

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 9 July 2013 at 6.30pm

WRITTEN MINUTES – PART A

Present: Councillor Sean Fitzsimons (Chairman)
Councillors Eddy Arram, Graham Bass, Richard Chatterjee, Pat Clouder, Jason Cummings, Clare George-Hilley, Steve Hollands, Terry Lenton, Michael Neal and Manju Shahul-Hameed

Co-opted members:

Parent Governor Representatives: Mr James Collins

Diocesan Representative: Mrs Elaine Jones

Non-voting teacher representative: Mike Dawson

A11/13 MINUTES OF 5 FEBRUARY MEETING (Agenda item 1)

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meetings held on 5 February 2013 be signed as a correct record.

A12/13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda item 2)

Apologies were received from Cllrs Bernadette Khan (reserve: Cllr Pat Clouder), Donna Gray, Justin Cromie and from Vinoo John.

A13/13 DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST (Agenda item 3)

Disclosures were made by the following members:

Cllr Eddy Arram

Cllr Jason Cummings

Elaine Jones

James Collins

A14/13 URGENT BUSINESS (Agenda item 4)

There was none.

A15/13 EXEMPT ITEMS (Agenda item 5)

There were none.

A16/13 SUB-COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP AND CHAIRING (Agenda item 6)

The Sub-Committee resolved to note the report.

A17/13 THE AVAILABILITY OF SCHOOL PLACES AND THE ROBUSTNESS OF PLANNING (Agenda item 7)

The following officers were in attendance for this item:

- Paul Greenhalgh, Executive Director of Children Families and Learning
- Pip Hesketh, Head of School Place Planning and Admissions
- Fionuala McGlynn, School Places Manager
- Sylvia McNamara, Director of Learning and Inclusion
- Diane Ellender, Head of Departmental Finance Corporate and Planning and Environment

The Executive Director gave a brief introduction to the report.

Officers were asked how accurate they could be in predicting future demand for school places. They explained that they obtained information on the number and size of housing units to be built in the borough, and completion dates. The lead-in time to building completion enabled the council to make appropriate preparations. However, they acknowledged that it was much harder to estimate accurate birth rates and levels of migration in or out of the borough, or the *age* of children arriving or leaving the borough.

Members commented that the speed of economic change in 2008 had been very swift, making it difficult for the borough to adapt educational provision to the changes it had brought about. Members added that economic recovery might lead to an exodus from the borough and to the closure of schools. Officers replied that confidence was easily lost, and much harder to build, and that departures en masse were very unlikely. They felt confident about predictions of a surge in demand in primary years over the next 5 years, and were using bulge classes to manage fluctuations more flexibly.

In answer to members' questions on school placements in 2013, officers stated that all children had been placed in schools requested by them. As regards primary schools, 92% of children had obtained a place in the 1st to 3rd choice of schools, and 76% of children had obtained a place in their 1st choice of school. Officers added that the statistics were similar for secondary schools.

In terms of trends, members were advised that demand in and around the town centre was increasing, and that demand for places in Croydon's secondary schools was increasing as their attainment was improving, reducing the outflow of pupils to other boroughs. The difference between net outflow and net inflow had fallen to 1700 children.

It was noted that there was a particular high demand in the north-west of the borough and a consistency of demand in the north. When a school was

deemed to be full, sites for annexes were sought for schools with “good” or “excellent” attainment while less successful schools were discouraged from expanding. The DfE requires the council to submit a robust business case for each school expansion. It was acknowledged that the search for sites represented a significant challenge in the densely populated north of the borough.

Members questioned officers regarding private schools. They were advised that a few small private schools had been badly affected by the economic downturn. However, officers warned against the council taking them over as their small size made them unviable for a wide range of reasons.

It was commented that parents tended to prefer smaller schools, where pupils and staff knew each other better, making for a friendlier atmosphere, whereas the new schools would cater for 600-800 pupils. Officers commented that from a planning, budgetary, staffing and curriculum point of view, smaller schools tended to offer less flexibility and resilience. One-form entry primary schools were seen to be very vulnerable, and had been falling in number, whereas four-form entry primary schools were seen to be “ideal”. The level of attainment was considered to depend considerably on the quality of leadership within a school, rather than the size of the school.

Members asked what measures were available to reduce the average travel distance to school and to aim for a maximum 2 mile distance or a maximum journey time of 45 minutes. They were advised that this target was critical for primary schools, as a council decision could not be enforced if a child’s school journey was longer, but was less significant for secondary establishments. Officers added that site searches from 2010 to 2013 demonstrated the difficulty in finding any sites at all for new build schools. However, this issue is being monitored by officers, using research on post code data. Officers stated that the analysis of this data could be provided to members if desired.

It was observed that school catchment areas varied considerably in size as well as shape, particularly if they were located in the vicinity of features such as railway lines. Faith schools, for instance, had a very wide catchment areas as pupils were prepared to go a long distance to the school of their choice. New schools also tended to have a wider catchment area than established ones. Members were advised that the council had been providing information to parents on the size of catchment areas to help them make an informed choice.

