

4 January 2012

Dear Parent/Carer

Proposed Free School, Southwater

Following the recent public announcement of a proposed free school in Southwater, jointly led by Horsham Churches Together (HCT) and The Oasis Trust, local school and college leaders believe that it is important to communicate directly with stakeholders upon this matter.

Whilst all of our institutions have unique identities, we all share common aims and aspirations where educational provision across our locality is concerned. In light of this collaborative approach we feel duty bound to raise significant questions about the proposed Free School in Southwater.

First and foremost, the pace of change proposed is too rapid to allow full and meaningful discussion of all relevant educational factors to be made and then considered. Currently, the message being put forward by HCT and The Oasis Trust is that there is an overwhelming need for new school provision in Southwater. We do not believe that this is the case.

Statistics available from West Sussex County Council demonstrate that unless significant housing development takes place in Southwater and beyond, there is not an inevitable need for a new school.

More importantly, however, any new school provision must be clearly thought through to ensure that the needs of all youngsters and their families within our community are best provided for. Alternative educational provision, other than the nature and style proposed thus far, may suit our community better. Numerous examples could include: a 5-19 school, an 11-16 school or an 11-18 school. Such institutions may provide different specialisms which complement that which is already provided.

If the best education provision is to be provided then it must be carefully structured and fully integrated. The fact that HCT and The Oasis Trust are now unclear as to whether their school should be 11-16 or 11-18 suggests that such clarity of thought is not yet in existence.

As a group of school leaders, who have a proven track record of success in educating youngsters across the area, we have also been disappointed by the lack of communication and consultation with HCT. We are led to believe that plans for a proposed Free School have been long in the making but direct communication with current schools and colleges has only come about very recently.

HCT and The Oasis Trust are also keen to promote a view that unless their proposal is supported by February 2012, all opportunities for potential new provision will be lost and community members may also receive only substandard provision and funding in the future. Again, this is not the case. The Academies and Free School legislation has only just reached the statute books and appears to be generally supported on all sides of the political spectrum. The DfE (Department for Education) is also legally bound to provide funding for new school provision should demographics make this a necessity.

Our unease at the current situation is further exacerbated by the feeling that some other narrow vested interests may be fuelling the desire for an expedient solution to potential developments that may lie ahead. The aspirations of politicians and housing developers clearly have a part to play but should not be the only guiding hand relating to this issue.

Our concerns are also enhanced by the rushed consultation that is currently underway. To date, the consultation appears to gloss over vital issues such as those raised here. It gives the impression of a desire to railroad interested parties into a hasty decision. It is difficult to see how Year 4 parents (as requested by Oasis) can give a first choice preference for a secondary school that has not been built and where a Headteacher has not been appointed.

As well as the nature and type of any potential new school, factors relating to transport, parental choice and allocation of scarce resources must also be addressed. The rationale and deeper objectives of the HCT and Oasis proposals must also be scrutinised further. Currently the proposed Free School does not enjoy the support of the Chichester Diocesan Board of Education.

In short, we believe that there should be a 'pause' that will allow genuine and coherent consultation in order to allow this vital issue to be fully debated and thought through. At the moment, The Oasis Trust and HCT are placing a rather one-dimensional view into the public domain and presenting it as fact. There is a need for questioning and discussion to ensure that decisions made now are not regretted at a later date.

We hope that you find this communication to be of use and of interest and would be happy to receive your views via our respective schools and colleges.

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