

Meeting: Executive
Date: 5 February 2013
Subject: Determination of Admission Arrangements 2014/15
Report of: Cllr Mark Versallion, Executive Member for Children's Services
Summary: The report seeks Executive approval to determine the Council's Admission Arrangements for 2014/15, specifically the local authority's co-ordinated admissions scheme and the local authority's admission arrangements for Community and VC Schools.

Advising Officer: Edwina Grant, Director of Children's Services
Contact Officer: Pete Dudley, Assistant Director Children's Services (Learning, Commissioning & Partnerships)
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Executive
Key Decision Yes

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

The report supports Central Bedfordshire's Medium Term Plan: *Delivering your priorities – Our Plan for Central Bedfordshire 2012-2016* and the specific priority of Improved Educational Attainment.

Financial:

1. There are no direct financial implications arising from Executive approving the determined admission arrangements.

Legal:

2. Regulations contained within the School Admissions Code sets out the requirement for the Local Authority to have a co-ordinated admissions scheme for the area. If an Admissions Authority proposes to make amendments to their arrangements they must consult between the 1 November and the 1 March the following year for a minimum of 8 weeks. Admission Authorities must determine their admission arrangements by the 15 April each year, for implementation in the academic year succeeding the next.
3. For Community and Voluntary Controlled schools the Admissions Authority is the Local Authority. Academies, Foundation, Trust and Voluntary Aided schools are their own Admission Authority and are therefore responsible for their admission arrangements.

4. The Council has fulfilled its statutory responsibilities by consulting within the timescales set out above and conducting a consultation with the relevant parties on the co-ordinated admissions scheme and the proposed changes to admission arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools. Thoughts and comments have been invited from all consultees, which have informed the outcome of the process. It is therefore necessary for the Council to determine its arrangements by 15 April 2013 for the academic year of 2014/15.

Risk Management:

5. This report sets out the statutory requirement for the Council to determine the co-ordinated admissions scheme for the area and the admission arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools. The risk of not doing so would result in:
- Failure to discharge statutory duty by not having a co-ordinated scheme in place for the area which sets out the admissions process.
 - Failure of not having oversubscription criteria for Community and Voluntary controlled schools if more applications were received than places were available.

In determining the co-ordinated admissions scheme and admissions arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools, objections to the admission arrangements can be referred to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator and must be referred by 30 June in the determination year. There is a risk therefore of the Schools Adjudicator upholding an objection and the Council being required to amend their admission arrangements, known as a variation of admission arrangements.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

6. Not applicable.

Equalities/Human Rights:

7. The School Admissions Code sets out the duty on Local Authorities and Admission Authorities to produce admission arrangements which are fair, clear and objective, which can be easily understood by parents. Admission arrangements must comply with regulations and legislation including the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998.
8. Public authorities have a statutory duty to advance equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender re-assignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. As part of the development of the admission arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools, the Council has carried out an equality impact assessment to check that the proposed changes do not have a disproportionate or negative impact on vulnerable groups.

Public Health

9. Not applicable.

Community Safety:

10. Not applicable.

Sustainability:

11. Not applicable.

Procurement:

12. Not applicable.

Overview and Scrutiny:

13. Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the Consultation on Admission Arrangements 2014/15 report on 11 December 2012. The Committee was generally supportive of the proposed admission arrangements outlined within the report but also acknowledged the need for Members to encourage parents, school governors and head teachers to respond to the consultation before final admission arrangements were determined.

The complexity of some of the issues which had been raised was acknowledged and the possibility of reviewing admission arrangements to reflect particular local circumstances following the consultation exercise considered. It was therefore important to encourage a good response rate to the consultation exercise, which would hopefully capture these issues in more detail.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Executive is asked to:

- 1. approve the Council's co-ordinated admissions scheme as attached at Appendix 1 and 2 to this report; and**
- 2. approve the admission arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools for the academic year 2014/15 as set out in Appendix 3 and Appendix 4 to this report.**

<i>Reason for Recommendations:</i>	<i>To enable the Council to meet its statutory obligations to determine its admission arrangements by 15 April 2013 for admissions in the academic year of 2014/15.</i>
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Executive Summary

14. The Local Authority has a statutory duty to ensure that admissions are co-ordinated for all admission authorities in their area for all children being admitted into the normal year of entry and that only one offer of a school place is made. The Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme for the academic year 2014/15 fulfils this requirement, setting out the timeframes for processing admission applications.
15. In addition, as the Local Authority is the Admission Authority for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools it is responsible for the admission arrangements, including determination of the admissions criteria in the event of oversubscription to these schools.
16. The consultation on proposed admissions criteria for the academic year of 2014/15 has now closed and responses and comments have been considered. This report sets out the key findings from the consultation and the process which needs to be followed for the Council to determine its admission arrangements. This requires the recommendations for the co-ordinated admissions scheme and the admission arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools to be approved by the Council's Executive.

Introduction

17. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 requires the Council to consult on its co-ordinated scheme and to consult on admissions arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools where changes are proposed. The consultation must be conducted for a period of 8 weeks, commencing no earlier than 1 November and concluding by 1 March the following year. Arrangements must then be determined by 15 April.
18. On the 6 November 2012, the Council's Executive approved a recommendation to commence a consultation on the Council's admission arrangements which included the co-ordinated admissions scheme and the admission arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools.
19. The consultation commenced on 12 November 2012 and concluded on 21 January 2013 allowing over 8 weeks for all interested parties to respond in order to take into account the end of the Autumn term break.
20. Legislation prescribes that the consultees must include the following:
 - a) Parents of children between the ages of two and eighteen.
 - b) Other persons in the relevant area who in the opinion of the Admissions Authority have an interest in the proposed admissions.
 - c) All other admission authorities within the relevant area.
 - d) The Governing Bodies of Community and Voluntary Controlled schools.
 - e) Adjoining neighbouring local authorities.
 - f) The body or person representing religious denomination schools.

22. The consultation was publicised via the following methods:

A letter was sent to:

- Headteachers and Chairs of Governors of Community and Voluntary Controlled schools in Central Bedfordshire.
- Headteachers/Principals of Academies, Foundation, Trust and Voluntary Aided schools in Central Bedfordshire, with a copy of the letter being sent to the Roman Catholic Diocesan Board and the Church of England Diocesan Board.

Posters to publicise the consultation, detailing the website address to access information were sent to:

- Schools and academies in Central Bedfordshire
- Nurseries and Children's Centre
- Town and Parish Councils
- Citizen's Advice Bureau
- Disability Resource Centre
- Community Centres
- Supermarkets

An email was also sent to neighbouring local authorities and publicised through a press release to the local newspapers.

23. Drop in sessions were also held for all Headteachers/Principals and Governing Bodies at Schools and Academies in Central Bedfordshire. These were held over three separate dates in December in Priory House, Watling House and a school in Leighton Buzzard to provide an opportunity to discuss the proposals and raise queries.

Consultation Responses - Co-ordinated Scheme for Admission

24. No comments were received in relation to the proposed co-ordinated scheme of admissions and approval is therefore recommended for the proposed scheme for Lower, Primary, