

Address to the Commission for Children and School Results - 10-11-06

Thank you Cllr Swan and members of the commission for inviting Standards-Not-Tiers to give evidence to the commission. We welcome the opportunity to participate. I should say that this presentation will take just under 20 minutes, so I apologise in advance for using my slot to the full, but I have, as usual, rather a lot to say.

I would like to begin by saying that our written submission in respect of the LSC's proposals, for a centralised 6th form facility, were based on the proposals made to the LEA, in a submission presented by the learning & Skills Council in June this year. These were conveyed to Standards-Not-Tiers by Patrick Joyce and Ian Sandbrook, in a meeting held here at County Hall on the 17th July.

Rather naively I did not read the Strategic Statement of Intent dated the 28th July prior to writing my submission to the Commission, in respect of the LSC proposal. I assumed that the purpose of the consultation was to examine the LSC's proposals, not their proposal - singular.

To be clear about this, there were originally a number of options put forward by the LSC, one of which was to build a limited 6th form facility for 200 students at the Isle of Wight College. The way this was presented by Mr Sandbrook at our meeting was: that the replacement of the high school facilities by a single college facility, would be too great an upheaval to undertake now and that a 200 place college might be a more modest starting point through which an understanding of the college's capability to deliver such a programme could first be appraised. Then if successful, the bigger and more complex decision to close high school 6th forms could be considered.

This was obviously a serious concern for us at that meeting, as we had already recognised that the option to close high school sixth forms would make the high schools unviable and lead to a reopening of the 3-tier 2-tier debate.

This was reported in the CP under the headline – “Standards Not Tiers say ‘2 Tiers not so bad after all’!” which was of course a grossly inaccurate summing up of an interview I gave to Sue Pert, who's article did in fact, rather more accurately report our arguments. Unfortunately it's the headline that people read, not the detail.

It is difficult for me to understand how the thinking of the LSC could have moved on so radically in just 1 month, for on the 10th August, the IWC was presented with the final Strategic Statement of Intent written on the 28th July just 10 days after our meeting in which all the options that Patrick Joyce and Ian Sandbrook had been so keen to emphasise as evidence that the 2 tier 3 tier debate would not be revisited, had been whittled down by the LSC, seemingly without discussing the matter with the LEA, and then presented as a *fait accompli*.

But...moving on....I would like to say how extremely heartening it is to see almost everyone agreeing with each other, for the first time in a quite a while! The effect has been dramatic and positive and I for one feel that this bodes well for the future.

I have spoken to countless people over the last 2 years about these issues and one thing that everyone seems agreed upon is the importance for the success of our schools, of inspirational and motivational leaders.

The submission from the High School Heads yesterday evening demonstrated that we have in our high schools, a group of extremely committed and inspirational leaders. They have demonstrated that they have moved on from the arguments of the great education debate of 2004/2005, by building success within the current system. Their massive efforts must be applauded not lambasted. They may be inspirational and motivational – but that does not mean that they do not themselves need inspiring and motivating. We must not forget that the LEA and the LSC have a leadership role to play too.

In paragraph 2 of the LSC Strategic Statement of Intent it says “...after the more radical strategy of school reorganisation was reversed just over a year ago. Improvement has not been fast enough”. Well I don’t know what they were expecting after just 1 year. In any event, the presentation by the high school heads last night seems to have cast considerable doubt on any claim that improvement is not occurring fast enough.

From our point of view the LSC’s assertion seems to be one built upon rather flimsy ground designed to challenge the democratic will of the newly elected council. It should not be forgotten that the mandate to keep the 3 tier system was based on an overwhelming election victory, during which the general public were treated to a huge amount of information from all sides with which to make an informed decision.

My organisation would like to respectfully point out to the LSC that it may be possible to see this proposal as nothing more than a challenge to the people of the Isle of Wight, who made a clear and democratic choice at the ballot box to elect this council in order, amongst other things, to preserve the existing 3 Tier System. Ordinary people, many of them parent’s influenced by our campaign, voted to prevent change for the sake of change. So, it’s fair to say that parents have shown a preference for the retention of the current system. A proposal that will ultimately lead to a change of the that system and all that that entails for a whole generation of school children, is therefore, not going to be acceptable to the majority of parents.