Members highlighted the usefulness of research commissioned by the council and carried out by LG Futures on the trends impacting upon the demand for school places, The research had been carried out to enable the borough to get a better understanding of its short, medium and long-term demand for school places and to develop its strategies for meeting this demand.

Members noted the need, highlighted in the paper, for constant re-evaluation of trends to make provision for the right number of classes in any one year. They asked why no permanent expansion had taken place four years ago. They were advised that they had had to face an

unpredictable transfer rate (the percentage of children born who later apply for reception classes) and that the provision of relevant statistics lagged behind population shifts. Officers were currently experiencing a much greater sense of urgency in the need for expansion than previously thought, and observed that growth had been underestimated even two-three years ago. The Cabinet Member added that the situation had been exacerbated by the character of the recession, which had had a bigger impact on migration rates than previous ones.

It was observed that the DfE had probed the statistics submitted by the council in depth, and that the £63m grant awarded to the council was testament to the robustness of the evidence provided to the DfE.

Officers were asked about the membership of the Pupil Place Planning Group, which members felt was limited and somewhat unrepresentative. Officers agreed that this could be improved.

RESOLVED:

That council officers consider the expansion of the Pupil Place Planning Group to include a wider range of stakeholders.

A18/13 CALL-IN: EDUCATIONAL ESTATES STRATEGY (Agenda item 8)

The Chair explained the call-in procedure and reiterated the grounds for the Call-In. These were:

- that the Cabinet decision was outside of the Policy Framework
- that the decision was inconsistent with the budget
- that the decision was inconsistent with another Council Policy
- that not enough detailed information had been provided at the Cabinet Meeting to justify the decisions made
- that there was public concern in the South Norwood area over the CALAT/Arena secondary school proposals
- that there were concerns over the implications of the Cabinet recommendations for Ryelands Primary School
- that there was lack of certainty that schools were being provided in the areas with the greatest need
- that there were concerns about the financial impact of the provision of new schools

The Chair acknowledged the urgent need for swift school expansion and welcomed the council's success in securing £63m of funding to bring this about. He stressed that the key issue was the choice of sites for new establishments.

Thanks were also expressed to the department for Children, Families and Learning for their provision of detailed replies to questions set through the Call-In, and of answers provided at short notice to the questions set by Sue Kennett, a local resident.

Sue Kennett set out her case and highlighted the following points:

- The north-east of the borough did not need any additional school

provision. The need was being felt in New Addington.

- It would be cheaper to expand than to build brand-new schools
- There were poor transport links to the proposed schools
- Traffic congestion in the area surrounding the Arena, which was already significant, would be exacerbated further
- The new school in Arena would be built partly on Metropolitan Open Land

Officers responded to the above points: They stated that:

- The two key planning areas in the borough were “north” and “south”, with no special secondary school provision for smaller districts within these two areas
- Trams ran in the proposed Arena site, providing public transport to pupils
- It was not true that it was cheaper to expand - it was far better value for money to build from scratch
- The current strategy addressed need for the next two years, but demand was predicted to grow beyond this period, and a large number of new forms would be needed by 2020 all over the borough
- The present moment offered an enormous opportunity to implement something innovative with partners on the Arena site, which would contribute to Croydon’s Olympic legacy.

Cllr Tony Newman, ward member for Woodside, was invited to speak.

He made the following points:

- He accepted the pressure to increase the number of school places in the borough in response to growing demand
- He also acknowledged the need for constantly reviewing demand for educational provision
- However, he felt that residents in the Arena area were unhappy about proposals to do away with Ryelands Primary school, thus disrupting local children’s education, and were concerned about the increase in traffic congestion which a large secondary school would bring about
- He observed that residents felt that ‘a deal had already been done’ which had not taken residents’ views into account, and that consultation carried out thus far had misled the local community

The Chair stated that the planning issues these proposals entailed should be left to the members of the Planning Committee to tackle.

The Executive Director of the Department for Children, Families and Learning gave assurances to the sub-committee that ‘no deal had been done’. However, he highlighted the potential win-win situation the proposals could provide:

- a major refurbishment for Ryelands Primary School
- a secondary school built on one site, with high quality sports facilities

Asked whether the council had the powers to ‘bring in the bulldozers’ if residents expressed a strong wish for Ryelands school to remain, the Executive Director stated that this was a political decision, not an officer decision.

Members were advised that the idea of moving Ryelands Primary School had been put forward by stakeholders responding to consultation on future school provision, and had therefore been incorporated into evolving plans. However, officers stressed that the educational impact of such a proposal

would have to be fully evaluated and approved if this option was to be chosen.

It was observed that people did not like change, but that the urgent demand for school places and the paucity of possible sites brought about conflicting reactions from the community and made unwelcome change necessary.

