

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Agenda Item 5b

Brighton & Hove City Council

Dear Councillor Older

I am writing to you and fellow members of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding the implications for education of Brighton and Hove children – and the management of and admissions to schools run by Brighton and Hove Council – of the financial pressures facing privately-run schools across the city.

In February 2009 it was reported that St Mary's Hall School in Kemp Town faced financial collapse but had been 'rescued' by Roedean School, which, it was reported, agreed to take on St Mary's Hall School's debts and to close the senior school at the end of the current year.

A full report was published in The Times newspaper – the article can be found at:

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/school_league_table/article5801838.ece see **Appendix 1**

Although Roedean School's management has, reportedly, agreed to offer places to current pupils, this transfer of ownership will reduce the number of private school places available in the city from September 2009, placing additional pressure on those schools, both privately and council-run, which remain.

This gives rise to a number of questions:

1. Has this likely increase in pressure on the city's schools been quantified?
2. What steps has the council taken to ensure it can cope with this likely increase in demand?
3. What discussions did the council have with St Mary's Hall School prior to the announcement that it was to close its doors and transfer assets to Roedean? If none, why not?
4. Worryingly, Roedean Head Frances King has publicly stated that the intention is to leave the St Mary's Hall site and school buildings and facilities empty until the value of the site's development potential rises. In the aforementioned Times article, it is reported:

Before the downturn, the site may have offered lucrative development potential. But Ms King said that in the current

climate, Roedean would keep the building empty for the time being.

This decision will leave a school sitting empty.

What legal powers exist to force or encourage the owners of a school to seek to bring it into use, rather than allowing it to sit idle whilst waiting for a change in its value, similar to those that exist to do exactly this in relation to homes? The council has staff seeking to bring empty residential properties into use, do we have staff trying to do exactly the same with relation to empty schools? If so, how are they getting on? If not, why not?

Although these questions all relate to St Mary's Hall School, their answers will have resonance across the city, as there are a number of private schools in the area which may find themselves suffering financial difficulty, or even collapse, during the current economic downturn. These circumstances may well be repeated at other schools with Brighton and Hove's boundaries, or at schools located outside the city but attended by children who live here in Brighton and Hove.

Indeed, last month, it was reported that Newlands School in Newhaven, East Sussex, faced imminent financial collapse. I can't imagine it will stop there.

This begs two further, more general questions:

5. Does this council support the principle of bringing financially failed or failing privately-run schools into council control? If so, what steps has it taken to bring about the necessary legal changes to allow this? If not, why not?
6. As recession bites, and unemployment rises, can we expect a significant number of children to seek transfer from private schools to council-run schools within the city? If so, how are we preparing to cope with this increase in demand for school places?

I hope officers will be able to provide answers to these questions for members of CYPOSC to consider at the Committee's next meeting on June 17th, with a view to considering whether to set up an ad-hoc scrutiny panel to examine these issues, or make any recommendations to either the CYPT board or the council in this regard.

Cllr Ben Duncan