

# WOOLMER GREEN PARISH COUNCIL

## Questions & Comments from Public Meeting 9 February 2011

1. WNAS claim 1,200 people have signed their petition however on the copy in the public domain there are only just over 500 names which include people not living in the area and children. Can WNAS explain the discrepancy?

SWGC: We ask that WNAS summarise their petition responses by Village to show how many signatures they have from Woolmer Green, Knebworth, Datchworth, Oaklands and Codicote plus others.

2. Will the school be a secular or faith school?

SWGC: It isn't clear at this stage, however we believe the school can be whatever WNAS, a private Limited company, decide it will be. It may also be possible for them to change it at a later date. Free Schools are also reportedly able to set their own admissions policy.

3. There is a difference between "need" and "want" that seems to be getting confused. There is an HCC consultation currently taking place on school places. I urge both groups to respond. Have WNAS responded already or will they be responding before the deadline?

SWGC: We agree that this is an issue of 'want' rather than 'need'. Is it a community seeking a school or a school seeking a community? Based on recent statistics almost all Woolmer Green children have been accepted at one of their 3 choices of school. The mainstay of the WNAS "Free School" application is their claim "Knebworth has the biggest allocation problem with 33% not getting ANY of their 3 choices". This "Evidence of Demand" presented to the DfE (Department for Education) in their official stage 2 "Free School" application was based on out of date information at the time of their application and we understand that the most recent figures for 2011 show that indeed 100% of Knebworth children received one of their ranked choices. We agree with Richard Thake (Cabinet Member for Education & Skills at Herts County Council) that there is simply no need for a new school in Knebworth or Woolmer Green. We have not responded to the consultation.

4. Are there circumstances where Welwyn Garden City and Stevenage children could be accepted into the catchment area of the new school?

SWGC: Yes, it is our belief that this could be a distinct possibility. Our research indicates that there simply is not the volume of children from the villages that would choose to populate a new, village based, secondary school. This would lead, we would suggest, to the migration of children from Stevenage, Welwyn Garden City and Hertford to the proposed free school in order to fill the school places.

5. If school places are needed in the area why is Heathcote closing? Have WNAS considered applying to use the Heathcote buildings for their new school?

SWGC: We would encourage WNAS to consider the Heathcote site if it is still available and to look more widely in Stevenage where the need for school places has been confirmed, however we note their official answer to the same question posed at the Knebworth PC meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2010:

*"Heathcote could possibly be a free school. The reason we are not currently pursuing that avenue is that we are hoping to bring the chance of millions of pounds worth of investment to our community, at a time when everything is being cut back – a chance to help our villages with some shared facilities, and jobs would be refreshing. - WNAS "*

In such times of austerity for WNAS to be asking our government to spend taxpayers' money so lavishly when there are cheaper, arguably better and certainly less environmentally damaging alternatives is simply breathtaking. Heathcote is 2.5 miles from the centre of Knebworth and is a fantastic alternative to handing over millions of pounds of tax payers' money to a multinational building firm. This will not be a small school that local tradesmen can build so the carrot of bringing government funding into the local economy is unfortunately a red herring in our opinion.

6. How can children walk or cycle from Datchworth when there is no footpath and the roads are dangerous?

SWGCG: We totally agree with this point, which remains one of our main concerns. WNAS have suggested that they will study the option of a "lit walkway across the fields from Datchworth". We can't see anyone being happy about their children walking across fields in the dark even if there is a lit walkway and neither is it clear where the funding would come from for the walkway.

7. I have lived in Woolmer Green for 30 years and consider it a paradise. I wrote to Mr Wallace who owns the land who replied that he had heard of no proposal to build on his land. Woolmer Green is a very small village and it does not need a swimming pool, theatre, café and other facilities which we can access in nearby towns. The countryside is precious and needed for relaxation. I would prefer to keep the "Green" in Woolmer Green- Why bring the town into the countryside?

SWGCG: We agree with this point.

8. WNAS say that their meeting in Woolmer Green in Sept. 2009 was well attended and warmly received. I find it hard to believe as most people here oppose the idea of a school. What evidence do either side have for popular support for their campaign in Woolmer Green?

