

Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Tuesday 6 December 2022 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Jason Ochere (Chair)
Councillor Rachel Bentley (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Chloe Tomlinson
Councillor Cassandra Brown
Councillor Renata Hamvas
Martin Brecknell (Co-opted member)
Marcin Jagodzinski (Co-opted member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Martin Seaton

OFFICER SUPPORT: Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Joseph Vambe who was substituted by Councillor Irina Von Wiese.

Apologies for lateness was received from Councillor Chloe Tomlinson.

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

There were no items of business which the Chair deemed urgent.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

There were no disclosures of interests and dispensations.

4. MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 17 October 2022 was approved as a correct record.

5. CLOSURE OF ST. JOHNS WALWORTH SCHOOL

The commission first heard from Roz Cordner, Director of Education, Church Of England (COE) Diocese on the following points:

- St Johns Walworth school closure at end of August 2021
- Fall in pupil numbers has impacted schools differently across the diocese of Southwark also covering 12 Local Authorities with surplus places in Southwark, Lambeth and Croydon and at maximum capacity in Richmond and Kingston areas for all schools not just church of England schools
- Governing body for St Johns Walworth in consultation with diocese and Southwark Council assessed the financial viability of the school. The decision was taken to close the school in August 2021. Series of processes including consultation with parents and stakeholders was followed in January 2021 which culminated in the closure of the school in the summer.
- A strategic group was setup with a dedicated project leader, supported by the diocese and Southwark Council to identify the needs of pupils and their families with regards to pupil destinations and admissions in church or non-church schools.
- Need for strong governing bodies that have the ability to manage advanced budgets especially now with regards to inflation, fuel costs and low pupil numbers.
- Support and training for volunteers in all aspects of committees involved in school closures is essential.
- A key lesson learnt is that the communication of information to parents, staff and wider community prior to the decision of school closure is important in generating public awareness of the issues faced by the school.
- Other factors which could have a detrimental long term impact on school pupil numbers are Brexit, Coronavirus, Housing costs in London, regeneration and relocation of families within and outside of London.
- Tracking Published Admission Numbers (PAN) prior to decision making on shrinking schools is critical, reducing the size of the school to one half of entry form could be a way to preserve the foot print of the school for future growth.
- Other aspects of school closures include staying engaged with community through named point of contacts for each family, managing HR for staff and caretakers, protection and future use of the school building, managing grief within the community and celebration, pride in what the school has achieved.

The commission then asked questions on the following themes:

- Cohort pupils for admission in other church schools who preferred staying in the church school setting
- Risk in the perception of Southwark having fewer families, schools and provisions thus influencing decision of families to move to other boroughs
- Exodus of pupils from certain years' creating a snowball effect as seen in Francesca Cabrini School

Roz explained to the commission that it was important to manage expectations for parents, and pupil admissions to other church schools were primarily based on vacancies in the schools and parent preferences with a priority for cared for and children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Although there have been media reports of Central London being on the path to being child free due to cost of living, birth rate etc., 90% of schools in Southwark have been rated good or outstanding. Southwark Council is known to be a good local authority with a very strong education offer. The diocese plays a role in communicating with headteachers to manage such changes by informing parents through the relationships built with families. The decision ultimately lies with the parents who either move schools for their child's security and stability or stay due to the history in the generations of family members being educated at the same school.

The commission then asked further questions around the following topics:

- Management of Published Admission Numbers (PAN) as an effective strategy to keep costs lower; St Johns Walworth School
- Interaction with the GLA on schools projections and using their forecasts to manage school numbers across the diocese.

The commission heard from Roz that managing temporary reduction to PAN to show temporary changes can be an effective tool to reduce the staffing costs which could help with coping budget deficits, giving the school an opportunity to grow in the future to original levels. St Johns Walworth had historic deficits in budgets but this was not a deciding factor for closure. One of the reasons for closure was due to the in-year deficit and there wasn't any option to manage the budget over a long term, in addition demolition of housing estates on Walworth road slowed admissions at the primary level and there are only a handful of nurseries feeding into schools in the area. Local authorities are the point of contact for the diocese for admissions and managing pupil places in schools and not the GLA.

6. GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY (GLA) - SCHOOL ROLLS PROJECTIONS SERVICE

The commission then heard from Ben Corr, Demography and City Modelling Manager at GLA on the following themes:

- Background on pupil place planning and methodology behind school rolls projections
- Majority of Local Authorities (28-29 in a year) in London opt in to the schools

rolls projections service, projections are derived by using mainstream data sets of age, sex and planning alongside consistent population projections which incorporate housing trajectory data from local authorities.

