

# Churchill Academy & Sixth Form

Churchill Green, Churchill, North Somerset, BS25 5QN

Our Ref: BW/SH

2<sup>nd</sup> December 2011

Dear Year 11 Parents

## Re: Year 11 Last Day & Ball

It has obviously come to my attention that there are a number of parents concerned about the timing of the Year 11 Ball. I attach to this letter a breakdown of our rationale for why we persist with such timing. I hope you would expect of me and the staff at Churchill to undertake an evaluation of such an event. We do - and informal feedback is very positive.

I should declare my own biases here; unlike many people who have a view on these matters, I have lived through alternative arrangements at other schools and in other circumstances. There are 'downsides' to alternative arrangements – a dislocated Year 11 'last day' when those with little investment in what comes next at the school behave in an unacceptable and somewhat predatory manner souring the occasion; a non-contextualised Ball, a valuable rite of passage, that has less substance and becomes a 'show'. I was genuinely delighted with what I found at Churchill: a real tradition; a tradition that worked; a tradition which allowed a positive and enjoyable experience appropriate to our Year 11, 16 year old students that finished one phase and led to another. Churchill has had no serious behaviour or associated issues on the Year 11 'last day' nor at the Ball. As a member of staff, I enjoy the day and am uplifted by the mixture of euphoria, excitement, reflection, nostalgia and 'party' enjoyed by us all. It is not only the students who mix true, genuine happiness with emotional, reflective tears – we are, as they say, all human. It is a buoyant start to the exam period.

One of the issues that parents have raised is the difference between the Churchill tradition and that of other schools. Yes it is – but this is not laziness or inertia; we really do believe such differences are beneficial; why should we change just because other schools do things differently? There are negative aspects of the way other schools do this (eg. Backwell Year 11 Leavers' Ball, which is quoted to me regularly). I should not talk of other schools but often these events are actually very sterile – the truth is that very few staff attend and only a proportion of the year group actually turn up. It is not the School's Ball, just a Ball. I've often spoken to other Heads about the pros and cons – and they do exist – of various formats and venues and I am occasionally really pleased when I compare the experience of other schools to that of Churchill. All scenarios work, of course; this is about which works best.

One of the supposedly decisive factors parents have cited is that other schools have better academic results as a result of the timing of the Ball. Whereas I fully understand parents' concerns, there is no demonstrable correlation – results don't vary because of one single factor. In terms of GCSE results, we have driven up results year on year – the 'old' 5+ A\*-C measure has risen and the best ever – 84% - last year reflected the success we have enjoyed over the entire spectrum of abilities. We expected similar results to other schools (eg. Backwell) last year and all indicators would have led us to this expectation. It didn't happen for a variety of reasons (and we have shared our analysis in detail with the governors) but the impact of the Year 11 'last day' and Ball in 2010 had no apparent impact as it had none in previous years. I would urge people to ask parents of students who have lived through this already – students have not 'suffered' and certainly not for one event, one day, one Ball.

I accept parents will – indeed, should – have opinions on various matters. However, I really don't believe current views on this matter, however reasonably and constructively expressed, are actually reflective of the facts nor conversant with other perspectives and experiences.

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I therefore confirm we remain committed to the idea of having a truly positive 'last day' experience before exams and a Ball that acts as part of this, as opposed to a dislocated experience for our students. The last years have required the accommodation of some exams in the morning of Year 11's last day. In these years we have successfully managed this experience and we are sure this would have been right for our current Year 11 also.

However, for the first time in our history, we have encountered a truly intractable issue; an afternoon exam on the planned day. We have only had this confirmed very recently and this has led to a reappraisal of our planned arrangements for the Year 11 Ball in 2012.

Therefore, we have considered our options. They are three:

1. Carry on regardless; this is the least best option considering the impact on the students involved.
2. Move to the period after the exams; not our best option in my opinion but, as importantly, we would be restricted in our choice of venue and timing: we would be in the 'frock & tux' hire / limo hire prime time as well as rearranging ourselves in school if, as I hope, we are to sustain our in-house traditions. This arrangement is dislocated from the end of 'Year 11' and is unlikely to attract either the full range of students or the support of staff. If we changed completely to another venue, the price suddenly increases dramatically.
3. Bring the arrangement forward to Friday, 11<sup>th</sup> May (not 18<sup>th</sup> May):
  - This is now our proposal.
  - This sustains our tradition.
  - This is in a week without exams.
  - Although one week earlier in terms of exam preparation, we'd continue with Year 11 lessons for those who choose to come in.

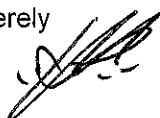
I have discussed this with my senior colleagues, informed the staff more generally and talked with some students. I have also explained the situation to all Year 11 students.

