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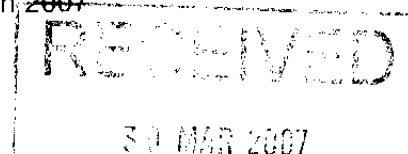


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Primary Places Review
Director of Children's Services
Wirral Children and Young People's Department
Hamilton Building
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Our Ref: FMC/SPB/01

28 March 2007



Dear Mr Cooper

PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES REVIEW : CONSULTATION FRAMEWORK

On behalf of the Trustees to the Diocese of Shrewsbury please find set out a response to the consultation exercise reviewing the provision of primary school places within Leasowe. For your reference the Trustees have not felt it appropriate to make any comment on those options specifically given over to primary places in the Community sector. As to the remaining options, comment can be delineated under the following headings.

OPTIONS C AND D3

The Trustees consider that it is essential to maintain a presence at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Primary School and the reasons for such can be summarised thus:

• THE KEY ROLE AFFORDED TO OUR LADY OF LOURDES

It is playing a vital part in meeting the educational and spiritual needs of children under its care. As to the first of these OFSTED has confirmed the quality of provision and the strong ethos at the school. For the second Our Lady of Lourdes enables children to grow in a learning community rooted in faith. Such experience is vital to their Faith journey and attainment of eternal destiny.

• THE BISHOP'S RESPONSIBILITY

The Bishop's responsibility is to ensure that Catholic education is freely ACCESSIBLE to baptised Catholics. Diocesan statistics demonstrate that the great majority of Leasowe Catholic parents, past and present, have expressed their strong support for such education at Our Lady of Lourdes.

• SERVING THE COMMUNITY

Our Lady of Lourdes serves not only Catholic parents but the wider community, for example its highly successful Breakfast, After School and Holiday Clubs meet the needs of many children and parents, including working parents. If it were to be lost, the quality of life for both would suffer.

• THE FAMILY OF DIOCESAN SCHOOLS

- Our Lady of Lourdes does not exist alone. It is part of a family of diocesan schools and has close links with a number of neighbouring Catholic primary schools. Such links extend curriculum provision, reduce the workload of subject co-ordinators and provide an enhanced range of in-service training and out of hours activities.
- The diocesan family also includes excellent secondary schools at St Anselm's College, Upton Hall School FCJ and St Mary's Catholic College, to which pupils at Our Lady of Lourdes have first criteria status for admissions. If they were to be dispersed to Community primary schools this status will be lost and with it, the strong pastoral links which Our Lady of Lourdes has with the Catholic Secondary sector.

- **QUALITY OF EDUCATION**

As instanced earlier the Diocese considers that Our Lady of Lourdes is providing a strong educational base for its pupils. This mirrors the thinking of OFSTED who, in 2005, summarised the position there as:

"Our Lady of Lourdes RC Primary School is providing a good education for its pupils. This is the result of the very good leadership of the headteacher and the hard work and commitment of the teachers. The pupils make at least satisfactory progress and in the Foundation Stage they achieve well. The pupils' attitudes and behaviour are good, reflecting an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust founded on the school's Christian ethos. The pupils benefit from visits and participate enthusiastically in an appropriate range of extracurricular activities".

Note too that the Authority's own documentation on the Value Added Scores at Our Lady of Lourdes show that its pupils are making the expected rate of progress overall and in each of the three individual subjects.

- **DIVERSITY AND BALANCE OF PROVISION**

Wirral's School Organisation Plan stressed the desirability of diversity of provision with specific reference to religious or denominational conviction and the national agenda has placed equal stress on such diversity. Therefore the present diversity of provision should be maintained in accordance with the intentions outlined and because it puts parents at the centre of our thinking and retains their range of educational choice. Further the existing range of provision in Leasowe promotes the right of the individual to receive a certain education of their own choice and so in turn guarantees cultural and education pluralism.

Taken together these are causes for congratulation rather than for any consideration of closure. As to the latter the Trustees consider that the rationale for such is flawed.

- **SURPLUS PLACES**

Certainly the LA has to reduce surplus places within Wirral and have emphasised this as a key priority but the Diocese and Governing Body have already taken the first steps to remove these at Our Lady of Lourdes. Further action has been put on hold until the outcome of the Review but if the latter means Our Lady of Lourdes continues with its present admission number then we can further reduce surplus places to an acceptable level by expansion for example of the planned Multi Function Centre for which initial LCVAP costings have already been established with the Authority.

- **FALLING NUMBERS**

The Authority is right to highlight an overall fall in the birth rate but Wirral Catholic baptismal figures, on which we base planning of school places, are stable or rising. This equally applies at Our Lady of Lourdes and indeed the Authority agrees that numbers at Our Lady of Lourdes are not only stable but rising. Diocesan projections in fact for 2011 are a minimum of 125 pupils plus the designated nursery, so in effect largely wiping out surplus places.

