



## **PARENTS IN THE DRIVING SEAT?**

### **Parents' role in setting up new secondary schools**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

In October 2005, the Research and Information on State Education Trust (RISE), with funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, commissioned the Centre for Educational Research at the London School of Economics and Political Science to undertake a research project on the role of parents in the planning and setting up of new secondary schools.

The context for the research was the White Paper, 'Higher Standards, Better Schools for All', in which a commitment was made by the government 'to put parents in the driving seat' (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2005a, p1) and to give parents the right to ask for a new school. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 enacted this commitment and 'places an explicit duty on local authorities for the first time to respond formally to parents seeking changes to the provision of schools in their area including new schools' (DfES, 2006a, p.1)

The main aim of the research was to investigate the extent to which parents were able to influence the types of new schools set up *prior* to the enactment of the legislation. The overarching research questions it sought to address were: to what extent are parents' wishes, either in favour of, or against a new school, taken on board when new schools are proposed? To what extent are parents involved in the planning and setting up of academies or other new schools? To what extent are parents successful in meeting their aims and objectives in terms of planning and setting up new schools?

## Methods

Fifteen parent campaigns were included in the research: seven aimed to obtain new schools and eight to prevent new schools being set up. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 26 members of the campaigns. The vast majority of the interviewees (23) were parents (17 were mothers) and at least one parent was interviewed from each campaign. Interviews were also conducted with four local authority officials who had been involved in campaigns, two academy sponsors and a DfES official. As there is no information available on the total number of campaigns or the types of campaigns, it is not possible to say to what extent the campaigns can be considered to be representative of campaigns that have taken place. Therefore any generalisations need to be made with caution.

## Findings

### Campaigns for new schools

- In six out of the seven campaigns for a new school, the reason for starting the campaign was a perceived need for more secondary school places in the locality. Parents wanted their children to be able to move on to secondary school with their friends from primary school and actively sought, or assumed, that the new school would be a community school. Two campaigns were supporting local authority proposals for new schools.
- In the other case the campaigners were seeking to find a way for a school in the independent sector, that offered a different philosophy of education, to enter the state sector as they wanted more children to be able to benefit from the education on offer.

## **Campaigns against new schools**

- Campaigners against the eight new schools were, in the main, parents whose children were attending schools threatened with closure. The planned closures were associated with proposals for new schools. In seven out of the eight campaigns, the proposed new school was an academy. This was nearly always of concern to campaigners, particularly where a faith-based academy was proposed to replace a community school.
- In a minority of cases, the site of the new school, as opposed to a new school *per se*, was the main issue for campaigners.
- The interviews with local authority officials and campaigners revealed, at times, sharp differences of opinion in relation to the performance of schools threatened with closure.

## **Who campaigners sought to influence and how**

- In most cases, campaigns for or against a new school sought to convince local authorities of the merits of their case. Contact with other campaigns was made in a number of cases to obtain advice, help and share information. In several cases joint campaigning activities took place.
- A majority of the campaigns for new schools reported contacting central government, primarily the DfES; the campaign for a school with a different philosophy of education also formed a parliamentary lobbying group.
- Several campaigns against new schools put forward alternative plans that would have enabled the schools facing closure to stay open. A number had contemplated making legal challenges against academies on various grounds

## **Issues, barriers and problems**

- Interviewees in all but one campaign reported difficulties in accessing information. Those campaigning for new schools described instances where the information was not available or not available in the right form; in some cases, the local authority had not assisted with the provision of information.
- Those campaigning against new schools found it particularly difficult to obtain information about proposals for academies; around half of the interviewees mentioned using the Freedom of Information Act to seek to obtain relevant material.
- Lack of expertise was a problem faced by some interviewees, particularly those campaigning for a new school. In a number of cases, interviewees experienced difficulties in understanding the local government system and its procedures.
- Campaigners tended to perceive government policy, particularly in relation to the academies programme, as a major obstacle given that they wanted either to obtain or to retain community schools. Concerns raised in relation to academies included: the circumstances that led to the proposal; the consultation process; the way that academies were approved; and more specifically, the replacement of a community school by a faith-based academy.
- All seven campaigns for new schools had faced difficulties in relation to school sites. Land scarcity and high land costs were identified as problems. Even where a feasible site had been identified, local priorities could determine that it was used for a purpose other than a school, as occurred in one

case. Local authority and DfES officials acknowledged that securing suitable sites for new schools was a major problem.

### **Outcomes of the campaigns**

- Overall six of the 15 campaigns were successful in that a new school appeared to have been agreed (four cases out of seven) or closure proposals had not been pursued (two cases out of eight). The remainder were either not successful (4) or remained unresolved (5) at the end of the autumn of 2006.
- Three of the four successful campaigns for new schools had the support of the local authority. In two cases the local authority had proposed the new school; in the other, the campaign may have influenced the location and the time frame for the new school but probably not a school *per se*. The other campaign where proposals for a new school were agreed in principle, was the school with a different philosophy of education.
- The two successful campaigns against new schools were parent-led but also had the involvement of school staff and teacher unions.

### **Conclusions**

In terms of the three key research questions we set out to answer, we found that: first, in some cases, parents' wishes, either in favour of or opposed to the setting up of a new school, were taken on board; second, parents' involvement in the planning and setting up of new schools was limited, particularly in relation to academies; and third, there was variation in the extent to which campaigners were successful in meeting their aims and objectives, although amongst our sample the campaigns for a new school appeared to be more successful than those against.

### **Policy implications**

There are a number of implications for policy arising from this research. Whilst it is not possible to generalise in terms of the outcomes of the campaigns, in terms of the processes involved there are some implications for policy. These related to the type of schools parents wanted; the process of setting up academies; the availability of information; securing sites; and improving links with parents.

#### **Type of school**

Nearly all of the campaigns for a new school wanted or assumed that the new school would be a community not a religious school. There was a concern that faith-based schools were replacing non-faith schools. There is a case for a debate on this issue, given that choice for parents who want a school without a particular religious focus/sponsor could diminish.

#### **Academies**

There was concern amongst campaigners about the process of setting up academies and, in particular the lack of information on the proposals; the speed of the process; the limited nature of the consultation; and what was perceived as the lack of democratic accountability regarding academies, particularly in relation to school governance. There is a case for reviewing these procedures to bring them into line with the establishment of other types of schools.

#### **Availability of information**

Information for parents on how to campaign for and against new schools could be provided. More support could be offered by the DfES, as is currently provided in the case of competitions for new schools. Councils vary in the extent to which they make documents (agendas, minutes, reports etc.)

available via their websites: it is important that this information is provided by all local authorities. It may be helpful for an individual within a local authority to be designated to assist parents with accessing information and to provide guidance about council procedures.

### **Securing sites**

Securing suitable sites for new schools was identified as a major problem by the DfES and local authorities; this is an issue that needs to be addressed by central and local government.

### **Improving links with parents**

There is a case for parents whose children's schools are threatened with closure to be more constructively engaged in discussions about the future of the school at an earlier stage. Parent campaigners against the closure of schools were concerned that they did not receive information about proposed closures in good time and that their views were not seriously listened to. More generally, the purposes of consultation regarding new schools – including the role of parents in the consultation – and the processes involved, should be made clearer to parents. The consultation processes themselves need to be carried out openly at a formative stage.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

In October 2005, the Research and Information on State Education Trust (RISE), with funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, commissioned the Centre for Educational Research at the London School of Economics and Political Science to undertake a research project on the role of parents in the planning and setting up of new secondary schools.

