

SPECIAL MEETING OF CENTRAL DUDLEY AREA COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 17th July, 2007 at 6.30 pm
at Saltwells Education Development Centre, Bowling Green Road, Dudley

PRESENT: -

Councillor Rahman (Chairman)
Councillor J Davies (Vice-Chairman)
Councillors Ahmed, Ali, Mrs. Aston, Cotterill, A Finch, J Martin, Sparks,
Waltho and Mrs While-Cooper, and Mrs. Edwards

OFFICERS:

Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (as Area Liaison Officer), Principal Project Officer (Directorate of Adult, Community and Housing Services), Director of Children's Services, Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources), Principal Solicitor and Mr R Jewkes (Directorate of Law and Property)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE

Approximately 45 members of the public.

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APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors Mrs. Coulter, Ms. Craigie, K Finch and Mrs. Roberts; and Ms. Little.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Rahman declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item Number 3 – Allocation of Secondary School places in the Central Dudley Area for the 2007/08 academic year, in that he had two children who currently attended Hillcrest School.

Councillor Ali declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item Number 3 – Allocation of Secondary School places in the Central Dudley Area for the 2007/08 academic year, in that he his children currently attended Castle High School and Kates Hill Primary School.

Councillor Ahmed declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item Number 3 – Allocation of Secondary School places in the Central Dudley Area for the 2007/08 academic year, in that his children currently attended Bishop Milner School and Dudley College.

Mrs. Edwards declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item Number 3 – Allocation of Secondary School places in the Central Dudley Area for the 2007/08 academic year, in that she was a Governor of Dudley Wood Primary School.

Councillor J Martin declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item Number 3 – Allocation of Secondary School places in the Central Dudley Area for the 2007/08 academic year, in that he was currently seeking appointment as a Governor of Netherbrook Primary School.

The Principal Solicitor declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item Number 3 – Allocation of Secondary School places in the Central Dudley Area for the 2007/08 academic year, in that his wife was employed as a teacher at Dudley Wood Primary School.

ALLOCATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PLACES IN THE CENTRAL DUDLEY AREA FOR THE 2007/08 ACADEMIC YEAR

An oral presentation was given by the Assistant Director of Children's Services (Resources) in relation to 'Secondary School Places in Central Dudley'. In introducing the presentation, he outlined the current admissions policy for Dudley community secondary schools, stating that parents were requested to express their preferred choices of school, which were considered on an equal preference basis. Places were then allocated according to a strict criteria, with priority being given in the following order: -

- 'Looked after children' who were in the care of the Local Authority.
- Children with a serious ongoing medical condition, as confirmed by a hospital consultant.
- Children who would have one or more siblings attending the school when they entered in year 7.

The remaining places were then allocated on the basis of the distance, in a straight line, from the applicants' home address to the main entrance of the school. Any pupil not obtaining a place at any of their preferred schools would be offered the nearest school with places available. In accordance with legislation, a child with a statutory statement of special educational needs (SEN) would automatically be allocated a place.

It was reported that the Local Authority was obliged by statute to consult annually on their admissions arrangements, with consultation being undertaken in the spring, approximately eighteen months prior to admission.

The Assistant Director then referred to a number of examples of how admissions for certain schools in the Borough had altered in recent years, with demand for certain schools growing rapidly while others fell, resulting in surplus places. He stated that in particular, demand for places at the Hillcrest School and Community College had risen drastically, with the

furthest distance from which applicants had obtained a place falling from 7020 metres in 2003/04 to 1241 metres in 2007/08. The increased demand had led to a number of parents being offered places at schools which were some distance from their home.

In concluding the presentation, the Assistant Director outlined a number of actions which would be taken in the coming years to ensure that the supply of secondary school places in central Dudley met demand, including the securing of 'Building Schools for the Future' (BSF) funding which would enable the Local Authority to increase capacity in the area. However, he advised that the process for securing this funding and then planning and implementing capital schemes was long and any resulting increase in capacity would not be in place until approximately 2012.

a. Questions from members of the public

At the conclusion of the presentation, the Chairman advised that a period of time for questions from members of the public would follow in relation to issues surrounding the allocation of secondary school places in central Dudley for the 2007/08 academic year. It was noted that questions would be taken in groups of three, following which representatives of the Directorate of Children's Services would be requested to respond.