The Cabinet Member spoke of the consultation process regarding the proposed establishment of a primary school in Haling Road, South Croydon. He described the conflicts of interest between older residents, who were concerned about the possible environmental impact of such a school, and younger residents, who were anxious to ensure that their children would secure a place in a school within a short distance of their homes.

Members asked whether any research data was available on the impact of secondary schools on neighbourhood primary schools. They were informed that there were already schools in that position, which worked together to address any issues that arose between the neighbouring primary and secondary establishments.

Members discussed transport provision for the Arena site. It was observed that while the secondary school proposed for this site was to cater for pupils throughout the north of the borough, the lack of east-west transport links could make school journeys on this axis quite lengthy. In addition, the tram line would not meet the transport needs of pupils living in Upper Norwood or Norbury. Officers informed Members that they were commissioning a full transport impact assessment to address future need in the area.

Officers were asked what other options had been considered alongside the Arena site. They explained that the only other suitable site was the general hospital site on London Road. However, this site was already ear-marked for another school. Members asked why there had been no consultation with the community on the proposed school on the General Hospital Site. They were advised that there had been three bids for the site, and that the Secretary of State had made the decision. The Council had received no information on these bids. Now, however, it had made contact with the Harris group, which was the successful bidder, and setting up steering group meetings to share information and views regarding the future school.

Members commented that planning priorities could change after the 2014 local elections and that the impetus for house building might shift to the south of the borough. In the light of this possibility, they suggested that these Cabinet decisions should perhaps be postponed till after the elections.

Officers stated that the demand for school places was so acute that Cabinet proposals represented the very beginnings of the council's response, covering the next two years. The picture would change as more sites were found and more housing developments were built.

Members questioned officers about the various sites being considered for

future school provision, including allotment sites and parking facilities. The Cabinet Member observed that most sites would attract objections, but, as demand was so acute and the actual range of possible sites so limited, the best approach was to consider a wide range of sites, even if many of them present planning challenges.

Officers were questioned about the Segas site in central Croydon and asked whether the Grade II listed building could realistically be refitted as a school. They stated that while such a choice would not have been made twenty years ago, the shortage of large enough sites necessitated far greater flexibility nowadays. Members also heard that provision for a playground could be made without affecting the façade. It was suggested that part of the site be dedicated to community use; officers stated that this suggestion would have to be discussed with the developer.

Members asked whether the council was working with neighbouring boroughs on school provision. Officers replied that they received regular updates listing new schools being built in the region, and had talked with other boroughs about working together to address local need. It was observed that the need for school places was high in all outer London boroughs, although more acute in Croydon because of the lower housing costs in the borough.

Members suggested an addition to the list of potential sites for future schools, namely, the meatpackers' site opposite East Croydon station, which could be used as an annexe to Oval School. The site had apparently been empty for some years. Officers expressed their willingness to receive other such suggestions from members.

The sub-committee summed up the key issues discussed as follows:

- the acute need for more school places in Croydon
- the paucity of sites in the borough
- the need to improve public transport provision to the Arena site

The Sub-Committee decided not to refer the matter back to Cabinet for consideration.

The Sub-Committee expressed their gratitude for the comprehensive information provided prior to the meeting and the full responses given at the meeting. They were particularly grateful for the detailed written response provided to Mrs Kennett's questions within 48 hours of receiving them.

A19/13

UPDATE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF APPROVED SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS ON "NOTICES TO SCHOOLS" (Agenda item 9)

The following officers were in attendance for this item:

- Paul Greenhalgh, Executive Director of Children Families and Learning
- David Butler, Teaching and Learning Advisor
- Sylvia McNamara, Director of Learning and Inclusion

It was acknowledged that, with hindsight, recommendation 1a,

'that all relevant agencies operating in Croydon adopt the procedure detailed in the group's findings and conclusions as per pages 11 and 12 of this report')

should have been more explicit and should have allocated responsibility to a designated officer on a 24/7 basis, to disseminate warnings swiftly, even at weekends.

Officers acknowledged that the response to "stranger danger" incidents in May 2013 had not been as good as they could have been. In response to these events, the Improvement Advisor for Safeguarding and Multi-Agency Liaison had been identified as the link LA officer with the Metropolitan Police and would be responsible for ensuring that school receive prompt, accurate and agreed alerts.

Officers observed that the viability of a school relay system, which had been discontinued, could be explored again. Members asked whether such a system could include communications to youth clubs and nursery schools. Officers stated that such a suggestion would constitute a natural next step, and that they were also working on improving links with faith groups in the borough.

Councillors expressed their satisfaction at the fact that lessons had been learnt and improvements implemented.

Officers were thanked for attending the meeting.

A20/13 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2013-2014 (Agenda item 10)

Members discussed the agenda for the 15 October sub-committee meeting

RESOLVED:

- That the following stakeholders be invited to contribute to the agenda item on "youth employability":

- Colleges
- A representative of local employers
- Youth council members
- Companies that sponsor apprenticeships

- That a suitable visit be considered to prepare for the 15 October sub-committee meeting.

PART B

None

The meeting ended at 9.25 pm