

PETITION FROM ST JOSEPH'S RC JUNIOR SCHOOL, WALTHAM CROSS

Report of the Director of Children, Schools and Families

Author: - David Ayres, Interim Head of Education Access
Tel: -01992 555933

Executive Member: - Robert Gordon

Local Member: - Dennis Clayton

1. Purpose of the report

To respond on behalf of the County Council to the Petition received from the parents of St Joseph's RC Junior School on 18 May 2004.

2. Summary

Information about the relative responsibilities of the LEA and the Archdiocese and the School is set out. The general duties of the LEA are outlined as are the responsibilities of the Archdiocese in respect of the planning and provision of schools in the Catholic Sector. In addition, information about the pattern of denominational provision and applications to St Mary's RC School is provided and reference is made to a previous, and related, petition concerning to the provision of home to school transport.

3. Conclusions

The request in the Petition for a guarantee of admission to a Catholic secondary school simply cannot be met because, under the Law, such an undertaking is beyond the power of any admission authority and therefore not within its gift. However, the admission authority, in its planning, generally needs to maximise the probability of parents gaining a place for their children at its school(s).

In terms of future provision of places, there appears to be no immediate action required on the part of the LEA because the responsibility for the planning and provision of Catholic education rests with the Archdiocese working with its schools.

The report has been prepared in consultation with the Archdiocese of Westminster. The Archdiocese and LEA share their conclusions in respect of the matters raised in the Petition. The LEA will continue to work in partnership with the Archdiocese and its schools in order to support denominational education within the county.

4. Financial Implications

None

5. Access to Service Implications

None

Background Papers

Petition to County Council on 18 May 2004

Moving On – Secondary Admissions booklet

1. Background

- 1.1 A petition was presented to County Council at its meeting on 18 May 2004 from St Joseph's RC Junior School, Waltham Cross as follows:

“St Joseph's Roman Catholic Junior School children are no longer guaranteed admission to a Catholic secondary school. We believe that future generations of this parish have the right to continue their education within a Catholic community. We are therefore asking for all the people within our parish to sign this petition to show that we want our children to have the opportunity to a continuing Catholic education.”

- 1.2 While this has been an issue in the area for some time, one possible immediate cause of the presentation of the petition may have been to do with the recent annual visit of the headteacher of St Mary's RC School to St Joseph's Catholic School to speak with parents about admissions. It is reported that the headteacher indicated that parents putting St Mary's as their first preference school would have a higher probability of securing a place for their child. In the event, a number of parents who followed that advice have not been successful in gaining a place.

2. Roles and Responsibilities

- 2.1 The Law as it stands and the operation of admission arrangements make it impossible for any admission authority to provide an absolute guarantee to any individual child or group of children that they will gain a place at a particular school. The Governing Body of St Mary's School is its admission authority and therefore has responsibility for its admission arrangements.
- 2.2 In the case of over-subscription to a school, objective criteria which are consistent with the guidance set out in the School Admissions code of Practice must be applied and all applicants treated on an equitable basis within the framework of admission criteria. Nonetheless, admission authorities, in their planning, generally seek to maximise the probability of parents gaining a place for their children at their school(s).
- 2.3 Hertfordshire, as the Local Education Authority, has a general duty to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community by securing that efficient primary education, secondary education and further education are available to meet the needs of the population of their area. There is also a general duty to promote high standards in all primary and secondary education.
- 2.4 As part of this general duty, the Local Education Authority is required to secure sufficient schools for providing primary and secondary education to provide the opportunity of appropriate education in view of pupils' different ages, abilities and aptitudes and the different periods for which they may be expected to remain at school. The Local Education Authority is not specifically required to plan and provide for denominational education. This is the function of the Diocese albeit working closely in partnership with the LEA.

- 2.5 In direct response to the Petition therefore, while the LEA fully recognises the right of parents to have their children educated according to their wishes, it is not under a duty to plan for and provide denominational education or to guarantee that type of provision to parents who wish for their children to receive a Catholic education.
- 2.6 Any such arrangements for the planning, provision and continuity of Catholic education are therefore primarily a matter for the Archdiocese, its schools and the wider Catholic community.