SWGCG: The Save Woolmer Green Campaign only began when the potential Woolmer Green sites were made publicly available late in 2010. The support so far against WNAS has been demonstrated by the petition against the school in Woolmer Green which stood at 519 at the time of the meeting on 9 February but at 26 February stands at 769 of which 445 are from Woolmer Green. As we understand it, the Woolmer Green 2009 meeting was held in the smaller room in the Village Hall. We have only been able to find one person that attended but would love to hear from others that did. More importantly the event was advertised by WNAS as

"We Need a School is lobbying for a secondary school on a site which straddles Knebworth and Woolmer Green. You are invited to an open forum"

There was no mention of any other sites at that stage, just the site towards the Knebworth end of the "Monread site" which is owned by Lord Cobbold. Arguably it could be said that what WNAS were 'consulting' on at this stage was a new school in Knebworth NOT Woolmer Green. The Free Schools policy was not launched until 2010 so that element of the WNAS proposal did not exist at the time of the 2009 meeting.

9. I attended a meeting in September 2009 and another in Datchworth in June 2010; since then plans have gone further. Why have WNAS not come back for another meeting to discuss the plans with Woolmer Green residents?

SWGCG: We agree with this point.

10. The campaign has moved on since 2009 and there seems to be a lot of mis-information or no information from the WNAS. The map that showed sites in Woolmer Green was a surprise to everyone. What actions are going to be taken to give residents the correct information?

SWGC: We have provided information to Woolmer Green residents based on the best information available to us and with the best of intentions although appreciating that sometimes it may not be perfect. Where we find errors in information provided we will correct it on our website [www.woolmergreen.org.uk](http://www.woolmergreen.org.uk). The map was provided to Woolmer Green Parish Council in November 2010 by WNAS and the WNAS proposal to the Department for Education confirmed that the preferred location would be 'at the heart of the search area'. The heart of the area was defined to be Woolmer Green in an earlier paragraph. The catch 22 is that it appears WNAS are not prepared to inform local residents of any potential sites, until after they have decided on a site and **concluded** negotiations with the landowner.

11. The old sewage system will need a big new main and the electrics in the village are not adequate; a new sub station will be needed to cope with an 800 children school. Who will pay for upgrading these services in the village?

SWGC: We believe that the cost and inconvenience of upgrading the services forms a strong argument against siting the school in Woolmer Green.

12. You can't destroy a forest to make a zoo. How can creating an artificial landscape be a substitute for natural bio diversity?

SWGC: We agree with this point.

13. In their statement WNAS claim that 75% of children around Nobel school walk or cycle. Would WNAS agree that it is inaccurate to compare the new school in a rural area with Nobel as that is in a dense residential area?

SWGC: We agree with this point.

14. You say 75% of children walk to Nobel School and 75% of children will live within walking distance of the new school. This means that 75% of 75% will walk to school which is 56.25%. Do WNAS agree with this calculation?

SWGC: No response required.

15. It is one thing to build a school but another thing to run it. WNAS say they will select teachers who live near the new school. However, shouldn't they be choosing teachers with the most appropriate qualifications? As a Deputy Head I know they will need professional backing beyond the setting up stage- where are they intending to get this professional advice from?

SWGC: No response required.

16. It is not easy to understand who runs any of the campaign organisations or how to contact them, how to become a member, how they make decisions and if they have a constitution. Are they going to publish this information?

SWGC: It was indeed unfortunate that, due to WNAS being unable to attend the meeting, we were not allowed to give our formal presentation which would have addressed all such issues. We shall however be arranging a new SWG meeting in the Parish Hall at which time all our research, concerns, and other pertinent information will be made public. In the interim, our website is the best place to visit – [www.woolmergreen.org.uk](http://www.woolmergreen.org.uk).

You can also email us at [campaign@woolmergreen.org.uk](mailto:campaign@woolmergreen.org.uk).

17. I have seen a film of Juliet Pomerance standing in a field that is to be the location for the school. Are they going to retract this information?

SWGC: This was the "Monread Site" option that was billed as the site of their school during which time they received 1000 of their 1200 alleged petition signatures.

18. Woolmer Green is at the centre of the area where the school should be located. Are there any other potential sites available, for instance to the North of Knebworth? Why choose Woolmer Green? Could WNAS publish a list of all the sites they have considered and the reasons for accepting or rejecting them as "potential sites?"

SWGC: We agree with this point and in the interests of public consultation WNAS should be required to consult with local residents on all potential locations. However as stated above we believe that it is likely the site will be decided and negotiations with the landowner will be completed before the location of the site is made public. We are concerned that there is little evidence to show that there will be any real public consultation initiated by WNAS other than the statutory formal planning consultation and we seek assurance from our Parish Council that they will carry out a full local consultation if WNAS does not.

