

**Braco Primary School Parent Council**  
**Committee Meeting Minutes**  
**Monday 27<sup>th</sup> February 2023 6:00pm**  
**Braco Primary School**

Present: Becca MacRae (Chair), Dominic Edward (Secretary), Adrian Davidson (Treasurer), Gillian Nixon (Committee Member), Rhona Nuttall (Committee Member), Kirsty Binnie (Acting Head Teacher), Craig Torrens (Principal Teacher)

**1. School Estate Update from PKC.**

An update from the project team, received on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2023, explained that land negotiations were ongoing with issues that still required to be addressed. The update informed that, if unable to secure land, the intention would be to refurbish and extend the current school. The timeline was looking nearer to 3 years, so completion by late 2025 would be challenging.

A further update on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2023 stated:

*"We had a meeting yesterday but only with the agent, we did get a bit more clarity around the trees and we have a potential solution should the felling not happen of PKC ownership of the verge where the trees are and an agreement of access rights. The agent is establishing the timing for a felling licence decision."*

AD noted that this update was consistent with his personal communications. It would appear that matters are working themselves out, with multiple solutions now being discussed, so that the outlook would appear positive.

It was questioned whether the update was correct in stating that the alternative option would be to refurbish and extend the current school if PKC were unable to secure land, rather than a new build on the existing state. GN/RN would seek clarification. *[The project team has responded since this meeting to confirm this should have stated a replacement school on the existing site.]*

**2. Information Request**

The meeting discussed information received from PKC in response to an enquiry made by DE in a personal capacity. The request covered various aspects of the new school estate project, condition of the existing estate and village hall extension.

RN & GN felt that there was nothing of great concern to them in this information.

Amongst the information received was a document showing the estimated timeline for the project. DE explained the project team had estimated the time from land purchase agreement to building handover would be closer to 3½ years, rather than the 3 years that had been communicated to parent council in a meeting with the project team on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2022. The timeline also shows that to achieve a handover in Oct 2025 the project team estimated they would have needed a land purchase agreement by April 2022 and an options decision by July 2022. Because of this, DE felt it was disingenuous that the project team had told parent council in November 2022 that they were working to an opening of the school in 2025 - as a land purchase agreement and options decision had not been completed at that time.

RN/GN disagreed. Their recollection of the meeting in November 2022 was that although a working date of 2025 had been given, the project team stressed that timescales had the very real possibility of being delayed. KB – who had also attended that meeting - agreed with this sentiment.

DE also felt that - due to concerns over planning permission, road access, drainage and finance – it was unlikely that the proposal to build on the new site would proceed as planned.

From information received, DE explained that in Nov 2022 - and contrary to communications from councillors at the time - the project team did not have a cost estimate for the new build project. DE felt that this should raise concerns about affordability, noting that costs for previous options (refurbishment, new build on existing site and Greenloaning decant) had all been significantly underestimated.

AD suggested that Parent Council should be thinking how we can work proactively to help ensure this project is delivered.

### **3. Future Strategy**

Those present agreed that the best way parent council can move forward on this issue is to help represent all parent's views. It was proposed that efforts would be made to share information about the school estate project with parents. Parent Council would then gather opinions, comments and questions through a variety of methods – email, whatsapp, drop in sessions/parent contact evening, online survey etc. A summary of these response and questions could then be shared with the project team in advance of a meeting. GN/RN would contact PKC to arrange a meeting. KB suggested that it would be better for this meeting to be separate from a routine Parent Council meeting so that enough time could be given to address the issues.

There was discussion to what extent parent council should be engaging with the wider community on the school estate. AD was of the opinion that this project should be viewed as a community endeavour, because, for example, concerns such as the future of the village hall would affect the whole community. Failing to address these issues could affect how the project progresses. There are also people in the community with relevant knowledge who could make a valued contribution. It was noted that the community has not been consulted on the school estate transformation project since 2017, when the prospect of having a new build on a new site was not a considered option. Everyone agreed that we want to work with the wider community moving forward, we need to ensure that our primary responsibility as Parent Council is to represent and express the views of parents in the community.

GN confirmed that she would ask the project team for more information about when wider consultation of the community would be arranged by PKC (a 'User Reference Group'). Parent Council has been consistently told this is not possible at this stage. BM suggested that the scope for wider interactions with the community should perhaps be looked into. GN said she would continue to ensure the project team is aware that some parents would like to see a wider consultation/User Reference Group set up sooner rather than later.

