

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.30 P.M. ON WEDNESDAY, 26 FEBRUARY 2020

C3 - TOWN HALL MULBERRY PLACE

Members Present:

Councillor Sufia Alam (Chair)
Councillor Gabriela Salva Macallan
(Vice-Chair)
Councillor Kyrsten Perry
Councillor Andrew Wood

Councillor Helal Uddin

Co-opted Members Present:

Neil Cunningham
Joanna Hannan

- Parent Governors
- Representative of Diocese of Westminster
- Parent Governors
- Parent Governors
- (Church of England Representative)

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Danny Hassell

Lead Member for Children Education & Schools

Apologies:

Khoyrul Shaheed

Officers Present:

Terry Bryan

- (Head of Pupil Services and School Sufficiency)

Anthony Harris

- Commissioning Manager

Debbie Jones

- (Corporate Director, Children and Culture)

Christine McInnes

- (Divisional Director, Education and Partnership, Children's)

Jonathan Solomons

- (Strategy and Policy Manager - Children and Culture)

David Knight

- (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

Rushena Miah

- (Committee Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence was received from Mr Khoyrul Shaheed, co-optee from the Muslim Faith Community.

2. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTEREST

Councillor Helal Uddin declared a non-pecuniary interest in that his daughter attended one of the schools being discussed at the meeting.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The following comments were made with regards to the minutes:

- Correction required, it should be noted that it was Councillor Marc Francis who asked the Chair if he could attend the meeting.
- Councillor Gabriella Salva-MacCallen thanked officers for making the amendments she requested to the minutes, specifically that SEND was an important and ongoing issue that should be further explored by the committee.

ACTION: for a spotlight session on SEND to be organised.

RESOLVED:

Having made the above amendment, the minutes of the previous meeting held on 17 December 2019 were approved as an accurate record.

4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

The Chair varied the order of reports in order to allow the guest speakers to present first. Therefore the Primary School Places presentation item was discussed first, followed by the SEND Transport Review. For ease of reading the minutes will follow the order published on the agenda.

Officers apologised to councillors for the late submission of reports to the committee.

The Chair requested a pre-meeting for the Committee going forward starting at 6pm for 30 minutes.

ACTION: Officers to arrange pre-meetings starting at 6pm.

4.1 SEND Transport Review - Presentation

The Committee Noted:

- That regarding independent travel there will be “Appropriate Person Training” for young to identify which adults to approach for assistance if lost e.g. MPS; BTP or TFL
- In addition for young people requiring help in travelling to school, there was training undertaken with the MPS so that police officers develop an awareness of young people who might come to them for help

- Training was also provided regarding the use of maps and the Service was exploring various Technical solutions e.g. Video Conferencing
- The Committee noted that some parents might consider that the use of a taxi is more convenient for them.
- It was important for young people to learn more skills to help them develop their confidence. This would be better for them in the long term because it would help them to develop their independence. Therefore it was not just about the here and now but the future
- It was noted that the council's consultation will run for 10 weeks and details were on the council's website
- There would be training for SEND ambassadors.
- With regards to the level of service it was noted that the Service will not be as flexible as before but requests for assistance with travel would be handled in a compassionate manner
- With regard to children living with hearing difficulties It was noted that the Council were working with the National Deaf Children's Society. The Council would be writing to all families about the service developments
- The Committee felt that those families who could afford to pay for travel should be able to, although this would require a revision of the Charging Policy. Charges could be made for those children post 16.
- It was noted the changes aimed to introduce choice and give greater control to families for travel.
- Children would receive training to enable them to travel and to develop greater independence.
- The Committee advised that it was made clear to parents that the changes would not have a significant impact on the majority of families. They said it was important parents be given this reassurance.

ACTIONS:

It was noted there would be:

- (I) a report on the Youth Service coming to a future meeting;
- (ii) a possible extra meeting on SEND;
- (iii) a look at the impact of housing on education maybe as a joint scrutiny challenge session with housing members;
- (iv) a challenge session on cyberbullying.

RESOLVED:

1. To note the presentation and actions.

4.2 Primary School Places Review - Presentation

The Committee heard from three school governor guest speakers on challenges schools faced and their experiences of mergers and federations.

Speakers included:

Judy Knappet, Head teacher, Hague Primary School, Ros Coffey, Chair of Governors, Smithy Street Primary School, and JP Morrison, Director of Education, Diocese of Westminster.

Judy Kanppet:

- One form entry school 210 children when full. At the time of merger it was not full it had 34 vacancies but because of class to teacher regulations they had to hire a second teacher.
- Context of schools in west of borough having increasing number of vacancies in the school due to declining birth rates borough wide, demographic change, and fewer family homes being developed.
- This was resulting in the inefficient allocation of resources such as the 15 hours nursery funding which was only used by four families.
- School governors came together to discuss solutions. One solution was to work in collaboration rather than competition and working towards hard federated status.
- Hard federated meant having one governing body for both schools. The schools retained their names but teachers and other resources were shared. This strengthened their curriculum and staff training opportunities. The bulk of savings had come from staffing.
- Ms Kanppet reported that she felt very supported by the local authority throughout the merger process particularly by Helen Jenner – Education Consultant.

