for development and a new site must be secured.

(4) There are currently 41 Pupils on roll at Portal House. Of these 14 come from Thanet, including the Newington Estate. The residential profile of the existing pupils by district is set out below.

Dover – 7, Shepway – 3, Ashford – 3, Maidstone -2, Thanet - 14, Canterbury – 9
Swale – 3.

Background

2. (1) A number of alternative sites within the Dover district and one in Thanet were explored as possibilities for relocation but these all proved to be unsuitable for a variety of reasons, including difficulties associated with location, access, geographical issues, acquisition of land and potential planning difficulties.

(2) The site of the former Newington Infants School became vacant when the Infant and Junior schools merged with effect from 1 September 2007 and were consolidated on the former Newington Junior School site from that time.

(3) The former Newington Infants School site provides the potential for development as a suitable site for Portal House. Development would require major new build on the footprint of the existing school building. It would also be necessary to use a small portion of the adjacent playing field site which currently belongs to Clarendon House.

(4) Early discussions were held with the interim governing body (IGB) of Newington Primary School about the possibility of relocating to the former infant school site. The headteacher of Portal House met with the IGB to discuss this issue, early in 2007 before the Newington Primary School was established.

The Proposal

3. (1) The proposal is to relocate Portal House School from its existing site at St Margaret's-at-Cliffe near Dover to the site of the former Newington Infants School, on the Newington Estate in Thanet with effect from 1 September 2009.

(2) Potentially, staff at Portal House would transfer to the new location. There would be no compulsory redundancies. However, given the distance between the existing site and the proposed new location, some staff may feel unwilling or unable to relocate. In those circumstances, in determining whether an employee is entitled to a redundancy payment, the determining factor would be whether or not an individual has unreasonably refused an offer of suitable employment. Each case would be considered on its merits against agreed criteria established in consultation with the Schools Personnel Service (SPS).

Site Issues

4. (1) The Newington site has a number of significant advantages which commend its suitability for the relocation of Portal House.

- It is available and already owned by KCC.
- It is sufficient in terms of space and provides a pleasing environment for students. The site can accommodate state of the art new buildings, as envisaged under the BSF scheme.
- A significant number of pupils (14) come from the Thanet area and approximately half of these come from Ramsgate. Travelling distances would therefore be reduced and parental contact with the school potentially eased by closer proximity to home.
- Use of the Newington site will allow Portal House to benefit from participation in Wave 4 of the BSF programme generating major capital investment by 2009.

Resource Issues

Capital

5. (1) Major investment of c. £7.7m is planned to provide state of the art facilities through the BSF programme. The site is already owned by KCC and there would be no costs in relation to site acquisition.

Human

(2) The human resource implications are referred to in S.3. In addition, staff who did transfer to the new site would be eligible for assistance with travelling expenses through the Appendix E scheme of allowances.

Views of the Local Members

6. (1) The local Members are Mrs E Green (Lab) and Mr A Poole (Lab).

(2) *Comments from Mr Poole*

“Portal House school is designated for children with Behavioural, Emotional & Social Development Need (BESD) and caters for up to 60, aged 7 to 13 year old children. The school is currently situated at St Margaret’s at Cliffe, Dover, and serves East Kent.

I understand that the proposal is for the school to be rebuilt on the currently vacant Newington Infant School site in Ramsgate, Thanet, and will cater for up to 60, aged 11 to 16 year old children.

The Newington Housing Estate has considerable social and economic problems and great efforts are currently being made to reduce anti-social behaviour and related problems.

I have been contacted by the District Ward Councillors and residents expressing the concern that siting a school for children with behavioural problems could have a detrimental effect on these efforts; I agree totally with these concerns.

As the school catchment area is East Kent, covering Thanet, Dover, Canterbury, Swale, Ashford and Shepway, I feel a more centrally situated site should be sought which would benefit the children by reducing travelling time. I believe it would be much more logical to site the new school in the Canterbury area which would also have the advantage of reducing travelling costs.”

