

THE SCHOOL PLACES PLANNING PROCESS

Report of the Director of Children, Schools and Families

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1. Purpose of the report

For the Committee to decide whether to scrutinise parts or all of the school places planning process, which has been raised by David Billing as a possible item for scrutiny.

2. Summary

2.1 The report describes why school place planning is undertaken, the statutory background and the scale of the work.

2.2 It then explains some of the main strands and issues in the process, including:

- policies for school provision and the School Organisation Plan;
- school places data;
- forecasting the future need for places;
- links with the capital programme;
- organising consultations;
- links with admissions.

3. Conclusions

3.1 Many, if not all, members of the Committee will have had direct experience of school place planning through involvement in issues at schools in their area. It is obviously an extremely important area of work: decisions about the future of schools are amongst the most significant taken by the County Council.

3.2 Members and Officers give this work the highest priority. This report sets out some of the significant issues involved; and the Committee are asked to decide whether they wish further to scrutinise the process.

4. Background

4.1 The purpose of the school places planning process is for the LEA to secure the correct number of nursery, primary, secondary and special school places, where and when they are needed. This is a statutory duty for the LEA. The work involves keeping the pattern of provision under review and bringing forward any necessary proposals for change, in order to:-

- reflect parental preference for schools;
- ensure schools are of an appropriate size to provide high quality education, cost effectively;
- respond to demographic change and new residential developments;
- manage the supply of places by adding capacity where there is a shortage, and by removing places that are not needed; and
- respond to parents' and communities' desire for particular types of school provision.

4.2 The statutory framework for organising school places was revised in 1998 by the School Standards and Framework Act, including:

- maintained schools are now either community, foundation or voluntary schools;
- LEAs prepare School Organisation Plans;
- The Secretary of State has no direct involvement in the decision-making process;
- School Organisation Committees, representing local interests, take school place planning decisions, particularly where consensus is not reached;
- Adjudicators take decisions where the School Organisation Committee is unable to reach agreement;
- no children aged 5, 6 or 7 are taught in classes of over 30; and
- the inspection of LEAs includes school places planning.

4.3 The work involved in school places planning includes background analysis to identify options; public consultation exercises; and then the publication of statutory proposals. Over the past five years Hertfordshire has published 136 statutory proposals:

- 59 proposals for nursery classes;
- 44 proposals to change standard numbers, including 33 reductions for Key Stage 1 class sizes;
- 9 referring to SEN bases or units;
- 4 involving major re-organisations (Welwyn Garden City and Borehamwood);
- 20 others (school amalgamations, enlargements, closures etc).

So far only four of those have generated objections; and in each of these cases, the School Organisation Committee approved the LEA's proposals.

4.4 The Ofsted Report on the LEA in January 2000 said the supply of school places was satisfactorily managed. It commented on the reduction of surplus places in both primary and secondary schools (though the methodology for calculation has since been changed by the Audit Commission, so the figures are now different). The Report noted that the School Organisation Plan had been agreed; and supported the strategy for responding to small sixth forms by strengthening sixth form collaborative arrangements. The Report

also covered the secondary reorganisations in Watford, Welwyn Garden City and Borehamwood and concluded "A successful outcome of these changes will allow the LEA, through the School Organisation Committee, to develop the confidence to be pro-active in undertaking the proposed area-focussed reviews, where surplus places exist or are forecast".

4.5 The School Place Planning targets in the Children, Schools and Families Service Plan: 2001–07 are as follows:

CSF Performance Measures	Actual 2001	Target 2002	Target 2003	Target 2004	Target 2005	Target 2006
Reduce the percentage of unfilled places in:						
Primary Schools	10.3	9.5	9.3	9.2	9.1	8.9
Secondary Schools	11.6	10.0	9.5	9.2	9.0	8.3
Reduce the percentage of schools with 25% or more of their places unfilled and at least 30 surplus places in:						
Primary schools	10.1	9.6	9.0	8.3	8.0	7.8
Secondary Schools	15.1	10.0	8.4	7.2	7.2	6.0

5. Possible Scrutiny Topics

5.1 This section of the report covers the main strands and issues in the school places planning process, to help the Committee decide whether to scrutinise parts or all of the work.

Policies for school provision and the School Organisation Plan.

5.2 The LEA's policies and principles for school provision are set out in the School Organisation Plan. The Plan is revised annually. A draft for consultation is published in June and widely publicised. Views, comments and any objections are considered by the Resources Panel. The School Organisation Committee then considers and approves or modifies the Plan in September.

5.3 The Plan includes area by area data and statistics; an assessment of the planning issues; and a priority categorisation. The latter was introduced two years ago chiefly to identify the high priority areas where action could be anticipated. Feedback from schools has been that they have found the information helpful and have valued knowing where the organisation of school places was problematic.