The starting point for this research was the Queen's Speech, following the Labour Party victory in the General Election of 2005, in which a commitment was made to introduce an Education Bill containing provisions to enable 'new educational providers', including groups of parents, to set up schools within the state system. The White Paper, 'Higher Standards, Better Schools for All', that followed went further and committed the new government 'to put parents in the driving seat' (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2005a, p. 1) and to give them the right to ask for a new school: 'We want to make it easier for them to express their views and to trigger action' (p. 29). The Education and Inspections Act 2006 enacts this commitment and 'places an explicit duty on local authorities for the first time to respond formally to parents seeking changes to the provision of schools in their area, including new schools' (DfES, 2006a, p. 1).

This research set out to investigate the extent to which parents were able to influence the types of new schools set up, prior to the enactment of this legislation. The aim was to focus on recent parent campaigns involving proposals for new schools to identify what lessons could be learnt for school planning in the future. The overarching research questions were: To what extent are parents' wishes, either in favour of, or opposed to the setting up of a new school, taken on board when new schools are proposed? To what extent are parents involved in the planning and setting up of academies or other new schools? To what extent are parents successful in meeting their aims and objectives in terms of planning and setting up new schools?

In order to answer these questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with campaigners (in the main parents) who were active in campaigns involving proposals for new schools. A number of specific questions were addressed relating to why parents/carers got involved, who they sought to influence and how; issues, barriers and problems encountered in planning/setting up/challenging proposals; and the outcomes of the campaigns. A number of other stakeholders – representatives of local and central government and academy sponsors – were also interviewed.

The following section outlines the policy context. Section 3 describes the research methods and section 4 presents the research findings. The final section concludes and presents a number of implications for policy.

## 2 THE POLICY CONTEXT

Major changes in education policy as it related to schools in England took place under Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997. Of particular relevance in this context, was an increased emphasis on parental choice of school, diversity and the role of parents in relation to education more generally. As stated in the White Paper 'Choice and Diversity': 'Since 1980, the Government has been intent on widening parental choice, and entrenching parental influence and control' (Department for Education (DfE), 1992, p. 4).

Amongst the key changes to legislation and policy were the Education Act 1980, which increased the priority given to parents' preferences for the school of their choice for their child; the Act also required school performance data to be published in prospectuses for use by parents (and others) and subsequently, following the Education (Schools) Act 1992, they were also published more widely, including by the media as 'league tables'. It was not only in relation to school choice that the role of parents was increased; in particular, the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts first gave and then expanded the role of parents in the governance of schools (see Table 1).

School diversity became a key policy issue following the Education Reform Act 1988 and the introduction of a quasi-market into the school-based education system (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). Schools were able to 'opt out' of local authority control and become grant-maintained. By the time of the 1997 general election around three per cent of primary schools and 18 per cent of secondary schools were grant-maintained (Department for Education and Employment, 1996). The Education Act 1993 extended the option of obtaining grant-maintained status to charitable, religious or independent sponsors, or groups of parents, to establish their own grant-maintained schools. Sponsors were required to contribute at least 15 per cent of costs relating to the site/school buildings (Walford, 2000). By the time of the 1997 general election, seven proposals had been agreed; all were from established religious bodies.

A rather different approach to increasing diversity was the city technology college (CTC) programme. This was launched in 1986 (Walford, 1997) and legislation followed in the Education Reform Act 1988, when the first CTC opened. The aim was for CTCs to contribute to education in urban areas, particularly in areas where academic achievement was low, and to focus on technology (in addition to following the national curriculum) with the intention of helping to meet the needs of the economy (see Whitty et al., 1993). They were established, as independent schools, by a partnership of government and private sector sponsors and the involvement of sponsors was an important element of the new schools. The intention was for the capital funds to be met by private sector sponsors with revenue costs being met by the state. As few sponsors were willing to fund the full capital costs of the schools, the government had to contribute a significant amount towards the capital costs. Only 15 CTCs were set up, which is likely to be attributed to the high costs involved for private sector sponsors (see also Whitty et al., 1993).

Subsequently the technology colleges programme was launched. This can be seen as an extension of the city technology college programme to state-maintained schools in that the schools specialised in technology, science and mathematics (in addition to following the national curriculum). In 1994, the programme was extended, and it became the specialist schools programme, to cover modern foreign languages and it was further extended in 1996 to cover sports and arts. Schools were required to raise about £100,000 of private sector sponsorship towards the cost of a capital project to improve their facilities for the specialist area(s). If successful, they became eligible to receive additional capital funding from central government to complement the sponsorship and increased central government grants.

The election of a Labour government in 1997 resulted in further policy developments (see Table 1). The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 abolished grant-maintained status; from September 1999, schools were designated as one of three new types of school – community, voluntary (aided and controlled) and foundation. Grant-maintained schools mostly became foundation schools although those that had been voluntary prior to having grant-maintained status became voluntary as did the sponsored grant-maintained schools.

Notwithstanding this change, the diversity agenda has been developed and expanded by Labour administrations. In 1997, the Labour government re-launched the specialist schools programme, with a focus on the sharing of specialist expertise and facilities by specialist schools with other schools and with the local community. The level of sponsorship was also reduced to £50,000 in 1999 and for the smallest schools it has been reduced to £20,000 (DfES, 2007a).

The scheme has gradually expanded and in November 2002 all schools were encouraged to obtain specialist status, subject to being eligible. It is important to note that: ‘It is unlikely that schools whose whole school performance is on a declining trend will be designated’ (DfES, 2007a, p. 4). The range of specialisms has also been expanded.<sup>1</sup> Finally, specialist schools, like other schools with a specialism, are permitted to select up to 10 per cent of their intake on the basis of aptitude in relevant prescribed specialist subjects. By September 2006, 82 per cent of all secondary schools in England had obtained specialist status (DfES, 2006b).

The Labour government has also established academies (originally city academies), provision for which was included in the Learning and Skills Act 2000 and the Education Act 2002. These have built upon both the CTC and specialist schools programmes: they are required to have a specialism and may select 10 per cent of their intake on the basis of aptitude in specified subjects; like CTCs they are independent schools in receipt of revenue funding from the government. They also have sponsors, which include philanthropists, business, faith communities, existing private schools and educational foundations (DfES, 2005b). Unlike CTCs they are only required to contribute a limited amount towards the capital costs; this is considered to be a charitable donation which represents 10 per cent of the building costs, up to a total of £2 million or £1.5 million if completely new buildings are not needed (DfES, 2005b). Since 2006, the sponsorship has typically been to establish an endowment fund, which is used over the lifetime of an academy ‘to fund activities which will focus on countering the educational impact of disadvantage and deprivation; and/or for educational work with the local community (DfES, 2006c, p. 8). Academies differ from CTCs in that they are not required to follow the national curriculum; rather they must have a broad and balanced curriculum (DfES, 2007b). There is a government target to establish 200 academies by 2010; in September 2006, there were 46 (DfES, 2007c). In November 2006, ‘the Prime Minister expressed an ambition eventually to deliver 400 academies’ (House of Commons Select Committee on Treasury, 2007, p. 1).

Academies differ from state-maintained schools in that statutory proposals are not required to set them up. They also differ in terms of their governance: sponsors set up new limited liability non-profit companies with charitable status and appoint a majority of founding trustees who in turn appoint the school governors (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), 2005). In this way sponsors have control over the governing body; only one parent governor is required to sit on the governing body.

