

Scrutiny & Overview Committee

Meeting held on Tuesday, 17 September 2019 at 6.00 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

- Present:** Councillor Sean Fitzsimons (Chair);
Councillor Robert Ward (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Leila Ben-Hassel and Joy Prince
- Also Present:** Councillors Mary Croos, Richard Chatterjee, Robert Canning and Andrew Pelling
Robert Henderson, Executive Director, Children Families and Education
Shelley Davies, Interim Director of Education
Colin Powell, Education Director, Southwark Diocese
Children Young People Sub-Committee Members- Councillors Sue Bennett, Bernadette Khan, Gareth Streeter and Callton Young. Co-Optees- Geoff Hopper, Elaine Jones, Leo Morrell, and Paul O'Donnell.
- Apologies:** Councillor Jerry Fitzpatrick. Councillor May Croos was in attendance in his absence. Councillor Jeet Bains, Councillor Richard Chatterjee was in attendance in his absence

PART A

31/19 **Disclosure of Interests**

Councillor Robert Ward disclosed that he is a member of Humanists UK, which campaigns for Faith Schools to be eventually absorbed back into the wider schools sector.

32/19 **Urgent Business (if any)**

There were no items of urgent business.

33/19 **Call-In: Proposed Closure of St Andrew's Church of England High School**

The Chair, Councillor Sean Fitzsimons introduced the Call-In item, outlining the reasons why the key decision to close St Andrews CofE High School had been called in. It was stated that the reason for the Call-In was for officers and the Southwark Diocese to be held accountable and to answer any queries arising on their reasons for recommended closure of the school.

The Chair explained the process for considering a Call-In confirming that the Committee needed to agree whether to review the decision and if it decided to proceed confirm how much time it wished to allocate for discussion of the item. The Committee agreed that it would review the decision and allocated 60 minutes for consideration of the item.

The Chair went on to explain that there were three outcomes that the Committee could reach as a result of the review. These were:

1. That no further action was necessary and the decision could be implemented as originally intended.
2. To refer the decision back to the decision maker for reconsideration, outlining the nature of the Committee's concerns
3. To refer the decision to Council, if the Committee considered that the decision taken was outside of the Budget and Policy Framework.

The Chair highlighted that as the reason for the Call-In did not raise the possibility that the decision was taken outside of the Budget and Policy Framework, it was unlikely that option 3 would be used in this instance.

It's important that the relationship between the LA and the Diocese in relation to managing the school and the finances are clear. St Andrews CofE was a Voluntary aided school which meant that it was part of the educational provision of the Southwark Diocesan Board of Education and the London Borough of Croydon. It's a state funded school in which the Diocesan Board contributes to building costs and has a substantial influence in the running of the school. The running costs are fully paid by central government via the LA. The Diocese maintains costs to the building, 90% of the schools Capital costs are met by the school and the Diocese responsible for 10% of the costs of capital work. As the school is a state funded school, by law any deficit incurred are the direct responsibility of the LA.

The Interim Director of Education addressed the reasons for the Call-in and directed Members to the Executive report which outlined the reasons for the agreed decision on closure of the school. During the introduction to the item the following was noted:

- The governing body made the decision for closure of the school, the Local Authority (LA) and the Southwark Diocesan Board of Education was asked to support the decision, with the LA asked to commence the statutory process of the school closure in December 2018.
- The school had struggled for a number of years to attract a sustainable number of children onto the school roll
- The financial viability of the school had been unstable for a number of years.
- The school had been rated inadequate by Ofsted following their inspection on 16 January 2019.
- A pre-publication consultation was undertaken with a request for suggested options for consideration on the proposed closure of the school.

- It was determined following careful consideration that the decision to close the school would not have a negative impact on pupils and schools in the north of the Borough.
- Parents were consulted and all children in year 7, 8 and 9 were given places at an alternative school. Pupils in year 10 and 11 would remain at the school to complete their examination courses in 2019 and 2020.

