

PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES IN DULWICH AND EAST DULWICH

Report of Overview & Scrutiny Committee

November 2009



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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This May, primary school allocations in East Dulwich hit the headlines after a number of children were initially allocated places involving difficult journeys from their homes.
- 1.2 Parents began raising their concerns with ward councillors about the number of primary school places in the area and perceived failures in the admissions process.
- 1.3 Concerns amongst residents began to feature on the East Dulwich Forum website, in the local press and were brought to the attention of the chair and other members of the overview & scrutiny committee.
- 1.4 We agreed to devote our October meeting to a scrutiny of admissions to primary schools and the provision of places in Dulwich and East Dulwich. The meeting took place on October 12 2009 at the East Dulwich Community Centre and was attended by local parents and residents, head teachers and school governors, ward councillors, council officers and the leader of the council (who has portfolio responsibility for schools and educational attainment).
- 1.5 Our recommendations are set out in full at section 6 of this report.

2. Evidence received

- 2.1 We received evidence from two Peckham Rye ward members, Councillors Aubyn Graham and Robert Smeath, who expressed concern over the treatment of parents and the resourcing of the admissions team. The two 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.
- 2.2 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. He and other parents contributed to the committee's discussion of the issues below.
- 2.3 The leader of the council outlined his understanding of this year's admissions. At the close of the first round of admissions 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 more places in East Dulwich allowing most children to be allocated a place near to home. However, there was also a significant number of late applications that placed a further strain on the system.

- 2.4 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).

3. Proposals to increase school places for this year
(Recommendations 6.1 and 6.2)

- 3.1 The deputy director, children's services, 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). We appreciated that these places had been opened with the active participation of head teachers and chairs of governors.
- 3.2 The deputy director drew our 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. We were 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.

Recommendations:

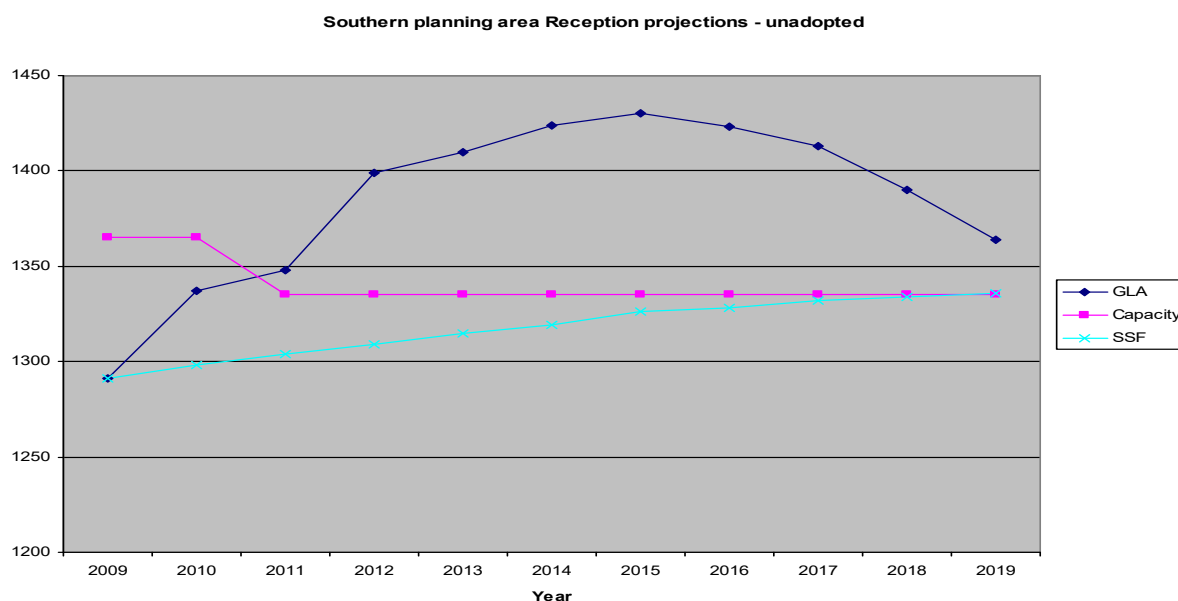
1. That all head teachers in the borough be thanked for engaging positively with discussions as to how to meet the demand for additional primary school places and particularly the heads at Crampton, Goodrich and Lyndhurst who took bulge classes for this year at such short notice.
2. That central government 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.

