

CONSIDERATIONS RELEVANT TO THE SECTION 10 APPLICATION FROM THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF WESTMINSTER FOR CONSENT TO PROPOSE A CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL IN THE LONDON BOROUGH OF RICHMOND UPON THAMES

I am writing on behalf of Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign¹ to put before the Secretary of State points relevant to his consideration of the Application from the Catholic Diocese of Westminster for consent to propose a Voluntary Aided Catholic secondary school in the borough of Richmond, and in particular to highlight and correct untrue and misleading information that the Application contains.

We appreciate that the Secretary of State is not making a decision to establish the proposed school if he grants consent to the Application. Nevertheless, if he consents, he is indicating that he would be content for that to be the outcome (subject to the required processes). **We do not believe it would be reasonable for him to sanction that outcome** as:

- Contrary to the statements made in the application about the offer of the site and lease arrangements, **Richmond Council has now claimed publicly² that it has not offered the proposed site to the church.** The claim was made in response to a challenge that an offer had been made without any prior Council decision or consultation on whether to hold an open competition, or to offer of the site exclusively to the Diocese for a Catholic Voluntary Aided (VA) school.
- The site in question (Clifden Road, Twickenham) **is the first and only secondary school site in the borough to become available for many years.** The Council does not plan another new secondary school for the foreseeable future. The issue has therefore become hugely controversial locally.
- Secondary school planning in the borough is the subject of a number of capacity, demand and quality challenges, with core supply/demand data disputed. **The Application does not enable the wider picture and the associated uncertainties - and hence the overall impact on other schools and local children - to be taken into account.**
- If consent is granted, the far narrower consultation processes associated with the establishment of a VA school will not address the key question of which type of school should occupy the site in order to meet the borough's long term needs. A consent decision will therefore effectively create a *fait accompli*.
- There are already three Academies in the borough, and an application for a Free School was made in 2011. The Council's policy is to convert all its schools to Academies. **But no attempt has been made to seek proposals to set up the new school as a Free School/Academy.**
- The new school will make **little contribution to increased diversity** of provision in the area as there are already 9 Catholic secondaries within a 5 mile radius of the centre of the borough, and 6 less than 3 miles beyond the borough borders (2 within 1 mile).
- **The Application contains a number of untrue and misleading statements** (*detailed below*).

On this basis, we believe the Secretary of State should conclude that the Application should be rejected.

¹ Campaign supporters range from the non-religious to Anglicans, Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Catholics, and include parents and senior figures from borough schools. Well over 2300 people have so far signed a petition asking the council "to ensure that every state-funded school opening in the borough from now on is inclusive, so that no child can be denied a place in a good local school because of the religion or belief of their parents" – a criterion that the proposed Catholic school will not fulfil.

² Education & Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting 17 Oct 11.

The following points refer to pages and sections of the Secondary School Application, and give the relevant extracts (many of the same points apply to the related Primary School application).

Page 1 – Section 1 – availability of site

“The Council has agreed to purchase this four-acre site. It is proposed that most of the site is to be leased to the Diocese of Westminster at a peppercorn rate for a period of 125 years...”

The Council has stated that the contract for the purchase of the site depends for completion on the vendor (Richmond Adult and Community College) meeting a number of conditions that are outside the Council’s control. On this basis, the Council claims (ref footnote 2 above) that, contrary to previous statements, it has not offered the site to the church. This calls into question the claimed lease arrangements.

Page 2 – Section 1 – community cohesion

“Community cohesion will be a core value of this ethos, together with an appreciation of the enriching features of ethnic and cultural diversity”

It is disingenuous to suggest that a new school that favours children from one religious minority could make a greater contribution to community cohesion than an inclusive school, especially as in this case the school is expected to fill completely with children of Catholics (see explanation below). In fact the controversy over the proposal is itself creating division.

In terms of social diversity, the following percentages of children eligible for Free School Meals³ at borough primary schools (40 schools of which 6 are Catholic and 9 CofE) suggest that, in this particular case, **a Catholic secondary would contribute less to community cohesion in terms of social disadvantage** than, for example, an inclusive Academy or Free School:

Richmond borough primaries - type	% of children eligible for Free School Meals
All primaries	10%
Catholic VA	3%
Church of England VA	8%
Community	12%

Page 2 – Section 2 - number of Catholics

“Catholics make up approximately 14% of the borough’s population”.

