

SUMMARY REPORT

**Tackling the school places gap:
Pupil place planning and the impact of academies and free
schools**

Scrutiny Challenge Session Report



**London Borough of Tower Hamlets
November 2013**

Chair's Foreword

Councillor Amy Whitelock Gibbs

Chair of the review panel, Scrutiny Lead for education

The lack of future school places has featured heavily in the news recently. While this is a London-wide issue, it is particularly significant in Tower Hamlets, as our borough has one of the fastest growing young populations in the country. Members are also acutely aware of parents' concerns about the growing school places gap.

As such, Overview and Scrutiny wanted to investigate how the council is currently managing school places in the borough and whether more needs to be done to both meet the growing gap and enable parents to navigate the system appropriately. Members wanted to understand the key national and local pressures on school places, relevant policy levers and restrictions, what steps the local authority has already taken and what other opportunities are available to expand school provision.

I am pleased to present this report which outlines the key challenges facing the borough and makes a number of practical recommendations for the council.

It became clear through the challenge session that the local authority is operating within a very restricted framework, as national policy prevents councils from setting up new community schools, while local policy opposes the development of academies and free schools. There is a strong tension between local authorities' statutory duty to provide sufficient school places and their inability to set up their own community schools, which is compounded by insufficient funding to meet need.

Nevertheless, Members identified a number of recommendations to address the three key challenges facing the borough – providing the right number of places, in the right place geographically, which offer sufficient choice for families. The recommendations focus on school expansion, proactively identifying new sites for schools, reviewing and improving information available to parents and Members, and prioritising measures to bring new schools into the family of community schools.

I would like to thank the officers and external speakers that contributed to the challenge session, especially Anne Canning, Service Head Learning and Achievement – early years, Pat Watson, Head of Building Development; and Terry Bryan, Head of Pupil Admissions and Exclusions. I am also grateful to my colleagues on the challenge session – both Members and co-opted parent governors – for their support, advice and insights.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1

Continue to identify options for expansion of existing schools, whilst retaining existing standards about quality and space.

Recommendation 2

Prioritise the continuation of procuring and developing sites in the borough for schools, the delivery of which can be supported by funding mechanisms which could include S106 or (in future) the Community Infrastructure Levy. Explore all options for retaining site allocations for community schools maintained by the local authority, as far as possible

Recommendation 3

Review the provision of information to parents, about the schools admissions process and allocation of places, to ensure it is flexible, user-friendly and understandable

- Consult with parents via the Parents Advice Centre project about the current information provided
- Explore alternative methods and formats, including digital options
- Re-assess user satisfaction with the information provided after each admissions round.

Recommendation 4

Provide more information and in a timelier fashion to Members about pupil places and admissions criteria to support them in dealing with residents' queries, especially on the day school places are announced.

- Provide information at ward level and borough-wide
- Provide information about the process at application time
- Provide summary information about the process and information on outcomes at decision time (for both secondary and primary places)

Recommendation 5

Pursue efforts to bring free schools and academies within the strong family of community schools, supported by the local authority:

- Prioritise the development of a formal agreement with free schools and academies, to ensure they deliver education in line with the council's values around admissions, curriculum and standards
- Seek Members' input to the draft 'Working with Academies and Free Schools protocol' prior to publication
- Where new schools are agreed, continue to build positive relationships with them at the Member and officer level and sell the benefits of the family of schools, including council services on offer

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Tower Hamlets is the fastest growing local authority in the country so ensuring there are enough school places remains a key challenge. With approximately 263,000 residents, the borough's population has increased by around 25% over the last 10 years. The borough also has a higher than average young population and growth in demand for school places is anticipated to grow at a faster rate than was previously projected. Current projections suggest that demand for reception places will increase by 23% over the next 10 years and by 44% for secondary school places.
- 1.2 The aim of the challenge session was to investigate whether the council's pupil place planning arrangements are effective and what more can be done to meet the school places gap. The need for the session arose in light of parents' concerns about the growing problem.
- 1.3 The objectives of the challenge session were therefore to answer the following questions:
- What measures has the local authority put in place to plan for school places?
 - How is national policy impacting on the options open to the local authority?
 - How do we work with schools which are their own admissions authorities to improve accessibility of school places?
 - What more can the council do to ensure the pupil place planning arrangements are effective to meet the gap in school places?
- 1.4 The session was facilitated by Cllr Amy Whitelock Gibbs, Scrutiny Lead for Children, Schools and Families. It took place on Tuesday 26th November 2013.
- 1.5 The session was attended by:
- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Cllr Amy Whitelock Gibbs | Scrutiny lead for Education |
| Cllr Josh Peck | Councillor |
| Cllr Carlo Gibbs | Councillor |
| Cllr Lesley Pavitt | Councillor |
| Memory Kampiyawo | Parent Co-optee |
| Nozrul Mustafa | Parent Co-optee |
| Clive Grimshaw | Head of Children's Services, London Councils |
| James Hodgson | LB Barking & Dagenham, BSF Project Director |
| Anne Canning | Service Head Learning and Achievement |
| Pat Watson | Head of Building Development |
| Terry Bryan | Head of Pupil Admissions and Exclusions |
| Frances Jones | One Tower Hamlets Service Manager |
| Vicky Allen | Strategy, Policy and Performance Officer, Corporate Strategy & Equality |

2. BACKGROUND

School types in England

- 2.1 There has been a drive by the Coalition Government towards the establishment of Free Schools and Academies, which are independent of local authority control, and a reduction of schools maintained by the local authority. This creates a tension, as whilst councils retain responsibility for ensuring that all school aged children have access to an appropriate school place, it has become more difficult to influence the location and type of school within their jurisdiction. The urgent need for additional school places leaves the local authority with the option of expanding the size of existing schools or relying on providers to operate a school which responds to the needs of the residents in its locality.
- 2.2 There are several types of publicly-funded schools in England with the majority of pupils attending either a maintained school or an academy. Maintained schools are maintained and funded by the local authority; they follow the national curriculum, national pay and conditions, and are overseen by the local authority. Maintained schools include:
- Community schools – responsibility of the local authority
 - Foundation Trust schools – responsibility of their trust and governing body
 - Voluntary Aided schools – mainly faith schools and supported by a trust
 - Voluntary Controlled schools – as above but responsibility of the local authority
- 2.3 Academies, Free Schools and Academy converters all have the same status in law, they are all ‘academies’ which means that they are all funded directly by the Department for Education (DfE) and are independent of local authority control. They are funded and held accountable through a legally binding funding agreement with the DfE. School land and property is transferred to Academy converters on a long lease at nil cost. Free Schools and Academies do not have to follow the national curriculum although teaching must be ‘broad and balanced’ and teach a range of subjects including English, maths and science.
- 2.4 The Government has both encouraged existing schools to convert to Academy status and interested parties to establish new Free Schools. They sell the benefit of the Free School and Academy route as a way of enabling schools to have greater autonomy over their curriculum, budget and staff in order to raise standards of education.

Legislation

- 2.5 The Education Act 2011 made changes to the arrangements for the establishment of new schools by introducing a presumption that when local authorities identify the need for a new school it will be established as an Academy (or free school).
- 2.6 The Act also made changes to the legislation relating to school land, to increase the Secretary of State's ability to make land available for free schools. There is no longer a requirement for Academies to have a specialism, and there have been changes to the requirements around consultation on the set up of an Academy. In addition, the DfE have recently published revised accommodation standards which reduce the standard areas for a school from the current requirements.
- 2.7 Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide sufficient school places for children of school age. These include the academic standards of maintained schools, the coordination of admissions arrangements, the education of permanently excluded pupils, and paying for additional support needed for individual statemented pupils with high needs.
- 2.8 As of 1st November 2013, 3,444 ¹ academies have been established in England, 382 of which are in London. 93 new free schools opened in England in September 2013. With London having around 2,200 schools, this equates to over 17% of all London schools in comparison to 15% in England as a whole. There are 78² academy conversions in the pipeline in London with 47 of those approved to open and 31 awaiting approval.
- 2.9 London Councils ³predicts that around 101,000 additional primary school places and 16,800 additional secondary school places will be required in London by 2016/17. As most new schools will be established as Academies and Free Schools, it is inevitable that the proportion of children attending a maintained school will decrease substantially.

¹ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/academies/b00208569/open-academies>

² <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/academies/b00208569/open-academies>

³ London Councils delivering school capacity, November 2013

Local context:

Population and projections

2.10 The census 2011 shows that 8% of the borough's population are aged under 5 years old, compared to the London average of 7% and England average of 6%. Information relating to the projected need for additional primary and secondary school places is in section 3.5-3.7 below.

Council's stance on academies and free schools

2.11 The Mayor and Full Council have pledged to oppose the development of academies and free schools. There has been a long-standing commitment by the council to protecting the family of community schools, given the diverse needs in Tower Hamlets, to ensure every child has equal access to good quality education and prevent a two-tier system developing.

2.12 A range of reasons why the Cabinet opposes academy and free schools include the following:

- A network of local authority schools supported by the local authority is the best way to ensure that all our schools and young people get the support and resources they require to achieve the best level of education;
- The reduced level of funding for the local authority limits its ability to work with schools to improve practice, support schools that are failing, and maintain the fabric of schools to a decent standard;
- Support services will need to be procured either from the local authority or arranged independently by individual schools;
- Reduced local democratic accountability to parents;
- Pupils excluded by academies will impact on neighbouring maintained schools that the local authority will have to place them in;
- Difficulty for the local authority to plan for future pupil places;
- Schools with their own admissions' policies may mean pupils have less access to a school of their choice and if they do not sign up to the 'fair access protocol' this could mean reduced community cohesion;
- Transferring land and assets to academies will make it more difficult for the council to co-locate services

Academies and Free Schools in Tower Hamlets

2.13 Tower Hamlets currently has 8 Free Schools and Academies, five of these are primary schools, two are secondary schools and one provides education to 14-19 year olds. There are further schools in the pipeline subject to finding sites or receiving DfE approval.

Current Academies and Free Schools

Age range	Name	Type	Date operational
Primary	Canary Wharf College 1	Free School	Sept 2011
Primary	Constable Education Trust (CET) primary school Tower Hamlets	Free school	Sept 2012
Primary	Culloden	Academy converter	Conversion in September 2013
Primary	Old Ford	Academy converter	Conversion in September 2013
Primary	Sir William Burrough	Academy converter	Conversion in December 2011
Secondary (11-19)	Bethnal Green Academy	Academy converter	Conversion in January 2012
Secondary (11-18)	Wapping High School	Free school	Sept 2012
14-19	City Gateway	Free School	Sept 2012

Approved by the DfE to open

Age range	Name	Type	Date operational
16-19	East London Academy of Music	Free school	Sept 2014
Primary	Canary Wharf College 2	Free school	Sept 2014
Secondary (11-16)	London Enterprise Academy	Free school	Sept 2014

Known proposed Free School applications to the DfE (but not yet approved)

Age range	Name	Type	Date operational
4-18	Canary Wharf College 3	Free school	Not yet determined
Primary	Constable Education Trust (CET) 2	Free school	Not yet determined
5-16	Tower Science Academy	Free school	Not yet determined
14-19	The Aldridge Centre for Entrepreneurship	Free school	Not yet determined

3. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Insufficient capital funding for school places

- 3.1 Members heard from Clive Grimshaw, the head of children's services at London Councils, about the Government's allocation of capital grants for funding new school places. He advised there is a significant mismatch between the funding the Government provides for school places – which has remained fixed – and the demand for school places, which has been rising. This has left a substantial gap in the funding settlement.
- 3.2 London Councils also reported that there is an issue with the methodology used to calculate the capacity required. The Government uses an average cost of £11,000 per new pupil place and bases capital funding allocations on this. However, conditions are different in London, compared to the rest of England, and especially difficult in a growth area such as Tower Hamlets. London-specific factors include rapid population growth, operating at a high capacity within school historically, most of the straightforward options for expansion of capacity having been delivered already and local cost drivers. London Councils estimate that an average cost per place of £20,000 would be more appropriate in London.
- 3.3 Members were very concerned that the average rate disproportionately disadvantaged Tower Hamlets and London as a whole. London Councils are currently lobbying Government on behalf of London local authorities about the problems with the funding methodology and the challenge local authorities face given their lack of control over new schools. There has been constructive dialogue with the Department for Education about the need to address the mismatch in the funding methodology for London, and the overall tension between local authorities' duties and lack of direct control, but further lobbying by London Councils is needed.