## Braco School Estate – Information Request 2022

Concerned that the project team at PKC have not provided frank and honest information about the new and existing school estate in Braco, I submitted a request for further information at the start of November 2022. The response to this request was completed in Feb 2023. A summary of the enquiries I made and my interpretation of the responses I received are as follows.

*Background:* In October 2021, the project team provided Braco Parent Council (BPC) with a list of issues raised by planning following a pre-application enquiry for the new build school. These were that the site was outside the settlement boundary; is within a historic garden; is in an area of archaeological interest; requires a new access point from the main road; and is within view of a listed building. The email from the project team included that *"We have had a relatively positive response from planning."* and *"The only one that we might have difficulty with is the archaeology"*. BPC expressed concern that these issues could take time to resolve and asked for more detail on agreed next steps. The project team replied with scant detail on how these issues would be overcome, reiterating that *"...the project team felt that the planning response was positive."*

### **1. I asked how the project team proposed to obtain permission to build a new school outside the settlement boundary, in a historic garden and within view of a listed building?**

I received a copy of the pre-application response from planning. The project team were advised that building outwith the settlement boundary could be permissible if it were demonstrated that there are no other suitable sites. Building within a historic garden and within view of a listed building could be permissible depending upon the quality of design, finish and landscaping. Historic Environment Scotland (HES) and the Conservation Planner would be consulted on any proposal.

From meeting notes provided to me, to achieve planning permission the project team acknowledges a need to produce a report demonstrating a specific need; complete a detailed heritage impact assessment; and potentially appoint a heritage consultant/external planning consultant. I have not received any information to show that the team has consulted with HES, though they have received feedback from a Conservation Officer within Planning & Development at PKC. The response of the Conservation Officer does not advise against building on this site but does include that *"I've had a look at the site and think there are some potential issues."* and *"There is limited scope to develop this site in a way that would protect its existing character..."*. This correspondence, from March 2022, is presumed to predate the decision to include a hall in the proposed build.

In other correspondence, an architect working on the project has stated that *"...the existing school site is not too small for development, but rather smaller than optimal for this size of school. Although not ideal, the existing school site should accommodate a new school if it is found that the current proposed site is unsuitable."* This statement could be relevant to arguments that there are no other suitable sites.

Though the information I received may cast doubt on the project team's claim that this issue can be overcome without difficulty; I did not receive any information that caused me to think obtaining permission would be impossible.

### **2. I asked for details of how the new road access would be constructed and whether they had any correspondence from the roads department that would indicate plans would likely be acceptable.**

The project team informed me that that initial plans for the road access have been drawn up in accordance with relevant guidance. These plans were not disclosed to me. In meeting notes the project team acknowledged that they still need to calculate visibility splays and carry out a speed transport survey. I was not provided with any information to indicate the project team had consulted the roads department yet.

Whilst the information I received may cast doubt on the project team's claim that this issue can be overcome without difficulty; I did not receive any information that caused me to think obtaining permission to construct this road access would be impossible.

### **3. I asked whether any drainage design had that would address concerns of building on a site that floods regularly.**

*Background:* The proposed site of the new school is known locally to regularly become waterlogged/flooded. A risk of surface water flooding for part of the site is recorded on the SEPA flood risk maps. The neighbouring village hall is known to flood on occasion and in 2011 PKC installed a new drainage system under the stage; though the hall has been known to flood since. Following rapid snow melt in 2023, a torrent of water was documented on social media flowing from the site, past the village hall onto Feddal Road.

*Response:* The project team is aware that an area to the south boundary of the site is recorded by SEPA as being at high risk of surface water flooding. The team has also commissioned an environmental report that contains a map showing areas at high risk of surface water flooding to both north and south of the plot. I was told that the project team has not yet drawn up a drainage plan for the site. I was provided with copies of correspondence between the project team, an external consultant engineer and a flood engineer within PKC. This correspondence is general in nature, discussing potential drainage solutions (e.g. soakaway or directly into the Knaik – which would require attenuation), also that adjustments to finished floor level may be required. However, discussions were non-specific and appeared to be based solely on theoretical risks of flooding indicated in the SEPA flood plan rather than knowledge of flood events that have actually occurred at or near to the site. For example, correspondence from the PKC flood engineer advises that even though SEPA maps indicate surface water risk these may not occur in reality. The same engineer also noted that the Braco Hotel cellar is recorded as being flooded in 2006, but makes no mention of flooding in the Village Hall next to the site.

