

Sefton Park Governing Body: Evaluation of Option One, November 2008

The Governing Body has been asked by the Local Authority to evaluate the “Option One” plans for the proposed expansion of the school. In evaluating these plans, Governors considered them from the point of view of optimising the educational experience of the children at the school, which we have been assured by the Local Authority will be the overarching concern.

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1. Executive Summary

- ❖ The Local Authority must acknowledge that the existing plans will need to be modified hugely in order to preserve the spirit and ethos of Sefton Park and produce a school that functions well.
- ❖ The architect must visit the school for a prolonged period to see it in action before any further plans are produced.
- ❖ This is acknowledged to be a “constricted” site. The primary use of the site is as a school, therefore all other discrete non-school functions must be re-located elsewhere, so as to maximise the space available for the school (both its indoor and outdoor space). The school would ideally have a bigger site; it simply does not make sense to deprive it of any of the small site that exists – the school needs all the space.
- ❖ The plan has no coherent concept of the school as a whole, which means that a) it wouldn’t work on an aesthetic and emotional level and b) it wouldn’t function properly. An overall vision or concept needs to be at the heart of the new school.
- ❖ In order to retain a “small school feel” in the new school, the years will be arranged in “villages” which reflect the three phases into which the school is divided. This is shown in the current plan, but the implications need to be thought through better, and delivery significantly improved.
- ❖ Plans for “external” aspects such as traffic must be developed alongside the actual building plans and not considered as last-minute details.
- ❖ The potential to improve both indoor and outdoor provision is recognised, but requires much more thought and design to be feasible.

2. The “Pros” of Option One

As Option One stands, it appears to offer

- a) our own kitchens which should result in better dinners;
- b) improved Foundation Stage delivery through better indoor / outdoor access and bigger classrooms;
- c) access to properly maintained games field for regular Junior use (a legal requirement which is not currently fulfilled by the school).

In an improved design which takes into account all our comments below, a well-designed expanded and refurbished school should be able to offer:-

- a) More play area per pupil on the Sefton Park site itself than currently. (This is also bearing in mind that the paved area and grassed area outside the terrapin do not technically belong to the school as a two form entry school (they are used by the school following negotiation at the time of the last “bulge”), and there might be a danger of them being taken away were we to revert to two form entry.) With dedicated halls and extra hard play space (especially the multi-use games area), it should be possible to improve PE provision within the school site;
- b) Better landscaped green space that is available to all children and usable all year;
- c) Bigger halls with adequate storage which wouldn't have to act as a passageway as at present;
- d) Accessibility and DDA compliance throughout;
- e) Adequate storage areas throughout the school;
- f) More and better placed toilets;
- g) Bigger classrooms relating in a more logical manner;
- h) Staff and leadership offices placed centrally.

However, Option One as it stands does not deliver all these benefits.

3. The “Cons” for Option One – Aspects that would need change / development

a) Evaluation of whole school design

i. Coherence of Overall Plan

The Option One plan lacks any sort of coherence or overall concept for the school – it is impossible to imagine that it will feel like one united school or even a sensible working building. In particular, the balance between the old and new parts is completely lop-sided in terms of thought and design. The school needs to be seen in a systematic and coherent way as a whole. We believe the best overall concept to work on the site would be the idea of a school built around a central courtyard to create a heart / hub for the new design (with the courtyard formed from the existing upper Junior playground and the centre of the new build) plus the “villages” for each of the three phases of the school. The staff and management areas need to be centrally located, relating to this hub.

The following aspects are some of those that need to be taken into account to pull together into a coherent vision. The site as a whole must be carefully considered to make the most of it; at the moment, there are too many odd spaces created which don't mean anything (for example, in these plans the two spaces on either side of the entrance don't look big enough to be usable; there are irrational uses of space in the old building which could be improved in a re-design). Also, the school currently has several exterior entrances / exits (including, for example, one that isn't used from the Infant School at the far end of the corridor to Happy Lane). Thought needs to be given to the best ways for children to move between inside and outside, and how parents / visitors enter and exit the school. Different entrances and exits may perhaps be used for different villages at different times of day. Other options should be considered for the main school entrance; it may be better sited elsewhere in the design, perhaps off St Bartholomew's Rd.

