

Rugby Area Committee – 7th March 2007

Supplementary report of the Strategic Director for Children, Young People and Families

Summary of responses to close Bishop Wulstan School, Rugby

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Approximately 150 letters and e-mails have been received in response to the consultation, including:
- letters and e-mails from parents and families of pupils currently in the school
 - letters from current pupils
 - letters from staff at the school
 - letters from other schools
 - letters from other interested parties.
- 1.2 Copies of all the letters and e-mails received to date have been placed in folders in each of the Group Rooms and a further set is available at the Rugby Area Office. While a summary of the main points raised in discussion is given below, Members will find it helpful to read the responses themselves in order to be aware of the strength of feeling which has been engendered by this proposal. It is perhaps not surprising that few of the responses support the Authority's proposal and there are many well articulated arguments given to retain the school.
- 1.3 The main points made in the responses received are summarised below under the following headings:
- Pupil numbers
 - Standards and levels of achievement
 - Parental choice – Catholic provision
– Small school provision
 - Consultation process
 - Exploration of other options
 - Funding
 - Arrangements in the event of closure.

2. Summary of main points raised

2.1 Pupil numbers

- Rugby has a growing population and in five years time several thousand houses are expected to be built. It seems short sighted to close the school when the town is growing at such a pace.
- Increased numbers of children from Europe can be expected to swell the school population.
- Small schools have a number of advantages over large schools, which suffer from poor discipline, are more difficult to manage, and where pupils lose their identity and lack pride in their school.

Commentary

- (i) *The issue of pupil numbers is central to consideration of the future of Bishop Wulstan School. Low pupil numbers mean fewer resources and difficulty for the school in sustaining any improvements already made and to raise the very low level of attainment at 16. The school is already small with a planned admission number of 83 and a capacity of 415. The numbers on roll have fallen over the last few years and currently there are 324 pupils.*
- (ii) *For September 2007, 53 pupils are likely to receive the offer of a place at Bishop Wulstan. Most parents who gave Bishop Wulstan a lower preference will be offered their first preference. The school is therefore unlikely to admit more than 53 pupils in September and numbers are unlikely to be much above 300 even allowing for some admissions mid year. If the trend in subscription for Year 7 continues then numbers will continue to fall, and the school would become financially and educationally unviable.*
- (iii) *A number of letters and e-mails draw attention to the new sports hall (completed in November 2004) and the newly acquired Business and Enterprise Specialist College status. There is no doubt that these represent significant achievements for the school but it should be noted that every other secondary school in Rugby also has specialist college status and a number have, or soon will have, sports halls.*
- (iv) *Respondents to the consultation are correct to point out the significant housing developments in the town. In the short to medium term there is further housing planned at Cawston to the north of the town and on the former Alstom/Cattle Market site. These developments will increase the demand for secondary school places although offset to some extent by falling rolls in primary schools. In the medium to long term, significant further housing is likely in Rugby as part of a regional plan to build more houses. There is evidence of a growing number of economic migrants to Rugby from elsewhere in the European Union, in particular from countries like Poland, many of whom are Catholic and seeking Catholic provision. A number of letters have been received from families in this position. Again these factors are very positive in terms of potential recruitment to the school but it should be noted that over the last two or three*

years many new houses have already been built at the same time that levels of subscription to Bishop Wulstan have fallen. The major expansion of new housing is still to be confirmed and is unlikely to have any significant impact on overall pupil numbers in the town until after 2012. Likewise, while a number of children from European migrant workers have been admitted to the school, overall pupil numbers still look set to fall in September 2007 and probably beyond.

- (v) *It is the case that Bishop Wulstan does admit a number of pupils during the course of the year, including people moving into the area but also pupils excluded from other schools.*

2.2 Standards and levels of achievement

- The school should be given a longer period to improve.
- The school should not be judged by its academic achievements.
- The school has produced many tradesmen and women that make a positive contribution to society.
- School could thrive if given help and support. It has been ‘talked down’ by people in high positions.
- Presence of grammar schools in Rugby undermines the school’s achievements.
- Results are a function of the pupil intake and the school has a number of difficult pupils rejected by other schools. Need to look at the ‘value added’ aspect.
- The staff work hard and know the pupils well.
- Clear that the County Council recognises that the school has made great efforts to improve but DfES refuse to find any merit in the school at all.

