



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Cabinet Member  
c/o Labour Group Office  
Brent Civic Centre  
Engineers Way  
Wembley  
HA9 0FJ

Our Ref: ML / ZA27954

16 June 2019

Dear Cabinet Member,

**Roe Green Strathcona School: Cabinet Decision**

I write to you prior to the cabinet decision to be taken on Monday 17<sup>th</sup> June 2019 in relation to the future of Roe Green Strathcona Primary School.

You will be aware that it is very rare that I comment upon what I recognise to be the proper functions of the council. That I do so now is because I am deeply concerned by the proposal to move to a formal consultation on the closure of the school which I believe to be flawed on every level.

On the evening of the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, 120 people attended a public meeting at the school to voice their protest against the Council, the substance of the proposal and the process by which the council has conducted its dealings with the school.

The officers report for the meeting of the council where the informal consultation was set out, presented what can only be described as an extremely partial view of the history of the school. In particular it failed to explain the discrepancies between the current reasons for the proposed closure and the original reasons for opening the school in 2014 and for confirming it with permanent status in 2016.

Brent Council's stated rationale for closing the School is in response to an estimated surplus of pupil places in the borough's "Primary Planning Area 2" at reception level, which has been predicted in Brent Council's 2019-23 School Place Planning Strategy. The Council have also said that other high quality schools in the area have capacity to provide education to those pupils who would need to be relocated. It has also been suggested that the school receives an additional amount of funding for operating on a split site and closure would therefore save scarce resources.

However, this rationale is in stark contrast to the decision made at Cabinet only three years ago on 11 April 2016 to permanently increase the age range and expand Roe Green Infant School on a split site. At that time councillors were explicitly informed that whilst there was a shortage of places predicted up to 2019/20, thereafter there was expected to be a surplus of places. Councillors in 2016 were advised that this would enable Brent to meet the guideline of a 5% surplus which was deemed



necessary to give appropriate parental choice. The current figure was then only 2.2% and was deemed insufficient. It is simply untrue therefore to claim that the current surplus was unforeseen and that the council are having now to respond to a new set of circumstances.

One of the key reasons put forward in 2016 in favour of making Strathcona permanent was that it would save the council £500,000 and it is therefore a matter of concern that councillors are now being told that the £200,000 split-site funding is a reason to close the school. I trust the cabinet will want to examine very carefully the basis upon which the original cost saving was predicated and why it no longer appears to be the case.

When doing so councillors will no doubt also consider that their decision in 2016 to make the school permanent also means that those teachers' contracts which had originally been temporary, were at that point made permanent. A decision now to close the school would therefore also lead to serious redundancy costs which appear not to have been quantified in the earlier officers' report.

Perhaps the most perplexing issue relating to the estimated surplus of places however, is that the council gave approval for a major expansion of places at Byron Court Primary and the creation of a new primary school at East Lane Primary AFTER the decision had been taken to make Strathcona permanent. The development at Byron Court was extensively opposed by local residents, and yet the council pressed ahead on the grounds that these places would be required. It seems perverse now to decide to close Strathcona when it was known at the time that the bulge in nursery admissions would decline by 2019/20.

The officers have suggested that other schools in the area would be able to provide places for the students who needed to transfer after any closure at Strathcona. This ignores the disruption to the education of those children who would be asked to change schools. Such disruption would be particularly acute for those children expected to go into year 6 at a new school just before they sit their SATS. The need to make new friends and settle into a different school routine would inevitably be damaging for those children's achievement.

It is also right that the council consider whether their action has been fair on the whole school.

Roe Green Strathcona opened in 2014, in response to an emergency request from Brent Council. A large number of children were unable to be provided with a primary place. In fact many children had been out of mainstream education for as much as ten months. It was on this basis that Brent asked Roe Green Infants if they would set up a second site. Originally a site owned by Kingsbury High School was to be the location, but when that proved too costly the Council asked Roe Green to open the new site at Strathcona — some 1.6 miles away from their central site. This was an enormous challenge for the school, but it was a challenge Roe Green readily accepted.

The Governing Body of Roe Green Infant School agreed to manage a new provision of Students at the Strathcona site at a Governing Body meeting of 14 January 2014. Teachers and staff worked day and night for seven weeks in order to convert the dilapidated Strathcona buildings and meet the Council's deadline for a fully operational School. This was achieved and the Roe Green Strathcona site successfully admitted its first pupils in two months later in March 2014.

In October 2014, the Cabinet approved the "School Place Planning Strategy 2014-2018". A refresh of the strategy was subsequently considered and agreed by Members at the November 2015 Cabinet.



In this report, the Council recognised the need for school places, and also acknowledged that such places should be established through the expansion of existing schools.

In 2015, Roe Green Strathcona were informed by the Department of Education that their temporary status prevented the School from extending by more than two year groups. The School would be in breach of DoE rules, if a permanent school status was not formalised by the next academic year. It is important to understand that the Council officers did not approach the school to advise them of this. It was the DoE that notified them of this deadline. On 11 April 2016, a determination was reached by Cabinet, agreeing to expand and alter – on a permanent basis – the age-range of Roe Green Strathcona School, effective from September 2016 on the grounds I have set out above.

Despite all the significant work that the school has done and the cooperation its staff have given to help the council resolve the very serious problem they had with a lack of places, the council appears not to have reciprocated that good will. It has long been a matter of contention that Brent Council have continuously failed to ensure the school is properly advertised on the Council's electronic enrolment system.

There have been significant difficulties experienced at the School with pupil admissions. Within the Cabinet Report of 11 April 2016, Brent Council acknowledge that pupil admission arrangements will be a big challenge for the School:

*“Currently there is no mechanism for parents to select the Strathcona site. By making the provision permanent it enables the authority (as the admissions authority for Roe Green Infant School because it is a community school) to consult in winter 2016/17 upon admissions criteria for 2017/18 year that would enable parents to express a preference for the Strathcona provision.”*

Despite this statement, the most recent Council report dated 17<sup>th</sup> June 2019 now states that pupil admission arrangements at Roe Green Strathcona are “not considered to be sustainable”. This is hardly surprising when Roe Green Strathcona does not appear on the “drop down” list on the council's website. It is unacceptable for the council to fail to ensure that parents are able to access information about the school on the electronic enrolment system and then accuse the school of not having “sustainable admissions”.

The effect is that parents are presently not able to choose Strathcona as a main option for primary provision on Brent Council's website, and that the Strathcona School only ever appears as a subsidiary option of the Roe Green Infant School site. Indeed, councillors might be shocked to find that even when one uses the School's postcode as a student's residential address on Brent Council's enrolment system, the Strathcona site is not offered. Only alternative local Schools are suggested in the search results. It is clear that there is a strong positive correlation between the decrease in pupil intake at the School, and the difficulty many parents have in registering their children onto the Strathcona roll.

Council officers have been alerted to this issue repeatedly but have never resolved the matter. It is also the case that in the past five years, up to 85% of pupil admissions at the Strathcona site have been during the middle of the academic year. I understand that Ms Sidhu, the headteacher, believes that in-year admission data has not been properly accounted for in any of the drafted Brent Council reports.



If council officers had actively been trying to prepare a case for the closure of the school, these are precisely the measures they might have taken. First ensure nobody knows about the place and even when they live next door, refer them to another school. In fact the head teacher has said that she has several reports of prospective parents who asked for their child to come to the school actually being told by council officers that the roll at Strathcona is full and they can take no more children. I would ask that the cabinet investigate these allegations which, if true, represent a serious breach of trust on the part of public officials.

Of course much of this might be more understandable were the school underperforming. In fact despite all the problems it has experienced, Roe Green Strathcona School is an excellent School, with their first cohort of Year 6 students achieving progress in the top 3% of Schools in England this academic year. This is particularly remarkable when one considers the extent of mid year admissions. In the public meeting held at Roe Green Strathcona on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2019, which was attended by local councillors, many parents testified to the quality of teaching and the quality of pastoral care that the school provides.

Just 3 years ago Council officers made an urgent recommendation that Roe Green Strathcona School become permanent by September 2016. They are now trying to persuade councillors that the school is not viable. What was then a saving is now said to be a financial drain on the council. What was then required to cope with the primary admissions crisis is now said to be part of an unnecessary and unsustainable surplus. What was then said to provide parental choice into the future is now having its very existence airbrushed from the Council admissions website.

Teachers and staff at the Roe Green School are rightly proud of the progress that has been made since the creation of the Strathcona school five years ago. In a borough where children had been out of formal education for many months, the School has added significant value to the educational development of every child that has entered its classrooms. They have served the council well. If the cabinet were to rubber stamp the proposal to launch a formal consultation for the closure of the Strathcona School site. I believe they would be betraying that service and acting arbitrarily.

Thank you for considering the matters I have raised.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barry Gardiner". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

**Barry Gardiner**  
***Member of Parliament for Brent North***