

Marshall Walker

WOCAMP remarks to TVPS Board 17 September 2009

Good afternoon, I am Marshall Walker: a resident of Barrett Street and a Wocamper some of you have met before. Thank you for receiving me this afternoon, but I am really only here as nuncio to our new chair. Tina Lees, who addressed this board last time, has been succeeded by Rosemary Preston, who sends her regards, and her apologies that a long-standing previous commitment prevents her from appearing before you in person.

Relatively recent events have overtaken both TVPS and Wocamp regarding Trajan House as a proposed site, changing the landscape entirely. Wocampers listened with profound regret recently when they heard that there are staffers of TVPS who felt personally offended in some way by our 'single-issue' campaign. Under no circumstances did the residents of West Oxford, or the Wocampers who spoke on their behalf, mean any offence to workers of the services. Please permit me to state, not for the first time but repeated for the sake of absolute clarity, that the residents of West Oxford do indeed support the work of the probation services.


I am happy to make these remarks to the assembled board in this venue, more conducive to precision and rationality of expression than discourse carried out in the public media.

The media is adroit at painting a 'single-issue' campaign in a harsher light based on redacted quotes and comments, or pictures often staged by press photographers themselves. But the general public do have issues of concern regarding the stratum of society that make up the core of the clients of your service. That does not make them probationer-phobes. This is true too among educated citizens, or formerly ignorant citizens made more aware of just what exactly the functions of the probations services are. Not only the board of Thames Valley, but other Probation Services as well, must take this truth on board, and further should note the strength of public feeling, and the power of resources available for marshalling even in a small, not overly affluent community.

These aspects helped form the opinion of Aileen Murphie of the National Audit Office who, in a letter to us on 18 August, and no doubt brought to your attention, expressed the view that consideration of the views of and likely impacts on local residents would have been reasonable to take into consideration in any decision making process on the siting of a new centre.

We understand well, and hear oft-repeated that the Services are under no statutory requirement to consult with the public in cases of this kind, but our experiences have demonstrated not only to you and me, but to the NAO, and no doubt beyond, that 'consultation encourages openness, transparency and community 'buy-in' and risks may materialise from failure to engage with the local community at an early stage.'

Thus, although the landscape of negotiation has changed in regard to Trajan House, the residents of West Oxford in its customary understanding as comprising more than merely



Mill Street, expect that the same pledges of communication and information that were hard won for our portion of the community will further be honoured with us and all our neighbours, especially, as we have understood, rather disappointingly, from that blunt instrument the media, that other sites in West Oxford are still under consideration by this board.

In our more reasoned discussions with the board as a whole, and at times one-to-one, Wocampers have outlined why we feel strongly that the Botley Road corridor does not make the best sense for the siting of the services. We rose to the challenge of functioning quite as professional property agents to assist in identifying many sites that we argued dispassionately and unequivocally functioned more effectively for the good of the services in the centre of town. Should the decision fall outside of West Oxford, we understand this is beyond our remit. But should a location be found outside the centre of town affecting some other community, we take heart in Ms Murphie's suggestion to yourselves 'that it is in the public interest and in the interests of good value for money to be as open as possible with the local community about the siting of TVPS's new office...', understanding that to mean any affected residents may expect reasonable notice, and engagement about issues of concern and worry to them.

Happily, we may now both move forward and leave any confrontational roles behind us. But around the Wocamp fire we look forward to hearing more from you as we follow the progress to an improved and more rational probation service with interest.

Thank you very much for your time and careful attention today.