

Janet Hilton: Statement to Cabinet LBRuT 21st July 2011

I'm speaking to you tonight about Agenda item 24; the purchase of the Clifden Rd site.

I am a community governor, Chair of Governors at the borough's largest primary school, and the primary community governor representative on the Council's Schools Admissions forum. There has not been time to consult with my governing body, so these are my own views.

Although I understand that tonight's meeting does not encompass a decision on the type of school to be provided, the intention would seem to be clear from the contents of the Council's press release, and from the Director of Education's accompanying email to school governors which was titled "Catholic Secondary Education"

I think the Council's top priority must be to deliver a community school, and not a faith school. I am very concerned that, by the council's own reckoning in a report to the Admissions Forum of 6 June, demand for places may exceed supply in our secondary schools as soon as 2014/15, and that's assuming every school can be 100% full.

I know that the vast majority of Catholic children leave the borough for secondary education. This is about 200 children per year – a whole school's-worth. Opening a Catholic school brings these children back to the borough, but makes no provision for the non-Catholic families (who make up 90% of the borough's residents) whose increasing numbers are the main reason why we need more places.

Everyone in Richmond knows that school expansion has been incredibly difficult because of the lack of suitable sites. It's good news that the Council has found at least one site, but, when community primaries are expanding by so very many children, why not make it available to house a community secondary school?

I understand from the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee's minutes, that they recently approved the "Children and Young People's Plan" priorities for 2011/12.

The first of these priorities was:

Promoting greater choice and diversity in education

As a governor at a large community school, this proposal does nothing to improve *my* families' choices about where to send their children. Indeed, if you're non-Catholic and male (about half my school's population) your choice of secondary school is doubly limited by having a girls – only school and now a proposed Catholic school on the doorstep. If the proposed new school follows the admissions criteria of other local Catholic schools, greater choice will be the privilege of only those families from the six Catholic primaries out of the 40 in the borough, plus Catholic families from other boroughs.

My community school is within a quarter of a mile of both a Catholic and a C of E primary school. The indicators for deprivation, and for SEN at my school are roughly twice those of my neighbours'. This suggests to me that these faith schools are not as diverse as mine. How can we be sure that a faith secondary school will promote the diversity that the council claims to have prioritized? I understand that offering a different sort of school is a kind of diversity, but, if only 10% of the borough's children are entitled to benefit from this new offer, then it's a very limited offer at best.

To conclude, it's almost entirely the increase in non-Catholics in the borough which is making the Council put so many new forms of entry into our primary schools, those children *must* have school places in six and seven years time. It has been very difficult indeed to find a site for a new school in Richmond. The Council's top priority for Education is to promote greater choice and diversity. Opening a community school on the site addresses these issues for the vast majority of the borough's residents. Opening a Catholic school does not.