A member of the public requested clarification as to why, given the fact that the Local Authority closely monitored birth rates and the demand for school places, action had not been taken earlier to ensure that a sufficient number of secondary school places were available in the central Dudley area in order to ensure that all children were offered a school within a reasonable distance.

A member of the public requested an explanation as to why the 'sibling' and 'distance' criteria were employed when places were being allocated.

A member of the public raised the question of why, considering the fact that central Dudley now had a shortage of secondary school places, further efforts had not been made to keep Cradley High School open and improve the school in order to increase its popularity.

In responding, the Assistant Director stated that by law the Local Authority was only required to offer each child a place in the nearest school with places available. Whilst numbers were constantly kept under review, the only funding available for capital building projects was BSF funding which, even if secured, would not have an effect for some years yet. In relation to the 'sibling' and 'distance criteria', he advised that siblings were offered places in order to try and keep families together, while distance was employed as the final criteria, simply as a way of making the final decision as to who would be offered places. In relation to the closure of Cradley High School, he stated that the closure of the school was not connected to the current problems in the central Dudley area. The school had been closed because the number of children being admitted to it was insufficient to make it sustainable financially.

A member of the public raised the question of which schools the children who lived in the Pedmore area would be attending in the next academic year, as several children living in central Dudley had been allocated places at the Pedmore College of Technology.

A member of the public commented that Cradley High school had been closed on the basis of information which had been falsified and manipulated by the Local Authority.

A member of the public stated that he had recently attended a private meeting with the Assistant Director at which he had agreed that in hindsight it would have been preferable for Cradley High to have remained open, at least temporarily, in order to accommodate some of the children affected by the situation in central Dudley secondary schools.

In responding, the Assistant Director stated that as far as he was aware the children from the Pedmore area who would be entering secondary education in September 2007 would primarily be attending the Pedmore College of Technology, the Redhill School and the Thorns School and Community College. In responding to the latter two points, he stated that the Local Authority had not falsified or manipulated any information in respect of Cradley High, and that the school had been closed simply because it was not popular enough to be viable. He also refuted the suggestion that he had privately agreed that the school should not have been closed.

A member of the public stated that whilst her granddaughter had secured a place at Hillcrest, her grandson had been offered a place in a Sandwell school which operated a different holiday calendar. She commented that her daughter could not afford to pay for childcare and questioned how she was meant to manage this situation.

A member of the public stated that her child had also ended up having to accept a place at a Sandwell school and commented that in her view serious mismanagement had occurred within the Directorate of Children's Services which had given rise to the current situation. She requested that an answer be provided as to who had not done their job properly.

A member of the public stated that her son had been moved to Pedmore College of Technology as a result of the closure of Cradley High. When he started at the school in September he would be required to leave home at 7.15am and would not return home until late, by which time it would usually be dark. She commented that the journey to Pedmore was too far for a boy of his age to travel alone each day, and expressed concern regarding his safety on his way to and from school.

In responding, the Assistant Director stated that several residents of central Dudley had accepted places at Sandwell schools, as they were the closest schools with places available. Indeed, under the current admission arrangements parents were entitled to express preference for any school, whether it was in Dudley or not. Many parents took up this opportunity each year for a number of reasons. In relation to the issue raised in respect of childcare, he advised that the Local Authority could not be held responsible for individuals' care arrangements, and that this was the responsibility of parents themselves. He stated that in his view all officers of the Directorate of Children's Services had done their job properly despite demographic difficulties in the Borough.

A member of the public stated that his daughter's appeal for entry to Hillcrest had been refused on the grounds that the school could not accommodate any further children without a health and safety risk being created due to the strain on resources and the school buildings. He questioned how, if this was the case, the school had taken 26 children who had been displaced as a result of the closure of Cradley High.

A member of the public raised the question of whether, given the fact that parents were being forced to move closer to secondary schools in order to ensure that their children got a place, the Local Authority was concerned that large areas of central Dudley, for example in the vicinity of Netherbrook Primary and Dudley Wood Primary, would end up being deserted by families, with a resulting drop in the number of children attending those schools.

A member of the public commented that the placing of children in schools which were a long distance from their homes would be damaging to family unity which was the very thing the Local Authority claimed to be protecting by giving priority to siblings in the admissions process.

In responding, the Assistant Director stated that the additional children who had been admitted to Hillcrest as a consequence of the Cradley High closure would be entering into years 8, 9 and 10 and consequently would have no impact on the admissions process for year 7 which was being considered at the meeting. In relation to future numbers at Netherbrook Primary and Dudley Wood Primary, he stated that numbers in those schools were already falling and that this decline would, it was envisaged, mean that competition for secondary school places in central Dudley would also ease off in future years. In relation to the question raised regarding the prioritising of siblings, he stated that the reason for having a published admissions policy was to create transparency in the admissions process and ensure that all applications were treated fairly and equally.

At this juncture, the Chair of Governors of Hillcrest School and Community College, who was in attendance at the meeting as a member of the public, stated that as a community school, the school had been directed by the Local Authority to admit the former Cradley High pupils, despite the resulting increased pressure on staff and accommodation at the site. Whilst the school would be happy to increase its admission number, this would only be possible if the necessary building work was completed and increased resources were made available.

A member of the public stated that her son had been offered a place at the Holly Hall Maths and Computing College, which was an impractical distance from her home in Netherton. She had contacted the Dudley School Admissions Services to discuss her situation and had received no response.

A member of the public commented that although the published admissions policy stated that priority would be given to children with siblings in a particular school, her child had been refused a place at the school which her other children attended.

In responding, the Assistant Director reiterated that under the current national admissions arrangements, parents were able to express preferences for schools, rather than making a definite choice. However, in relation to the comments regarding the Admissions Service and the admission of siblings, he requested that the questioners provide him with their contact details after the meeting, in order that he could follow up the issues raised and respond to them accordingly.

A member of the public stated that due to his child being offered a school which was an impractical distance away, he felt he had no alternative but to educate the child at home. He raised the question of what the legal repercussions would be should he follow this course of action.

A member of the public stated that although her child had been refused a place at Hillcrest on the grounds of distance, she was aware of at least one family who had secured a place, despite living further away, by giving a false address on the application form.

In responding, the Assistant Director advised that under legislation, the Local Authority needed to be assured that every Dudley child who was being educated at home was receiving an adequate level of education. If the Local Authority did not feel that this was the case, it was required to offer a place at a school, following which the child would be expected to attend. In relation to applicants giving false addresses on application forms, he stated that similar allegations had already been investigated and had resulted in offers of places being withdrawn from the parents in question. He requested that the questioner provide him with the details of the family in question in order that he could investigate further.

b. Comments from members of the Committee

At the close of questions from members of the public, the Chairman advised that each Member of the Committee would be given the opportunity to comment on the issues raised and to raise any questions arising from the discussion. Each Member then spoke on the matter, commenting as follows:

Councillor Mrs While-Cooper expressed particular concern that some children from the central Dudley area were being required to travel three miles twice a day to attend Holly Hall Maths and Computing College, particularly as this would exclude the affected children from after school activities. She was also concerned about the safety of the children involved.

Councillor Sparks commented that the closure of Cradley High School had exacerbated the situation with regard to secondary school admissions in central Dudley, and commented that the process for the closure of this school had been wholly mismanaged. He stated that the closure of the Gilbert Claughton school, which had been managed by a previous administration, had involved detailed planning for the redistribution of the displaced pupils, wide consultation with the community, and the engagement of the relevant Ward Members. He commented that had these measures been taken prior to the closure of Cradley High, the current situation would not have arisen.

Councillor Cotterill expressed concern that the length of the journey some children in central Dudley would be expected to make to and from the schools at which they had been offered a place was unacceptable, particularly as conditions would be considerably worse during the winter months. He stated that the closure of Cradley High had compounded an already worrying situation in relation to secondary admissions in central Dudley.

Councillor Waltho commented that the current situation showed that major issues existed regarding the Local Authority's forward planning in relation to secondary school places in central Dudley. He echoed concerns that the closure of Cradley High would make the situation worse.

Councillor Ali commented that education was a primary concern for all parents and that the transition from primary to secondary was a particularly worrying time both for parents and children. He stated that the Local Authority's handling of the situation had been unacceptable as the closure of Cradley High should not have been undertaken until BSF funding or an alternative means of replacing the lost school places had been identified.

The Chairman expressed concern that due to the current situation parents in the area may have to move house to ensure that they obtained a place at a local school, and stated that the forward planning of the Local Authority in respect of the closure of Cradley High had been inadequate. He commented that the safety and social development of children was being compromised, as they would have to travel to schools which were several miles from their homes.

Councillor Ahmed expressed sadness regarding the current situation, and commented that the education and safety of local children should be the top priority of the Local Authority. He requested that Council act quickly to address the points raised at the meeting.

Councillor Davies commented that other areas of the Borough, including his own ward, St. Thomas's, were being affected by the lack of places available in the area. He reported that children in his ward had been offered places at Leasowes Business and Enterprise College which was also a considerable distance away, and echoed previous comments that this situation was unfair on the families affected.

Councillor Martin expressed agreement with the comments previously made, and stated that he had been contacted by a number of constituents affected by the problem who had generally expressed concern for the safety of their children. He had also been contacted by parents who claimed that the Headteacher of Cradley High had actively discouraged them from expressing a preference for that school.

Councillor A Finch commented that the views of local parents had been disregarded in the management of secondary school places in the area, and requested that the Local Authority pay more attention to their wishes in future.

Councillor Mrs Aston expressed sympathy with the families affected by the current shortage of secondary school places in the area, and expressed regret that the closure of Cradley High had been approved, as this had exacerbated the existing problem.

At the close of comments from Members, the Chairman requested that the representatives of the Directorate of Children's Services respond briefly to the points raised, answering any specific questions which had been put.

In responding, the Director of Children's Services stated that he and the rest of his Directorate took the issues discussed at the meeting very seriously, and appreciated the importance of consistency and forward planning in the school admissions process. He advised that the consultation on the admissions process for the 2008/09 academic year had already taken place in spring 2007, but that the Directorate would look very closely at the points raised when considering its proposed admissions arrangements for the September 2009 entry.

In relation to the admissions policy and the use of distance as a criteria, he stated that he did not feel that the 'lottery' arrangements employed in certain local authorities around the country would be any fairer, and reiterated that 91% of Dudley parents had been offered a place at their first preference school. In addition, those parents who were not satisfied with the school they had been offered had the option to put their personal case forward to an Independent Appeal Panel. Also, free transport would be provided for any children who had been allocated a school which was more than three miles away from their home.

In relation to criticisms levelled at the Local Authority in respect of forward planning and the provision of places, he stated that changes in the preferences expressed by parents, particularly in respect of the Hillcrest School and Community College, had led to a surplus of demand for a limited number of places in certain schools. Although the Local Authority made great efforts to plan the provision of places, it was not possible to predict the preferences expressed by parents year on year. In addition, he reported that the 18% fall in birth rate which the Borough had experienced in the last twelve years was now working its way up to secondary schools, with the resulting effect that demand for places would fall away in future years.

In concluding his comments, the Director reiterated the earlier point that the Local Authority was required to consult on its admissions arrangements on an annual basis, and invited parents, if they felt that the current arrangements were unsuitable or somehow inadequate, to make their views known during the next period of consultation in spring 2008, in order that the Local Authority could take account of their views when preparing future admissions policy.

At the close of the discussion, Councillor Davies proposed a course of action to be taken in light of the issues considered at the meeting. The proposal was duly seconded and it was

RESOLVED

That the Cabinet Member for Children's Services be requested to delay the closure of Cradley High School in order to enable a more orderly transition.

Information was given regarding the dates for future meetings of all Select Committees, which were held at the Council House, Dudley. Members of the public were welcome to attend such meetings.

RESOLVED

That the information given in respect of the dates of future meetings of Select Committees, be noted.

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DATES AND VENUES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED

That the dates and venues of future meetings of the Committee, as follows, be noted: -

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| 11 th September 2007 | – | Dudley Concert Hall, St James' Road, Dudley |
| 7 th November 2007 | – | Sledmere Primary School, off Buffery Road, Dudley |
| 22 nd January 2008 | – | Dudley Concert Hall, St James' Road, Dudley |
| 11 th March 2008 | – | Saltwells Education Development Centre, Bowling Green Road, Dudley |

The meeting ended at 8.15 pm

CHAIRMAN