

Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Thursday 22 February 2024 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Rachel Bentley (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Joseph Vambe
Councillor John Batterson
Councillor Renata Hamvas
Councillor Irina Von Wiese
Councillor Maggie Browning (Reserve Member)
Jonathan Clay (Co-opted Member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Jasmine Ali

OFFICER SUPPORT: Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

The Vice-Chair explained to the commission that the Chair had taken ill and that she herself would be chairing this commission meeting instead.

Apologies for absence were received from the Chair, Councillor Chloe Tomlinson and Martin Brecknell (Co-opted member).

The commission also noted that Councillor Jason Ochere is on parental leave.

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

The Chair informed the commission with deep sadness the untimely and sudden passing away of Tina Daley from East Street market traders. The commission acknowledged Tina's contribution in presenting to the commission in the last municipal year on the economic hardships faced by East Street traders in light of the cost-of-living crisis.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

Councillor John Batteson declared his role as a Governor at Bird in Bush School.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 January 2024 were approved as a correct record.

5. REPORT REVIEWING AMALGAMATION OF BIRD IN BUSH SCHOOL

The commission first heard from James Robinson, Executive Head teacher Bird in Bush School (BiB) on the following points

- Initially the decision to amalgamate Camelot and Coburg in February 2023 met with hostility from parents. However, amalgamation was a success with a big number of children admitted to the new BiB school.
- Key factor in this amalgamation was the strong strategic leadership from the council, other Local Authority (LA) community schools and head teachers facing falling school rolls need such leadership.
- Negativity in media with regards to amalgamation, however this was clarified by inviting BBC to visit the school and meet pupils.
- Establishment of a consistent staffing of teachers at BiB; School of 485 pupils.

The commission then heard from Richard Hunter, Principal Advisor on the following topics

- Governors and Head teachers instrumental in implementing the amalgamation plan provided by LA; pragmatic approach was to amalgamate as improvements at Coburg school were identified with help of a new governance body at Coburg working in partnership with James.
- Effective and strong governance; working with LA to provide constitutional support, timetabling of processes; providing quality education by retaining experienced staff.

The commission then asked questions on the following themes

- Clarification on concerns for next academic year; support for staff not on permanent contracts during amalgamation; Communication and timing when contacting parents on amalgamations.
- Moving governors from Coburg to Camelot (BiB); in contrast to BiB school amalgamation, improvement in processes for amalgamation of two other relatively well performing schools who are facing falling rolls
- Impact on children as a result of amalgamation.

James explained to the commission that the Pupil Place Planning Board has informed BiB on the continuing trend of the falling pupil numbers from 58-60 pupils, per year group this year, to 40 pupils next year.

The commission learned from Richard and James that from Coburg all the 7 teachers and the full time permanent teaching support staff except 2 who chose not to, were moved over to Camelot. 75 % of teaching support staff on fixed term contracts were retained by Camelot and after 6 months they would be on permanent contracts.

James informed the commission that governors on the interim executive board expedited the process for amalgamation by working with the council. Within the processes of amalgamation it is important that the period of 23 weeks is adhered to and amalgamation completed before the start of the academic year in September.

The commission learned from James that the existing governing body from Coburg was disbanded and a new Interim Executive Board was established with 3 governors from Coburg and one Chair of Governors (Juliette Young) for both schools, after the amalgamation all 3 governors were moved to the BiB governing body.

Richard explained to the commission that amalgamation of any two schools is not an easy process, it's important that we consider the different ways that the two schools operate, the differences in the communities that they serve. Effective communication to parents is critical in explaining the different processes during amalgamation, the council is looking in great detail on communication within the strategy.

James explained to the commission that one of the key factors in working with schools is LA support and investment in schools, and regular conversations with head teachers and school leadership on the future of their schools. Southwark council's commitment to investing, and encouraging messaging to schools showing support is essential during this period of falling rolls.

The commission heard from James that from a stronger financial stand point BiB has been able to offer children more provisions such as funding for Chinese New Year day; creating masks, music provision, physical education provisions. In addition Camelot school site has much better facilities in classrooms, playgrounds and sports.

Furthermore, children from Coburg school were brought over to Camelot with their teachers to play games on strike days, this gave teachers key insights and all decisions were made ensuring the needs of children are met.

Richard informed the commission that the council has taken learnings and experience from the impact that closures of school such as Townsend, Francesca Cabrini and St. Johns Walworth, have had on children especially in case of special needs children.

6. INTERVIEW WITH CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, EDUCATION & REFUGEES.

The commission first heard from Councillor Ali on the following points

- Good reviews in Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), 98% good and outstanding schools this year; good feedback of care leavers services and youth justice service.
- Children and young people exam results in schools have been very good; there were concerns before the exams of poor results leading from the recovery after the pandemic period, however Southwark children outperformed London schools in key stages 4 & 5 and also bucked the national trend. English & Math grades up by 2.4% in schools. Southwark ranks 15th across all LAs'.
- Corporate Parenting Committee working successfully; GCSE and A levels scores are also very good; majority of young people getting into first choice colleges and universities; Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provisions also very good (handouts circulated to commission)
- Improving provisions for complex and multiple needs; development of greater needs and provisions in all settings; development of pathways into adulthood for young people with SEND; Investment of £4.5m in SEND.
- Challenges- deficit plans for closure of schools in the Keeping Education Strategy; Council absolutely committed in supporting schools, however in a different way to the past; Successes in social care and early intervention and prevention.
- Inclusion work and regular meetings with Head teachers (primary & secondary), councillors, council leader and senior council officers to exchange information; importance of wrap around services like early intervention and prevention to reduce children coming into care, free mental health hub and free school meals (FSM); pilot FSM in secondary schools; Corporate Parenting Committee handouts to this commission.

The commission then asked questions on the following themes

- Changes in leadership structure of the council and the role of Head of Education; retaining the best teachers whilst battling private sector pay; mental health support in schools; free breakfast in schools
- Reducing the processing time for Education and Health Care Plans (EHCP) in nurseries for children under 5; tracking of EHCP and SEND needs from early years to later in education
- Refresh of Keeping Education Strong (KES) strategy in light of the projected continual trend of even lower pupil intake in coming years; trends in the impact of falling school rolls from primary schools feeding into secondary schools, year 7 and significant funding issues; post 16 provisions and offers.
- Government's expansion of the scheme in early years' provisions, assessment of Southwark with supply of provisions when compared nationally.

Councillor Ali explained to the commission that officers will competently manage the transition as a result of the change in the leadership structure. Inclusion work will be managed by early intervention and prevention in schools.

The commission learned from Alasdair that he is absolutely committed to education in Southwark, and the leadership structure beneath all the changes is very stable. Anna Chiva has recently been appointed as the Asst. Director for SEND. The council has been committed to ensure that the most vulnerable pupils with special needs get the best provisions in SEND. Furthermore, the council is keen to ensure communication with head teachers and governors of primary schools, secondary schools and multi-academy trusts during this period of changes in education. The council has also been working in partnership with external partners ISOS, who originally help develop the Keeping Education Strong (KES) strategy and to develop policies for better education structures and processes in schools.

Alasdair further explained to the commission that central government funding for education has substantially reduced and a part of the reasoning for restructuring of the leadership is having the right people in the right roles with an emphasis on SEND provisions for children and young people.

Councillor Ali informed the commission that Southwark having 98% good and outstanding schools and 10k pupils with SEND; bringing together a director of education with an experience of 21 years in social care and a Head teacher with an OBE for services to education is the right approach to increasing SEND provisions. On mental health support, the commission learnt that with an investment of £2m from the council, schools now have mental health champions and the mental health drop in service from NEST. The budget has also been amended to include the outreach work through NEST. There is bi-partisan support for mental health provisions and also party support for free breakfasts in schools.

The commission heard from Anna that key worker housing and priorities for key workers has been undertaken by the council corporately especially for teaching support staff. The council is also working on providing core training for SEND by working with Headteachers and Special Needs Co-ordinators (SENCo) using Continuous Professional Development (CPD) days; this will look to ensure that we are retaining staff and they are equipped with training for SEND support. The council has already undertaken work in tracking data in nurseries with SEND and EHCP needs to provide support in the form early intervention and prevention and resource based provisions. The council has also been developing a pilot programme due for consultation, to target young people with SEND and providing timely intervention using the outreach programme, teaching staff, specialist support, specialist advisory teachers and speech and language therapists. This will create a positive influence in nurseries as a pre-cursor to EHCPs.

Councillor Ali explained to the commission that a recent report from London councils' suggests a downward trend in the number of pupil intakes, Southwark council is continually working to be ready for these challenges in the coming years, not forgetting the commitment to build more houses in Southwark making it more attractive for young families to move to the borough.

Alasdair informed the commission that the council have experts working on the pupil place projections with the GLA, however it's not an exact science and the pupil numbers need to be assessed at the time of school intakes. The council has legal duties with regards to monitoring pupil numbers beyond the KES.

