

**EXTRAORDINARY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 19 SEPTEMBER 2007
SUMMARY OF STATEMENTS**

RAY GOODING

Ray Gooding, the local County Council member for the area, was deputy cabinet member for Children's Services, but had no direct input into this decision. He spoke as a representative of the local residents. He was in support of the decision to close Wicken House and thought it was in the best interests of Children's Services as a whole. The County Council had looked at the five locations of centres in the county and had reported the recommendations to Cabinet and this had not be called in. It had been debated and approved by Full Council and had been subject to extensive scrutiny. The review had taken into account the needs of the users of the property and it was hoped there would be an improvement in the overall service. The capital from the sale of Wicken House would be ring fenced for children services. The County was now preparing a business case for the future. He was aware that the staff that worked at Wicken House were concerned at how the situation had been handled, but this was an issue between the employees and the staff. He was also aware that local residents used the facility, but hoped that the sale would result in some compensation for the community. The review would establish what was required and then put forward the best package.

Members' Questions

- 1 Councillor Schneider asked how wide the consultation had been before the decision had been taken and whether all the groups that used the centre had been consulted. Ray Gooding replied that the review had taken account of all users of facilities, but Councillor Dean pointed out that in the document to Cabinet, there had been no mention of the adult users or outside organisations.
- 2 Councillor Lemon said that the main reason for the closure appeared to be financial cutbacks and he asked for clarification on this. Ray Gooding said that income was £1.2 million and outgoings were £2.7 million leaving a £6,000 shortfall. Work was also needed to put the building into a useable condition amounting to about £230,000. He said that this would be better spent on other centres. He said that the financial information could be provided, although some figures could not be released due to commercial sensitivity.
- 3 Councillor Dean said that the figure quoted for the annual shortfall was different to that set out in the cabinet papers and asked for clarification of this.
4. Councillor Jones asked for an undertaking that savings would be spent on providing children's facilities. Ray Gooding replied that this was the rationale behind the decision and that the capital funding would be ring fenced.

- 5 Councillor Dean said it appeared that Wicken House had very different facilities to the other sites in the County and asked how these would be absorbed. Ray Gooding replied that the drama and music facilities would be developed in other areas. He said that although Wicken House was a nice place to be, the County had to consider the best use of available resources and most of the facilities at the site could be provided elsewhere.

RENEE JOYCE

Renee Joyce was a teacher in Harlow and had been involved with the gifted and talented programme for the last five years. She took groups of children for residential courses at Wicken House. This was an ideal site, it had a theatre, lecture theatres, beds for 40 children, grounds, play and game facilities, dining and common room. It enabled creative and intellectual activities to be undertaken and there were no other sites in the county that could provide these facilities.

She said that Councillor Gooding was wrong to say there had been no opposition to the closure; she had correspondence from the Liberal and Labour Groups stating their opposition.

The Government had put forward the “every child matters” agenda and required schools to provide courses for gifted and talented children. Wicken House also gave opportunities to disadvantaged children and provided primary school children with a residential experience. She said the other centres in the county must also be expensive to run and questioned the rationale behind the choice of Wicken House. If the facility was closed, there would be a huge gap that could not be filled.

Members’ Questions

Councillor Rolfe asked Renee Joyce to define the uniqueness of Wicken House. She replied that there was no other academic and cultural centre available in the County.

JULIAN WHYBRA

Julian Whybra was a director of GIFT Ltd that had provided courses for gifted children at Wicken House for the last 12 years for 15 weekends and four weeks a year. He said that the centre had gained a national and international reputation. He made the following statement.

I wish to bring to your attention the following regarding (1) the decision made by Essex County Council last week to close Essex Education Department’s Wicken House Residential Study Centre and (2) the letter posted on the Wicken website (www.wickenhouse.com) referring to the Council’s report. The decision is seriously flawed for a number of reasons:-

In the Cabinet report Wicken House is described as an “Outdoor Education”. It is not. It has always been part of the Essex Outdoor, Residential and

Environmental Centres but is not intended as a centre for sailing and mountaineering; it does however offer plenty of outdoor education in its portfolio but it is primarily a residential, environmental and conference centre for youth in line with government expectations that “every primary school child will have a ‘residential’ are not mutually exclusive terms. Essex County Council seems to have confused ‘residential centre’ with ‘outdoor activity centre’ – they are two separate terms. In further arguing that Wicken House should be sold as it cannot deliver the range of outdoor pursuits provided by other residential outdoor centres, the Council has simply rigged the criteria for closing the centre.

The hope that existing users will transfer to other Essex ‘residential’ (ie camping and cabin huts) centres is ludicrous. There are limited workroom/study facilities at such centres and, even if there were equivalent accommodation space, which there is not, on-site safety and security would be a nightmare.

Councillor Chapman has written that “The proceeds from the sale of Wicken will be reinvested in improvements in other centres to provide a much improved experience and ensure that we will have the same number of beds that we do now”. The other centres cannot be raised to the level of service provided by Wicken. It is stated that other centres will be ‘upgraded’ to provide a similar number of beds. First, Maes in Wales is too far away to be of use (especially at primary level); Bradwell’s accommodation is cramped; Danbury’s is essentially a ‘camping’ facility where security is a nightmare. What exactly will be the nature of this ‘upgrade’ be? Secondly, it is not just a question of beds. How will other centres replace the Wicken facility of workrooms/large common rooms/dining room/theatre, lighting box and rehearsal rooms/computing suite/outdoor classrooms/environmental areas/games pitches and courts/nature trail? The Council’s notion of replicating accommodation and facilities at other centres is nothing more than wishful thinking.

Closure would mean immediate reinvestment at huge cost. Stopgap, temporary measures elsewhere would be expensive and involve in the middle term a huge loss. The financial ‘relief’ of Essex County Council through the closure would be cancelled out and outweighed by the financial burden incurred through ‘enhancement’ and ‘transformation’ opportunities that would then have to be created from scratch. Where is the evidence that bringing other centres up to the level of accommodation AND facilities provided by Wicken will not far exceed the cost of the work estimated for Wicken alone.

The Cabinet reports goes on to argue the proposal to maximize the use of outdoor provision within Essex while reducing the number of centres used to deliver services and that this change will reduce net costs and lead the centres to become self-financing by 2010/11. However, this is illogical, given that a review of centres set up by the Council (and cited as background papers in the Cabinet report) found that Wicken House can be revenue neutral within 12 months. Where is the Council’s logic in closing the centre which currently draws the least on the Council’s overall budget and could be self-supporting by as early as 2008?

Neither is their any mention, or taking into account, of the Essex Outdoor and Residential Manager's vision for developing the centres with their own comprehensive and business-like recommendations, nor the fact that Wicken House is the only centre closest to being self-financing and far exceeds the other centres in being profitable.

The Review Panel's report notes that "meeting Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance remains a financial issue for all centres". Although the Cabinet report makes no mention of this issue, it is singled out by Councillor Chapman in her comments on the proposed closure, and given as main reason for it, on the Wicken House website, where she says: "Unfortunately Wicken House is a grade II listed building with very limited Disability Discrimination Act compliance. It is impossible for us to improve the facility to offer the range of outdoor activities that we would like". But his is not so. It is the Essex centre furthest advanced in its disabled access and disabled facilities. The only feature that is missing is a disabled lift. A sum set aside by Essex County Council to complete this last year is still being held by the Council. None of the other centre have Wicken's already existing facilities for the disabled o the cost of upgrading for them will be even greater. From the financial point of view Essex would lose an excellent and well functioning centre, in which the Council very recently itself wanted to invest (in the form of the allocated money for the disabled lift).

Councillor Chapman has written that the cost of running the service on this site has been rising over the years, entirely at the expense of the Essex ratepayer. It is a question of whether Essex ratepayers are willing to fund it - the strength of feeling from the number of people who have protested is clearly on the side of continuing to fund it. She has further written that "Given that Essex has in real terms been losing grant money from the Government to support such services as adult social care and looked after children, we need to examine our costs on services like the outdoor centres to ensure that they are run in the most effective and business-like manner". Indeed, and Essex County Council's own figures show that Wicken is run more effectively and in a more business-like manner than all other centres, so why penalize it?

