

SOUTHWARK COUNCIL

COUNCIL ASSEMBLY

(ORDINARY MEETING)

WEDNESDAY 10 JULY 2013

URGENT QUESTION

1. URGENT QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR ANOOD AL-SAMERAI

Does the Leader welcome the commitment of Education Minister, David Laws MP, to new primary and secondary schools in Southwark? What has he personally done to ensure a new school is built on the Dulwich Hospital site?

RESPONSE

I welcome any interest that Ministers show in the provision of schools in Southwark. However, the Minister has not informed the Council of any new commitment and so I am asking officers to seek clarification from the department about whether or not there is any new commitment.

I am disappointed that we as a local authority are not in a position to build and open our own new schools. David Laws' and Michael Gove's obsession with free schools as the only solution to problems with school place provision is about their commitment to conservative ideology rather than what is in the best interests of children and the educational needs of boroughs like Southwark. While I recognise that free schools can be part of a solution, they should only be part of a solution, and I would encourage Liberal Democrat Councillors to use any influence they have with David Laws to enable Southwark to build and open our own schools.

There is an urgent need for an additional 420 primary places (or 14 forms of entry) by 2015. How we will respond to this is set out in the Council's primary investment programme which is coming to Cabinet next week. This is in addition to the 1080 additional places which we have already created between 2009 and 2013.

With limited capital funding allocated to Southwark from central government we are working creatively with popular and successful schools to enable them to expand, as well as actively sourcing opportunities for new schools. Tonight, I am pleased to announce that governors and staff at Ivydale Primary School in Peckham Rye have been working with officers to expand the school onto a new site, in an area where we know there is a shortage of high quality local places for local families. Brand new provision on the Bredehurst site means that more children will have access to this popular community school.

In addition we will shortly come forward with plans to reopen the Old Bellenden School site as part of an expansion of an existing primary school. We are also working to find a suitable site for the Southwark Free School and are bringing the Galleywall School back into use once the Southwark Park School go back into their refurbished buildings.

Our forecasts are that with new secondary schools planned to open in the borough in September 2013 (Ark All Saints academy in Camberwell and Compass academy in Rotherhithe) and in September 2014 (the University Engineering Academy South Bank in Walworth) there should be sufficient secondary places available in the short term. The forecasts show continuing demand for secondary places and suggest that in the medium term from 2016 additional secondary places may be needed in the borough. We will be keeping this under careful review including working with our existing secondary schools.

In terms of the Dulwich Hospital site, I have been regularly briefed and updated on the potential uses of the site and have given my full support to the recognition of the site as suitable for a school. The Dulwich SPD, due to be adopted by Cabinet next week, sets out that the use of part of this site for a school would help to meet the requirements of the planning brief and Cllr Fiona Colley and Stephen Platts, Director of Regeneration, have met with NHS Southwark Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to confirm our support for this use on the site.

Schools and school places remain critical for not just Southwark, but all of London. The best way to address this is to take an all of borough approach, ensuring that places are available in the right places and meet the needs of our growing population. Whilst the Liberal Democrats focus on one school on one site in one part of the borough, we are working hard to ensure that all children in the borough have access to the best schools. I am confident that Southwark has one of the most robust plans in place to deal with the future shortage of places to ensure that all children get access to a good local school.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR ANOOD AL-SAMERAI

Thank you Mr Mayor, yes I do and thank you to the leader for his answer. I am slightly concerned that he is worried about the ideology and talking about politicians being obsessed with ideology, but he is still going on about his own obsession against free schools and frankly we live in the real world and if free schools is what we have got to work with then we should be getting on and building some new schools but his answer only talks about expansion, so I will try and ask again, what has he done as Leader in a massive school place crisis to actually get new schools? For example has he meet with Harris who are offering to do a new school in Dulwich?

RESPONSE

Thank you Mr Mayor and thank you Councillor Al-Samerai for her supplemental question.

I mean, school places is one of the most urgent issues facing us as a borough and it is an issue which occupies both myself as leader and Councillor Dixon-Fyle as cabinet member with responsibility and the cabinet generally; that is why we are going to be considering a paper on primary places and pupil places at next week's cabinet meeting.