The academies programme has changed over time. The Education Act 2002 enabled all-age academies to be set up and academies to be established outside urban areas; it also allowed there to be an emphasis on any subject areas or combination of areas. Although the focus of the academies programme has been on providing or replacing schools in disadvantaged areas and, in particular, on ‘failing schools’

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<sup>1</sup> They now include arts; business & enterprise; engineering; humanities; languages; mathematics & computing; music; science, sport; and technology.

the range of circumstances suggested for building an academy now includes: population growth, school reorganisations and school competitions as well as the replacement of a failing school (DfES, 2005a). In addition, independent schools joining the maintained sector are also eligible for academy status (DfES, 2005a). There is also a requirement that local authorities seeking funding under the government's capital funding programme, 'Building Schools for the Future', should consider academies as part of their bid for funding where new or replacement schools are needed (DfES, 2004, 2005a). Finally, most CTCs have converted or are converting to academy status (SSAT, 2004).

The Education Act 2002 also included provisions in respect of new maintained schools. It required a local authority, where it had identified a need for a new school, to invite 'interested parties' to bring forward proposals before it published its own. These 'voluntary competitions' were intended to provide opportunities for promoters of new schools who were outside the maintained sector, including parents, community groups, voluntary groups and private companies. No competitions took place under the 2002 Act which was superseded by the 2005 Education Act. This widened the circumstances under which school competitions could take place to include replacement as well as additional (new) schools and detailed the way that they should be run (Office of Public Sector Information (OPSI), 2006). The DfES expects that approximately 15 secondary school competitions will be conducted each year (OPSI, 2006).

Proposals set out in the White Paper 'Higher Standards, Better Schools for All' (DfES, 2005a), envisaged a new role for parents in the provision of schools in their area, by requiring local authorities to respond to parents' representations about local schools. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 enacts this commitment and places an explicit duty on local authorities to consider representations from parents about schools in their area. The Act also requires local authorities, when carrying out their strategic duties in relation to the provision of schools, 'to do so with a view to securing diversity and increasing opportunities for parental choice'. In this context, restrictions are imposed on local authorities wishing to propose new community schools in school competitions: only those that are high performing will be able to enter into a competition without the consent of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills. It is important to note that the research reported here was carried out *prior* to the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

**Table 1 Key points relating to selected English education legislation and reforms**

Legislation/reform	Key points
Education Act 1980	Placed a duty on local education authorities (LEAs) to make arrangements enabling all parents to express a preference for the school they wished their child to attend; gave parents rights to be represented on governing bodies; required LEAs and school governors to provide information to parents on admissions criteria, examination results, curriculum, discipline and organisation.
Education Act (No 2) Act 1986	Increased parental representation on school governing bodies and rights for information.
Education Reform Act 1988 City Technology Colleges	Enabled the Secretary of State to enter into agreements to establish independent schools to be known as city technology colleges.
Education Reform Act 1988 Grant Maintained Schools	Enabled local authority schools to become grant-maintained.
Parents Charter 1991 (updated 1994)	Promised parents: a report on their child's progress at least once a year; regular reports on their child's school from independent inspectors; performance tables for all local schools; prospectus or brochure about individual schools; and an annual report from the school's governors 'It signalled the start of an information revolution to extend parental choice and raise standards' (Department for Education (DfE), 1994).
Education Act 1993 New Grant-Maintained Schools	Enabled existing independent schools and other promoters to make proposals to establish grant-maintained schools (sponsored grant-maintained schools); sponsors required to make a contribution to capital costs.
School Standards and Framework Act 1998	Abolished grant-maintained schools and introduced a new framework for schools; required local education authorities to establish school organisation committees to consider proposals regarding school organisation.
School Standards and Framework Act 1998	Parent Governor Representatives elected from serving parent governors to represent the views of all parents on local authority committees dealing with education matters.
School Standards and Framework Act 1998	All maintained schools and city technology colleges to adopt a home-school agreement and associated parental declaration; before adopting/revising these, the governing body is required to consult all registered parents of pupils at the school who are of compulsory school age.
Learning and Skills Act 2000	Enabled city academies to be established.
Education Act 2002	City academies renamed academies; no longer restricted to urban areas; all age academies allowed and restrictions removed on areas of specialism; city technology colleges able to convert to academies.
Education Act 2002	Local education authorities required to invite interested parties to bring forward proposals for new schools before publishing their own ('competitions').
Education Act 2005	Enabled competitions to take place for replacement schools (after reorganisations).
Education and Inspections Act 2006	Duty on local authorities, in exercising functions to do with provision of schools, to do so with a view to securing diversity and increasing opportunities for parental choice; duty on local authorities to consider representations from parents about provision of schools; imposes restrictions on local authorities wishing to propose new community schools; school organisation decisions become a responsibility of local education authorities. School organisation committee abolished.
Schools Commissioner (2006)	The first Schools Commissioner was appointed in September 2006 following proposals in the White Paper 'Higher Standards, Better Schools for All'; the Commissioner has a particular role in promoting choice and diversity by encouraging the development of a wide variety of schools.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODS

The Research and Information on State Education (RISE) Trust in conjunction with the research team identified a number of parent campaigns for and against new schools. Altogether, 15 campaigns were included in the research; these were predominantly located in urban areas and included some aimed at obtaining new schools and some aimed at preventing them.<sup>2</sup> Having identified campaigns, the research team then undertook a series of semi-structured interviews during 2006. Altogether 26 individuals, who were leading members of each campaign, were interviewed (18 were women). The vast majority of the interviewees (23) were parents (17 were mothers) and at least one parent was interviewed from each campaign.

Six follow-up interviews also took place to provide additional information or an update where the outcome of the campaign was not resolved at the time of the initial interview. The interviews were either carried out face-to-face or by telephone; all were tape recorded, with permission of the interviewee, and subsequently transcribed. Table 2 gives details of the number of interviews carried out with parents and other campaigners.

**Table 2 Number of interviews carried out with parents and other campaigners**

<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Others (e.g. resident)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Individuals interviewed	23	3	26
Follow-up interviews	3	3	6
<b>Total number of interviews</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>32</b>

Interviews were also conducted with four local authority officials who had been involved with campaigns, two academy sponsors and a DfES official involved in proposals for new schools.

As there is no information available on the total number of campaigns or the types of campaigns, it is not possible to say to what extent the campaigns can be considered to be representative of campaigns that have taken place. Therefore any generalisations need to be made with caution.

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<sup>2</sup> Each of the campaigns appears to have represented a significant level of opinion amongst parents and others in the areas concerned, however, we do not claim that there were no alternative opinions expressed within these areas.

## 4 FINDINGS

This section presents the main findings of our study, which involved seven campaigns for new secondary schools and eight campaigns against. Each campaign had its own particular context both spatial and political, its own history and resources in terms of the cultural, social and economic capital of those involved. We first provide details of the campaigns – their membership and the reasons for setting up the campaign – before examining who the campaigners sought to influence. We then explore the issues, barriers and problems encountered by the campaigns; finally we highlight the outcomes of the campaigns. In addition to drawing on the responses of campaigners, we also draw on interviews conducted with local authority officials, academy sponsors and an official from the DfES.

### 4.1 The campaigns and membership

This section describes the campaigns in the study, in particular their membership and the reasons that they were established.