Despite drainage plans not having been drawn up, I was assured that the project team has taken account of additional costs which may be incurred. These estimated costs were not disclosed to me. I was not provided with any information to suggest that the boundaries of the land being purchased were designed to account for the potential space required to accommodate a drainage system.

**4. I asked for a copy of the most recent cost estimate for the project and any information that would confirm the currently anticipated costs are affordable.**

*Background:* The project team has previously underestimated the cost of works to transform the school estate at Braco. For example, the options appraisal published in March 2018 suggested a cost of £1.6m to refurbish the current school buildings and £129k to prepare Greenloaning Primary School for a decant. Subsequent cost estimates in Nov 2019 and Feb 2020 came in at £3.6m and £734k respectively. The project team also appeared to have underestimated the costs of building an extension to Braco Village Hall (see point 7 below). This is potentially relevant as it has been widely reported in the media that soaring costs are putting the PKC capital budget under intense pressure, placing the future of some school estate projects in jeopardy.

*Response:* I was initially told that *“The cost for the project has been calculated using BCIS and inflationary rates forecast to the time of building.”* Unsatisfied with this response I asked for a copy of these figures. I was then told *“...we have not set a budget for the project.”* In final clarification I was told that *“I can confirm that the council did not hold details of cost estimates at the time that your request was submitted.”* I was also not provided with any information to show that anticipated costs are affordable – that is, no information that would indicate the level of financial resource set aside for this project in capital budgets, if any.

At the same time I submitted this information requested I had also contacted Councillor John Rebbeck (Convenor of the Learning & Families Committee) for reassurance about the project. The response I received was that *“Budgets are becomingly increasingly tight but Braco Primary has been budgeted for and the timescales appear realistic.”* I also recall that Councillor Keith Allan made similar claims about finances at the BPC meeting in Nov 22.

**5. I asked for a copy of the timescale for the project and any information that was used to produce these estimates.**

*Background:* The options appraisal recommending the school estate be improved at Braco was published in March 2018. The proposed date for completion of this work has been pushed back on at least 3 occasions since then. In a meeting with the project team in Nov 2022, BPC were told that the build would take from 24 to 36 months following an agreement to purchase the land (12-18 months design/planning & 12-18 month build). The project team also gave a working target date of 2025 for opening a new school. The 2025 target has been further assured by Councillor Keith Allan in subsequent BPC and Community Council meetings.

*Response:* I was provided with a copy of a high level programme for the project giving a timeline for the works. The project team declined to disclose the qualifications of the author, the date it was produced, the information upon which it is based or any caveats/assumptions that might be expected for this programme to be interpreted. Nevertheless, the total duration of the programme is shown as being 181 weeks (approximately 42 months/3½ years). The timeline indicates that to achieve the target of completion in Oct 2025, an options decision would need to have been made by Jul 2022. I was not provided with any information demonstrating a 24 to 36 month timescale. I was also told that “the recent proposal to increase size of the building and site would affect the construction period in the next programme revision.”

## **6. I asked for information about maintenance of the existing school buildings.**

*Background:* Scottish Government guidelines recommend that a full condition survey of all school buildings is carried out every 5 years and that intermediate condition surveys are conducted annually. Buildings are graded on a scale from A to D according to national guidelines and this information is collated from all local authorities each year ([School estates: condition reporting core facts - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-estates-condition-reporting-core-facts/pages/2.aspx)). The last full condition survey of Braco Primary School was conducted in Feb 2017 when the school was graded B. A mechanical and electrical survey in Nov 2017 noted that heating and electrical systems were nearing the end of their expected lifespans and items of essential work items were recommended. A structural survey in Nov 2019 recommended repairs to roof flashings, loose slates, localised repointing and stone repairs. Recommended repairs to roof flashings and loose slates appeared not to have been completed – loose slates are clearly visible and there have been leaks in the school since the survey. Recommended repointing and stone repairs also appeared not to have been completed. Since submitting this information request stonework has fallen into mid lane and a hole is now visible in the 2 storey gable end.

