

Committee Minutes

Consultative Committee with Parents Children and Families Estate Review

Edinburgh, 29 January 2008

Present:- Martin Southern (Bonaly Primary School) (In the Chair), Nick Crolla (Buckstone Primary School), Alison Walker (Tynecastle High School), Alistair H Keil and Eric Jackson (Drum Brae Primary), Martin Williams (Clermiston Primary School), Liz Carrie (Balerno High School), Keith Wilson (Clermiston Primary), Elizabeth Anderton and Rachael Hay (Westfield Court Nursery), Jeanna Brady (Bruntsfield Primary School), Stewart Roebuck (South Morningside Primary School), Malcolm Fraser (Boroughmuir High School), Sheila Smith (Hillwood Primary), Brian Armstrong and Lesley McGoohan (Wester Hailes Education Centre), Claire Murdoch (Dean Park Primary School), Lynda Flex (Drummond Community High School), Donna Hennen (Gylemuir Primary School), Tina Woolnough (RHS/Blackhall Primary School), David Martin (Broughton High School), Tom Macintyre (James Gillespie High School), Tracy Rendall and Stephan Eisenhardt (Craigentinny Primary School), Brian Wright (Hermitage Park Primary School), Ken Aitken (Portobello High School), Jonathon Gibbs (Nether Currie Primary School), Valerie Tritton (Cameron House Nursery School), Julia Macintosh (Abbeyhill Primary School), Jackie Kelly (Lorne Primary School), Susan Edwards (Victoria Primary School), Sheila Appleton (Hillwood Primary) and Mandy Gallacher (Craiglockhart Primary School).

Apologies:- Apologies were received from Julian Chapman (Fox Covert Primary School, Dr Karen Traill (Liberton High School) and Sue Pain (Wardie Primary School).

1 Children and Families Estate Review: Rationalisation and Development Programme

In response to a continued need to manage the supply of education and care facilities with a view to ensure the delivery of best value, the Council had considered a framework for a review of the entire Children and Families property estate. That matter was the subject of detailed consultation.

Martin Southern explained that he, Linda Flex and Liz Anderton had been invited by the Children and Families Department to represent the Consultative Committee with Parents on the Forum on Children and Families Estate

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evaluation. The appointment had since been ratified by the Consultative Committee with Parents (CCWP). This meeting had been called by the three Forum members under the auspices of the CCWP with a view to obtaining the widest representation of views possible on the matter. Mr Southern added that each of the parent representatives recognised the needs of the wider group. He also explained that the Forum members had agreed to respect the confidentiality of the meetings of the Forum on Children and Families Estate Evaluation in the interest of full and frank dialogue within the Group and also that the Forum itself did not have decision-making powers. Any recommendations made went to the Children and Families Committee of the Council.

Mr Southern also outlined his understanding on the reasons for the Estate Review as being driven by demographic change and because money was now being spent on buildings in Edinburgh that should really be directed towards benefiting children. The issue primarily was not about money and not about making savings. The issue, at least that the intention, was to act in the best interests of the children involved. Elizabeth Anderton and Linda Flex were supportive of this view. Both expressed concern at the method of their nomination to the Estates Forum. Both also expressed their reservations at their qualification for appointment.

In response to a question on the thinking behind the Estates Evaluation Programme, it was suggested that, in addition to considerations on the quality of existing buildings, a bigger picture had emerged on perceived falling school roles and the mismatch that created in demand and supply. Confirmation was sought that it was children and not buildings that were the focus for the change process and the wider community values represented. Martin Southern expressed the view that the effectiveness of schools needed to be taken into account, it being perfectly possible for a good and effective school to operate within a poor building. Elizabeth Anderton supported the view that it was important to see beyond the physical state of buildings in conducting any assessment.

A question followed on the possibility of extending the scope of the Estates Evaluation in that it was believed necessary to balance considerations against the need for catchment area changes. The Chairman agreed the importance of catchment area change and expressed the view that this might be something that could be brought into consideration in the fullness of time. Nonetheless at the present the focus had to be on addressing the request for views on the criteria for change.

It was then suggested that the statistics provided by the Council in support of the Estate Rationalisation process required detailed and careful scrutiny. The view was expressed that Edinburgh was probably at the base of its population curve at the present time. As such any assumptions made should be prefaced on population expansion. This in turn called for an area by area planning exercise utilising the best information available on local area growth patterns. It

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also suggested that there was a need to evaluate the return from recent PPP and PFI initiatives. A further question on the progress of the catchment review led to suggestions that the changing circumstances within Edinburgh suggested the need for a return to basics on catchment evaluation relative to the Estate Evaluation which was now being undertaken.

The Convener drew attention to the Children and Families position in Edinburgh of having approximately 25,000 pupils in schools with a total 35,000 pupil capacity. This led to further discussion on how that assessment had been undertaken and to question on the inclusion or exclusion of spaces now occupied by libraries and computer suites. The Clermiston representatives expressed the view that the actual capacity of Clermiston Primary School had probably fallen to about 75% of its notional capacity given the spaces now reallocated to ancillary use. The point was made that the Children and Families Department appeared to have disregarded this erosion in capacity in carrying out their assessment.

Lynda Flex expanded on the view on notional capacity, explaining that notional capacity was set by each individual education authority. She added a further explanation on the factors which required to be taken into account, particularly the effect of Scottish Government proposals on reduction of P1, P2 and P3 school classes to 18 pupils. She also outlined the methods that could be employed to achieve smaller class sizes. Discussion followed on the evidence supporting a belief in an increase in pupil numbers in the coming years, attributable at least partly to the effects of immigration. The significance of this would, it was thought, be more evident in some areas than others. The question was also put as to perceptions of a lack of clear, unequivocal, substantive evidence for some of the assumptions which were being made.

Stephan Eisenhardt outlined his understanding of the rationale for two stream and single stream schools and clarified that the area set aside for support areas such as libraries and computer suites were not part of the pupil capacity calculation. The basic principles on which capacity was assessed were then discussed in greater detail, it being clear that there was a view that any assumptions made by the Children and Families Department as part of this exercise should be scrutinised and judged against, amongst other things, the quality of teaching experience which was being provided and what was desirable to future needs. It seemed that the Department might have prefaced their assessment with a view that single stream schools were neither efficient nor effective. That view should, it was said, be reviewed in the light of the new information now available.

In response to a question on the timescales set for the consultation exercise the Chairman made clear that as far as he could be aware there was no fixed time set. Rather there was an interest in ensuring broad support for any proposals which emerged. Discussion followed on the references in the letter (by Dave Fenton) of 17 January 2008 to the type of issues that the meeting might wish to

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consider, including patterns of parental choice. The Chairman reviewed these at this stage in context as follows:

- (a) General feedback on the principle of undertaking an evaluation of the Estate.
- (b) The suggested criteria for the evaluation which were –
 - (i) educational outcomes.
 - (ii) patterns of parental choice.
 - (iii) value for money.
- (c) Suggestions for how stakeholders would be best able to feed their views into the next steps of the process.

In response to a question as to the value placed on HMle reports, it was made clear that there was a commitment to address the key areas of assessment and the widest range of factors in any assessment. One element of this, of course, was the HMle report. These however had to be seen in context and against the background of other factors including school progress and the school's place within the community. The view was expressed that a poor HMle report might simply reflected poor management, a matter for concern within the Council although its impact was clearly felt at a local level. At this point the Craigentenny Primary School representatives drew attention to a letter which they had prepared for submission offering input into the evaluation process.

(Appendix 1)

Attention was also drawn to a paper "Suggested Evaluation Criteria for Edinburgh Schools" prepared by Boroughmuir High School Parent Council.

(Appendix 2)

This was explained by the Boroughmuir High School representatives as a "buildings based" vision statement. It was agreed that these papers be accepted in principle for referral to the Forum.

A cautionary note was sounded that, taken at face value, the criteria suggested by the Boroughmuir High School representatives would close some very good educational establishments simply because they suffered the misfortune to be occupying antiquated, Victorian premises. This led to discussion on the dangers of fixating on HMle findings and on the need to find imaginative, creative and sustainable solutions. It was also proposed at this stage and accepted by the Group that every School Council and Parent Board should be offered the opportunity to express a view on the way forward.

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Following from the open discussion above the Chairman invited those attending to give further consideration to the Evaluation Criteria which should be the focus of the Estates Review and the keys to rationalisation and development. In turn these were discussed and agreed as follows:-

Criteria

HMle Report,

Communication Function/Multi-function buildings (other weekend and evening uses)

The free school meals test and travel distances and the effect on the above closures.

Parental choice.

Social Mix.

Progress and forward momentum of the school and adjacent schools.

Realisation that good schools were not all the same.

