

APPENDIX C

Independent assessment of the Wirral LA's context and secondary review-

What follows is my report and findings following my visits to the Wirral, and the next steps the LA should consider taking following:

- its review of secondary provision in Birkenhead and Bebington
- the successful delivery of 14-19 implementation which meets the needs of all its students in Birkenhead and Bebington,
- the announcement in October 2007 that Birkenhead High School was to seek academy status, and above all
- **the implications for the local authority and its secondary schools of the recently announced National Challenge.**

Introduction:

I would like to extend my warm thanks and appreciation to Councillor Phil Davies, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning and to Howard Cooper, Director, Children's and Young People's Department, and his colleagues in the Local Authority and schools for the way in which they have helped me undertake my task on the Wirral. They have been welcoming, open and thoughtful in all my interviews and deliberations with them. I would also like to thank Frank Field MP for the time, help and support he and his research officer Patrick White have given me in undertaking this task, and Michael Clark, Diocesan Director, Shrewsbury Diocese, for his generous time to discuss issues, his background briefing and information. Most of all I would like to express my appreciation to the students from the Wirral schools that I met on my visits and the head teachers and staff that work with them to help raise their standards of achievement, their aspirations and ambitions. I should like to record a special thanks to Dawn Kenny (PA to Howard Cooper) for the speed and flexibility with which she organised my visits and ensured they all were successful. Her flair in programme planning and her excellent organisational skills were much appreciated.

Context and visits:

- 1 The Wirral is at a critical point in its deliberations about what is the best provision for meeting the needs and aspirations of its current and future generations of young people. It needs to make some important, difficult and very necessary decisions about surplus places as well as inadequate standards of attainment. **It needs to respond to the Government's recently announced National Challenge in a candid, bold and visionary way.** It also needs to ensure that implementation of the 14-19 reforms aid its improvement drive, and help it meet the needs of all its young people, particularly those most at risk in terms of access, participation and progression. It also has to decide how it should respond to the prospective Academy at Birkenhead High School and the part this might play in its

strategy for the peninsula. Most importantly it needs to weave all these dimensions well into its vision, strategy and decision-making for the way ahead in autumn 2008.

- 2 I have visited Rock Ferry High School, Prenton High School, St Anselm's College, Park High School, Bebington High School, Upton Hall and Ridgeway High School, met with all the heads, several Chairs of Governors, many staff and quite a number of students. I have also had meetings with Councillor Phil Davies (Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning), Howard Cooper (Director, Children and Young People's Department) and his local authority colleagues: Chris Batman, David Armstrong and Gordon Fair. I have also had discussions with Frank Field MP and his Researcher Patrick White, and also with Michael Clark (Diocesan Director of Education, Shrewsbury Diocese).
- 3 I have read copies of the *Provision of Secondary School Places – Future Strategy* report to the Wirral Council Cabinet meeting of 29th November 2007, and also the *Director's Report to Cabinet of 26 June 2008 Review of Secondary School Places Phase 1: Area Reviews of Birkenhead and Bebington*. I have also read the Report of the Director of Children's Services to the Cabinet of 13 March *School Categories and Characteristics*. In addition I have read submissions given to me by schools that I visited, as well as a document from the Diocesan Director on *Diocesan Planning for Catholic Secondary Education within Wirral Authority*.
- 4 I am aware that there are several other schools that I could visit as well as other people it would be useful to meet. However, I consider it helpful to write up my observations from my visits and meetings so far, for all parties to consider, given that time is of the essence and the Wirral Cabinet has already delayed decision-taking pending this independent assessment.

The need for radical action:

- 5 **The Wirral has a significant surplus places problem.** It is already above the Audit Commission's recommended 10% maximum for surplus places and has at least 3 secondary schools, in the part of Wirral being considered in this review, in the 25% and 30 places category (Rock Ferry High School, Park High School and Bebington High School. It is also projecting Ridgeway High School to be at 15.2% surplus places by 2013.) "If no action is taken, **this is projected to increase to 21% by 2013, more than double the Audit Commission's maximum acceptable level.**" *Cabinet Report 26 June 2008*. It must act

to remedy this situation and, whilst removing surplus places, use this as a challenge and a driver for change and improvement.

- 6 There is an expectation that local authorities will be prepared to make tough decisions about what to do with poorly performing schools. The Wirral had 6 schools below 30% in 2007. They were: Rock Ferry High, Park High School, Ridgeway High School, Pensby High School for Boys, Wallasey School and The Oldershaw School. It also has Bebington High School at just 30%.** The recently announced National Challenge requires local authorities to have local school improvement plans with a clear trajectory for improvement planned for every school where fewer than 30% of children attain 5 good GCSE grades including English and mathematics. LAs are asked to review school outcomes and make their own estimate of expected results in 2008, 2009 and 2010. They are also asked to assess whether any schools currently above the floor target are at risk of dropping below this over the time period. Where any schools within the National Challenge are most at risk of remaining below the floor target and making slow progress, local authorities are urged to be quick to intervene to address the situation and they should be prepared to take radical action, including implementing radical solutions, if necessary.
- 7 The Local Authority also has a significant population of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), and is actively considering its alternative learning provision in order to better meet the needs of youngsters at risk of falling into this category.** It particularly needs to expand its vocational and skills offer to young people in Birkenhead. At a wider level, it is preparing to implement 14-19 diplomas in order to widen the curriculum offer 14-16 as well as increase access, raise participation and improve progression post 16.