The Committee was given the opportunity to question the decision maker, officers and the representative from the Southwark diocese who had been involved in the decision making process. From the questions asked, the following was noted:-

- There had been ongoing discussions between the school governing body, the local authority and the Diocese on the viability of the school, with all involved in the process aligned on the decision.
- The governing body was advised to seek independent advice before making the decision, which had been done prior to reaching their final decision on the closure of the school.
- Other options had been explored with Archbishop Tennison School invited to expand onto the site but following exploration of these options their governing body had voted against this proposal.
- The site was part owned with the Diocese owning the building and the Council the surrounding land.
- It was planned that the site would remain designated for educational use.
- The Council would be responsible for the financial deficit accumulated.

Members took the view that as the school was part owned, the Council should not be solely responsible for the deficit but were informed that as the school was a voluntary school aided by the Council, the law states that responsibility for any deficit lies with the local authority.

It was questioned why a decision had not been taken earlier when it was identified that there was a substantial deficit being incurred. Officers advised that the school had been declining over a number of years. A decision had been made to change the leadership which made an impact but the school was still not able to attract new pupils. The situation continued to be monitored with improvement measures made. A large proportion of the deficit had been incurred to ensure that the children in attendance continued to receive a balanced curriculum. The school could not continue as it was, the deficit would have continued rising and would have been unable to maintain provision of a balanced curriculum if the decision for closure had not been made.

It was highlighted that the Diocesan would be responsible for the ongoing maintenance of the building and it was asked if the building could be used to offset some of the deficit such as leasing it at affordable price to charities or community groups. Officers responded that conversations were taking place on the utilisation of the building in the short term and longer term discussions on options of proportionality of church school places.

Members took the view that it was important that the site was retained for educational use as since the consultation for proposed closure had taken place, proposals had been announced for further intensification of the surrounding area with thousands of new homes planned. Living within the area of planned expansion in the town centre and Waddon Marsh would be children who would need educating and it would be disappointing if the site was lost. The housing target was increasing as a result of the Local Plan and it was asked whether specific financial modelling could be done on the predictions of required school place and future costing based on this. Officers said that when looking at planning and provision of school places, local intelligence and GLA predictions were used as the Council had to ensure there was a surplus of 5% of school places. Planning on school places was difficult to predict, however it was noted that housing predictions and costing would be an interesting concept to explore.

Members were informed that the Diocesan Board as well as the Council were committed to retaining the site for educational use. Funds had been and would continue to be spent on maintenance of the building and despite the decline in number of pupils the building was in good condition and was fit for purpose could it be re-opened as a school in the future. It was hoped that in the short term the site could be utilised in a way that would benefit the LA financially.

There was a concern raised regarding the loss of denominational secondary school places, with officers advising that they had wanted to explore the possible expansion of Archbishop Tenison's School with detailed information provided, but while there had been interest, they had decided against expansion onto another site due to budget constraints. It was important to note that if Tenisons had agreed to take over the site, it would have expanded its current provision and not necessarily have led to the creation of new places.

The Committee was reminded that this had not been an easy decision or one that had been taken lightly. Every decision made had to ensure that the children were at the heart of the decision.

Following the questioning of the officers the Committee considered the outcome of the call-in request and following a vote, the Committee unanimously **resolved** that no further action was required and the decision could be implemented as originally intended.

Conclusion

Following discussions, the following conclusions were made:

1. That the tremendous contribution the school had made to the community of Croydon since it opened in 1947 was commendable and should never be forgotten.
2. It was regrettable and sad that the school was closing during a period of population growth in Croydon.

3. It was regrettable that the funding system for schools made it difficult for smaller schools to function effectively and remain in operation.
4. That the Children and Young People Scrutiny Sub-Committee should discuss this issue further during the Question Time session with the Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning to identify lessons learnt and what other preventative measures could have been taken

Recommendation

The Committee resolved to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Education that:-

1. A formal commitment be made to ensure that the whole site was retained for educational use.
2. That the Council work with the Diocesan to produce an ongoing plan to raise capital through the short term use of the building
3. That a commitment be made to utilise the Local Plan to ensure that the land remained allocated for educational use.

34/19 **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

This was not required.

The meeting ended at 7.20 pm

Signed:

Date:

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