

# Edinburgh councillor blogs – Cllr Mary Campbell

Cllr Mary Campbell is Green councillor for Portobello/Craigmillar and is the Green Group education spokesperson.

Here she writes about the announcement that the council is planning to consult on the possible closure of some schools and replacement of others in the west and south west of the city.

*The controversy around the schools review in west and south west Edinburgh could, and should, have been avoided argues Mary Campbell.*

*Even in the seven months since being elected as Green councillor for Portobello/Craigmillar, it seems to me that many disputes in which the council finds itself are a consequence of really poor engagement with people affected by changes.*

*Take the current schools review in west and south west Edinburgh, for example. It has dominated social media and local press in the week since it was unveiled, with most attention being focused on the proposal to close both high schools in Currie and Wester Hailes (WHEC) to be replaced with one new school, along with some changes to catchment for other high schools. Quite understandably, many people in both communities, having grown up with a local high school, have reacted with dismay to this unheralded news.*

*In all of the debate so far I have not heard anyone question the need to increase high school capacity – indeed, it has been well-trailed in recent years with lots of additional building at primary schools to cope with rising P1 intakes. And seven years later, well, it is hardly a surprise, is it?*

*Edinburgh is a fast growing city and schools – both primary and secondary – have to evolve to keep up.*

*The figures are stark. In September 2016 the number of secondary school students was 18,145. By 2026 it is projected to increase to over 24,000, outstripping the absolute capacity of the secondary schools at just over 22,000. Crucially, unlike earlier population cycles this is not expected to ebb and flow – the pattern of growth is projected to continue.*

*Nor have I heard anyone claim that the buildings at Currie and WHEC have indefinite shelf-life. Like far too many postwar buildings the decades have not been kind to them. Having been a pupil at one such building – Portobello High – and now seeing the new school there I can vouch for the difference a new school building can make.*

*So in Currie the school condition surveys earlier in 2017 have identified that a new building is needed. In WHEC (and Balerno High) improvements to the buildings are recommended.*

*So if the twin drivers of rising numbers of secondary school-aged children and the need to modernise the school buildings are accepted why is there now such a controversy?*

*The answer lies in the process, I believe. As the Green spokesperson on Education and member of Education Committee, I approved, as did all political parties, a paper back in August 2017 which set out a number of challenges for secondary schools, including Castlebrae, Trinity, Boroughmuir and Gaelic medium education.*

*In the west of the city, the paper highlights that the new Queensferry High, scheduled for 2020, cannot cope with the scale of population growth so a new high school in west Edinburgh is needed. In south west Edinburgh the scale of growth is much less pronounced – by 2026 only another 77*

secondary school pupils are projected (just under 4 standard classes worth) – so it is school condition that seems to loom largest.

That paper in August promised an informal consultation on options with a report and possible full statutory consultation being kicked off in December.

This was largely repeated at the October Education Committee. Councillor workshops were scheduled for the October school holidays and workshops with school communities were to be set up.

In neither report was the option of closing two schools to be replaced by a single school even hinted at.

Given the above description imagine my surprise when the next news I received was a phone call from The Evening News on Friday 24 November asking for a comment on the schools review as just published on the council website. That is despite being the Education lead for my group and a member of Education Committee. The other Green councillor on the committee, Gavin Corbett, only found out about it at the same time as he is a parent at Tynecastle High School, which is affected by some knock-on catchment changes.

So much for keeping councillors in the loop. The same seems to be the case with consultation with school communities which is now promised between 9 January and 9 February rather than in advance of any ideas being published.

So forgive me if claims by the SNP-Labour council that this is “informal consultation only” ring a little hollow. Proper consultation does not involve issuing (with no prior warning) a detailed blueprint, with only some minor variations. It means setting out the challenges faced (outlined above) in front of school communities and walking through with them all of the possible ways they might be addressed. My instinct is that they’ll get the issues of rising rolls, of improvements

*needed and even that budgets are limited. And those will inform the options that are then put out formally. That is what the best consultations – real consultations – do.*

*So where does this leave the review issued a week ago? It already looks to be a non-starter, given the reaction and given the failings outlined above. In some ways that is frustrating because doing nothing is an option no one wants and, in a large package of proposals, there are some ideas that many parents will welcome.*

*And this is just the start. The west and south west of the city is just the first of a number of reviews that need to consider secondary school capacity. The quality of buildings, the need for more capacity, the need for catchment areas to flex with changing populations all need to be in the mix.*

*But the council needs to learn and learn fast from this botched process.*