*Response:* I was told that all roof repairs were completed by April 2022 and that other repairs identified in the Nov 2019 structural survey are currently being programmed. I asked for evidence that roof repairs had been completed. No evidence of the alleged repairs was provided and no explanation given for why this could not be provided. It was further claimed that there have been no reported leaks in the building since Nov 21. I received a comprehensive summary of work being done to maintain and service the heating and electrical systems in the school.

The next full condition survey of Braco school was due in Feb 2022. This was not completed. I have also been told that the most recent intermediate annual survey was carried out in 2019, more than 3 years ago. I was informed that the reason for delays in performing condition surveys was due to the Covid-19 pandemic. No information to support this claim was provided. Alternatively, Parent Council was informed in Feb 2023 that delays to completing the condition survey at Braco were due to uncertainty around the new school project.

The claim that school condition surveys were paused due to the pandemic lockdowns appears inconsistent with reported data. PKC completed 15 full condition surveys in 2020, 11 of these being after the first lockdown started on 23<sup>rd</sup> March. Yet, as lockdown restrictions eased only 1 full condition survey was completed in the whole of 2021 and none were completed between Jan and Apr 2022. Furthermore, delays to school condition surveys were not similarly experienced by other local authorities. In the April 2022 submission of school estate statistics to the Scottish Government - 23 out of the 82 schools across PKC (28%) did not have an up to date condition report. This contrasts with many other authorities reporting up to date condition survey data for 100% of their schools – including Stirling, Falkirk, Angus, Clackmannanshire and Dundee.

## **7. I asked for all information the council holds about the proposed extension to Braco Village Hall.**

*Background:* A proposed extension to the rear of Braco Village Hall has been promised for many years now. In a meeting of the Community Council in June 2022 it was reported that construction would take place in summer 2022. This never transpired. Works to create a new doorway from an existing window in the kitchen commenced but were left boarded up until Feb 2023.

*Response:* Plans for the extension were initially delayed as the council needed to acquire a small sliver of land from the neighbouring landowner. The council acquired this land in June 2020. There is no record of any progress being made on the project between June 2020 and late 2021. In January 2022, the project officer messaged colleagues and a member of the Community Council saying that work was proposed to take place during summer 2022. A site meeting was arranged with a member of the Community Council in May 2022. In minutes of the Community Council meeting in June 2022 a message was relayed to the community that construction would commence at the end of June 2022

and that a contractor was organised. However, the information I have received shows that designs for the extension were not approved by structural engineers until July 2022 and I was not provided with any information to suggest a contractor had been appointed. The public register shows that a building warrant application was not made until August 2022.

At some point a decision was made to pause this long standing project. I have been told that the council does not hold any information about when this decision was made, who made the decision or why it was made. I have been told that the only correspondence about this decision was made verbally. I have not been provided with any information to indicate that any community group (e.g. community council, hall committee, parent council) was either consulted on this decision or informed about the decision at the time it was made. Parent Council were informed of this decision in a meeting at the start of Nov 2022. The reason given was that the hall extension project is now subject to decisions on the wider school transformation project. Correspondence shows that the member of community council who had been liaising with project officers to help deliver this project was not informed about the decision to pause until the end of November. This was only after the community council member made contact to request an update on why works hadn't taken place over the summer.

In March 2019, a quantity surveyor in PKC estimated the cost of the proposed extension at about £60k. Correspondence in April 2022, more than 3 years later, suggests that the same cost estimate was being assumed without any adjustment for inflation. A cost plan from a construction company in August 2022 quoted a cost of just over £134k. I have not been provided with any information to indicate that sufficient financial resources were available to cover the costs of this project.

I have not been provided with any information to explain why work to create a new external door from the kitchen commenced in 2022 but ceased abruptly and was left boarded up. Advice available online from PKC Building Standards advises homeowners that any work to alter the external wall of a building requires a building warrant. There is no record in the online register of a building warrant being approved for this doorway when work commenced. It is possible that the installation of this doorway was included in the building warrant for the extension. That warrant application was submitted in August 2022, approved on 14<sup>th</sup> Feb 2023 and a new external door have been installed shortly thereafter.

Dominic Edward Feb 2023