

When the British Council for School Environments asked C21 Schools co-editor **Sharon Wright** to co-ordinate a school makeover in a week, she took up the challenge

# Look what you can do in 5 days!

Staff Room before



Staff Room after



The British Council for School Environments (BCSE) held the first National School Environments Week in June this year. A programme of discussions, activities and visits included an international best-practice summit at the Academy of St Francis of Assisi in Liverpool. Ty Goddard, BCSE Director, had the idea that a school makeover would showcase what could be achieved with creativity and imagination and a fundamental rethink of existing spaces. He recognised that many schools will not benefit from the huge investment in capital investment through Building Schools for the Future for some considerable time. In the meantime, they have to make the best of their existing environments.

Ty asked me to take on the co-ordination of the makeover and it proved an exciting and rewarding challenge! Wirral Borough Council, a member of BCSE, offered one of their primary schools for the makeover. Liscard Primary School in Wallasey was built in 1911 as a boys' grammar school. With 700 pupils and 98 staff, it is one of the largest primary schools in the country. In September 2006 a Children's Centre was added to the school to provide a range of health, education, childcare and family-support services.

While the school occupies an impressive-looking building, set back from the road with good-sized play spaces, and enjoys good support from parents and the local community, the learning spaces no longer provide the flexibility required for the modern primary curriculum. Space is at a premium, with every possible area of the school being used for learning activities. External play areas to the back of the school are poor, classrooms range from very large to very small with no uniformity, and staff spaces are cramped. The school has poor accessibility for pupils with mobility problems, and if a child is in a wheelchair, the whole class has to be decanted to a ground-floor classroom to facilitate their learning.

Wirral BC will be spending a significant amount of money on the school this year to do structural works designed to improve the reception (a very small space for the number of visitors and parents who come through the school) and administration

areas (which currently see staff working in corridors and corners), and to provide additional car parking with safe separation of pedestrians and vehicles. The school is planning to spend its devolved capital on upgrading pupil toilets, which are in a dreadful state. These improvements are much needed and are rightly a priority for the school and the authority, but the headteacher, Rose Littler, sees a real need to improve teaching and learning areas if the school is to provide the best possible experience for pupils, staff and the community.

BCSE is a charity and membership organisation for schools, local authorities, architects, contractors and consultants interested and involved in school capital projects. We sought the support of members to develop a small number of areas in the school during National School Environments Week and were overwhelmed with the offers of expertise, materials, labour and funding we received. The school was also deeply committed to the project and involved pupils and staff in the activities, creating ownership and allowing members of the school community to think critically about what would make their school a better place to work and learn.

This makeover project had a number of core objectives:

- To enhance learning and teaching at Liscard Primary School
- To create ownership by involving the school community in all aspects of the project
- To build the capacity of the school management team to understand the issues presented by their learning environment, enabling them to prioritise future work
- To model a process which other schools could learn from
- To show that auditing learning environments, understanding the issues and developing creative solutions need not be expensive or time consuming – that a lot can be achieved for a relatively small investment in a short time.

During the week we redeveloped two key spaces in the school:

- The staffroom, in line with staff requirements, involved painting, new flooring, a coffee bar in a feature wall, new ceiling tiles, a new kitchen, and appropriate furniture. This will provide staff with a space to relax and share practice, and value their important role in the school.
- The school library with a more appropriate layout, lighting and circulation, new furniture and book storage, repainting, lighting, carpet and acoustic ceiling panels. This will make the most of a small learning-resource space for use by all children in the school.

We also worked with pupils through the week to:

- Seek pupils' views on how the school might, in future, develop external curriculum areas (such as a small garden for use in science)
- Provide consultancy support and expert advice to the school on how it might be more sustainable, develop better learning environments and overcome acoustic problems.

**1. The staffroom (Size: 43 square metres)**

The staffroom, as in many similar schools, is too small for the number of people who could use

it. At the start of the project it was a pretty tired space which lacked purpose and was underused as a result. It had poor storage, seating, flooring and kitchen facilities, and a loud photocopier in the corner. In short, it was a confused space, being neither a good place to work, nor a relaxing space to have a coffee.

Staff, as a result of this project, discussed how the space could be improved and how its use could be more appropriately defined for their needs (for socialising, relaxation, discussing practice, etc.). There is an additional room set aside on the second floor for staff preparation and planning, so the staffroom does not need to be a formal 'working' space. The head was keen that this space should show staff that they were valued, and contribute to their well-being. This space was recognised as potentially important in the recruitment and retention of high-quality staff now and in the future.

In consultation with staff we defined the space with new furniture and finishes. Staff ideas included:

- Re-decoration
- Improved heating and air conditioning
- Comfortable seats
- Tables to eat off
- Breakfast bar
- Renewed and increased cupboard space and surfaces
- New carpet
- Better lighting – blinds/curtains
- Decent cutlery and crockery
- Improved hot water dispenser
- Communal tea and coffee etc... never enough boiling water at playtimes and lunchtimes
- Large fridge with water cooler
- Good cooker/microwave/toaster/dishwasher
- Flat-screen TV/Vehicle for communication
- Internet access
- Improved pigeonholes with doors
- Sound system
- Magazine rack
- Windows that open better
- Recliners
- Relocation of photocopier
- Mirrors



Liscard Primary School



Library before



Library after

We covered as many of these aspects as possible within the time and resources available, and the school can add to the design over time (TV/sound system, for example). In particular, we:

- Repainted the room
- Built a curved feature wall with a built-in coffee bar
- Closed off one of the doors into the room (there were two) to create more usable space
- Installed a new kitchen with a water boiler and cooker, had the dishwasher leak fixed, provided new tiling, and the school purchased a new fridge
- Provided new flooring (carpet in the 'lounge' areas, wood in the 'cafe' space and vinyl in the kitchen)
- Replaced the ceiling panel and light filters to improve lighting levels and acoustics
- Provided sofas for the 'lounge' space, tables and chairs for the 'cafe' area and stools for the coffee bar

The school relocated the photocopier, accessorised the staffroom with candles, mirrors, pictures created by the pupils, a large clock and plants, and approached the local branch of Asda, which donated crockery and cutlery.



Pupils enjoying the refurbished library

## 2. The library (Size: 48 square metres)

For a school of this size, the one library space was small and uninspiring, but had potential. We felt that some creative thinking about how this space could be improved would significantly enhance learning opportunities for all pupils at the school. In consultation with staff, we were able to:

- Rethink circulation to increase available space. This included closing off one of the doors into the room
- Provide new furniture and storage. A 'Learn' bookcase, tables (shaped like an apple and a lemon) for reading and working, and a large table with 4 concealed flat-screen PCs which, at the push of a button, rise up from the central section, providing the flexibility to work at the PC or use the table flat for small-group work
- Repaint the space
- Provide acoustic panels to improve noise levels
- Remove panels from internal windows to create more natural light.

The school also approached Scholastic Books and they donated a range of new reading material for the library.

## 3. Consultancy advice

We used the expertise of BCSE members to help the headteacher think through issues to do with:

- How the school can create a more sustainable environment. This is an area which we discussed with pupils and staff to consider environmental conditions (heating, lighting ventilation) and how these affect learning, cost-saving from energy use and recycling, etc.
- Making best use of external learning spaces to deliver the curriculum by working with pupils.

These projects were designed to embed the BCSE best practice in the school, encourage them to consider how they might make best use of their devolved budget in future years, and involve the whole school community in the project.

### Project programme

This was a lot to achieve in a week! The programme, managed by Martin Crews from David Langdon and Mike Walmsley from Willmott Dixon, was a real challenge and involved:

### Library programme

Monday – Strip out and block doorway with stud partition  
 Tuesday – Decoration  
 Wednesday – Acoustic and carpet  
 Thursday – Electrician and furniture  
 Friday – Reveal to pupils and staff

### Staffroom programme

Monday – Strip out  
 Tuesday – Fit kitchen and form curved partition  
 Wednesday – Fit light diffusers, decorate and tile splashback  
 Thursday – Fit new floor  
 Friday – Reveal to pupils and staff

### Impact on the school

While it is difficult to fully estimate the total cost of the project as practically all the materials, labour and expertise was donated by contributors, we consider that the week was worth upwards of £40,000 to the school.

And was the makeover a success? Rose Littler, headteacher at the school, said: 'The results are fantastic – I can't believe how much has been achieved in just five days. My thanks go to all those, including teachers and pupils, who have worked so hard to transform the school.'

According to Ty Goddard, director of the BCSE: 'This work over the last week shows how much can be achieved in a very short time with limited resources – a real transformation of key areas in the school. It's a tribute to school staff and pupils, as well as the organisations that generously donated their time and resources to help make it happen.'

And Wirral's Director of Children's Services, Howard Cooper, added: 'This is a fantastic project. As with all schools, the staff here are a major resource, and an improvement to their working environment will no doubt have a positive impact on the whole school. In addition to this, we expect the rejuvenation of the school library to really inspire pupils.'

### Contributors

BCSE members who donated time, expertise and materials were:

- **Wirral BC:** School expertise and health and safety support
- **Creative Wit:** Project co-ordination
- **Davis Langdon:** Project management
- **Nightingale Associates:** Design of staffroom
- **Aedas Architects:** Design advice and financial support
- **Willmott Dixon:** Main contractor, who brought in a number of their local sub-contractors
- **Thorpe Kilworth:** Staffroom furniture
- **Isis Concepts:** Library furniture (which included a donation of four flat-screen PCs from Westland Helicopters)
- **Ecophon:** Acoustic ceiling panels
- **Mouchel Parkman:** Pupil engagement on external spaces
- **BRE:** Advice on sustainability and pupil engagement

The Liscard branch of Asda provided new crockery and cutlery for the staffroom.

Scholastic Books provided reading material for the new library.

For further information about the British Council for School Environments go to [www.bcse.uk.net](http://www.bcse.uk.net) or call 0207 785 6291.

All pictures courtesy of BCSE