

REPORT TO: Cabinet Member – Children’s Services
Cabinet
DATE: 9 December 2008
11 December 2008
SUBJECT: ‘School Admissions Policy’ Working Group Report
WARDS AFFECTED: Manor
REPORT OF: Legal Director
CONTACT OFFICER: Ruth Harrison/Janet Borgerson
**EXEMPT/
CONFIDENTIAL:** No

PURPOSE/SUMMARY:

The final report of the ‘Schools Admissions Policy’ Working Group was considered by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Children’s Services on 2 December 2008. The Committee agreed the recommendations contained within the report and requested to forward the report to the Cabinet Member – Children’s Services and the Cabinet for approval.

REASON WHY DECISION REQUIRED:

That the Cabinet Member – Children’s Services and the Cabinet endorse the recommendations contained within the report.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

- 1) On balance of the information Members managed to review, they did not think it was a viable option to change the Formby Primary School Admissions, or to change them to allow new admissions from Hightown to be treated as a priority.
- 2) Members understand the upset this is causing to the parents of Hightown, but would recommend that they be made aware of the following appeals procedures that are available to them:
 - (a) That an appeal can be made to Sefton Schools Admission Forum, to determine if any changes can be made to the Sefton Admissions Policy for 2011/2012; and
 - (b) Parents have the right as individuals or as a group, to appeal directly to Office of Schools Adjudicator.
- 3) Hightown parents are made aware of the transport links that are in place for primary school children.
- 4) The Working Group felt that there was a clear need for a multi-faith school close to Hightown, and to that end, felt that the authority should work with the appropriate religious authorities to look at the feasibility of St Mary’s school to meeting this need.
- 5) To enable parents to make a much more informed decision, any open days for primary schools should be scheduled to take into consideration those parents with work commitments.
- 6) In order to speed up the allocation process in the appeals stage, we request that the time taken should be reduced. We would hope that the parents of Hightown would respond immediately when their initial allocation is made.

KEY DECISION: No

FORWARD PLAN: N/A

IMPLEMENTATION DATE: Following expiry of call-in period following the publication of the Cabinet minutes

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS:

IMPLICATIONS:

Budget/Policy Framework:

Financial:

<u>CAPITAL EXPENDITURE</u>	2006/ 2007 £	2007/ 2008 £	2008/ 2009 £	2009/ 2010 £
Gross Increase in Capital Expenditure				
Funded by:				
Sefton Capital Resources				
Specific Capital Resources				
<u>REVENUE IMPLICATIONS</u>				
Gross Increase in Revenue Expenditure				
Funded by:				
Sefton funded Resources				
Funded from External Resources				
Does the External Funding have an expiry date? Y/N	When?			
How will the service be funded post expiry?				

Legal:

Risk Assessment:

Asset Management:

CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN/VIEWS

CORPORATE OBJECTIVE MONITORING:

<u>Corporate Objective</u>		<u>Positive Impact</u>	<u>Neutral Impact</u>	<u>Negative Impact</u>
1	Creating a Learning Community			
2	Creating Safe Communities			
3	Jobs and Prosperity			
4	Improving Health and Well-Being			
5	Environmental Sustainability			
6	Creating Inclusive Communities			
7	Improving the Quality of Council Services and Strengthening local Democracy			
8	Children and Young People			

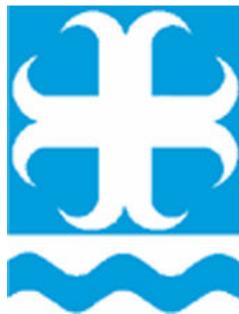
LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS RELIED UPON IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS REPORT

Listed in reference section of the report

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SEFTON COUNCIL

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Children's Services



Schools Admissions Policy
Working Group

REPORT

December 2008

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Acknowledgements

The Working Group would like to thank the people who took part in the research carried out by the Schools Admission Policy Working Group, and kindly contributed to the quality information gathered for this report. A warm thanks goes out to staff at Sefton Council, especially Jane Clark, who went out of her way to provide data at such short notice.

A special thanks goes to the Hightown Action Group for their submissions and well-debated request. We would also like to thank Ruth Harrison and Janet Borgerson the Overview and Scrutiny Officers for their hard work.

The Lead Member wishes to thank the Members of the Working Group for their diligence and prioritising their time to address this important issue.

Forward

Each year, parents with children that start a new school, need to complete a common application that gives parents the opportunity to indicate up to three different primary schools in order of preference. The Council consider all preferences on the application using the equal preference scheme, which means that each preference expressed by a parent for a community school carries equal status and is ranked against the individual school's admission arrangements (cited in *Information for Parents*, September 2008).

