

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Monday October 12 2009  
at 7.00 pm at East Dulwich Community Centre, 46-64 Darrell Road, East Dulwich,  
London SE22 9NL

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**PRESENT:** Councillor Fiona Colley (Chair)  
Councillor Jane Salmon  
Councillor James Barber  
Councillor Toby Eckersley  
Councillor John Friary  
Councillor Barrie Hargrove  
Councillor Richard Thomas  
Councillor Veronica Ward  
Councillor Lorraine Zuleta

**EDUCATION REPRESENTATIVES:** Colin Elliott, Parent Governor

**OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT:** Councillor Aubyn Graham  
Councillor Robert Smeath  
Councillor Nick Stanton

**OFFICER SUPPORT:** Pauline Armour, Assistant Director of Access & Inclusion, Children's Services  
Romi Bowen, Strategic Director of Children's Services  
Shelley Burke, Head of Overview & Scrutiny  
Doreen Forrester-Brown, Legal Services  
Iain Johncock, Strategy Manager, Children's Services  
Terry Parkin, Deputy Director Children's Services  
Peter Roberts, Scrutiny Project Manager

**ALSO PRESENT:** Kemi Adegoke, Dulwich & West Norwood Conservatives  
Alastair Bowman, Peckham Rye Liberal Democrats  
Robin Bruce, Parent  
Jenny Clover, South London Press  
Debra Davies, Governor, Dulwich Village Infants School  
Edward Dunphy, Headteacher, St James the Great RC Primary School  
Laurie Eggleston, Peckham Rye Liberal Democrats  
Oliver Kempton, East Dulwich Labour Party

Jane McDonald, Headteacher, Bessemer Grange Primary School  
Kerry Muraszko, Chair of Governors, Heber Primary School  
Shirley Patterson, Headteacher, Goodrich Community Primary School  
Oliver Pugh, Southwark News  
Rosie Shimell, Southwark Liberal Democrats  
Julia Taylor, Parent

## **1. APOLOGIES**

- 1.1 Apologies for lateness were received from Councillors John Friary and Lorraine Zuleta and, for absence, from Councillor Adedokun Lasaki.

## **2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT**

- 2.1 There were no late items of business.

## **3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS**

- 3.1 Councillors Toby Eckersley, Richard Thomas and Veronica Ward declared non-prejudicial interests:
- Councillor Toby Eckersley, governor of The Charter School
  - Councillor Richard Thomas, parent of pre school-age children living in East Dulwich
  - Councillor Veronica Ward, governor at Dulwich Wood Children's Centre and grandmother of young child living in East Dulwich

## **4. MINUTES**

- 4.1 The minutes of the meeting held on September 14 2009 were deferred to the next meeting of the committee.

## **5. PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES IN DULWICH AND EAST DULWICH**

- 5.1 Councillors Aubyn Graham and Robert Smeath expressed concern over the treatment of parents and the resourcing of the admissions team. The two Peckham Rye ward members were concerned that next year there would be a repetition of numbers of parents not being clear about whether they had a place for their child and that this would be exacerbated by allocation of places being finalised at a later date. The anxieties of parents needed to be addressed promptly and sympathetically and government guidelines in respect of the two mile radius from application address needed to be challenged.

- 5.2 A local parent was of the view that information about the admissions process and schools was distributed in a piecemeal way and did not help parents to understand the process or what was required of them.
- 5.3 The leader of the council outlined his understanding of this year's admissions. At the close of the first round there were around twenty-four East Dulwich parents who had registered their preferences for the same five or six schools but had not been allocated a place in any. All had been offered places within the national guidance of two miles from application address but not in any of their preferred schools. In some cases the children would never have got into the school in question because of the small catchment area. As parents with multiple offers began to accept one offer and give up their other offers this freed up places within the system and the original parents were contacted. Subsequently, in June, there was a whole tranche of late applications.
- 5.4 The deputy director, children's services, gave a presentation setting out the context of the admissions process including the GLA roll projections and increased pressure for primary school places across London. He reported key facts about Southwark primary schools and changing trends locally and explained national guidance relating to admissions and Southwark's own aims. The deputy director emphasised that in the 2009 admissions round only eight complaints were ongoing and only eight out of one hundred and twenty appeals had been successful to date (the majority of which related to parents who had failed to apply on time for a sibling place).