School places data

- 5.4 The data needed to identify possible school place planning difficulties, to analyse issues and propose options includes:
- the demand for school places, as expressed by parents' stated preferences;
 - pupil achievement data;
 - information on the condition and suitability of school buildings; and
 - information on the sufficiency of schools' accommodation.
- 5.5 Information on sufficiency – physical capacity – is particularly problematic because it is deduced from a government requirement for 'more open enrolment' (MOE) that has not kept pace with changes in the curriculum and the demands on school accommodation. Later this year a new methodology known as, and for calculating, 'net capacity' is being introduced by the DfES. To prepare for this the LEA is securing digitised plans for all school buildings which will make it much easier in future to agree physical capacity.

Forecasting the future need for places

- 5.6 This is another problematic and contentious area of work chiefly because, although our system has produced reasonably accurate forecasts, it is complex, not transparent and it is hard to explain how local area forecasts have been constructed. The LEA is, therefore, procuring a new computerised forecasting system that will be installed this month.
- 5.7 The sources used in the new system are:-
- (i) Database of individual pupils, addresses, etc. against their current school and last year's school. This enables the calculation of:
 - Cohort survival rates for each year group in every school;
 - Cross area flows between every planning area; and
 - Cross boundary flows in/out of the county to every planning area.
 - (ii) GP data on all young people registered up to school leaving age. This provides information on future intakes.
 - (iii) Housing data – this is analysed into the number of new dwellings in each area and is used to predict the number of additional pupils likely to be moving into an area over time.
 - (iv) Postcodes in each planning area.
 - (v) Schools matched against planning areas.
- 5.8 The current data is similar; but it is not used in a transparent way that can be demonstrated, as will be the case with the new system.

- 5.9 The outputs of the new system will be forecasts derived from:
- calculating the surviving cohort in each year group in each area;
 - plus the cross area flows;
 - plus the new pupils from additional housing;
 - and the birth rates from GP data.

The system will also allow for error smoothing over time, by comparing actual figures with forecast.

- 5.10 The future need for places will be significantly affected by any Structure Plan alterations to 2016, both in terms of the local demand from additional housing and from the likely use of former school sites for residential development. Officers are doing work for the Structure Plan Panel to confirm the effect of additional housing on the school places planning requirement; and to contribute to the housing capacity study with the Structure Plan alterations.

Links with the capital programme

- 5.11 Schemes to provide additional school places following an area review are always given high priority within the capital programme. Designated borrowing approval is given by the government if the LEA can demonstrate a 'basic need' for more places. That is when there is an absolute shortage of primary school places within a two-mile radius of a growth area, and of three miles for secondary places. Additional borrowing approval is also available in some instances for the removal of surplus places.
- 5.12 If these circumstances do not apply, for example because although more places are needed at one school, there are places available at another within 2/3 miles, the cost of expansion has to be contained within the LEA's main borrowing approval/capital programme.
- 5.13 One aspect of capital programme planning for more school places that requires further work, is the range of costs for adding the same amount of additional capacity to different schools. This is mainly because the starting point at, say, two secondary schools facing expansion by one form of entry will be markedly different. However, officers in CSF and Hertfordshire Property are also exploring the scope for greater standardisation in specification in order to ensure that individual variations in brief and design are kept to the minimum.

Organising Consultations

- 5.14 It is obviously very important that possible changes to school places are the subject of widespread consultation. Consultation documents need to be clear, logical and with sufficient information to enable those affected to form a considered view of the proposals. Consultation meetings must include an explanation and rationale of the proposed changes with plenty of time for answering questions and expressing views. It is also important to provide a range of ways in which those being consulted can respond.

- 5.15 Changes to the organisation of school places are invariably controversial and the LEA seeks to minimise the emotional impact by carefully handling the consultation arrangements. Improvements can always be made and a few years ago, members of the (then) Performance Review Panel followed a consultation in order to identify aspects of good practice and where changes would be beneficial.

Links with admissions

- 5.16 Parents are obviously most anxious to obtain a place at the school which they regard as best for their child. Members will know how difficult an issue this can be in some localities for school place planning. It is not possible to expand and contract schools solely in response to parental demand; and in those areas where there are marked differences in perception about the quality of schools, any surplus places tend to congregate in the weak school thus possibly creating a spiral of decline.
- 5.17 All LEA staff help all schools to raise their esteem. This is particularly important, in the context of school place planning for weaker schools. It is equally critical that the management of places and of admissions are seen as two aspects of the same fundamental issue: ensuring that parents are not disappointed by the allocation process because there are places available in the good schools they want.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 The costs of school place planning are borne by the divisional/staffing budget for the Planning Division. The School Places Unit is currently under establishment because of difficulties in recruiting for vacant posts.

7 Conclusion

- 7.1 Many, if not all, members of the Committee will have had direct experience of school place planning through involvement in issues at schools in their area. It is obviously an extremely important area of work: decisions about the future of schools are amongst the most significant taken by the County Council.
- 7.2 Members and Officers give this work the highest priority. This report sets out some of the significant issues involved; and the Committee are asked to decide whether they wish further to scrutinise the process.