

Area Planning Policy Team  
Department of Education  
4th Floor  
Rathgael House  
Bangor  
Co. Down  
BT19 7PR

Thursday, 13 June 2019

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Development Proposal 584: St Mary's High School, Brollagh**

At the meeting of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (4 June 2019) and the Policy and Resources Committee Meeting (12 June 2019), Members strongly opposed the proposal stated within the 'Case for Change' document, for:

'St Mary's High School, Brollagh, to discontinue with effect from 31 August 2020 or as soon as possible thereafter.'

**Effects of Uncertainty**

The Council notes that the future of this school has been the subject of several consultations exercises over the recent past, with each consultation process resulting in additional confusion and uncertainty for the future of the school. This has resulted in many parents within the catchment area deciding to send their children to other schools, despite St Mary's being their preferred option (in case the school closed, and their children had to move schools mid-term).

Several strategic documents for Northern Ireland outline the importance of rural schools, like St Mary's High School (Brollagh). Outcome 14 of the draft Programme for Government aims to 'give our children and young people the best start in life', whilst the Fermanagh and Omagh 2030 Community Plan aims to '...ensure that we have the right number of schools in the district and that they are of the right size, time and in the right place, to ensure pupils receive the best possible education'.

## **Rural Isolation**

St Mary's High School provides an educational opportunity to young people in an area that is significantly adversely impacted upon by rural isolation. The local 'Super Output Areas' (and catchment areas) are ranked highly in terms of the deprivation measure 'Access to Services':

**Belcoo and Garrison** (ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> overall in Northern Ireland).

**Beleek and Boa** (ranked 14<sup>th</sup> overall in Northern Ireland).

**Derrygonnelly** (ranked 50<sup>th</sup> overall in Northern Ireland).

(Statistics taken from the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service)

By removing yet another key service from these more deprived areas of Northern Ireland, it will only exacerbate the existing levels of disadvantage experienced by the local community.

## **Transport**

The Council is concerned in relation to the lack of emphasis that has been placed on the additional travel times that will be experienced by pupils in the area travelling to their nearest school.

There will be a significant impact on pupils within the area, currently attending (or enrolled for) St Mary's High School in relation to transport/travel and how this will impact on extending their school days. If children within the area (particularly the more isolated areas) are forced to travel further afield (i.e. to Enniskillen) to attend school, they will automatically be facing substantially longer school days. They will have to leave earlier in the morning (often 7.10am or before) and they may not return until later evening (i.e. 5.00pm or after). Such journeys are clearly outside the recommended travel time of 45 minutes. Their more urban-based counterparts will automatically have a much shorter school day, as well as not having to experience stress/difficulties that the further transport/travel arrangements may create.

This will create an inequality almost immediately – with rural dwelling pupils, and their families, experiencing additional stress because of their locality, with those more urban based pupils and families not experiencing these issues.

St Mary's has a high percentage of children on the SEN register who would be particularly impacted upon by any increase to their school day.

Safe and accessible transport to and from school for children is essential and in many rural areas, particularly within the Fermanagh and Omagh District, it is a necessity, with many families relying on it. Therefore, the Council is concerned that

little, or no, consideration has been given to new transport routes for pupils who will be travelling to different schools. It is unacceptable that with one academic year left until the proposed closure, parents are still unaware of the potential increase to their child's school day as well as how their children will get to and from school.

The Council is also concerned that the Department, the Education Authority and CCMS have consistently failed to address the issue of extracurricular activities. The fact that there is a 'late bus provided (from Enniskillen to Belleek) at least once per week is irrelevant. The pupils will still have to make their way from the bus to their homes at a much later time, increasing the risk for accidents and incidents. Many extracurricular activities (such as sports) are provided on more than one evening per week, adding to the already increased school day and potentially impacting on their concentration, and achievement, levels.

## **Finance**

Council notes the following comments within the "Case for Change" Closure Proposal:

"There will be additional transport costs as pupils normally attending St Mary's HS will require transport to an alternative school. The EA has noted that the cost of this cannot be determined at this point, as a service to transport 100 extra pupils per year would have to be specially commissioned"

"Some adjustments to accommodation at St Fanchea's College and St Joseph's College may be necessary to cater for the additional pupils. However, St Joseph's College has sufficient capacity to take all boys who would opt to go to that school. Additional accommodation at St Fanchea's College (for girls) in the form of a modular building, if required, would cost approximately £100,000 - £120,000. As a permanent build, this would cost approximately £150,000 - £180,000."

Council would strongly recommend that at the very least, an indicative costing could be made available in relation to transport provision, based on the costs incurred on similar routes within the district. This would then enable consultees to reach a more informed view in relation to the financial costs which will be incurred should the School be closed.

## **Equality Considerations – Gender**

As St Mary's School is a mixed-gender school, both males and females have equal access to the KS4 subjects which are offered. Should the pupils transfer to St Fanchea's and St Joseph's Schools which are the same sex schools with which the document makes comparisons, the following adverse impacts would ensue:

1. Females would not have access to Construction GCSE ICT GCSE, OS Engineering, OS Design and Creativity or OS Construction.
2. Males would not have access to Construction GCSE ICT GCSE OS Business and Services and OS Design and Creativity.

The effect of such changes would be to limit career choices to the more traditional routes at this important stage in the educational journey, further exacerbating traditional gender stereotyping.

## **Conclusion**

The Council strongly objects to the proposals to close St Mary's High School (Brollagh) from 31 August 2020. The Council feels the proposal and reasoning outlined within the Case for Change document is unfavourably biased against schools in isolated rural areas, which provide an invaluable service for many within the local community. Many of the sustainability factors (including ideal numbers) appear to favour more urban-based schools.

The fact that St Mary's High School has been the subject of consultation and speculation for several years, despite its very good academic achievement, is unacceptable. This ongoing speculation has damaged the school's reputation and pupil enrolment.

The Council understands the need for reform of services to ensure our children and young people are afforded the best educational opportunities, however this will not be achieved by closing a St Mary's High School which provides such an invaluable service to an isolated rural community.

The Council also notes that the Education Authority gave an undertaking to take a Community Planning approach to any proposals for the rationalisation of Schools, but this has not been evidenced in the decision to close St Mary's High School.

The Council notes that the school community is working with NICIE to progress the option for an integrated solution and calls upon the Department to delay the proposed Closure date in order to facilitate the ongoing work to consider the potential for the development of an Integrated Educational Complex, which would strengthen the sustainability of the School in the future.

Yours sincerely