

DIOCESE OF SHREWSBURY EDUCATION SERVICE

- committed to encouraging 'fullness of life'

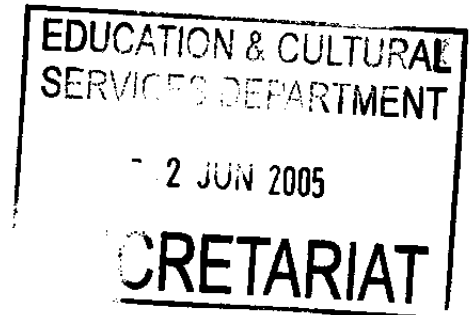


Primary Places Review
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FMC/SPB/01

25 May 2005



Dear Mr Cooper

NORTH BIRKENHEAD AND BEECHWOOD CONSULTATION

Further to the invitation for interested parties to comment on the above, may I advise that the Trustees to the Diocese of Shrewsbury, in whom ownership of the school is vested, strongly object to proposals for closure at St Paul's Catholic Primary School.

Those objections rest first on the positive strengths of St Paul's:

- **CATHOLIC EDUCATION : THE IMPORTANCE OF ST PAUL'S**

It is playing a vital part in meeting the educational and spiritual needs of children under its care. As to the first of these the LEA has confirmed the quality of provision and the strong ethos at the school. For the second St Paul's enables children to grow in a learning community rooted in faith. Such experience is vital to their life journey and attainment of eternal destiny. Ensuring that experience is key to the educational Mission of the Catholic Church.

- **CATHOLIC EDUCATION : THE BISHOP'S RESPONSIBILITY**

The Bishop's responsibility is to ensure that Catholic education is freely ACCESSIBLE to baptised Catholics. The overwhelming majority of Beechwood Catholic parents, past and present, have expressed their support for such education at St Paul's. For those parents, sending their children to Catholic schools outside the estate is not a practical option. The nearest Catholic schools are approximately a mile and half away, too far to walk possibly twice a day with a pram and small children, particularly if one child is in part time nursery education, thereby necessitating an extra journey. Car ownership is low and the estate is surrounded by very busy roads making journeys to Catholic schools outside the estate potentially dangerous for unaccompanied young children. Bus fares are out of the reach of many parents, a large number of whom are unemployed.

In addition, one of the two nearest Catholic schools will have difficulty in accommodating additional children. The other, Holy Cross Catholic Primary School, would have to alter considerably its current targeted capital scheme for the removal of surplus places in order to provide additional classrooms for St Paul's children. These spaces would almost certainly have to be reviewed again in the future as it became obvious that St Paul's parents were unable to get their children to the school; such building in of 'surplus places' does not make economic or strategic sense.

- **CATHOLIC EDUCATION : SERVING THE COMMUNITY**

St Paul's serves not only Catholic parents but the wider community, for example its highly successful Breakfast Club meets the needs of many children and parents, including working parents. If it were to be lost, the quality of life for both would suffer. The school also runs a number of Family Learning and parental help courses for which it has acquired the Basic Skills Quality Mark on three consecutive occasions. These initiatives have significant long term potential for supporting the development of basic and parental skills on the Beechwood Estate.

- **CATHOLIC EDUCATION : THE FAMILY OF DIOCESAN SCHOOLS**

- St Paul's does not exist alone. It is part of a family of diocesan schools and has close links with a number of neighbouring Catholic primary schools. St Paul's is currently establishing formal collaborative arrangements with some of these to extend curriculum provision, reduce the workload of subject co-ordinators and provide an enhanced range of in-service training and out of hours activities.

- The diocesan family also includes excellent secondary schools at St Anselm's College, Upton Hall School FCJ and St Mary's Catholic College, to which pupils at St Paul's have number one status for admissions. If they were to be dispersed to Community primary schools this status will be lost and with it, the strong pastoral links which St Paul's has with these schools.