Of course many of us will be attracted to the prospect of a nice new shiny 6th Form facility with state of the art classrooms and equipment. And it is all too easy to be taken in by dramatic claims of excellence and guarantees of performance. But the reality would be years of disruption, as the changes, that we all democratically voted out, are introduced anyway, to make room for our lovely new 6th Form college.

And whilst we are on the subject of the strangeness of this proposal, let us consider the cost of implementation. The LSC are very kindly able to arrange a no-strings public-purse-opening exercise to the tune of £25 million pounds - give or take a few pounds. That will take care of the building, but how will the LEA fund the required **system** change. One thing Ian Sandbrook was very clear about when he met us in July, was the fact that there really had not been funding available for system change back in 2005. The budget for the 4S implementation was in the order of £70m. That cannot happen overnight. So just how will the system function in the mean time?

Can the LSC be so foolish? Rushing to present proposals that do not have a hope in hell of being implemented. What is going on? These are intelligent, likeable men, who seem to have the interests of the Island at heart – and yet their proposals seem fatally flawed. They are clearly serious about the matter, having committed considerable time and effort in marketing their proposals to the population.

I think, I know, what the real reason behind their proposal is.

And before I let you in on the secret, I should say I was of two minds as to whether to tell you this, for fear of wrecking the LSC's plan...which I think is a master stroke and exactly what the Island needs.

I believe that the Learning and Skills Council have watched the Island for years with growing despair over its inability to address the problems thrown up by the introduction of the national curriculum and the key stage system, for our 3 tier structure. They had great hopes for the 4S report only to see any chance of it being implemented thrown away by the crazy electorate, hell bent on educationally assured destruction. They felt so strongly about the inability of the Island Schools to work together, that they decided, that despite the change of council they had a duty to intervene. But of course they knew that it would be impossible to resurrect system change at this point in the new council's life. So, they decided on reverse psychology as a strategic project.

Wars, natural disasters and crises, bring groups together. Groups that would ordinarily exist in isolation unable to co-operate are, under extreme circumstances, forced to collaborate - forced to get on - forced to sit at the same table - united by the common foe...in this case a proposal so unbelievably cruel, given the uncertainty of the last few years...that it was bound to have the desired unifying effect.

Of course they will deny it. That's their duty. After all, there is a danger that after the storm has passed and the opportunistic looters have been dealt with, everyone will go back to being spitefully and silly again.

So take this seriously everyone. No one, not even the LSC, spends this kind of money as a gimmick. Although if I'm right, then this will have been a wonderful Christmas present.

And just for those of you who think I'm mad, saying this, I have had to listen to virtually every conspiracy theory going in relation to this proposal - and a number of them were a good deal more extreme than my theory!

Which brings me nicely onto what parents want for their children in a 6th form environment.

Firstly we all want our children to be happy. Happy children learn better and faster and want to learn. I have 4 children all at different stages of their education. My primary and middle school sons are a complete joy, for their enthusiasm and interest in their schoolwork - and that is a credit to their teachers, who have done so much to inspire them. My eldest two children are at Medina High and are thriving in a more mature way, but again because of inspirational and motivational teaching. So what we need, and for the most part I think what we get, are great teachers. We want this for our 6th forms too.

What we do not want, is for our inspirational teachers to be turned off by endless consultations, uncertainty and other demotivating factors, such as rumours about impending doom and gloom, or snide comments from politicians who don't really

understand how hard teachers have to work to get the results that the same politicians can then take credit for. Sorry to be so cynical!

I am certain that a college facility could deliver inspirational teaching and in fact I was a beneficiary of it 25 years ago when I attended the college and gained the equivalent of grades BBC at A level through a combination of vocational and academic qualifications, that allowed me to be the first person in my family to go to university and graduate with a decent degree. If it wasn't for my college education, then I would not be here now, with the ability to challenge the LSC's proposals.

This is why I was happy to support the 200 place proposal.

