

Presentation: Save Colvestone Primary School  
CYP Scrutiny Commission, Hackney Town Hall, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2023  
Aim: 8 minute read

Thank you to the Chair, and to the members of the Commission for allowing us to speak today. Many other parents and staff from the school I know would wish to be here, but this meeting has been programmed at the same time as the Council's public consultation at the school.

As you will be aware, the parents group of Colvestone Primary School prepared a detailed submission for Hackney Education / Hackney Council during the pre-informal consultation phase of this process in response to the criteria outlined by the Council. It draws on school financial data, Council-produced statistics and projections, Council planning and policy documents, parent surveys and testimony and a wide range of historical and contemporary primary and secondary reference materials with the intention of clearly establishing the financial, political and academic case for removing Colvestone Primary School from the current phase of consultation on mergers and closures of Hackney Primary Schools. We are extremely disappointed that the main 'Education Sufficiency and Estates Strategy – falling rolls' briefing report fails to address the majority of our points – failing both to challenge them, to adjust the proposals in light of them, or even to acknowledge them in any substantive form. We are grateful for the opportunity to raise some of these points again now in the hope of a response. We will also take up the invitation to feedback on the process itself as it has so far been conducted.

Financial viability:

After a period of turmoil of major building works, a change in head, senior management and change in federation, Colvestone entered into a new and highly successful federation with the Blossom Federation under specific promises from Hackney Education that the school was not being considered for closure. Having returned the school to surplus, this consultation was announced barely 6 months into this new arrangement, and just as major works were being completed. Why was this new partnership, arrived at in consultation with the Council, not given time to prove itself?

In the pre-informal consultation period the school presented the council with a projected budget for the next two years based on current pupil numbers showing the school continuing to run a surplus, as it has this year. (Note also this was a conservative estimate - we believe that numbers will rise now that the fabric of the Grade 2 listed building is restored and accessible, the new leadership team has proven itself, and the school is benefitting from its new partnership – though, as I will return to later, inclusion in this consultation of course needlessly jeopardises this progress.

In the public consultation meeting at Colvestone in April, Interim Director of Education Paul Senior stressed that the decision could not be an emotional one – that it must be taken based

on 'the figures'. So, we requested them – specifically the financial modelling that contradicted the schools own regarding financial viability. We were told that the school would receive them at speed (this is recorded as an action point in the minutes of the meeting contained in the Consultation pack for the last Cabinet meeting, highlighted in red, on page 193.) The meeting was in April, and we still have not received them two months later. If these figures are central to the decision-making process, why has this modelling data not been released?

During the Cabinet meeting in which the Cabinet voted to put all six schools through to the next stage of the consultation Mayor Glanville said that this is a consultation on *whether* to close the schools, not *how* to close the schools. If this is the case, why has the Council thus far done no work with schools to develop alternatives to closure?

When asked what it would take for a school to be removed from the closure list, Cllr. Bramble said the key issue is financial viability. What exactly would a school have to demonstrate with regards to financial viability to be removed from the closure list?

More broadly: given that the consultation itself is potentially hugely damaging to the schools in scope, how does the consultation process help inform a decision whether to close a school?

How exactly will the consultation documents help inform this decision? What are they expecting to learn from the consultation that will help them decide whether to close a school?

If this is a consultation on whether to close the schools, the Council should be able to identify explicit criteria for the consultation process (in simple terms, "in order to determine whether to close a school we need to know X, Y and Z. The consultation will help us learn X which will then help inform our decision" etc.) What are these criteria and how will they be informed through the consultation process? This is particularly important as this question has bearing on whether the consultation is authentic, as is repeatedly claimed.

Having been given assurances from Blossom prior to the consultation that Colvestone would be running in surplus for at least the next two years, in the process reducing its historical deficit, what modelling has been done that shows the financial logic of closing Colvestone? Closing the school will not allow it to run down its historical deficit, forcing the Council to write off £560,000. The consultation documents suggest the cost of mothballing a school to be between 250 and 300 thousand pounds per year – and the multiple restrictions on the building suggest that it is an extremely difficult building to re-purpose (but an excellent building to be a school). Factoring in staff retention bonuses for the year 2023-24, the cost to close the school is close to £1 million pounds, even before the considerable costs of redundancies are factored in (note jobs at Princess May are protected by existing contracts) – a calculation it appears the Council has not made as the HR data has not been requested. So:

What modelling has been done (and why is it not public) to show that this proposal wouldn't be an egregious waste of public money?

Why is the Council suggesting that the school could be mothballed, at great expense to the taxpayer, and then re-opened as a school when the Council's own Strategic Guidance argues against such a strategy as the Council would lose control of both the school and the site under 'free school presumption'?

Why has no due diligence been done (as recommended in the Council's Strategic Document) to ensure that the restrictions on the Colvestone building do not specify (continuous) educational use, or forfeit the building to the charitable foundation from which it was acquired, under restriction from the Charities Commission, in 1906? (For precedent, see All Souls vs Brent Council, 2012).

If financial viability is the key issue, why is there no data regarding financial viability (as opposed to lost potential revenue) in the consultation document? Why has the Council not provided its own Colvestone-specific financial modelling two months after it said that it would?