The Council has further stated that it has conducted consultation over the closure. Wicken is a public facility - where and when has public consultation taken place? The Cabinet report mentions consultation undertaken with schools in a five-line paragraph, with no supporting data or documentation about what information the consultation document actually contained, what questions it asked and what options it gave. Decisions to close the facilities without proper consultation having taken place and full information being presented to the decision takers have been overturned by judicial review in several recent cases. Given this, might I suggest that the Council reflect on whether it has upheld its responsibilities to consult stakeholders and users properly before arriving at its decision?

In the light of the above, I would ask for a review of the closure decision and for Essex County to reconsider its action in the light of a thorough and professionally prepared report, containing all the facts of the case and supplying full legal advice to those charged with taking the decision.

Members' Questions

- 1 Councillor Dean asked about the current disabled facilities at Wicken House. He was advised that there was one twin bedroom downstairs with toilet and shower. None of the other County education centres had these facilities. Also in terms of safety, this was the only centre that had facilities that were appropriate for primary age children.
- 2 Councillor Lemon understood that there was a budget forecast that Wicken House could be self supporting in 2008 and he asked for details of this.

FABIAN BULLEN

Fabian Bullen was the Chairman of Wicken Bonhunt Parish Meeting and he made the following statement.

- (a) *Despite our efforts including intervention by Sir Alan Haselhurst MP in early spring 2007 – no prior efforts were made by the “closure committee” to meet with us to hear our views. In fact, the next we heard was towards to the end of July 2007 and by a chance e-mail from a local resident. This seems like a deliberate “keep it quiet policy – as opposition will spoil our own plans”. In fact the “gagging notices” imposed on employees of Wicken House would support this thinking.*
- (b) *We are concerned about job prospects for those who rely upon Wicken House for employment.*
- (c) *Effect on local businesses and casual workers.*
- (d) *The parkland at Wicken house has been used by some local families as play space for their young children. As well as usage for local Wicken Bonhunt children with local parent organised 5 a side football and village fundraising fetes, etc. To close this will ensure that no such space will exist in Wicken Bonhunt. Ensuring that parents, guardians and fete visitors/organisers will have to drive to another town or village (as public transport is sparse) – this is not good for anyone’s quest to aid reduction in carbon emissions.*
- (e) *A recent huge County investment in facilities for the parkland will become a complete waste of taxpayers money.*
- (f) *Our village will need to find a new polling station in the village – or the carbon emissions point as above gets increased validity.*
- (g) *We also use the Wicken House as a recycling centre for bottles – see (d) and (f) above re carbon emissions.*
- (h) *Wicken Bonhunt has no other village park or village hall – Wicken House has served that purpose for many decades.*

- (i) *Even though your department as already proposed closure and sell off – no approach or dialogue has been made to or with the residents and users of Wicken House as to, firstly the above points, or just as importantly ‘how we see its best future following closure’. As residents we do have a collective voice and opinion and those opinions could disturb, resist or even aid Essex County Council’s hope for this building.*
- (j) *The Schools and Children’s Department seem to have tried to show that only children use this facility – whereas it is common local knowledge that the centre is also used nearly every weekend by adults on learning and interaction courses. In fact we are also advised that the centre is self supporting and we hear fully booked for at least the next 18 months.*
- (k) *In view of the above (especially in (j)) we will need to know very soon as to why another department in Essex could not make good use of the building.*
- (l) *What user survey has Essex County Council carried out to ensure that “beyond all reasonable doubt” the people of Essex and users of Wicken House can identify that Essex County Council is making a sensible closure decision.*
- (m) *If Wicken House is closed and all funding withdrawn then presumably there will no longer be employees at the House and all general upkeep of the building and the grounds will cease. If a purchaser is then sought after they presumably will need the various ‘change of use’ planning permissions. This aspect will take many months as I am sure much delaying tactics will take place by individuals and interested organisations. As the building and grounds during these stages are likely to be no longer in use – this will provide a real security problem to Wicken Bonhunt, perhaps even entice vandalism and certainly create an eyesore.*
- (n) *Some knowledge seems to recollect that Wicken House was sold to Essex County Council by a village person on the basis that it continued to serve the needs of Wicken Bonhunt. This aspect needs to be investigated more closely.*
- (o) *Finally we take great exception to Essex County Council intimating that Uttlesford District Council and its people, via whichever committee it wishes to voice an opinion, should not question the decisions of one department in Essex County Council. If all government moved that way the expansion at Stansted Airport would be a done deal – and it’s not.*

Members’ Questions

- 1 Councillor Dean asked if he could have copies of the correspondence with the County Council.

- 2 Councillor Schneider said that although this was a county facility, the residents of Wicken Bonhunt had been encouraged to use the house and had supported it financially. It appeared that the rug had been pulled from them without consultation. She hoped there would be compensation for the village community resulting from any sale of the premises. .
- 3 Councillor Lemon thought that the County Council should be asked about the financial implications of job losses at the centre. Although this would be drawn from a different budget, it would still be taxpayer's money.
4. Councillor Jones said that all the material facts and full costings should be available for scrutiny. He asked for the costings for all the other centres and a rationale as to why Wicken House had been chosen.

TIM YOUNG

Tim Young made the following statement

I am the parent of a user of the excellent Wicken House Residential Study Centre. I welcome this opportunity afforded by the District Council's Scrutiny Committee to express my concerns about the proposed closure.

The decision made by Essex County Council's Cabinet on 31 July 2007 to close this establishment run by Essex Education Department appears to be seriously flawed for five reasons.

Firstly, the Cabinet report argues that its proposal is to maximise the use of outdoor provision within Essex while reducing the number of centres used to deliver services, and that this change will reduce net costs and lead the centres to become self-financing by 2010/11. However, the decision to close Wicken House is perverse, given that a review of centres set by the Council (and cited as background papers in the Cabinet report) found that Wicken House can be revenue neutral within 12 months. It doesn't seem sensible to close the centre which currently draws the least on the Council's overall budget and could be self supporting by as early as 2008!

Secondly, it is argued that Wicken House should be sold as it cannot deliver the range of outdoor pursuits provided by the other residential outdoor centres, but this simply rigs the criteria for closing a centre. While Wicken House has always been part of the Essex Outdoor, Residential and Environmental Centres, it is not intended as a centre for sailing and mountaineering. It does offer plenty of outdoor education in its portfolio but it is primarily a residential, environmental and conference centre for youth in line with government expectations that "every primary school child will have a residential experience" – indeed it is the only such centre owned by Essex.

Thirdly, although the report adds the proviso that Wicken's residential capacity should be replicated in one or more of the other outdoor centres, this is wishful thinking. There are only limited workroom/study facilities at such

centres. Even if there were equivalent accommodation space, which there is not, on-site safety and security would be extremely problematic.

Fourthly, Councillor Chapman mistakenly singles out disability access as a reason for closing Wicken House, in her comments on the proposed closure on Wicken House's website, where she says; "Unfortunately Wicken House is a grade II listed building with very limited Disability Discrimination Act compliance. It is impossible for us to improve the facility to offer the range of outdoor activities that we would like". **But this is not so.** It is the Essex centre furthest advanced in its disabled access and disabled facilities. The only feature that is missing is a disabled lift. A sum set aside by Essex County Council to complete this last year is still being held by the Council.

Finally, there is the issue of the serious flaws in the way in which Essex County Council carried out consultation on Essex Outdoor Centres, as the "consultation" on the facilities were called. Central government has a Code of Practice for consultations which although not binding on local authorities is recognised by the High Court in judicial review cases as providing benchmarks for assessing whether a consultation has been properly carried out. Decisions to close facilities without proper consultation having taken place and full information being presented to the decision takers have been overturned by judicial review in several recent cases.

The Essex County Council "consultation" is deficient in several respects:

- The 'consultation' was with schools only – other users of the centres, including young people and their parents, and other stakeholders, such as Uttlesford District Council itself, were not consulted.
- The 'consultation' made no mention of the fact that the review of outdoor centres was considering the sale of centres and relocation of some provision, thus denying consultees sufficient information on which to base proper and considered responses.
- Since the 'consultation' only asked six rather general questions in all, none of which asked for schools' opinions as to which of the centres should be closed and provision relocated, it is hard to see how the Cabinet report can credibly claim that "consultation has been carried out regarding the future use of the Outdoor Service and the results have been taken into account in arriving at this proposal [close to Wicken House]".
- The Cabinet report devotes only five lines to the consultation outcomes which are briefly described as schools valuing the centres and appreciating outdoor learning as a significant contribution to the school curriculum, but anticipating that parents might be reluctant to pay increased costs.

