

29th January 2007 CALCAG MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

Correspondence with Essex County Council

Our long and detailed letter to Mrs Pummell taking up issues raised in her answers to our AGM questions has been answered by Lord Hanningfield. Unfortunately, little was added, the majority of his letter being reiteration of points previously made. A notable assertion, however, was that there had been "formal consultation with staff" that "there have been many opportunities for local people to express their views" and that there was a majority view in favour of what they were doing. It was therefore decided to respond. Vice Chairman Doris Bishop wrote back, challenging the claims of full consultation and support for ECC's proposals and asking for a face-to-face meeting. This was eventually granted (see below).

Meeting at County Hall

A delegation from CALCAG (Chairman, Vice Chairman, Treasurer) met Cllr Mrs Iris Pummell, Mr Bowes and an officer from Asset Management on 22nd January. They put a range of questions to them, including topics such as how the formal consultation worked and what system was used to record feedback, which options were explored for locating the adult education HQ in Colchester and what liaison may be expected in the future. Delegates were disappointed with the meeting, having received the impression that they would not be able to have any detailed discussion of ECC's plans for the future of local adult education.

ECC Area Panel Meeting

CALCAG Trustees attended on 24th January and put forward the following statement and question:

"A delegation from CALCAG had a meeting about the proposed closure and sale of Grey Friars adult college with the portfolio holder and officers at County Hall on Monday.

CALCAG had previously been in partnership with County officers to prepare for upgrades to Grey Friars, including the installation of a lift. This partnership was abandoned by the County Council some time in 2004/5. Delegates asked why they had been excluded from any consultation on the recent decision and were told that this issue is seen as a 'management decision' and as such there is no obligation to formally consult local people.

They also gained the impression that they would not be party to either the research which led to this decision, nor any forum within which they could debate the details and put forward alternative proposals.

They further felt that all the educational, historical, social and environmental advantages of having Grey Friars as the headquarters for local adult education were being ignored in what was primarily an asset management issue.

Continuous centralisation of the management and planning of local adult learning is on the brink of having all educational decisions made by staff based in Chelmsford. To lose our high-profile, centrally-located flagship adult college would be a further blow for Colchester.

Bearing in mind the gravity of this decision, what will our local, elected, Members do to ensure that this proposal does not get manipulated through without a proper democratic engagement?"

When the Chairman asked for a response, no Councillor answered, but the adult education officer, Mr Bowes responded, simply repeating that ECC did indeed have no obligation to consult, that there was the need to reduce the premises to one site only and that Wilson Marriage was the best site in their opinion.

Future CALCAG action

CALCAG will continue to question the manner and validity of the County Council's proposals for adult education in Colchester. We exist to support and advocate for the wisest possible access to education for all adults. We have treated the Grey Friars controversy as an access issue, but will of course continue to support adult education wherever it is based. In the meantime, we have just donated a hoist to assist wheelchair users in their classes and have other bids for help under consideration. We have a website proposal in preparation and will endeavour to regenerate a working relationship with those who manage our local adult education services. We thank our members for their support.

Future Trustees' Meetings

The Trustees' Committee meets again on Wednesday 21st February. In the meantime, please stay in touch if you wish c/o the post and email addresses above.