Initial proposals:

- 8** Whilst the proposed Academy at Birkenhead High School has been controversial and doubts have been raised about its success in some quarters, nevertheless a significant number of the heads I spoke with thought it would be successful and were onto the next stage of their thinking and planning in relation to how they considered their school needed to improve, change and adapt. This was both as a consequence of the Academy's emergence and of the changing landscape facing all schools in the Wirral. After listening to many people's views and reactions, I consider that Wirral Local Authority would be best placed if it planned for the Academy's place in its strategy for raising

standards of attainment in secondary education over the next three years.

- 9 I visited Rock Ferry High School, listened carefully to the views of the headteacher and the Chair of Governors and read the Head's submission to Lord Adonis. I was also taken around the school and its extensive site and met a number of staff. The Head and his staff have created a very caring environment for learning to take place. The young people I met clearly valued the education they were receiving at the school, and the many opportunities the staff provided for them during and beyond the school day.
- 10 I also visited Park High School and took careful note of discussion with the headteacher and his senior leadership team about the progress they had made in raising attainment and their plans for that improvement to continue. I was also shown around the school and site by the head and met several staff. As in Rock Ferry I met young people who clearly enjoyed their work at school, the part they played in school life and the wider opportunities they had to visit higher education institutions.
- 11 My view is that the Council has to take difficult decisions. One such is that it should close Rock Ferry High School. It should also close Park High School and transition it into a new Academy on a new site in Birkenhead, additionally with a 14-19 Vocational Centre as part of the campus offer. This Vocational Centre should also consider including a Studio School (or similar concept) in order to improve the offer available to youngsters at risk of falling into/ or already in the NEET group.**
- 12 I visited Ridgeway High School and met and talked with the outgoing headteacher. She has obviously made real change and improvements happen for young people and the wider community during the time she has served as Headteacher at the school. I also was shown around the site and met staff and students during the visit. It is very clear that all value the school and its work, and their enthusiasm, energy and innovation for their specialism was very clearly evidenced. However, on the hard evidence of improvement in 5 good GCSEs including English and mathematics, the school was at 26% in 2004, and is at 27% in 2007. The school buildings are in need of refurbishment and/or replacement. There is a real fear that the proposed BHS Academy will impact adversely on the intake which is already 60:40 boys to girls. Next September's intake is at 138 against 160 places.
- 13 I visited Bebington School and met and talked with the Headteacher. I also was shown around the school site and met

staff and students. He has been at the school for 4 years and the school has seen several significant changes and improvements. Attainment has been raised at 5 good GCSEs including English and mathematics to the floor target of 30% in 2007. Current Y7 is at 132, and the head stated that this would increase to 170 this next year. However, the longer term view of intake in the new Wirral context is likely to see a wider gap between the number of boys admitted and the number of girls, likely to be 2/3 boys to 1/3 girls and the situation is likely to become more extreme over time. This against a current surplus places figure of 20.6% and a 2013 projection of 40%.

- 14 The Council needs to consider difficult decisions in relation to both these schools. It should consider closure of one or both, and the opening of one or more new Academies or National Challenge Trusts in order to bring new ambition, partners and sponsors to help drive up improvement and raise attainment at a pace. (National Challenge Trusts involve a radical transformation including the closure of the existing school, linked to a plan to re-open as a new Trust School. This would also require an improvement partnership, led by a strong local school to collaborate and build capacity. It would also involve a local business or university to bring extra energy and capacity to the Trust. National Challenge Schools receive appropriate additional funding to enable re-structuring, attract fresh teachers and develop ambitious plans for raising attainment.)**
- 15 I visited Prenton High School, and met the headteacher and the Chair of Governors there. The school has gone through a remarkable transformation during the past 3 years since the PFI build. Specialist status has been achieved; results have been raised to 35% 5 good GCSEs including English and mathematics, and the Head is predicting this will increase to 41% in 2008. The head clearly considers that the proposed BHS Academy is likely have a negative impact on Prenton High School for Girls intake. She considers this may happen just at the time they have achieved over- subscribed status with 154 for September 2008 and 18 appeals. She and the Chair of Governors would also like to develop a Sixth Form at the school to improve access, participation and progression.
- 16 The Council needs to consider carefully how it should seek to maintain the strong improvement trajectory at this school in the light of the BHS Academy development and its own review of secondary provision. It does appear that this school is both in a strong position given its recent trajectory, as well as vulnerable re future intake in light of the academy's emergence. My conclusion is that the two girls' schools should work towards a formal collaboration,**

that Prenton High School for Girls should also be considered for Academy status as a means of securing its future, and this consideration should include allowing it to develop a sixth form.

17 From my visits to Wirral secondary schools and my discussions with heads and LA officers it is clear that whilst the emergence of the proposed BHS Academy has been a clear irritant, it has also led to different thinking about the kind of school system needed for 21st century learning on the peninsula. The announcement of the proposed academy last autumn has also been overtaken by the implications of the National Challenge for the Wirral. These different circumstances present the Council with a window of opportunity to realise major improvements through radical solutions to some stubborn problems relating to attainment as well as to curriculum offer. I hope that my interim findings help it with that task.

18 I recommend that in order to provide clarity and direction, the local authority should publish a clear pathway for decision-making about secondary schools and future provision. Time will be of the essence, since DCSF investment decisions are important to future success on the Wirral. This timetable also needs to recognise the National Challenge timeline requirements for finalised local authority plans by end of September 2008.

19 I have not commented on Pensby High School for Boys, Wallasey School and The Oldershaw School because they have not been part of the LA review of secondary provision so far, and I have not visited them. However, the Council will also need to consider whether structural intervention needs to have a place in decisions about these schools as a consequence of the National Challenge and its timelines.

George Gyte 7 August 2008.