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# NEWSLETTER

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January 2014

Dear Parents

## CHANGES TO HEREFORDSHIRE SCHOOLS AND POST 16 TRANSPORT POLICY

I am sure you will be aware through JMHS Newsletters and the local media that Herefordshire Council voted on 19 December 2013 to make changes to their home to school transport policy. At the meeting in December the Cabinet of Herefordshire Council decided to withdraw free home to school transport eligibility based upon **catchment** school and replace eligibility based upon **nearest** suitable school in England. This decision was supported and recommended by the Director for Peoples Services, Jo Davidson, and will take effect from September 2014.

This means that if your child currently attends JMHS but you live closer to another school (eg The Chase or Dyson Perrins) you will not be eligible to free school transport. From September you will either have to arrange to transport your children privately or pay £720 per annum to purchase a seat on a school bus, but there is no absolute guarantee that a spare seat will be available. Students who will be in Year 10 or Year 11 in September 2014 will continue to receive free school transport, if they are currently eligible. JMHS fought extremely hard to persuade Cabinet not to make these changes as we fear they are detrimental to our students, our school and the local area in which we all live.

Despite our robust challenge, in conjunction with other schools, the appeal was unsuccessful. We have subsequently been informed by Cllr Liz Harvey with whom we have worked closely on this project, that the decision has been 'called in' by the General Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This means that the decision may not have followed the decision making principles set out in the Council's Constitution and is therefore going to be re-considered. We believe that this gives us a second opportunity to put forward our concerns and to challenge a decision which we consider to be incorrect, is based on inaccurate financial forecasting, and goes against the Council's *Yes We Can* plan to support children, young people and families.

The General Overview and Scrutiny Committee are meeting on 15 January and members of the public are free to ask questions, however these must be submitted in advance and must be directly related to the item on the agenda. As we write the agenda has yet to be published but we have been advised that questions must be submitted no later than Friday 10 January to Mr Ben Baugh ([bbaugh@herefordshire.gov.uk](mailto:bbaugh@herefordshire.gov.uk)). We would urge parents who are affected, or who may be in the future, to submit their views to Mr Baugh by the deadline so that the Committee is made aware of the tremendous implications of the decision made by Cabinet.

Parents who live in Cradley, or any of the surrounding villages, may also wish to attend the public meeting organised by parents at Cradley Village Hall on Thursday 9 January at 6pm to explain the situation and discuss appropriate questions. Representatives from JMHS will also be in attendance.

JMHS will be submitting a formal response and we give below some of the areas we will be raising. Please feel free to use any of this information in your response.

### **Questions JMHS intends to submit to the General Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

- 1. It is not clear that the cost modelling has taken the full cost impact of the decision into account across all areas of the council's operation, and therefore assurance is sought that the total anticipated net financial effort is achievable, realistic and proportionate.**
  - a. From Cradley and Mathon, current students in Y10-Y13 and other eligible students would still have to be bused into JMHS. However other students would need to be bused to Dyson Perrins in Worcestershire. Thus there would be two buses paid for by the Council not one. How would this save money?
  - b. Our understanding is that part of Colwall is nearest to The Chase School in Malvern and part is closer to JMHS. Again the Council will therefore have to pay for two buses instead of one. How would this save money? Furthermore if the Chase School was full (and Worcestershire have already indicated that they will not be making any changes to their admissions criteria) a third bus may be required to transport students from the village to yet another school.
  - c. We are aware that some financial modelling and research has been done; however the Council's own report states that *the actual financial savings are hard to forecast precisely*. We would question why such a major decision purportedly based on the need to save money, will actually achieve the required result when the cost of additional buses is taken into account.
  - d. Has the requirement for extra buses been discussed with bus providers and reassurance obtained that they can meet the extra demand whilst ensuring that children arrive at different schools on time?
  - e. When determining the nearest school, has any account been taken of physical obstacles such as the Malvern Hills or the River Wye?
  
- 2. It is not clear that the significant and negative effects of the changes highlighted in the consultations have been given proper weight and due consideration in the decision-making process.**
  - a. We have calculated that the long term effects of the change would move approximately 250 secondary aged children from Herefordshire Schools into Worcestershire or Gloucestershire schools costing almost a million pounds per year. Even if the alleged savings were achieved in full, four times this amount will disappear from schools' budgets. How is this justified and what attempts have been made to consider a more coherent and holistic view of funding? Has Jo Davidson, the Director for People's Services, clearly communicated the considerable damage this would cause to Herefordshire schools to all councillors?
  - b. With academies free to design and teach their own curriculum rather than following the national curriculum, students moving school after Year 7,8,9 would face particular disadvantages. They could have missed out considerable chunks of learning or forced to study the same topics twice. What account has been taken of educational disadvantage to Herefordshire children in these calculations?
  - c. There is considerable research evidence that children who move secondary school after they have started do less well. What account has been taken of this?
  - d. The Ledbury Cluster of schools have worked extremely hard to create an effective transition programme with younger students enjoying many visits and activities in JMHS, close liaison between heads, governors, teachers and support staff to help with continuity of education, which is crucial to a good start at high school. The proposed transport changes will lead to the abandonment of traditional catchment areas and makes this work much harder. Is this what the Council wishes to achieve? Furthermore, has account been taken of young people making less progress and being unhappier as a result of this?

