

James Heather - STATEMENT TO RICHMOND COUNCIL CABINET – 21 JULY 2011

This statement is in relation to Agenda Item 24, the purchase of the Clifden Road site. I am a local parent and a supporter of Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign.

Although your decision today is formally about the purchase, the Council's press release of last week made clear that the intention is that this should become the site for a new Catholic secondary school. And we are seeing how fast things can move. I therefore want to draw the Cabinet's attention to three important points.

Firstly, while the availability of the Clifden Road site for a new school is welcome, the advice we have received is that the Cabinet cannot simply decide to give it to the Catholic Church without any competition. Under the Education and Inspections Act, the Council can only establish a new school without a competition in two circumstances: firstly, where the Secretary of State has given his consent, and secondly where the new school is an Academy. And no new faith-based Academy can apply faith-based admissions criteria to more than 50% of their places. And the Secretary of State still needs to agree the funding.

Secondly, as Catholic schools only cater for 10% of the population they are obviously going to be more thinly spread than inclusive schools, so the borough cannot be looked at in isolation. 14% of the secondary school places in Richmond and its adjacent boroughs are already at Catholic schools. And there are eight Catholic secondaries within 5 miles of the centre of the borough. At the same time, the evidence from the only Catholic primary currently in the Linked Schools system, Sacred Heart in Teddington, suggests that many Catholic parents are quite happy for their children to go to a good local Community school if they have the chance. Providing yet another Catholic school cannot be an educational priority for the area.

Thirdly, if the Catholic school goes ahead, two more schools will still be needed. The borough is already a "net importer" of 850 secondary school children: over a third of places at borough secondaries are taken by children from outside the borough, while a quarter of borough children go to out-of-borough secondaries, mainly because their parents choose Catholic schools. A new Catholic school in the borough will make the imbalance worse, because the intention is that almost all its 150 places taken by children who would otherwise go to out-of-borough Catholic secondaries. But there will still be the same underlying need for a second new school by 2014 and a third one by 2017 or 2018 simply to handle the underlying growth in demand. And that's ignoring the impact of adding 6th forms.

As far as we know, the Council has only acquired one site – Clifden Road – and is aiming to acquire a second. But it has no plans for a third site. And there is little money. This will be a major problem for whichever party is in power after the next Council election, and for the 90% of non-Catholic parents who will struggle to find places for their children.

We need more high quality inclusive schools. More and more people, including fair-minded Catholics, are expressing their opposition to the current unfair and divisive policy. I urge the Cabinet to listen to them.

James Heather

Handouts: Map showing location of nearby Catholic secondaries. Supply/demand chart.