Some of the schools in scope have already lost many of their students as a direct result of the consultation. If the decision has not been made, how will the council protect schools from the negative impact of the consultation on the financial viability of the school in the event that a decision is made not to close a school? How will it protect the school from the impact of losing pupils, teachers and other staff? Is the impact of the consultation being considered as part of a measure of a school's viability (in other words, when a decision about viability is made, are schools going to be penalized for losing students/staff due to the consultation)?

The Mayor has said that the council cannot 'do nothing' in the face of falling rolls. However, in the case of Colvestone, Hackney Education had already taken action, working with the governors to appoint a strong new senior leadership team, forming a partnership with an existing federation, which creates financial benefits of a larger scale, investing in the equipment in the school and in the improvement of the building. Not closing the school is not 'doing nothing'. There was already a plan in place. Why would the council not allow its first plan to address falling roll take effect before moving to close the school? Why go to plan B before you've given plan A a chance? Why close a genuinely diverse, financially-viable school with a recently much-improved parental offer and an academic record that out-performs Borough and National averages? Who would this decision serve?

Context: (Dalston Plan, modelling and timeframe)

Colvestone Primary School is in the centre of the Dalston Plan ('Hackney Plan', adopted July 2020) The plan commits to building 600 new homes in Dalston, with nearly 200 being affordable 3-bedroom family homes with more at market prices. The overwhelming majority of these will be built at Kingsland Shopping Centre, with a number of smaller development sites nearby. For almost all the new developments, Colvestone would be the closest school.

Clause 3.5 of the Briefing Report discusses the Plan in general terms but not in specific relation to Colvestone and its centrality to these developments. Further, the Report addresses the need to consider “school place demand in the short to medium term”; however both the Statutory Guidance and the Council’s own Strategy document that incorporates it (p.99) state that potential demand must be considered in the “mid- to long-term”. So:

Why does the Report under-estimate the impact on demand for places at Colvestone and its unique position in the middle of the Dalston Plan and its closest school provision? As a small school even a small rise in pupils is statistically significant. Whilst the Council Report suggests that there will be capacity for the families in the new developments in the Borough, this is not *local* capacity - particularly if you factor in the need for non-religious school provision.

Why is the impact on the Dalston Plan *itself* not considered, the current consultation proposing to remove the 161-year-old listed and recently-restored village school from the heart of a new development, reducing the parental offer and one major attraction to families returning to the area? Why is this not considered (in the risk assessment at least) as removing both local authority provision and a potentially significant selling point for the new homes?

Why does the Report continue to state the incorrect relevant timeframe for consideration of potential need for places (‘short to mid-’ as opposed to ‘mid- to long-term’) despite this error being repeatedly highlighted to Hackney Education and the Council in the pre-consultation period? Further, does this mean that the Council has not prepared modelling of places that addresses long term need, as required by the Statutory Guidance (and its own Education and Sufficiency Strategy document that these consultations fall under)?

Parental choice:

Hackney Education is proposing merging two schools that are very different. Princess May is a two-form entry school in an imposing Victorian building that sits on a busy main road. Colvestone is a one-form entry school in a small, intimate building that sits on a quiet side street. They are distinct parental choices. In our submission to Hackney Education we conducted our own consultation, reaching over two thirds of Colvestone families across the school. This consultation data showed that 95.7% of parents surveyed did not include Princess May in any of their six preferences when selecting a primary school. Further, 87% said they would not send their children to Princess May, with a further 6% undecided. Only four households stated that they would send their children to Princess May. Further reasons for preferring Colvestone were collected and are analysed in our report. The closure of Colvestone and nearby De Beauvoir Primary School would mean there would be no non-faith, one-form entry local authority schools within a mile of the Colvestone building.

Continuing with this strategy therefore will likely close both Colvestone *and* Princess May – an eventuality the Head of Education will not discount. Why is this data, and the question of parental choice, not reflected in Council documents that continue to assume all 120 pupils at Colvestone will move to Princess May - a number that also mysteriously includes year 6?

How has the Council prepared for the possible scenario where only a very small number of families (at best) transfer their children to Princess May - leaving it with a financially-debilitating 'just over' single form roll?

Why are there not more options included in the consultation that might allow for parental feedback and flexibility in the proposals (whilst also mitigating the potential damage to schools in scope of the consultation itself)?

SEND and parental choice:

24% of the children that attend Colvestone have special education needs. The main factor for parents for this very conscious choice is that Colvestone is a one form entry school. As research consistently shows, this is the best setting for autistics and children with ADHD, as both groups suffer greatly when placed in larger two form environments, consequentially not being able to access education due to overwhelm and overstimulation.

The school leadership team, the SEND parents and the save Colvestone campaigners, have been requesting for the council to consider the opening of an ARP unit within Colvestone – the Mayor responding favourably when this was suggested as a use for the currently under-exploited caretakers house teaching spaces on site. Given that the Council's Strategic document encourages the supporting the repurposing of unused buildings to financially support the school and specifically adjustment to SEND provision, why is this proposal not being looked at more closely – particularly given the Strategic need for SEND places in the Borough and Colvestone's excellent SEND track record and optimal one-form integrated teaching environment?

