



## Home & Hospital Tuition Service



15 June 2018

Mr Chris Ward  
Director of Education  
Sandwell MBC

Dear Chris,

### **Consultation on a proposal to increase the number of special school places for young people with Special Educational Needs and Learning Disabilities**

I am writing to comment on the above process and the proposal itself. Unfortunately, given the way in which the consultation question is constructed it is not possible to give a proper response on what is being consulted upon. The consultation sheet is only a simple tick box asking if you agree with increasing the expansion to the number of places at Westminster School. In agreeing with this, which most people will due to the lack of provision for those young people, it is implicit that the relocation of Whiteheath is also supported. Clearly, these are entirely different considerations and should have been consulted upon separately.

This whole process started with the publication of the first proposal published in January 2018 which proposed an increase in the numbers of pupils attending the Westminster School by relocating Whiteheath to a "modern well maintained building within Sandwell" but did not detail why this was necessary, contain any information on where this would be, or the impact on the pupils. This document was three pages long and did not set out any options. You are aware of the Management Committee's view that this relocation was not in the best interests of the pupils and could not be supported. Staff, parents, pupils and governors commented on the proposal to this effect and to my knowledge between 80 and 100 consultation sheets were submitted to Kevin Rowland stating non-support for the proposal. You may also be aware that I went to see my local councillor, Steve Eling. The proposal was then withdrawn and we were told a further proposal would be developed following the Election.

We received the current consultation document on the 11<sup>th</sup> May, 2018. Whilst this document is considerably longer (12 pages) the preferred option is still the same, to extend the capacity at Westminster by relocating Whiteheath Education Centre to a



#### **HOME & HOSPITAL TUITION SERVICE**

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comparable site. The consultation document states in justification “young people in Sandwell have also requested that Supported Internships and Apprenticeships programmes, based at the Westminster School be expanded so that more young people with special needs can access pathways to employment”. Whilst the inclusion of the views of young people in planning decisions is to be commended, in this case it is inequitable as the young people at Whiteheath have had no such opportunity to express their views.

The consultation document in support of extending the Rowley campus states “The school’s accommodation at Rowley Campus was purpose built to suit the requirements of the school”. The document omits to mention that the accommodation for Whiteheath Centre pupils was also purpose built to meet their needs.

The document says a great deal about why option e) is the authority’s preferred option, but does not describe in any real detail why the 16-19 provision could not be developed on another site separate from the School other than it would not provide a “cohesive transition”. The other factors supporting the preferred option are not really relevant. For example, the fact that “Young People themselves are demanding the number of places is increased” is no justification for why Whiteheath Education Centre should give up its purpose built accommodation. The fact that “the Westminster School has achieved ‘Outstanding’ status from OfSTED” is not a reason why Whiteheath should relocate. The consultation document also omits to mention that Whiteheath also received ‘Outstanding’ status from OfSTED in January 2018 nor considers the impact the proposed relocation might have on it retaining this status.

The document is unequivocal in stating that “A proposed relocation site for Whiteheath Education Centre, Sandwell Community School – Tipton Campus, provides similar facilities at an equivalent standard as the centre’s accommodation at Rowley Campus”. I must vigorously dispute this point. I have visited the Tipton Campus on two occasions, most recently on Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2018 with the Head and Parent Governor. The Tipton Campus is located on a very busy road, sandwiched between Ace Academy on the right and a Day Nursery on the left. It was originally used as a centre for pregnant teenagers; hence the co-location with the nursery. Whilst there is a separate entrance at the front, the outside space at the rear is very overgrown, but more importantly it is overlooked by Ace Academy school playing fields and the day nursery. Many children from the day nursery can be seen through the fence and heard. It is very noisy when children from the nursery are using the outside space.

Internally, the floor space is 100 square metres smaller than our current footprint but, more importantly, the overall appearance of the building is very traditional, is more closed and the common space is very dark. Whilst there is a dedicated art room, science room, kitchen area, staff room and other classrooms the internal fixtures and fittings are old. The standard of the building is not the same as the Rowley Campus as it is over 30 years old. There is no disabled shower which is critically important for us as many of our pupils have medical needs.

As you know, accommodation at the current Whiteheath Centre on the Rowley Campus is of a very high standard. It was designed and purpose-built to meet the needs of current pupils, the vast majority of whom have special educational needs and the majority having both physical and psychological health problems which mean they cannot attend mainstream school. Many of them have been out of education for some time before they

attend Whiteheath. Many have to make a slow transition back into education and the unique design of the current building is key in this, in that it is very different from a traditional school building. The design of the current Centre means that our pupils have completely separate access, located away from pupils attending St. Michael's and Westminster schools. Pupils cannot be seen from either of these two schools. They have access to quiet outside space which is not over-looked and which gives respite for pupils with anxiety issues. It has double height common rooms and fully glazed walls to give space and light. It has a lift and a shower for disabled pupils or those with severe medical needs.

I believe it is unfair to expect our pupils who have access to and use of excellent facilities because they have additional needs to give these up and accept accommodation of a lesser standard (not designed for their needs) in order that other young people with special needs can take advantage of them. The consultation document states "All mainstream schools and PRUs have recently had to manage reductions to their SEN budgets. However the budget for Whiteheath Education Centre has been protected from reductions." I am not sure how or why this is relevant, but it suggests that Whiteheath has had preferential treatment in the past and should now expect to make some compromises as that is only fair. The fact that the Tipton site would save Whiteheath £23,000 is also not relevant as the proposed site is not comparable or suitable for the kind of pupils, we provide a service for, but again perpetuates the myth that the pupils will be well catered for in the preferred option for re-location.

The document states, "The proposal for Whiteheath Education Centre to re-locate has led to the consideration of three sites". The process that was undertaken to consider these options and who was involved is not enlarged upon. I am not sure who with any insight as to our pupils' needs has been involved in this process. We have never been approached to consider options 1 or 2 in any detail. In fact we have never been asked for our pupil's needs although we developed a specification which we submitted.

The consultation document states "the only alternative option available to the authority is not to proceed with an expansion". I am not sure this can be correct. The Authority did not consider developing increased SEND post 16 provision on another site, such as the Tipton campus. Not ideal perhaps but would enable the authority to meet the needs of young people, the Department of Education and OfSTED's requests to expand the Supported Apprenticeship programme within the SEND Capital Grant.


By giving only one option e) for consideration the Authority has made it impossible to support expansion of provision for young people with special educational needs and learning disabilities in Sandwell, without displacing other young people with special needs from the accommodation that was purpose built for them.

Last time this same proposal was put forward parents, pupils and staff all made their views known using the consultation sheet process. Up to 100 were submitted. We were promised a summary of the responses but have never seen one. Having spoken with parents this time, they have little faith in submitting comments as they believe their views have not been listened to. I expect you to have very few. However, that does not mean that they support the proposal. Many parents are

disillusioned and angry about the proposals and the fact that the consultation period has been held over a very stressful period with year 11 students taking their GCSE exams. Many of our parents have housing, benefit and health problems themselves with 60% of students coming from the most deprived wards in Sandwell.

I should be grateful if you would include this response in full in any future report to Committee or Cabinet on the consultation so that my concerns regarding the overall nature of the exercise and its flawed design can be considered

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Parkes". The script is cursive and somewhat informal.

Mary Parkes

**Chair**

cc. Cllr. Steve Eling,

cc. Dr. Kevin Rowland