4. Primary schools projections and proposals for future years
(Recommendations 6.3 – 6.11)

- 4.1 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 in order to meet its statutory duty to provide sufficient places.

4.2 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 will be formally considered by the executive in November. The graph below shows the capacity in our primary schools, GLA projections and Southwark Schools for the Future projections for the southern planning area which broadly covers the area South of Queen’s Road.



4.3 The deputy director suggested that factors contributing to the increase in demand for primary school places included:

- rising birth rate
- fewer families moving out of the borough
- an increase in the number of houses in East Dulwich being converted from flats back to family homes
- increases in cross borough applications from Lambeth and Lewisham residents
- parental recognition of improving local schools
- an increased demand for state school over independent places

4.4 The deputy director 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. Our members expressed concern that these projections were based on data originating in the Office of National Statistics, with which the council has 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. We took the view that it was essential for the executive to closely scrutinise this year’s projections, before formal adoption, and ensure that the method and projections were regularly reviewed.

- 4.5 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 were 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. He also outlined the arguments against building a new school:
- the increased demand is projected to be temporary and can best be met by bulge classes
 - the process to establish a new school is lengthy (up to 5-7 years) and therefore unlikely to deliver places in either short or medium term
 - no funding or site is available
 - a new school would destabilise existing schools
 - a new two-form entry school would require a site of 5000 square metres and no appropriate site was available in this part of the borough
- 4.6 If the executive can be satisfied of the above, we 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 we noted that negotiations are ongoing with some schools in the Dulwich area. At the same time our members raised several concerns about the use of bulge classes over future years, as follows.
- 4.7 The deputy director reminded us of improvements in our primary schools and that two-thirds are rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding. He also drew our 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, was under-subscribed this year and particularly so after additional places had been created at other local schools. The chair of governors from Heber school, who is also a parent there and who had accepted a place for her child 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. We felt that, in addition to opening bulge classes at currently popular schools, the council needs to recognise reputation lags and take action to publicise improving but previously less popular schools.
- 4.8 In terms of the use of bulge classes, we highlighted the importance of increasing forms of entry at schools in areas experiencing a population bulge. We 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.
- 4.9 Finally, our 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.

- 4.10 After considering these factors, we 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.

Recommendations:

3. That the executive scrutinises 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 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 other schools being undersubscribed.

5. Admissions team and admissions process

(Recommendations 6.12 – 6.21)

- 5.1 The deputy director, children's services, 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. We were concerned that this did not demonstrate that our admissions team is twice as cost-effective but, instead, that the council is not adequately resourcing the team. We were pleased that the decision has been taken to increase the team by three members of staff and that recruitment is underway. In addition,

good practice from Lewisham and other areas is to be introduced in Southwark such as proactive follow-ups with parents who are not initially allocated a preferred school. We were 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.

- 5.2 We recognised that the number of parents retaining multiple offers of places will 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. Applications for children resident in the borough would be made on a single form, administrated by Southwark as the home authority, and parents would be advised of only one offer. Our 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 as this had to be agreed as a pan-London initiative. 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.
- 5.3 We 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. We welcomed the council’s own criteria and felt that the government should be lobbied to differentiate its guidance between urban and rural areas. Equally, some of our 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.
- 5.4 Parents at our meeting brought to our 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, in 2009 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. Open enrolment means that the qualifying distances vary each year according to demand and other factors, including the number of siblings, can have a significant effect on the availability of places. In contrast, other neighbouring boroughs did not incorporate such a criteria (Southwark’s and Lewisham’s community schools admissions criteria are set out as an appendix for comparison).
- 5.5 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. Our members 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 this should be reviewed by the admissions forum.