#### **Proposals to increase school places for this year**

- 5.5 The deputy director reported that the most popular schools in the area were oversubscribed by 5:1 and that the late applications had placed a huge strain on the system. In response, forty-five additional places had been opened at short notice at Goodrich and Lyndhurst primary schools (and up to a further thirty places at Crampton in the north of the borough).
- 5.6 The deputy director drew attention to the pressure on reception classes across London and elsewhere in the country. Lambeth and Lewisham had each added five forms of entry (one form of entry being equivalent to thirty places) and Richmond seven forms of entry. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) had invited bids for £200 million of new capital funds to provide additional places in areas of need. The committee was concerned that the bar for funding was set too high, meaning that many authorities did not appear to qualify even though their need to add places was very clear. The deputy director explained that, as a result of pressure from these authorities, the original bid round had been withdrawn and that a revised process was awaited.

#### **Primary schools projections and proposals for future years**

- 5.7 The deputy director, children's services, explained that primary school projections are provided by the Greater London Authority (GLA) on an agency basis using school rolls supplied by the participating authorities. These forecasts are used by the council to determine the need for places in each planning area. The initial GLA school roll projections were received in April and, given concern about sharp rises

in reception numbers across London, reissued in May 2009. These would be formally considered by the executive in November.

- 5.8 The deputy director suggested factors that contributed to the increase in demand for primary school places. He stressed that GLA projections had proved sufficiently accurate for planning purposes in the past and that the GLA was the most cost-effective source of projections. Members expressed concern that these projections were based on data originating in the Office of National Statistics, with which the council had long been in dispute. Members also challenged the scientific basis and robustness of the projections and sought assurance that the GLA would respond to this year's experience and take account of changes in future years. The committee took the view that it was essential for the executive to closely analyse this year's projections, before formal adoption, and ensure that the method and projections were regularly reviewed. A member of the committee put forward the argument that the government should fund extra capacity at all schools, over and above the projections, in order to provide real choice for parents.
- 5.9 The deputy director made clear that, on the basis of the GLA projections, the continuing increase in demand for places could be met by expanding the number of places at existing local schools (bulge classes). Benefits of this included that the council could be more flexible in its response to parental demand, surplus capacity could be reduced in the system, schools benefitted from increased investment and, once the numbers of reception children stabilised, there was a reduced risk that schools might be closed or suffer budget difficulties. In response to questions from members he also outlined the arguments against building a new school and explained that a new two-form entry school would require a site of 5000 square metres and that no appropriate site was available in this part of the borough.
- 5.10 If the executive can be satisfied of the above, the committee agreed that the temporary increase in demand should be met by the introduction of bulge classes rather than beginning the process of opening a new school. In reaching this recommendation the committee noted that negotiations are ongoing with some schools in the Dulwich area. At the same time members raised several concerns about the use of bulge classes over future years, as follows.
- 5.11 The deputy director reminded the committee of improvements in Southwark primary schools and that two-thirds are rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding. He also drew attention to the reputations of some schools lagging behind their improving performance. As an example, he cited Bessemer Grange Primary School which had improved significantly but, because of its previous reputation and particularly after additional places had been created at other local schools, was under-subscribed this year. A parent who had put their child into Heber when the school was just out of special measures agreed that it was very difficult to raise the reputation of a school amongst parents who tended to favour schools which had been popular for some time. The committee felt that, in addition to opening bulge classes at currently popular schools, the council needed to recognise reputation lags and take action to publicise improving but previously less popular schools.
- 5.12 Members of the committee highlighted the importance of increasing forms of entry at schools in areas experiencing a population bulge. The committee also sought confirmation that any increases in numbers of classes could be incorporated within

existing school buildings, without the use of temporary accommodation and certainly without any encroachment on play-grounds. The deputy director responded that spare capacity and space would be utilised and that temporary classrooms would be avoided wherever possible.

- 5.13 Finally, members were concerned at the short timetable imposed this year on those head teachers asked to increase the numbers of form entry in their schools.
- 5.14 After considering these factors the committee agreed that it would be best for any decisions on future bulge classes to be made as soon as possible after applications have been received and analysed so that the number and location of extra places can be matched as closely as possible to need.

### **Admissions team and admissions process**

- 5.15 The deputy director reported that a review of the admissions process had revealed the council's admissions team to be around half the size of, for example, the equivalent team in Lewisham. Some members of the committee were concerned that this did not demonstrate that our admissions team was twice as cost-effective but, instead, that the council was not adequately resourcing the team. The committee was pleased that the decision had been taken to increase the team by three members of staff and that recruitment was underway. In addition, good practice from Lewisham was to be introduced in Southwark such as proactive follow-ups with parents who are not initially allocated a preferred school. The committee was hopeful that this would meet some concerns of parents – such as lack of information and access to support throughout the admissions process – and agreed that the children's services and education sub-committee should review the impact of this after the 2010 admissions round is completed.
- 5.16 The committee recognised that the number of parents retaining multiple offers of places would continue to cause problems within the admissions system and asked how this could be addressed. Officers explained that a common admissions form for primary school places would be used across London from 2010/2011. Members asked whether the introduction of this form could be brought forward but understood from officers that the process of formal consultation across boroughs made this impossible. On the other hand, the council was liaising informally with our nearest neighbours to ensure as smooth a process as possible in the interim year.
- 5.17 The committee explored the issue of admissions criteria, particularly that of distance from residence to school. The deputy director clarified that the national guidance was to place a child within two miles of their home but that Southwark's admissions team took the view that this was unacceptable and aimed to offer a place within one mile or three bus journeys. The committee welcomed the council's own criteria and felt that the government should be lobbied to bring the national guidance into line with our own. Equally, some members were aware of cases where a mile distance as the crow flies would in practical terms still require a long and complicated journey by public transport.
- 5.18 Parents at the meeting brought to the committee's attention their concerns about Southwark's admissions criteria with regard to distance, which give preference

firstly to children for whom the school is their nearest community school (criteria iv) and then only after this to children for whom it is not the nearest community school (criteria v). Parents felt that this could mean that families could fall beyond the qualifying distance for their closest school and then be at a disadvantage for their second nearest school. For example, the qualifying distance for entry into Heber Primary School was 320m and many parents who applied to Heber as their closest school were not allocated a place. In contrast, other neighbouring boroughs did not incorporate such a criteria or had more flexibility built in.

- 5.19 Officers explained that if a child was not allocated a place at their closest community school they would be allocated a place in the nearest community school with a vacancy. The committee took the view that, while Southwark's criteria were well intended (to encourage parents to apply to their nearest community school), in cases where some school are heavily oversubscribed criteria iv and v could have unintended detrimental effects and should be reviewed by the admissions forum.
- 5.20 The deputy director outlined reasons for late applications in this year's admissions process, the majority of which were given as the parents not knowing that application was necessary. This often related to two specific situations – where the child was already going to a nursery class in a primary school and where the child had a sibling in the primary school. It was assumed that a place in the primary school would be offered automatically and with no formal application being necessary. In addition, there were possible issues around English language literacy levels in the borough which could make it difficult for some parents to be aware of their responsibilities in this area. The committee was concerned that there were two hundred more late applications this year than in previous years and that action was essential to address the roots of this.
- 5.21 A member of the public suggested that area based school fairs should be introduced with the specific aim of publicising the admissions process and the requirements on parents to apply for a place within the primary school system. An additional aim would be to promote those schools suffering from a “reputational lag” in respect of their improving performance. Members also felt that there were existing social networks which could be made more use of, such as community and faith groups and on-line forums. Members were also of the opinion that the council's website needed to be reviewed – to publicise the admissions process and relevant deadlines and also to encourage and facilitate on-line applications.
- 5.22 Finally, the committee noted that the number of late applications included applications which had been submitted on time but subsequently amended by parents. The admissions system categorised these changed applications as late applications. Members of the public at the meeting felt that this was inappropriate and confusing and the committee agreed to recommend that the system be altered.