19. Why not use Heathcote as the Free School instead of building a new one? This would be a brownfield site and be a better use of money.

SWGC: We would encourage WNAS to consider the Heathcote site if it is still available and to look more widely in Stevenage where the need for school places has been confirmed. Please also see our response to question 5 above.

19. Wouldn't it be cheaper to spend tax payers' money on upgrading Heathcote?

SWGC: As stated in answer to question 5 above, we believe so yes. However WNAS appear to disagree:

*"Heathcote could possibly be a free school. The reason we are not currently pursuing that avenue is that we are hoping to bring the chance of millions of pounds worth of investment to our community, at a time when everything is being cut back – a chance to help our villages with some shared facilities, and jobs would be refreshing. - WNAS "*

20. From a survey conducted by Welwyn Hatfield Council it was found that people do not like coalescence and water, electricity and sewage are big problems in the area. Why has no one from WNAS had the common courtesy to come to Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council about building a school within their jurisdiction?

SWGC: No response required.

21. There have been recent meetings in Knebworth and Datchworth; has there been any communications with the residents of Oaklands and Mardley Heath and what plans are there to consult people living in these areas?

SWGC: We are unaware of any consultation with the residents of Oaklands or Mardley Heath.

23. If the majority of residents in Woolmer Green do not want a school here what will WNAS do?

SWGC: WNAS have stated publicly that if there is strong local opposition to the school they will not go ahead. We must keep them to their word as it is very easy to make promises and then later retract them.

24. If the school goes ahead then there will be less funding and less children going to the surrounding schools. Will this school be detrimental to other schools in the area?

SWGC: We believe it will potentially be detrimental as this new school will be competing directly with existing schools. Existing schools will then potentially have less pupils and hence less funding each year which will possibly lead to making some of them less viable over the coming years.

25. WNAS want a low impact school and suggest a footprint no bigger than Monread Lodge. However, modern planning regulations suggest a much bigger footprint would be needed. How have they arrived at their conclusion?

SWGC: We find it incredible that WNAS state that a modern secondary school for 800-900 pupils can take the same footprint as a single storey care home. Monread Lodge has a capacity for 64 residents. It does not have ample parking for around 100 teachers plus sixth formers, a swimming pool, a library, a school hall, lecture theatres, an adult education centre, a 250 seat theatre, changing rooms, a restaurant, cafe, gym & fitness centre, an indoor sports centre, flood lit football and rugby pitches, netball, tennis, bowls and climbing facilities, "chill out" rooms, caretaker's facilities, staff rooms, on site generators / substations, large kitchen facilities, school bus parking and drop off points not to mention that a school of this size will be a multi storey building (probably 3 or 4 stories high). A school for 700 to 800 pupils needs 6 hectares of playing fields space.

26. Why not ask the children if they want this school or prefer to gain independence?

SWGC: We sincerely believe that it is no bad thing for village children to broaden their horizons and travel a few miles each day to secondary schools in towns. Many in our group did just that.

27. The school will not help children broaden their horizons and make new friends. Is it possible that some children will want to go to schools outside Woolmer Green?

SWGC: This seems quite likely to us. In the last 2 years there have been around 15 children from Woolmer Green moving on to secondary school. If some of them choose to travel to other schools the number of Woolmer Green children in the school would be a very small proportion. However, it may become very difficult for parents to be able to choose schools like Monks Walk for their children if this school goes ahead.

28. My daughter prefers to go to Stevenage and make new friends. Distance is a key part of how school places are allocated and, depending on where the new school is, it may be that people from Codicote will not get in to the new school. Have WNAS made its supporters in Codicote aware of this, and what was the reaction?

SWGC: We ask WNAS: Has there been any consultation with any residents from Codicote and if so what are the results of that consultation?

29. I go to Richard Hale and I couldn't wait to get out of the village and away from my parents. I was excited, it was an adventure, it helps you grow up.

SWGC: No response required.

30. Improving existing schools should be looked at before building new schools. Wouldn't it be better to put the proposed investment into the existing schools in the area?

SWGC: We believe that the funding available should be focussed on providing school places where they are needed and that they are not needed in Woolmer Green. Indeed, Richard Thake, County Councillor with responsibility for Education and Skills said at the meeting that WNAS is quite right – there is a place planning issue but it is not here. He went on to say that where we need the school is not in this area but is in Stevenage.

