

National Autistic Society Rotherham Branch
Rotherham

rotherham@nas.org.uk

2nd January 2014

Dear Mrs Thacker,

Re: Newman School expansion

We are writing as the NAS Rotherham Branch, in response to the public consultation regarding the expansion of Newman School to encompass the former Bridge PRU as a unit for children with complex needs.

Government SEN statistics clearly show that since 2006 there has been an overall increase of 219% in the number of pupils at school action plus/statement of SEN with a primary need of Autism within Rotherham. Primary, secondary and special schools have all seen significant increases, with the highest being a 313% increase within secondary schools.

As you are aware our branch handed in a petition to the council on 26th September 2013, requesting that the council look at the issue of provision for children on the higher functioning end of the autism spectrum, where their academic abilities are above average but who are unable to cope within mainstream classes due to environmental considerations. We started the petition after a survey of local parents revealed this was of concern to a considerable number.

We feel that it is positive that RMBC are looking at developing alternate provision within the local area to enable children of local families to attend a school within Rotherham which can meet their needs. We are also pleased that the proposal includes the involvement of a multi-disciplinary team to support the child within the setting. We welcome the progress RMBC has made in addressing our concerns and see in this proposal the opportunity for an excellent service to be developed. However, the current proposal does also give rise to some concerns, which are outlined below.

The reports to cabinet dated 18th September 2013 and 27th November 2013 state that the unit at Newman will not be ASC specific, and includes a list of the targeted groups of children that this unit could provide for. This information indicates that the new provision will be grouping together children with vastly different support needs. For example a young person with an attachment disorder has very different social and communication needs to a young person with ASC. It is also well known that children with ASC are unsuited to EBSD peer groups; due to their vulnerability, mimicry, and their need for an alternate approach to behaviour management.

Given the broad range of difficulties within the proposed peer group we do not think that it would be suitable for ASC to be included within this mix. The proposal also states that the placement will cater for children from mainstream academic ability to mild/moderate learning difficulties/disabilities. We would question how such a diverse mix of needs and abilities can be combined to adequately and appropriately meet the needs of these children. It is also unclear as to how such a wide mix of academic abilities would be managed, to ensure that none of the pupils are isolated. Will GCSE's and A levels be offered on site? Children with High Functioning ASC and Asperger's require a level of academic challenge and a peer group of similar academic ability, and it is not clear from the information given as to whether a wide range of GCSE's or A levels would be offered on site. Accessing provision/ classes within a mainstream for specific GCSE's is not suitable for the group of children we are campaigning for.

We are also gravely concerned at the ability/experience of the staff within Newman School to be able to meet the needs of this diverse range of pupils; which is significantly different from their current remit. We are aware of several families with children with ASC (particularly where the children are of mainstream academic ability) who have had major difficulties whilst attending the school, due to a lack of knowledge about ASC within this setting. Teaching high achieving children requires a very different range of experience to teaching children with learning disabilities, and while the staff within Newman school have demonstrated expertise in the latter, they do not have expertise in teaching high functioning children. We are therefore not clear how the needs of any children with ASC placed within the unit would therefore benefit from the links with the existing school.

It is also noted that the budget for this unit will be controlled by Newman school, but will not be ring-fenced for the children attending it. This also gives concerns as to whether the school will have adequate understanding of the needs of a child or young person with an ASC in order to ensure the budget is spent appropriately to meet those needs.

Finally, we have an additional query, in regard to the full proposal submitted by RMBC to the Department for Education. This documents states under 'section 18' that the additional pupils will be children with ASC; and that any additional specialist features that are to be provided will be for children with ASC. This contradicts with the information contained in the report to cabinet mentioned previously; therefore we would be grateful if RMBC could please clarify whether the proposed unit will be an ASC specific provision?

In conclusion, we feel that it is a positive that RMBC are looking into widening the SEN provision currently available within Rotherham; and are recognising the benefits of utilising a multi-disciplinary team to support the young people. However, in the current proposed format we have major concerns on the impact of placing young people with ASC into such a provision and the limited number of potential pupils with ASC this unit proposes to support and therefore we object to the opening of the unit. We would welcome the opportunity to work with RMBC to help address the concerns we have raised.

Yours Sincerely

Debra West

Branch Officer

On behalf of the National Autistic Society Rotherham Branch.