The decision by Essex County Council to close Wicken House has been a travesty of proper decision-making and a cruel blow to all the young people who have enjoyed rich and rewarding educational experiences at Wicken House, in its unique atmosphere and surroundings.

In the light of all these flaws and weaknesses, I would urge the Scrutiny Committee to call on Essex County Council to consult properly, commission a

thorough report, containing all the facts of the case and full legal advice and reconsider its decision.

Members' Questions

- 1 The chairman said that he had not seen two of the documents that had been referred to in the statement. He said it was important that all the relevant documents were obtained from Essex County Council.
- 2 Councillor Lemon asked for the report of the Essex Outdoor Review Panel and information relating to the value of assets at the other centres.
- 3 Councillor Jones said that the cabinet document referred to "controllable" revenue budget but it was essential to clarify the actual costs of the closure.

HEATHER SALVIDGE

Heather Salvidge had been involved with Wicken House since 1946 and outlined the various activities that had taken place over the years. She said that it had been a very adaptable facility but if it was sold, the building would be lost forever.

PETER DAMARY HOMAN

The Chairman read the following statement.

We elect people into positions such as MP or County Councillors in the hope that they will represent our views and not follow their own agendas. Part of this bargain is that these people are accountable to the electorate.

By refusing to attend this meeting it would appear that Councillor Chapman believes that accountability does not apply to her. This I feel is insulting to this Council and to the people of Uttlesford. I feel that if she is not prepared to work to the rules she should do the honourable thing and resign.

Councillor Chapman has stated that Wicken House offers nothing unique. Obviously she is not aware that the Essex website states that Wicken House provides a unique residential study and conferencing centre, facilities which the website implies are not provided at the other centres.

How is Wicken House different? I believe Wicken House is different to the other Centres in several ways.

- 1 *Accommodation – this is provided in a substantial building with proper bedrooms with only a small number of people sharing each room. To me this is important when dealing with children who may never have been away from home and are not used to sharing a room. It also makes Wicken more suitable for adult groups, which are useful for*

filling gaps at those times when schools and youth groups would not use it. This provides a valuable source of additional income.

- 2 Groups are relatively small and when schools are in residence, the children, whilst being in a new environment, do not have to cope with mixing with a lot of strangers. I again believe this is important when dealing with young children away from home for the first time. I note from the Essex website that at least one site can accommodate 300 participants which would be quite daunting for a lot of young people.*
- 3 The other centres appear to offer more physical outdoor activities such as canoeing, climbing and sailing, etc. Whilst Wicken offers some outdoor activities this is balanced by more educational activities, which I believe adds to the uniqueness of the centre. This balance must be right because some schools come back year after year. It is undoubtedly a popular place for a whole range of groups.*

Each time a reason is given for closing WH it changes. One statement said that the reason for closure was because it has "a very limited Disability Discrimination Act compliance". I understand that WH does have some disabled accommodation which appears to be more than can be said for the offices of the Essex Special Educational Needs Area Team. Apparently the offices, which are used for meetings with children with disabilities and special needs, are on the second floor and there are no lifts. Certainly not "Disability Discrimination Act compliant". I imagine that if one were to look closely at the other centres some of the physical activities offered would be unsuitable for people with disabilities.

Have any funding provisions been made in the recent past to bring WH up to the required standard?

In another statement the reason for closure is changed to:- WH is not providing the kind of outdoor facilities we want to deliver such as canoeing and sailing and we want to buy more canoes for Bradwell. Surely the facilities provided must take into account the requirements of the users. Not all youngsters want to be in boats!

I believe WH is in fact providing the appropriate service, because schools and other groups return year after year.

Outdoor education is not all about sporting activities it also includes an educational element which WH provides.

Have any of the users of WH been properly consulted about what they want from and get out of WH?

Outdoor Education is supported by Central Government which is investing large sums of money through two funds. There is a total of £115 million available for 2006-2008. These funds are not a replacement for core funding of youth work or investment in facilities, and should be focussed on disadvantage. Essex County Council's allocation from this additional government funding was £2.5 million.

In the House of Lords on Wednesday 21 June 2006, during the second reading of the new Education Bill, Lord Adonis said that “we agree that more needs to be done to ensure that the youth work provision available to young people is sufficient and appropriate.

