

# TAKING RISKS WITH SECONDARY SCHOOL PRIORITIES

**For Cabinet consideration in conjunction with Council paper “Secondary School Priorities”.** *Updated version of paper sent to the Education Overview & Scrutiny Committee.*

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There are major uncertainties in the future demand for secondary places at borough schools. These uncertainties are not adequately reflected in the Council’s Secondary School Priorities paper of 24<sup>th</sup> November 2011 and the calculations that lie behind it, which were shared with the Scrutiny Committee on 21<sup>st</sup> November. The Council takes an optimistic forecast of demand and the success of work to improve the appeal of all three academies, and then plans for only 3 to 4% spare capacity by 2014 (reducing to zero on the basis of the revised assumptions about Free Schools contained in the Cabinet paper).

But the data suggest that there is an equal probability of a higher level of demand than the Council has assumed, and even modest changes to demand will result in shortages of places. The level of uncertainty here is reflected in the Council’s **Corporate Risk Register**, where the residual risk score associated with “school places” has recently been increased “*reflecting complexity of school place demands and uncertainty over funding streams*” and the overall status is “Amber”.

In this situation, the Council should give priority to maximising flexibility.

## Uncertainties affecting demand

- The borough is a substantial net “importer” of secondary children from surrounding boroughs. A 5 form entry Catholic school in Clifden Road today would reduce the “exports” but have no effect on “imports”. This is largely because 5 of the 8 existing secondaries – including the three academies - are close to borough borders, and the **law does not permit discrimination between in and out of borough applicants**. The statement in the Council’s paper that “*the first batch of families whose children would miss out if the academies became over-subscribed would be those living further away – i.e. well outside the borough*” is therefore open to question.
- The Council assumes a major decline in out of borough demand. But **Hounslow** (accounting for half the out of borough secondary children) had a 40% increase in birth rate 2001-2010, outstripping increases in local secondary capacity, including any expansion of community schools converting to academies. An increase in demand, at least by 2015, is just as likely as the decrease the Council has assumed. Pressure is also likely to rise from **Wandsworth** (33% increase) and **Hammersmith & Fulham** (17%), despite capacity increases. Improving the quality and reputation of the academies will further increase out of borough demand.
- The Council assumes that **Kingston’s** new secondary will open as planned in 2015 and will immediately result in a reduction of 70 in out of borough demand at Grey Court, rising ultimately to 100. But there is great uncertainty over the financing and hence timing of the new school (expected to be clarified in December). Any delay will increase pressure on Richmond schools. And Kingston Council believes the impact on places at Grey Court will in any case be less than Richmond Council assumes, as the new places are needed to meet their own shortfall.

- The Council has a priority to bring all borough secondaries up to a high quality standard. Yet the Council's paper ignores **the effect of more parents then choosing to save school fees and keep their children in the state sector** as they move from primary to secondary, especially during an economic downturn. The average ratio of resident pupils attending state secondaries (in and out of borough) versus state primaries in the ten most prosperous London boroughs is 60%, while Richmond is by far the lowest at 49%, suggesting a lot of pent-up demand. And the borough has already experienced an increase in the number of parents choosing state primaries in recent years. An increase in Richmond's ratio to the 60% norm would mean a rise in demand of 260 children per year; even 55% (the level of the next lowest borough - Wandsworth) would mean a rise in demand of 150 places, the size of the Clifden Road school.
- The Council's paper for the Scrutiny Committee on 21<sup>st</sup> November assumed *"that two of the proposals [for **Free Schools**] will be approved"* both filling with 95% in-borough pupils – 95 new places (despite the only known proposed site - Maharishi School, Hampton – being close to the borough border). But the paper provided to the Cabinet states *"...it would be imprudent if the Council to diminish its own plans for providing additional places on the presumption that any such submissions will be approved, given that there has so far been considerable nation-wide competition for free school funding."* The fact that the Council's own assumptions have changed over a matter of days illustrates the high levels of uncertainty here. 95 places is 63% the size of Clifden Road.
- The Council is currently consulting (consultation period from 15<sup>th</sup> November to 13<sup>th</sup> January) on the **removal of the "Linked Schools Policy"** impacting Grey Court, Orleans Park and Teddington schools. If the LSP is indeed dropped, the effects on parental behaviour, both in and out of borough, are hard to predict. For example, there may be an increase in applications from Kingston to Teddington – another source of uncertainty.
- Currently only a small number of children from Catholic primaries attend community secondaries. A significant impact of removing the LSP is that **children from Catholic primaries will no longer be disadvantaged** in applying to these three secondaries, all now with good reputations. Even if there is a new Catholic school in Clifden Road, there is no evidence to suggest that a significant number of places will be freed up in local community schools and academies as a result. There is an equal probability that the removal of the LSP will have the opposite effect.

## Implications

Even the Council's demand forecasts assume the need for a new community school by 2016, and the information in this paper suggests the need could equally arise sooner. But there is only one definite site. And there is no money in the capital programme for a community school on another site. The only "bird in the hand" is Clifden Road.

**Given the high level of uncertainty, it is taking a massive risk to prioritise giving a 125 year lease on the only currently available/financed site for a school that will effectively be closed to around 90% of the borough's children when the capacity may be required in 2013-2015. The response to high uncertainty should be to maximise flexibility. Clifden Road should be used for an inclusive community school in 2013 or 2014.**

The Council claims that such a community school in Clifden Road would damage **recruitment to the three academies**. Yet:

- If the academies improve their performance and reputation they will fill anyway, as there will be an increase in demand as more borough parents choose state secondaries, and the schools attract more out of borough applicants.
- A new community school at Clifden Road will itself be unproven and take time to establish a positive reputation, giving the academies further breathing space.
- If one or more of the academies continues to struggle, despite all the efforts over several years, a policy deliberately to deny parents access to alternative community places in order to force them to apply to struggling schools, especially at the far end of the borough, would (rightly) be considered an abuse.
- To exempt Catholic parents from this pressure by providing an exclusive Catholic school at Clifden Road would compound the sense of unfairness.

For parents living in **central Twickenham**, close to Clifden Road, but not close enough to Waldegrave or Orleans Park (especially those with boys), the Council's paper indicates that the only choices available by 2013 will be Richmond Park Academy and Twickenham Academy, with RPA at the far end of the borough. At the same time, if the Council's plans go ahead, they will be confronted with a new secondary school within walking distance from which their children will be barred (unless they happen to be Catholics). It is hard to imagine a more socially divisive and unfair situation.

**Even setting aside the in-principle arguments about inclusivity and Catholic Voluntary Aided schools, the only responsible course of action for the Council is to prioritise an inclusive community school at Clifden Road.**

*See Appendix 1 for details and Appendix 2 for map*

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