3. Current Position

- 3.1 Just under 7% of the school population in Hertfordshire attends Roman Catholic schools. There are 7 Roman Catholic secondary schools within Hertfordshire. Together their capacity is just over 40 FE (Forms of Entry). Five of these schools are located in the South and West of the county (1 in Hemel Hempstead, 2 in Watford, 2 in St Albans), one is located in Stevenage and one in Bishop’s Stortford.
- 3.2 St Mary’s RC School in Bishop’s Stortford has a physical capacity of 800 places and admits 155 children per year. It primarily serves the following areas:

Bishop’s Stortford and Sawbridgeworth (62 places),
 The remaining areas of the Lea Valley Deanery (i.e., Hoddesdon, Broxbourne, Cheshunt and Waltham Cross) (62 places),
 Dunmow, Bardfield and Thaxted, Saffron Walden and Stansted (31 places).

Roman Catholic applicants from these areas are therefore allocated places in the proportions 40%, 40% and 20% respectively.

- 3.3 The school is significantly oversubscribed with approximately 300 applications annually in the last three years for a considerably smaller number of places. In the last three years, pupils have been allocated to St Mary’s RC School under the following criteria:

Criterion	2001	2002	2003
RC with sibling	46	47	62
RC – B/S Parish	24	15	23
RC – Lea Valley Parish	32	48	48
RC – Dunmow, S/Walden, etc	8	13	13
Other RC	16	7	7
Non RC with Sibling	6	0	0
Non RC attending RC school	0	-	0
Non RC practicing Christians	0	-	0
Non RC with sibling as past pupil	-	0	0

- 3.4 There are 38 Roman Catholic primary schools in Hertfordshire with a combined capacity of 40 FE. In the Hertfordshire areas served by St Mary’s RC School, there are 9 Catholic primary schools with a combined capacity of 9 FE. Accordingly, there would appear to be a mismatch between the primary school capacity and the secondary school capacity in the areas to the East of Hertfordshire served by St Mary’s RC School. Information is not available about

the number or capacities of Catholic primary schools on Essex's borders served by St Mary's RC School.

- 3.5 There is an on-going dialogue involving Hertfordshire, Essex, Westminster Archdiocese and the Brentwood Diocese concerning secondary denominational provision in SE Hertfordshire and SW Essex and how it might best be developed to meet increasing demand from the areas. As a result of this, there has been some expansion at St Mary's in recent years to an intake of a full five forms of entry. There is the possibility of a further phase of expansion in the future in response to demographic growth. This expansion would, however, require major capital investment at the school.
- 3.6 Overall, in the East and South East of the county, there are sufficient secondary places (in all categories of schools) to meet demand currently, although the population is set to rise over the remainder of this decade. In Bishop's Stortford and Sawbridgeworth and in Hertford and Ware, currently there is more than sufficient capacity. In Hoddesdon, capacity and demand match and in Cheshunt there is an excess of demand over capacity.
- 3.7 There is a separate but related matter, which Members of the Committee may wish to note. A petition was presented to the Council in July 2003 from parents in the Cheshunt area regarding the availability of free home to school transport to St Mary's RC School. For certain parts of the Cheshunt and Waltham Cross areas, Nicholas Breakspear is the nearest Catholic secondary school. Transport had traditionally been provided to Cheshunt and Waltham Cross pupils attending St Mary's following the closure of Cardinal Bourne Catholic School in Broxbourne and the "assimilation" of the area previously served by Cardinal Bourne into St Mary's area.
- 3.8 It was agreed last year to continue to provide free home to school transport for children from the Cheshunt and Waltham Cross areas attending St Mary's RC School. Longer term arrangements in respect of transport to Nicholas Breakspear, if needed, have yet to be resolved and availability of transport continues to be an issue of uncertainty for a number of parents from the Cheshunt and Waltham Cross Districts.