

1.0 Context

Wirral is the eighth largest Metropolitan Council with 327,000 residents and a low rate of population decline. The Wirral Peninsula is bounded on three sides by the Mersey Estuary, Irish Sea and Dee Estuary with a land boundary only with Cheshire. The western side is relatively affluent and contrasts with the eastern areas which have areas of severe decline and deprivation centred around Birkenhead, with the North Birkenhead ward the most deprived in the country in respect of child poverty. Overall the council is the 44th most deprived in England. Unemployment is higher in the eastern areas where a number of large scale initiatives are underway, including the Housing Market Renewal Strategy.

2.0 Pupil numbers

Primary numbers are falling, with a reduction of approximately 3300 pupils forecast by 2007, from the current figure of 27,321. Current occupancy rate is 89%. Secondary numbers are approaching a peak, with a current occupancy rate of 98% putting the system close to full capacity, with a steady reduction forecast from 2005/06 onwards.

3.0 Secondary school provision

No new, additional secondary schools are planned – any modest housing growth can be met via existing provision. The Wirral has a complex provision of secondary provision, with all ability and grammar schools and sixth form provision via the VIth Form College in Birkenhead and school based in other areas. There are 26 secondary schools comprising: 16 community schools, 2 Foundation schools, 4 Voluntary Aided Catholic Schools, 4 Community Special schools and an all-age Community Hospital School. There is also a Pupil Referral Unit. One Catholic Aided School was closed in 2002 and one Community School was closed seven years ago to deal with surplus place issues. There are no denominational High Schools other than the Catholic schools outlined above.

4.0 Recent investment in Secondary provision

Significant recent and current investment comprises four main elements:

- a) By far the greatest is the Wirral PFI scheme, £55 million capital investment, at eight secondary schools and one primary – the eight secondary schools comprising one new build replacement and seven extension/refurbishment works including two consolidations onto single sites. The scheme was one of the first grouped schemes in the country and the provider has experienced serious difficulties in meeting timescales, both phases and end dates. Final completion is now indicated at September 04 (originally Jan 04). This challenging scheme will, when complete, transform school environments in the eight secondary schools which had the most serious Suitability, Condition and temporary accommodation issues. These schools do not form part of our BSF Expression of Interest.
- b) Investment at two schools – Mosslands and Oldershaw, under a mid 1990s bid initiative – Capital Challenge, which consolidated them to single sites from split sites and provided extensive new accommodation. The remaining needs at these schools are included in this BSF Expression of Interest.
- c) Investment in the Catholic Aided schools, following the closure of St Benedict's Catholic Aided School in 2002. Of the four Catholic Aided schools, two are former independent schools which became grant maintained, then aided – Upton Hall Convent has enjoyed major Targeted Capital investment and LEA VCAP investment is planned for St Anselm's. The two other Catholic secondary schools, Plessington and St Mary's are currently enjoying major investment through Targeted Capital and LEA VCAP funding. The remaining needs are included in our BSF Expression of Interest.

- d) Investment at other non PFI schools, using Modernisation, NOF, local capital, Expanding Popular Schools, Laboratory, Staff room, Access, Seed Challenge, Specialist Schools and delegated funding. All of the above combine to provide a significant and diverse onward programme ahead of BSF.

5.0 Implications of current position for BSF

- i) The PFI programme, after consultation, selected schools with the greatest Suitability, Condition and temporary accommodation issues. They are therefore distributed across the peninsula – which results in a similar distribution pattern for the non PFI schools included in this BSF Expression of Interest. However, the compact nature of the peninsula means that the BSF school list could be seen as one group in procurement and geographical terms.
- ii) The initial work programmes put forward reflect a similar approach to that of the PFI works ie. mainly large scale extensions/adaptations to meet Suitability shortfalls and extensive Modernisation/condition elements. This would produce a consistent standard across the LEA, reflect the relatively stable population and geographical distribution, make best use of investment to date outlined at 4.0 above and enable a programme of works to continue ahead of BSF.
- iii) Greater levels of new build and renewal are required in the special sector and this is reflected in this Expression of Interest.
- iv) The LEA will seek further guidance from the DfES and other sources on the best options for those schools currently with the highest combined A and B percentage total.

6.0 Consultation

The consultation ahead of the PFI scheme resulted in the overall prioritization of works across the secondary sector. The principle of “follow on” investment in the non-PFI schools was established some time ago and as outlined at 4(d) above an ongoing programme is in place ahead of BSF. All schools have been circulated with details of the BSF Initiative by the LEA, together with additional clarification of the LEA’s decision to make an Expression of Interest and also to confirm the ongoing programme ahead of BSF, thereby dispelling fears schools may have had that all non urgent works would be put on hold ahead of BSF. All schools (except the PFI schools) have been invited to contribute to their line on the Expression of Interest spreadsheet and a small number have done so. The DfES and additional LEA information has been shared with the Diocesan Bodies and BSF will now be an agenda item at future LEA/Diocesan meetings and AMP group meetings. Further discussion is planned with Headteachers, governors and elected members in Spring 2004.

7.0 Summary

- i) BSF offers a unique opportunity to build on the current and recent investment, particularly the PFI, to complete major investment needs in Wirral secondary schools. Being probably at least half way makes that goal achievable more quickly.
- ii) BSF would bring major investment into the special schools, would support the LEA Special Needs plan and inclusion agenda.
- iii) The PFI means that a pool of LEA staff and Heads have current, extensive and very practical experience of the demands of working with a private sector partner – through good and challenging times and, large scale construction and investment, particularly when the schools involved are ‘live’ sites. BSF offers the opportunity to roll this expertise and support on to the remaining schools.
- iv) As explained at 5(i) above, the PFI school distribution pattern across the borough unknowingly determined the BSF schools list. This results in a spread of schools, with a full range of deprivation from the most extreme, and also a full range of ability and outcomes. The schools in the BSF Expression of Interest, we feel, could be procured in one bundle, manageable in volume, cost and relatively tight geographical spread of the schools.
- v) Clearly, this is the start of a long process, but one which offers the unique opportunity to build on existing recent progress and complete transformation of all the secondary accommodation. We feel we have a good track record in working with the private sector, local partners, schools and the DfES and will welcome further advice, input and comment on our plans to date in a positive manner.