Commentary

- (i) *The issue of viability is related to the issue of standards of pupil attainment and, as importantly, to the capacity of the school to improve these very low standards.*

Levels of attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 in 2005 and 2006 are given below:

GCSE results	% 2005	% 2006
5+ A*-C	12	25
5+ A*-C incl. English and Maths	9	10
5+ A*-G	77	84

- (ii) *2006 results showed some improvement in the previous year in Key Stage 4 but a decline in performance in Key Stage 3. However the results in Key Stage 4 fell well below the school’s own target, the DfES’s floor target for all schools*

of 30% and the expected levels of attainment. In addition other key indicators, including contextual value added scores, which give an indication of pupil progress, are low at both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

- (iii) Bishop Wulstan is a small school, fluctuations in the school population can affect the statistics and it is accepted that there is significant movement in the school within key stages. These figures, therefore, need to be viewed with some caution.*
- (iv) It is also recognised that some improvements have been made: the 3-16 partnership working, strengthening of the leadership and management of the school, and the improvement in five or more A*-C GCSE grades.*

However, it is clear that standards in the school currently are unacceptably low and must improve. This concern is shared not only by the County Council but also by the school community, the Catholic authorities, and officials and the Minister at the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The school has been judged to be in a category of concern by the County Council and continues to receive additional levels of support, as it has for a number of years

- (v) The concern that the school lacks the capacity to improve levels of achievement mitigates against the case for giving the school more time.*
- (vi) The existence of selective schools in East Warwickshire is given by some as a reason for the school's underachievement. The 'Contextual Value Added' figures, which assess the progress made, are based on the progress made by pupils in similar schools operating in similar contexts.*

2.3 Parental choice – Catholic provision – Small school provision

- Bishop Wulstan has a very caring ethos and has tackled some of the least achieving children in Rugby.
- Closing the only Catholic secondary school in Rugby will be a loss to future youth.
- New Polish and Portugese families will expect a Catholic school to be available in Rugby.
- The school has a strong ethos of supporting inclusion.
- UNICEF report rates British pupils as most unhappy in the western world because of a lack of investment. This proposal would close a school where every child does matter.
- Its small size enables it to have a close community spirit.
- Smaller religious schools should be supported to overcome problems when they have a long record of success.
- Family values taught in Catholic schools are needed in view of the number of dysfunctional families and anti-social behaviour in society.

- More pupils would have expressed a preference for the school if they were sure it would not be closed.

Commentary

- (i) *This Authority is committed to the principle of parental choice and to diversity in its school provision.*
- (ii) *The Authority is also committed to the 'dual system' of education established by the 1944 Education Act and has a long tradition of working very closely and successfully with the church authorities to make denominational provision available.*
- (iii) *The Authority is statutorily required to maintain the proportion of denominational places across the county.*
- (iv) *It is for these reasons that, although the school has been giving concern for some years, the Authority only consulted on the proposal to close the school in 2006 and then agreed to withdraw even those proposals while the Archdiocese explored other options. For a number of years, the Authority, working with the Diocesan Schools Commission, has supported the school in order to sustain Catholic provision in the town. However, with the rejection of the Archdiocese's plans by the DfES and continued concerns about viability and capacity to raise standards, closure is considered to be the only remaining option. The principles of diversity and parental choice are important but cannot be supported if a school is unable to deliver an acceptable level of education for its pupils.*
- (v) *Moreover the evidence suggests that, while the Catholic community is keen to preserve denominational provision, insufficient numbers of Catholic parents are choosing Bishop Wulstan School. This position was largely confirmed by the parental survey undertaken by the Diocesan Schools Commission as part of the 'fresh start' proposal. While pupil numbers have grown in the last twelve months, including the children of European migrant workers, overall pupil numbers are low and may fall over time as the larger year groups leave.*
- (vi) *In taking the decision on whether to go forward with the decision to close, Members will therefore need to recognise that closure will end Catholic secondary provision in Rugby and it is unlikely that such provision will be restored in the foreseeable future. Alternative provision in Leamington or Nuneaton may not be acceptable to Catholic parents because of the very significant distances involved.*
- (vii) *If parents of Bishop Wulstan pupils secure places at Trinity Catholic School in Leamington, free transport would be provided in line with the County Council's Home-to School Transport policy.*
- (viii) *So far as the size of the school is concerned, it is clear that for many parents and pupils being a small school is attractive. There was much convincing testimony at the public meeting held twelve months ago from parents to the way in which Bishop Wulstan had provided for their children, some of whom*

had special educational needs, some of whom had transferred from other larger schools, some of whom had not coped in larger schools, and one or two of whom were dual registered at Bishop Wulstan and at Brooke (Special) School. There is no doubt that the school has created a very strong caring ethos and is very inclusive and that this ethos is helped by the small size of the school. The difficulty is that the size of the school while attractive to some parents does make the school vulnerable if pupil numbers remain low.

