

Winchelsea Town Plan Recreation and Youth Working Group Note of meeting at St Thomas's School, 15th November 2004

On 15th November, Richard Comotto (Chairman, Winchelsea Town Plan Steering Committee) and Siobhan Hart-Jones (Chairman, Winchelsea Town Plan Recreation and Youth Working Group) met with Mr Richard White (Headmaster, St Thomas's School). Apologies for absence were received from Mrs Tortello-Myers (Deputy Head) and Mrs Sharon Simpson (Chair of Governors).

Mr Comotto explained the objectives of the Town Plan and its history, and the purpose of the meeting as part of the process of consultation with bodies in the Town.

The following issues were discussed:

1 What active connections does the school maintain with the Town?

Mr White listed recent connections: close relations with the Church; the recent production of 'Joseph' at the New Hall; a reading by children with the Literary Society; a nature project led by the National Trust Warden; use of the WCO by the Homework Club; visits by the Mayor; and contact with the Winchelsea Archaeological Society.

There was discussion about the depth and duration of some of these connections, eg the contact with the WAS was simply a class passing by a survey site and receiving a brief description of what was going on.

There was also some discussion of the breadth of contacts between the school and the community. It was agreed that there was greater contact with Winchelsea Beach. Events in Winchelsea, such as the Open Day, had not been successful. It was agreed that this reflected the fact that most pupils lived in Winchelsea Beach.

2 How does the school & PTA communicate with the Town?

The school mainly communicates through letters to parents and articles in the Parish Magazine.

3 How much support does the school receive from the Town?

The answer was 'not much'. Support for the Governors' annual appeal and the Auction of Promises had dwindled.

4 What Town activities does the school support? Could it do more (eg meeting space, swimming pool)?

A class attended the Remembrance Day ceremony at the cenotaph. The school gave a Carol Concert every Christmas. The Headmaster attended the Mayoring.

5 How does the school believe it is perceived in the Town?

Mr White was unsure.

6 What measures does the school take to deal with negative perceptions? How does the school plan to deal with criticisms about:

- Parking and traffic problems.
- Lack of consultation or planning over recent construction work.
- Delivery vehicles.
- Lack of consultation over the recent traffic exercise.
- The state of Friars Road in front of the school and occasional litter.

The school had discussed the parking problems and had written to parents. It was hoped that the Friars Road frontage would be restored.

7 What is the long-term future of the school?

The school has a cap of 150 pupils, so no expansion is envisaged. This would mean pressure for places given the exodus of children from Rye primary schools to the more pleasant surroundings and higher standards of village schools. It was expected that the catchment area for the school would widen further.

8 Can the Town Plan have data on the school?

- Numbers of pupils over the last 5 years.
- Analysis of where pupils come from.
- Number of staff and number of staff living in the Town.

This was promised.

In view of the imminent departure of Mr White, it was agreed to contact his successor in the new year.

Issues for the Town Plan

Concern was expressed that the school is becoming detached from the community in Winchelsea, in part, due to the decreasing number of children from the Town who attend the school. This would be a loss for the Town and create risks for the school.

One risk is that the Town will cease to identify with and support the school. There is evidence of this already in the dwindling financial support for the school. It is also possible that some residents associate the school only with the problems it creates, eg parking and traffic problems.

The fact that most pupils live outside Winchelsea has created confusion at East Sussex County Council. The recent road safety exercise at the school was not advertised in the Town by County Council officials because they assumed that letters from the school to parents would adequately cover the Town. It may be that the incorrect assumption by local authorities that most pupils at the school come from Winchelsea could cause more serious problems in the future. Residents may be left out of future consultations about the school and its site. It may already cause them to underestimate the scale of the traffic and parking problems.

To combat negative perceptions, the school needs to urgently broaden its channels of communication with the Town. The current, rather traditional, channels of communication exclude many people in Winchelsea, eg non-church goers. Mr White was asked to put up posters in the Town (Little Shop or Parish noticeboard) and occasionally leaflet residents directly. He was asked to encourage the PTA to do the same. Events such the recent production of 'Joseph' were felt to be enormously useful.

The school often seems to miss opportunities to engage with the community. It failed to publicise the results of the archaeological investigation of the site of its extension or even make a copy available to the Winchelsea Archaeological Society.

There had been a project for pupils to spend time in the Little Shop to learn about its role in the community and see a business at work. This was not pursued. Some residents have expressed regret that there is no participation by the school at the Summer Fete. There are problems given that this takes place in the summer, but should be explored.

The school was encouraged to hire out its premises as a meeting place for the Town. The Town Plan would seek to use the premises where possible. The school grounds could be used by the Town but there may be problems with insurance cover.

It was noted that the grants made to the school to refurbish the swimming pool had required it to open the pool in the summer holidays, but this had never been done. This was a missed opportunity to link the school and community.

The Town Plan needs to discuss the possibility that an attempt may be made in the future to increase the number of pupils at the school. This could exacerbate problems for the roads leading to the school.

Given the cap on the number of pupils, which may make it uneconomic in the long term, the question of the long-term future of the school site needs to be considered in the Town Plan. It would be an attractive site for housing. However, would it be a better long-term location for the village hall and/or community sports facilities than the current site across the A259?

Given complaints about traffic and parking by parents from residents of the roads leading to the school, concrete plans need to be formulated and agreed with the school, and the Highways Authority, on how to control the nuisance. This is perhaps the most immediate concern for the Town Plan.

The school is the largest employer in Winchelsea. However, this employment is of little economic benefit to the Town. There are just three resident employees, all part-time. Only a few of the other employees use shops in the Town and the school has failed to fulfil its promise to bank at the Winchelsea Post Office.

RD Comotto
31st January 2005