

APPENDIX B

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 24TH MARCH 2016 QUESTIONS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

Question to the Chairman of Planning and Licensing Committee, from Councillor Bruce Laughton

Does the Chairman of the Planning and Licensing Committee think it is sensible to split the Rights of Way department, hiving off half to CORMAC whilst retaining control over the legal side of the department?

Response from Councillor John Wilkinson, Chairman of Planning and Licensing Committee

Can I thank Councillor Laughton for his question, particularly given his knowledge and expertise regarding the intricacies of Rights of Way.

I do have some sympathy with the sentiments which, I feel, lie behind his question and I can confirm that the decision to transfer certain functions of the current rights of way team into VIA, was a finely-balanced one.

That this finely-balanced decision came down in the end on the side of splitting the team is based, in the main, on the view that sees Rights of Way as an integral part of the highways system and it was felt that, Area Officers dealing with oversight and maintenance of the network should be part of VIA in order to have that consistency of approach and clarity of purpose for members of the public, that we would all seek.

Councillor Laughton, quite rightly, identifies the legal aspect of the Rights of Way process and thought was given, initially, to transferring the whole team. It was obvious, however, that certain functions had to be retained within the County. It is essential, particularly in the transitional period, that there is close working between all elements of the team. This, of course, will be aided by the fact that officers will be based in the same office, which will mitigate some of the potential problems of division of responsibility.

I want to assure Councillor Laughton that, in order to address the concerns implicit in his question, that regular meetings are planned between the retained client and VIA as part of the contract management approach and the performance of the Rights of Way service will be scrupulously monitored. That this assurance will be backed by both the determination of oversight by the Planning and Licensing Committee itself, plus the welcome intensity of the Laughton eye, should bring comfort to all of us, determined to make the new system effective.

Question to the Chairman of Children and Young People's Committee, from Councillor Ken Rigby

The Government has announced that all schools will be forced to become Academies by 2020 and that the role of 'Parent Governors' is not a necessary one. Does the Chairman of the Children & Young People's Committee agree with me that this may

have a negative impact on education standards in Nottinghamshire, that schools and their governing bodies should have the right to choose based on the knowledge of their own school and communities and does the Chairman agree with me that Parent Governors play an integral and important role in the effective governance of schools?

Response from Councillor John Peck JP, Chairman of Children and Young People's Committee

I would like to thank very much Councillor Rigby for asking this question, giving me the opportunity to address some of the points that he raises.

Firstly, I do not want anything I say to be misinterpreted today as denigrating any Nottinghamshire schools or academies as that certainly is not the case. This local authority enjoys very good relations with all of our schools and we have worked in partnership wherever possible, but have also been prepared to challenge schools where we have felt that they were under performing. However, like many lead members across the country, the Local Government Association, not to mention many Head Teachers, governors and parents I have deep concerns about the Chancellor of Exchequer's announcement, during his ill-fated budget speech, that all remaining maintained schools would be forced, they don't use that word but that's the outcome of that, will be forced willingly or not to become Academies by 2020, or have in place a plan to have in becoming an Academy by 2022 at the latest. And the subsequent white paper, which Nicky Morgan the Secretary of State was actually allowed to announce on her own, contained some proposals that I might broadly agree with in amongst a lot of what I would term apple pie waffle. But what concerns me above all else is the aim to force, not persuade, to force all schools to be Academies. I'm actually perfectly satisfied with the current situation, whereby governing bodies are able to make an informed choice as to the form of governance that they prefer. The White Paper makes it absolutely clear that local authorities will be excluded from any involvement in their local schools, other than three points that are outlined in the paper, and they will be responsible for. As the white paper states first, ensuring every child has a school place. Second, ensuring the needs of vulnerable pupils are met, although I am not quite certain from everything that I have read in the paper exactly how that will pan out and thirdly acting as champions for all parents and families, whatever that may mean. So just those three points, that is the remaining role of local authorities, as mapped out in the White Paper, and the reality is arising from that, that no democratically elected local member will have any say whatsoever in what happens in their local schools. You, won't be sitting on your local schools governing body, even. I guess there are a great many governors sitting here today.

Furthermore, it would appear that the White Paper does not respect the pivotal role played by parents, which Councillor Rigby has referred to in his question and it would appear that they also will have no right to representation on governing bodies at all. The White Paper does say that the Government will actually do more to ensure parents will have more of a significant voice, and it goes on to describe that they are going to set up a parent portal. I am not quite sure how that will increase parent's voice, but it sounds to me like a sort of "mums net" for parents, so that they can chunter away about their local school. But that is not the same as being able to sit on a governing body and hold that school to account and challenge that school and support the school.

All of this is in the name of freeing schools from the stifling control of big bad local authorities and this view, often expounded by a certain kind of media, in my view is a myth. All schools have been virtually independent of local authority control for the past 25 years, and indeed in many ways I would argue and have argued often, that Head Teachers in our maintained schools actually have more independence in many ways, than those that are part of an Academy trust or chain.