- e. This policy would force middle income parents who live in Herefordshire to choose a school out of the county. Herefordshire Council have spent considerable sums of money on creating a Children and Young People's Partnership whose vision - the 'Yes, We can' plan - sets out their aims for children living in Herefordshire and promotes collaboration with different organisations to make things better for children. We would question whether the 'Yes We Can' team have been consulted for their views on the proposed changes to school transport? And if not, why not? One of our parents has ironically suggested that the plan should be re-named 'Yes You Can if you can afford it in Herefordshire' which is a less snappy title but perhaps rather more accurate.
- f. A key part of the coalition government's philosophy on education is based on parents being able to choose a good school for their children. The decision to transport to nearest school is inequitable in that it only provides choice for the better off who can afford the bus fares. How do Councillors square this with the political views the parties they represent espouse about education?

**3. No reasons have been given for dismissing the approaches taken in other authorities.**

We would ask the Council to consider alternative approaches taken by other authorities. For example Gloucestershire operates a 'nearest or catchment' policy. Durham offers a 'nearest school in county' option. Have these options been considered and discounted?

**4. SEN proposals go against the Council's first principle of protecting the vulnerable.**

- a. Is any account being taken of students with SEN at School Action or School Action Plus for whom moving school will create discontinuity of support and damage their progress and learning? This is equally true of pre and post-16 SEN students.
- b. We have excellent provision for post-16 SEN education in Herefordshire and JMHS would not be able to provide the facilities or standards for these students that are currently in operation at Barrs Court School. Has the Council considered the cost implications of post-16 SEN students attending their nearest school and the extra resources that may be required to accommodate their particular needs.

**5. The decision has a disproportionate effect on families with more than one child.**

- a. If a parent was desperate to keep their children at their current secondary school and had two or three children in Y7-Y9, could they be given any financial help? If so how could this be achieved in a way that is equitable and fair to all parents?
- b. Has due consideration been given to the prospect of splitting children in the same family and forcing them to attend separate schools? Costs to parents could include extra child care provision to meet the different term dates, the inability to pass on school uniform to siblings, the inability to take family holidays at certain times of the year and the sheer impossibility of having two or three children attending schools in adjacent counties.

**6. Families unable to support this additional cost have not been given the notice they need to amend their school choice for the September 2014 intake.**

- a. We are disappointed that Herefordshire did not make their intentions clear to parents of current Year 6 students before requiring them to make their preferred choice of secondary school. It is further noted that our adjoining authorities (Gloucestershire, Monmouthshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire) would not permit any changes to parental preferences after the official closing date of 31 October 2013. This severely disadvantages residents of Herefordshire and their children. We would ask if due consideration was given to the implementation date of the proposed changes?

**7. The total effects of the decision in exporting the County's young people to schools in other counties, in not demonstrating adherence to the principles of our transport plan, is not evidencing alignment with the Sustainable Modes of Transport Strategy for Schools, and in not demonstrating the net savings at council level exist when loss of pupil grants are taken into account, raise concerns that aspects of this decision fall outside of the council's current Budget Monitoring and Policy Framework.**

- a. The change would encourage more parents to drive their children into school rather than catching buses thus decreasing cost effectiveness of bus services and preventing the alleged savings from taking place. What account has been taken of this?
- b. Education Transport made significant changes to bus routes and contractors in August 2013. How would the proposed changes affect the contractual arrangements currently in place?
- c. Increased traffic into the JMHS site would create safety issues on the site. Has an impact assessment based on the Safer Routes to Schools programme been carried out to assess the impact of the proposed changes?
- d. Increased volume of traffic would also cause greater congestion, increased road repairs and environmental damage. Has an impact assessment on the environment been carried out?
- e. Has an impact assessment on equality of opportunity especially for vulnerable young people been conducted?
- f. It has been suggested that high schools could be devolved funding to arrange their own transport. We consider that this may be unlawful as local authorities cannot delegate the budget for home to school transport. Could we ask what clarification has been sought on this suggestion?

We firmly believe that the Cabinet decision to withdraw the Herefordshire free home to school transport policy eligibility based upon nearest and catchment school and replace eligibility based on nearest suitable school with places is incorrect and flawed as it:

- Fails to take account of Herefordshire Council's Children and Young People's Partnership vision to ensure children have the best education and opportunities within Herefordshire.
- Has not been subjected to full and proper consultation with all organisations who work with children in Herefordshire to ensure they are healthy, happy and safe.
- Fails to consider equality, diversity and respect for human rights but relies totally on a hard to project financial saving.

We accept the need for the Council to make savings and understand their desire to provide only the statutory minimum service it is required to do, unless there is good reason to do otherwise. We do feel, however, that the Council has failed to take into account the ripple effect of this decision and consider that there are sufficient good reasons based on the Council's holistic approach to children within Herefordshire, to overturn this decision. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Council to consider ways of improving transportation and seeking cost savings, if appropriate.

Andrew Evans

Headteacher