

School Closures in Edinburgh: a briefing from Edinburgh Green Party

June 2009

1. Summary

- Announcements on further school closures in Edinburgh are anticipated before summer of 2009. Greens oppose school closures on any widespread scale.
- Statements on “surplus” school places in Edinburgh are much over-inflated, yet are used to justify reducing the number of schools.
- Closing schools will run counter to measures to increase the number of children choosing active travel modes to school, with consequences for obesity targets and traffic congestion. Edinburgh already performs poorly compared to other Scottish cities in children walking to school.
- Schools are community assets, not just places of learning. Closing them reduces community facilities at a time when other options are reducing as well.
- The long-term demographic and economic trends for the city do not support school closures in the state sector.

2. Introduction

On 16 June the Education, Children and Families Committee of the City Council is expected to give details of future school closures in the city. The budget papers for 2009-10 contained an assumption that four primaries and one secondary would close by 2011¹. This is on top of the three primaries being closed in the course of this current year: Lismore, Bonnington and Westburn.

The city's 3 Green councillors – Alison Johnstone, Steve Burgess and Maggie Chapman – and Green MSP, Robin Harper, vigorously opposed the last major round of closures which was announced in August 2007 and then later withdrawn. This paper explains why Greens do not feel that a further major round of closures is justified.

3. Background

The City of Edinburgh Council struggles to find budget to fund schools adequately. In 2008-09 it imposed a 1.5% cut on devolved school management budgets which, as evidenced by a dossier from parent councils, had immediate negative effects on schools. The City Council planned a further 2% cut in 2009-10 but only withdrew after significant pressure from parents. However, the 1.5% cut remains in place.

The City Council also faces major challenges to build and improve schools. There are currently five schools in need of major refurbishment or replacement. Many more buildings need significant improvements. But the current budget means that it will be years before some schools see the necessary improvements.

As a result, the Council has argued that it is better to spread the pot of money that it does have among fewer schools, the better to fund those that remain in the school estate. This can seem a seductive argument but it is misleading.

¹ This assumption was in the budget papers provided for councillors on 28 November 2008 – “Children and Families Departmental Information Pack Budget 2009-12; page 24.

4. Capacity myths

The City Council believes that schools are under capacity. In particular, it says that, in primary schools there are 9,000 more spaces than there are children².

However, there is no standard method of assessing capacity and it is clear that “capacity” is rather a notional concept. For example, a primary school like South Morningside Primary School is well-known to have severe over-crowding problems. Education Convenor, Marilyne Maclaren has said that *“I hope that our plans to refurbish the janitor's house will go some way to relieving the accommodation pressures felt at this school”*³. Yet, according to the Council's own capacity data, the school has 64 spare spaces!

In truth, the method of estimating capacity is based on almost every space being used for teaching and assuming that every classroom will be filled to the legal maxima. This is quite detached from how schools actually operate.

The capacity myth is even more absurd when one considers the overall direction of school policy. National Government has a stated commitment to reduce class sizes to no more than 18 in primaries 1-3⁴: If this is implemented some of this spare capacity will be absorbed.

Linked to the myth of capacity is the myth of optimal size. Much of the thinking in Edinburgh seems to be driven by a view that larger schools are better. However, there is little real evidence to support this view.

5. Travel to school

Edinburgh has the poorest performance of the 4 main Scottish cities in encouraging children to walk to school. In Aberdeen 62.4% of children walk to school; in Edinburgh the figure is 51.5%. Closing schools which are located within neighbourhoods and forcing children to travel further will reduce the number choosing active means of getting to school. This will run counter to efforts to reduce childhood obesity, reduce traffic congestion and tackle transport-based emissions.

6. Community assets

Greens believe that schools are more than just places of learning between 9am and 4pm. At their best, schools are hubs of community activity. So removing a school not only makes the neighbourhood less attractive to families with or anticipating having children, it also deprives a community of much needed space, at a time when other facilities such as church halls are also closing.

Greens argue for schools to be opened up for greater community use, as a way of embedding them more fully in neighbourhoods. That is why we argued for a reversal of the decision, taken, without consultation in March 2009, to ban community lets of primary schools on Thursday evenings.

² Numbers need to be constantly updated. The capacity of primary schools is estimated to be 33,279 with a roll of 24,535, leaving 8,744 “surplus” spaces. The spare capacity in secondary schools is estimated to be much lower at less than 2,000.

³ Quoted in Edinburgh Evening News, 3 March 2009

⁴ Current class size maxima are 25 in P1 and 30 in P2-3.

7. Demographic and economic trends

Migration data show that Edinburgh has been a net exporter of around 3,000 households per annum to the wider city region. Many of these households will be families with children, seeking respite from Edinburgh's high house prices. That is, some of the difficulties facing schools are a failure of housing policy rather than education policy. In September 2007, Green councillor, Alison Johnstone, asked the City Council to conduct research into the reasons lying behind this trend and what options there might be to retain more families within the city. To date, that request has not been met.

But decisions about schools need also to be based on long term rather than short term horizons. Looking over the long term it is clear that the historical decline in the number of school age children has been arrested and is set to increase dramatically. For example, the General Registers Office for Scotland's figures project that the number of primary school aged children (aged 5-12) will rise from 33,367 in 2009 to 40,167 in 2020: a rise of around 20%.

Not all of these children will go to state schools, of course. A relatively high number of Edinburgh's children go to private school, certainly in the secondary sector⁵. It is unlikely that this proportion will rise, given economic conditions; indeed, there are already reports that private sector primary school rolls are falling – between 2004 and 2008, the number of primary school aged children attending private school in Edinburgh fell by 3.3%⁶.

It is argued that even if we accept that school rolls will rise and that the private sector will not take up the slack, schools still need to close because the trends in population are in certain areas. But that would mean that the City Council would have to be demolishing schools and then, somehow, building new ones at a time when it cannot maintain the current buildings and where leveraging funds from private developers for new school building by way of section 75 agreements is almost impossible⁷. Far better to review catchment areas to reflect demographic patterns than to go through the highly wasteful process of demolition and rebuild⁸.

8. Conclusion

Greens do not say that all school closures are wrong. We recognise that there are circumstances in which a school has declined or lost community support to the extent that it is not in the interests of the children to seek to keep it open.

However, the evidence we have assembled in this paper backs our claim that a sustained and large-scale closure programme in Edinburgh would be ill-conceived. Paying adequately for all schools in the city should not be at the cost of depriving some communities of a school altogether.

⁵ According to the most recent independent school census just under 4,000 children attend private primary school in Edinburgh but the figure for secondary schools is over 6,000. Some children living in Edinburgh may attend private school elsewhere.

⁶ Independent School Census: further data obtained on request.

⁷ Section 75 agreements are agreements in the planning system whereby a developer, typically involved in new housing development, agrees to fund the cost of services like water and new roads, but also community services like leisure centres and schools.

⁸ Leading architects have condemned the environmental costs of the UK's demolish and rebuild development culture, such is the embodied energy in existing buildings.