This enables schools and the local Council to ensure children are provided with a place in a school with a continuity of education and equity of access, and also allows parents to choose a school that is suitable for their child's specific needs.

However, Sefton has a unique geographical location that stretches approximately 22 miles along the coast, then inland to towns and rural areas with small villages, one of these in specific being Hightown.

Hightown does not have a primary school within its village and therefore children living in here need to travel to a nearby school, with the nearest being approximately 2 miles away. Sefton Council has transport arrangements in place to help these children access school without incurring extra costs.

Recently, the Cabinet Member for Children's Services was alerted to a problem in the treatment of children from Hightown when applying for a place at a local primary school. The Hightown Action Group stated that parents were not securing a place in their choice of school for their children, and were being discriminated against because of their geographical location.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services forwarded this concern to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Children's Services on 28th October 2008, requesting them to look into the School Admissions Policy in detail. The Committee resolved this by establishing a Working Group to review the Schools Admission Policy, which directly impacts upon Hightown residents. The 'School Admissions Policy Working Group set out to determine the problem and consider any weaknesses that could be improved.

Members of the School Admissions Working Group:



Cllr Richard
Hands (Lead)



Cllr Alf Doran



Cllr Geoff Howe



Cllr Paul Larkin

Introduction

Primary schools provide education for children aged between 4 and 11 years old with most infant and junior education being provided in a single primary school (www.sefton.gov.uk).

Primary school standards in Sefton are very good and the number of primary schools judged to be outstanding in Sefton is almost 3 times the national average, and between 2002 and 2007, ranked within the top 10 on English Local Authorities (*Primary Capital Strategy*, March 2008). Sefton Primary schools are well equipped and generously staffed with qualified teachers and have a high reputation for caring about children's welfare (www.sefton.gov.uk).

Sefton's geographical layout located between the Mersey and Ribble estuaries with a coastline of 22 miles, with the more rural parts of the borough lying between the urban areas in the north and south. There are also small rural villages dotted throughout Sefton, for example Hightown, which lies between Crosby and Formby.

Due to the location of Hightown and there being no primary school within the village, children need to travel to primary schools outside of the area. The Hightown Action Group have suggested that Hightown children are being discriminated against when trying to access the schools of their choice, due to children in the towns who are naturally nearer to a school, being given preference when getting into the school of their choice. In some instances, it was stated that Hightown children did not get any of their choices.

Giving the geographical location of their village, the Hightown Action Group is requesting that the green belt land between Hightown and Formby and/or between Hightown and Crosby, be excluded from the geographical criteria, which would enable Hightown children to be on a level playing field with children from other conurbations in the Sefton area. There is a precedent already in existence for this approach in Lancashire, whereby children residing in isolated rural areas not served by a school are given preference (cited from the *Hightown Action Group Submission*, October 2008).

Therefore, the aim of this Working Group is to determine the facts around schools admissions and any concerns with admissions policies that could potentially discriminate against children of Hightown, due to them living further away than children in towns.

Prior to presenting the findings, the next section outlines the methodology used in conducting the research by the School Admission Policy Working Group.

Methodology

On 28th October 2008, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Children’s Services received a request from the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services to look into the Schools Admissions Policy in detail. The Chair, Councillor Richard Hands welcomed the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services, Councillor Peter Dowd, Manor Ward Councillor – Councillor John Gibson and Members of the Hightown Action Group to the meeting. Councillor Dowd explained that he had attended a public meeting in Hightown over concerns that had been raised in relation to the equality of the school admissions policy, which had directly impacted upon Hightown residents. As a matter of urgency, Councillor Dowd asked the Committee to investigate this matter. Councillor Down then left the meeting.

The Hightown Action Group gave a presentation and questions were asked by Members of the Committee. The Committee resolved that they establish a Working Group to review the Schools Admission Policy, which directly impacts upon Hightown with the following Members nominated to serve:

Working Group Membership

Councillor Richard Hands (Lead)
Councillor Alf Doran
Councillor Geoff Howe
Councillor Paul Larkin

The following Schools Admissions Policy **Working Group Meetings** took place:

Friday 7th November 2008

Members met with Council Officers to review various documentation, facts and figures regarding Sefton Schools Admissions, and complete a Scoping Exercise.

Friday 21st November 2008

Members of Working Group met with Members of the Hightown Action Group in relation to Schools Admissions in Sefton, to discuss concerns of Schools Admissions of Hightown children to local primary schools.