- **VIABILITY OF ST PAUL'S**

- ***Financial viability***

St Paul's does not have a deficit budget and does not expect to be in a deficit position in the foreseeable future. Its current budget projections to 2008 include a healthy rollover and allow maintenance of current staffing levels for classes, meet workforce reform requirements and at least a 0.5 teaching Head, which is appropriate for a school of its size. It is the view of the Governing Body and the Diocese based on close monitoring of successive budgets and estimated costs, and borne out by OFSTED's judgements in their 2003 inspection, that the school represents good value for money, especially as regards its provision for pupil progress and its ethos, management and contribution to the community.

- ***Organisational viability***

Mixed age teaching is not a problem in St Paul's and does not trouble its parents. Since St Paul's introduced mixed age teaching, pupil achievement has actually improved, including standards at Key Stage 1. This is confirmed by the LEA's own monitoring which has commended on several occasions the quality of the school's planning and assessment for learning systems. Parents, far from having concerns, point to the good effect mixed age teaching has had on their children's social education

- ***Workload curriculum responsibilities, extra curricular activities and teachers professional development***

Workforce reform time is already planned for and is not an issue. St Paul's is engaged in collaborative arrangements with other Catholic schools to share some curriculum responsibilities, provide specialist teaching, joint opportunities for professional development and engagement in sporting and other extra curricular activities. St Paul's governors are actively seeking to extend and formalize these before the beginning of the next school year and are considering federation with another Catholic school in the near future. The Governing Body and Diocese see this as a positive move forwards to collaborative inter school networking, in line with Government thinking.

The Trustees are also moved to object to the closure of St Paul's given the weakness of the case for such put forward by the Local Education Authority:

- **SURPLUS PLACES**

Certainly the LEA has to reduce surplus places within Wirral and have emphasised this as a key priority but the Diocese and Governing Body have already taken steps to remove these at St Paul's and lease the space to an organisation serving the community in line with the "Every Child Matters" agenda. So this key priority for the LEA has already been achieved.

- **FALLING NUMBERS**

The Authority is right to highlight an overall fall in the birth rate but Catholic baptismal figures, on which we base planning of school places, are stable or rising (see enclosure). This information strongly argues for the maintenance by the Diocese of St Paul's. This data has been made available to the Education Department on many occasions.

- **SMALL SCHOOLS**

The correspondence from the LEA lists a series of problems, largely financial, associated with small schools. However the Diocese covers ten local education authorities, including some such as Cheshire and Manchester with very large numbers of schools and our experience across those areas is that small schools can be very effective.

This is not only the view of the Diocese but that of OFSTED. Arising from its survey of 1,780 small schools (defined as having less than 100 pupils), it reported that:

- Compared with larger schools small schools are equally capable of providing an effective education and many are among the most effective in the country
- It is well within the capacity of small schools to teach the full range of the National Curriculum.
- The good ethos of the great majority of small schools is one of their strengths and Inspectors invariably described very good provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils especially in church schools.
- Inspectors noted that costs can be higher (though remember St Paul's is working effectively within its planned budget) but they concluded that a good case emerged for the place of small schools in the education system as a whole when the quality of their educational performance is added to the broader contribution they make for their communities.
- The good quality of provision at St Paul's (confirmed by the LEA itself), and its strong ethos, provide evidence that small schools can be successful.

The Trustees are also very much concerned as to the process underpinning the consultation review. First as the options stand within that review, five identify closure for St Paul's and two, concerning joint Faith schools, do not exist as neither ourselves or the Anglican Diocese of Chester see these as practicable within the circumstances of this particular review. Parents at St Paul's are therefore denied any meaningful say within the options available to select an option maintaining Catholic education as a distinct entity. Such runs contrary to natural justice.