#### 4.1.1 Campaigns for new schools

##### Membership

Members of the campaigns were reported to be, in the main, parents although several interviewees drew attention to other local people that they had recruited:

*Our campaign has a core of people whose children are sorted out, they're in secondary school or they can afford to buy themselves out of things, and they care about kids and that's why they're doing it. Those people are worth their weight in gold.*

*Grandparents who have known this problem for a long time, as well as people who work in the area who are astounded that there isn't a school.*

Although a few of the parents involved in campaigns were said to be teachers by profession, teachers and teacher unions appeared not to be extensively involved; however, there were exceptions: in one case it was reported that headteachers and teachers from three local primary schools were involved and in another, four or five secondary headteachers were said to be supportive as was the National Union of Teachers (NUT). Another campaign had got the support of the local NUT through joint campaigning on another issue.

In some instances, Members of Parliament (MPs) were said to be supporting the campaigns; in one case, in particular, a prominent local MP had sent a colleague to meetings who wrote 'pressurising letters' when necessary. MPs were particularly involved in the campaign for a school with a different philosophy of education as this was a national rather than a local campaign. This involved active lobbying at parliamentary level and MPs were recruited to the campaign on an all-party basis for this purpose. In addition, several of the interviewees reported that they had received support from their local councillors, but in only one case were councillors reported to be actively involved.

##### Reasons for setting up the campaign

Different reasons were put forward for setting up a campaign. In six out of seven cases, the interviewees argued that more secondary school places were needed in their locality:

*There weren't sufficient places. The demographic pressure meant there was a Bermuda triangle – parents didn't get into any secondary school.*

*Five years ago at secondary transfer 50 per cent of children [in the primary school] had no offer of a place. I was just a Mum with three children at the primary school and the eldest was in year 5. Me and a group felt it was a terrible situation and we needed to support parents of children in year 6 in finding school places.*

From the interviews with local authority officials, it was apparent that the need for new schools was not always accepted by them. In particular, in one case, the availability of places for pupils aged 11 to 12 years (year 7, the first year of secondary education) was a source of dispute between the local authority and campaigners.

In all but one case, the parents interviewed wanted their children to be able to move on to secondary school with their friends from primary school and they either actively sought, or assumed, that the new school would be a local community school:

*...what we want is a local authority-run community comprehensive school. Overall, we're not interested in a denominational school; we want to be able to maintain the social and racial mix we get in our primary schools... The primaries are really nicely mixed and you get to secondary stage and it just fragments.*

*...always our strength has been to return to the key issue. People want open community schools at which their child can thrive along with their peers.*

One campaign was quite different from the other six. The campaigners in this case, were seeking to find a way for a school in the independent sector, that offered a different philosophy of education, to enter the state sector in order that more children could benefit from the education on offer. The problem was succinctly summarised by one of the interviewees: 'As long as it is in the independent sector it is only available to those who can pay for it, so it is about inclusion really'. For this campaign, the type of state school that was being sought was not an issue: campaigners just needed it to be within the state sector.

The campaigns for most of the new schools were, in the main, established by an individual parent or a group of parents who, having identified the need for more school places, decided to start up a campaign for a new school. In relation to the campaign for a school offering a different philosophy of education, timing was all important:

*When the Labour Party came into power it seemed like a window of opportunity that all sorts of things could be refreshed and revisited. I presented myself to the organisation and said it's time to lobby and they said fine...*

For another campaign, it was the availability of a suitable site that provided the trigger for the campaign: 'An empty building and a crying need for a new school, we thought it was too good an opportunity to waste'.

For two other campaigns, the impetus came from local authorities rather than parents. These campaigns were formed after the local authorities announced proposals for new schools. In essence, in these two cases, the parents came together to support pre-existing proposals rather than to start up their own campaigns. In this respect, they differed from the others, insofar as the need for a new secondary school had already been accepted by the local authority, and an outline strategy for delivering it had

been put forward before the campaign was formed. One campaigner explained: *'We didn't have to campaign for the idea of it but we did have to make everything happen'*.

#### **4.1.2 Campaigns against new schools**

##### **Membership**

Interviewees campaigning against new secondary schools, consisted, in the main, of parents whose children were attending schools threatened with closure, but also several residents or community objectors, and a parent of a child whose primary school was within the 'catchment area' of the planned new school.

Headteachers, teachers and teacher unions – because of the implications for jobs – were also involved; however, participation by these individuals appeared to be more covert given that it was local authorities, their employers, that were putting forward the closure proposals. In one case the headteacher was seen to be particularly influential:

*She was a tower of strength actually. Without her we would have got nowhere. She was not obstructive but she was unwavering... She forced [those proposing the closure] to be analytical all the time.*

And in other cases, school staff were also considered to be supportive:

*Behind closed doors people were very willing to provide ideas and enhance what we already had and to give us day-to-day help or point us in the right direction. They couldn't publicly come out.*

Current and former school pupils were also said to be involved in several campaigns. MPs were said to be involved in some. Local councillors tended not to be involved in these campaigns, although in a minority of cases they were said to be supportive, but in the background.

##### **Reasons for setting up the campaign**

Although the campaigns were essentially against new schools, in most cases the main objective of the campaigners was to prevent the closure of the school that their children attended. In seven of the eight campaigns the intended replacement school was an academy. The fact that it was an academy was nearly always of concern, particularly where a faith-based academy was proposed to replace a non-faith community school.

In a minority of cases, the site of the new school was the main issue for campaigners – either on grounds of the inadequacy of the site or because it would result in a loss of amenities for school children and/or residents. Nonetheless, although campaigns may have brought individuals together with differing concerns, they all shared the single aim of seeking to prevent the new school being built. A range of concerns raised by the campaigners against the closure proposals were given:

*The Council believed that unless they rationalised the number of school places their bid for school funding wouldn't be successful. Therefore, their strategy was to close a number of schools and replace them with academies. They believed they had to close a number of schools and our school was one of these...When it does close it will leave a huge area without a secondary school.*

*Half the children are on [free school meals], a third are on the special needs register, there are a large number of asylum seekers etc. which the Council don't deny. But they said the school was failing these children, but it was completely the opposite.*

*It was because they were going to demolish a great school for no reason at all other than to put a secondary school on the site.*

The interviews with local authority officials revealed that there could be sharp differences between the views of local authorities and parents. In particular, parents involved in campaigns against the closure of schools with performance that was well below average, insisted that they were 'good' schools although they accepted that this was not reflected in General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination results. From the local authority perspective, on the other hand, there was a wider agenda which included school improvement, meeting targets, financial issues and securing future government capital funding:

*The proposal to establish the academy was primarily a response to a decision by the Authority that the school was not able to significantly improve. That wasn't a judgement that the school was failing... but it was just not capable of securing the step-change in attainment levels...*

One particular issue related to surplus places:

*First, rolls were falling quite dramatically, second because it always had surplus places that meant that it took any excluded fallout from other schools and thirdly, on a unit cost basis the Audit Commission every year reminds us how many surplus places we have. As part of the Building Schools for the Future scheme [the government's programme for capital expenditure on schools] is to remove surplus places, you can see all those factors led to the proposals.*

The setting up of the parent campaigns against new schools was, in many cases, an immediate reaction to the news that their child's school was threatened with closure:

*I was incensed to receive a letter giving us very little warning that in a week's time the proposal [to close the school] was going to Cabinet. It came completely out of the blue – we hadn't been aware that the school was under that kind of threat. We knew it was a struggling school because it had a difficult intake but we weren't in special measures or anything of that kind.*

*We got a report from Ofsted [the Office for Standards in Education] saying that it was a great school and about two weeks later a letter proposing to develop it as an academy.*

*Our boss had been to a meeting and said to us that there's an academy coming. That day there was a piece in the [local newspaper] about it... We thought, no, we're not going down that road.*

In other cases, the campaigns came later when parents had had time to look at the proposals and consider them in more detail:

*Our headteacher asked me to chair the consultation committee [on the academy] and then to prepare our response... Up until that point I had known about the academy but had not really thought about the impact.*

## 4.2 Who campaigners sought to influence and how

In 13 out of 15 campaigns, the first objective when setting up the campaign was the recruitment of more parents. Interviewees involved in both types of campaign felt they needed to develop a strong and committed group of parents in order to present their case as strongly as possible; the weight of numbers was considered to be particularly important by campaigners against new schools. Interviewees seeking new schools were more aware of the need to make their campaigns as representative as possible of local parents given that the lead campaigners tended to be from middle-class backgrounds.