Faith / Voluntary Aided schools / Parental choice:

The Council briefing document appears to go to some length to mask the problem of falling rolls in the borough's faith schools, where the problems are substantially worse. In the Briefing document / 'falling rolls' Report produced by Hackney Education a brief section is given to address faith / voluntary aided schools (p.34/5). In it, the number of *applications* is given as the metric of evaluation, whereas for community schools *offers* are used as they more accurately represent student numbers. The report suggests that faith schools had slightly more applications than places: we might reasonably assume that they are operating at capacity. In fact, whilst community schools are operating at 80% capacity, faith schools are running at 60%. To put this in context, by the metric of applications, Colvestone was oversubscribed by almost 50%, and there are nine (9) faith schools in the borough that had fewer applications than Colvestone. The Report cites census figures that 30% of the borough identify as Christian. It should not be assumed that 30% of residents desire a Church of England or Catholic education for their children, however – indeed, Hackney's own research shows that 84% of respondents want a non-religious education for their children. So:

Why is the Council protecting faith schools in this manner (other boroughs, Lambeth and Southwark, for example have closed faith schools)? Why aren't these conversations (community and VA consultations) being run concurrently as part of a holistic approach?

Furthermore, if only community schools are considered for closure, what is to stop this, and the announcement of any subsequent consultations, causing flight from local authority schools that will be considered unsafe by parents in the borough, forcing families into a choice between religious education, for-profit education in the academy/free school sector, or flight from the borough altogether? Indeed, this implied risk in the local authority school sector would be further enforced if no schools in the current set of proposals remained open even when shown to be viable.

Pollution and health:

Air pollution is a major health issue that disproportionately affects the young, exposure to which permanently limits health and life expectancy and the capacity to learn. However 2021 figures show pollution levels 40% higher at the Princess May site than Colvestone. Whilst Hackney might be able to mitigate some of this exposure at Princess May, the site will always be on the main road (the A10). Whilst Colvestone is in a quiet back street, a key part of a fully funded re-greening project which will further improve air quality.

Colvestone Primary School is central to a pioneering proposal to turn Colvestone Crescent into 21st Century Street, Hackney's first permanent play street. A long tree-lined pedestrian walkway with lots of new plantings, ecology gardens, spaces for congregating and innovative play spaces. A key tenet of the 21st Century Street is that it is located next to a primary school. Explicitly, without Colvestone school, that plan makes less sense.

The Mayor has committed not to raise the levels of pollution pupils are subject to in the Borough. Why is it pursuing a proposed merger that will do exactly that? (A note on process: this is clearly a problem for the Council as when the Briefing Report was re-published subsequent to the Cabinet decision this pollution figure for Princess May had been drastically reduced – only being corrected after our complaints.)

Whilst Hackney states that all schools are at acceptable levels (the Council's limit is 4 times higher than WHO guidelines), why is the explicit raising of pollution levels experienced by pupils at the proposed new site at Princess May (not to mention a daily commute up the polluted A10) not considered in the Education Report or the risk assessment? How can they be justified?

Why is the lowering of pollution at the Colvestone site not accounted for in the consultation document? Or its centrality to the fully-funded 21<sup>st</sup> Century Street of which it is the heart?

Further points on process:

Why has the scope of the consultation been changed since it was published in the original Briefing document and reproduced in the Decision document to no longer include consultation with 'All Residents'? Given that community impact is a specific assessment criteria listed in the Council's Briefing Report, why has the local community, including future parents of school age children, been disenfranchised in this manner?

Why has the consultation been timed, and communications apparently phrased, to be as damaging as possible to the schools in scope? Contrary to Statutory Guidance the consultation proposals were made public two days before a school holiday (the Easter break); key decisions were made just after incoming parents had to accept (or reject) Reception places, and the consultation process runs into December such that no clarity is given prior to the start of the next academic year / further damaging 2024/25 intake school visits and applications?

As mentioned earlier, what mitigation or financial consideration has been put in place to protect schools damaged by the consultation process itself?

Nearby DeBeauvoir has already rapidly lost or has Part 2 transfer requests from many of its students, and the ones who remain now have no non-religious options in the vicinity for Key Stage 1. Keeping Colvestone open would give parents at DeBeauvoir an option that is close to them, is small and non-denominational like DeBeauvoir and has enough space to allow friend and family groups to remain together. Has the Council discussed with parents whether they would like to be able to attend Colvestone if it remains open? If not, why is that option not being considered? Why are there not more flexible options on the table to mitigate potential damage to the schools in scope?

Aside from reducing larger school PANs, how has the Council worked to protect the unique educational environment of the single form local authority schools in Hackney and enable them to compete against Academy and Free Schools? How has the Council worked with school staff and communities to ensure that as many schools as possible are financially viable?

In closing: we are aware that there is a problem with falling rolls, but we have been frustrated in our attempts to open a constructive dialogue with the Council with regards to creative, stakeholder-informed solutions and Colvestone's role in them. We appreciate this opportunity to raise our concerns in this forum.