

## Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

21 September 2011

### Briefing note on Reception year school places for September 2011

#### Background to briefing note

1. In view of the significant increase in demand for reception year school places in recent years, and especially for this September, the panel has asked for a briefing on the current position for September 2011. It should be noted that this briefing was completed on Monday 12 September so reflects the position on this date.

#### Background to the position

2. Planning sufficient places for September 2011 has been the most difficult challenge for the council since schools re-organisation for the following reasons:
  - This September has the single greatest increase in the cohort of pupils, reflected by an increase of 278 children in the equivalent birth rate
  - It is the first year of London wide co-ordination for school admissions, meaning past trends in applications do not provide such an accurate guide
  - Uncertain economic times mean that the relationship between state and independent school choice is more difficult to interpret
  - There appears to be more migration to the borough than previously, reflected in an extraordinary number of late applications and a much higher pupil retention from birth to reception year
  - Budget pressures mean the financial cost to open additional classes is even more challenging, and can only be justified if absolutely required
3. LB Merton planned for the largest single year increase in demand for school places in well over a generation. Its previous plans of an additional 7 classes for September 2011 compared to the previous year – which was passed on previous historic patterns continuing - was increased to 9 classes in April when it became apparent that an unprecedented number of late applications meant that there would not be sufficient places for the demand (\* See note for list of schools)
4. It is a statutory requirement for all reception year children to obtain a place the term after they reach five years i.e. autumn born children should start school in January, spring born in April, and summer born the following September. However, it is LB Merton's policy and a requirement of the School Admissions Code 2010 for all reception year children to be offered a September start, rather than offer different points of entry.

## Current position and officer's current approach

5. Having agreed the additional two classes in April, officers were aware that the council was still operating to a very low surplus, and there was a risk that another class may need to be opened. However, such risks have been taken in all of the past four years and we have found that sufficient children do not take up their place in September (from moving away or taking a place in the independent sector without informing the council), thus ensuring the council has sufficient places to offer.
6. As of 12 September LB Merton had 52 resident children unplaced for reception year in 2011/12 of which 33 have received and rejected a local school place offer within 2 miles of their home. Of the remaining 19 who have not received an offer, 9 applied by the closing date and the LA has been unable to make contact with about half of these, suggesting they no longer require a place. This is against 26 current vacancies or multiple offers to be resolved
7. In summary, the council has either offered or has the places to offer a place for every child who has wanted one for September. However, this is not all for schools within 2 miles of their home and some of the parents who rejected an offer will still need a state school place when their child is of statutory school age. The continuing number of late applications and growing demand through the school year is of concern.
8. As part of our continued monitoring of the position, officers have been in close contact with schools to identify vacancies from children not taking their places at the start of term in September. Additionally, we are in advanced discussions with a specific school to provide an additional class, and an announcement will be made on this shortly.

\* Note: The following 10 school opened an extra class this year for the first time: All Saints CE, Gorringe Park, Liberty, St. Marys RC, Singlegate, William Morris, Wimbledon Park, Dundonald, Hillcross, The Priory. Bishop Gilpin opened a new class in 2010 but have now reverted to their previous admission number, hence the 9 extra classes compared to last year.

This is in addition to the 8 schools that have opened new classes since 2008 and are continuing to expand. These are Wimbledon Chase, Holy Trinity and St. Thomas of Canterbury, Benedict, Hollymount and Joseph Hood, Aragon and Cranmer. The council has therefore provided an additional 18FE (540 places) in reception year since 2008. Garfield School expanded from September 2006 so is not included in these figures.

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