

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
SCHOOL ADMISSIONS FORUM  
HELD ON 23 NOVEMBER FROM 7.05PM TO 9.40PM**

*Present:-*

**Local Education Authority Representative:**

David Chopping

**Diocesan Representative:**

David Babb

**Parent Representative:**

Phiala Mehring

**Schools Representatives**

Elaine Stewart – *Aldryngton Primary School*

Hilary Winter – *The Piggott CE Aided Secondary School*

*Also present:-*

*David Armstrong, Policy and Schools Access Officer*

*Piers Brunning, Service Manager, Children's Services Infrastructure Development*

*Steve Clarke, Tribal Consulting*

*Dave Gordon, Democratic Services Officer*

*Alan Parker, Tribal Consulting*

*Sue Riddick, Lead Admissions Officer*

*Rachael Wardell, Head of Children's Services Strategy and Partnerships*

**67. MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 17 June 2010 were confirmed as a correct record.

**68. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence was submitted from Jean Bateman, Sharon Jhheent, Peter Lewis, Colonel Derek McAvoy and Beth Rowland.

**69. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

David Chopping declared a personal interest in the meeting as a Ward Member affected by the proposals for Maiden Erlegh School. Phiala Mehring also declared a personal interest as a resident affected by the same issue. As a result, both also stood down from Chairmanship of the meeting.

**70. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN**

**RESOLVED:**

That David Babb be elected Chairman of the Forum for the remainder of the meeting.

**71. SECONDARY ADMISSIONS REVIEW CONSULTATION - OUTCOME**

Prior to discussion of the report, the meeting was reminded of the role of the School Admissions Forum. It was confirmed that the School Admissions Forum was an independent consultative body which did not make decisions but its role was to consider and advise on the fairness of admission arrangements and related proposals.

A revised report had been circulated replacing that contained in the published agenda. Steve Clarke presented the report and informed the Forum that this had been based on pre-statutory consultations, which had proved useful in allowing for greater dialogue and testing proposals. Whilst there was no obligation to follow the majority of opinion, the comments made during the consultation would be borne in mind. In particular, there had been some criticism of the language used (e.g. shared designated areas) although the technical nature of the matters under discussion would make some of these issues unavoidable. It was noted that the highest level of response had been encountered in the Maiden Erlegh / Bulmershe area and the next stage of consultation would need to involve the Southern part of Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC) area more as there was likely to be an impact here as well.

In terms of general comments about the review, concerns had been raised about the impact of the closure of Ryeish Green School. Within the report there were three main sections; the first concerned simplifying admissions criteria. The criteria further down the list had a limited impact, and many respondents had agreed that simplification was required and as a result, it was suggested that consultation continue on this matter.

The most controversial section concerned proposed changes to the Maiden Erlegh / Bulmershe Designated Areas. As there was no way of physically expanding Maiden Erlegh, the matter of admissions to this institution would remain a contentious matter; there were logical arguments regarding the right for local pupils to be admitted from across all parts of Earley and Lower Earley. These comments were well made and would require a response in the consultation process; in addition, any potential impact on the designated area for the Holt and Forest Schools would need consideration. Finally, a section on the area South of the Borough and Wokingham Town suggested a move to radial distance and may require consultation.

In general, the process was about establishing a set of proposals for a rational admissions policy. One option which was open was to use a tie breaker involving the distance to the second furthest school (which had been adopted by some other local authorities). Recommendations 3 -5 contained in the report were to be discussed under the next section of the agenda. At this point, the Forum wished to extend their thanks to Steve Clark and Alan Parker for their work on the matter.

Forum Members made the following comments:

- At present, there were some problems in understanding the mathematics involved and the criteria to be used for admissions. For this to go to public consultation, explanations would need to be carefully presented. With regards to the Maiden Erlegh / Bulmershe issue, had this also been based on a desire to avoid buses to the respective schools crossing each others' paths?