Thursday 27th November 2008

Members reviewed the draft Working Group report, prior to submission to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Children’s Services.

The Scoping Exercise produced the following Terms of Reference and Objectives for the Schools Admissions Policy Working Group:

Working Group Terms of Reference

To review the Primary Schools Admissions Policy in the Hightown area, taking into account their geographical positioning (*Sefton Council, Scoping Exercise – Schools Admissions Policy, November 2008*)

During the process of this review, Members of the Working Group gathered a substantial amount of information from various sources, which are noted in the 'Reference' section. The findings from this research are reported in the next section.

Submissions

This section highlights some key results, which will help gain a picture of the extent of any potential issues in relation to primary schools admission for children from Hightown.

Views expressed by representatives of the Hightown Action Group

- Some Hightown residents did not get any of their three preferred primary school choices for September 2009.
- Children in surrounding areas to Hightown get into the schools of their choice.
- The Hightown Action Group presented a petition to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, of approximately 650 residents, to highlight this problem.
- Only 50% of Hightown residents got into the school of their choice (L38 postcode), compared to 95% in L37
- Children without a religious belief are discriminated against.
- 2 children from Hightown got 2nd choice of primary school.
- There are no suitably lit pavements between Hightown and neighbouring schools and they believe this is not a suitable walk way.
- Hightown is outside the nearest town boundary and they believe this causes problems with being admitted to local primary schools, due to their distance compared to other residents.
- Open Days for some schools are at inappropriate times that do not allow working parents to attend easily.
- There is an even spread of faith parents within Hightown.
- The appeals process takes 4 months.
- 90% of school admission appeals are unsuccessful, and appeals that are successful are due to determining that the Council has not followed the correct procedure.
- The Hightown Action Group pointed out that Lancashire Council has an admissions policy that enables rural communities to have better access when applying for schools.

Submissions presented by Sefton Council

Views expressed by Sefton Council:

- Residents are required to state their schools of choice, even if they intend to send their children to a privately funded school. Therefore, it is often quite late on in the admissions process that residents become aware of school places being opened up again, and by this time, people have already accepted their 2nd or 3rd choice.
- The Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) have released changes to the new Admissions Code of Practice, which had to be implemented immediately. Therefore, it is now too late to make any changes to the school admissions for 2009-2010, as originally thought, in time for it to be recommended by Cabinet in December after the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting for Children's Services on 2 December 2008.
- Any recommendations from this Working Group will be considered, but unfortunately cannot be implemented for 2009-2010.
- Sefton schools use various policies, which affects how admissions are prioritised (Sefton Council, *Information for Parents*, September 2008 (Page 27-53)).
- Voluntary Aided Faith Schools have their own schools admission policy that is difficult to affect, and is controlled by the dioceses.
- Of the 9 families residing in Hightown with children that were admitted to Primary schools in September 2008, the following table shows how the admissions were allocated in April, then again in September after parents declined the original places offered to them:

	1st Pref School Allocated	2nd Pref School Allocated	3rd Pref School Allocated	No Pref Allocated	Total
April 2008	5	2	0	2	9
Sept 2008	5	3	1	0	9

Other points considered by the Working Group

- We reviewed the Schools Admission model used by Lancashire County Council for their rural areas, which we did not consider comparable to the circumstances in Hightown.
- A free bus services is provided to children that attend local primary schools (Sefton Council, *Information for Parents*, September 2008 (Page 54-56)).

- There was a rise in Sefton birth rates for 2004, which impacted on the admission for 2008/09 to primary schools. This could have contributed towards some of the Hightown Action Groups concerns. However, birth rates are projected to drop, leaving a projected drop in primary school admissions (Figures provided by Schools Organisation and Data Book, November 2008).
- In some schools, the demand outstrips the availability of places as shown in the following data:

Primary Schools		
Community and Controlled Schools	Admission Number	Places Available
Freshfield Primary School	30	0
Redgate Primary School	30	19
Woodlands Primary School	60	23
St Luke's CE School	60	0
Voluntary Aided Schools		
Our Lady of Compassion	30	0
St Jerome's Catholic Primary School	30	0
St Mary's Catholic Primary School	15	0
Trinity St Peter's C.E. Primary School	30	0

(Figures from Sefton Council/Information for parents, October/September 2008)

This table shows how some schools are under-subscribed, such as Redgate and Woodlands, due to lack of requests for places.