- (ix) *As has already been noted, the closure of Bishop Wulstan would reduce elements of the diversity of secondary provision – not only Catholic provision but the opportunity to attend a small school. The capacity of the high schools in Rugby is as follows:*

School	Age range	PAN	Capacity
<i>Ashlawn (bilateral)</i>	<i>11-18</i>	<i>256</i>	<i>1,508</i>
<i>Avon Valley</i>	<i>11-16</i>	<i>166 *</i>	<i>830</i>
<i>Bilton High</i>	<i>11-16</i>	<i>285</i>	<i>1,426</i>
<i>Harris (C of E)</i>	<i>11-16</i>	<i>157</i>	<i>750</i>

** It has been agreed that for Avon Valley the PAN will rise to 220 and the capacity to 1,100 from 2007.*

- (x) *It should be noted that the size of these schools is not out of line with the situation across the country and indeed some Authorities have schools much larger than those in Warwickshire. It is important to recognise also that larger schools put in place pastoral systems which allow high levels of support and care for pupils, and that all the schools in Rugby are committed to meeting the needs of all their pupils including those with special educational needs and very successfully do so. In celebrating the success of Bishop Wulstan in providing care and support it should not be assumed that such care and support is not available in other Rugby schools.*

2.4 Consultation process

- The tone of the consultation document suggests a decision has already been made. The paper gives scant detail and does not address school's key difficulties.
- The consultation process, including the period for feedback, is too short and the closing date too close to 11+ examination results to allow these to prompt extra Year 7 preference for September 2007.
- Grave concern about the stress and trauma caused to pupils as a result over the repeated uncertainty over closure.
- The County Council should meet with parents as part of the consultation process. The reasons for the proposal have changed since the 2006 proposal.
- If the school is going to close, it would be better to conclude the matter quickly.

Commentary

- (i) *Officers have made clear throughout the consultation period that the only decision taken by the Council is to consult on the proposal. Any decision would only be taken following the period of consultation.*
- (ii) *A number of respondents were concerned about the short timescale for consultation. Members will be aware that the decision of the Minister at the DfES to reject the 'fresh start' proposal of the Archdiocese was not known until January 2007.*
- (iii) *Having taken the decision to consult, the view was taken that if the school were to close it would have to be in August 2007. To prolong the period of uncertainty to August 2008, for example, would increase the anxiety of pupils, parents and staff and make it almost impossible to maintain the staffing and curriculum. It would be increasingly likely that over that much longer period parents would seek places in alternative schools. As a result, the consultation period is necessarily short although within the guidelines.*

2.5 Exploration of other options

- Closure should be delayed until all avenues have been exhausted. The possible merger of two faith schools in Rugby has merit.
- School could thrive if given help and support. It has been 'talked down' by people in high positions.

Commentary

- (i) *The Authority has been concerned about Bishop Wulstan School for a number of years and has discussed with the Diocesan Schools Commission a number of different ways to support Catholic provision in Rugby, including links with other Catholic schools and other high schools. None was felt to offer a solution to the problem of capacity to improve which the school faces as a result of its small size.*
- (ii) *In 2006, faced with very low levels of subscription and very poor examination results, the Authority took the view that there was no alternative to closure. However the County Council withdrew its proposal to close the school, to allow the Archdiocese to explore alternative solutions which had become possible. Since that time the Archdiocese's two proposals have been turned down by the DfES. The first proposal, submitted in July 2006, to establish an Academy failed because the DfES decided it did not meet its criteria. The second proposal was to create a federation of Catholic schools in Rugby and to close Bishop Wulstan and establish a new 'fresh start' secondary school. This 'fresh start' proposal has also been rejected by the DfES, stating that on the basis of forecast pupil numbers the school would not be viable or represent a responsible use of public funding. The DfES go on to say that:*

“Given the present position there appears to be a strong case for Bishop Wulstan to be closed as soon as possible.”

2.6 Funding

- The school is only economically unviable because the funding formula discriminates against small schools.
- The consultation gives no indication of the cost of closure, transport, staff redundancy costs, etc.
- The County Council is just trying to recover monies spent on other schools.
- A new sports hall was built in 2004 and the school secured Business and Enterprise status. The two projects cost a lot of money and this cannot be recouped.

