

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

26 July 2011

Public Participation From Father Jean-Patrice Coulon – Denominational Home to School Transport

Question

While our community welcomes the news that the Cabinet meeting to decide on subsidised transport for faith schools will be deferred to a time that is not in the school holidays, it nevertheless remains the fact that the meeting is going to be held on a weekday in the day time. The Council is making this proposal on the basis that we are living in difficult economic times. However, it is also saying that if parents wish to have a say in directly speaking to Councillors, they have to forego a day's pay to do so.

Furthermore, in attending the Children's Services Select Committee meeting at the Bradley Road Council Chamber on Friday 22nd July, I was struck as were several members of our community at how small this Chamber is. Parents were only informed of this meeting on Monday 18th July and yet already all the seats were taken, with even an elderly gentleman sat on a chair that had been placed in the middle of a public gangway. Our community has greater notice of the Cabinet meeting, and even though it is being held on a weekday daytime, there are likely to be over 200 people there. Furthermore, there could well be more than 70 people who would wish to make a personal statement. While respectful of the wishes of Democratic Services for us to form a group of spokespeople, it is very hard to ask someone not to speak when it is a question of education. As one councillor put it at the recent Full Council meeting, the education of our children is one of the most important things we do in our lives.

When school transport subsidy was proposed to be withdrawn in 2007, an evening meeting was held in the Sports Hall at St. Augustine's Catholic College which attracted over 500 people. Will Cabinet agree to take up the suggestion of the Leader of the Opposition Cllr Jon Hubbard to have a single issue evening Cabinet meeting? This would ideally be held centrally in Trowbridge, for which the premises of St. Augustine's would be happily donated to the Council. In the interests of local, open honest discussion, the Cabinet should explain to parents directly why they wish to make this proposal which will jeopardise children's education and reduce parental choice for the sake of less than £170,000 in a budget of close to a billion pounds. In doing so, the Cabinet would successfully refute the suggestion that Mr Michael Stevenson, the Chair of Governors of St. Augustine's put at the Full Council meeting of a "Council afraid to face up to its responsibilities".

Response

Every effort has been given to consult those affected by the proposal. From the feedback received to the consultation it was evident that those affected have been given adequate opportunity to convey their views and these views have been incorporated in the report which was initially considered by the Children's Services Committee last Friday.

Nevertheless, from the comments received, it was apparent that a number would welcome the opportunity to attend the Cabinet meeting but would not be able to do so given the timing of the meeting during the school holidays. In recognising this, it has been agreed to defer consideration of the proposals until 13 September. I would expect that given the strength of feeling shown and the sense of importance attached to the proposals as reflected in the comments received, those who would wish to attend will make the necessary arrangements to enable them to attend the meeting given that sufficient notice has been given of the date of the meeting in September.

In terms of accommodation, Father Coulon will be aware that the venue for today's meeting was originally set for Salisbury but was rearranged to meet here at Bradley Road to make it more accessible for those interested in attending for the item. Similarly, the meeting in September has been rearranged from meeting in Devizes to meeting again in this Chamber. As you will see, with the doors opened, we are able to accommodate approximately 50 people. We cannot of course provide unlimited accommodation but have made every effort to provide reasonable accommodation in an accessible location.