In consideration of the above factors it was also clear that on-site evaluation of schools based not just on a formula, that special needs schools should continue in proximity to key areas, that any closure or other significant change had a knock-on effect on neighbouring schools and that qualitative and quantitative indicators were necessary to the evaluation process including character building effects. It was also said that there was a need to reassess and redefine catchment areas as part of the overall exercise and that the key to this was inevitable grass roots opinion. It was also suggested that adaptability as well as sustainability were key considerations and therefore that there was the need to tap into the planning process at an early stage, particularly on housing planning issues. Following from that and considerations of the social mix within specific areas came detailed examination of demographic issues. Reference was also made to considerations of other key community facilities being accommodated within Education establishments as part of a possible charge back process.

Attention was also drawn to the link of any projection on educational provision to provision of affordable family housing. This led to further views being expressed on Government plans for smaller class sizes, to demographic trends including the information available on regional and postcode areas, the implications for transport of changes and closures and the importance of parental views, not just parental choice.

Under the heading of wider criteria and consideration was added new headings of community sustainability and its ramifications and the clear view that any rationalisation programme should not begin with a pre-disposition towards

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closure of facilities. Alongside this was added a need for careful handling of special needs facilities and to a need for due regard and consideration of the financial impact of what was being recommended.

The meeting agreed that, whatever the outcome, a key areas paper should be distributed electronically. They also proposed that the Forum members should be representing for an extension on time to allow further full and detailed consideration of all facets of the proposals. The Balerno High School representatives particularly made reference to their areas urgent requirements for a catchment area review and to the representations they had already made on that matter. The point was also made in the discussion which followed that the meeting was not a political lobbying group although there was a real need to define and extol the virtues of qualitative measurement. Anxieties were also expressed that whatever was said could be diminished, offset and ultimately dismissed if the views expressed were not consistent and well argued. The arguments in favour of community and sustainability were seen as keys to taking forward a cogent and well-argued case. Neither was it viewed as helpful to condense the number of criteria selected. This was viewed as potentially counter productive and possibly over-simplistic. With these issues all vying with each other and requiring a framework and structure, it was also suggested that the three Forum members should be making a case for an extension on time to allow a full and detailed evaluation process on criteria to be undertaken. Neither was there any counter view expressed to the belief of certain of the members present that the Estate Evaluation process could constitute a real, tangible threat to the future of some schools.

Process

The Chairman, Mark Southern, having thanked members for the contributions already made drew attention to the need to move forward to discussion on the process which was being followed. He explained that he and his two fellow members of the Forum had been co-opted on to the Forum on the first instance. The appointments had subsequently been ratified by the CCWP.

In response to his invitation for comment on the usefulness of the exercise, there was unanimous agreement that the meeting provided a necessary and useful opportunity for a meaningful expression of views. Alongside expressions of support for the members chosen, there was also some concern voiced that the initial appointment process had not begun with the CCWP. Indeed there was concern that other representations made by members of the Group had not elicited a response and appeared to have been overlooked. There was also discussion that the selection of cluster representation had showed neither openness nor transparency. In response to implied criticism that the process was being driven forward apace and with a lack of due regard to the need for careful and balanced consideration, the Convener accepted that it had not been possible to offer greater notice of the meeting and that he had sympathy with some expressions of disquiet on that account.

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Lynda, outlining her response to a question on the matter indicated that she understood that it was her voicing of a clear opinion on the matter which had commanded her appointment to the Forum. She had been approached in a telephone conversation with a Children and Families Department representative on her appointment and had agreed simply on the basis of her availability. Responding to a similar question, the Chairman confirmed that every School Council had been invited to send representation to a meeting. Elizabeth Anderton confirmed that she had been telephoned by the Children and Families Department on her appointment and invited to take part. Her response had been governed by her interest in ensuring that the action followed was appropriate to the seriousness of the issues being considered. She also had doubts that she had the qualifications or experience to fulfil her role. Martin Southern expressed the view that the approach to him had been occasioned by his repeated questioning on the Estate Evaluation process. He confirmed his intention to ensure that every school Council and parent representative body was invited to express a view on the matter and that those views be made known. In response to a question of concern that that might not happen and that the window of opportunity to influence the process was a narrow one, a commitment was given to consultation across the spectrum and on the widest range of options including any proposals on mergers, closures and integrated working. Moreover a commitment was made to ensure that the recommendations were presented in clear, concise, direct statement of fact. The point was made that there were vacancies amongst the School Council Chairs and that the opportunity should be extended to other schools which did not have School Councils to bring forward a view. Equally this was a matter that should be raised with the PPWP. This led to a request that the three Forum members prepare a summary of the recommendations to be taken to the Forum and that, prior to that happening, notes on the matter should be circulated to every possible School Council.

The meeting closed with expressions of the view unopposed amongst those attending, that the Council should be exhorted to be proactive in obtaining the views of every school whether or not a school Council was available.