This is unsupported by evidence. According to the Catholic Hierarchy website⁴, the Catholic populations in the two Dioceses that cover the borough are: Westminster 10.1% (2010 data),

³ School Level Census issued June 2011

⁴ <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/country/spcgb1.html>

Southwark 9.5% (2004 data, but consistent for 5 years). There is no borough-level data on the Catholic population. **We and Lord True, the Leader of the Council, have been using 10%.**

We assume the 14% is based on the % of primary school places accounted for by Catholic primaries. But this is not a measure of population. It includes both children from other boroughs (12% of primary places borough-wide) and any non-Catholic children attending Catholic primaries. It also includes the many non-religious “Catholic” parents who baptise their children and attend church for a period simply to secure a place at a preferred school. The use of this number would also imply that the addition of a new Catholic primary would, by itself, create a step change in the Catholic population. This is clearly not the case. It cannot be extrapolated to a conclusion about the “borough’s population” as a whole.

It is reasonable to state that 90% of the borough is non-Catholic.

Page 2 – Section 3 - places taken in community schools

“As a result many are taking places in local community schools, adding to the pressure in the area for community places.”

This is an exaggeration. The Richmond Council Cabinet member for Education, Councillor Paul Hodgins has recently (11 Oct) forecast that: *“The Catholic secondary school would free up c. 20 places in community schools in the borough and c. 10 Foundation places at Christ’s [a CofE school].”*

But **even these relatively insignificant figures are likely to be too high.** There is no evidence for the implied claim that all Catholic parents would prefer to send their children to a new Catholic secondary rather than other high quality schools in the borough, which include two Ofsted “outstanding” schools and other schools fast gaining ground.

The borough currently operates a Linked Schools system, giving priority for children from specific primaries applying to linked secondaries. The Catholic primaries are not included in the system with the exception of one school, which took its case for inclusion to the Schools Adjudicator. Some Catholic parents at other schools complain that the Linked School system (which is likely to be dropped) is unfair as they would like their children to go to nearby high performing community schools.

Page 2 – Section 3 – travel

“...local children...have to travel long distances to access a Catholic school”

Many local parents, both Catholic and non-Catholic, would prefer their children’s schools to be nearer. The map shows the existing Catholic secondaries in the area and the borough boundary. **There are 9 Catholic secondaries within a 5 mile radius of the centre of the borough⁵, and 6 less than 3 miles outside the borough boundary (2 less than 1 mile).**

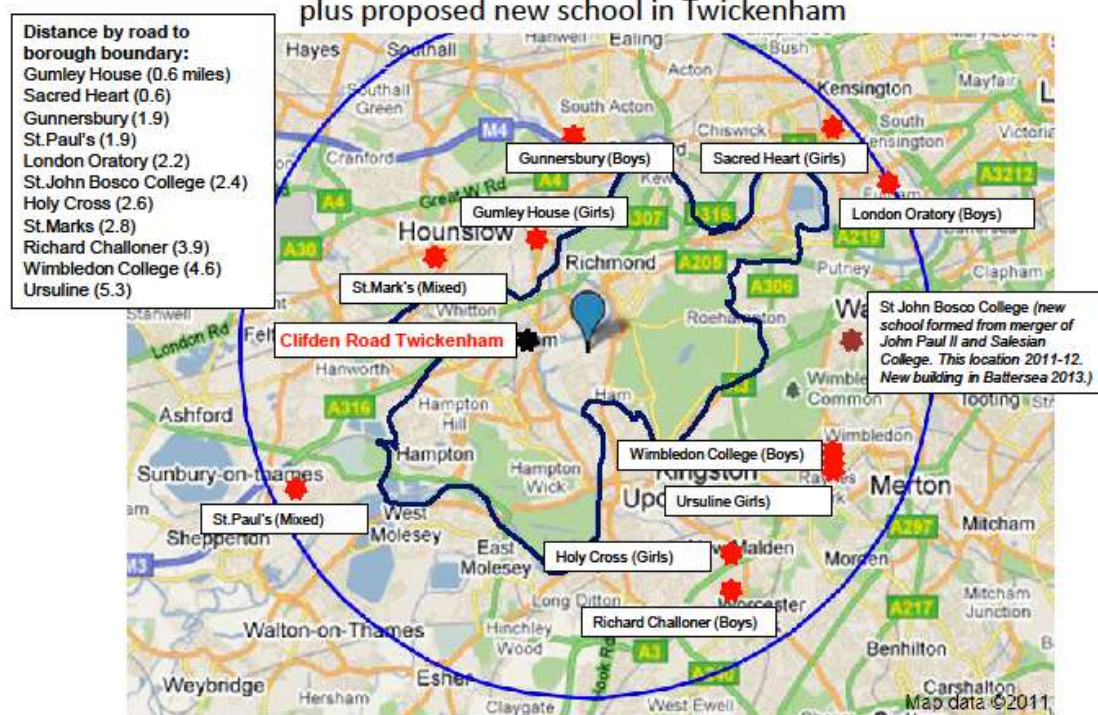
⁵ Excluding St.John Bosco – a new Catholic school, formed from two others that is due for relocation in 2013,

Nevertheless, it may well be the case that some children have long or awkward journeys to a Catholic school. It is inevitable that schools catering for the special requirements of 10% of the population will be more sparsely distributed than inclusive community schools.