In Nottinghamshire almost all of the 45 Secondary schools are now Academies, however of the 280 odd primary schools only around 45 or 15% have converted to Academy status, so the vast majority of schools in Nottinghamshire are not Academies. This is similar to the national picture, where 6 out of 7 primaries are not academies. Why should they be forced into the unknown, when they have consistently performed well? And, in Nottinghamshire our primary schools have consistently performed around or above the national average, in such results at the end of key stage 2 and most of our primary schools are actually rated good or outstanding. I have done a lot of research on this and I can find no evidence that Academisation is a magic bullet and necessarily brings about improvements in standards. Some schools have performed well, when they have converted to an Academy status and some not so well. Some multi-academy trusts are performing well and some not so well. As indeed the Chief Inspector of Schools Michael Wilshaw has drawn attention to recently and indeed turning to our Secondary schools in Nottinghamshire I actually find a rather worrying picture at the moment. GCSE results at the end of Key Stage 4 appear to have steadily declined as more schools have academised. Since 2006 our secondary schools had been improving GCSE results year on year with the support of our excellence school improvement service. However, the Children and Young People's Committee this week considered the performance figures for Nottinghamshire schools and there appears to be a decline, a noticeable decline, in results in the Secondary sector.

There are currently eight publicly funded secondary academies in Nottinghamshire below the Government's floor target. This has risen from four in 2014, and whilst it is the case that outcomes overall have declined between 2011, when there were only 11 secondary academies in the county, compared to 2015 when this had risen to 41 academies and as I say eight now below floor targets and the floor targets are at 40% and the schools targets' should at least achieve 40% in five GCSE's including English and Maths. The situation with A Levels is, if anything, even worse, and this suggests to me that Academisation does not necessarily improve educational outcomes.

You might well say, what are you doing about it then? Well the truth is that both I and the Children and Young People's Committee are powerless to intervene. Academies are the responsibility of the Regional Schools Commissioner, who is an appointed civil servant responsible directly to the Secretary of State. She has written to me refusing to accept the invitation of the Children and Young People's Committee, declining to discuss with us her role and the performance of Nottinghamshire Schools. Furthermore, she has told me to back off trying to meet with heads of underperforming academies, as it's not my business, I paraphrase the letter, but those are quite clearly her sentiments; that it is none of my business nor that of the Children and Young People's Committee.

We will see where all of this goes but at the moment, this is a White Paper, not an Act of Parliament, and we have seen this week with the budget that a policy which seemed good one day can be unceremoniously dropped the next day. There appears to be strong cross party opposition across the country to wholesale forced Academisation. For example, the Conservative Lead Member for Hampshire has expressed outrage, he said and I quote him 'why should our 500 schools, most of which are good or outstanding be forced to put so much time and energy in taking a step into the unknown' and I could say exactly the same in reference to our Nottinghamshire schools, Councillor Rigby. Councillor Roy Perry Conservative Children and Young People's spokesman for the Local Government Association, was extremely angry about this and he said 'the Local Government Association opposes both forced Academisation and the transfer of significant powers relating to education to unelected civil servants, who parents and residents are unable to hold to account to in the ballot box.' Councils are among the country's most effective education leaders with 82% of council maintained schools rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding, that's similar to us in Nottinghamshire. It defies reason that councils have been portrayed as barriers for schools improvement. It is vital we concentrate on the quality of education rather than the legal status of schools. Also there are no proposals to reimburse councils for the significant costs they will face of the conversion of up to 18,000 maintained schools across the country. And, that last point is important because each academy conversion incurs a significant cost to the local authority, particularly if a school has a deficit budget. We often end up picking up the tab, and of course of our legal team will have increased pressures upon them should they be in the position of the conversion of 240 odd schools. As Councillor Owen has said our legal team have been under some pressure this week sorting out the mischief making in our Children and Young People's Committee.

I trust that most Members will agree with me that we should be concentrating on standards in schools and the quality of leadership, teaching and learning, not on changing the badge on the door. Quite frankly, I fail to see how this highly centralised system fits in with all the promises of devolving powers to local communities.

Question to the Chairman of Transport and Highways Committee, from Councillor John Wilmott

At a surgery on Saturday, at the Tesco Superstore, there were numerous complaints by the general public on the standard of workmanship by firms that are doing our pothole repairs in Hucknall. Can I ask the Chairman of Transport and Highways to investigate this accusation and bring back a report to the Transport and Highways Committee at your earliest convenience on the state of the repairs?

Can I also say I shall be doing my own investigation on the same issue?

Response from Councillor Kevin Greaves, Chairman of Transport and Highways Committee

It is concerning to hear that members of the general public have raised complaints about the standards of workmanship of pothole repairs in Hucknall. As Members will recognise, the public highway is constantly subject to wear and tear, and the amount of damage is prone to increase during the winter months. We maintain the public

highway in a safe condition for all users and over the last few years our repair techniques have changed.

One repair treatment that is now frequently used by our highway team to address potholes is the use of a proprietary instant road repair material. This material enables an immediate repair to be carried out, as part of a first time fix where the repair is made at time of inspection. This type of repair is extremely durable, with a very low failure rate and there is little, or no waste. A significant advantage of using this material is that the pothole does not need to be excavated or cut square, and it can be undertaken in all weather conditions. As the defect is not tied to a square or rectangular patch this can give the impression that the workmanship is poor. However, these repairs last longer than conventional treatments and offer a cost effective rapid response to the repair of defects.

Whilst I believe it is the treatment type, not the workmanship of the repair, which has given rise to the concerns in Hucknall, I do recognise that there may be occasions when a highway repair is not satisfactory and in this regard I would welcome the opportunity for any specific examples to be investigated.

At this stage Councillor Wilmott has not approached me about any specific cases, nor has he raised these issues prior to this question. As I have publically stated before in this very Chamber, I am more than willing and in fact invited Councillor John Wilmott to meet with me on any such transport and highways issues. I once again await for Councillor Wilmott to agree a meeting or maybe it will just be like every other time - I will have to wait for another County Council question in this Council Chamber.