

St Albans Admission Meeting

30/03/2009 St Albans Arena

In Attendance:

Chris White (Chair) (**CW**), John Harris (**JHA**), Keith Gould (**KG**), Glenda Hardy (**GH**), Sarah Vize (**SV**), Jayne Howard (**JHO**), Pauline Davis (**PD**)

Introduction:

The meeting was opened by Cllr CW and introductions took place.

JHA: Anxious time for parents who want the right school for their child. 93% secured 1 of 3 preferred schools County wide and this was similar in St Albans which was one of the highest district satisfaction rates across the county. 119 pupils were not allocated a preferred school at allocation day but this is only the start of the process. So by September the situation is usually a great deal better – last year only 17 NRA's remained which equates to 99% being offered a ranked school.

Parent: Not really useful statistics as people's preferred choice is really only 1st preference.

JHA: Law requires fair and transparent admission arrangements for schools which are applied fairly according to the admission arrangements. Wherever possible the law requires that Admission Authorities comply with parental preference.

Parent: How many will get a school preference by 8 April? And particularly in Harpenden? Distance criteria – end of shuffling.

JHA: Sorry the CI process can take time. We proactively keep in touch throughout the process – places turnover rapidly. Already there are 30 places back into CI for this area for places at community schools.

Parent: Why use rules for CI? If a parent already has a ranked school, then they should go to the back of the queue.

JHA: All admission arrangements have to be fair. HCC looked at alternatives for operating the CI process for 2010. We consulted on an alternative, however due to mixed responses a change has not been recommended by officers. We will look at this issue again for 2011.

Parent: Obvious, put in NRA, 3, 2, 1

SV: We are restricted by law in what is permissible as far as any changes to the CI process. The School Admissions code says: "Waiting lists must be clear, fair and objective and must not give priority to children based on the date either their application was received or their name was added to the list. For example, if a child moves to an area outside the normal admissions round and has higher priority against the published oversubscription criteria, they must be ranked above those with lower priority already on the list, subject to the requirements of paragraph 3.21."

Parent: How can we change the law?

SV: OSA overviews Code. We are in regular contact.

CW: DCSF – has OSA as part of it. How? MPs can raise, County Council can influence via the Local Government Association.

Parent: Why has this not been done before?

Parent: Who consulted?

SV: Consultation typically takes place in January/February. This year schools via Headteachers, Chair of Governors, Parent Governors, County Councillors, MPs and Chief Executives of District Councils were included in the consultation. Parent Governors were particularly included to ensure parents were consulted upon.

CW: Advertised in papers?

SV: Yes, press releases, articles and notices. So would take responses into account prior to making recommendations on arrangements for 2010.

Parent: Don't you ask for feedback from parents?

JHA: Keep reviewed and use feedback. Yes, people like you. You have my assurance. We have had a hard look and we will go back to look at this again.

Parent: If 10 parents get together can they complain to the OSA?

JHA: County Council determine the arrangements tomorrow for 2010. If you wish to object you can do so in the way you describe. But against the 2010 rules. If matter relates to 2009, you would need to say that the LA/Admission Authority failed to follow its scheme.

Parent: Yes, but OSA had asked to change In-Year too – Sandringham had to take +26.

JHA: Published Admission Numbers – yes it is possible to apply for and gain an In-Year variation but only in very exceptional circumstances where there is a major change. HCC could apply and would need to make a judgement whether additional places would need to be found.

Parent: How would we initiate it?

SV: In 2006 HCC applied exceptionally for an In-Year variation to increase the number of places available. The major change in circumstances related to the sufficiency of places and the number of applications from the independent sector, which was relevant to that year group. The submission to OSA by HCC: "The Council states that there has been a significant increase in requests for places, not predicted by the authority's 'planning forecast tool', as a result of 'changes in patterns of parental preference at secondary transfer including between the state and independent sector.'"

Parent: The admissions criterion is not clear and transparent. When you produce the booklet can you state the last distance admitted by metres for each school? When I spoke to County

Hall I was told it was on the website but you should publish it in the booklet as well. I have looked in the school admission code and it says you must not give priority to children according to alphabetical order of their first name.

GH: We will be publishing distances next time but be careful as they change year on year. New code came out after we set our rules and we will be changing our tie break rule for 2010.

Mary Crofts: What is fair/transparent? I represent SABLE. In one local school this year not one local child got in but only siblings, which may include some who live too far away. The sibling rule is too old.

JHA: Big national debate when Code changed. Ministers backed as family friendly criterion.

Parent: How can you justify getting first child in and then prioritise siblings, when someone close by can't gain a place?

JHA: Since then, debate on appropriateness for sibling rule and particularly where sibling link has been established. We looked at it in 2009 but on balance have kept it but we may need to come back and look at it again.

Parent: Judy Shardlow, Councillor for Wheathampstead has said she has been trying for 3 years to change the sibling rule with exceptions but this has been turned down.