- **OTHER CATHOLIC SCHOOL OPTIONS**

The Authority identifies five Catholic schools within a two mile radius of Our Lady of Lourdes (three of which incidentally are full). In fact the nearest Catholic schools are respectively 1.70 and 2.07 miles away.

What the authority has not done, contrary to guidance for Decision Makers, is consider the quality of transport links to the alternative provision, journey times and costs and the effects that all of these may have on pupil unauthorised absence. For many parents the extra costs of bus fares daily may be prohibitive and it is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect them to make the return journey, say to Sacred Heart, on foot daily particularly if accompanied by other very young children in prams or buggies. The end result is that such parents are denied their legitimate preference for a Catholic school.

• **SMALL SCHOOLS**

The correspondence from the LA lists a series of problems, largely financial, associated with small schools. However the Diocese covers ten local education authorities and our experience across those areas is that small schools can be very effective.

This is not only the view of the Diocese but that of OFSTED. Arising from its survey of 1,780 small schools (defined as having less than 100 pupils), it reported that:

- Compared with larger schools small schools are equally capable of providing an effective education and many are among the most effective in the country.
- It is well within the capacity of small schools to teach the full range of the National Curriculum.
- The good ethos of the great majority of small schools is one of their strengths and Inspectors invariably described very good provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils ESPECIALLY in Church schools.
- Inspectors noted that costs can be higher (though remember Our Lady of Lourdes is working effectively within its planned budget) but they concluded that a good case emerged for the place of small schools in the education system as a whole when the quality of their educational performance is added to the broader contribution they make for their communities.

The Adjudicator who ruled on Authority efforts to close St Paul's Catholic Primary School also asserted that small schools can be highly successful, save where school rolls are falling rapidly and this is not the case here.

• **COSTS**

Returning to costings those for schools in poorer socio-economic areas are almost inevitably higher and costs for Our Lady of Lourdes are roughly in line with the other Leasowe schools. Again referring to the St Pauls ruling the Adjudicator recognized that Authorities are right to be concerned about high costs per pupil but those costs should be seen in the context of the levels of deprivation in the area and also weighed in the balance against other factors.

The arguments set out here should persuade those to whom the Local Authority reports that the option to close Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Primary School is best withdrawn.

OPTION D1

The Diocese of Shrewsbury working with the Diocese of Chester believes that the option to establish a Joint Church School has many potential benefits. It will serve to reinforce both the stability of denominational provision in the Leasowe area and demonstrate the willingness of the two communions to support, and work with, each other. Further it addresses the absence of Church of England School provision in Wallasey and also serves the Government agenda to encourage diversity and balance of provision.

We are advised that the Authority do see benefits in this proposal and certainly both Dioceses remain more than willing to again explore the joint Church school option. This is equally true of the Governing Body, Staff and Parents at Our Lady of Lourdes. As a sign of their support for this option the Trustees to the Diocese are considering the transfer of part of the Parish Church to the proposed Joint Denominational School for use as a multi function inter-faith centre.

A series of fruitful inter-diocesan meetings have already been held to look at how best to progress this new venture for Wirral but to progress these further we need to know that the closure of Our Lady of Lourdes is removed from the agenda. The maintenance of a faith school base there is essential if it is to be successfully extended to provide a Joint Faith School. Both Dioceses have also considered the benefits of placing such a school on the present site at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Primary School and these can be identified thus:

- Ownership is already vested in the Trustees to the Diocese of Shrewsbury
- With an established Church school 'in situ' this will provide a firm base for expansion.
- In terms of costings £441,935 has been spent on build and repair between 1999 and 2004 at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Primary School to improve accommodation and the Shrewsbury Diocese Trustees would not wish to see such an outlay abandoned.

- Should expenditure be required to meet any future expansion the present Our Lady of Lourdes site will best allow for development within the limited resources available to the Dioceses.
- If, in the long term, a rebuild at Our Lady of Lourdes is progressed via either BSF or the Primary Capital programme then the present site will allow a 'side by side' build without any need to decant pupils.

OPTION D3

This option was only inserted by the Diocese to cover possibilities that might emerge from decisions taken by the Authority in the Community sector, and if it did not prove possible to progress a Joint Church School. Its status as an option can too only exist where the closure of Our Lady of Lourdes is set aside. Within those variables it may be (as is the case nationally for Catholic schools) that demand for places increased at Our Lady of Lourdes. If that were the case the school could be expanded to a one form entry primary school whilst holding to its present admissions policy which, whilst maintaining first criteria status for baptized Catholics, welcomes applicants from other or no faiths whose parents want their children to have an education in a Catholic school.

As indicated earlier this option cannot stand alone given that it is inter-related to and inter-dependent upon a series of outcomes which have yet to be determined.

On behalf of the Trustees I would be grateful if their views were made available to elected members.

Yours sincerely

F. M. Clarke

F M Clarke
Director of Schools