

CABINET – 18 MAY 2010

ITEM 4 – QUESTIONS FROM COUNTY COUNCILLORS

Questions received from the following Members:

1. Question to Councillor Robertson from Councillor Fooks

There is still a problem with the new phone system in County Hall. I rang the main County Council number, 792422, the other day and the phone just rang and rang – then cut off, with no message or opportunity to leave a message. I was told that this is happening to other people too. Could the Cabinet member follow this up , as it is extremely poor customer service?

2. Question to Councillor Waine from Councillor Fooks

“The most recent Admissions figures for September 2010 show that the County Council is very short of reception class places, particularly in the city of Oxford. It is very clear that new school places will be needed for September 2011 and the currently planned increases look to be inadequate. If the bulge is repeated in subsequent years, which looks extremely likely, more places are going to be needed right through the primary schools, putting huge pressure on existing schools and causing huge problems for parents.

What plans are being developed to meet this growing school population? The review of the city catchment areas is urgently needed as well as provision of new places, probably new schools, across the county. When will the review take place and when could it be implemented? Where does the cabinet member hope to be able to provide new school places throughout the primary phase?”

Answer

- Through the strenuous efforts of officers, working very closely with headteachers and governors, it has been possible, once again, to ensure that every child whose parents have requested a school place has been offered one; the overwhelming majority (c.90%) have received the offer of a place at their first preference school. This has required a number of tough decisions but I am committed to ensuring that the Council continues to meet its statutory duty to ensure an overall sufficiency of school places.
- It is indeed the case that if you add up all the Published Admission Numbers of our schools there was a shortfall of places for Reception age pupils, but for September 2010 we have managed to create an additional 530 or so places. This has been achieved through a combination of installing temporary classrooms (as a precursor to permanent buildings), bringing classrooms back into use as teaching spaces, and schools being flexible about how they group children. In Oxford (and immediate vicinity) alone 220 places have been created.

- Population forecasts suggest that the current levels of demand will continue for the next 2 - 3 years to be followed by a slow decline, reaching pre-2008 levels within about a decade.
- Schools which can be adapted/expanded to accommodate larger intakes on a permanent basis have been identified and schemes to deliver additional classrooms are at various stages of development; some have already been subject to the necessary statutory expansion consultations. Headteachers and governors of schools which may have the potential for permanent expansion, but which have yet to agree to this, will be approached in order to further increase the number of additional school places that can be created.
- Where there are to be substantial new housing developments we will take the opportunity either to create brand new schools or secure funding to expand local schools; the Council's developer contribution team is working hard to secure funding from developers (S.106 contributions).
- Changes to catchment areas obviously don't create any additional school places but they can help to better match 'supply and demand' and help parents to reach an informed view about the likelihood of obtaining a place at their preferred school. Preparatory work for a review of Oxford catchment areas will be undertaken during the summer in order that any possible changes can be subject to the fullest consultation in the autumn/winter as part of the annual statutory consultation on school admission arrangements. The earliest that catchment area changes (other than those already subject to consultation such as that for Wolvercote School) can be implemented is for September 2012 admissions.
- As far as it is possible so to do, additional primary school places will be created close to where the additional children live as part of our 'Primary Strategy for Change' commitment to creating an 'outstanding school at the heart of the community'.