

## Appendix 3

Dear Sir/Madam

As part of the consultation in to school places in Halton I would like to put forward the following points for consideration.

The standard of secondary education in the town has really improved over recent years and each school in the town has something to offer. My concerns are to do with fairness, risk to meeting strategic objectives, risk to meeting the requirements of the schools admissions code.

### **Admission criteria:**

Schools admissions code section 1.14 states that catchment areas MUST be reasonable. Must makes this a legal requirement. Reasonable is more subjective, however the dictionary definition refers to "fair" more than once and from a legal perspective reasonable it often referred to as the "man on the street test". So, if you asked someone what they thought would they consider something to be fair in the context of the situation.

Taken alone each school sets out a clear and reasonable admissions criteria, based on distance for 2 schools and faith/ partner schools for the other.

However – as there is just over 1 mile between the two schools that specify distance as their main criteria I do not see how this can be fair and therefore reasonable.

Our town is ~ 31 square miles yet children and families living in less than half of that space ~ 13 square miles have a choice of the school, some a choice of all three. Yet others, outside the distance boundary have no choice at all and if they have no faith they are 9<sup>th</sup> on the list of the other, faith, school in the town.

To illustrate with some examples, (for simplicity the catchment boundary is considered to be for both academies to be around a mile but is known to be less than that in some years and Wade Deacon is set at a maximum of 1600m):

*Child A – Lives within ~ 1 mile of both OCA and Wade Deacon and is Catholic baptised/ of faith – Full choice of 3 schools*

*Child B – Lives within ~ 1 mile of both OCA and Wade Deacon and is not baptised/ of faith – Choice of 2 Academy schools though able to choose to be considered a space at the faith school if wishes, though 9<sup>th</sup> on the criteria list.*

*Child C – Lives within 1 mile of either OCA or Wade Deacon and is baptised/ of faith – Choice of either an academy place or a place at faith school*

*Child D – Lives over ~ 1 mile from both OCA and Wade Deacon is baptised Catholic – Meets the 4<sup>th</sup> criteria selection to choose a place at faith school*

*Child E – Lives over ~ 1 mile from both OCA and Wade and has no faith – No choice of academy school and 9<sup>th</sup> on the list to receive a place at the faith school.*

So against the admissions code is it fair and therefore reasonable that:

A portion of families and children get a choice of 3 schools and some children and families get no choice what so ever?

That distance is used to differentiate yet catchment areas overlap so significantly one even passes the gate of the other school?

## Appendix 3

That families and children can use faith and choose to baptise to take advantage primary school places then choose to not use faith when choosing a secondary school?

That children who don't have faith have their options limited?

That some children and families can have the empowerment and feeling of being in control of their own destiny through choice where others feel they have to take with whatever is left?

Is it fair that one school has a sibling rule when another does not?

\*This is not a question of advantaged children vrs disadvantaged children as children of all socio-economic backgrounds are affected by lack of choice.

Steps must be made to change catchments to offer a fairer distribution of choice.

### **Strategy:**

Overall Halton is operating at 87% capacity in secondary schools. Widnes schools are suffering from oversubscription, showing the demand for places. Runcorn has more secondary school places available than Widnes yet the population of school age children (up to 19) is roughly the same.

Within the councils own strategy, they state that a reasonable distance for children over 8 to travel to school is 3 miles. Although it maybe 3 miles as the crow flies from some areas as there is a body of water to cross no school in Runcorn offers reasonable traveling distance to many parts of Widnes and therefore the towns provision should be considered separately.

If you split the towns there is a high risk that capacity of the schools in Widnes does not meet demand. There are 870 primary school places available vrs 805 high school places (with some of those high school places earmarked for Catholic children in Speke and Cronton) so there is a risk of capacity not meeting demand.

Although there are more exports than imports in the town has any consideration been given to if this was voluntary, e.g. wanted to leave the town for school or by having no choice? Can we really rely on this in the future as schools around the town become more in demand as houses continue to be built closer to Penketh and Rainhill for example.

Also in the strategy the long term view considers the declining birth rate, but does not reference any forward considerations about changing population demographics. Due to the housing boom.

### **Risk:**

*Section 2.25 of the schools admissions code states: Where a maintained school or Academy is to be closed, the local authority must collaborate with all schools in their area to consider the best way to secure provision for children in other local schools*

Fairfield high was closed in 2010 – long before I moved to the town. However, this would have been the secondary option for my family to choose as it served our side of Widnes. It closed and for a while Wade Deacon covered my side of Widnes, which includes many boroughs such as Farnworth, Crows wood, Halton view, Weates Close etc.

## Appendix 3

For those of us on this side of the town unless we have faith, especially Catholicism, we are at risk of being left in a no mans land of priority for school spaces. Too far away to meet the distance criteria of any school either in Widnes or neighbouring towns. Of no faith so at the bottom of the list of admission criteria for P&P.

P&P's reputation has been building over recent years with the introduction of new leadership. Results and ethos are all showing that it is good school and one that is sure to become increasingly sought after if this momentum stays . This school selects on faith and does not specify that you have to live in Widnes. So children from surrounding towns who are baptised Catholic could start to choose a place at this school.

Other schools in neighbouring towns are either too far away to access reasonably and/or state distance as their selection criteria. These are in towns where there is a housing boom and many houses are being built closer to the schools.

Schools in other towns are becoming increasingly not an option so something must be done to ensure a fair and even distribution of schools places within Widnes. It makes no sense to think a child could get a place at school 2 – 5 miles away that differentiates on distance when a place at a school 1 mile away isn't an option.

Note: If either Penketh or Rainhill are mandated to take children from Widnes it is not in their publises admissions criteria and this therefore does not meet the legal requirements of the school admissions code.

My ask is that as part of this consultation you:

Consider the fairness of the criteria that selects pupils for secondary schools. How can a situation that allows "child A" a choice of 3 schools and "child E" no choice be a fair and reasonable way of managing access to school places in a town?

Consider that children have already been split by distance and consider allocating feeder schools so that the situation is fairer, more evenly distributed and children and parents have certainty about the future. Something that is even more vital in this post pandemic world.

Consider how the council will meet its obligation to provide a school place to all children if something doesn't change in the admissions criteria of the 3 schools.

Look at the disparity between Runcorn and Widnes – Runcorn has more schools, more available places, smaller class sizes, smaller schools, but a smaller population and a similar, though smaller, school age population.

Consider that investment in school facilities (primary and secondary) and more secondary spaces are needed in Widnes to meet the demand for spaces.

Consider that Runcorn should not be included in school capacity planning of Widnes as few children in the town would have a Runcorn school either 3 or 2 miles away as defined in the school strategy. So capacity in Runcorn should be irrelevant to the consideration of capacity in Widnes.

I sincerely hope that the points raised are debated and that all points are carefully and respectfully considered.