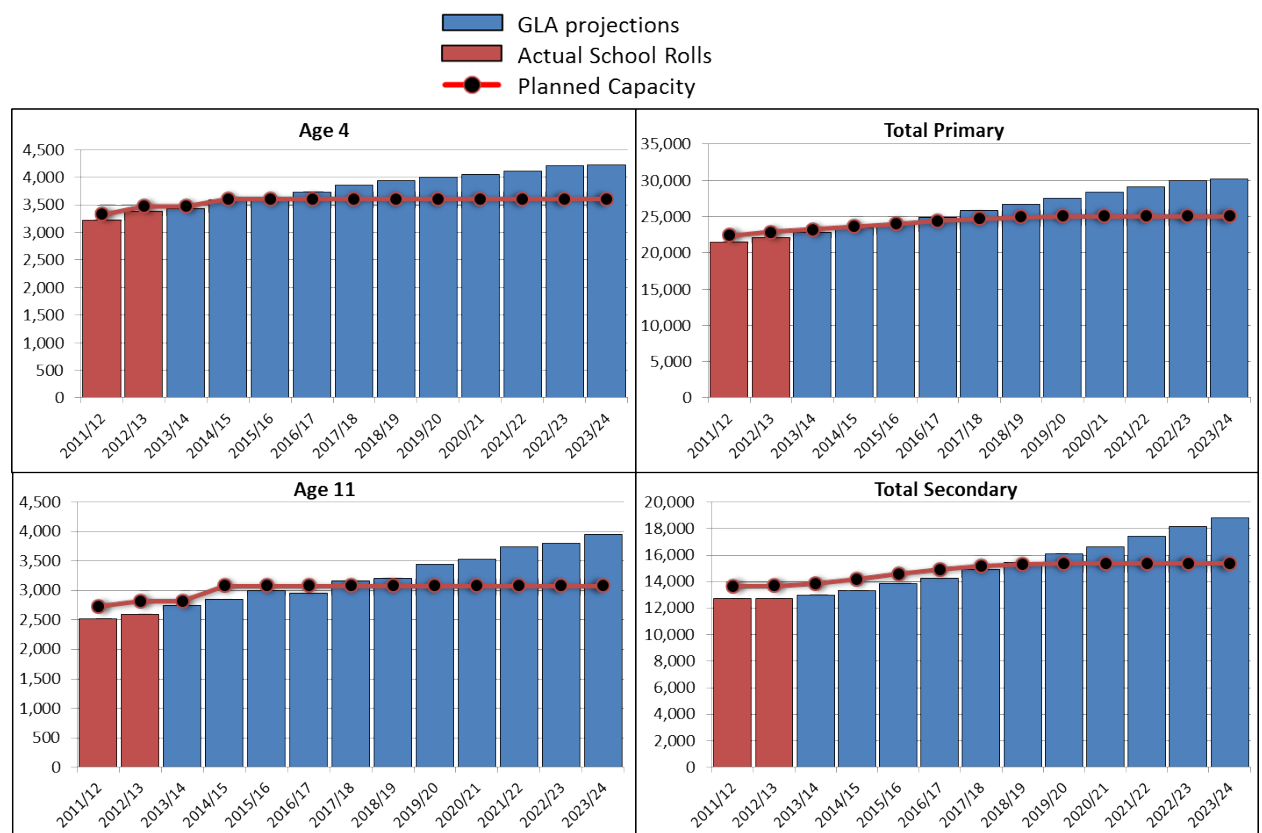
Rising school place capacity need

- 3.4 London Councils also reported that the population growth of young people in London is growing faster than any other region in England. Between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, the birth rate in London rose by around 27%. In the same period, there has been a rise in the number of young people aged 0-19 of around 12% in London compared to 3% in England as a whole. By 2016/17 it is projected that the number of additional primary school places needed in London will be approximately 101,000 and 17,000 for secondary. This means 42% of the additional primary school places required for the whole of England will be needed in the London, and 52% of all secondary school capacity needed.
- 3.5 Members heard that this significant demand for school places in London was partly due to London being an employment hub for young people who then go on to have families. Added pressure comes from the fact that while traditionally families have moved out to the suburbs, this is not as simple an option now because of rising housing costs. London

Councils also reported that there is some evidence that families come to London because education is often perceived as of a higher standard.

3.6 For Tower Hamlets, Members were advised that the rising need for school places was due both to the impact of new housing developments in the borough and the birth rate⁴ which is higher than the inner-London average. The births figure for 2011 was 25% higher than the number of births in 2001 (an additional 911 births). This trend is projected to continue, meaning increasing pressure on school places into the future. Officers confirmed that meeting the need for school places is one of the biggest risks facing the Education, Social Care & Wellbeing Directorate.

GLA School roll projections for Tower Hamlets



3.7 Members analysed the graphs above which show that by 2016/17, there will be more primary aged pupils, and by 2017/18 more secondary aged pupils, than there are currently school places within the borough. 800 additional primary school places and 1,200 additional secondary school places are needed in the next 10 years. A total of 6 extra forms of entry for primary places are required on top of those already planned by 2016/17, rising to a further 9 extra forms of entry by 2022. For secondary schools, there is projected to be a need for a further 4 extra forms of entry by 2015/16 rising to 27 extra forms of entry by 2022.

