

## Public Meeting: Cowes Yacht Haven 10-07-08

A Standards-Not-Tiers Report

Attendees from SNT: Chris Welsford and Debbie Hart

Council Officers present: Chris Vieler-Porter; Keith Simmonds and Danny "the hat" Neale

### Introduction

The meeting was poorly attended. There were only 12 attendees. We were five minutes late and apparently Danny, the MC, had been told to close the meeting early on account of the low numbers and the expectation of fewer questions. I didn't know that this had been planned and when they eventually tried to close the meeting, despite there clearly being more questions to be asked, they said that the meeting could continue but informally only. As that would have meant it being off the tape I did not agree and insisted that they restart the tape. Danny was most unhappy and although others that I asked afterwards thought he was just rather irritated, I thought he seemed aggressive. He actually told me that I had asked more than my fair share of questions already. In fact the sound engineer gave the game away when he said that he "thought the meeting was going to be the same length as *last time*" and made a bit of a fuss over having to switch the system back on. They managed to not record the rather nasty exchange between me and Danny. Apparently I had shouted out earlier to correct something Keith Simmonds tried to present as fact but was actually highly contentious and that had undermined Danny's authority.

I received a message from another attendee after the meeting which said: *"I think you did well with your questioning and it was great you did not let them stop the meeting early. The staff at my school are very pleased that you are not going to change the campaigning, there is a lot of respect for your organisation"*

One man made the point that holding just two public meetings both at Cowes, and this one at least, apparently being incorrectly advertised on the CP website, although I doubt that made much difference, was not fair to the majority of the Island's population.

It occurred to me that holding them just one week apart was tough on anyone on holiday for those two weeks. Also 2 public meeting in the formal stage as against 15 during the informal stage seems to say something about the relative importance to the council of hearing peoples' views and legally having to take them into account. In my book that makes this a highly managed PR exercise.

In our opinion the informal consultation was clearly designed to frighten and sap everyone's strength and the formal consultation has become a push over with hardly anyone engaging because they think the decision has already been made, which it has not. This was likened to an artillery barrage prior to the infantry going in to surgically eradicate the remaining enemy troops left battered and wounded by the initial bombardment.

I'd describe the meeting as edgy but at the same time the officers had answers, albeit not very good ones, but answers nonetheless, to most of the questions and anything they couldn't answer was deemed a matter for the politicians and needed to be put to the formal consultation formally...to which I said that I thought that the questions and the answers given at a formal meeting like this one, were supposed to form part of the formal consultation formally anyway, which was why it was all being recorded. Carrying on the meeting "informally" seemed to me to be a complete waste of time.

We did not notice any press or media presence at the meeting. Maybe they, like many members of the public have decided that such meeting are not worthy of their time.

### Collaboration

One of the key aspects of the current difficulties is the seeming inability of the local authority to enforce proper and effective collaboration between all areas of the education system. This is addressed by this version of reorganisation, by physically joining up the key stages through the removal of the middle schools and supposedly forcing the high schools to collaborate on subject offerings at GCSE and more so at A level. This means students having to travel between schools to attend different courses during the normal school day.

I and others said that this was not working well as students would often find themselves arriving at the designated school late for the lesson, because the transport that had been laid on was not well synchronised with the school timetable.

*(SNT comment: Some students have also reported being made to feel less than welcome in the "foster" school. This has led to students dropping out of the collaborated programme, favouring courses being run at their home site. Clearly an unacceptable situation that cannot be addressed better under the proposed arrangement.)*

Unbelievably Chris Vieler Porter told the meeting that collaboration between high schools is currently working well. I disagreed. It begs the question, why do we need reorganisation to address this issue if it is working? He said that there is always room for improvement. He went on to explain that we need to consider what happens in private schools and that in such fee paying institutions, students have to work longer hours and include Saturday mornings in their school timetable as a matter of course. He felt that this should be required of state educated students too and that this would in some way help to improve matters in respect of collaboration. I assume that this is because it would provide more time overall and compensate for the time expended travelling between schools.

*(SNT Comment: it would have been good to make the point that there are many differences between state and private schools and that some of these differences, such as the abandoning of key stages and key stage testing could in some peoples view be helpful in broadening the currently rather narrow curriculum that our state educated children often have to endure as a result of teaching to test.)*

I was able to ask how collaboration between high schools would be improved without the establishment of a single trust or some other legal framework agreement as had been considered so vital by Steve Beynon last year.

Keith Simmonds tried to explain that the LA are hoping to achieve proper collaboration between the various secondary schools to allow them to offer the full range of subjects at A level (and I suppose in the diploma) through the outsourcing of the management of new high schools. This would involve a bidding process where the school management is effectively done by an extended governing body - charitable trusts, parents groups etc - who are contracted to ensure that collaboration works. In other words the Local Authority will only select a bidder that states that they will ensure collaboration works. How they are to achieve this was not explained.

I asked what difference there was between that and now where the LA has responsibility for enforcing the collaboration? Mr Simmonds said it would be very different but failed to explain to my satisfaction how it would be very different.