- Criteria specified by the various local school admissions policy, is adapted from a national model and local schools do not have to implement all the criteria from the national model.
- Sefton villages that could be in a similar position to Hightown, geographically and potential issues with schools admissions, include Ince Blundell, Lunt, Sefton and Little Crosby.
- The Working Group felt that all of the schools in the area are of a high standard with places available across the catchment area.
- The appeals process is now carried out by independent governors, not Sefton Council.
- The Working considered the avenues of appeal available for residents who felt the admissions policy was wrong.

- Distance of schools from Hightown village:

Name of School	Distance from Hightown Village
St Mary's Catholic Primary School	1.8 miles
St Luke's Cofe Primary School	1.9 miles
Redgate Primary School	1.9 miles
Our Lady of Compassion Catholic Primary School	2.2 miles
Woodlands Primary School	2.3 miles
Holy Trinity St Peter's Primary School	2.3 miles

(<http://schoolsinthearea.ukvillages.co.uk/schools/Hightown-Merseyside>)

With a few privately funded schools within a 3-4 mile radius of the village.

Conclusions

It is evident from the findings within this report that the Hightown Action Group had concerns for the admissions of their children to primary schools in the area.

The Working Group, even though they had great empathy for the parents of Hightown, felt that overall the admissions policy did not discriminate against their children.

But our findings have shown that there are sufficient places in Formby Community Schools for Hightown children to attend, but there may be other issues regarding Voluntary Aided Faith Schools admissions that could be addressed in another forum.

The Working Group could not justify recommending any changes, due to the impact it would have on the wider community.

Recommendations

- R1 On balance of the information Members managed to review, they did not think it was a viable option to change the Formby Primary School Admissions, or to change them to allow new admissions from Hightown to be treated as a priority
- R2 Members understand the upset this is causing to the parents of Hightown, but would recommend that they be made aware of the following appeals procedures that are available to them:
- (c) That an appeal can be made to Sefton Schools Admission Forum, to determine if any changes can be made to the Sefton Admissions Policy for 2011/2012; and
 - (d) Parents have the right as individuals or as a group, to appeal directly to Office of Schools Adjudicator.
- R3 Hightown parents are made aware of the transport links that are in place for primary school children.
- R4 The Working Group felt that there was a clear need for a multi-faith school close to Hightown, and to that end, felt that the authority should work with the appropriate religious authorities to look at the feasibility of St Mary's school to meeting this need.
- R5 To enable parents to make a much more informed decision, any open days for primary schools should be scheduled to take into consideration those parents with work commitments.
- R6 In order to speed up the allocation process in the appeals stage, we request that the time taken should be reduced. We would hope that the parents of Hightown would respond immediately when their initial allocation is made.

References

Department for Children, Schools and Families, *The new local consultation process for determining admission arrangements*, November 2008.

Hightown Action Group, *Hightown Action Group Submission*, October 2008.

Sefton Council, *Admissions to Primary Schools in Sefton 2009-2010*, September 2008.

Sefton Council, *Figures provided by Schools Organisation and Data Book – Reception Pupil Numbers in Sefton from 1997 to 2013, Reception Pupil Numbers in Sefton, by Area, from 1997 to 2013*, November 2008.

Sefton Council, *Hightown Bus Estimated No's, Formby Bus Est No's*, 2008.

Sefton Council – Overview and Scrutiny Working Group, *Admission Policy for Community Primary Schools in Formby 2010/11*, November 2008.

Sefton Council, *Primary Capital Strategy*, March 2008.

Sefton Council, *Primary Schools – Admission Number/Places Available/ONS Births Manor Ward*, 2008.

Sefton Council, *Sefton Map Primary Schools/High Schools*, 2008.

Sefton Council, *Sefton Unitary Development Plan, Proposals Map – Bootle Central Area*, 2006.

Sefton Council, *Sefton Unitary Development Plan, Proposals Map – Formby*, 2006.

Sefton Council, *Sefton Unitary Development Plan, Proposals Map – Maghull*, 2006.

Sefton Council, *Sefton Unitary Development Plan, Proposals Map – Southport*, 2006.

Sefton Council – Technical Services, *Public Transport Accessibility to Secondary Schools (Ainsdale High closed) AM Peak 08.00-09.00*, August 2007.

Sefton Council, *Which School? General information and arrangements for admission to secondary schools in Sefton*, September 2008

<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/sacode/index.shtml>

<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/>

<http://schoolsinthearea.ukvillages.co.uk/schools/Hightown-Merseyside&logid>

<http://www.sefton.gov.uk/>