⁴ ONS Births by area of usual residence of mother 2012, released September 2013.

Meeting the need

- 3.8 Members asked what measures are taken to meet the need for additional school places. Members were concerned about provision of school places in three main respects:
- Provision of a sufficient number of places
 - Ensuring places are in the right place geographically
 - Giving families appropriate choice of different types of places
- Members asked officers to outline how the council's pupil place planning meets these three pressures to ensure both need and choice are met.
- 3.9 Officers confirmed that two main principles underpin their approach for managing the demand for school places: guaranteeing equitable admissions and good quality schools. These drivers mean some options for meeting the need – for example, further expansion of already large schools – are rejected, as they would compromise quality.

Identifying the gaps

- 3.10 The maps below shows where the existing schools are located in the borough, compared to where the greatest need is for school places. The darker the shading the higher the percentage of population increase in the area, and therefore need for school places. The diagram shows that there is greater need for school places in the Isle of Dogs and to the East of the borough than in the West. The rapid and extensive expansion in the East of the borough and on the Isle of Dogs has resulted in insufficient school places for families in these areas and means they often have to travel further for to access a school. The map also identifies which schools have potential for expansion, which have already been expanded and which have no site capacity for expansion.
- 3.11 Clear conclusions are that there is limited further scope for expansion on existing sites, in order to meet the rising demand for school places – though there are still a limited number of schools with potential site capacity, which should be pursued. Members also noted the geographical gaps in terms of where current schools are and where new developments are in progress or planned.

Percentage Increase in the Number of Children 2012/13 - 2022/23

Reception Age Pupils

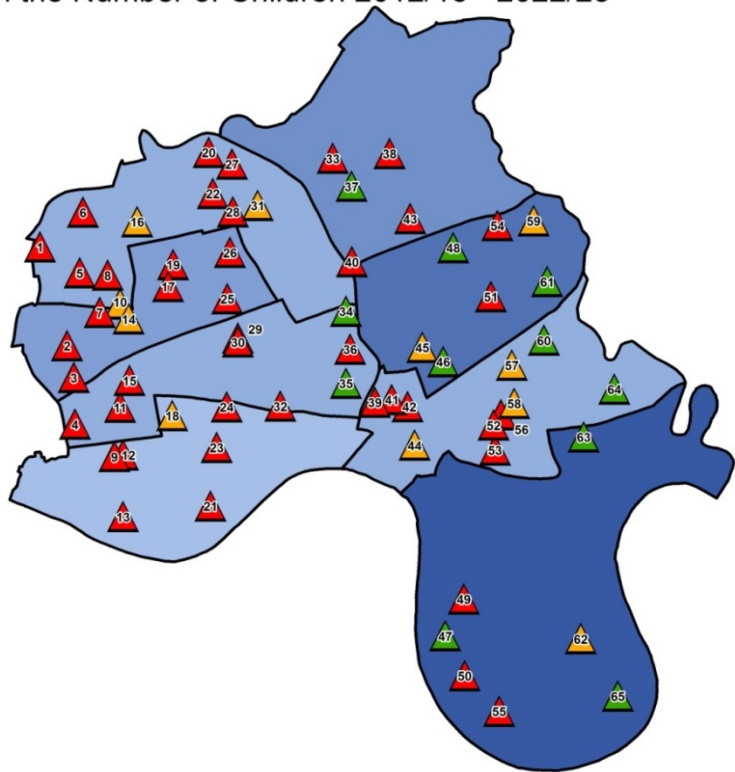
Source: GLA School Roll Projections 2013

Legend

- ▲ Expansion implemented / in progress
- ▲ Potential site capacity
- ▲ No site capacity

Percentage Increase 2012/13 to 2022/23

- 4.4% - 10%
- 10.1% - 20%
- 20.1% - 30%
- 30.1% - 40%
- 40.1% - 50%
- 50.1% - 60%
- 60.1% - 70%
- 70.1% - 80%



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Percentage Increase in the Number of Children 2012 - 2022

Children Aged 11

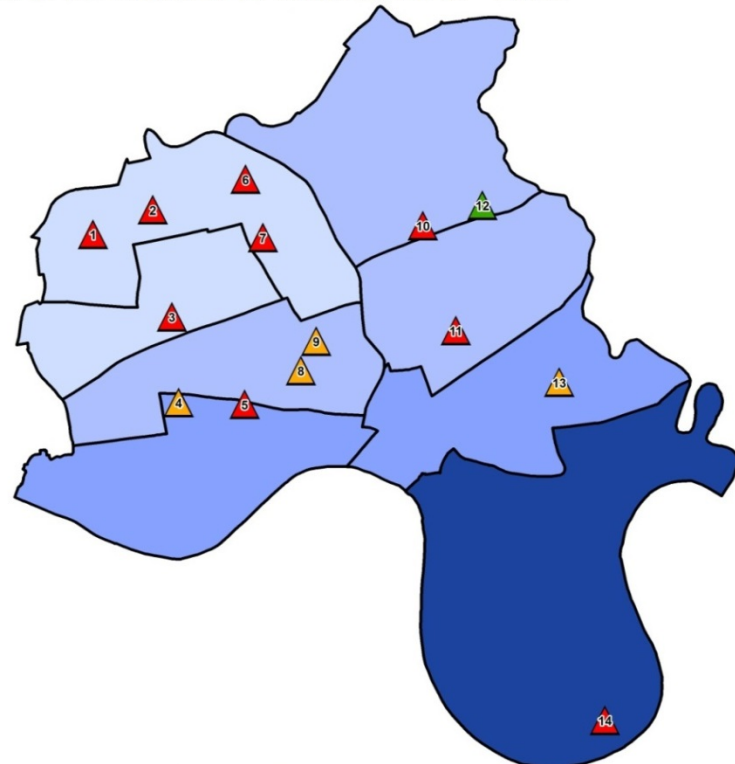
Source: GLA Population Projections 2012

Legend

- ▲ Expansion implemented / in progress
- ▲ Potential site capacity
- ▲ No site capacity

