

ADMISSIONS FORUM

Minutes of the Meeting held

Wednesday, 29th June, 2011, 10.00 am

Members: Andrew Davies (Chair), Suzanne McDonald (Vice-Chair) and Anne Forrest

Also in attendance: Kevin Amos and Sue Calvert

1 WELCOME

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Kevin Burnett, Alison Creech, Cllr Sally Davis, David Guy, and Cllr Nigel Roberts.

3 MINUTES: 10 NOVEMBER 2010

These were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 MATTERS ARISING

There were none.

5 CONSULTATION ON NEW ADMISSIONS AND APPEAL CODES

Kevin Amos introduced his report, which listed the main changes between the proposed new codes and the current codes. The consultation on the new codes would end on 19th August 2011.

The Forum discussed the proposed changes.

A. ADMISSIONS CODE

Popular Schools to be allowed to expand

Suzanne was concerned that if popular schools were allowed to take more pupils, less popular schools could become unviable. Anne referred to very large primary schools in Dorset with 800 pupils, which she thought far too many. In reply to a question from Andrew, Kevin confirmed that it would only be possible to complain to the School Adjudicator about admission numbers on grounds of safety. Suzanne wondered how a school that wanted to expand would be able to afford to do so. Andrew said that it would be difficult for schools to fund a large number of additional places while, on the other hand, an adverse report on a school could destroy it. He asked how the Forum could express its opposition to the proposal. Kevin replied he and Sue would be responding to the consultation on behalf of the Council, and would incorporate any views communicated to them by Forum members.

Role of Local Authority

Under the new code, local authorities would continue to co-ordinate reception, primary and secondary admissions, but not in-year admissions. For in year admissions parents would deal directly with schools, though local authorities would continue to have an advisory role in advising parents on the availability of places. With parents making applications directly to schools it will be difficult for the LA to effectively manage the Fair Access Protocol. Sue said that a great deal of work had been put into to support for children with challenging behaviour, which would be lost in in-year admissions were not centralised. Ann said that at the moment if a school was full it was only necessary to inform the relevant officer in the local authority, whereas dealing with individual parents would be time-consuming.

Priority Admissions for Children of School Staff

Kevin said that it was not clear to which staff this applied. Andrew said that it used to apply to anyone employed by the school; there was a danger that it might seem unfair. On the other hand, the fact that staff wanted their own children to attend the school they worked for could be seen as a validation of it. Kevin said that it could provoke resentment if children living close to a school could not attend it because places had been taken by the children of school staff living further away. This could be especially difficult in the primary sector where in Bath the last couple of years children are being refused where they live very close to their preferred school.

Infant Class Size

Ann welcomed the proposal for allowing the admission of multiple-birth children and children of armed forces personnel as an exception to ICS. Members noted the proposal not to require qualifying measures for excepted children. Ann said that class size was more significant for younger children, who needed more individual help with reading etc.

Schools' Consultation on Admissions Criteria

Kevin said that he did not see any difficulty about the proposal to require schools to consult about their admissions criteria every seven years rather than every three. Schools would still have to publish their criteria every year, giving the opportunity for the LA to challenge if appropriate.

Academies

Suzanne expressed concern that there appeared to be no monitoring of academies to ensure that they complied with the Admissions Code. Anne queried whether academies would be inclusive, and was concerned that their selection criteria might cause problems for other schools. Suzanne referred to an academy which had interviewed prospective pupils. Andrew mentioned another academy which had charged admission fees. His view was that the Code applied to all schools, and that it was intended to be clear and to incorporate a reasonable level of inclusivity; only the School Adjudicator could determine whether a particular school was compliant or not. It was noted that academies and free schools would be able to give priority to children eligible for free school meals.

Siblings

Kevin drew attention to the definition of “sibling” to be included in the new Code. This is already included in the LA admission booklets

Deadline for Objections

Kevin drew attention to proposal to bring forward the deadline for making objections about admissions criteria to the School Adjudicator from 31 July to 30 June. He commented that this would allow sufficient time for the Adjudicator to give a decision and for the local authority to publish the admissions booklet, with any necessary amendments, on time.

B. APPEALS CODE

Time Limit for Appeals

Currently appeals have to be lodged within 10 days. The proposal was to extend this to 30 days. Kevin noted that many parents lodged appeals but some obtain a place on a second round of allocations without going to appeal. He said that the extension to 30 days would put additional pressure on local authority staff. He suggested that if the appeal period were to be extended, the closing date for primary applications should be brought forward to 31 October and that there should be a uniform closing date and offer date for primary and secondary schools. The Forum supported this. Anne commented on the difficulties for schools and parents caused by prolonged uncertainty about the final destinations of some children.

Venues for Appeals

It was noted that under the new Code appeals could be held on school premises.

6 UPDATE ON PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SEPTEMBER 2011 ADMISSIONS AND APPEALS

Sue Calvert tabled two documents giving statistics for reception admissions and infant/junior and secondary transfers for 2011/2012. She said that this had been the first year of co-ordinated admissions for reception admissions. There had been issues with the information provided and some neighbouring authorities had had staffing difficulties. However, the April 26 deadline had been achieved for the Bath area. Overall there had been just enough places. There were a couple of hotspots in the north and west and discussions had taken place with two schools about providing extra places. These discussions were still continuing when final allocations were sent out and some parents received an interim offer. The late January closing date had caused significant problems; all the difficulties previously predicted had actually occurred. Primary admissions were increasing. There had been an increase in the percentage of first-preference secondary places that could be offered. Secondary appeals had already been heard and primary appeals were ongoing.

Anne referred to adopted children from Thailand and China, whose applications were often delayed and who tended to come in clusters because of co-ordination by

support groups. Adopters often knew one another and wanted their adopted children to attend the same school.

Kevin said the LA will be examining whether it is worth bringing the sibling criterion for non rural schools in line with the criterion for rural schools. Any proposed change will come back to the admissions forum in October as part of the consultation for September 2013.

7 ADMISSIONS CONSULTATION FOR 2012-13 - VERBAL REPORT

Sue Calvert reported. There had been few changes following the consultation. Widcombe Junior had changed its oversubscription criteria to give preference to children who had siblings at either the Junior or Infants Schools who would still be attendance when they began Year 3. They had also not proceeded with a proposed reduction in admission number from 60 to 56, as this might have prevented some children from transferring from the Infants School.

8 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Secretary reported that a clause in the Education Bill, currently going through Parliament, would abolish the requirement for local authorities in England to have Admission Forums. An attempt had been made to amend this clause in the Lords, but had failed. He also advised members of the need to ensure that the membership of the Forum included representatives of all the types of school specified in the Regulations. When the current members had been appointed there had, for example, been no academies in the area. It would be possible for members whose schools had changed to a different category to remain on the Forum to represent that category instead of the category of school which they had originally been appointed to represent.

Members indicated that they found the Forum useful and would like it to continue on a voluntary basis, if it ceased to be a statutory requirement to have one.

9 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

NOTED that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on 19 October 2011 at 10.00am at Beechen Cliff School.

The meeting ended at 11.10 am

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services