I think looking across London where there is an incredible pupil place shortage, anticipated to only get worse over the coming couple of years, and I think in comparison to where a lot of councils are, we are in a very good place and actually taking very robust action, and I am delighted actually that today we are in a position to say that Ivydale School will be expanding onto the Bredinghurst site, providing effectively a new school on that site, a new primary school for the people of Peckham and Nunhead where we have a particular shortage. It might be regarded as just an expansion by

Councillor Al-Samerai but actually it will be very, very warmly welcomed by the parents of young children in that area who are in desperate need of a place.

We are looking at how the Galleywall site will be opened up and we are also looking at how the old Bellenden site will be opened up and we do have to quite frankly as a local authority, at this time look at expansions really of existing schools. We as a local authority cannot open new schools and new free schools. It is an absolute nonsense, even academies cannot have difficulties opening new academies. Free schools are the only game in town that the government will support, and we will work with free schools where they seek to work with us. And we are working with Southwark free school to try and find a more suitable site for that school, I think it is very regrettable again at this time that they are operating in a tenants hall for the second year in a row, which is not suitable accommodation for twenty first century education of young children.

On the Dulwich Hospital site I have not met with Harris, officers have, Councillor Dixon Fyle points out; I have met with Academy chain sponsors with my hat on as executive member for children and young people on London Councils. Harris is the only academy chain of all in London that we have written to and who have not taken up the offer to meet and discuss education right across London not just in Southwark, so I think the fault does not lie with Southwark Council, the fault lies with Harris and why they won't work with us as a very good and improving local authority. And I was very pleased when I met with Sir Michael Wilshaw, the Ofsted Chief Inspector of schools, and he praised the work that Southwark is doing and the school improvement work that is going on and the fact that our results in Southwark are improving year on year.

So I think we are on a robust and in a good place so I think we should be congratulating the schools in Southwark for the work that they are doing, and the officers in the council for the work they are doing in trying to resolve this very difficult issue but I think we are ahead of the game across London in terms of the robust plans we have got in place.

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL FROM COUNCILLOR ANOOD AL-SAMERAI

Thanks Mr Mayor; I think there is a slight danger of the Leader sounding a bit complacent. There is clearly a school places crisis, there is a place for expansion but actually he is right to say free schools are the only show in town so the answer is to go and talk to people who are would-be free school providers, make sure we get the ones we want in this borough who have a proven track record in this borough. Can I just ask him about the community council meeting we had recently where we had a presentation on the Canada Water action plan, we asked officers whether there was any thought about a primary school in the area – we know we are desperate for places – and the answer was no, so can I make a suggestion to him, in that he takes some leadership and goes and talks to some potential free school providers about the desperate need for primary school places in Bermondsey and Rotherhithe?

RESPONSE

Well I don't think I sound complacent. I was telling council assembly about the work we have done in a fairly lengthy answer but if that is complacent, well I am sorry that I am telling you all about the work we have done, and if I had a shorter answer which would suggested I was doing nothing you might have thought I was sounding less complacent. I don't quite understand your response at all. Albion school is going to double in size. That is meeting the increased need for places in the Canada Water area. Now, I think that is a good move and a very exciting move for education. Compass Free School will be opening on Southwark College site; that is a secondary school I know that.

Galleywall School is opening. Redriff have got a new link with the City of London Academy. There is a lot going on in schooling in the Rotherhithe and Bermondsey area, and I think, as I say, I am not being complacent, it is a big issue; we are dealing with it and I am confident we are dealing with it in an appropriate way. We are not having to panic we are dealing with these things, and we are not going to be a council which was in the position of the Liberal Democrat administration between 2006-2010 when kids were not getting school places and there was utter chaos and disarray.

And I am just going to make this final point as well, about free schools I am not ideologically opposed to free schools, anticipating a question from Councillor Mitchell a bit later on, at all. But the overwhelming choice of parents where they have a choice is to go to a good community school; a good local authority school, they still trust us as the number one provider so where we are seeking to expand good existing schools that is parents' choice and if we are in an era of parental choice, that's what they want and that's what we are responding to.