Rachel Wardell informed the meeting that the 'crow flies' distances would be subtracted from each other to calculate the tie breaker. However, the usual criteria (e.g statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN), Looked After Children) would be applied and the tie breaker only used where necessary.

- Were consultants satisfied with the consultation process thus far and had it met their needs?

It was confirmed that the consultation process had proved beneficial. The aim of any consultation should be to provide information and allow respondents time to give their views, and a range of formats had been used to enable this. One example of the benefits of pre-statutory consultation was the refinement of a question which had

proved to be ambiguous; this would now be explained more clearly in the formal proposals.

**RESOLVED:** That

- 1) recommendation 1 be supported;
- 2) the view of the Forum was that the wording of Q6 was not sufficiently ambiguous to the point that results cannot be relied upon;

## **72. CONSULTATION ON 2012/2013 ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS FOR VOLUNTARY CONTROLLED AND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, AND PRIMARY AND SECONDARY COORDINATED ADMISSIONS SCHEME**

David Armstrong introduced the report, as set out on agenda pages 34 to 63. The report outlined WBC's proposals for consultation and covered all admissions arrangements. It was noted that there were no proposed changes to admission numbers. On amending the siblings criteria, the Forum was asked to provide a view on including siblings of SEN children. The Forum was informed that the Council did not support this going to consultation, as it was felt that this could distort the admissions process and place further pressure on designated areas; the Forum agreed with this stance.

The proposal to remove the feeder schools criterion was then discussed. WBC proposed this although it was noted that it was of benefit to relatively few applicants and was prone to substantial year-on-year variations. Those who used this criterion to gain admission to a school were also often already within the school's designated area, further rendering it unnecessary in the view of WBC. However, the Forum did question whether this proposal would mean that applicants could be treated inconsistently; in response Alan Parker stated that the criterion may be overestimated and did not achieve the effect often assumed.

The proposed removal of the single sex / coeducational criterion was based on the limited impact this had, particularly with regards to the Holt School. However, Members of the Forum raised doubts about this, with 43 out of the 200 places awarded to applicants on that basis in September 2010. However, with 19 places also awarded under 'another reason', others felt that these 43 would have been granted anyway. It was also argued that this criterion unfairly benefitted those who understood the system and knew how to use it to their advantage and could lead to those living closer to the School losing their preferred places. It was felt that the proposals for transitional protection for siblings regarding changes made to Primary designated areas would require more specifics before being put out for consultation.

Regarding designated areas, it was proposed that Maiden Erlegh's area be expanded to incorporate parts of the current Bulmershe and Holt / Forest areas in Lower Earley. This area would be part of the Bulmershe designated area allowing those who did not get places at Maiden Erlegh to receive education at Bulmershe. Piers Brunning then introduced the alternative tie breaker being proposed, which had been raised by a respondent during the consultation process. This was based on calculating the additional distance travelled if Bulmershe was awarded instead of Maiden Erlegh, as under the present system there would be a natural bias against applicants from the South West of the designated area. This also recognised the greater options open to those in the Loddon Bridge area who had a range of other schools (e.g. Bulmershe, Waingels College) within relatively short distance. This proposal also went some way to meet the objections raised by Reading Borough Council.

Whilst the exact impact of the proposals was as yet unclear given its potential impact on variables (e.g. parents choosing a house according to designated areas), more analysis would be undertaken to provide parents with as much information as was possible. However, this would have to exclude the provision of exact estimates as to the addresses where the tie breaker would award a place at Maiden Erlegh; instead, the principles behind the new mechanism would need further explanation given the need for clarity, fairness and objectivity. Despite this, it was admitted that the matter would continue to be an issue for local residents, with some in Earley and Lower Earley still not getting the places at Maiden Erlegh they desired; however, other possible solutions (e.g. reducing Maiden Erlegh's designated area) would seem to be less equitable.