I will therefore bring forward an amendment to clause 6 to make it explicit that local authorities, in fulfilling the new duty, must ensure access to activities that will promote their personal and social development, which in practice includes youth work”.

In August in The Times Educational Supplement an article was published by Dr Anthony Seldon. This is a small extract from that article:-

“Many adults would cite their trips out as the most memorable part of their entire school experience. These trips should be increased for all children in the future. Academic learning, however, is only a part of what schools should be doing. As important is the development of the whole personality. Children should be afforded opportunities while at school to be challenged and to learn about themselves in testing environments, therefore learning how to manage risk and conquer fear. To my mind, 10% of the school year should be spent on trips out of school, including at least three nights away for seven to eleven year olds”.

I would argue that youth services are not just about the disadvantaged but should also include children who are experiencing their first trip away from home and who are being stretched and helped to realise their potential through appropriate activities as recommended by Dr Seldon.

I believe that WH offers appropriate facilities to all groups and Essex County Council should acknowledge the work done at the centre and should do what is necessary to ensure that WH continued to provide the quality service which it has provided to young people and others over the last 60 years.

I therefore ask this meeting who is better placed to judge which activities meet the above. Is it the youth workers, teachers and users of the services or is it a County Councillor?

JENNY GIBSON

Jenny Gibson was the Education Officer at Saffron Walden Museum. She often met the users at Wicken House and the one characteristic that she noticed was the sheer enjoyment of the children. She could not understand Essex County Council's decision to only fund outdoor centres. Wicken House had so much more. It was a unique location and offered young people the opportunity to stay in a house in the country which inspired imagination. It was a unique facility that offered a very different experience.

SARAH LEWIS

Sarah Lewis was a drama teacher at Tabor Science College in Braintree. She had been taking pupils to Wicken House for the last 10 years. She said the

facility was in an ideal location, it had good security and a great atmosphere. It was very well used, the booking board was always full and to book weekends she had to do so two years in advance. The staff put a tremendous amount of effort into the centre and the children would be very upset at its closure. She had approached the estate agent that would be dealing with the sale of Wicken House and had expressed an interest to buy the property in order to keep it as an educational centre. The estate agent had indicated that the type of buyer was likely to be a business, a hotelier or conference centre. It was likely to be offered for sale at auction to the highest bidder. There had been no consultation with the school, the first information she had was a letter from Wicken House saying that the facility was to be closed.

MEG HOUSE

Meg House was a resident of Newport and a member of the Gifted and Talented Group. She had been going to the residential school for the last three years and also with her primary school. She said that at the house she had met people that had changed her life and had become her best friends. She had been able to do things that she would never have the chance to do elsewhere. The building had a special ambience and atmosphere and pupils had an emotional attachment to the building. She said couldn't understand why she was actually having argue about retaining the facility. She could see no reasons for its closure.

CATHERINE SHEPHERD

Catherine Shepherd was a young person who had attended courses at Wicken House. She said there was nowhere else that had the same facilities, whereas there were many places in the County for outdoor pursuits. She said the whole experience was so valuable and could not be described.

MADELINE NEWMAN

Madeline Newman had worked at the centre and said that it catered for a wide range of children. Courses equipped the children with social skills and a sense of self worth.

MARY ANDERSON

Mary Anderson said that a number of local teenagers were employed at Wicken House which gave them a sense of community and responsibility.

NICK FELTINO

Nick Feltino was the deputy head at a school in Basildon and had been using the facility for the last 20 years. Each year he brought 30 to 40 students to Wicken House as a study centre. It gave his pupils the opportunity to live together and work responsibly. The house had good secure accommodation

and staff that understood children. He said the house was part of the experience and would stay in the memory. He was not convinced that the capital receipts from the sale of the building would go to another Essex facility. He said that ring fenced money often replaced the original funding and no additional benefit was received.

CLOSING COMMENTS

The Chairman thanked all the speakers for their statements. He said he was impressed at the passion and depth of feeling. He was disturbed by some of the comments that had been made and there were a number of issues that would need to be investigated further. He said the future of Wicken House was not in the District Council's hands, but the Committee would examine the decision. He hoped to keep all those who had attended the meeting informed of the progress.