All of these aspects need to be based on a coherent overall vision of how the school would work (resulting from the architect visiting and also detailed discussions with Head / staff).

ii. Courtyard

To give the overall design some coherence, and unify the new and old into a single school, the best way would be some sort of more obvious or explicit courtyard design (not necessarily regular, but clearly related and part of a plan, not just a residual feature after other things have been designed). In Option One, parts of the school are too far from the entrance and Halls, requiring everyone to traipse through most of the building to get to some of the further classrooms. A courtyard would allow more sensible circulation through the building, since it would be possible to access all three of the villages either from the Entrance Hall or from the central courtyard. This would require **a)** more space at the centre of the new build to join onto the existing upper Junior playground to make larger central courtyard area, requiring rethinking of the proposed atrium area (and probably pushing the buildings of the new build out into more of a U shape, i.e. move part of the new build a little further down towards Ashley Down Rd to create the necessary central space); **b)** the current Infant entrance must be joined to the new build with a cloister or covered passage to improve access from the current Infant building to the new part of the school; such a covered passageway is a necessity at **both** ends of the old building to join it to the new building, but the cloister might also be used further around the courtyard to provide a unifying design (and some covered play area in the central courtyard); **c)** relative levels properly taken into account, possibly with stepped levels in new build going down to courtyard.

iii. Phase Villages

These are physical groupings for the three Phases into which the school is divided, ie Early Years (up to Year One), Middle School (Years Two, Three and Four), and Upper School (Years Five and Six).

What makes villages work successfully? The ancillary areas, which provide a degree of independence and so foster the feeling of intimacy. So **each of the three villages** needs a) **associated toilets (very important)**, b) associated IT facilities, c) associated cloakroom space, d) associated small group rooms for flexible use. The exact nature of these needs to be discussed in detail with the Head and staff.

In addition, there must be clearer strategies for the outdoor space and playgrounds, linking it with specific villages at the plan stage and not as an afterthought. The plans of the outdoor space need to acknowledge that year groups will increase from 60 to 90 children. A partly covered outdoor area needs to be created for each of the villages.

The specific siting of each phase village would be a matter for detailed discussion with the Head and staff.

iv. Circulation

Good circulation is crucial to the functioning of the school. Points that must be considered include:- In the Option One plan, parts of the existing school at what is now the Infant end are too far from the entrance / Halls / Administration offices (without going outside – not practical). As noted above, there **MUST** be direct covered access from the new build to **both** ends of the old building. This would be addressed by having a central courtyard space with some sort of covered passageway or cloister going round.

Parents are encouraged to come into school in the morning and in the Infant phase this invariably happens; this entails pushchair traffic as well, and some parents have more than one child. Patterns of traffic through the school need to be considered (perhaps with some sort of one-way system through each “village”), together with the routes from and to the school entrance(s). In addition, there must be a strategy for collection of children at the end of the day – this needs to be discussed in detail with the head.

Children will be eating in the Halls and will then need to disperse to the various playgrounds independently; this means the routes to the various outdoor play areas from the Halls need to be made clear and safe for children on their own (perhaps considering things like colour-coding). Adequate toilets must be accessible from play areas as well as from inside such that staff are happy for children to access them unsupervised.

v. Playgroup

If we had a bigger site, we would welcome the co-siting of the Playgroup. Given the restrictions on space in this incredibly cramped site, however, we very strongly feel that the Playgroup should be re-sited elsewhere (possibly to share the Scout Hut on the Brunel site), as it will be impossible to include the Playgroup anywhere on this restricted site in a way that doesn't by definition take space from the school that it can ill afford to lose. In addition, the logistics of having separate entrances / security / playspace for the Playgroup would make it very difficult to use the site in the most efficient way for the functioning of the school.