Rachel Wardell added that the purpose of admission arrangements was to meet WBC's policies in terms of not disadvantaging vulnerable groups or siblings and the minimisation of travel. However, the calculation of the impact that this proposal would have had on previous years would not be practical given the sensitive nature of the information involved and the impact that these changes may have had if they had been applied in those previous years (e.g. patterns of parental house purchasing). Alan Parker commented that a draft of the proposals with further detail for clarification would be required; however, it would remain focused on the underlying principles rather than providing estimates as to the point at which the tie breaker would have an effect. The exact locations of houses would be decided using the Ordnance Survey data available to all local authorities. In view of Forum members desire to understand the proposal more fully an invitation was extended to them to two briefing sessions arranged for local members on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2010 at 2.00PM in Committee Room 2 and on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2010 at 6.00PM in Committee Room 4 (both at Shute End).

It was also proposed that the designated areas for Emmbrook, Holt, Forest and St Crispin's Schools be merged into one shared designated area, with radial distance to be continued as the tie breaker for Emmbrook and St Crispin's and combined radial distance to Holt and Forest being the tie breaker for those schools. No major changes were being proposed for the coordinated schemes for primary, secondary and in-year admissions as, at present, no new Code of Practice had been introduced. The main element of the proposals was a move from 3 to 4 school preferences being expressed on the form, and also the allocation of the nearest or a nearby school to the pupil's home address should no preference be met instead of the nearest school. Alan Parker commented that this could be phrased as the most accessible school. Reading Borough Council had already adopted the 4 school preferences system, which had allowed local residents more opportunity to express an interest in schools outside their local authority's area. The operational dates were put before the Forum without objection. In terms of Nursery Schools, this was outside the code but should still be included with an update on free entitlement. Schools would also adopt WBC's policy on the Fair Access Protocol, whilst Sixth Forms Admissions Model Policy would be reissued for consultation without changes.

**RESOLVED:** That

- 1) the removal of the feeder school criterion be agreed;
- 2) the removal of the single sex / coeducational criterion not be agreed;
- 3) the proposals regarding transitional protection for siblings be agreed;

- 4) the proposals regarding the Maiden Erlegh / Bulmershe designated area be agreed subject to further detail being provided in the consultation;
- 5) the proposals regarding Emmbrook, Holt, Forest and St Crispin's Schools be agreed;
- 6) the proposals for coordinated schemes be agreed, subject to 'the nearest school' being amended to 'the most accessible school'.

### **73. CONSULTATIONS ON VOLUNTARY AIDED SCHOOLS' ADMISSION POLICIES FOR 2012/2013**

David Armstrong summarised the relevant documents included in agenda pages 64 to 97. Two schools had already started the consultation process, and the Diocese had discussed the matter. It was noted that the meeting in February 2011 would respond to these. It was proposed that proposed timescale for acceptance of offered places be amended from 21 days to 14 days. With regards to Earley St Peter's Primary School, page 3 of the report contained a reference to the Fair Access Protocol whilst page 5 made no such mention when discussing waiting lists. The Forum was asked if it was content for WBC to respond to these consultations, or wished to make an independent contribution.

**RESOLVED:** That the Forum was content for WBC to respond without alteration.

### **74. SCHOOLS ADJUDICATOR DECISIONS**

David Armstrong introduced the decisions as set out on agenda pages 98 to 113. The Forum was reminded that these decisions were binding, and were to be noted and consideration should be given to whether any of these decisions necessitated changes to any elements of WBC policy. There were two decisions, the first of which related to the Secondary Admissions Review, with a previous adjudication having been made in relation to the same parents. The matters raised were being addressed via the on-going consultation.

The second case referred to the Piggott School and was a detailed ruling. There was an outstanding request from the Piggott School for WBC to respond; Hilary Winter stated that the School had addressed the key issues raised.

**RESOLVED:** That the Forum note the Adjudicator's decisions.

### **75. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

Forum Members were reminded that the dates of future meetings were 15 February and 15 March 2011.

*These are the Minutes of a meeting of the School Admissions Forum*

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