Percentage Increase 2012 to 2022

- 0% - 10%
- 10.1% - 20%
- 20.1% - 30%
- 30.1% - 40%
- 40.1% - 50%
- 50.1% - 60%
- 60.1% - 70%
- 70.1% - 80%
- 80.1% - 90%



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- 3.12 Additional pressures come from changes to the school leaving age. Members heard how the Pupil Place Planning group have started to look at finding additional school places to accommodate an increased need due to the 'Raising the Participation Age' agenda – which requires all young people up to the age of 18 to be either in education, training or employment. They also welcomed the work the group has planned on reviewing provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) to ensure that there are proportionate additional places for pupils with SEN who require places in special schools.
- 13.3 Officers reported that the council also cannot control the arrival of new free schools in the borough or of new housing developments (subject to planning approvals), both of which impact on pressures around where and how many places are needed.

The right numbers of places – Expanding existing schools

- 3.13 Members heard that given the council's position on free schools and academies, the main option available is to expand schools – either providing more forms in each year, or expanding the school into new age ranges. Officers reported that the more straightforward options for expanding primary schools within their existing sites had generally been implemented. Officers stated that further options are likely to be more difficult or costly to achieve. A number of primary schools have already been expanded and this has provided 9.5 extra forms of entry up to September 2013. In addition, a further 7 extra forms of entry are being provided in September 2014: 3 for primary and four for secondary.
- 3.14 For primary schools, options for further potential capacity have been identified and are being explored. For secondary schools, expansion has been implemented or is in progress in one school, there is potential site capacity which is being explored at 4 schools and for the remaining 9 schools, there is no site capacity.
- 3.15 Officers explained that tackling the school places gap may mean investigating options that would not normally be considered including:
- mixed use development with housing above school accommodation;
 - reducing the standard for external recreation areas, particularly where there is a public open space adjacent to the school which could be used by pupils;
 - the use of non-traditional buildings such as former office or retail premises;
 - whether schools and other services could be co-located.
- 3.16 The Service Head for Learning and Achievement spoke about the innovative plans that are in place to provide additional capacity for St. Paul's Way School, by expanding to accommodate a wider age range of pupils. The new building will include residential properties above the school.

3.17 Members and Officers alike agreed that consideration to expand a school could not be taken lightly, especially if there was a chance that educational standards may be affected. In addition, they did not want the council to reduce the high specifications already adhered to for school buildings and play grounds. They considered these standards essential for young people whose own living conditions may be overcrowded and lacking access to outdoor space.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Continue to identify options for expansion of existing schools, whilst retaining existing standards about quality and space.

Schools in the right place – Identifying and predicting potential sites

3.18 Members asked whether the council was doing enough to predict potential sites for Free Schools and Academies that may be secured by the DfE for new schools, as this could help proactively manage the council's pupil place planning duty. Officers reported that knowledge is shared through the Pupil Place Planning Group but it is becoming increasingly more challenging as standards relating to school buildings have been reduced and the DfE is allowing schools to consider sites which the local authority would not have identified or agreed as being acceptable in terms of space, location, size etc.

3.19 Members heard that as a response to the need for more school places, the council now places high priority on the procurement of sites for schools, as it does for affordable homes through the planning application process. Long term planning has achieved several site allocations for new schools. The site allocations would potentially provide for two secondary schools and four primary schools at London Dock, Westferry Printworks, Fish Island, Neptune Wharf, Bow Common and Leven Road Gas Works. Members were advised that the council will develop these sites which may then be operated by a Free School or Academy provider. However the council will not be in a position to control the timing of potential implementation, which will be driven by the site owners coming forward with planning applications.

3.20 Members were concerned to hear that the council may not be aware of a Free School or Academy's intention to set up in the borough until the DfE approves the application. Moreover, there is significant uncertainty about whether the school will go ahead and be developed at all, or be subject to site changes and shifting timescales. This all makes planning for pupil places more challenging and the council invests significant time in responding to the implications of new schools: waiting to hear if they are approved or have a site; managing the pressure on the admissions process; and trying to bring them under the council's admissions criteria.

3.21 Members were also worried that Free Schools and Academies opening without sufficient regard for location could lead to maintained community

schools becoming less viable because of the proximity of the new schools. Pupils may be drawn away from these maintained schools causing a strain on the school's funding. There was also a discussion about the pressure on the schools' admissions process, as the council offers school places to pupils who then may be drawn to a new Free School or Academy. Conversely, if Free Schools and Academies fail, this puts pressure on the admissions system as the council will have to belatedly find places for the pupils affected. Both scenarios destabilise the admissions process in the short-term, as well as impacting on the council's ability to plan for the long-term.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Prioritise the continuation of procuring and developing sites in the borough for schools, the delivery of which can be supported by funding mechanisms which could include S106 or (in future) the Community Infrastructure Levy. Explore all options for retaining site allocations for community schools maintained by the local authority, as far as possible.