A second concern centres on the process of consultation with the Diocese. The Audit Commission Report of September 2004 as presented to the Education and Cultural Services Select Committee on 16th September 2004 "stressed that the need for effective dialogue between the LEA and the Dioceses continues to be vital in the overall management of school places." Such dialogue is all too often absent in practice as evidenced by:

- Failures to circulate papers associated with the planning review to either Diocese; all too often we are dependent on colleagues in schools for passing on information.
- Failures to factor in evidence from the Diocese to the planning process, most particularly in respect to the differing perspectives afforded by live birth statistics and infant baptismal rates.
- Failure to maintain a consistent base for consultation. The letter from Wirral's Director of Education to parents on February 1st 2005 established surplus places as the key review criteria.

The Governing Body and Diocese reacted quickly to address the issue. In subsequent correspondence with parents on 20th April from the Director the surplus places driven review had move on effortlessly to the financial problems of small schools and indeed the disadvantages of small schools perse.

It is worth emphasising at this point that successive Acts of Parliament since 1870 have recognised and confirmed the 'dual system' of education in this country, i.e. the provision of schools both by the state, through local education authorities, and by voluntary organisations (usually, but not always, churches). The concept embodied in legislation is of separate but collaborating bodies. This means that, for the Catholic sector, dioceses are coordinate with, not subordinate to, local education authorities. So far the consultation process has not reflected this accepted stance.

Bearing all the above in mind, and particularly the adverse results of closure for parents wanting a Catholic education for their children, the effects of closure on the local community and the current educational and financial viability of the school, the Diocese argues that St Paul's Catholic Primary School should be maintained in its present form but with a reduced Indicated Admission Number. Looking to the wider perspective arising from this exercise the Diocese now wishes formally to consult with the Council on transferring the review of Catholic education to its hands as is already happening in Tameside LEA. The Diocese will, in collaboration with the Authority then undertake that review across its provision in Wirral and bring forward proposals that meet with the Audit Commission's recommendation that surplus places are reduced to its bench mark of 10%. Such an action will of course require the removal of St Paul's Catholic Primary School from the current review in North Birkenhead and Beechwood.

Yours sincerely

F. M. Clarke

F M Clarke
Director of Schools

Copied to:

Rt Rev Brian Noble, Bishop of Shrewsbury

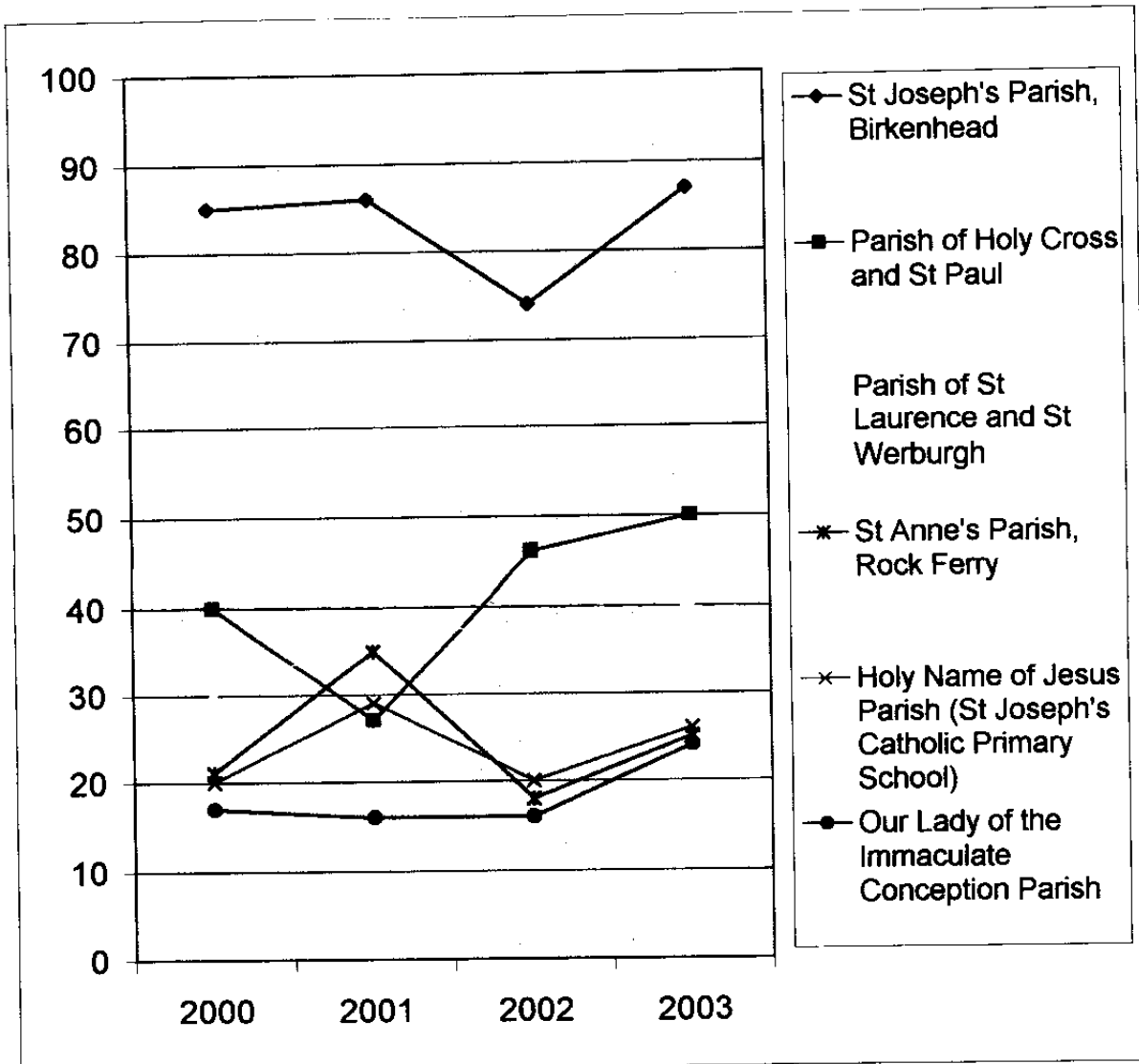
Rev D Roberts, Diocesan Director of Education

Mrs M Cook, Chair of Governors, St Paul's Catholic Primary School

Mrs M Jackson, Acting Headteacher, St Paul's Catholic Primary School

DIOCESE OF SHREWSBURY EDUCATION SERVICE

**INFANT BAPTISMS 2000 TO 2003 (inc)
NORTH, CENTRAL AND SOUTH BIRKENHEAD**



Infant baptisms do not include children baptised at later ages and so, as a planning mechanism, tend to understate the demand from Catholic parents for Catholic education by some 9%

CHESTER DIOCESAN BOARD OF EDUCATION

Consultation on Primary School Provision in North Birkenhead and Beechwood

The Diocesan Board of Education wishes to enable the Church of England to continue to serve this community through the provision of a Church school. Consequently we cannot support option C1.

Any move from the current area would make the distance to the Parish Church greater and consequently make the link with the Church more difficult to maintain and develop. Furthermore we understand that such a move would make it difficult for children currently at the school to attend the new school. Consequently we cannot support option C2.

We understand that similar problems would exist for Catholic parents if St Paul's Catholic School amalgamated with St Oswald's on the Ballantyne Drive site. Although we would support the provision of a joint denominational school, reluctantly we must recognise that options B1 and B2 cannot be agreed.

We recognise the difficulty caused to the Catholic community in options A1 and A2. However, they would satisfy our wish to maintain a Church of England School in the area, providing in A2 that the amalgamated school had Church of England status. We are conscious, however, of the excellent special needs provision in St Oswald's CE School and the need to protect more vulnerable children from the disruption that a move would produce. We are also conscious that the current St Oswald's site would require the least expenditure to accommodate more children. Part of the St Oswald's site is owned by the Diocesan Board of Education.

For these reasons, we believe that the appropriate decision will include the maintenance of a Church of England school on the current St Oswald's site.

Jeff Turnbull
Director of Education
Diocese of Chester
2 June 2005