Parents and their children need choice. The college could provide that choice. To say that a 200 place facility would not be acceptable seems very odd, and I am grateful to the LSC for saying last night, that they recognise, that in our quaintly English way, compromise will probably be possible, for I strongly believe that whatever arguments there may be in favour of high school 6th forms, an FE "A" level facility is badly needed, to cater for those student that are more mature, confident or just not happy at school. The school environment doesn't suit everyone and the Isle of Wight College should be in a position to offer A level courses as part of a whole Island collaboration scheme.

Remember too that children and parents build relationships with teachers that influence their choice of subject at A level and make the transition to 6th form smoother and less traumatic than it might otherwise be. Whilst not every student will base their decision on relationships, the current collaborative system allows parents and children a real choice at A level.

As many other have said already, the introduction of a single 6th form facility would reduce choice by only offering one institution on the Island. If it failed or was not to a persons liking, then a mainland college would have to be selected or an education undertaken from home through distance learning or forgone altogether. It would also close down an opportunity that currently exists for young people to develop more gradually through maintaining their familiar home school base, but allowing them if they so choose, to travel to a collaborating school 6th form, to attend lessons in subjects not taught in the home school.

This brings me to possibly the most important matter of all, the wonderful Academy status that our High Schools have worked so hard to achieve which would almost certainly be sacrificed under the new system. With no A level facility those teachers who currently teach to advanced level would probably, as Mr Williams pointed out, leave the Island altogether. There would be nothing for them here. Academy status gives parents the assurance that their child's particular ability can be developed to the **full at...at least** one of the high school 6th forms. The college might well argue that they could replicate these academies in their new centralised 6th form, but what a waste of the current specialist departments, whose expertise and professional camaraderie could not be expected to transfer easily to the college.

We want our children to do well. That means not wasting the efforts made over the last 18 months, as evidenced by the High School heads submission last night. If we change to a centralised 6th form facility we are going to have to start all over again and that includes pre 16 too. What a waste of time and effort, not to say money.

Also, parents want to know that their children are subject to appropriate discipline. By forcing all children to attend the college for A level studies we are in danger of falling into a trap that could fail our most able students and make it extremely difficult for many, possibly a majority of children, for whom a school environment to the age of 18 or 19 is more conducive to study than the freer less formally disciplined college environment. You will understand that I am not berating the college environment in this. I thrived there, in a way that I could never have done at school. But many others would not have.

There is a real danger too, that the system for payment to 6th form students to encourage them to stay on, could have an adverse effect on the working environment, if some young people are encouraged to remain in education mostly for the money. Then they may not be attending class to study, but simply to qualify for a relatively easy wage. This could have a detrimental effect on those students who really do want to be there. This is already evidenced at GCSE with classes disrupted by pupils who really don't want to be there, ruining the experience for those that do. One of my children has made GCSE decisions based on which teachers she respects and whether the course is likely to be populated by what she refers to as "those useless pillocks"! This could be a more difficult problem in a college where lecturers naturally expect a more mature approach from their students.

Finally parents do not want to be bamboozled by clever people in suits waiving important pieces of paper with the answers to life's greatest questions described by statistics that seem to prove that their arguments must be right and cannot be disputed unless the person making the challenge wants to end up looking a fool for ever daring to question what any fool can see is a self evident truth. The days of "it must be true because the important man from the council said it is" are over. We can think for ourselves but we need clarity and most of all we need honesty.

We can make this thing work. There will inevitably have to be changes that enable the schools to function more efficiently and as a pressure group Standards-Not –Tiers will not stand in the way of real progress.

So LEA, we call upon you to concentrate your efforts on motivating and inspiring your head teachers, teachers, ancillary staff, governors and parents, so that they feel confident to get on with the task of educating our children, without constantly worrying whether or not they will still have a job this time next year, or wondering if it's all worth the effort, because the school might not exist soon. You have a duty to prevent corporate depression!

In this way, when our children arrive for their first day, for example, in the University of Southampton's Philosophy department, as I did all those years ago, they will at least be able to engage their mainland counterparts in a meaningful discussion on the relative merits of John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism and it's ability to bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people!