The right choice of schools – Meeting the needs of the local community

- 3.22 Members welcomed the work that Officers were doing to plan for school places in the borough as far as possible, but they were concerned that the ability of a Free School or Academy to open within the borough without much regard for the wider community's needs could undermine short and long-term planning and, in the future, lead to a two-tier system of education. It was noted that recent improvements in attainment, particularly at GCSE, were achieved through the community of maintained schools, led by the local authority. Members were concerned that free schools had the freedoms to choose their own admissions criteria or curriculum specialisms – or even proactive policies – to recruit only from certain groups or abilities which would undermine social cohesion and undermine the principle that all children should have equal access to a good education.
- 3.23 Members expressed their constituents' concerns about ensuring that the schools in the borough met the diverse needs of local residents. With regard to single sex schools, the Service Head for Learning and Achievement confirmed that there was no policy to reduce the number of single sex schools. She explained that the decision to extend provision in Bow School to girls was because there was a shortage of provision for girls in the East of the borough. It was discussed that Free Schools and Academies brought additional parental choice which could be both positive and negative depending on perspective. The tension facing the council is between providing choice and meeting the needs of all pupils.
- 3.24 Members reported that there is confusion amongst many parents about both the types of schools available locally and the admissions process, particularly around the catchment area system for primary schools.
- 3.25 Members heard about the work being done within Children's Centres and other under-five services on raising awareness of the admissions

process. They felt however that communications could still be made clearer, and expanded to other childcare establishments such as non-maintained or private nurseries who are less aware of the system, and proactively provided to parents online and via social media networks. Members reported that they had been approached by some parents who said that they found the information about the system complicated and often had difficulty understanding the best way to make their choices about preferences for schools. Members also reported that some parents had found it difficult to access the information they needed or to get responses to queries they raised, and others found it difficult to understand why certain decisions had been made about which school their child was placed in.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Review the provision of information to parents about the schools admissions process and allocation of places, to ensure it is flexible, user-friendly and understandable

- Consult with parents via the Parents Advice Centre project about the current information provided
- Explore alternative methods and formats, including digital options
- Re-assess user satisfaction with the information provided after each admissions round

3.26 There was a brief discussion about the catchment area system. Members reported that they had received enquiries from some parents who had lived close by to several schools but didn't get a place at any of them, because of the catchment area system. Members felt that residents have insufficient information to understand the system including knowing whether or not a school was likely to be over-subscribed before they moved into an area. Members also felt that they had insufficient information in order to support their constituents both before and after admissions decisions had been made. Officers reported that information on oversubscribed schools is included in the brochures parents receive when applying for a school place. There is also a dedicated website: www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/equalchance, which explains how the catchment area system works, together with a virtual map to enable parents to see which primary schools were in the catchment area for their address. It was acknowledged though that some parents still experienced challenges using the information to guide their decisions and preferences.

3.27 Clive Grimshaw from London Councils also advised Members of the London Schools Atlas hosted by the GLA. The website provides information about the projected need for school places in London. It shows details of schools across London, including the distribution of home addresses for pupils on roll. This indicates whether a school has a very local catchment area or recruits from a wider area <http://www.london.gov.uk/webmaps/lisa/>. It was agreed that this should be publicised to parents as part of the improved information package.

- 3.28 Officers explained that the Tower Hamlets catchment area model for primary schools was designed to improve accessibility for pupils to a school near to them, as schools are not distributed evenly around the borough. It has helped to significantly reduce the number of children having to travel to a school over two miles away. In terms of choice, officers reported that over 93%⁵ of pupils got a place in their top three choices of schools, with nearly 84% getting their first choice school. This compares favourably to the London average of 82% gaining a place in their first choice school. As more school places become available, it might be appropriate to revise the catchment areas in order to ensure fairness in accessibility. To this end, there is currently a proposal to change the geographical area for priority admission to community schools by removing the catchment area currently known as Area 3 (Bow South) and replace it by expanding both of the catchment areas currently known as Area 2 (Bow North) and Area 4 (Poplar).⁶
- 3.29 Members acknowledged the figures to show the majority of children are given their first choice of school, but were clear that nevertheless some still do not receive any of their top three choices. Members also reported that regardless of the statistics, there was still a perception of unfairness amongst some parents.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Provide more information and in a timelier fashion to Members about pupil places and admissions criteria to support them in dealing with residents' queries, especially on the day school places are announced.

- Provide information at ward level and borough-wide
- Provide information about the process at application time
- Provide summary information about the process and information on outcomes at decision time (for both secondary and primary places).

Working with schools which are their own admissions authorities

- 3.30 Despite the Cabinet's stance to oppose Free Schools and Academies, it was recognised that there was a real need for the school places and given the restrictions the Government has imposed on local authorities opening maintained schools, they may have to be part of the solution. In particular, free schools sometimes arise due to concerns from parents about a lack of sufficient school places locally or absence of the specific type of schooling they want for their children in their local area.
- 3.31 Members heard how Barking and Dagenham manages its pupil place planning. The borough decided to proactively support proposed free schools and academies, as the Department for Education prefers to allow schools with Local Authority assent, meaning it gives the council a stronger negotiating position when talking to potential schools. As a

⁵ London Councils: <http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/news/current/pressdetail.htm?pk=1478>

⁶ http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgs/851-900/867_consultation/school_admissions_for_2015.aspx?lang=en-gb

result, Barking and Dagenham have secured agreement from all of the borough's free schools and academies that they have to use the LA's admissions policy. Free schools in particular have access to other capital that the Local Authority cannot lever in, so the borough feels it's stance is a pragmatic way to deal with the growing need for school places.

- 3.31 The Service Head for Learning and Achievement advised Members of the work the service already does with Free Schools and Academies to secure support for some key joint principles for educating pupils in the borough. The Head of Pupil Admissions and Exclusions reported that the majority of Free Schools and Academies do follow the council's admissions policy. This is because the LA has worked with academies and free schools to seek to ensure that their admission arrangements are fair, accessible and serve the needs of local residents. This is a key provision in the Protocol the LA is devising for its work with Free Schools and Academies. Members agreed that given the context of legislation around opening new schools, it was important the council seeks to bring free schools and academies into the family of schools, to adhere to the council's standards and help meet the demand for school places.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Pursue efforts to bring free schools and academies within the strong family of community schools, supported by the local authority:

- Prioritise the development of a formal agreement with free schools and academies, to ensure they deliver education in line with the council's values around admissions, curriculum and standards.
- Seek Members' input to the draft 'Working with Academies and Free Schools protocol' prior to publication.
- Where new schools are agreed, continue to build positive relationships with them at the Member and officer level and sell the benefits of the family of schools, including council services on offer.

4. CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 Local authorities, particularly in rapidly growing boroughs like Tower Hamlets, face a number of tensions in meeting the school places gap:
- Balancing the need for a sufficient number of places, in the right geographical areas, and providing the right types of schools to meet diverse community needs and parental choice
 - The mismatch between Government funding for school capacity and the realities of rapid population growth that outstrips resources
 - The legal responsibility to deliver a school place for every child versus the lack of control local authorities have to open new schools themselves, in the areas where they are needed
 - The unpredictability of supply and demand, given new academies and free schools can open without regard to local need or plans, and the timing of new housing developments cannot be controlled

- 4.2 Members acknowledge that these factors make short and long-term pupil place planning very challenging, but the recommendations seek to alleviate the growing problem, so that families better understand the system and can be assured there will be a place available for their child, at a good local school. By improving information for both parents and Members, seizing opportunities for expansion and procurement of new sites and proactively engaging with new schools that are approved in the borough, the council can more effectively meet the significant need for school places in future.

SCRUTINY REVIEW ACTION PLAN: Tackling the school places gap – pupil place planning and the impact of academies and free schools

Comment	Action	Responsibility	Date
R1. Continue to identify options for expansion of existing schools, whilst retaining existing standards about quality and space			
<p>This is a priority for the ESCW capital programme to ensure the continuing supply of places. However, the number of suitable sites with capacity for expansion is now very limited. Options for expansion of secondary schools are very limited.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to review expansion options for schools and consider for inclusion in the ESCW capital programme • Design briefs for school expansions to continue to include working to BB 98 and 99 standards (i.e. standards applicable before DfE introduced lower standards) wherever possible • Implementation of school expansions to consider the priority location of schools to meet needs, the management capacity of the school to implement expansion successfully and the site capacity to deliver a cost-effective and good quality school environment 	<p>ESCW Resources</p> <p>D&R Capital Delivery</p>	<p>Ongoing to meet need for places</p> <p>Progress and review of need and capacity reported annually to Cabinet (September)</p>
R2. Prioritise the continuation of procuring and developing sites in the borough for schools, the delivery of which can be supported			

SCRUTINY REVIEW ACTION PLAN: Tackling the school places gap – pupil place planning and the impact of academies and free schools

Comment	Action	Responsibility	Date
by funding mechanisms which could include S106 or (in future) the Community Infrastructure Levy. Explore all options for retaining site allocations for community schools maintained by the local authority, as far as possible			
<p>Site allocations for new schools have been achieved, but availability of sites will depend on developers' timetables. The need for seeking additional sites through the strategic planning process will be kept under review. The need for school capacity is included in the Council's IDP (Infrastructure Delivery Plan) which is kept under review. CIL/s. 106 contributions are sought from new residential development and funds used in the ESCW capital programme to provide school places. Operation of any new schools will be considered in accordance with the applicable legislation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with developers to ensure that the LA secures the ability to develop the allocated sites • Ensure IDP reviews include updated school requirements • Develop funding strategies for sites to establish delivery programmes • Establish operation of new school sites to meet programmes for opening, taking into account where possible the options for expansion of community schools 	<p>ESCW Resources D&R Strategic Planning</p>	<p>Ongoing to meet programme needs</p> <p>Progress reported to Cabinet annually, as above. Cabinet decisions sought as required.</p>

SCRUTINY REVIEW ACTION PLAN: Tackling the school places gap – pupil place planning and the impact of academies and free schools

Comment	Action	Responsibility	Date
<p>R3. Review the provision of information to parents, about the schools admissions process and allocation of places, to ensure it is flexible, user-friendly and understandable</p>			
<p>This has been included as a key priority in the 2014-15 Pupil Admissions and Exclusions Team Plan. The Team is in the process of reviewing the provision of information available to parents and preliminary work has taken place to revise the various publications, including information on the Tower Hamlets website.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A review of existing publications and online information was introduced to parents at the Parent Carer Council (PCC) meeting held by the Parent & Family Support Team, on 8th March 2014. • The PCC agreed to review the Primary and Secondary brochures and were asked to comment on the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Whether the policy was clearly set out? - Were the brochures easy to follow? - Language, style and content. - The use of pictures/visual charts to aid understanding of policy. - What other methods and formats of communication would parents find useful. - Using digital options and online facilities for communication and 	<p>Pupil Admissions and Exclusions</p>	<p>By Sept 2014.</p>

SCRUTINY REVIEW ACTION PLAN: Tackling the school places gap – pupil place planning and the impact of academies and free schools

Comment	Action	Responsibility	Date
	<p>completing applications.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Views on the Tower Hamlets Website; - Other suggestions for improvement. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional workshops will be held to ensure there is wider engagement from parents to capture their views. • The outcome of this exercise and other planned meetings will be used to make improvements on the publications and information available to parents to ensure that information is clear; user friendly and offers clarity on policy and procedures. 		

SCRUTINY REVIEW ACTION PLAN: Tackling the school places gap – pupil place planning and the impact of academies and free schools

Comment	Action	Responsibility	Date
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consult with parents via the Parents Advice Centre project about the current information provided 			
<p>There is ongoing consultation and work with various agencies, including the PAC , Parent & Family Support team and School Admission Forum . A series of scheduled meetings; workshops and surveys will be used to capture parents' views.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning meetings taking place with PAC. Clear action plan including further meetings with parents; running workshops; and undertaking parent surveys will be devised. 	<p>Pupil Admissions and Exclusions</p>	<p>31st May 2014</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore alternative methods and formats, including digital options 			
<p>It is recognised that online and digital options are a more efficient and secure method for sharing of information. Consultation is taking place with parents and representative groups to collate views on current methods and how they could be better facilitated for families who have limited access to ICT.</p> <p>Pupil Admissions has seen increased</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carryout consultation with parents to gather views on using online facilities to access information and complete applications for school admission. Explore new methods and ways to encourage more families to access online facilities, with the aim of providing a wider range of online facilities that are user 	<p>Pupil Admissions and Exclusions</p>	<p>December 2014</p>