Commentary

- (i) *It has been made clear in the consultation document that the proposal is not borne out of a desire to reduce costs. Indeed it is the case that if the school were to close, the Authority would be faced in the short term with significant additional costs. Nevertheless the Authority does have a responsibility to ensure the effective use of resources and value for money.*
- (ii) *The issue of the new sports hall funded by the DfES is an issue but is not germane to determining the future of the whole school and its pupils.*
- (iii) *Members will be aware that schools are funded by a formula which includes a ‘per school’ allocation but is largely based on pupil numbers. In 2004 the Authority changed the formula to provide additional support for small schools like Bishop Wulstan School. However, any further change to the formula would be at the expense of other schools. The cost per pupil at Bishop Wulstan is already amongst the highest in the county.*
- (iv) *The concern is that in future years the resources available to the school will reduce as pupil numbers fall, significantly impairing on the viability of the school.*

2.7 Arrangements in the event of closure

- Travelling to Trinity Catholic School in Leamington is not acceptable as it is too far and in breach of the Council’s policy and would increase cost to WCC.
- Pupil with dyslexia says he is dedicated to the school and would not travel to Trinity Catholic School in Leamington.

- Transitional arrangements following closure will mean some pupils returning to schools in Rugby which they have previously left following problems.
- How will the present Year 10 pupils be catered for?
- With all the Rugby schools full, pupils will be squeezed into overcrowded accommodation.
- How will the special educational needs of pupils be met?

Commentary

(i) *The consultation document sets out in broad terms the arrangements the Authority would put in place in the event of closure. Clearly in any process of closure the highest priority is to protect the education of the pupils currently in the school. If the decision is made to close the school:*

- *Where parents/carers wish to send their child to another Catholic school, e.g. Trinity School in Leamington, free transport will be provided in line with the Council's Home-to-School Transport Policy.*
- *Some parents/carers may wish to seek alternative places for their children at other Rugby schools which have places. The County Council will do all it can to facilitate transfers to alternative schools for existing pupils, if the decision is taken to close the school.*
- *All those parents and carers whose children are due to transfer to secondary education in September 2007 and who are to be offered a place at Bishop Wulstan School were sent a form along with their offer letter enabling them to express alternative preferences. The Authority will liaise with local schools and admission authorities to meet, wherever possible, the preferences of parents/carers in the event of closure of Bishop Wulstan School.*
- *In order to protect the curriculum for pupils following GCSE courses in the present Year 10 (Year 11 in September) we will endeavour to keep this group of pupils taught together under the management of another Warwickshire secondary school. In this way we will do all we can to ensure continuity in the courses followed by these pupils. Arrangements to facilitate parental preferences for pupils in existing Years 7, 8 and 9 to transfer to other schools for September 2007 will be put in place. The details of any final arrangements will only be agreed following an assessment of the individual needs of all existing pupils in the school. Parents and carers were strongly advised not to seek alternative places for their children until the final decision had been taken on this proposal. It is unlikely to be in the best interests of children to move school in the middle of the school year.*
- *In terms of alternative provision, preliminary discussions have taken place with all of the other High schools in Rugby and with Trinity School in Leamington. All have committed to doing all they can to support the Authority in providing for the pupils currently at Bishop Wulstan School in the event of closure. All the schools have co-operated in advising parents not to seek alternative places for their children until a decision*

has been taken on the proposal. All are committed to providing for and welcoming any pupils who transfer to their school from Bishop Wulstan, and to minimising the disruption.

- (ii) Inevitably any process of reorganisation has the potential to disrupt the education of pupils currently in the school. The Authority is committed in the event of closure to minimising the disruption.*
- (iii) Responses to the consultation suggest that alternative provision short term or in the longer term on the site of Trinity School would not be acceptable to many parents solely because of the travel distances involved.*
- (iv) In the longer term, the Authority may need to expand one of the existing Rugby schools by one or two forms of entry to meet the demand for secondary places in the town in the event of closure. The Authority would, therefore, be faced with significant capital expenditure with no possibility of capital receipts since the site of Bishop Wulstan School is not in the ownership of the County Council.*
- (v) A meeting has been held with all staff and the arrangements for protecting their interests outlined in broad terms and discussed and further information supplied. The Authority has committed to one-to-one interviews with all staff to consider their individual circumstances, their wishes and aspirations and the support available from the Authority. Members will be aware that closure could involve significant costs if staff are made redundant.*

3. Learning and Skills Council – Coventry and Warwickshire

We have also received a response from the Coventry and Warwickshire LSC. It commented as follows:

Given the falling rolls, levels of attainment and achievement at the school, the County Council has no alternative but to close the school. Every effort has been made to retain the school as a viable institution and to work has taken place to improve standards. However, young people are not able to access fully the level of education to achieve their full potential and progress to rewarding post 16 options. It is recognised that every effort will be made to protect the education of pupils currently at the school.

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5th March 2007