31. In the end, will the Parish only be able to object to the plans for the school, not the school itself?

SWGC: WNAS state on their website:

*"Q: Will there be a consultation?"*

*A: There most definitely will be. There could be 2 separate ones. First of all, we will work with the DfE to collect local opinion as evidence that there is demand for a local school. Secondly, when planning permission has been requested from the local planning authority they will commission their own independent consultation within the local area."*

It should be noted that WNAS state that there "could be 2 separate ones". They don't say that there WILL be two separate ones. We know that WNAS need to provide robust "evidence of demand" in stage 2 and stage 3 of their "free school" application. Indeed they have already stated in their stage 2 application that there is evidence of demand, so one needs to ask if "We need a school" consider that they have already carried out this "consultation" as they have already submitted their "evidence of demand" to the Department for Education (DfE).

If so, we believe that this may well leave us with simply a planning consultation. As we understand it there are fairly limited grounds for objecting to planning consultations.

Even if WNAS have not completed the first part of the "consultation" we are very worried when looking at the quality and narrowness of "consultations" that have been carried out elsewhere around the country for Free School applications. One such consultation for the West London Free School had just **four** very leading questions. Ref:

<https://www.westlondonfreeschool.co.uk/consultation.html>

Questions received by letter/e-mail:

1. I am neither for or against the school but I do need one point clarified. I have noted that there is a possibility of 300/500 extra cars in use should this proposal go ahead but will the dropping off and collection points for these cars be on the school premises or on the public road?

SWGC: We identified the potential additional traffic dropping off and collecting children if a school was built in Woolmer Green but we demand that WNAS carry out a full study into the traffic issues a new school would cause. Worryingly WNAS state in their response to the 1<sup>st</sup> December meeting in Knebworth:

"The school will provide limited parking places which will actively discourage teachers from driving individual cars to work."

Government recommendations stipulate one parking space per teacher as a minimum. In a school with potentially 100+ teachers, we believe that limiting parking spaces would lead to teachers parking elsewhere on residential roads. Inevitably this will lead to a situation we see in Hatfield where local residents are unable to park outside their own houses which can lead to resident only parking schemes.

2. If the school is to be built in Woolmer Green, is site A (the most Northerly one, between Knebworth and Woolmer Green) the most favoured?

SWGCG: We don't know which is favoured. WNAS have stated that there are other potential sites but that they will not reveal these until the DfE have approved one of them. From our research it would appear that the potential sites have to stay secret until the DfE have concluded their negotiations with the landowner of their chosen site. Therefore it is likely that we will not know which site has been chosen until it is a done deal.

3. Will it be considered that the proposed school has ample parking for parents to drop off and pick up pupils without having to park on the road and also to charge parents for this facility? This would be the only way to encourage parents to get pupils to walk and would provide useful revenue for the proposed school.

SWGCG: If you charge parents to drop their children off / pick them up this will potentially lead to parents parking "around the corner" on residential streets. Unfortunately it is a fact that parents do drive their children to school for various reasons and, as we have highlighted already, the quality of the footpaths and distance between villages makes this very likely in this case. A study was recently carried out by St Michaels School, Woolmer Green that indicated that the children that walk most days or at least one day per week tend only to be those that live within approximately half a mile of the school although we note that these children are younger.

4. Will the Swimming Pool be a definite facility?

SWGCG: At this stage there can be nothing guaranteed and it should be noted that this is the only element of the extensive community facilities promised that is caveated as 'if Government funding permits'. As the WNAS DfE proposal refers to building on 'limited budget' it seems likely that the swimming pool will be removed from the plans.

5. It is 'hearsay' that one of the proposed areas of farmland is owned or associated with a member of the WNAS group. I would like to know if there is any substance to this allegation or not?

SWGCG: No response required.

6. I would like to know where the attendee figures come from with regard to the children that would attend this school. Is there evidence that there are significant pupils within the catchment area to attend such a large school?

SWGCG: Our research indicates that there is not a need for school places in this area and this was confirmed by Richard Thake at the meeting. He indicated that there is a need for more places but this need is in Stevenage and not Woolmer Green or Knebworth.

7. Would parents within the catchment area of this new school be happy to send their children to a "Free School" which is government funded yet may not be required to employ qualified teachers?

SWGCG: No response required.