JHA: I met her and parents in Wheathampstead in July 2008. At this meeting it was agreed to look at some restriction concerning CI and those who already have a ranked school. This was fed into the policy review. I can confirm Judy Shardlow did put forward suggestions but this was last summer. There is a judgement call to be made on aspects of admissions e.g. sibling rule. We will look again at the evidence.

Parent: All dismayed at the Wheathampstead situation— 3 years ago Rob Gordon said he'd get it changed. 'Just a blip' not so.

JHA: Happy to look again at siblings etc.

Parent: Please tell me how I got allocated outside my priority area? Received a Smallford/Hatfield allocation.

JHA: 3 preferences as equal preferences.

Parent: Where in importance? We picked 3 and didn't get any but were allocated a school in Hatfield.

GH: If not eligible for ranked schools you would be allocated the nearest school with a vacancy. This is not dependent on priority areas.

Parent: Your system is wrong.

JHA: Can we pick this up after the meeting?

Parent: How many didn't get any ranked schools and were allocated Francis Bacon? About not being happy about failing school. Has been failing for years and nothing has been done. Why not improve it?

JHA: As well as sufficient places, we have had to ensure all our schools are good. Our standard in Hertfordshire is to have schools as good as anywhere in the Country. Where not, we put in measures to help improvement. Where schools are in the situation such as Francis Bacon, support and challenge are given to ensure rapid changes are made.

Parent: Going on for years. It isn't making a rapid improvement.

JHA: It should improve rapidly when we put measures in.

Parent: What time period?

JHA: Within 2 years

KG: Process for Francis Bacon: HMI deemed it to go into special measures. As a consequence building resources put into place. Expected in 2008 to swiftly remedy the footpath and Governance – Chair of Governors has been changed. Set up school partnership with two other schools and Chair of Governors. Lots of resources brought for leadership, middle leadership and what goes on in the Termly inspection visit. Progress KS3 AND 4 on where they started and finished, as would be expected. If we don't believe this to be sufficient, the improvement partnership will stay for 2 years. We have a good track record on this.

CW: Parents frustrated, this is now but this has been going on far too long. Why? Changing?

JHA: It was not in Special measures.

Parent: But you say 2 years but we've got to wait till then?

JHA: If your child goes to Francis Bacon they should do as well as they should.

Parents disagree.

JHA: But the evidence does suggest this.

Parent: But at Francis Bacon there are more behavioural issues, drugs etc. Supply teachers = 80%.

JHA: No tick boxes. I have closed a school elsewhere overnight in another authority and put in new management within 2 weeks. Within 18 months that school turned around. It requires a concentrated effort etc. If everyone goes in with a negative attitude what can you expect? It can be done and it is possible. Need to have a can do attitude!

Parent: Teachers and parents. Work in school close to Francis Bacon and have been willing it on for 10 years. Now furious. Francis Bacon hasn't worked hard. It needs new leadership but this is too late for us now.

Parent: Have moved from different country to come to St Albans – was bullied. Only child in his class who didn't get his ranked school. Has been given Francis Bacon. We don't want it as it is very bad and has bullying etc.

Parent: Transparent/fair/family friendly – Harpenden – Francis Bacon although sibling in St Albans and another in Hampstead.

JHA: We can discuss this at the end of the meeting.

Parent: Observation – why different this year and carried forward previous year i.e. Sandringham school. Fleetville: of 40 girls only 19 got Beaumont. All girls this year haven't got in, is there something wrong this year? Verulam is losing respect so boys are voting with their feet.

2. Credit crunch: 1 in 10 hasn't got a place at a ranked school. If you don't expand schools which can take on additional places you'll find in time that there will be a crisis. People doing lots to fiddle the system. These conditions won't change in a few months.

Parent: Single sex, oversubscribed. Why do you include 2nd and 3rd choice in random allocation?

Parent: In the priority area for my first two preferred schools. Was almost certain I would get the first two preferences but now I will have to walk in 2 different directions. Want to go to my local school/county/friends/after school. Your system doesn't work.

GH: 2/3rd into random – legal to work an equal preference system. Ranking only relevant when there is a tie-breaker. Need to lobby Parliament as not permissible by law. There is an annual consultation and this has been raised.

JHA: My opening remarks respect the difficult time and am sorry for individuals. I will look at individual cases raised tonight. Could be a system problem or when I look at individual preferences there could be an issue with how appropriate these are. Can't comment any further now.

Parent: Want best for my son – no parent in their right mind would send their child to Francis Bacon and wait for it to improve.

JHA: I am happy to facilitate a meeting between the Head, Chair of Governors and parents about the school's response to the action plan and for the school to hear parents' concerns.

CW: Should involve County Councillors too.

Parent: Want to support what has been said about turning schools around. Marshall's Wick and Wheathampstead falling rolls merged and with Sandringham most want to go there.

Parent: Single sex – 7 rules for STAGS and ranked the school 1st. Some under 4/5 rules have got a place. How can that be?