- 5.6 Around one in six applications were deemed late in this year's admissions process. The deputy director outlined reasons for the late applications, 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. We were 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.
- 5.7 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. Our 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 comprehensively overhauled – to enhance the information provided about the admissions process, to provide up to date information about schools and to achieve a step-change improvement in the numbers of on-line applications.
- 5.8 Finally, we took note 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 our meeting felt that this was inappropriate and confusing and we agreed to recommend that the system be altered.

Recommendations:

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 policy of ensuring offers within one mile of residence, rather than the government's guidance of two miles, be welcomed and that the government be asked to reflect this in its guidance by

differentiating between urban and rural areas and providing funding to meet this.

17. That the admissions forum be requested to 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, in partnership with head teachers and governors, 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 comprehensively overhauled – to enhance the information provided about the admissions process, to provide up to date information about schools and to achieve a step-change improvement in the numbers of on-line applications.
22. That the admissions system be altered so that changes to applications are recorded as changes and not as late applications.

6 Summary of recommendations

Proposals to increase school places for this year

- 6.1 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.
- 6.2 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

- 6.3 That the executive scrutinises 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.

- 6.4 That the executive put in place mechanisms to ensure that projections remain under regular review.
- 6.5 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.
- 6.6 That ongoing negotiations with some schools in the Dulwich area regarding bulge classes be noted.
- 6.7 That the experience of schools such as Bessemer Grange, where there are fewer children than anticipated, be noted with concern.
- 6.8 That action be taken to publicise the rising reputations of previously less popular schools.
- 6.9 That any increase in the intake of specific schools be matched as closely as possible to the areas experiencing a population bulge.
- 6.10 That any increase in numbers of classes should make use of space within existing school buildings and not encroach on play space.
- 6.11 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 other schools being undersubscribed.

Admissions team and admissions process

- 6.12 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.
- 6.13 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.
- 6.14 That difficulties in the admissions system caused by some parents retaining multiple offers of places be recognised as an ongoing problem.
- 6.15 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.
- 6.16 That the council's policy of ensuring offers within one mile of residence, rather than the government's guidance of two miles, be welcomed and that the government be asked to reflect this in its guidance by differentiating between urban and rural areas and providing funding to meet this.

- 6.17 That the admissions forum be requested to 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.
- 6.18 That, in partnership with head teachers and governors, 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.
- 6.19 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.
- 6.20 In addition, that existing social networks such as community and faith groups and on-line forums are accessed.
- 6.21 That Southwark's website be comprehensively overhauled – to enhance the information provided about the admissions process, to provide up to date information about schools and to achieve a step-change improvement in the numbers of on-line applications.
- 6.22 That the admissions system be altered so that changes to applications are recorded as changes and not as late applications.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Fiona Colley (Chair)
Councillor Jane Salmon (Vice-chair)
Councillor James Barber (Reserve October 12 2009)
Councillor Toby Eckersley
Councillor John Friary
Councillor Barrie Hargrove
Councillor Adedokun Lasaki
Councillor Richard Thomas
Councillor Veronica Ward
Councillor Lorraine Zuleta
Mr. Colin Elliott, Parent Governor

Southwark Community Primary Schools Admission Arrangements for September 2010 and January 2011

Over-subscription Criteria (for all years except nursery):

In the event of there being more applications than places available, places will be allocated in the following order of priority:

- (i) Children in public care (Looked After Children);
- (ii) Children who will have brothers or sisters attending the school at their time of entry;
- (iii) Where professional evidence indicates that there are particular psychological, medical or social needs which the LA and Headteacher agree can best be addressed at the school;
- (iv) Children for whom it is their nearest Southwark community school measured by straight line route from home to main school gate
- (v) Children living nearest the school measured by straight line route from home to main school gate