Ros Coffey:

- Experienced a decline in demand for places at the school. She cited a few reasons for the decline including bedroom tax, lack of social housing and a fall in the birth rate.
- In June 2018 she met with Christine McInnes and Terry Bryant from the Council to discuss the issue.
- The school of governors suggested an amalgamation with the school next door which was Redlands School. Both school governors met and are in consultation with parents and the local community on the merger.
- It was noted Redlands had a PFI in place for facilities managed but plans had been made to manage this over the seven year period.
- The benefits of the merger were described. These included: maintaining the high level of learning both schools provided, school results had risen, increased community cohesion between parents and children at the schools, staff are learning best practice from one another and teachers are working with shared intelligence.

- The merger will change the name of the school to 'Stepney Park Primary'. The new name would unify children and parents from both schools and encourage a joint sense of ownership.
- Joint meetings between both school of governors, treating one another as equal partners and open dialogue between the schools enabled the schools to happily merge.
- Governors came up with an innovative idea to 'let' unused spaces in the school with the intention of reclaiming the space if or when pupil numbers increased.
- The school will have a simple and affordable new school uniform. They could be purchased using the school uniform grant.

JP Morrison

- Reported that Tower Hamlets had 9 catholic schools in the borough.
- He conducted a piece of research on best practice using Camden Council as a case study.
- Catholic schools were in general dependent on eastern European migrants as the primary users of their schools. However due to the departure from the European union, fewer children have applied to attend.
- Other factors that had limited intake included the lack of social housing and the prevalence of AirBnB in residential areas close to schools. The 50% faith cap introduced by the David Cameron government, at a time when faith schools were oversubscribed, has also had a detrimental impact on the schools now there was less demand.
- Parent choice had changed. Academy schools were fast becoming parent's first choice over a more traditional faith school setting.
- There was a discussion on the guardian angels catholic primary school closing. It was noted it was in a bad financial position with a deficit of £300,000 and had resorted to closing the school. The majority of the assets belonged to the council then the church and parish. The council had not yet made a decision on how the land would be handled.
- The Camden Council case study highlighted that support and good communication throughout the closure process was key in managing expectations in the community. It was also important for the school and council to provide a unified message throughout the process.
- The guest speaker recommended that Tower Hamlets look to the Camden model in handling school closures. Officers disagreed and explained that the council did work closely with Guardian Angels school and that it had the support of the education consultant, schools HR, the Admissions Team, the service head of education and partnership and the head of pupil services.

In response to the guest speakers, Members made the following comments:

- Members queried why PFIs (private finance initiatives) were significant and how schools worked together when one school had a PFI. Officers summarised in very simplified terms that PFIs could be compared to taking out a mortgage that was repayable over seven years. The rates were fixed at a certain rate agreed and the start of the loan and there was no leeway for flexible payments if a school was experiencing issues. It was noted that one school could not ask a partner school to absorb the cost, so governing boards had to work PFI repayment into their business planning and make savings in other ways.
- Members were impressed that schools were able to work in collaboration. They asked what else helped form the partnerships. Guest speakers said it was important to build personal relationships between the school boards, treating both schools as equal partners, an open door policy and keeping parents and children informed was key.

The Committee next received a presentation from Councillor Danny Hassell, the Lead Member for Children Schools and young people, on Pupil Population Projections.

In response to the presentation Members made the following comments:

- Was there a projection formula that could predict demand so schools could plan for a shortfall in their 3-5 year business plans?
- Were there any plans for schools in the same catchment areas to work closely together in order to improve and compete with the more popular schools outside of the catchment? Officers said that it was important for schools to come together to shape solutions rather than compete.
- How do you plan for places? Officers said there was a position paper on place planning. They recognised that the borough was changing and this had impacted infrastructure demands. It was found that the borough had the right number of schools but not necessarily in the right places. In order to build schools the council would have to strategically dispose of some assets. To have an indication of leading times there would need to be more research on the boroughs populations but at present schools could plan on a 2-3 year lead time.
- It was highlighted once again that if classroom provision was unused it would be rented out but the space would remain under the ownerships of the school or council and would be available if demand for school spaces grew.
- It was noted that the boroughs population and demographics had changed from 15 years ago and consequently this meant faith schools received fewer applications. Officers advised that faith school's would have to review their admittance procedures if they wanted to stay open. Officers said that they would do everything in their power to support existing faith schools in the borough but there were no plans to build new faith schools due to low demand.
- It was noted that the council worked closely with the Pan London Schools Forum and this partnership provided benchmarking on what

was happening with schools across London. Officers said the population shift in tower Hamlets was the most significant compared to the rest of London.

- A Member said it was important for support schools to receive financial modelling and space management advice and support and there needed to be clarity on what the local authority would be funding.
- Members thanked Terry Bryant for his clear and succinct responses to Member questions.

ACTION: to make a recommendation to the Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee to do a scrutiny session on the borough's demographic shift and how that had affected school places.

RESOLVED:

To note the presentation.

5. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS CONSIDERED TO BE URGENT

There was no other business.

The meeting ended at 9.30 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Sufia Alam
Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee