

## **Whitgiftian Association Chairman's Report: December 2019**

As I think most of you will be aware, the Whitgiftian Association stands at a crossroads.

What is proposed, indeed has now been formally set out in writing by the HeadMaster to current parents, is a true realignment of the School's relationship with its alumni. A new alumni office is to be set up, based at and professionally administered by the School. All past and present schoolboys will be considered alumni for this purpose and such services as the office does provide will be free to all enjoying this status. I believe the school is genuinely committed to creating a thriving network of OWs capable of offering support and advice to each other, facilitating the organisation of reunions, strengthening the bonds between the School and its alumni and they with each other, as well as increasing efficiency and effectiveness of fundraising for bursaries.

This is consistent with the Vision that I set out for the WA at a special members' meeting in May. It was pleasing to see every seat around the Founders Room table taken, albeit that the 30 old boys in the room represented just a small fraction (maybe 0.3%) of the total number of OWs around the world. I received a good deal of positive feedback and a number of very constructive comments, for which I was most grateful. My view and that of the wider WA Committee was that there was broad support in the room for the Vision and a wide acceptance of the need to evolve.

The overall direction of travel remains consistent with best-in-class alumni organisations in both the school and university sectors. Having examined many of these organisations I have no doubt that change is required.

Clearly, the School's announcement calls into question the purpose and long term viability of the WA. It is right that this debate occurs and that all members feel free to express a considered view. The Committee is absolutely committed to defending the interests of its members and to ensuring that the WA remains administered appropriately in accordance with its Constitution. For the avoidance of doubt, in financial terms there is no need for swift decisions to be made in this regard; the WA is in a robust financial position. In any event, no strategic decisions will be taken without canvassing the views of members.

While there is broad acceptance of the need for change, these reforms have become entangled with the future of our Croham Road clubhouse. It is an emotive issue for some and it is good that people feel passionately about the facility. I, like many OWs, have spent many happy hours both on the playing fields and in the bar. I and the WA Committee recognise the contribution that so many members (and sports club representatives) have and continue to make in keeping the facility in functional order.

For most of us, Croham Road is and should remain the spiritual home for all OWs.

However, in truth the clubhouse is ageing and dilapidated. It requires significant maintenance. These costs – running in the tens of thousands each year - have invariably fallen to the WA despite structural changes several years ago that were designed to help Whitgift Sports Club run on a standalone basis and to relieve the WA of that burden over the medium term.

The ownership structure of Croham Road is both simple and complex at the same time. However, it is ultimately the Whitgiftian Association that owns it and which is responsible for ensuring its long-term future.

The WA Committee has, therefore, been exploring ways to best do this and – most importantly – ensure that we protect the interests and benefits enjoyed by current and future OWs. This has been paramount and clearly expressed as we have discussed the future of the clubhouse – and remains so. There are long-standing covenants in place which we value highly and, however we decide to progress, these covenants must and will be respected.

Reality must also play a part.

Our good relationship with the School in recent years has seen the School's grounds staff take on responsibility for pitch maintenance. They are in impeccable condition – the best I have ever seen. It is an example of how a partnership can work in the best interests of both parties.

We also know that the school is keen to utilise the grounds and facility much more during the week, at times when it would otherwise be empty.

The School is keen to invest significant funds in the clubhouse over the long term, but we can't expect something for nothing. What the Committee is now seeking to investigate is a framework that might allow such an investment to be made. We think it likely that the School would expect certain assurances as to the use by, and availability of the club house for School and/or local community outreach purposes. On our side, we would seek to ensure that any such assurances are consistent with the rights and privileges that members (in particular members who are regular users of the facility on a sporting or social basis) enjoy. A framework such as this will need careful drafting and consideration before being put to members.

For the avoidance of doubt, it has never been the intention of this Committee to simply hand over Croham Road to the School. It is not going to happen. Equally, we can and must find a way to work together to ensure that the future of Croham Road is secured for the benefit of the wider Whitgift and Croydon communities.

The WA will not make a recommendation in haste. This needs proper review and discussion. It is recognised that there may be other, possibly better, approaches to consider and the WA Committee recognises that it will be incumbent upon it to review properly and transparently any proposal which is accurately costed and consistent with the WA's Constitution. No decision can or could be taken without the support of the membership.

However, the opportunity to work more closely with the school is an opportunity that should not be dismissed out of hand or clouded by any short-term or personal issues or any one interest group.

I would encourage the Committee and members to be open to detailed discussions with the School with a view to finding a solution that might be acceptable to the vast majority of OWs.

Sadly, after three years as Chairman of the WA and five years on the committee, I have concluded that it is time for new leadership. I have informed the committee that my work commitments over

the next years are likely to increase significantly, particularly on the international front, and so I have regretfully decided to stand down from all my WA and OW positions.

I would like to thank all WA Committee members – past and present – for their support, advice and guidance. Committee discussions have always been lively and, although discussion has often been robust, it has always been with the aim of ensuring the best possible future for the WA and all OWs.

I encourage all WA members and Old Whitgiftians to look beyond the short term and ensure that a holistic solution is found to the current challenges.

Jonathan Bunn (1980-88)

WA Chairman