

**Statement to B&NES Cabinet on Wed 10 April 2013 by Raymond Friel, Executive Headteacher of St. Gregory's Catholic College and St. Mark's Church of England School, Bath, regarding Denominational Transport**

Members of the Cabinet

You have before you this evening a number of options regarding Denominational Transport which are intended to achieve savings in the Council's overall budget. I appreciate the challenge you face and understand that we all have to play our part, but I will argue this evening that removing the subsidy for denominational transport could save very little and could in the end prove to be very costly in political terms.

The community of St. Gregory's school benefits the most from the current policy, with 194 students being transported at a subsidised rate. St. Gregory's was not established as a Bath school but as a school in the Diocese of Clifton, intended to serve a very wide catchment area which covers all of B&NES and beyond. In 2007, when the Council introduced a charging policy for denominational transport, the number of Catholic children attending St. Gregory's fell by 100 in the five years following, because many Catholic families could not afford the transport costs. Because St. Gregory's is an outstanding school with an excellent reputation, these 100 places were filled by children from the Bath area and the school remains oversubscribed. Having spoken to many parents with children at our partner primary schools I have no doubt that there will be a further decrease in the number of Catholic students and a subsequent increase in the number of Bath children if the subsidy is removed altogether. What the Cabinet members need to consider is the impact on other schools in Bath. There are many surplus places in the city and at least three schools operating at well below capacity. If more Bath children are drawn to St. Gregory's, small schools in the city will suffer as a result and we could be looking at a scenario which I know this Cabinet finds unacceptable: the prospect of unplanned and politically unpopular school closure. If you turn St. Gregory's into a Bath school by removing the subsidy, it will place intolerable strain on the secondary school system.

The next point to consider is the extent of actual savings to be made if the subsidy is removed. As we now know from the backing papers to Item 24 on proposals for term dates for 2014/15, there is the very real prospect of a saving in the transport budget of around £130k by determining the same 190 school days for most schools in the Authority. This could easily cover the proposed savings from denominational transport for the next three years. There is also much more work to be done on calculating the cost to the Council of those Catholic families who would send their children to their nearest appropriate school instead of St. Gregory's if the subsidy were removed. I'm not aware that any work has been done to calculate this cost. Many of our current and prospective families live in the villages outside of Bath and would still be beyond the statutory walking distance to their nearest school. The Council would have to pay for this and the subsequent proposed saving would be diminished further.

Another major point to consider is the impact of families from minority ethnic groups. As I have said in public many times, the Polish, Filipino and increasingly Kerala Indian communities are drawn naturally to Catholic schools. We have the highest populations of children from these communities and we are set up to meet their needs with academic and pastoral support. If the subsidy is

removed, many of them could not afford to send their children to St. Gregory's, the school which they consider their natural home. They would then be spread throughout the Authority in schools which, while they would do their utmost to look after them, would simply not be set up in the same way to meet their needs. I am also bound to say that the Equalities Impact Assessment which was published with the agenda for this meeting does little to assure them, other than to say that if the subsidy were to be removed the subsequent published material would be available in various translations. I would respectfully suggest that the Equalities Impact Assessment needs to be re-visited.

In summary, I would urge Cabinet to follow the recommendation of the O&S Panel which met on 28 January and voted almost unanimously not to remove the subsidy. There is an exemplary partnership in this Authority between the Council and faith schools, as witnessed by the significant investment in the new sixth form. I very much hope that partnership continues and you allow our families to access the faith-based education which is so important to them by continuing to support subsidised transport.

Raymond Friel

5 April 2013