

Minutes of the meeting of the **RUGBY AREA COMMITTEE** held at the **TOWN HALL, RUGBY** on the **7 March 2007**.

Present: -

Councillor John Vereker (Chair)
“ Tom Cavanagh
“ Gordon Collett
“ Katherine King
“ Brian Levy
“ Philip Morris-Jones
“ Jerry Roodhouse
“ Ian Smith
“ Heather Timms (Vice Chair)
“ John Wells

Other Councillors:-

Councillor John Burton, Portfolio Holder (Schools)

Officers:-

Nick Darwen, Area Manager, Performance and Development Directorate
Marion Davis, Strategic Director, Children, Young People & Families Directorate
Peter Endall, Senior Solicitor, Performance and Development Directorate
Mark Gore, Head of Service (Education Partnerships and School Development), Children, Young People & Families Directorate
Claire Lloyd, Area Administration Officer, Performance and Development Directorate
Ann Mawdsley, Senior Committee Administrator, Performance and Development Directorate
Peter Thompson, Senior Area Schools and Communities Officer, Children, Young People & Families Directorate

Also Attended:-

150 Members of the public (approx)

1. General

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for their responses to the Consultation and support at the meeting. He added that the Rugby Area Committee Councillors had fully supported the pupils, parents, teachers and governors throughout the process and recognised that the work being done by these groups had general support. He outlined the events to date and noted that this meeting was to consider the responses to the Consultation and advise the Cabinet at their meeting on 8 March.

(1) Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Richard Dodd.

(2) Members' Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

Members declared personal interests as follows –

- (1) Councillors Tom Cavanagh, Gordon Collett, Jerry Roodhouse and Heather Timms - by virtue of them serving as Rugby Borough Councillors.
- (2) Councillor Tom Cavanagh declared a personal interest in Item 2 as a Governor at Bilton School.
- (3) Councillor Katherine King declared a personal and prejudicial interest in Item 2 as a Governor at Bishop Wulstan Catholic School.
- (4) Councillor John Vereker declared a personal interest as a Governor at Bilton Junior School.
- (5) Councillor John Wells declared a personal interest as a practicing Catholic and a former Lay Minister of the Church.

Councillor Katherine King left the room.

2. Bishop Wulstan School, Rugby

The Chair agreed that the following members of the public could speak to the Committee:

- Giovanni Manzelli, Year 10 student at Bishop Wulstan
- Mary Deery, Chair of Governors at Bishop Wulstan
- Jackie Parkin, Chair PTFA and Parents Action Group
- Brendan Higgins, Head Teacher

Giovanni Manzelli, Year 10 Student at Bishop Wulstan School

Giovanni Manzelli noted that he was speaking on behalf of the staff, students, families and community and thanked the Committee for the opportunity to express his feelings on the proposed closure. He added the following points:

1. He was one of the Year 10 and 11 students at the School preparing to write GCSE exams who were having to cope with the threat of the closure of the School for a second time, which would have an impact on their results.
2. Bishop Wulstan was the only Catholic Secondary School in the area and was a small school with a family atmosphere. He felt students were always met with a friendly face, teachers and students knew each other's names and the school was a family, which could not be said of other secondary schools. The proposal to close the school had come as a shock to pupils, parents and staff and would tear this family apart.

3. Bishop Wulstan's work in achieving all the outcomes of Every Child Matters was not taken account of.
4. The standards and results of the School had improved with constant support from the Head and the closure would not allow the School to reach its full potential.
5. Bishop Wulstan is a Business and Enterprise College and should be given five years to prove its successes, as was normal for any business.

Mary Deery, Chair of Governors at Bishop Wulstan

Mary Deery thanked the Committee for the opportunity to speak and referred to the response sent to the Local Authority (LA) and Members from the Governing Body. She added the following points:

- i. Governors were disappointed that the LA had not held a consultation meeting with parents, particularly in light of the new parents to the school.
- ii. The Governing Body had worked closely with the Arch Diocese throughout the process.
- iii. The Governing Body thanked parents, students and both teaching and non-teaching staff for all the support they had shown during this difficult period. Mary Deery added her thanks and admiration to the Governing Body.
- iv. As highlighted in the testimony received from parents, Every Child Matters did matter at Bishop Wulstan.

Jackie Parkin, Chair PTFA and Parents Action Group

Jackie Parkin thanked the Area Committee for their support and noted that as parents, they believed Bishop Wulstan showed a vested interest in their children and was the best school for their children.

Brendan Higgins, Head Teacher

Brendan Higgins thanked the Committee for the opportunity to express his views and concerns. He paid tribute to the Area Committee who had been outstanding in their support, recognising the qualities of the school, particularly through the difficulties over the past year. He added the following points:

- a. At Bishop Wulstan it had been difficult to balance his personal commitment in terms of the close relationship between staff, pupils and parents and his responsibilities as the lead professional, maintaining a professional and objective view.
- b. It was disappointing that the Government had not recognised that Bishop Wulstan had taken on board the Every Child Matters agenda, even before it had been introduced nationally.
- c. He highlighted the support of parents, as shown in the many succinct and eloquent letters and e-mails they had submitted.
- d. There were many parents who did not support the School, who took notice of headlining and achievement tables and judged the school on the current "football league" basis. He responded that Lord Adonis had recently said schools should not be judged on league tables alone, but should also be judged on their ethos and the values they brought to young people.