Parent: Colney Heath. Don't agree allocation system. 2 appeals. One in town centre which we don't want and Hatfield. Is there something we can do about not being given Hatfield schools?

JHA: Circumstances e.g. falling rolls. This is not the case for Francis Bacon – next best thing to be linked with other successful schools. The Head and Governors work in Francis Bacon alongside staff to learn and ensure rapid improvement. Have been closed and under management of another school. I come back to my suggestion about getting you together with the school to discuss your concerns.

JHO: Single-sex rules explained. Places are allocated to parishes proportionally based on the number of applications from these parishes. First priority within the parish goes to those people who live nearest to the school and if places remain then these are allocated on a random basis. For Colney Heath Hatfield is therefore the closest with an available place on allocation day.

JHA: This is a critical issue, so random was introduced for single-sex schools. There were concerns from those who lived further away that they would never get in on distance, so random was introduced. Other alternative ways to measure distance e.g. shortest alternative journey. We look at all distance measurements year on year to see any improvement. Those who don't get in and affect on those who live closer. Balance is a difficult issue – impact of local people getting in.

CW: But if more people to go to Francis Bacon, less push to Hatfield?

JHA: Sure, you are right. If there is a good school in the locality, people will want to go.

Parent: In Sandridge everyone gets their third choice. We live 3 miles from Sandringham but get Francis Bacon which is 10 miles away – how is this possible?

Parent: Am aware of the problems at Francis Bacon. 90% people here have got that school. Have you considered closing it and spending money on more spaces at schools where people want to go?

JHA: When a school goes special measures we have discussions with Ofsted – we have to prepare a commentary on improvement before we consider it for closure. We have made the judgement that Francis Bacon can make rapid progress and therefore it is impractical for it to close. If it doesn't improve we don't hesitate to intervene.

Parent: You are likely to get a lot of appeals. How many are likely to be successful?

JHO: There is no exact percentage. Independent appeals panel base their decisions on individual cases. Historically a number are upheld but this less than 30% on average. No quota.

CW: But more people in this position get a place through CI but this doesn't mean shouldn't put in an appeal.

JHA: Man from Sandridge can we speak to you at the end of the meeting?

Parent: Why make special cases for one person?

CW: Can any person receive individual advice?

JHA: Yes.

Parent: By 2008 17 people didn't have a ranked school. What happened then?

JHA: They would have gone to their NRA'd school i.e. the nearest with a place for allocation.

Parent: What if every person refuses to attend Francis Bacon?

JHA: You as parents have duties too. We have to comply with your preference and if not give you an alternative school. Your duty is to send your child to school.

Parent: You say Francis Bacon is suitable. My daughter is dyslexic but Ofsted say the Learning Support Unit can't meet their improvement partnership needs.

KG: It has been recognised that SEN support is not as good as it could be. Partner schools working in Francis Bacon so we expect things to improve. We would have considered whether to close. When the HMI visited first they said satisfactory progress had been made. Since then, another visit concluded that continued good progress had been made. But if it doesn't, there is an option to close but don't I don't think that will happen.

Parent: Admissions Code – haven't got closest school. Live just over 1 mile away. Trying to encourage walking/cycling, as in the Code, but have not been allocated my closest school. Should be our right. Asked what my 3 nearest schools were, put them down, but didn't get any.

Parent: Would have been happy with third let alone first.

Parent: Primary school: admission system funding. There are practical issues: have 5 children travelling around the city and child minding in 2 areas. You go along with what the Council said but your 3 local schools didn't have any places. The Council should have told us and consider the impact of the carbon footprint.

Anne Main MP: Constituents written into Francis Bacon. Look at re-branding/re-packaging the school. But on another level whether the child is not going to attend. Could John explain the home education option?

JHA: Can confirm this is an option to educate at home. Standards expected to be met and LA will visit and advise/provide information to parents.

Anne Main: Is there is an active home education group operating in St Albans?

JHA: Yes, can supply advice and information available.

Parent: Inadvertent sexual discrimination re. Fleetville.

GH: Gender isn't part of the rules so not discriminatory but where single-sex schools this can cause an in-balance for local mixed schools. But due respect we can't do anything about this.

Parent: Ask you to consider you have inadvertently put in rules – should we have to build case against you?

CW: Regarding the minutes please could these be checked by me and another member from another party to ensure everything has been picked up.

Parent: Daughter lived here all her life and received no choice. Some have moved in a year ago and get one of theirs. This is unfair. 23 in the class got their choice. 2 girls in her class didn't. Some in her year got into schools she wanted but others got in. Francis Bacon is our nearest school but there are personal reasons as to why we don't want it. 118 in this area who haven't got a preferred school. People in Watford/Beds/Luton have. Most people have paid their taxes all their life and are being railroaded into schools they don't want.

JHA: Have to formally comply with your preferences and where can't, allocate a school.

CW: Impressed by concern of parents and need to improve esteem of one school and we'll work towards that and rules.

Will ensure you get letters – Good luck with your appeals etc. Keep in touch and thanks for coming.