



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

MINUTES

**Business and Children's
POLICY and SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
7 March 2022**

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of the Call-In meeting of the **Business and Children's Policy and Scrutiny Committee** held on **7 March 2022** at **6.30pm**.

Hybrid meeting via Microsoft Teams and Rooms 18.01-03, 18th floor, 64 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QP.

Members Present: Councillors Karen Scarborough (Chairman), Ian Adams (substituting), Geoff Barraclough, Aicha Less, Eoghain Murphy, Tim Roca, Mark Shearer and Jacqui Wilkinson (substituting).

Co-Opted Members Present: Marina Coleman, Alix Ascough Head of All Souls Primary), Ryan Nichol (Elected representative, Parent Governor)

Also present: Councillor Timothy Barnes (Cabinet Member for Young People and Learning), Wendy Anthony (Head of Admissions and Access to Education, virtual), Daniella Bonfanti (Cabinet Manager, virtual), Ian Heggs (Bi-Borough Director of Education), Tracey Chin (Policy and Scrutiny Co-ordinator), Artemis Kassi (Lead Scrutiny Advisor), (Patrick Ryan (Portfolio Advisor, virtual), Anita Stokes (Lead SFM Childrens, virtual), Peter Sweeney (Director of Education, Westminster Diocese)

1. MEMBERSHIP

1.1 Councillors Christabel Flight and Lindsey Hall were unable to attend and sent apologies. Councillors Ian Adams and Jacqui Wilkinson attended as substitutes.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2.1 Marina Coleman declared her role as a headteacher of a Roman Catholic school in Westminster and a Roman Catholic Diocesan Representative. Ms Coleman also confirmed that Mr Scott Cree (Head Teacher of Westminster Cathedral School) had been her Deputy Head for six years. Councillor Karen Scarborough declared her role as a school governor for two RC Westminster schools.

3. MINUTES

3.1 It was confirmed that the minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2022 would be approved at the next meeting on 31 March 2022.

4. CALL-IN: CABINET MEMBER DECISION TO AMALGAMATE WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL AND ST VINCENT DE PAUL RC SCHOOLS

4.1 The Committee convened to review a call-in brought by three of the Committee's members - Councillors Geoff Barraclough, Aicha Less and Tim Roca. The members stated their reasons for the call-in, identifying three key areas:

1. What makes an effective amalgamation: why one site was chosen over the other.
2. How the schools got to this point.
3. Parental concerns relating to possible consequences of the merger e.g. additional school uniform costs, separation of siblings.

4.2 A report responding to the reasons for the decision was presented by the Cabinet Member for Young People and Learning, Councillor Barnes and Ian Heggs, the Bi-Borough Director for Education. Both addressed members' questions arising from the report.

4.3 The Council cited a 22-23% surplus in the number of places available in primary schools in Westminster as the main reason for the amalgamation (3.2 of the report). This figure extended to up to 25% in the south of Westminster. Schools needed to obtain a certain number of pupils to ensure the viability of the school. It was concluded that it was in the young people's best interests to amalgamate the schools. The Council stated that their role was to recognise and agree to the recommendations put forward resulting from the numerous discussions that had been held between governors and the RC diocese.

4.4 Call-in members queried the reasons for the site selection. The Council stated that the decision was made by the governors and diocese, who recognised that the Vincent de Paul site had "better" facilities to be able to continue as a Catholic school. The Council confirmed that both sites would be used for educational purposes.

4.5 Following queries from the call-in members on the issues of school uniform costs and class sizes, it was confirmed that discussions were ongoing on uniforms, but that additional support would be provided for parents where needed. It was explained there was sufficient space at the new site to take in additional pupils with no issues anticipated. It was confirmed that disabled access would be improved.

4.6 Regarding the staffing of the new school, it was explained that a consultation was currently underway to discuss the arrangements going forward.

- 4.7 Concerns were raised about the possible separation of siblings if one sibling had to be educated elsewhere, due to “overcrowding”. It was stated that the risks of this happening were low, owing to the surplus of school spaces already available, and that this was unlikely to result in future school openings.
- 4.8 Members enquired about the marketing process to invite pupils from other parts of the City. The Council confirmed that a thorough marketing strategy had been utilised and explained that there were not enough pupils to enrol overall. The Council stated that over 40% of children attending were from outside the City, with the reputable school system mentioned as being a key factor in attracting pupils.
- 4.9 Call-in members reported parents’ concerns that they were not fully informed about the schools’ financial position prior to the consultation. It was explained that it was the governors’ duty to liaise with parents and provide as much detail as was possible. It was stated that training would have been provided to governors on best practice for this.
- 4.10 Members queried who would be responsible for the deficit. It was confirmed that the costs would be coming from multiple sources, including from the schools’ general fund and from the Council. It was confirmed that local taxpayers would not be responsible for the costs.
- 4.11 The Council acknowledged the sensitivities of delivering the news and maintained that due process had been followed in involving both schools’ governors and parents, with governors making the final decision. It was confirmed that the schools had liaised closely with the Council to ensure a deficit recovery plan was in place. An additional FAQ document was available to parents to help address their concerns.
- 4.12 A question arose on the efficacy of the deficit recovery plan. The Council explained that this was dependent on each schools’ particular circumstances. Both schools had differing deficits, with Vincent de Paul’s being the lower of the two. Resident location and population decline also had an impact. Depopulation was a continuing issue which was impacting on schools in the City. It was stated that a birth rate of 2.1% was needed to maintain a stable population. In 2021, the national rate had been recorded as 1.6%. It was concluded that more schools were available in the City than was needed.
- 4.13 The Chair enquired about Catholic admissions in schools. Peter Sweeney, Head of the Catholic Diocese in Westminster, explained that approximately 70% of pupils were Catholic, but that spaces were open to all. The intention was to ensure that the option of a Catholic based education was available to parents, but which was not exclusive to Catholic families.
- 4.14 Discussion arose on the future of the Westminster Cathedral site. The Council reported that proposals for the site to provide SEND facilities was

under discussion. It was confirmed that the site would remain a diocesan school in Westminster.

4.15 The Committee queried the impact the decision would have on the school rolls. It was confirmed that work was ongoing on this. Factors to consider were changing life and work patterns as well as individual choices.

4.16 The Chair provided a summation of the discussion and thanked everyone for their hard work before moving the Committee towards a formal vote. The vote included all Committee Members, plus three co-opted members.

4.17 **Voting:**

8 – For: to note the report.

3 – Against: to proceed with referral back to the decision-maker.

4.18 **RESOLVED:** That the Committee note the report.

5. WORK PROGRAMME

5.1 The Committee noted that its next scheduled meeting would take place on 31 March 2022.

6. TERMINATION OF MEETING

6.1 The meeting ended at 19.42.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____