(3) *Comments from Mrs Green*

“I wish to object to the Portal House School planned relocation to Newington Estate on the grounds the travelling time is totally unreasonable.

I understand this is an excellent well run school for children with Social, Behavioural and Emotional difficulties and am perplexed as to what motivates this planned move specifically to Newington Estate in Ramsgate. There have been a huge number of objections expressed to me by local residents and concerns expressed by local District Councillors who have fought hard to raise the profile of the local estate. There are great concerns that this school is being placed on Newington Estate as it is seen as a "problem area". I do hope this local perception is not correct as it would be very unfair on the school too, when we need to raise the profile of both.

I found the argument that most of the children came from the area did not tie up with the statistics I obtained at the end of June - obviously there may be some changes since. With the older age range now included, the number of pupils set to almost double to 60 and with such a wide catchment area this must be difficult to foretell.

Notwithstanding my representations on behalf of residents, my overwhelming concern is the welfare of the children. The prospect of sending children from places as distant as Folkestone, Sheppey, Maidstone, Ashford and Sittingbourne totally horrifies me. I have been asking why a site more central cannot be found to prevent this dreadful twice daily journey for our young people. Somewhere in the vicinity of Canterbury would seem to me to be more sensible as it is more central and a high proportion of pupils did come from the area. When this proposal first came forward I asked what sites had been investigated and was told only the Newington Estate site and one in Margate (which had been dismissed) had been considered.

At a recent SOAB meeting there was much justified concern about the distance children with disabilities would have to travel and it was stated it was important to reduce travelling time as much as possible. This move would involve the vast majority of pupils travelling an enormous distance twice daily, so please consider these children too, when making any decision.”

School Improvement Implications

7. Relocation to the Newington site would provide the opportunity to develop superb facilities within a vibrant educational community combined with a reduction in travelling distances for many students, the move would have a beneficial impact on standards by allowing students to be educated and supported in a first class learning environment with strong community connections.

Equality Issues

8. The existing site and accommodation inhibits delivery of an appropriate curriculum offer over the long term. The new site would allow for all students to have access to their full educational entitlement in purpose-built facilities.

Transport & Environmental Impact, including Community Implications

9. (1) The largest number of students currently at Portal House School, come from Thanet. Given the residential profile of existing students, the overall impact of relocation is likely to be that travelling times would be reduced. Even with Portal House full at 60 pupils, the overall number of pupils is small and many live in the locality. It is not anticipated that the relocation would generate significant problems with traffic or congestion locally. Certainly, the situation in St Margaret's-at-Cliffe would be improved significantly, given the narrow road and difficult access to the existing school site.

(2) The plan is to create new purpose-built accommodation on the footprint of the existing Newington Infants School replacing the existing architecture with aesthetically pleasing functional accommodation, designed in sympathy with the surrounding natural environment.

(3) Development of the former Infant school site to include a new school for Portal house would serve the local community which already provides a significant contingent of the student body.

Proposed Timetable

10. (1) The following timetable would apply, subject to the proposal going forward to public consultation.

Report to SOAB seeking views of public consultation	10 January 2008
Public consultation commences	24 Jan – 6 March
Public meeting(s) in St Margaret's-at-Cliffe And Newington	Mid February
Report back to SOAB	7 May
Public Notice Issued (subject to Cabinet Member decision)	23 May
Public Notice Expires	4 July
Determination by Local Authority	Mid July
Adjudication (if required)	September 2008
Building work commences	
Implementation	September 2009

Recommendations

11. Members are asked to give their views on whether there should be a public consultation on the possible relocation of Portal House School from its existing site at St Margaret's-at-Cliffe to the former Newington Infants School in Thanet.

Martyn Doole
Area Education Officer
(Thanet & Dover)
Tel: (01227) 284461

Background Documents:

None