

Essex Admission Forum

Minutes of a meeting of the Essex Admission Forum held at 2.00 pm at County Hall, Chelmsford on 30 November 2010

Membership/Attendance

Representatives of the following:

Schools (9)

Community Schools (2)

* Mrs G Field Mrs J Woodham (Vice-Chairman)

Voluntary Controlled (VC) Schools (1)

Mr P Tidmarsh

Voluntary Aided (VA) Schools (2)

Vacancy (primary) Mr Antony Schular (secondary)

Foundation Schools (2)

Mrs T Boothman Mr J Tippet

Academies (1)

* Mr Steve Leverett

Selective Schools (1)

Mr K Jenkinson

Religious Bodies (2)

Mrs B Harris (RC Diocese of Brentwood) * Mrs E Marshall (Anglican Diocese of Chelmsford)

Parents (2)

Mr O Richards (Primary) * Mr R Carson (Secondary)

Community Representatives (7)

County Councillors (4)

* Cllr R G Gooding (Chairman) Cllr Mrs M Hutchon
(for part of the meeting only)
Cllr S Castle

* Cllr R A Pearson (in the Chair for the first part of the meeting)

Looked After Children (1)

* Cathryn Adams, Narrowing the Gap Officer, Essex CC

Children with Special Educational Needs (1)

* Ms A Stanford, Manager, Statutory Assessment Service, Essex CC

Neighbouring Local Authority (1)

Ms H Cole (London Borough of Redbridge)

* Present

The following were also present: -

Mr S Noor	School Planning and Admissions Manager
Mr D Jones	Secretary to the Forum
Mrs J Dignum	Governance Officer

Mr D Jones, Secretary to the Forum, in the Chair

11. Election of Chairman for the first part of the meeting

The Chairman of the Forum, Councillor R G Gooding, had sent apologies for lateness. In the absence of the Vice-Chairman it was necessary to elect a Chairman to preside until Councillor Gooding arrived. Upon being put to the meeting it was

Resolved:

That Councillor R A Pearson act as chairman for the meeting pending the arrival of Councillor R G Gooding.

Councillor R A Pearson in the Chair

12. Quorum

The Secretary advised that, as fewer than eight members of the Forum were present, the meeting was inquorate. It was agreed to proceed as an informal meeting, whereby any conclusions reached following consideration of the items on the agenda would take the form of recommendations subject to approval at the next quorate meeting.

The items referred to in minutes 13 - 21 below were considered on this basis. As the meeting subsequently became quorate with the arrival of Councillor R G Gooding, the recommendations made during consideration of these items were ratified and became formal resolutions of the Forum (minute 24 below refers). For ease of reference, they are recorded as such throughout these minutes.

13. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs T Boothman, Ms H Cole, Mrs B Harris, Councillor Mrs M Hutchon, Mr K Jenkinson, Mr O Richards, Mr A Schular, Mr P Tidmarsh, Mr J Tippett and Mrs J Woodham.

Councillor Mrs A Turrell, appointed as substitute for Councillor Mrs M Hutchon, also sent her apologies.

14. Membership Issues

New Members

The Chairman advised Members of the appointment of Mr Jonathan Tippett to represent Foundation Secondary Schools and of Mrs Gina Field to represent Community Secondary Schools. He welcomed Mrs Field to her first meeting.

Mr Brian Pead

The Chairman informed Members with sadness of the recent death of Mr Brian Pead, formerly the representative for Community Secondary Schools. Members asked the Secretary to write to Mr Pead's family conveying their sympathy.

Councillor Mrs Margaret Hutchon

Members were sorry to learn of Mrs Hutchon's continuing ill-health and her lengthy stay in hospital. They asked the Secretary to write to her, expressing good wishes for her recovery.

Mr John Long

Members noted the recent resignation of Mr John Long following involvement with the Forum since 2005, originally as a full member and subsequently as the substitute for the Chelmsford Church of England Diocesan representative. It was agreed that the Secretary should write to Mr Long on the Forum's behalf, thanking him for his contribution to its work.

15. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

16. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 July 2010 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

17. Variation in the Order of Business

It was agreed to vary the order of the agenda to allow item 4 (The Co-ordinated Scheme for Secondary School Admissions for pupils living in Essex for 2012/13) and item 5 (The Distribution of the Annual Composite Primary and Secondary School Admission Prospectuses) to be considered at a later stage.

A revised agenda was circulated at the meeting and Items are recorded below in the order in which they were discussed.

18. Future Development of the Forum – next steps

Members considered a report (EAF/09/10) by the Secretary which presented an action plan detailing how the proposals agreed at the last meeting relating to the Forum's future development may be taken forward.

In response to a question, Mr Noor clarified the role of Forum members with respect to the bodies/groups they had been appointed to represent.