SCRUTINY REVIEW ACTION PLAN: Tackling the school places gap – pupil place planning and the impact of academies and free schools

Comment	Action	Responsibility	Date
<p>requests for information via online methods, as well as an increase in the number of families applying for school places using the online facility. The LA will need to give serious consideration to the provision of significant additional funding to encourage and enable families to use the online facility to access information and complete applications across all pupil services functions. This will bring greater efficiency and enable officers to provide better support.</p>	<p>friendly and accessible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clear guidance on using digital and online facilities and ensure support from Pupil Admissions staff is readily available. • Carry-out an equalities impact assessment and explore ideas for Pupil Admissions to provide surgeries for parents on a regular basis • Provide a position paper for DMT and members to consider. • Plan ahead with implementation strategies to ensure maximum effect. • Inform parents of any planned changes on the process. 		<p>September 2015</p>

SCRUTINY REVIEW ACTION PLAN: Tackling the school places gap – pupil place planning and the impact of academies and free schools

Comment	Action	Responsibility	Date
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Re-assess user satisfaction with the information provided after each admissions round. 			
<p>Pupils Admissions will undertake surveys on user satisfaction following the completion of the 2014 Primary and Secondary admissions rounds. Outcomes and recommendations will be incorporated in the process to further improve service delivery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carry out user survey Head of Section and Service Head to consider the findings and incorporate into the procedure/planning for service delivery Monitor impact on service users. 	<p>Pupil Admissions and Exclusions</p>	<p>To start in June 2014 – complete by August 2014.</p>
<p>R4. Provide more information and in a timelier fashion to Members about pupil places and admissions criteria to support them in dealing with residents’ queries, especially on the day school places are announced.</p>			
<p>The policies for Primary and Secondary admissions have already been presented to Members. The paper included information on the application procedure and how offers of places are determined.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information provided in September 2014. 	<p>Pupil Admissions and Exclusions Team.</p>	<p>This action is already in place and will be ongoing.</p>

SCRUTINY REVIEW ACTION PLAN: Tackling the school places gap – pupil place planning and the impact of academies and free schools

Comment	Action	Responsibility	Date
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide information at ward level and borough-wide 			
<p>Information on the breakdown of offers by Council ward and borough wide is provided to Council Members after each admissions round. This includes information on parental preference outcomes and the planned arrangements for children who have not been offered places at the preferred school(s).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A breakdown of outcomes by council ward and parental preference for the Secondary Transfer exercise was provided to Members in March 2014. Similar information for Primary admissions will be provided to Members following the initial outcome in April 2014. Ongoing information on school admission policy and any changes to the arrangements is provided to Members via the Members Bulletin and in response to Member's Enquiries. Periodic impact assessments are carried out and the findings presented will be alerted to members through the Members Bulletin and cabinet reports. 	<p>Pupil Admissions and Exclusions</p>	<p>March and April 2014. Ongoing.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide information about the process at application time 			
<p>Information on the policy and process will be provided to Council Members before the start of each admissions process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide information for both Secondary Transfer and Primary co-ordination at the start of each Autumn term, to enable Members to be fully informed of the school admissions process and timetable. Primary and Secondary admissions brochures will now be provided to Members at the start of each school year. 	<p>Pupil Admissions and Exclusions.</p>	<p>September 2014</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide summary information about the process and information on outcomes at decision time (for both secondary and primary places)a 			
<p>Reports with a breakdown of how places were offered, clearly explaining the policy and tie-break used to make offers will be presented to Members.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This information will be presented after decisions have been made and outcomes finalised. 	<p>Pupil Admissions and Exclusions</p>	<p>May 2014 and ongoing.</p>

R5. Pursue efforts to bring free schools and academies within the strong family of community schools, supported by the local authority			
<p>The Council facilitates network meetings for headteachers to ensure they are kept up-to-date with policy and other developments in Tower Hamlets. All headteachers, including those from academies and free schools, are invited to these meetings. In addition, the Council provides a weekly e-bulletin during term time to heads and academy and free school heads are invited to subscribe to this.</p> <p>In addition to the free support the Council can provide a range of support services to academies and free schools on a traded basis and there are a fair amount of services which are already bought in by these schools. The Council also provides a named link for each academy/free school from its school improvement team.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to promote engagement among new academy and free school heads in the headteacher network meetings and encourage subscription to the weekly e-bulletin • Further promote traded services to existing academies and free schools and publicise our traded services offer with heads of any new academies and free schools 	<p>ESCW Learning and Achievement</p> <p>ESCW Resources and Transformation</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise the development of a formal agreement with free schools and academies, to ensure they deliver education in line with the council's values around admissions, curriculum and standards 			
<p>Operationally we have a draft protocol</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold early discussions with any new academy or free school about 	<p>ESCW Learning and Achievement and</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>

<p>which we look to adopt with academies and free schools. This sets out both sides' responsibilities and the Council's expectations about how these schools will work with us in relation to admissions, safeguarding, data sharing etc. However, we cannot enforce sign up to the principles in the draft document.</p>	<p>responsibilities and expectations and encourage them to sign up to the principles in our draft protocol</p>	<p>ESCW Resources</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek Members' input to the draft 'Working with Academies and Free Schools protocol' prior to publication 			
<p>This is a draft document which guides us operationally. It could become more formalised with Member input.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage the Lead Member and Scrutiny Lead for children in the draft protocol 	<p>ESCW Learning and Achievement and ESCW Resources</p>	<p>September 2014</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where new schools are agreed, continue to build positive relationships with them at the Member and officer level and sell the benefits of the family of schools, including council services on offer 			
<p>The intention through the draft Working with Academies and Free Schools protocol is to do exactly this. In addition, these schools are invited to be part of the borough's family of schools through attendance at termly heads meetings and subscription to the e-bulletin etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold early discussions with any new academy or free school about the support the Council can provide and how they can be part of the family of schools 	<p>ESCW Learning and Achievement and ESCW Resources</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>