

Admissions Forum – Meeting held on Wednesday, 9th July, 2008.

Present:-

Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools

Gill Bodman – Western House Primary School
Kate Makinson – Chalvey Early Years Centre

Foundation Schools

Hilda Clarke – Langley Grammar School
Italo Cafolla – Castlevew Primary School

Voluntary Aided Schools

John McAteer – St Bernard’s Grammar School

Parent Governor Representatives

Mohammed Din – Ryvers Primary School

Local Education Authority

Councillors Dale-Gough and Pantelic

Officers Present:

Tony Browne (Head of School Services)
Kevin Barrett (Democratic Services Manager)

Apologies for Absence:- Bill Alexander, Maureen Ball, Chris Bowler, Councillor May Dodds, Clair Pyper and Councillor Pat Shine.

PART I

1. Appointment of Chair

Resolved – That Councillor Peter Dale-Gough be appointed Chair of the Forum for 2008/09 municipal year.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chair

Resolved – That Councillor Natasa Pantelic be appointed Vice-Chair of the Forum for 2008/09 municipal year.

3. Declarations of Interest.

None.

4. Minutes

The minutes of the last meeting held on 24th April, 2008 were approved as a correct record.

5. Matters Arising

With regard to Grammar School admissions, members referred to the issue discussed at the previous meeting in respect of some 60 Slough parents whose children had achieved an 11+ pass mark of 111 or more but had been unable to secure a place at one of the Slough Grammar Schools. Members asked for an update on how many Slough children had still been unable to secure a place. Ms Clarke commented that the situation was somewhat fluid in that some parents held an offer for one of the Grammar Schools but then relinquished it at the last moment and it was therefore not possible to give a precise figure at this time. However, she would be able to produce accurate information for the Forum in September. Mr McAteer commented that no Roman Catholic Slough child who had passed the 11+ and wanted a place at St Bernard's had been unable to secure one.

In respect of the request that Slough be granted an extension to the 15th April deadline to agree admission arrangements for September, 2009, no feedback had yet been received from the Minister. However, Mr Browne commented that he believed that it was highly unlikely that any such extension would now be granted.

In response to a question, Mr Browne stated that the current DCSF consultation on admissions closed in October and he would bring a report on the issue to a meeting of the Forum in September.

It was noted that work was still in hand with regard to an audit of the appeals procedures in foundation and voluntary aided schools.

6. Grammar School Admissions

Mr Browne presented the admissions policies for the Slough Grammar Schools for 2009/2010 academic year for the Forum's comment. In opening the discussion, the Chair expressed his concern that, whilst in the past any Slough child who passed the 11+ and wished to gain entry to one of the Slough Grammar Schools would have been able to do so, there appeared to be a particular problem in the current year with a number of children not having been able to gain a place. He was concerned that, whilst most Slough parents were in favour of a grammar school system, if it became more difficult to access them, this may change parents' attitude to the schools. Mr Browne responded that there had indeed been a greater pressure this year on the places at the Slough grammar schools and he believed that this was largely due to more Slough parents indicating a preference for a Slough school rather than for one outside of the Borough. This was a reflection of the improvement in the quality of the Slough schools but it had created other problems.

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Ms Clarke added that whilst it was extremely encouraging that Slough schools were becoming more popular, this was now giving rise to a problem of over-subscription and consequent tensions which were difficult to overcome in the short term. She also referred to the fact that there was a lot more turbulence in the system this year and the impact of the new Beechwood and Langley Academy schools was having a significant impact.

Ms Makinson commented that parents perceived that many children from outside of Slough were gaining places at the Slough grammar schools and this was having a detrimental impact on Slough children. She asked whether it would not be possible for the grammar schools to give priority to Slough children in their admissions policy. Ms Clarke responded that the grammar schools selected on the basis of ability and to amend the policy to include priority for Slough children would have a detrimental impact on the non-selective schools in the town and was not favoured by their head teachers. The Forum was reminded that there had never been a guarantee of a place at a grammar school for all Slough children who passed the 11+ although, in recent times, there had not been a particular problem in this area.

Mr Din referred again to his concerns expressed at the previous meeting and asked whether a catchment area system could be introduced such as applied in the Buckinghamshire County Council area. Mr Browne responded that it had already been agreed to do a piece of work with the grammar schools on this particular issue but it was not yet complete. He hoped to report back on this issue by September.

Reference was also made to the difficulties caused by the fact that Slough Grammar School was now outside of the Consortium and there was therefore less working together by the grammar schools than had been the case in the past.

Ms Clarke reiterated that any change to the current policy would be against the wishes of the heads of the community schools and she believed that this could open the grammar schools to a judicial review. She undertook to raise the issue again on 10th July at a meeting of Slough head teachers.

The meeting then proceeded to consider the individual grammar school admissions policies in detail and made the following comments.

Herschel Grammar School – Clarification was sought as to the way in which the waiting list operated and what happened after it was closed. Ms Clarke explained that, to avoid turbulence, the waiting list was limited until the end of September and anyone applying after that date would be treated as an “in year” admission. She explained that only one test was taken at 11+ and this applied to the other schools in the Consortium. She could not however speak for Slough Grammar School.

Ms Bodman asked why no reference was made in the policy to the position of looked after children or children with special educational needs (SEN). Ms Clarke commented that the grammar schools had received advice that they

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did not need to specifically refer to these as they were obliged to give preference to these categories. Following a discussion it was proposed and seconded that the Consortium grammar schools include specific reference to looked after children and those with SEN in their admissions policies.

Members noted the wording in the St Bernard's admissions policy regarding accessibility of tests for children with disabilities and special needs and it was agreed that this wording would be appropriate in each of the grammar school policies.

Slough Grammar School – The Forum had a number of issues with the wording of the School's admissions policy. With regard to paragraph 6 relating to Children with SEN there was a concern at the wording "(from a recognised professional in an appropriate discipline)" which was considered to be too vague. Mr Browne commented that the admissions policy had been submitted to the Adjudicator by the LEA last year and attention drawn to the admission process for pupils with SEN. The Adjudicator had not recommended any change to this wording. Any further referrals to the Adjudicator may be fruitless.

Mr McAteer referred to the contradiction of paragraphs 3 and 8 in the policy and the negation of paragraph 5 by those two paragraphs. He suggested that the word "required" in paragraph 3 should be amended to read "permitted".

It was moved and seconded that a formal objection be made to the Schools Adjudicator addressing the areas of concern in the Slough Grammar School admissions policy and this was agreed unanimously. However, it was agreed that the concerns expressed by the Forum should first be passed to the Head of Slough Grammar School with a request that amendments be made to the policy. Depending upon the response received, a formal reference on the matter would be made to the Schools Adjudicator.

The areas of concern were as follows:-

Paragraph 5 was negated by both paragraphs 3 and 8 and needed to be re-written.

The section relating to SEN needed to be amended by the deletion of the words in brackets.

In relation to paragraph 10, it was noted that the planned admission number for year 12 was an additional 150 pupils and this would be a considerable drain on other schools in Slough and would have huge ramifications for them. It was essential that this paragraph was clarified and an objection made if appropriate. It was felt that this was an unreasonable policy and should have gone out to formal consultation due to its implications for other schools in Slough with sixth forms.

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St Bernard's Grammar School – Clarification was sought as to how students “demonstrated their suitability for education in a selective school”. Mr McAteer explained that an in-school test was taken in English, Maths and Science and agreed to clarify this in the policy.

Consortium of Grammar Schools – Mr Cafolla again referred to an issue he had raised at previous meetings concerning his view that the Consortium application form was inappropriate and contrary to current guidance and he did not believe that there was any need for such a form as the Common Application Form (CAF) only should be used. Ms Clarke responded that the form was for administrative purposes only and was not an application form. Mr Cafolla took the view that all of the data in question could be provided by the primary schools and did not feel that the grammar schools should at any stage know what the first choice expressed by the parents was.

The comment was also made that there were already too many forms for parents to complete and it may have been preferable if parents did not have to complete such a registration form. Following discussion, it was agreed to note the concerns raised on this point.

Mr Cafolla expressed strong concerns at the change in the 11+ test for the 2009 entry, namely that there would no longer be a maths test and the length of the non-verbal reasoning test had changed from 20 minutes to 50 minutes. He felt that this was a substantial change and should have been formally consulted on with the Admissions Forum and other admissions authorities in the town. He believed that this change went against the spirit of the Admissions Code of Practice and was an error of judgement by the Consortium. Mr Browne expressed the view that it may have been preferable to consult on the change but that it was too late to do anything in respect of the 2009 entry although it could be looked at for the future.

Ms Clarke responded that she did not believe that this change required formal consultation and the Consortium had taken the view that it had simply reduced the test and had followed the spirit of the Code. The Consortium did not believe that the change was significant enough to require formal consultation. Other members of the Forum expressed concern at this decision and felt that, in hindsight, it may have been preferable to consult on the change. However, Ms Clarke reiterated her view that it was an internal matter for the Consortium. Following discussion, it was agreed to note the position and the majority view of the Forum that it would be preferable for changes of this nature to be more widely consulted on in future.

Resolved –

- (a) That a further report be considered at the next meeting of the Forum in September on the grammar school admission arrangements.
- (b) That the Consortium grammar schools be requested to include specific reference in their admissions policies to the position of looked after children and children with special educational needs.

- (c) That the concerns of the Forum regarding Slough Grammar School's admissions policy as detailed above be raised with the School in the first instance and that, if unsatisfactory response is received from the School, a formal objection be made to the Schools Adjudicator.
- (d) That the concerns raised by some Forum members at the Consortium's requirement for parents to complete a registration form and at the lack of consultation on the change to the 11+ test for 2009 entry be noted.

7. Buckinghamshire Admission Arrangements.

Mr Browne advised that he had circulated a copy of the Buckinghamshire admission arrangements together with maps outlining their catchment areas for the Forum's information. Mr Cafolla suggested that an objection should be made to the fact that Buckinghamshire undertook testing at 12+ as well as 11+ but it was pointed out that the matter was before the Forum for information and it was in any case too late to raise a formal objection with Buckinghamshire at this time.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

8. Primary School Admissions

As requested at the last meeting, Mr Browne had written to Priory School in respect of their nursery admissions policy whereby they gave priority to the children of staff. Whilst this related to non-statutory education, the Forum had taken the view this was an issue of inequality and the matter should be taken up with them to bring the policy into line with the other nursery policies across the town. Following Mr Browne's letter, the School had agreed to review this with their governors.

Resolved – That the position be noted.

9. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting should take place on Wednesday, 24th September, 2008 at 4.00 p.m.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 4.00 pm. and closed at 5.35 pm.)