

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
SCHOOL ADMISSIONS FORUM
HELD ON 29 JANUARY 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.00 PM**

Councillors

Graham Howe

Sarah Kerr

Schools Representatives

Ben Godber

Bohunt School

Amanda Woodfin

The Bulmershe School

Sue Runciman

Shinfield St Marys Junior School

Also Present

Luciane Bowker

Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist

Piers Brunning

Senior Specialist Strategy and Commissioning

Sal Thirlway

Assistant Director Learning Achievement and Partnerships

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

Sue Runciman was appointed Chairman for the remainder of the 2020/21 academic year.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

Ben Godber was appointed Vice-Chairman for the remainder of the 2020/21 academic year.

3. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Patricia Cuss and Celia Thatcher.

Luciane Bowker, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist stated that David Babb was standing down from the Forum, and Christine Jones would be joining the Forum in his place in the future.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 6 June 2018 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

It was agreed that there would be little point in considering the actions from minutes of a meeting that had been held over a year and a half ago, particularly in view of Sal Thirlway's report and conclusions, which he went on to share in Agenda item 6.

5. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

6. SCHOOL ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS UPDATE

Sal Thirlway, Assistant Director for Learning, Achievements and Partnerships presented the School Admissions Arrangements Update report which was set out in agenda pages 13-18.

Sal Thirlway stated that he was aware that School Admissions Forum had not had a meeting since June 2018. Since he started working in his current role he had talked to

colleagues and considered options about the best way forward for the Forum, the report contained his proposal.

Sal Thirlway stated that as a result of re-structuring within the Council, the School Admissions Team had been moved to the Customer Localities department. He believed that not enough consideration had been given to the importance of this service and the service was not operating at the desired level.

Sal Thirlway stated that the senior management had decided to move the School Admissions Team back to Children's Services, it was now part of his portfolio. He recognised that the team needed more resources to operate at the right level. It was also necessary to re-think processes to make them more efficient.

Sal Thirlway stated that School Admissions Forum was a non-statutory body; although the discussions held at the Forum were informative, the Forum had no ability to affect decisions or influence the development of policies. He was proposing to change the Forum to a Task and Finish Group where there would be an opportunity to co-produce and challenge the admissions processes and policies. He envisaged a broad membership on this Task and Finish Group, involving schools, parents and professionals. The Task and Finish Group would report to Schools Forum.

During the discussion of the item the following comments were made:

- Sal Thirlway emphasised that he wished to encourage the co-production of solutions and response to challenges;
- Councillor Kerr was uncertain about the new group being called a task and finish group, as those usually were set up to look at a specific issue for a limited time, she wished the scrutiny of school admissions to be ongoing; it was thought therefore that this might need to be referred to as 'working group';
- Ben Godber stated that there was a Finance Task and Finish Group of Schools Forum which had been in operation for the last three years and was ongoing, and this worked well;
- Sal Thirlway stated that there was no intention to move away from scrutinising school admissions, this should continue;
- It was agreed that the group would be reformed out of the existing School Admissions Forum and would meet according to need; for example, Sal Thirlway stated that "where there are peaks of activity, we will need to work more frequently"; he added that there may be a need to co-opt specialist expertise, and there would need to be flexibility;
- Sal Thirlway stated that he was prepared to draft the Terms of Reference and arrangements for the governance of the task and finish group. It was agreed by the members present that the Terms of Reference would be likely to determine the nature of future membership and representation, and should therefore be a priority for the present members to agree at the first meeting of the new group;
- Amanda Woodfin was in favour of the changes and agreed that the procedures followed by Schools Forum worked well;
- In response to a question about membership, Sal Thirlway stated that he would contact the headteachers' federations for nominations, but the membership should also include elected Members, parents or carers and the appropriate officers;
- Members stated that it could be difficult to engage parents and that the language used in school admissions processes could be difficult to understand;

- Councillor Kerr questioned the fact that online applications were now the only option for parents, and there was a short discussion regarding this which clarified the support available. Sue Runciman reminded members that the Children's Centres had in the recent past offered their support to parents in the completion of the online admissions forms, and Piers Brunning added that there were a number of other services also which supported this;
- Amanda Woodfin stated that it was important to include someone from the Special Needs Educational (SEN) in the task and finish group;
- In response to a question Piers Brunning, Senior Specialist Strategy and Commissioning stated that the changes in School Admissions were essential and well overdue. Members agreed that they were relieved that School Admissions had returned to Children's Services, where it would be possible for the team to be proactive in its administration;
- Members asked about the financial implications of the changes. Sal Thirlway stated that additional resources were needed and he was currently looking into how to secure the funds to achieve the additional resources;
- Councillor Kerr asked how many full time equivalents (FTE) were in the School Admissions team. Sal Thirlway agreed to find out and report back on the FTE, as he was unsure of this figure. He believed that six people were on the team altogether;
- Sal Thirlway stated that one of the improvements that needed to be made was to streamline phone calls. Some non-complex telephone queries could go to non-skilled professionals in order to free up the capacity of skilled professionals.

After much discussion it was decided that the first meeting of the newly formed School Admissions Working Group would take place with the current members of School Admissions Forum. The membership, governance arrangements and Terms of Reference for the group would be discussed in the first meeting of the group, which should take place before the next meeting of Schools Forum. Sal Thirlway would draft the Terms of Reference in advance of the meeting and members could expect to receive them a week in advance. It was thought that there should be representation also from the SEN team.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) School Admissions Forum would cease to exist; and
- 2) A School Admissions Forum Working Group would be created and would report to Schools Forum

7. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

It was agreed that the first meeting of the School Admissions Working Group would be 4 March 2020.