A range of methods were adopted by campaigners to recruit more parents and these tended to be similar for both types of campaign. Meetings were arranged, leaflets produced, contact lists (usually using e-mail) and websites established. Several campaigns had set up stalls in local markets at weekends to collect signatures and canvass opinion. Parents were involved in activities aimed at raising the profile of their respective campaigns and, in particular, in influencing their particular local authority.

In terms of the actual conduct of the campaigns, a number of interviewees contacted other campaigns in order to obtain advice, help and share information. In several cases, joint campaigning events were organised, such as marches or events to raise the profiles of the respective campaigns. In a number of cases, national campaigns were contacted and in some cases the local campaign joined.

Campaigners said that they often found it necessary to undertake their own research. Several campaigns for new schools had undertaken their own analysis in order to identify the number of school places that were available in the area and the number that were needed:

*We started at the grassroots with parents and then moved on to politicians. We had to do lots of homework and find things out first. We could not find things out from the Council so we did it ourselves. We found that there were x pupils in year 6 and that we were x places short and that there were too many denominational places....*

Campaigners against one new school undertook a survey of prospective parents to find out whether they would be willing to send their children to the school threatened with closure if it were kept open and facilities improved. Some carried out fact finding missions to discover what parents thought of the proposals and what they wanted, whilst others felt that their first objective was to provide detailed information to parents about the proposed academy and about academies more generally. Another tactic, used by both types of campaigns, was for individual campaigners to stand for local election. This was considered to be important both in terms of the specific campaigns themselves and in terms of influencing local politics more generally.

The second main objective for most campaigns in the early stages, following the recruitment of parents, was to convince local councils of the merits of their case. Petitions were used universally, and letters and e-mails sent; several campaigners reported petitions containing over 1,000 signatures. Marches were organised and deputations made to councillors. The local media and in some cases national media were used, often in creative ways, by many of the campaigns. Some campaigns became very adept at using different branches of the media and obtained wide-ranging coverage both locally and nationally.

The two campaigns that were supporting local authority proposals for new schools were in quite a different position from others. Each had to campaign, but reportedly in different ways. In one, the aim was essentially focused on presenting a case for a particular site, via the use of the local press. In the other, interviewees reported that they had needed to campaign hard on specific issues at key points in time and as the proposals developed. Local authority officials acknowledged the key roles played by campaigners:

*We worked with the group and encouraged them and they took on an existence of their own and developed.*

*I think it would have been much more difficult to make the decision [in favour of the preferred site] without the campaign.*

A majority of campaigns for new schools contacted the DfES for help. One interviewee explained:

*The local authority we found quite hard to get through to. We did lobby councillors. We knew it had to come from the top really, so it was the DfES.*

In the case of the campaign for the school with a different philosophy of education, the need to influence government was its primary aim. The target of the campaigners was the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (the most senior government minister); one of the main tactics they adopted was the formation of a cross-party parliamentary group to help exert pressure at a national level.

Those campaigning against new schools did not appear to have tried to influence government but they reported using various other tactics. Several, for example, had put forward alternative plans that would enable the schools to stay open. One of these included an alternative plan for an academy that did not involve a faith-based sponsor and several others proposed alternative sites for the new school.

The local authority officials who were interviewed said that they had considered alternative plans put forward by campaigners and had also considered their own alternative options but none of these were felt to be as good a solution as the closure of the schools concerned. One commented:

*We had a very clear set of criteria and were very public about those criteria on which we judged other options. There was never at any point an option that met the criteria as well as the academy that was being planned.*

Another said:

*We did ask the community about whether they thought it should stay open and any alternatives they would offer, we always do. But, unfortunately, nobody usually comes up with another solution.*

Some campaigns against new schools had made representations to the school organisation committee.<sup>3</sup> This committee had to give unanimous support for a proposal to be accepted. In the event of it not being unanimous, it was referred to the Schools Adjudicator, a body set up under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, with responsibility for making a decision. One interviewee explained:

*The [school organisation committee] outcome was a huge success. It was an amazing meeting. It started at 7.00. At 11.00 a decision still hadn't been made. I thought...at last we have some debate - it was the first evidence of real argument... [At the vote] the local councillors group was split and the governors' group was against and were unanimous.*

When other tactics had failed, a number of campaigns had considered making legal challenges against academies on various grounds and several had attempted to pursue this route.

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<sup>3</sup> The school organisation committee (abolished under the Education and Inspections Act 2006) considered school organisation proposals. It was established by each local authority but was independent; there were at least five groups on the committee: the local authority, Church of England dioceses, Roman Catholic dioceses, school governors and the Learning and Skills Council.

### 4.3 Issues, barriers and problems

This section focuses on a range of obstacles interviewees reported having faced in mounting and sustaining their campaigns. The themes raised by interviewees included: access to information; lack of expertise; government policies and priorities; local authority priorities and attitudes; lack of sites for new schools; and funding and sustaining the campaign.

#### 4.3.1 Access to information

Interviewees in all but one campaign reported difficulties in accessing information. For those wanting a new school it was sometimes because the information on school places was not readily available:

*It's not that the information is being hidden – it's just that it's not available...for pre-school children the census is too old to be useful and for school age children, if children do not go to schools [in the local authority], they are out of the radar as far as the [local authority] is concerned.*

On other occasions, the local authority was felt to be unhelpful when campaigners asked for information:

*Access to information was a problem. We asked the Council for information in a particular format and it came back in a different one, for example, we asked for raw numbers and they provided percentages. After a while we found out that the reason for this was the format they provided supported their view not ours. It made us very cynical about data.*

In another case, perceived secrecy on the part of local authority officials was said, by interviewees, to have created an unnecessary barrier and led to misunderstandings and mistrust.

Accessing information also appeared to be a major problem faced by campaigners challenging proposals for new schools. This is underlined by the frequency with which campaigners reported having made requests under the Freedom of Information Act in order to obtain documents: around half of the campaigns mentioned using the Act on at least one occasion. The problem appeared to be associated, in particular, in obtaining information about proposals for academies. Comments included:

*It was almost impossible. We were told that 'eventually it will be in the public domain'... We were never offered anything by the Council and made to battle for everything. If we did not know something was available we would never be told that it was.*

*[It was] a very considerable problem. If you asked a question you would be told that it has not been decided yet or we can't tell you that.*

*[The Local education authority], planning department, architects, DfES. If I'm paranoid about it, it seemed as if they were colluding to prevent information being given.*

In two cases, campaigners' requests under the Freedom of Information Act were said to have been rejected: one was in relation to an academy because the information was said to be 'commercially sensitive' and another because the local authority had said that it would publish the information by a given date although, according to the interviewee, this had not happened.

Out of the 15 campaigns, only one group felt they had not faced any significant difficulties in accessing information. This was one of the campaigns supporting a local authority proposal. An interviewee explained:

*The [local authority] published all the information. Consultation was very clear. The planning department published all their information which was very clear – it was accessible on paper and on-line.*

#### **4.3.2 Lack of expertise**

A problem reported in relation to some campaigns was a lack of expertise. Several campaigners for new schools spoke about the ‘*steep learning curve*’ that they had faced or that they ‘*had to learn everything*’. This was perceived as less of a problem for those campaigning against new schools.

