

**April 2023**

## **Response to the consultation to close Birchwood College**

At a meeting on 28 February 2023, the Governing Body of Birchwood Community High School voted in favour of a proposal to remove the college provision from the school. Further, that the change should be implemented with effect from the new academic year commencing in September 2023 in relation to new admissions. It was agreed that the proposal should be subject to a consultation with all stakeholders in accordance with statutory guidance.

Despite the success of the school, it is a fact that the number of competitive choices in the local area, including in the neighbouring local authority area means that many of the students move elsewhere for post 16 courses. In fact, the majority of students in year 11 prefer to leave the school at age 16 and transfer to colleges. The school college became a Vocational only institution in 2019 due to the falling numbers for A level courses.

As the number of students attending colleges elsewhere is high, they are able to offer a wider variety of courses to choose from than at Birchwood College, and they therefore become the preferred choice of more students.

As the number of students selecting Birchwood College has reduced, the number of courses it has been able to offer has also had to reduce meaning that an increasing number of students will select an alternative provision with a wider offer. Therefore, whilst the total number on roll in years 7 to 11 at the school has been increasing, the number on roll in the sixth form has been steadily reducing and is now very low.

The following table shows how the number on roll at the school in each academic year group has changed over time.

	<b>Year 7</b>	<b>Year 8</b>	<b>Year 9</b>	<b>Year 10</b>	<b>Year 11</b>	<b>Year 12</b>	<b>Year 13</b>
<b>2022/2023</b>	190	188	167	163	138	27	40
<b>2021/2022</b>	183	168	163	135	152	55	37
<b>2020/2021</b>	160	154	142	151	177	58	41
<b>2019/2020</b>	150	134	157	176	158	58	52
<b>2018/2019</b>	128	156	179	156	167	73	75

Projected for 2023/2024 – 12 students in year 12 and 22 students in year 13.

The table overleaf provides details of the destinations of Birchwood Community High School Year 11 students over the last three years after completing their GCSEs. This highlights the fact that the numbers transferring to the school college has been reducing and also the growing popularity of Warrington Vale College (WVR).

2022	Numbers	2021	Numbers	2020	Numbers
Birchwood College	17	Birchwood College	39	Birchwood College	44
Priestley College	54	Priestley College	58	Priestley College	55
WVR College	49	WVR College	35	WVR College	30
Winstanley College	8	Winstanley College	16	Winstanley College	11
Other	17	Other	25	Other	27

Therefore, if students needs can be met because they are able to select from a range of high performing alternative provisions in the area, it can be considered that it is more sensible to use resources to continually improve the quality of provision at 11-16 for the benefit of a very large number of students than trying to maintain a very expensive college for a very small number of students. This is why the Governing Body of Birchwood Community High School has voted in favour of the change.

The consultation period was from 06 March 2023 to 31 March 2023 and on the 06 March 2023 a copy of the consultation document was sent by email to the following stakeholders:

- Pupils and Parents/Carers of Pupils attending BCHS
- Birchwood Community High School Governing Body,
- Birchwood Community High School Staff,
- Warrington Secondary Schools,
- Warrington Primary Schools within the Birchwood area
- Warrington and Vale Royal College
- Priestley College
- Local special schools and AP
- The Local Authority

Stakeholders were advised that they could respond by email to a dedicated email address: collegeconsultation@birchwoodhigh.org

A drop-in session was also arranged for parents and pupils at the school, for 16.00pm on 23 March 2023 where members of the senior leadership team were available to respond to queries and concerns.

### **Electronic Response to Consultation**

Responses to the consultation have been collated. Responses have been received from the following groups:

- Parents: Responses from 5 different parents – 4 objections and 1 in support.

Therefore, of these responses 1 was in favour of the proposal and 4 were objections to the proposal, which is a very low response rate considering the numbers consulted.

Response via Drop-In Session at the School - A total of 2 people (both parents of the same child) attended the drop-in session for parents and pupils held on 23 March. They were one of the electronic response objections too.

Therefore, this does not change the number of objections – it remains at 4 objections and 1 in support.