Neil explained to the commission that the council will move to business as usual approach beyond the KES at the end of this year, whilst ensuring outstanding actions from KES are completed. Cabinet receive reports in October every year on pupil place planning, monitoring the trends in different parts of the borough's primary and secondary schools. We still do have some schools approaching the council with reduction in PAN numbers but are in a much better position now than prior to KES.

The commission learned from Councillor Ali that in discussions with Headteachers of secondary schools it was apparent the impact of falling schools rolls is not as severe, with some schools asking to increase their PAN due to families with secondary school pupils willing to travel greater distances. On post 16 offers, Southwark College Board are working with London South Bank University (LSBU) to provide good post 16 offers to students.

The commission agreed as a follow-up action to ask for current percentages and future projected trends for year 11 students going outside the borough for higher education.

Neil informed the commission that secondary school numbers are likely to be affected as a result of falling pupil numbers in primary schools. In March 2024 the council will be better placed to inform councillors of applications and preferences on post 16 offers. The post 16 offers in Southwark have improved over the years, however students moving outside the borough has been higher in Southwark when compared to other boroughs.

On early years' provisions the commission learned from Neil that there is ambivalence amongst the councils with the government's policy, there are questions on whether there are sufficient budgets for early years' provisions given the immediate implementation of the expansion. Southwark has broad and resilient network of 150 early years' providers, 150 nurseries and voluntary sectors in primary schools, this should have sufficient capacity for the expansion. It is difficult to assess how the expansion goes and what its demands would be, the parents who are already paying for early years' provisions would have some monies back if they take up the provisions and this could also mean that more parents could take up employment as a result of this expansion. Southwark council would be monitoring the demands within this expansion with improved infrastructure for nurseries to access funding for early years' provisions.

The commission then heard from Kate on the following topics

- Working of the Dedicated School Grants (DSG), statutory framework and guidance for LA authority providers, maintained schools, academies, independent providers and councils; the LA is recipient of the DSG, Section 151 officer has the responsibility to ensure the grants are deployed within

the framework.

- Almost the entirety of the funds is passed to front line education providers with some rules around retaining some of the funding centrally to provide statutory functions of LAs' in education.
- LAs' also have the responsibility of monitoring the DSG grants given to providers; four main blocks in DSG as in the report; LA don't have a lot of discretion on how the money is distributed amongst maintained schools and mainstream academies; funding blocks will remain the same till 2027-2028 but amount of funding will reduce over the same time period.
- Safety Valve Agreement wherein Southwark has moved funds from the schools block to the high needs block at £1.2 m per year to support inclusion and SEND provision; top slicing, de-delegation and retention; LA is the commissioner for high needs block and also discussing its funding with high needs group.
- Changes in entitlement to the early years block; extension of child care scheme by central government has seen increase in funding to Southwark of £10m in 2024-2025. However it's based on 100% uptake which cannot be used to model funding for Southwark's education, as the uptake is complex with early years funding, hourly rates and contingencies.

The commission then heard from Neil on the following points

- Working on funding levels with the Schools Forum and sectors representing nurseries; increase in hourly rates payments for 2 year olds from £6.80 to £9.20.

The commission then heard from Anna that from the reports submitted today and discussions thereafter, it reflects building upon integrated working around children services and early years provisions with schools and partners; inclusion of early years' provisions in the SEND strategy.

The commission then asked questions on the following topics

- Kintore Way nursery school additional funding and distributing funds to other schools in need
- Existing SENDIF formula and changes proposed

Councillor Ali explained to the commission that KW nursery school additional funding of £1.2m was given after discussions with the Schools Forum, Ann Bernadt school was also given funding previously, funding is equitable among schools in need.

Anna informed the commission that SEND needs are higher among LA maintained schools and they are looking to increase the early years SEND Inclusion FUND (SENDIF) funding in the budget. The council is also looking to remodel the funding structure to provide group funding to SEND providers, this would be an amount given to groups at the start of the year for the entire year. This should reduce bureaucracy and improve sustainability by recruiting throughout the year. The council has made progress on working with multiple agencies such as health

advisors, speech and language therapists and wider community on planned admissions in SENDIF.

On SENDIF formula, the commission heard from Anna that there seven point bench marks in the formula that are very complex. Southwark has had a two point system Band 1 and 2 which results in more provisions for providers in early provision years. However, officers are looking at creating a 4 tier model with percentage funding allocated to first 3 tiers and the 4th tier for cohort funding. Anna agreed to provide a brief note on this new model to the commission.

7. WORK PROGRAMME 2023-2024

The commission noted the addition of Southwark's Safeguarding Children Partnership (SSCP) to the work programme for the upcoming 14 March 2024 commission meeting.

Meeting ended at 8:38 pm

CHAIR:

DATED: