

PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES IN EAST DULWICH

Report of Overview & Scrutiny Committee

November 2009



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1. Introduction

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

2. Evidence received

- 2.1 We received evidence from two Peckham Rye ward members, Councillors Aubyn Graham and Robert Smeath, who expressed concern over the treatment of parents and the resourcing of the admissions team. The two members were concerned that next year there would be a repetition of numbers of parents not being clear about whether they had a place for their child and that this would be exacerbated by allocation of places being finalised at a later date. The anxieties of parents needed to be addressed promptly and sympathetically and government guidelines in respect of the two mile radius from application address needed to be challenged.
- 2.2 A local parent was of the view that information about the admissions process and schools was distributed in a piecemeal way and did not help parents to understand the process or what was required of them. He and other parents contributed to the committee's open discussion of the issues below.
- 2.3 The leader of the council outlined his understanding of this year's admissions. At the close of the first round of admissions there were around twenty-four East Dulwich parents who had registered their preferences for the same five or six schools but had not been allocated a place in any. All had been offered places within the national requirement of two miles from application address but not in any of their preferred schools. In some cases the children would never have got into the school in question because of the small catchment area. As parents with multiple offers began to accept one offer and give up their other offers this freed up places within the system and the original parents were contacted. Subsequently, in June, there was a whole tranche of late applications.

- 2.4 The deputy director, children's services, gave a presentation setting out the context of the admissions process including the GLA roll projections and increased pressure for primary school places across London. He reported key facts about Southwark primary schools and changing trends locally and explained national rules relating to admissions and Southwark's own aims. The deputy director emphasised that in the 2009 admissions round only eight complaints were ongoing and only eight out of one hundred and twenty appeals had been successful to date (the majority of which related to parents who had failed to apply on time for a sibling place).

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

- 3.1 The deputy director, children's services, reported that the most popular schools in the area were oversubscribed by 5:1 and that the late applications had placed a huge strain on the system. In response, forty-five additional places had been opened at short notice at Goodrich and Lyndhurst primary schools (and up to a further thirty places at Crampton in the north of the borough). We appreciated that these places had been opened with the active participation of head teachers and chairs of governors.
- 3.2 The deputy director drew our attention to the pressure on reception classes across London and elsewhere in the country. Lambeth and Lewisham had each added five forms of entry (one form of entry being equivalent to thirty places) and Richmond seven forms of entry. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) had invited bids for £200 million of new capital funds to provide additional places in areas of need. We were concerned that the bar for funding was set too high, meaning that many authorities did not appear to qualify even though their need to add places was very clear. The deputy director explained that, as a result of pressure from these authorities, the original bid round had been withdrawn and that a revised process was awaited.

Recommendations:

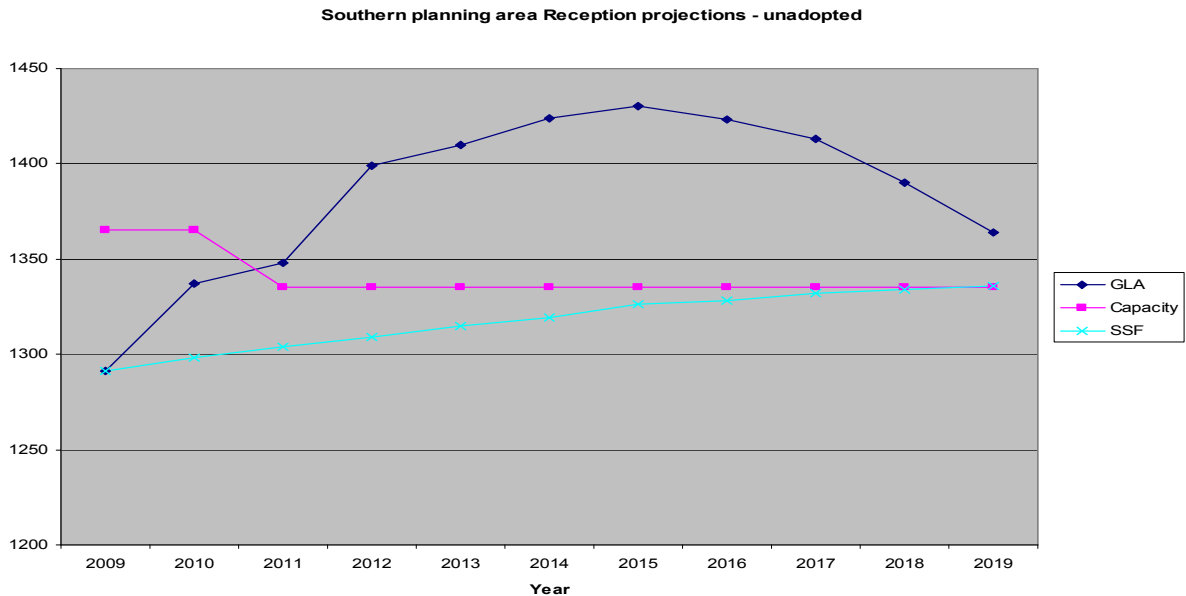
1. That all head teachers in the borough be thanked for engaging positively with discussions as to how to meet the demand for additional primary school places and particularly the heads at Crampton, Goodrich and Lyndhurst who took bulge classes for this year at such short notice.
2. That central government be urged to make funding available in addition to the £200 million capital funds already offered and with a revised set of criteria in order to address the national bulge in the primary school population.

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

- 4.1 The deputy director, children's services, explained that primary school projections are provided by the Greater London Authority (GLA) on an agency basis using school rolls supplied by the participating authorities. These

forecasts are used by the council to determine the need for places in each planning area.

- 4.2 The initial GLA school roll projections were received in April and, given concern about sharp rises in reception numbers across London, reissued in May 2009. These will be formally considered by the executive in November. The graph below shows the capacity in our primary schools, GLA projections and Southwark Schools for the Future projections for the southern planning area which covers XXXXX.



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

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

- 4.4 The deputy director stressed that GLA projections had proved sufficiently accurate for planning purposes in the past and that the GLA was the most cost-effective source of projections. Our members expressed concern that these projections were based on data originating in the Office of National Statistics, with which the council has long been in dispute. Members also challenged the scientific basis and robustness of the projections and sought assurance that the GLA would respond to this year's experience and take account of changes in future years. We took the view that it was essential for the executive to closely analyse this year's projections, before formal adoption, and ensure that the method and projections were regularly reviewed.

- 4.5 The deputy director made clear that, on the basis of the GLA projections, the continuing increase in demand for places could be met by expanding the number of places at existing local schools (bulge classes). Benefits of this were that the council could be more flexible in its response to parental demand, surplus capacity could be reduced in the system, schools benefitted from increased investment and, once the numbers of reception children stabilised, there was a reduced risk that schools might be closed or suffer budget difficulties. He also outlined the arguments against building a new school:
- the increased demand is projected to be temporary and can best be met by bulge classes
 - the process to establish a new school is lengthy (5-7 years) and therefore unlikely to deliver places in either short or medium term
 - no funding or site is available
 - a new school would destabilise existing schools
- 4.6 If the executive can be satisfied of the above, we agreed that the temporary increase in demand should be met by the introduction of bulge classes rather than beginning the process of opening a new school. In reaching this recommendation we noted that negotiations are ongoing with some schools in the Dulwich area. At the same time our members raised several concerns about the use of bulge classes over future years, as follows.
- 4.7 The deputy director reminded us of improvements in our primary schools and that two-thirds are rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding. He also drew our attention to the reputations of some schools lagging behind their improving performance. As an example, he cited Bessemer Grange Primary School which had improved significantly but, because of its previous reputation, was under-subscribed this year and particularly so after additional places had been created at other local schools. A parent who had put their child into Heber when the school was just out of special measures agreed that it was very difficult to raise the reputation of a school amongst parents who tended to favour schools which had been popular for some time. We felt that, in addition to opening bulge classes at currently popular schools, the council needs to recognise reputation lags and take action to publicise improving but previously less popular schools.
- 4.8 In terms of the use of bulge classes, we highlighted the importance of increasing forms of entry at schools in areas experiencing a population bulge. We also sought confirmation that any increases in numbers of classes could be incorporated within existing school buildings, without the use of temporary accommodation and certainly without any encroachment on play-grounds. The deputy director responded that spare capacity and space would be utilised and that temporary classrooms would be avoided wherever possible.
- 4.9 Finally, our members were concerned at the short timetable imposed this year on those head teachers asked to increase the numbers of form entry in their schools.
- 4.10 After considering these factors, we agreed that it would be best for any decisions on future bulge classes to be made as soon as possible after applications have been received and analysed so that the number and location of extra places can be matched as closely as possible to need.

Recommendations:

3. That the executive analyses the GLA projection figures in depth, particularly in terms of fully understanding the information supporting the projections and assumptions made, before formally accepting the forecast for Southwark.
4. That the executive put in place mechanisms to ensure that projections remain under regular review.
5. If it is satisfied that the projections can be relied upon, that the executive accept the proposals from officers to meet the bulge in demand via permanent expansions and temporary bulge classes rather than seeking to open a new school.
6. That ongoing negotiations with some schools in the Dulwich area regarding bulge classes be noted.
7. That the experience of schools such as Bessemer Grange, where there are fewer children than anticipated, be noted with concern.
8. That action be taken to publicise the rising reputations of previously less popular schools.
9. That any increase in the intake of specific schools be matched as closely as possible to the areas experiencing a population bulge.
10. That any increase in numbers of classes should make use of space within existing school buildings and not encroach on play space.
11. In future that consideration of any increase in number of forms of entry be made as soon as possible to avoid excessive pressure being placed on local head teachers, but that this should be decided after all applications have been received and analysed in order to identify and respond to local need and to avoid other schools being undersubscribed.

5. Admissions team and admissions process

(Recommendations 6.12 – 6.21)

- 5.1 The deputy director, children's services, reported that a review of the admissions process had revealed the council's admissions team to be around half the size of, for example, the equivalent team in Lewisham. We were concerned that this did not demonstrate that our admissions team is twice as cost-effective but, instead, that the council is not adequately resourcing the team. We were pleased that the decision has been taken to increase the team by three members of staff and that recruitment is underway. In addition, good practice from Lewisham is to be introduced in Southwark such as proactive follow-ups with parents who are not initially allocated a preferred school. We were hopeful that this would meet some concerns of parents – such as lack of information and access to support throughout the admissions

process – and agreed that the children’s services and education sub-committee should review the impact of this after the 2010 admissions round is completed.