b) Specific Essential Requirements to be Incorporated

i. General

- Better design of siting of shared facilities such as libraries; discussion is required with Head and staff as to what facilities are shared by whom and how access to them would work. Also look carefully at siting of staff rooms, Head's office, leadership offices and admin, reprographics room. These should be centrally located.
- Better staff room, which must be re-sited from its current removed location. One possibility to explore is to have two staff rooms, one "chatty" and one for quiet work.
- Meeting room
- Family Room and Medical Room (so that health visitors could make regular visits and to provide a space for inclusion programmes, parenting courses etc)
- Disabled access to the existing upper floor should be built in (either direct, or perhaps by having a two-storey cloister allowing access from the upper floor of the new build).
- Since the existing upper floor is not a sensible place to site the staffroom, consider best use for the space; the most obvious one is staff storage and resource rooms.
- Plan for storage of lunchboxes (where sited, whether mobile or not)
- Plan for access to coats, bearing in mind that children will be going from Hall to play areas after lunch (so cloakroom areas need to be next to play areas, or else on the route to the play areas).
- Necessary IT infrastructure built in.

ii. Halls

- Direct access from outside to the halls, so that community users can access while the rest of the school remains secure (this also requires planning access to a toilet and to simple kitchen facilities).
- Making the halls into attractive, lettable spaces should be borne in mind in their design.
- Storage next to halls for both school use (chairs, tables etc) and other users (eg After School Club resources)
- The After School Club should be consulted about access and storage requirements relating to the small hall.
- Access to new build / halls MUST be covered (passage / cloister) to avoid the need for coats.
- Big hall large enough to hold all of Key Stage Two (ie 360 pupils).

- Relative size of the two halls to be discussed with the Head and staff as the sizes given in Option One are not optimal.
- Halls that will accommodate all children for lunch at two sittings.
- Both halls directly accessible from the kitchen.
- Halls designed to facilitate efficient set-up and clearing-up time for catering staff so that there is the minimum encroachment on the use of halls for teaching.
- Large hall to have retractable stage.
- Large doors from hall leading directly onto courtyard to maximise potential for indoor/outdoor use.

iii. Phase Villages

- Each village to have small rooms for flexible regular and occasional use by children (small groups, music lessons, additional support for individual children, school nurse visits etc).
- Enough toilets in suitable places.
- Adequate IT resources.
- Adequate cloakroom areas for wet coats etc, if possible avoiding busy corridors / passageways.
- Coherent vision of the use of old halls (as they will be after existing classrooms have been enlarged into them).
- Shared rooms for key learning areas for use by more than one class.

iv. Classrooms

- ALL classrooms should meet minimum space requirements. **We question the conclusion that the classrooms in the old building cannot be enlarged.** Almost all the classrooms which face the old halls have two archways in the hall wall (one containing the door) which are clearly **not** structural and could be removed. We feel that with imagination these classrooms could easily be enlarged into the halls; the enlarged sections would be separated from the main classrooms through the arches, but this can easily be worked with as classrooms are already set up for different activities to take place in different areas. There is even scope for flexible walls or sections of walls which could be drawn back as children arrive in the mornings or for other activities when adjoining classes wish to work together.
- All classrooms to have warm and cold water supplies and water fountains.

v. Outdoor areas

- Brunel Field brought up to decent standard for playing field.
- Integrated outdoor learning space for Foundation Stage classrooms, and if possible also Year One.
- Make sure that outdoor space is properly planned, and especially that soft play area is properly landscaped so that it is **usable all year** (bridges, paths), especially under shade of trees. We support the preservation of as many trees as possible, but would also say that some modifications might be needed to make the space actually usable by the school. (If there is excavation for the new building, some of the excavated material might be used on the soft play area to even out levels, even bearing in mind the difficulties of working round existing trees.)
- Make sure all outdoor areas are thought through in terms of how they would be used, and especially in terms of adult supervision at playtimes (taking into account things like size, sightlines, storage for play equipment, ability to “zone” different activities etc).
- Perimeter of grounds must be safe and secure.