Resolved:

- (1) That the progress made to date in taking forward the proposals agreed at the last meeting of the Forum be noted.
- (2) That reports concerning Member access to statistical data and undertaking reviews on matters of interest or concern be submitted to the next meeting.
- (3) That the membership of the Forum be reviewed at the July 2011 meeting and annually thereafter, the review to be informed by a record of members' attendance at meetings over the past year, details of any current vacancies and information concerning any input provided during the year by groups with no permanent representation.
- (4) That the Forum identify groups or individuals who may have an interest in any particular item of future business and invite them to contribute, either in person or in writing, to the meeting at which that item is to be discussed.
- (5) That the following process be introduced to assist the Forum in exercising its statutory power to review admissions policies and raise objections where these are unfair:
 - A report to be submitted to the Autumn meeting concerning the outcome of the LA's determination of admissions policies earlier in the year, identifying any schools in respect of whose policies the LA had raised an objection
 - The admissions policies of these schools, and any new schools, be submitted for review to the Spring meeting of the Forum.
 - The Forum make no comment on any other admissions policies.

19. Forward Look

The Forum considered a report (EAF/10/10) by the Secretary which presented a Forward Look detailing the Forum's future business. The report also sought Members' comments as to format and content, and suggestions regarding potential topics for future consideration.

Members welcomed the introduction of the Forward Look, as agreed at the Forum's last meeting, as a helpful means of setting objectives and monitoring progress. They noted that it was a 'living document' which would be updated following each meeting and would form a standing item on the agenda for every meeting.

Resolved:

That the format of the Forward Look be approved and its content noted.

20. Briefing on Academies and Free Schools in Essex and the implications of current Government Policy on school admissions

The Forum received a presentation by the School Planning and Admissions Manager concerning current issues in school admissions (a briefing note was circulated at the meeting). The presentation detailed current government policy with regard to the establishment of Academies and Free Schools, and the likely impact of this in Essex. It also explained the government's stated requirement for these institutions to comply with the law on school admissions and the statutory School Admissions Code. The Forum noted that the majority of Academies and Free Schools were not permitted to select pupils by ability (the exception being those Academies established through the conversion of a previous, maintained school which selected all or part of its pupils by ability). There was to be a continued role for local authorities in ensuring that schools comply with the School Admissions Code and 'policing' admissions arrangements to ensure fair access for all pupils.

Finally, the presentation referred to the recent publication of the Government White Paper on Schools ('The Importance of Teaching').

The Chairman thanked Mr Noor for his presentation and commented that he welcomed the continuing role for local authorities.

Arising from general discussion, the Forum noted that to date some 40 schools in Essex had expressed an interest in becoming academies. They considered the potential impact of the expansion in academies with some members expressing concern that they may attract the brightest pupils and best staff, to the detriment of other schools. Other members did not consider that this would be a problem, referring to the different levels of provision that already existed and the fact that staff would continue to seek employment at schools for a variety of reasons. Whilst acknowledging the concerns and agreeing on the need to minimise disruption to children's education and staff employment, the Academies Representative reassured the Forum that academies would continue to work in partnership with the LA and schools in the community.

The Forum commented on the need to ensure fair access to all schools for children with Special Educational Needs and the importance of making their views on this known in future.

The Forum voiced its concern at the inclusion in the Schools White Paper of a proposal to abolish Admission Forums. The view was expressed that Forums provided a unique opportunity to bring together representatives of various parties with an interest in school admissions, including representatives of looked after children and children with special educational needs. This was likely to become of increasing importance as more schools became their own admission authorities, creating a need for effective scrutiny of the fairness of admission arrangements. Members agreed to make these views known during the forthcoming consultation process, and to highlight instances where the Forum could demonstrate that it had been a force for change.

The content of the presentation was noted.

Resolved:

That the Forum's comments on the future role of Admission Forums be included in its response to any consultation on the proposals contained in the Schools White Paper.

21. The Distribution of the Annual Composite Primary and Secondary School Admissions Prospectuses

The Forum considered a report (EAF/08/10) by the School Planning and Admissions Manager which sought Members' views on a proposed change of approach to the Local Authority's distribution of the annual composite admissions prospectuses.

The report detailed the current practice for producing and distributing the composite prospectuses in Essex. It then went on to outline the proposed change in these arrangements, which involved essentially restricting the distribution of the hard copy documents in favour of encouraging greater take-up of the online application facility. The benefits and risks of the proposed change were described.

The Forum considered the following options, the first two having been set out in the report and the third arising from discussion:

- i. Retaining the existing system
- ii. Ceasing to provide the composite prospectus to parents as a matter of course (whilst continuing to comply with the legal requirement to provide a prospectus on request and publish it on the Council's website). The LA would write to parents directly about the admissions process, and advise of the online application process. The correspondence would refer to the availability of the prospectuses online and on request, whilst including an explanatory leaflet, setting out the critical information about the process.
- iii. As ii. above, but including an application form with the documents provided to parents.

Whilst keen to encourage online applications, the Forum was concerned to ensure that the children of those who could not or chose not to access the internet were not disadvantaged by any change in the current arrangements. Having sought clarification from Mr Noor, Members were satisfied that other local authorities who had moved to a similar system had experienced neither a rise in the numbers of parents failing to apply for a school place nor an increase in the numbers of statutory appeals. The Forum therefore agreed to support the approach set out in paragraph iii above, with the comment that the LA should aim to implement the approach set out in paragraph ii in due course.

Resolved:

That the Forum support the proposed change of approach in the distribution of the composite prospectuses, as set out in paragraph iii. above, with the comment that the LA should aim to implement the approach set out in paragraph ii. in due course.

Councillor R G Gooding in the Chair**22. The Co-ordinated Scheme for Secondary School Admissions for pupils living in Essex for 2012/13**

The Forum considered a report (EAF/07/10) by the School Planning and Admissions Manager which sought its view as to whether the Local Authority (LA) should increase the number of preferences that parents can express on their application for secondary school places in the normal admission round. The matter was currently under consideration by the LA following a representation from a resident requesting an increase in the current maximum of four.

The report outlined the statutory background to the requirement for Local Authorities to adopt a scheme for the co-ordination of applications for school admission and, as part of that scheme, to comply with the minimum requirement to allow parents to express a preference for up to three schools. The Forum noted that the Essex scheme exceeded this minimum requirement by offering parents to express a preference for up to four schools.

The report provided factual information regarding the percentages of parents offered a place at one of their preferred schools and the numbers of parents who opted not to use all of the preferences offered (eg expressed a preference for fewer than four schools). The position in Essex was compared with that in other local authorities, and information was provided concerning the numbers of preferences offered to parents as part of those authorities' respective co-ordinated schemes.

The background to the request for a change in the number of preferences was described, together with potential arguments in favour of and against such a development. Finally, the Forum was asked to consider whether it supported the need for change and if so, whether it would wish the LA to undertake the statutory consultation process for the co-ordinated scheme on the basis of increasing the number of preferences to five or six.

The Forum gave detailed consideration to the matter, taking particular account of the following:

- The law required parents to apply to their home local authority for school places, regardless of the local authority area in which their preferred school(s) were located. In this way, residents of Essex applying for a place in a school situated in the area of a neighbouring local authority would not be disadvantaged if the co-ordinated scheme operated by that Local Authority made provision for the expression of fewer preferences than the Essex scheme.
- This was the first such representation to have been received concerning the existing scheme, which had been in place for a number of years.
- As, according to the information provided in the report, only 26.6% of parents in the normal admission round 2009/10 used all of the four preferences currently available, it was unclear how the offer of further preferences would be of benefit.
- The support for an increase in the number of preferences seemed to be prevalent in areas where parents did not wish their children to be offered a place at the local school. Whilst understanding these parents' position, the Forum did not believe that offering more preferences would provide the solution they sought. It was more likely that the additional preferences would be used to apply to schools further from their home, where a place was still unlikely to be offered. In these circumstances, it was possible to imagine a future representation to increase the number of preferences still further.

In the light of the above, the Forum did not believe that a change in the co-ordinated scheme would be appropriate at this time. Accordingly it was

Resolved:

That the Forum support unanimously the option set out in paragraph 5.2 of the report, namely that no change should be made to the existing co-ordinated scheme for secondary school admissions (or, by extension, to the scheme for primary school admissions) and that the Local Authority should proceed to consult on this basis.

23. Dates of Future Meetings 2011/12

In accordance with the decision taken at the previous meeting of the Forum that meetings should be scheduled in advance it was:

Resolved:

- (1) That meetings of the Forum be held on the following dates:
 - Tuesday 15 February **or** Tuesday 15 March 2011
(to be confirmed depending on the timing of consultation on the revised Code of Practice for School Admissions)

- Tuesday 5 July 2011
- Tuesday 29 November 2011
- Tuesday 13 March 2012

(2) That a proposed schedule of meetings be submitted annually to the November meeting of the Forum.

24. Ratification of Decisions

As the meeting had become quorate upon the arrival of Councillor R G Gooding, the Forum was able to ratify the recommendations made previously while it had been inquorate and meeting informally.

Resolved:

That the recommendations made while the meeting was inquorate be accepted as formal resolutions of the Forum (minutes 13 – 21 above refer).

The meeting closed at 3.30pm.

Chairman
5 July 2011