- 5.2 We recognised that the number of parents retaining multiple offers of places will continue to cause problems within the admissions system and asked how this could be addressed. Officers explained that a common admissions form for primary school places would be used across London from 2010/2011. Applications for children resident in the borough would be made on a single form, administrated by Southwark as the home authority, and parents would be advised of only one offer. Our members asked whether the introduction of this form could be brought forward but understood from officers that the process of formal consultation across boroughs made this impossible. On the other hand, the council was liaising informally with our nearest neighbours to ensure as smooth a process as possible in the interim year.
- 5.3 We explored the issue of admissions criteria, particularly that of distance from residence to school. The deputy director clarified that the national rule was to place a child within two miles of their home but that Southwark’s admissions team took the view that this was unacceptable and aimed to offer a place within one mile or three bus journeys. We welcomed the council’s own criteria and felt that the government should be lobbied to bring the national criteria into line with our own. Equally, some of our members were aware of cases where a mile distance as the crow flies would in practical terms still require a long and complicated journey by public transport.
- 5.4 Parents at our meeting brought to our attention their concerns about Southwark’s admissions criteria with regard to distance, which give preference firstly to children for whom the school is their nearest community school (criteria iv) and then only after this to children for whom it is not the nearest community school (criteria v). Parents felt that this could mean that families could fall beyond the qualifying distance for their closest school and then be at a disadvantage for their second nearest school. For example, the qualifying distance for entry into Heber Primary School was 320m and many parents who applied to Heber as their closest school were not allocated a place. In contrast, other neighbouring boroughs did not incorporate such a criteria or had more flexibility built in (Southwark’s and Lewisham’s community schools admissions criteria are set out as an appendix for comparison).
- 5.5 Officers explained that if a child was not allocated a place at their closest community school they would be allocated a place in the nearest community school with a vacancy. Our members took the view that, while Southwark’s criteria were well intended (to encourage parents to apply to their nearest community school), in cases where some school are heavily oversubscribed criteria iv and v could have unintended detrimental effects and should be reviewed by the admissions forum.
- 5.6 The deputy director outlined reasons for late applications in this year’s admissions process, the majority of which were given as the parents not knowing that application was necessary. This often related to two specific situations – where the child was already going to a nursery school with a primary school attached and where the child had a sibling in a primary school. It was assumed that a place in the primary school would be offered automatically and with no formal application being necessary. In addition,

there were possible issues around English language literacy levels in the borough which could make it difficult for some parents to be aware of their responsibilities in this area. We were concerned that there were two hundred more late applications this year than in previous years and that action was essential to address the roots of this.

- 5.7 A member of the public suggested that area based school fairs should be introduced with the specific aim of publicising the admissions process and the requirements on parents to apply for a place within the primary school system. An additional aim would be to promote those schools suffering from a “reputational lag” in respect of their improving performance. Our members also felt that there were existing social networks which could be made more use of, such as community and faith groups and on-line forums. Members were also of the opinion that the council’s website needed to be reviewed – to publicise the admissions process and relevant deadlines and also to encourage and facilitate on-line applications.
- 5.8 Finally, we took note that the number of late applications included applications which had been submitted on time but subsequently amended by parents. The admissions system categorised these changed applications as late applications. Members of the public at our meeting felt that this was inappropriate and confusing and we agreed to recommend that the system be altered.

Recommendations:

12. That the expansion of the admissions team by three officers be welcomed, together with proposals to provide a more personal and responsive service to parents to take them through the admissions process.
13. That in September 2010 officers report back to the children’s services and education scrutiny sub-committee regarding the implementation and operation of these changes.
14. That difficulties in the admissions system caused by some parents retaining multiple offers of places be recognised as an ongoing problem.
15. That the introduction in the year after next of a single admissions application form, covering all London boroughs, be welcomed together with increased informal co-operation across South East London boroughs for next year’s admissions process.
16. That the council’s attempt to ensure offers within one mile of residence, rather than the statutory two miles, be welcomed and central government be asked to reduce the statutory limit to one mile and to provide funding to meet this.
17. That the admissions forum review the unintended consequences of the distance criteria whereby failure to get into the nearest school (because of its small catchment area) may work against getting into the second and other nearest schools

18. That the council develop an action plan to tackle the increased number of late applications, including publicity around parental responsibility if a child is at a nursery school attached to a primary school or has a sibling at a primary school and any issues around English language literacy levels in the borough
19. That new publicity include area based school fairs at which the heads and senior staff of multiple schools can host stalls and meet parents. This will bring more parents into contact with staff from successful schools which are currently undersubscribed. One aim of the fairs should be to overcome the "reputational lag" from which some schools suffer.
20. In addition, that existing social networks such as community and faith groups and on-line forums are accessed.
21. That Southwark's website be reviewed with the aim of encouraging and facilitating on-line applications.
22. That the admissions system be altered so that changes to applications are recorded as changes and not as late applications.

6 Summary of recommendations

Proposals to increase school places for this year

- 6.1 That all head teachers in the borough be thanked for engaging positively with discussions as to how to meet the demand for additional primary school places and particularly the heads at Crampton, Goodrich and Lyndhurst who took bulge classes for this year at such short notice.
- 6.2 That central government be urged to make funding available in addition to the £200 million capital funds already offered and with a revised set of criteria in order to address the national bulge in the primary school population.

Primary schools projections and proposals for future years

- 6.3 That the executive analyses the GLA projection figures in depth, particularly in terms of fully understanding the information supporting the projections and assumptions made, before formally accepting the forecast for Southwark.
- 6.4 That the executive put in place mechanisms to ensure that projections remain under regular review.
- 6.5 If it is satisfied that the projections can be relied upon, that the executive accept the proposals from officers to meet the bulge in demand via permanent expansions and temporary bulge classes rather than seeking to open a new school.
- 6.6 That ongoing negotiations with some schools in the Dulwich area regarding bulge classes be noted.

- 6.7 That the experience of schools such as Bessemer Grange, where there are fewer children than anticipated, be noted with concern.
- 6.8 That action be taken to publicise the rising reputations of previously less popular schools.
- 6.9 That any increase in the intake of specific schools be matched as closely as possible to the areas experiencing a population bulge.
- 6.10 That any increase in numbers of classes should make use of space within existing school buildings and not encroach on play space.
- 6.11 In future that consideration of any increase in number of forms of entry be made as soon as possible to avoid excessive pressure being placed on local head teachers, but that this should be decided after all applications have been received and analysed in order to identify and respond to local need and to avoid other schools being undersubscribed.

Admissions team and admissions process

- 6.12 That the expansion of the admissions team by three officers be welcomed, together with proposals to provide a more personal and responsive service to parents to take them through the admissions process.
- 6.13 That in September 2010 officers report back to the children's services and education scrutiny sub-committee regarding the implementation and operation of these changes.
- 6.14 That difficulties in the admissions system caused by some parents retaining multiple offers of places be recognised as an ongoing problem.
- 6.15 That the introduction in the year after next of a single admissions application form, covering all London boroughs, be welcomed together with increased informal co-operation across South East London boroughs for next year's admissions process.
- 6.16 That the council's attempt to ensure offers within one mile of residence, rather than the statutory two miles, be welcomed and central government be asked to reduce the statutory limit to one mile and to provide funding to meet this.
- 6.17 That the admissions forum review the unintended consequences of the distance criteria whereby failure to get into the nearest school (because of its small catchment area) may work against getting into the second and other nearest schools.
- 6.18 That the council develop an action plan to tackle the increased number of late applications, including publicity around parental responsibility if a child is at a nursery school attached to a primary school or has a sibling at a primary school and any issues around English language literacy levels in the borough.
- 6.19 That new publicity include area based school fairs at which the heads and senior staff of multiple schools can host stalls and meet parents. This will bring more parents into contact with staff from successful schools which are currently undersubscribed. One aim of the fairs should be to overcome the "reputational lag" from which some schools suffer.

- 6.20 In addition, that existing social networks such as community and faith groups and on-line forums are accessed.
- 6.21 That Southwark's website be reviewed with the aim of encouraging and facilitating on-line applications.
- 6.22 That the admissions system be altered so that changes to applications are recorded as changes and not as late applications.

Southwark Community Schools Admissions Criteria

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

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

Lewisham Community Schools Admissions Criteria

If more parents want places for their children than it is possible to provide in that year, the local authority, who decide on admission to the schools, will give priority in the following order to:

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

4. children for whom it is the nearest community school (priority within this category will normally be given to those living nearest to the school but other children living further away may have to be given preference if they cannot reasonably be offered an alternative school).
5. if, after these criteria have been taken into account, there are still more applicants than places remaining, priority will be given to those living nearest to the school.