### **RECOMMENDED:**

#### **Proposals to increase school places for this year**

1. That all head teachers in the borough be thanked for engaging positively with

discussions as to how to meet the demand for additional primary school places and particularly the heads at Crampton, Goodrich and Lyndhurst who took bulge classes for this year at such short notice.

2. That central government be urged to make funding available in addition to the £200 million capital funds already offered and with a revised set of criteria in order to address the national bulge in the primary school population.

### **Primary schools projections and proposals for future years**

3. That the executive analyses the GLA projection figures in depth, particularly in terms of fully understanding the information supporting the projections and assumptions made, before formally accepting the forecast for Southwark.
4. That the executive put in place mechanisms to ensure that projections remain under regular review.
5. If it is satisfied that the projections can be relied upon, that the executive accept the proposals from officers to meet the bulge in demand via permanent expansions and temporary bulge classes rather than seeking to open a new school.
6. That ongoing negotiations with some schools in the Dulwich area regarding bulge classes be noted.
7. That the experience of schools such as Bessemer Grange, where there are fewer children than anticipated, be noted with concern.
8. That action be taken to publicise the rising reputations of previously less popular schools.
9. That any increase in the intake of specific schools be matched as closely as possible to the areas experiencing a population bulge.
10. That any increase in numbers of classes should make use of space within existing school buildings and not encroach on play space.
11. In future that consideration of any increase in number of forms of entry be made as soon as possible to avoid excessive pressure being placed on local head teachers, but that this should be decided after all applications have been received and analysed in order to identify and respond to local need and to avoid schools being undersubscribed.

### **Admissions team and admissions process**

12. That the expansion of the admissions team by three officers be welcomed, together with proposals to provide a more personal and responsive service to parents to take them through the admissions process.
13. That in September 2010 officers report back to the children's services and education scrutiny sub-committee regarding the implementation and

operation of these changes.

14. That difficulties in the admissions system caused by some parents retaining multiple offers of places be recognised as an ongoing problem.
15. That the introduction in the year after next of a single admissions application form, covering all London boroughs, be welcomed together with increased informal co-operation across South East London boroughs for next year's admissions process.
16. That the council's attempt to ensure offers within one mile of residence, rather than the government guidance of two miles, be welcomed and central government be asked to reduce the guidance to one mile and to provide funding to meet this.
17. That the admissions forum review the unintended consequences of the distance criteria whereby failure to get into the nearest school (because of its small catchment area) may work against getting into the second and other nearest schools.
18. That the council develop an action plan to tackle the increased number of late applications, including publicity around parental responsibility if a child is at a nursery school attached to a primary school or has a sibling at a primary school and any issues around English language literacy levels in the borough.
19. That new publicity include area based school fairs at which the heads and senior staff of multiple schools can host stalls and meet parents. This will bring more parents into contact with staff from successful schools which are currently undersubscribed. One aim of the fairs should be to overcome the "reputational lag" from which some schools suffer.
20. In addition, that existing social networks such as community and faith groups and on-line forums are accessed.
21. That Southwark's website be reviewed with the aim of encouraging and facilitating on-line applications.
22. That the admissions system be altered so that changes to applications are recorded as changes and not as late applications.

The meeting ended at 10.15 pm