Notes

- (a) A child in public care (looked after child) means a person under the age of 18 years who is provided by social services with accommodation by agreement with their parents/carers (Section 20 of the Children Act 1989) or who is the subject of a care order under Part IV of the Act. Children who are looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (such as respite) are excluded.
- (b) Brothers and sisters include half brothers and sisters and step brothers and sisters who share the same home. It also includes adopted and foster brothers and sisters who share the same home.
- (c) The straight line walking distance is measured from the main entrance of the child's home to the main entrance of the school. The system used to measure distance takes account of high-rise accommodation and measures from the main entrance. When dealing with multiple applications from a block of flats to the same community school, we will measure from the school's main entrance to the ground floor entrance of the flat. Lower door numbers will take priority.
- (d) Where a school becomes oversubscribed within a single criterion, places will be offered to those children for whom it is their closest community school and then to those who live nearest the school. If oversubscription still exists, lots will be drawn. The process will be overseen by a person independent of the process.
- (e) The home address is the address where the child resides. Where a child spends time with both parents/carers in separate homes and both have parental responsibility, the school will need to establish where the majority of school nights (Sunday to Thursday) are spent and treat that as the home address.

- (f) Evidence of particular psychological, medical or social needs must be substantiated by written evidence from relevant qualified professionals e.g. a child or educational psychologist, a child psychiatrist, a general practitioner, an orthopaedic consultant or social worker.
- (g) A child's attendance at a co-located nursery class does not guarantee admission to the school for primary education, separate application must be made for transfer from nursery to primary school.
- (h) Where a child is offered a place in a primary school before they are of compulsory school age, parents may request that their child's entry be deferred until later in the same school year.

Lewisham Community Primary Schools Admission Arrangements for September 2010 and January 2011

Some community schools are able to admit all children who have applied for a place but if more parents want places for their children than there are places available, the local authority applies the admissions criteria listed below to decide which applicants are offered a place.

Priority is given in the following order to:

1. Children in Public Care (also called 'looked after') – details must be supplied by the allocated social worker. A 'looked after' child is a child who is in care to a local authority or who is provided with accommodation by that authority.
2. In exceptional circumstances there is discretion to admit children on the grounds of their or their family's acute medical or social need for that particular school and who would not otherwise qualify for admission. The application must be supported by a letter from a hospital consultant, social worker or similar professional, clearly setting out the reasons why the school is the only one able to meet the child's needs. The admission decision will be considered in consultation with sub-groups of the Admissions Forum, which includes teaching and medical professionals. Medical professionals provide advice on applications made under medical conditions and teaching professionals advise on applications made for social or special reasons. Supporting evidence must be provided before the closing date for applications. Please note that applications for admission on the grounds of acute medical or social need must be made by the closing date for applications.
3. Children whose brother or sister (a sibling) is on the roll of the school on the closing date for applications and is expected to be on the roll of the school, or of the junior school in the case of separate infant and junior schools*, at the intended date of admission. If the school is oversubscribed entirely with siblings, priority will be given to those living nearest and to those with exceptional social and medical need. Siblings include all blood or adoptive siblings or half siblings, foster siblings of 'looked after' children and step-siblings. Siblings must all be living at the same address as the child. Proof of the sibling relationship may be required. Older children on roll in Year 6 and who will have transferred to secondary school by the time the younger child is due to be admitted to school do not qualify.

(* This applies to children attending Sandhurst Infant and Junior schools, Stillness Infant and Junior schools and Torridon Infant and Junior schools.)

4. Children living nearest to the school. All distances will be measured in a straight line, using digitised mapping software or Ordnance Survey maps of the area, from the home to the nearest gate nominated by the school. Proof of permanent home address will be required before an offer can be accepted, and will include current council tax statements, utility bills, residence orders or other court orders. In some circumstances, Lewisham Authority will rely on other information held or accessed by the Council to confirm the permanent home address. If more than one applicant lives in a multi-occupancy building, e.g. flats, priority will be given to the applicant whose door number is the lowest numerically and/or alphabetically. If a false address has been given and an offer made on the basis of that information, the offer of the place may be withdrawn.