### **Academic Year 2022-23**

Following an intensive college promotion strategy with year 11, 42 students were recorded as first choice. In the September, this translated as 32 students enrolling into year 12 – 17 of which were from Birchwood's year 11. Then some students dropped out and currently there are 27 students in year 12.

### **Academic Year 2023-2024**

Following an intensive recruitment and promotion initiative to Year 11 and the subsequent college interview process, including personal interviews with the headteacher, 9 students from Year 11 stated that their first choice was Birchwood College. This was in February 2023.

There was a possible further 8 students from 6 other schools in Warrington who had applied and indicated Birchwood as their first choice but had not confirmed this at that point.

That gave indicated numbers for year 12 as 17 at the most in September 2023, though likely less due to courses not being able to run and not all of the external applicants likely to confirm. Previous years indicated that less students enrol than have applied as first choice at this point in the year also.

All of the above information highlights the fact that Birchwood College is not the first choice for the vast majority of students at the school. Despite the school's attempts to retain students, many decide to go elsewhere for their post 16 experience and this makes it difficult to justify continued expenditure on courses when the take-up is low. As indicated previously, eventually the numbers have declined to a level where the provision is not offering value for money and for some courses does not provide a quality learning experience.

A number of issues were identified in the responses to the consultation and these are set out below together with a comment on each issue.

**Issue:** *The college offers courses that cannot be studied in other colleges (1 objection – parent 1).*

**Comment:** The numbers signed up for next academic year were so small that only 3 of the courses on offer would have actually have been able to run, and that would have been with extremely low numbers. Other colleges offer the subjects offered at Birchwood, for example, Barrow Hall College is a small college in Warrington that offers vocational pathways, academic pathways and a mixture of vocational and academic pathways. They offer the full subject range that Birchwood College currently does, and more.

**Issue:** *A small sixth form is the right environment for those children that struggle to cope in large colleges, specifically students who have SEND (3 objections from parents across 3 year groups – parent 1, parent 2 and parent 3).*

**Comment:** There are other relatively small sixth forms at other schools in the Warrington area for students that would prefer a school sixth form (including Barrow Hall and UTC). Therefore, the current organisation across Warrington offers a good variety of choices for students. However, individual school governing bodies need to achieve an appropriate balance between meeting the preferences of individual students and effective use of resources provided for the whole school community.

**Issue:** *The announcement of the college closure is short notice for the students involved (2 objections – parent 1 and parent 4).*

**Comment:** In order to make the decision on whether the college should close, it was important to see how many students applied with Birchwood College as their first choice. At the time of the consultation, there were only 9 confirmed applications as first choice for next year, and of the courses picked, 10 of them would not have been able to run as they only had 3 or less students signed up for them. That meant of the 9 applications, 5 of them would not be able to do the courses they had picked. To continue to run the college on these numbers next year would mean the main school subsidising the provision by approximately £200,000+. It would also not offer the students a full post-16 provision with so few numbers in their year group.

**Issue:** *The college could be promoted more to increase numbers (1 objection – parent 1).*

**Comment:** The school has invested heavily in the promotion of the college over the last few years. This has included increased management positions in order to promote and recruit students from other schools. The team have delivered sessions in schools across Warrington, delivered assemblies and attended open evenings at the schools too. More has been done within the main school in creating opportunities to see the college and have assemblies, taster days and student experiences to promote recruitment. In spite of everyone doing more than ever, the numbers are continuing to drop significantly in the college.

The outcome of the consultation is that a small number of issues have been identified and above with a comment on each issue. However, given the number of stakeholders consulted, the level of response has been extremely low. Of those responses, 4 were objections and 1 was in support of the proposal.

The reason that the Governing Body decided to request the change was that the number of students choosing to study at Birchwood College is low and, given the amount of funding received for that number of pupils and the associated costs involved, maintaining a sixth form for this number of students is not a cost-effective use of resources. Further that the funding could be more effectively used for the benefit of 11-16 education and support the school in its ambition to move from good to outstanding.

Given that the number of students wishing to attend the provision is low and that the education needs of these students can be met by the alternative provisions in the area, it is suggested that the issues identified do not justify retention of the college.

A full business case, including the objections and responses from the consultation, has now been submitted to the Department for Education.

Best wishes and take care,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'E Mills'.

Emma Mills  
Headteacher