- Unbiased and independent projections based on in-depth analysis of demographics which complement the reports submitted to Department for Education (DfE) by the Local Authority with very few changes, some authorities use the projections as a check against their own numbers.
- GLA projections are challenging to produce and are based on complex models, these models are highly transparent to help the Local Authority's understanding on the various factors that have or have not been used in the projections.
- Projections are based on 'Trend based population projections' which is an internationally recognised method also used by Office for National Statistics (ONS), specifically GLA use a multi-regional model based on past trends of birth and death rates and then factor in housing data from Local Authorities. This model then assigns children to actual schools based on patterns.
- Issues with inflation in population projections in the middle of the decade caused by high international migration especially in London having higher migration. Therefore affecting school rolls projection that produced higher numbers in addition to other challenges of predicting fertility rates, family planning decisions, housing completion and delivery. A short period of time exists between birth and the point where reception is required for children in primary schools, official data could take up to two years to be processed and published making it difficult to produce accurate projections
- Other challenges that affect school projections
 - Size, makeup and tenure of housing stock
 - Housing development and delivery with delays that could last years
 - Shock events such as financial recession in 2008 and post 2004 boom in birth rate in London
 - Covid short term impact still unknown
 - Brexit, eastern European migration trends in some parts of London.
 - Changing characteristics of family planning and size that are hard to predict
 - Regeneration schemes and gentrification
 - Changing popularity and number of schools
 - Need for Local Authorities to communicate better with regards to opening of new schools.
 - Birth rates have fallen by 33% in the past 10 years

The commission then discussed the following topics

- Young couples who moved to Southwark before the spike in birth rate and are not having babies anymore, this is an increasingly common phenomenon.
- Increase in birth rate from 2004 onwards that might have had an effect on school projections
- Methodology behind inaccurate school projections in 2015 to 2016 resulting in change to GLA methodology 2018 onwards
- Other significant factors such as housing affordability and cost of living crisis

- Shared housing in multiple occupation have more incomes to afford the rent when compared to couples and families
- Need for the council to work with the GLA to adapt methodology, software and code to Local Authority data modelling as revisions in Census Data take years for GLA to revise their school projections

7. PUPIL PLACE PLANNING ADVISERS- REGIONS GROUP - DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION (DFE)

The brief written update was noted by the commission.

8. INTERVIEW WITH CABINET MEMBER FOR JOBS, BUSINESS AND TOWN CENTRES

The commission then heard from Councillor Martin Seaton, Cabinet member for Jobs, Business and Town Centres, Danny Edwards Head of Economy and Laura Hills, Manager- Planning Policy and Digital Transformation on the following topics:

- Different strands of work on target for delivery of council plans such as 250 paid internships for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, Southwark Pioneers Fund (SPF), New Green Jobs and a world class health innovation area involving Guys and St Thomas, Kings and South London and Maudsley Trusts
- High Street Fund to be launched in January 2023 awaiting confirmation from GLA.
- Completion of the consultation on the New Economic Strategy which is the overarching strategy to deliver economic initiatives from now until 2030
- Plans to build coherent town centre neighbourhoods with the initial focus on areas such as Camberwell, Peckham, Elephant & Castle and Old Kent road with a proactive approach of developing those town centres with resident and community consultations.
- Proposal for a register of affordable workspaces benefiting local entrepreneurs and businesses
- Expansion of street markets to provide means of starting a business in a cost effective way with minimal overheads giving entrepreneurs the stimulus to develop and grow work ethos and their respective businesses
- Closer working relationship with Department for Work and Pensions on job centres
- Southwark Works was setup to encourage entrepreneurship especially for people with barriers such as people just out of the justice system, Black and Minority Ethnic people and young people in need of education and training
- Role of councillors in their respective wards to encourage the town centre initiatives of buying locally

The commission then asked questions around the following themes:

- Impact of Brexit, Covid and Inflation on entrepreneurship and increase in rents and 5 year leases in commercial council properties in the Bermondsey area
- Protection of our local high streets where private landlords opting to convert commercial properties to residential as this is more lucrative and also relaxation of regulations in planning class usages make it easier for conversion to residential properties
- Licensing of street markets, night markets and Christmas markets

Councillor Seaton explained to the commission that council rents had been frozen for the past two years during Covid and there has been only a reasonable increase rent since then, privately rented commercial properties have increased rents by 20-40% compared to 5-10% increase in council owned commercial properties. The question arises whether it is reasonable for the council to run commercially rented properties at a loss, profit or at least break even, budgetary targets have raised £20m so far with the deficit being at £26m.

Danny explained to the commission that the property team within the council can help and support businesses struggling to pay their rent. Laura explained to the commission that the planning team have placed Article 4 directives on certain shopping parades restricting their permitted development rights, therefore these properties cannot be converted without a full planning permission and the planning team have been monitoring the areas regularly. Councillor Seaton explained to the commission that there are plans to have a dedicated resource such as an event manager for street markets and events learning from the markets at the privately owned and developed Elephant Square.

The commission then discussed the following points:

- Business rates increase while there are still council owned empty commercial properties; this is to be raised with lettings teams
- Support for small business on council websites with regards to networking and business rates payment options and cabinet member visits to businesses
- Decrease in the number of public toilets on the high street, vast majority of businesses have customer toilets
- Small businesses undergoing relocation due to private redevelopment are actively supported by the Local Economy team and Councillor Martin Seaton ensuring that communities are not at a detriment due to investment and redevelopment and also encouraging such businesses to engage in the planning application process of such redevelopments
- Encouraging development of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to organise independent refuse and waste collection; monthly BIDs meeting with council to improve networking; discussing new innovations and resolving issues such as levels of shoplifting and street crime leading to an extended and resilient high street.

9. WORK PROGRAMME 2022-23

The Work Programme 2022-2023 was noted by the commission.

Meeting ended at 9:12 pm

CHAIR:

DATED: