

Notes of a Meeting between RPCAG and
Nick Whitfield, the Education, Children and Cultural Services Director
For LBRUT

Attendees:

Nick Whitfield	Director of Education, Children and Cultural Services
Barry Woodward	Parent / Vice Chair of RPCAG
Joanne Kemp	Parent / Chair of RPCAG
Sylvie Harding	Parent
Stella Mabb	Parent
John Doherty	Parent
Mirielle Khair	Parent
Pat Leggett	Admin / RPCAG

Nick Whitfield expressed his surprise as to the number of people attending the meeting as he was only expecting to meet with Joanne Kemp. He requested that this did not happen in future, as he would like to invite people from other departments, such as Health, to attend if he thought it appropriate. This he felt would make meetings more informative and everyone would benefit by getting a wider view as to what is happening.

John Doherty said the reason so many had attended was because everyone wanted to know what will happen if Richmond and Kingston merge as was reported in the local paper. NW said the report was a 'leak' and nothing had been finalised. He agreed that they had been discussing various proposals with Kingston but the 'leaked' article has created difficulties with the discussions and could reduce the chances of the merger going ahead. Last autumn there was a change of Administration at the Council and the new body wants to become a commissioning council. This means they will buy in the services as required. They would also like all schools to become academies. They want Children's Services to move away from the council and become an independent group called 'Achieving for Children'. This would be set up as a social enterprise and a community company.

NW would like to merge with Kingston, as there are a lot of savings that could be made. He used the example of the Children's ICT Monitoring SEN Admissions Database. This cost Richmond £900,000 and Kingston £1,200,000 purchasing it independently. Had they contracted it together it would have cost £1,400,000 and they would have saved £700,000 between them. The Council has also spent £100,000 on creating a 'bulge' class whereas if the Councils had worked together they would not have needed the class.

NW said there had been a lot of investment within the Borough, although he recognised the provision at Strathmore is still poor. He did not believe any extra

capital would become available but there was still ongoing development in all schools. He recognised there was still a lot to do but he was pleased with the continuing progress of a number of plans. Although he was expecting to see an improvement to what was on offer in the Borough he would not expect children who are receiving help out of Borough to be affected. He also did not want to interrupt their current arrangements. The parents did say though, that if the provision improved, they would be happy to bring their children back in Borough. The special needs unit improvements at Orleans, Waldegrave and Grey Court have been finished. When all the work that has been planned is finished all eight secondary schools will have special needs provision. There will also be three primary schools that have improved provision and Richmond House has been opened. NW said it is essential that Strathmore and Clarendon provision be improved. Again he said if Boroughs worked together parents would have far better choices.

The new government Green Paper does state that the Government wants Health and Education provision to be joined together. The decision hasn't yet been made. One thing NW was sure of though was, if parents came forward with a plan to purchase and set up a school, they would get a lot of support along with financial help to do so. Another item in the Green Paper is Personalised Budgets. NW felt this could be a good thing, particularly for personal choice, but there could also be a problem if the budget is limited. There is not enough detail regarding the Personalised Budgets to be able to see clearly what the benefits would be. The parents who attended were concerned about having to manage a Personalised Budget along with everything else they have to manage. It was also felt that they would be taking responsibility for what the Council should be doing. NW suggested that parents should voice their concerns by replying to the Green Paper.

NW went on to say that Strathmore needs rebuilding but he does not believe there will be sufficient funds available for that. Meanwhile, a set of proposals has been drawn up for Strathmore, which would improve provision, but there is still a lot more needing to be done. NW sincerely believed that if Kingston and Richmond merged it would be a real benefit. One parent asked, if Kingston and Richmond did not get together, was there the possibility of a merger with another Borough. Everyone present said they wanted to work with the Council to improve SEN services. JK mentioned that Richmond NHS PCT had merged with Hounslow, which is a Borough with quite different needs, would this cause problems if other services in the Borough then go and merge with Kingston, or any other Borough? NW said he couldn't really comment and had to say he still wasn't sure whether there would be a merger with Kingston or any other Borough. Even if there is no merger there is still a lot of work to be done within the Borough. Some things are just simple changes in work practices e.g. speech therapists to have term time contracts.

Another thing NW is doing is working with doctors on commissioning therapies, counselling, and respite care. He is trying to get them to understand the knock on effect of having someone in the family with a disability. He feels the PCT does not really accept this. If Health and Education do join services in the future then, hopefully, it will be easier to get GPs to understand what they need to provide.

It was noted in the Green Paper that the Government was asking for earlier assessments and diagnosis but parents were concerned whether that would work against them in the future, as the needs of the person are ever changing. NW said that "Achieving for Children" is definitely going to go ahead and when it does they will be addressing parents concerns. NW asked if the parents would have a good look at the plans he has for Strathmore. He was confident they would be impressed by what they are planning to do. Generally, it was felt that so much money is being spent sending children out of Borough that if, Clarendon and Strathmore were significantly improved, the costs could be covered by the savings made with the children staying within the Borough. NW felt they needed to put pressure on the Council as well as provide a good business plan for the benefits of providing better provision.

One of the parents enquired as to whether the Council had plans to use volunteers to provide services in order to save money. NW said they already buy in services from the voluntary sector but they are not intending to use volunteers instead of paid staff. The Council is looking to find organisations that will fund services by donation. NW said they have a duty of care for the children and they must be provided for and that SEN is a priority.

Parents voiced their concern regarding Social Services and wondered if the problems were due to cuts. NW confirmed there had been no cuts but that the department does have a problem recruiting staff. Lack of social workers does mean parents experience delays in reviews.

NW said because he understood parents concerns he would like them to attend meetings with Health so they can voice their concerns to the departmental staff. He feels that doctors will be more supportive of parents than the PCT has been. In the future everyone needs to work together to get the best possible outcome from the resources available. NW feels the whole family needs to be supported so any review must not just focus on the child. It is also hoped that the Head of Strathmore will be empowered in the plan to support the parents as well as the child. NW wants to set up a Parent Partnership. This would mean there would be a person to mediate between services and would be able to give parents, particularly new parents, all the information and help they need from one point of contact.

NW was asked what experience the Scrutiny Committee members have of SEN. He wasn't too sure but said the reason for wanting parents to take part in the meetings was to provide the members with details of what family life was like when there is a member of the family with a disability. He said this was extremely important.

The meeting was brought to a close, as Nick Whitfield had to attend another meeting. Joanne Kemp thanked him for his time and agreeing to see everyone and promised, that in the future, she would advise him who would be attending the meeting and some idea of what they would expect of the meeting.

Pat Leggett /4 July 2011