- e. There were significant and challenging problems in terms of viability, falling numbers (the past five years having a two form entry when there should have been three forms), poor headline statistics and poor value-added. The School recognised these but were proud of their achievements and the special educational experience they brought to individual pupils through their soul, atmosphere and ethos.
- f. He was deeply saddened at the prospect that Bishop Wulstan and the particular role they played as a small, Catholic school, could be lost to Rugby.
- g. Bishop Wulstan was a good school that made a difference to individual children's lives. This was recognised by students, parents and staff and their opinions should not be ignored.

The Chair thanked the speakers for their contributions and added that the Area Committee did recognise the special attributes Bishop Wulstan had and the unique way it contributed to education in Rugby.

Mark Gore, Head of Service (Education Partnerships and School Development), presented the report of the Strategic Director for Children, Young People and Families providing an opportunity for the Area Committee to consider the proposal to close Bishop Wulstan School and the responses to the consultation received from other stakeholders. He added that all e-mails and letters received in response to the consultation had been considered and were being forwarded to Members of both the Area Committee and the Cabinet. He added the following points:

1. Bishop Wulstan had been a concern to the LA for a number of years and during that time officers had worked extremely hard to support the School at a time of very limited resources for the Directorate.
2. The impact of the viability of the School and its capacity to improve on the standards achieved through continuing poor results and low levels of subscription had culminated in a proposal in January 2006, to close the School. This was followed by a consultation and meetings with stakeholders, including parents, and the decision by the Cabinet to withdraw the proposal.
3. The Arch Diocese proposed the formation of an academy, which was turned down by Government.
4. The second alternative put forward was a proposal to close Bishop Wulstan and open a Fresh Start School and Federation of Catholic Schools. The consultation, discussions and parental survey highlighted three issues:
 - Support from the Catholic community in Rugby was less than overwhelming
 - LA support was on the basis that there was no other alternative available
 - By definition the inclusion in the option for the school to close, meant that a status quo would not be an option.
5. The conclusion that there was no alternative to closure in light of the concerns in respect of the viability of the school and the incapacity to improve standards, was shared by the Minister and the Diocese.

6. Responses to the consultation had been unanimous in opposition to closing Bishop Wulstan and had made a number of important points, including:
 - the need to preserve Catholic provision in Rugby
 - the good work done by the School, particularly with SEN pupils, excluded pupils and children of migrant workers
 - the benefits of a small school
 - the expected increase in housing in Rugby
 - the increase in standards over the past year and the growing number of children seeking admission for Year 7.
7. Members need to take a view taking into account the strengths of the school against the capacity of Bishop Wulstan to respond quickly to the current disappointing standards of the School.
8. The LA recognised that standards were not the only factor and the importance of achieving the five outcomes of Every Child Matters. One of those, however, was children being able to “enjoy and achieve” and there was concern that children in Bishop Wulstan were not able to reach the standards expected locally and nationally and which the LA had a statutory duty to provide for all children in Warwickshire.

Members of the Area Committee were invited to speak and the following comments were made:

During the ensuing discussion the following points were made:

1. Members thanked all those who had sent letters and e-mails in response to the consultation and added that the Rugby Area Committee had given its full support to Bishop Wulstan before and since the first consultation to close the School, and would continue to do so.
2. Members agreed that Government needed to take some responsibility by the emphasis placed on league tables and academic results rather than on the needs of individual children and the life skills they needed to leave school with. There was also broad agreement that the Church had not done all it could to help the School and noted the decision of the Diocese not to consider the possibility of partnering with non-Catholic schools.
3. The Area Committee acknowledged that Bishop Wulstan opened its doors to all children regardless of achievement and ability and had a vital role to play in Rugby, both from an academic and religious point of view. The Area Committee would be saddened by any decision to close the School as it would result in a weaker diversity within the Borough Council community, would lose some of the value and ethos of the education offered in Rugby and would be a sad day for Rugby and all it represented in Rugby.
4. Concern was raised about the impact the process was having on pupils preparing for GCSEs and A-levels and the need to ensure they continued to have the best provision and support.

5. Members recognised the improvements that had been made and noted their strong support for the school and wished the staff and pupils every success.
6. It was suggested by several Members that the Committee ought not to concede that closure was inevitable and that the best had to be made of a bad situation, but rather that a strong case should be put forward that everything had not yet been done which could be done to try and remedy the School's difficulties and closure should not be resorted to until those avenues had been properly explored and given a chance to take effect.
7. The Committee agreed that there was a need for a decision to be made and that continuing uncertainty for the school worsened the whole situation.
8. The Area Committee acknowledged the unique Secondary School position in Rugby, which offered a perfect variety of parental choice and felt that this would be lost with the closure of Bishop Wulstan and would be a tragedy that would be regretted in the future.
9. Members acknowledged that funding was needed to improve standards and the only way to increase funding was through increased numbers.
10. The Spatial Strategy being considered by Government would, if approved, only start to have an impact on housing in 2011 and therefore did not impact on the current problems.
11. While Ofsted had agreed not to inspect Bishop Wulstan during the current process, if the Cabinet withdrew the proposal to close the School, they would be inspected and would be put in a category of concern, which could lead to the School being closed by the Minister.

Resolved:

The Members of the Area Committee remain fully supportive of Bishop Wulstan Catholic School and regret that the value and importance of the school within the Rugby Area education system has not been recognised by the Minister.

We therefore urge the Cabinet to take full account of all views expressed during the consultation period before reaching a final conclusion.

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Chair of Committee

The meeting closed at 7:50 p.m.