

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

22 May 2019

**Jan Winfield – Statement regarding agenda item 6
Specials Schools Consultation**

To Councillor Laura Mayes – Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills

Statement

I have read the report prepared for Cabinet members today. I read it with a mounting sense of disbelief and frustration at the lack of clarity, the vagueness and omissions. It is not, as it might appear to some, an attempt to present the whole picture. It is strongly biased in favour of its original proposal. It fails to present an accurate account of many of the central issues. It is highly selective in what it chooses to prefer and what it chooses to omit. It is manipulative in its choice of evidence and opinion. And it relies heavily on emotive rhetoric to make promises that are generalised, vague, non-specific and unsubstantiated. I am disappointed that so much effort by so many people has resulted in such a politically convenient document. For this reason, if I were you – I would be postponing any decision today in order to have sufficient time to properly interrogate the document and its 'vision' – and to look beneath the pretence for the reality it presents to those whose lives will be utterly determined by it: our SEND community and their children.

For the sake of all those who wish to make their opinion heard today, I will restrict my comments to 4 core elements of what is described as The Wiltshire Vision:

They are:

Community Inclusion

A one site school

Links to mainstream schools

Transport

Inclusion:

Wiltshire Council need a much stronger, clearer definition of what inclusion means before we commit ALL the county's SEND children to one school!

- Strong and vibrant community links – with cafés, community gardens and public playing fields – with inclusive businesses and civic spaces and services that facilitate and advocate independent living for all

Let's examine this a little more closely... 'strong and vibrant' are merely adjectives. When applied to a small village, they sound rather over-stated. 'Cafes, community gardens and public playing fields' – these hardly constitute a complete community! A café, garden and playing fields open to the public at a special school which is almost inaccessible by public transport and too remote to walk to from the nearest town is **NOT** inclusion, under any definition! It **EXCLUDES** access to ALL the services that a community can provide: from shops, parks, museums, sports centres, libraries, supermarkets, information centres, doctors and dentists to public transport links, cinemas, leisure facilities, banks and post offices – ALL of which are available in each of our strategic towns. It is disingenuous to pretend that a small village can replicate the extended community of a large town, or that children and young people with SEND do not need to learn how to negotiate them from an early age. Weekend and holiday access alone is not enough. We know that our children learn to be familiar with and feel secure in their local environment only by having many, many opportunities, on a daily basis to practise living in them. A rural environment is a very different thing and, whilst desirable for a few, it will NOT prepare the vast majority of our children – including many who attend Rowdeford – for independent living as a young adult; there being no suitable accommodation or services available in a rural setting to accommodate them. However delightful it is to learn about horticulture in a sylvan setting, the reality of our young people's lives is that they need to learn about stranger danger, crossing a busy road, using a bank or post office and waiting in a queue in a busy supermarket. They need to learn how to negotiate the towns and urban environments most of them live in – and will continue to live in for the rest of their lives.

Attractive, comfortable, child-scale buildings - safe, friendly, calm

Hmm... well, setting aside the car park for a school of 400 pupils and at least as many adults, plus the 60 or so minibuses arriving and departing every day – a not inconsiderable obstacle for any SEND child, let alone one with severe learning difficulties and the high anxiety levels that come with complex needs and autism, the sheer size of the site will be bewildering and confusing to so many of our SEND children. It took my SLD son 2 years to learn his way around the local college he transferred to at 18 – and it was less than half the projected size of the proposed school. Of course, during this time he needed one to one support to find his way around and stay safe on the site. Has this been costed in to a school for 400?? No matter how attractive and friendly a school is designed to be, the reality for SEND children is that size matters. It really does.

- Powerful and empowering links with mainstream schools,

This is a bold claim! But let's examine the reality: there is only one mainstream school in Rowde. It is a small primary school. Its capacity to develop 'powerful and

empowering links' will be limited by the number of additional children that can be accommodated at any one time for any given purpose. With 400 SEND children on its doorstep, I suspect it will quickly be overwhelmed! So links will need to be made further afield. This increases the transport 'footprint' with staff and children being ferried to and fro to access training, inclusion, inreach and outreach programmes, as well, of course, as maintaining that community inclusion we have already mentioned. With time spent travelling to and from other schools, curriculum time is lost and children who will already, in many cases, have long journeys to and from school each day, will spend even more time on transport. A 'link' that only happens once a term, because of staff shortages and the difficulties of timetabling and travel, is neither 'powerful' nor 'empowering.'

- Good transport routes and means of transport,

NONE of this can be managed without a constant flow of traffic in and out of the site, all day, every day. Not to mention health visits, therapy appointments and reviews, sick children to be collected, school plays, sports events and school trips – all of which will necessitate car, taxi and minibus journeys for every child and every child's family. It's easy to attend the nativity play when you can catch the bus to town and walk the 5 – 10 mins to St Nicholas or Larkrise schools. But every event at the proposed new school will involve anywhere from one to 100+ vehicles arriving and leaving – and that carbon footprint just grows and grows. A backward step indeed, when Wiltshire Council has just signed the Emergency Climate agreement! Now think, for a moment, about that anxious youngster who has to negotiate a route between those 'child friendly' buildings, just as the senior school event ends and 100+ people come flooding out of the next building. Can you honestly put your hand on your heart and say s/he will be 100% safe? Or confident? As for travel to and from school, I cannot even begin to address the nonsense of the travel plan suggested in this report. How Rowdeford pupils achieve any journey time saving at all when their journey will be exactly the same? How children from the urban areas of Trowbridge, Warminster, Westbury, Chippenham and Malmesbury can POSSIBLY have shorter journeys than at present?! Or how the route from Rowde across Devizes at rush hour has not even been taken into account! I have personally sat in that queue for 40 minutes or longer on many occasions. An additional 30 or 40 minibuses every day is not going to make it any shorter! Let's just be honest about this: at a time when we should be making every effort to decrease the amount of traffic on our roads, Wiltshire Council is proposing that we go full tilt towards INCREASING the number of car and minibus journeys twice a day, every day to transport 400 children and at least as many staff from all points of the compass to the one school. It is a madness that is hard to comprehend and smacks of either a ruthless manipulation of the facts – or complete idiocy.

There are over 500 pages to this report and I have only touched on one! Cabinet members, this is the biggest review of SEND education in a generation in Wiltshire. Whatever you decide is not for the next few years, or until your term of office expires. It represents a massive upheaval for almost every SEND family in the North and West of the county. 400+ children in special education plus thousands of others in mainstream schools whose chance of a better outcome is not about 'world class' buildings or equipment. It is about committed, imaginative teachers working closely every day with vulnerable children whose ability to communicate their needs and

desires is severely restricted. It is about enabling those teachers to build strong, caring relationships with their pupils in small, familiar, low key settings where anxieties are reduced, confidence is built and learning is thus enabled and encouraged. On life's journey, our SEND children only take very small steps, one at a time. They need a slower pace, a shorter path, a clear and simple goal. Only when they have this level of security can they reach out, reach high, aspire, like all other children, to be their very best. Please think very hard before you raise your hand today: are you giving them what THEY truly need? Or just what your planners tell you you can have?

Jan Winfield