*(SNT Comment: I don't think the new system makes much sense in terms of improving collaborative arrangements. I can't see how schools that currently find it almost impossible to timetable subjects so that all students can travel and attend the class on time, will be able to do it any better under the new arrangements. It seems to me that we need to look far more deeply at the issue and if a two-tier system is voted in by the public in 2009 we should reconsider the LSC (Learning & Skills Council) offer to introduce a single sixth form college, or perhaps two units to provide the competition that was a stumbling block in the 2006 proposal.*

*The main reason why we opposed the LSC offer then was that it was a covert way to get a two-tier arrangement imposed by removing an important revenue stream from the high schools. Under a two tier arrangement high sixth forms are not more viable and there may be no compelling argument to keep them. In this case the high schools cannot be allowed to have their cake and eat it at the expense of the middle schools. But that of course, is what is currently being proposed.*

*David Pugh recently asserted that the LSC proposals were soundly rejected during the 2006 consultation. This statement seems to be both selective and ignorant. The main reasons that the LSC proposal was rejected was that it would have forced the Local Authority to move to a two-tier system and that the proposal did not allow sufficient competition. As Mr Pugh is proposing two-tiers anyway, that only leaves the competitive element to address and that might be achieved by striking an arrangement with mainland colleges or building two smaller but no less effective sixth form colleges on the Island. The current reorganisation plans fail completely to address these issue and consequently fail to address the issue of collaboration.)*

#### Single Transfer and Size of the new Secondary Schools

Keith Simmonds stated the "fact" that single transfer will be more productive than multiple transfers. I was forced to interject and inform him that this was not a fact and that there was no research to show this to be the case. He conceded that this was true but said that there was always an opposing view to any assertion.

Another attendee asked whether single transfer would not create far more traumatic transfers for eleven year olds as result of the large size of the proposed secondary schools as against the small size of some of our primaries. She cited the example of a child at a new 1FE Sandown primary school, transferring to the massive 12FE Sandown High School. That child would be going from a year group of 30 to one of 360 overnight.

Mr Simmonds was not sympathetic saying that the new secondary schools would not be particularly big. He offered no answer except to explain that objections like that were a matter of policy and more a political point that should be raised as part of the formal consultation under the heading "objection to change"...I think that was what the lady concerned was trying to do! Keith Simmonds seemed to me to be very clear however...12FE is not big!

*(SNT Comment: We did not really have the opportunity to counter this. We do however have a broad body of evidence to support the view that our secondary schools are already too big and making them bigger is likely to cause a decline in standards. We strongly believe that Island results are partly a consequence of the size of year groups at GCSE and in line with the results produced by other schools on the mainland (predominantly two tier) that have similar size year elevens. We know of at least one large urban authority that despite having many smaller secondary schools of 6FE or less, are looking at small successful secondary schools elsewhere for inspiration and guidance – so why aren't we?)*

The impression at the meeting was that the Local Authority seems to be relying almost entirely on what they consider to be the "fact" that single transfer will be more productive than multiple transfers. They conceded that age not stage testing and learning (in that order as far as I can see!) will make the age of transfer less of an issue....but not yet, so reorganising from one system to another still makes perfect sense.

### Surplus Places / Capacity

The subject of surplus places featured heavily in the informal consultation and SNT still maintains that the local authority's failure to implement their own strategy for reducing surplus places led directly to the problem escalating out of control and that using this as a reason to reorganise to two tiers is not justifiable.

I asked about the rising birth rate and apparently they have that covered. Alex Moffatt explained that he has the live birth data projected to 2017 and did not see a serious rise in the birth rate on the Isle of Wight being an issue. If it was though, there would be sufficient spare capacity built into the system to cope.

### Vacant Teaching Posts and Staff Retention

It will surprise many of us to learn that according to Mr Simmonds, teacher vacancies are roughly the same today as they were this time last year. We did not have the opportunity to cross examine him and ask whether that is across the tiers or separately because I would expect to see middle schools suffering badly right now.

Mr Simmonds told us that making sure that we hold on to good staff is something being looked at right now.

*(SNT comment: seems to me to be something they should have addressed already - like in January before scaring all the good middle school staff and those in schools threatened with closure in other sectors, into looking for posts on the mainland or in primary and high schools.)*

They talked a lot about "natural redundancies" and the fact that there are no figures available for possible compulsory redundancies. We did not ask if the LA had been taken to tribunal for constructive dismissal yet.

They seemed dismissive of the ideas that the reorganisation is already causing massive upheaval and disquiet amongst staff in schools.

### Paying for Reorganisation

Moneywise all the money will come from central government and it is £200m in total. They said the falling land prices and demand will not impact on the plans at all. They are not relying on selling land to cover any of the costs of reorganisation.

The shortfall on the Cowes pathfinder is projected and part of the natural way these things are funded - it not a shortfall but a planned funding gap - the media got it all wrong in the way they reported it. People just don't understand and it's a shame.

And Finally...

There were many things that were deemed a matter for the politicians and we were told needed to be put to the formal consultation formally by formally writing to a formal part of the formal consultation but really something that could not be answered adequately at a formal public meeting that was about to close (run out of recording time / inconvenience officers / make the sound engineers late for their after gig party) and become informal (sigh of relief).

Amongst other things, some already mentioned, these were interesting:

Q: Parents with children starting in 2010 but no others in the system have not been consulted?

A: And...?

Statement by Mr Simmonds: Apparently the LA has a statutory responsibility to respond to parental demand for successful and popular schools by expanding them.

Q (not asked): How does that fit in with the LA plans to issue successful and popular schools with statutory closure notices in March next year?

A: Didn't get one because we couldn't ask as the formal meeting ended – without added time for the time wasted discussing the merits of restarting the recording of the session...Mmm...

Chris Welsford  
Chairman Standards-Not-Tiers  
10<sup>th</sup> July 2008