- Toilets planned so as to be accessible from play areas as well as from inside.
- Somewhere with cover for parents to wait when they are collecting children; if possible combined with facilities such as notice boards for parents. These areas could double as covered outdoor areas for children at other times of day.
- Service yard is waste of space and needs to be re-thought. It should be possible to get the benefits of dedicated delivery area without sacrificing this whole space.

vi. Transport and Access

- There MUST be a turning round / circle built into the plan; if other measures are taken to control traffic, this should not of itself increase car movement by making it “easier” to drive up here.
- A proper traffic management plan to minimise traffic, protect children and answer residents’ concerns.
- Consider such measures as: traffic lights; drop-off areas, “Park and Stride” remote parking areas (Brunel site, somewhere near St Andrew’s Park) with walking buses; blocking access to Williamson Rd at beginning and end of school day, perhaps with electronically controlled timed bollards to which the residents and the garage have remote access.
- Consider improvements to Ashley Down Rd to make it safer, including re-siting bus stop, better road markings, traffic lights at the bottom of Williamson Rd or moving the pedestrian crossing.
- Include Happy Lane and Derby Rd in the plans.
- Prevent vehicular access into Happy Lane from Derby Rd at peak times for school access (eg 8:30 – 9:30 and 3 – 4 pm)
- Co-operation from parking services; recognition that traffic restrictions will need regular enforcement.
- Consideration of access by emergency vehicles (active parking enforcement is particularly vital here).
- It is essential to put in an alternative access to St Bartholomew’s Rd from Happy Lane so it doesn’t come through school playground (the obvious place would be down the side of the current Scout Hut site). (School could retain direct access to Happy Lane for emergencies.)
- Safe access to Brunel playing field, minimising use of main road (for example improving Happy Lane to its end on Ashley Down Rd), and with changes to main road to make it safe (eg fencing off the pavement for the entire distance that children will have to walk along it from the end of Happy Lane to the Brunel entrance, putting in a zebra crossing at the end of Sefton Park Rd etc).
- Bicycle parking, covered if possible (for both children and staff).
- Staff access to a shower, to encourage cycling.

vii. Management Issues; LA support will be needed to ensure the following outcomes:-

- An agreement with the Cricket Club for the maintenance of the Brunel field to a high enough standard that it could be regularly used by the school. Also, if used by community groups, some sort of clear management structure and booking system. Also clear management regime for Scout Hut / Changing Hut building and agreement about who it belongs to and who is responsible for maintenance.
- A clear management agreement for the school buildings in terms of Head’s management vis-à-vis community users.
- Clear understanding that after-school activities of school get priority for use of school buildings, as part of the extended schools partnerships.

4. Background requirements for the new design which need to be considered when / if it is planned in detail

As these are only feasibility plans, we cannot tell to what extent the features listed here have already been taken into account; however, we consider these to be key requirements in developing any future plans.

Energy efficiency and “environmental friendliness” built in to new design (natural lighting, insulation, geothermal boreholes and pumps). A large amount can be done with good design (planning natural light and choice of materials for example) without incurring extra cost. We would want to know the budget implications for other desirable aspects (such as geothermal bores). Proper consideration of the results of using specific materials (eg if glass used, how will temperature be controlled?)

Use of “sound management”, to reduce noise both for the benefit of the school community and of its neighbours. (Design of spaces, materials used, plantings etc)

Evacuation routes and fire assembly points built in.

More consideration should be given to the levels of the various buildings – they need to be considered especially as a means of uniting the new and old into a coherent whole. Some excavation should be considered so as to a) make the new build relate better to the older building (stepped levels, not just a six-foot difference, for example) and b) the possibility of reducing the overall height so as to lessen the impact on neighbours.

5. Essential Requirements for Building Phase

Physical Issues

- A management plan for the school site during the building works.
- Secure perimeter for building site.
- Maximise all outdoor space that is available all season.
- Consider possibility of using Scout Hut / Scout Hut site temporarily for school use during construction.
- Traffic plan for building works to include;- regular and pro-active co-operation from parking services to enforce parking restrictions; consider temporary lights; delivery restrictions at peak times.
- Consider evacuation routes and fire assembly points during the building works.
- Discuss with the Head how best to accommodate the bulge class once the terrapin is removed.

Management Issues

- A site manager whose details would be circulated to residents etc and who would respond to any problems / emergencies etc including incursions and H&S issues (including out-of-hours on-call)
- Regular checking of site for safety, including at the start of every school day.
- Extra funding to support the Head Teacher and management team.

Janet Bremner, Chair of Governors
21st November 2008