But in many cases one of the Catholic secondaries close to the borough borders will be nearer to a child's home than the proposed new school in Twickenham. In fact the distance by road from 4 out of 6 of the borough Catholic primaries to the proposed new school is longer than to the nearest existing Catholic secondary, even allowing for the fact that some of the secondaries are single-sex.

Catholic secondary schools

within 5 mile radius of centre of Richmond borough
plus proposed new school in Twickenham



Page 3 – Section 3 – environmental benefits

“There will be clear environmental benefits in allowing so many more children to attend a secondary school of their parents’ choice closer to their homes.”

The claim of an environmental benefit is unsupported. There is only one school site, and the issue is whether to use it for a Catholic VA school or an inclusive school. The average travel distance for pupils if it becomes a Catholic VA school (drawing on children across the borough and beyond) will by definition be longer than if it is an inclusive Academy (drawing on the full range of local children). There is also no evidence that the average distance to the new school versus journeys to existing Catholic secondaries would in fact be significantly lower (ref above). Hence the net environmental benefit is unknown and unlikely to be significant.

Page 3 – Section 5 – standards

There is no doubt that Diocese schools are generally of good quality. They have no monopoly on that: two of the borough's existing secondaries are "outstanding" according to OFSTED, and the borough's primary schools are excellent across all providers. Whichever provider runs the new school in Clifden Road it should/must be of excellent quality.

But the more emphasis that is placed on the potential excellence of a proposed Catholic secondary on the site, the stronger are the objections to the fact that it will be effectively inaccessible to 90% of the borough's children (see below).

Page 3 – Section 5 – admissions

"The proposed school, whilst giving priority to Catholic children in its oversubscription criteria, will be open to pupils of all denominations and cultural and ethnic backgrounds."

This is highly disingenuous, especially in terms of denomination. The capacity of the proposed school is 150 children per year. The stated intention in setting it up is to "repatriate" the 200 children who currently go to out-of-borough Catholic schools (albeit often nearby). It will give also priority to children of Catholics from other boroughs over local non-Catholics. **No-one has disputed the prediction that the school will fill entirely with children of Catholics.** This must be well-known to the Diocese.

Page 3 – Section 6 – evidence of demand

It is unsurprising that, in an area where there is intense competition for places at good local schools from parents of all backgrounds, and increasing pupil populations across the board, there is a demand from Catholic parents for their own secondary school. **But there is only one site available.**

No analysis is provided of the overall supply/demand picture in the borough for the coming years, and the available data is disputed. The loss of flexibility in the overall mix of schools as a result of introducing a new secondary which will be effectively closed to 90% of the borough's population due to its admissions policy is likely to be a major "regret" for decades to come.

Page 4 – Section 7 – consultation

"Both the Diocese and the Borough have carried out a number of local consultation exercises, all of which have consistently shown widespread support for a new Catholic secondary school."

There has been no consultation whatsoever on whether the only site available in the borough for a new secondary school should be used for the Catholic VA school or an inclusive Academy or Free School. In particular local community and CofE primary schools and parents have not been consulted, yet they will be directly affected. Our campaign has strong support from a number of school governors, including the Chair of Governors of the borough's largest primary school, which is nearby.

The four consultation exercises quoted in the Application date from 2001-2005. Three of them were conducted by the Diocese itself, primarily within the Catholic community. They cannot be considered an adequate guide for the Secretary of State to the views of local schools and people affected or the impact on school capacity and demand in the borough. He is being asked to take a consent decision in 2011 which is likely to have an impact on borough schooling from 2013 and for decades thereafter.

Page 4 – Section 7 – manifesto commitment

“The current Conservative administration was elected on a local manifesto which included a promise “to encourage” a local Catholic secondary school”.

The full manifesto contained 13 pledges on education, of which no.6 was indeed “Work for a Catholic secondary school”. But Number One of the four “key commitments” or pledges on which the Council was elected was **“Consult first, act afterwards”**.

The Council could not have anticipated the level of opposition to the use of this site for a Catholic school, yet has so far not conducted any consultation about the type of school that should be provided there.