I can only apologise for any inconvenience caused by this change of date but I'm sure you will appreciate this has been forced upon us by circumstances beyond our control. I hope also you will appreciate the very good reasons we have tried to sustain the essence of something pretty unique which is better by far than any of its pale imitators.

To be clear, the current Year 11 students' last day and Year 11 Leavers' Ball will be:

**Friday, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2012.**

Yours sincerely



**Dr Barry Wratten**  
**Headteacher**

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**RATIONALE FOR YEAR 11 BALL NEAR BEGINNING OF THE EXAM PERIOD**

**1. BACKGROUND:**

- a. Churchill was probably the first local school to institute a Year 11 Ball – now many years ago.
- b. It has been at or near the beginning of the exam period since then.
- c. Over the years, the exam timetable has expanded; it can only expand ‘earlier’ – ie. into May – as the results deadline cannot go later.
- d. Over the past few years, this schedule-creep has impacted on the timing of the Year 11 Ball.
- e. Each year, an evaluation is carried out with a series of options (eg after Year 11 GCSEs have finished; last day before half-term, etc) – for the reasons below, we have stuck to the calendarised date.
- f. Pressure has been put on schools to abandon study leave altogether or to make it begin as late as possible.
- g. Pressure by government and the Local Authority to drive up attendance figures (drive down absence) means relatively little flexibility when study leave could begin.

**2. EXPERIENCE SO FAR:**

- a. Overwhelmingly positive:
  - i. Year 11’s last day is a mixture of reflection and anticipation.
  - ii. The ‘whole day’ experience keeps students in a very up-beat mood.
  - iii. The use of the school as a venue works well and is highly appreciated by students.
  - iv. Throughout the day – and especially at the end of the Ball – students’ feedback is positive and characteristically grateful.
- b. Because Churchill is out of step with other schools does not make it wrong – it is unique.

**3. RATIONALE:**

- a. The majority of Year 11 return to Churchill’s Sixth Form.
- b. The ‘last day’ and Year 11 ball are rites of passage for the ending of their compulsory school years, not their association with Churchill.
- c. [At the end of the exam period, two Sixth Form induction days are held – these provide a new rite of passage on these 16 year olds’ educational journeys].
- d. The timing of the Year 11s’ last day marks a beginning of the main exam period – launched in a celebratory way, not in an ominous way.
- e. The experience of the Year 11s’ last day remains an up-beat topic of conversation during the exam period, lightening the mood of a potentially stressful time.
- f. Having the first few exams prior to ‘last day’ has not seemed adverse [nb. students with an exam on the actual last day are not best served; however, they appear to have accepted this in the past]; we have been able to give lead lectures and reminders and keep the atmosphere calm – we even give all students a bottle of water for their first exam.
- g. The usual pattern (except for some practical exams) is for all students to do two exams in the week of the Ball, although some will do more; all other exams will be after this.
- h. We remain committed to keeping the Year 11s’ last day experience ‘in house’; we see few advantages of going for example, to a hotel:
  - i. We are able to manage the process more effectively.
  - ii. We get more staff volunteering to participate.

- iii. We understand the logistics (eg drop-offs from limos etc).
  - iv. Catering can be relatively cheap – last year’s ticket price was £15 per head (and bespoke to student requests which were canvassed).
  - v. ‘Control’ of the site is in our hands – we know the nooks and crannies and the points of ingress.
  - vi. The message about alcohol – ie. ‘none’, it’s not necessary, parties (if required) after, school event/schools site – is generally persuasive.
  - vii. We can engineer some flexibility – students inside/outside, use of Sixth Form Centre.
  - viii. The students are genuinely amazed at the transformation of ‘their Hall’ into the Ball venue.
  - ix. It is their Ball – typically Churchill.
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- i. The inclusion of virtually all students from the cohort in the ‘last day’ experience is genuinely touching – these students have been together at least 5 years, some for 12 or more; post-exams period ‘last days’ inevitably reduce the number participating.
  - j. Inclusion is also strengthened by the relatively low cost of the event itself [parents already pay enough for frocks, hair, shoes, transport etc].
  - k. [Last day before the ‘half term’ break would be very difficult; the event requires a large presence of staff; many staff will be heading off for the break and many will be reluctant to commit the very last Friday night before the break to a school function].

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

- a. There are pros and cons to all arrangements.
- b. Churchill’s Year 11 ‘last day’ experience has far more pros than cons.
- c. Discussions with other Heads reveal the same debates about their Year 11 ‘last day’ and often an appreciation that I am always able to talk so fulsomely of our experience here.
- d. Detailed analysis of examination results would not lead us to believe there is any significant detriment from these arrangements.
- e. The beginning of the much heralded and much anticipated exam period is definitely lightened by an always enjoyable and often effervescent day.
- f. I am not averse to change, but here is one example of something not broken.

**Barry Wratten**  
**November 2011**