Nevertheless, there was one area where several campaigns from each type experienced difficulties in terms of their expertise and that was to do with the functioning of local government itself, an issue related again to accessing relevant information. These were often, but not always, associated with the new local government system.<sup>4</sup> One campaigner explained: ‘*We did not know how local government worked. The system has changed with the mayor and cabinet. Not even local councillors seem to understand it*’.

A more experienced campaigner took a different view and felt that under the new system it was actually easier than under the old, as there was now an identified Cabinet member that individuals knew they needed to lobby rather than having to try and identify the most influential Council members for themselves.

In other cases, it was the actual procedures that caused difficulties. One campaigner against a new school described one of the occasions when this had occurred:

*Somebody managed to tell us that [it] was on the agenda [of Scrutiny Committee]. So I managed to ring up two days before and asked to speak... Somebody got back and said, no you can't speak. Then I told somebody at the school – and because he had worked in local government before – he told me what to say when I rang back. He said I had to quote standing orders at them. I had it all down on a piece of paper and I rang back and read it out and was allowed to speak at the meeting.*

#### **4.3.3 Government policies and priorities**

Government policies and priorities were perceived as major obstacles by those involved in both types of campaigns. One campaigner spelt out what were considered to be the contrasting aspirations of parent campaigners and government ministers:

*As parents you are being told all the time that parents are important and are to be involved in everything, yet there is a feeling that the actual policies in terms of new schools go against what we, as parents, are fighting for. The policy does not seem to be about creating good local schools for everyone, rather it seems to be about saying that some schools are better than others and we'll help everyone to get into the good schools which seems to be divisive. What we've discovered in campaigning is that there is much common ground between parents of different backgrounds...*

The type of schools that the government was promoting was another cause for concern. This was because most campaigners were seeking a local community school (six of the seven campaigns) or to

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<sup>4</sup> Following the Local Government Act 2000 the committee system of local authorities was replaced by a system based on a leader with a cabinet, or a system involving a directly elected mayor.

prevent a local school closing (six of the eight campaigns). Thus, the fact that an academy was proposed as a new school or a replacement was an issue. Confronting this was seen as a difficult problem by campaigners for new schools, but one they recognised that they needed to tackle and resolve, as the following comments indicate:

*It was really a difficult time because it was clear that everyone wanted a community school – if you like, a bog standard comprehensive.*

*There was a strong debate about it. It wasn't clear cut as there was a feeling amongst some of the parents that we might be risking it all – throwing the baby out with the bath water – on the basis that any school is better than no school.*

*Academies are not what we want but having said that if push came to shove and that was the only option available we would say better a school than no school.*

Interviews with local authority officials indicated that they were aware of parents' desire for local community schools and also aware of government restrictions on their ability to deliver them: *'They all do want local community schools...'* and *'We never tried for a community school because if it is a community school you had to go through a competition under the 2002 Act'*.

Another commented: *'There were parents that did want a local secondary school and they were a bit doubtful about academies...There were no other options'*.

Government policies in relation to its capital building programme, 'Building Schools for the Future', also constrained local authorities' room for manoeuvre. This is because when bids were made for capital funding under this programme, academies are required to be considered as part of the bid. One local authority official described the constraints imposed on elected members:

*[The Leader] would say it's the only way to get... capital building and he would like the approach that was available 10 years ago but it isn't available now. It's the only game in town.*

Those campaigning against new schools voiced a wide range of concerns over academies: the circumstances which led to the academy proposal; the consultation process and the way that academies were approved. There also appeared to be a general level of mistrust in the minds of many campaigners about the academies programme. One campaigner, discussing the reason that an academy was being considered to replace the school her child attended, put forward the following theory:

*[Our school] was in 'special measures' but everyone was surprised when we went into special measures. Very surprised. When we have actually sat and thought about it we think that it was done deliberately. If a school's doing well then there's no reason for it to become an academy.*

Others commented:

*We still never got an answer for why they were putting an academy here. The guidelines on the academies website say that they can only be built where it is a failing school or where there is a need for additional places. Neither applied.*

*In those days you had to be seen to be failing in order to qualify for academy status, so it seemed fairly obvious that they were trying to fail the school in order to qualify.*

It was often unclear to campaigners where the proposal for an academy had originated. In some cases the local authority appeared to have taken the initiative:

*The Director of Education was wedded to the academy... He saw it as a real kudos having an academy and was astounded that we couldn't see how brilliant it would be.*

In others, it appeared that the government was the driving force:

*There was a constant feeling that the DfES was applying pressure in the background.*

*The Director of Education did tell us that he had applied for funds for new schools and had been turned down. [Academies] were big flagship programmes of the Labour Party and they were determined to have them in.*

The interviews with two academy sponsors confirmed that in the cases with which they had been involved, the first move had come from either the DfES or a local authority: the sponsors did not appear to have been proactive. One, who had worked with particular local authorities, explained: *'We don't have plans in other areas. We respond to specific needs and do not set out to be a sponsor'*.

Another had different experiences: *'The DfES made the first approach in each case... In the case of local authorities they either want an academy or are asked to consider an academy by the DfES'*.

Another issue for campaigners against new schools was the perceived speed of the academy process. This appeared to increase the levels of mistrust and, in the view of campaigners, reduced their opportunities to put forward a considered case against the proposal:

*It was so quick. By the time we knew about it, it was at the architectural planning stage. And they kept saying that they had to deliver the scheme, that there was some cut-off point for getting academy money. The agents [appointed to manage the academy process] had the absolute urgency for pushing it forward, pushing it forward...*

*The [Chief Education Officer] brought around architects... The headteacher did not know but found out. After that she contacted governors and called an emergency meeting. The closure of the school was presented as a fait accompli.*

*A lot of the main decisions were made before anybody could be involved. They'd got the site, the sponsors, the specialism...*

The tight timetable involved in academy proposals was acknowledged by one local authority official, who explained:

*The DfES Academies Unit approached the local authority... there was a very tight envelope of time for the authority to make a decision.*

There was also general concern about the consultation process. One campaigner considered that the consultation was limited and not objective:

*[It was] fairly biased in the questioning and the limited nature of the questioning in order to come out with the desired outcome which was yes, there is majority support for an academy.*

Another considered that public information about the consultation was inadequate:

*I said that as a member of the community I had no idea that they were doing a consultation, I only knew because I got involved. But if I was an average person in [the area] I wouldn't even have known it was taking place.*

Several other campaigners drew attention to the inadequacy of the distribution of consultation leaflets:

*Every household is supposed to be consulted but huge chunks have not got the consultation leaflets.*

*They didn't all go out, no; they were actually in the Education Office under someone's desk... Because the forms weren't circulated when we went to the public meeting, it was only because of our intervention that parents were aware of it.*

Others drew attention to what they considered were the inadequacies of other aspects of the consultation. These included the organisation of consultation meetings which allowed very limited opportunities for parents to speak and ask questions; and very limited consultations with parents face-to-face or with other people in the community. One interviewee, who had been closely involved with the distribution of consultation leaflets, even disputed the results of the consultation.