Page 4 – Section 7 – political support

“...a debate took place in the April 2011 Council meeting at which both Conservative and Liberal democrat councillors expressed support for this proposal (extract of minutes enclosed)”

This is misleading. The Liberal Democrats on the Council oppose the use of the proposed site for a Catholic school.

“This proposal” was not, of course, the proposal contained in this Application, i.e. to progress towards the establishment of a Catholic VA school on the Clifden Road site - the site did not become available till June. The debate was on a petition stating: *“We the undersigned declare our support for the establishment of a Catholic Secondary School in the London Borough of Richmond and call upon Richmond Councillors, of all political persuasions, and the Diocese authorities, immediately to take all necessary steps to secure this objective.”* There was indeed support from the three speakers in the debate in April for the principle of a Catholic school (no vote was taken). But at the time the Council’s plan was for two new schools, one a community school. And the minutes record no discussion of the priority, timing or type of either school.

Another debate took place in September 2011 on the basis of the RISC petition asking the council *“to ensure that every state-funded school opening in the borough from now on is inclusive, so that no child can be denied a place in a good local school because of the religion or belief of their parents”*. This was after the Council had decided to purchase the Clifden Road site. Again there were three speakers and no vote. The Liberal Democrat Education Spokesman, Councillor Eady, was minuted⁶ as saying: ***“...the priority should be to utilise the Clifden Road site for a community secondary school...”*** None of the speakers responded directly to the petition.

⁶ <http://cabnet.richmond.gov.uk/documents/g2790/Public%20minutes,%20Tuesday,%2013-Sep-2011%2019.00,%20Council.pdf?T=11>

Page 4 – Section 7 – claimed offer of the site

“The Council approached the Diocese of Westminster with the offer of the school site”

As noted above, **there is no record of the Council having made the “key decision” to offer the site to the church** rather than set up a competition. And the consultation that is constitutionally required to precede such a decision has not taken place. The Council now claims that it has not offered the site to the church, and is not answerable for the above statement made by the Diocese.

Page 4 – Section 7 – opposition to the proposals

“Since news of the Council’s proposed acquisition of the site has become public, a group has been formed which opposes in principle schools with a religious character.”

This is untrue in two respects: firstly, Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign (RISC) was launched in April 2011, well before the site was known about, in response to the pro-Catholic school petition presented to the Council and growing opposition expressed in the local press.

Secondly, as we have repeatedly stated, **the campaign is “pro inclusive schools” and not “anti-faith-schools”**. This is the minute⁷ from the full Council debate on 13th September at which we presented our petition:

Mr Roddell [sic] commenced his presentation by stating that the Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign did not oppose the provision of faith based education within the Borough. The Campaign was committed to supporting improvements in quality, choice and provision of education and highlighted that rising pupil numbers indicated that two additional secondary schools would be required by 2015. He explained that the purpose of the Campaign was to promote inclusive admissions policies and fair access to school places for all of the Borough’s children. It was the strong belief of the Campaign that the use of the site procured for a secondary school at Clifden Road should be made available for a community school with an inclusive admissions policy.

The key issue is inclusive admissions. There is no necessary incompatibility between faith schools and inclusive admissions. The latest wave of Free Schools to be announced includes the second Church of England Free School in London (north Ealing) to have fully inclusive admissions⁸.

Page 4 – Section 7 – petitions

“An e-petition started by this group has gathered less support than that set up by parents in favour of the school...”

This is both untrue in terms of the numbers and misleading, as the two petitions are not simple opposites. The RISC petition asks the council on a point of principle *“to ensure that every state-funded school opening in the borough from now on is inclusive, so that no child can be denied a place*

⁷ <http://cabnet.richmond.gov.uk/documents/g2790/Public%20minutes,%20Tuesday,%202013-Sep-2011%2019.00,%20Council.pdf?T=11>

⁸ <http://schools.london.anglican.org/119/north-ealing-church-of-england-academy-necea>

in a good local school because of the religion or belief of their parents.” The other petition referred to in this section of the application asks the council *“to support the creation of a new Catholic Secondary School within the Borough.”*

At the time of writing the RISC petition had gathered 2339 signatures and the other 2243⁹. We have not sought to make this a race: the other petition was started after ours, with heavy backing from the borough’s Catholic church and school networks.

I would be happy to provide additional information or answer any queries if required.

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⁹ www.richmond.gov.uk/home/council_government_and_democracy/petitions/online_petitions/epetitions.htm?mgI=mgEPetitionDisplay.aspx&ID=44&RPID=9090072&HPID=9090072