But, overall, many campaigners appeared to feel that the consultation was not really designed to find out what parents really wanted. One felt, for example, that '*it did not amount to consultation – it was presentation*'. Another considered that:

*In everybody's perception, all of the campaigners against the academy, in everybody's view this appeared to be a done deal.*

Indeed, it was not clear precisely what the formal consultation was intended to achieve. A local authority official commented:

*It wasn't so much to find out whether they liked or didn't like these proposals, it was more to develop the proposal in a way that would make it more palatable and actually reflect some of the aspirations and ambitions of those communities. So I don't think we were saying we would change our minds about what we were going to do, but as we were doing it we did want to win over hearts and minds in terms of what we were going to produce as an end product.*

In another case, however, it appears that the academy proposal was not pursued when it received little support from the local community.

Campaigners for new schools were also concerned about the consultation procedures and, in particular, the way management consultants conducted the consultation. There was a feeling that parents campaigning for the new school had not been sufficiently involved in the process:

*They were not getting good local input and the first things they have done in their consultation have put people's backs up really badly.*

*They carried out a consultation with [management consultants] which worked out all right in the end but was fraught early on because we did not think they were asking the right questions and managing things well.*

Many of the campaigners considered that the whole decision making procedure for academies was flawed. One summarised the issues as follows:

*For an academy, no statutory proposals are required. The legal basis is the funding agreement. The DfES guidance for decision makers is clear – where an academy is to replace an existing school or schools ‘there should be a general presumption in favour of approval’. That seems to be the principal sentence that can be taken out of 80 odd paragraphs to say we will approve it because it’s going to be an academy...*

Academy sponsors were asked for their views on the consultation process. It appeared that they had mixed views on the efficiency of local councils in organising the consultation process and on the expertise of the project management teams that were employed to undertake the consultation.

#### **4.3.4 Local authority priorities and attitudes**

The priorities of local authorities could also present a barrier to campaigners for new schools, especially if the Council’s own aspirations or commitments did not include the provision of new schools. One interviewee reported having been told repeatedly by the DfES that *‘without the support of the local political leaders and the local authority we would not get our new school’*. In another case, according to campaigners, the local authority was concerned that building a new school would threaten another school.

Local party political issues could also, on occasion, present problems to campaigners. According to several, some wards were considered to be more favoured than others because of the party political allegiance of residents, whilst in other cases changes in the political composition of the Council during the course of campaigns for new schools were said to have caused uncertainty or delay.

One of the academy sponsors felt that problems could arise if the majority party was not in overall agreement about the academy proposal: *‘This can be obstructive, misleading and confusing to parents... Different local views on closure can lead to confusion and doesn’t help parents’*.

Another problem was that several campaigners for a new school felt that the local authority had a particular view of the type of parents involved in such campaigns and questioned their motives. One interviewee explained: *‘There is an all pervading view of parents as being aspirational system-workers who only want to make things better for their own child. I think that is wrong’*. In another case:

*The Council first of all thought that we were just a bunch of pushy middle-class parents but what they did, is to use us as part of a bargaining tool to try and get more money from government.*

This difference in views appears to have been at least partially confirmed in interviews with local authority officials. They felt, in several cases, that some parents were campaigning for a new school when there were places available elsewhere that they were not willing to consider for their own children. On the other hand, local authority officials appeared to accept that parents wanted community schools with intakes that were reflective of the whole community and accessible to all.

#### **4.3.5 Lack of sites for new schools**

All seven of the campaigns for new schools had faced difficulties in relation to school sites; even if a suitable site was found problems could still arise. It is the local authority’s responsibility to make a site available for a new school by either allocating the land – if it owns a suitable site – or purchasing the land if it does not. Campaigners, therefore, needed to convince their local authority of their case. However, land scarcity, competing priorities and high land costs could pose difficult and sometimes insuperable problems, even if the local authority accepted the need for a new school. Campaigners described a range of problems that they had faced:

*It has to be the right location and the right size. Then you come to the issue of cost, it will obviously run into millions so that's a problem...*

*Land has been the sticking point for us. There is no way that you can get money to buy land. It has to be provided by the local authority.*

Even where a suitable site had been identified, the Council could decide to use it for another purpose as occurred in one of our case studies: *'Priorities of the Council were a barrier as they preferred [another building] on the site'*.

In relation to the campaign for the school with a different philosophy of education, the group concerned had to provide the site and that proved difficult given the cost of land:

*We would have loved to have a site in an inner city location but it is extremely complicated for us to find the money to buy a site that is big enough and has the right planning consent.*

The problems of identifying and securing suitable sites for new schools were acknowledged as a major problem by both the DfES official and the local authority officials we interviewed. Indeed, for one local authority it was seen as 'our big issue' whilst the DfES official considered that the availability of sites was a problem faced by all promoters of new schools, including parents.

#### **4.3.6 Funding and sustaining campaigns**

Two other issues were raised – funding and sustaining the campaigns. Generally, it appeared that finance was not a major issue; this appeared to be, at least in part, due to the modern style of campaigning that relies increasingly on e-mail and the Internet. Even so, some campaigners felt that with *'with more we could have done more'* and several campaigners against new schools felt that with more funding they *'could have been more proactive'* by obtaining legal advice, mounting legal challenges or employing someone to help.

Several campaigns for new schools had received donations or specific funding to pay for individuals' time; others had made continual appeals for finance at their meetings and events. Campaigners themselves often made financial contributions, and in some cases this was the only source of finance.

Several campaigns against new schools received donations from other organisations and help in kind with printing, photocopying and preparing banners; others carried out fundraising, but a number relied on contributions from campaigners. One interviewee explained: *'We didn't raise funds. It didn't seem necessary. But the campaign cost me hundreds of pounds...I invested in a computer that cost £1100'*.

Sustaining campaigns over time was also identified as a problem for campaigns for new schools as they could be very lengthy and problematic if the lead campaigner(s) worked full-time or if a significant number of the core group were forced to make other arrangements for their child's secondary education. One campaign had confronted this problem and an interviewee described her feelings:

*I don't think the group will go on for very much longer unless the decision is made [soon]... Probably my eldest child will be a qualified teacher and able to teach before the school opens. That is how ridiculously long it has taken.*

Another parent campaigner from a successful campaign summarised the issue for her campaign:

*For us [if the deadline had been missed] we would have to start again with another group [of parents]. [Our MP] says if you are going to have parents involved it has got to benefit their kid as well as other kids. But it must benefit their kid.*

#### 4.4 Outcomes of the campaigns

Table 3 summarises the characteristics of the campaigns for and against new schools in terms of whether they appeared to have been successful or unsuccessful.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 3 Campaigns for and against new schools and success of campaigns**

Type of campaign	Successful	Unsuccessful	Unresolved (a)	Total
For new schools	4	0	3	7
Against new schools	2	4	2	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>

(a) Unresolved (autumn 2006)

##### 4.4.1 Campaigns for new schools

By the end of the autumn 2006, four of the seven campaigns for new schools could be regarded as successful in that a new school had been agreed or agreed in principle (the other three had not been resolved). In one of these, however, the campaigners did not feel that they had been totally successful, in that they had originally aimed for a community school and instead obtained an academy, and there was still some concern over ‘*the governance issue*’ given that the academy had only one parent on the governing body whilst some other local schools had a number of parent governors.

It is noteworthy that three of the four successful campaigns had the support of the local authority and, to some extent, central government. In two of them, local government support was explicit and the link between parents and the local authority had been one element of the success. In the other case, involving an academy, the situation was more complex. It appears that the campaigners may have influenced both the location and the time frame for the delivery of the new school, but probably not a new school *per se*, given that an academy appeared likely to be built somewhere in the locality at some point in time. A campaigner explained:

*It was very much a parents’ campaign. However, I should say that a school would have got built without the parents. I don’t think we should take credit for the school being built... It’s the location and the timing that we pushed on... they did originally talk about [another location].*

The campaign for a school with a different philosophy of education had been lengthy. Although government support for the idea was obtained fairly early on, the fact that the national curriculum was not offered was a significant hurdle that needed to be overcome. If the school were to become state-maintained a way would need to be found of allowing all pupils to be ‘disapplied’ from the national curriculum. Indeed, it was only with the academies programme that a way forward was found as academies have more flexibility than state-maintained schools, as instead of delivering the national curriculum they needed to deliver ‘a broad and balanced curriculum’.

<sup>5</sup> When fieldwork was completed at the end of autumn 2006.

Interviewees who were part of the three unresolved campaigns were able to point to successful aspects of their campaigns. One interviewee noted that the campaign had lobbied successfully for improvements to the admissions criteria used by some voluntary-aided and foundation schools, so enabling more local children to obtain places. These campaigners also felt that they had been successful in challenging what they perceived as a misconception on the part of the local authority that:

*Middle-class parents are out there working the system just to secure a good school place for their child, is one of the most important things that the campaign has done over the years.*

In relation to the other two campaigns, it was felt that mounting the campaign had been a significant success in its own right, whilst the more longstanding of the two had also built considerable grassroots support, DfES support and had worked extensively with other groups that had a common cause.

#### **4.4.2 Campaigns against new schools**

Two of the eight campaigns against new schools were successful: in both cases, the proposals for academies were not pursued and the existing schools were retained. Four campaigns were unsuccessful and two had not been resolved by the end of autumn 2006.

The two successful campaigns involved parents, school staff and teacher unions, although one of the parent groups was said to be *'not particularly large'*. Campaigners from these two successful groups explained:

*We kept up an even pressure, consistent pressure which was from parents and absolutely with the headteacher and staff. There was no gap between us.*

*I think central to the success was parents first of all leading the campaign because the teachers were accused on many occasions of just trying to save their own skins. It is the parents leading it but being supported fully by the teachers and the unions. Together that made us a very, very strong campaign.*

Given that campaigns against the closure of a school were usually working to a strict timetable, the ability to establish the campaign speedily was also seen as very important. But there were also specific external factors that appeared to have made a major contribution to the successful outcomes. In one, the proposal for an academy was not considered *'viable'* by campaigners; however, they still thought that an academy may well have been built had they not exposed the scheme's inadequacies so cogently. In the other case, there was a sponsor, perceived by the campaigners to be controversial, for the proposed academy which meant that the campaign was able to generate a large amount of media interest. This invigorated the campaign, aided recruitment and resulted in a large vote against the proposal at the formal consultation stage which appears to have led to its abandonment.

On the whole, it would appear that the unsuccessful campaigns were not able to mount such tightly knit campaigns. In particular, some campaigners had found it difficult to recruit parents in what they considered were sufficient numbers:

*The problem for me is that people want to be very accepting of everything they are given. They weren't questioning the quality and they weren't questioning the content. It was just, yes please. We don't get anything very often, can we have it.*

*The rest of the people didn't want [the school] to close but felt it was a waste of time because the Council had made its mind up...*

*We weren't able to reach a wider group of parents...and that was one of the weaknesses of the campaign.*

Irrespective of the outcome, there were some positive aspects of unsuccessful campaigns that those involved could identify. In particular, the campaigns raised people's awareness of the issue. In the case of one campaign, interviewees felt that the experience had been beneficial as a second proposal for an academy did not go ahead:

*I think it was a training ground for us because we all were able to look back and see where we had gone wrong and things that we could improve. It was all a very good negative cause to refer back to and how not to work and that was certainly the case in discussions about the new academy. We had a precedent...*

## **5 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Conclusions**

The research reported here focused on 15 campaigns for and against the setting up of new schools. In terms of the three key research questions we set out to answer, it was found that: first, in some cases, parents' wishes, either in favour of or opposed to the setting up of a new school, were taken on board; second, parents' involvement in the planning and setting up of new schools was limited, particularly in relation to academies; and third, there was variation in the extent to which campaigners were successful in meeting their aims and objectives, although amongst our sample the campaigns for a new school appeared to be more successful than those against.

There were similarities in the experiences of campaigners irrespective of the type of campaign they had taken part in. Most had experienced problems in accessing information either because it was not readily available or, particularly in the case of those campaigning against a new school, because information was not provided to them. Government policies and priorities were perceived as major obstacles by many campaigners as most either wanted to obtain a new community school or to prevent a community school closing, whilst the government prioritised academies. Local government priorities were to some extent bound up with those of the government in the case of academies.

A major problem for those campaigning for a new school was the difficulty in obtaining a suitable site for the school. This was seen as a major issue by both DfES and local authority officials. Providing a site for a new school is the responsibility of the local authority and there are issues of availability and cost as well as the competing priorities of the local authorities concerned. Another major difficulty for campaigners for new schools was lack of expertise on legal, technical and other matters.

The major barrier for many campaigning against a new school was considered to be the academy process from which interviewees felt they were excluded. In particular, they were concerned at the lack of openness, the speed of the process, the method of consultation employed and what appeared to many to be the inevitability that the academy would be built. Those campaigning for a new school who had been involved in consultations on an academy were also critical of the consultation undertaken.

In terms of the outcomes of the campaigns themselves, two of the eight against a new school prevented it being established, four did not and two were not resolved at the end of autumn 2006. Four of the seven campaigns for a new school appeared to have been successful (three had not been resolved). However, it is important to note that two successful campaigns for new schools were formed in direct response to proposals announced by the local authorities concerned and so cannot be considered to be similar to the other campaigns.

## **5.2 Policy implications**

There are a number of implications for policy arising from this research. Whilst it is not possible to generalise in terms of the outcomes of the campaigns, in terms of the processes involved there are some implications for policy. These related to the type of schools parents wanted; the process of setting up academies; the availability of information; securing sites; and improving links with parents.

### **Type of school**

Nearly all of the campaigns for a new school wanted or assumed that the new school would be a community not a religious school. There was a concern that faith-based schools were replacing non-faith schools. There is a case for a debate on this issue, given that choice for parents who want a school without a particular religious focus/sponsor could diminish.

### **Academies**

There was concern amongst campaigners about the process of setting up academies and, in particular the lack of information on the proposals; the speed of the process; the limited nature of the consultation; and what was perceived as the lack of democratic accountability regarding academies, particularly in relation to school governance. There is a case for reviewing these procedures to bring them into line with the establishment of other types of schools.

### **Availability of information**

Information for parents on how to campaign for and against new schools could be provided. More support could be offered by the DfES, as is currently provided in the case of competitions for new schools. Councils vary in the extent to which they make documents (agendas, minutes, reports etc.) available via their websites: it is important that this information is provided by all local authorities. It may be helpful for an individual within a local authority to be designated to assist parents with accessing information and to provide guidance about council procedures.

### **Securing sites**

Securing suitable sites for new schools was identified as a major problem by the DfES and local authorities; this is an issue that needs to be addressed by central and local government.

### **Improving links with parents**

There is a case for parents whose children's schools are threatened with closure to be more constructively engaged in discussions about the future of the school at an earlier stage. Parent campaigners against the closure of schools were concerned that they did not receive information about proposed closures in good time and that their views were not seriously listened to. More generally, the purposes of consultation regarding new schools – including the role of parents in the consultation – and the processes involved, should be made clearer to parents. The consultation processes themselves need to be carried out openly at a formative stage.

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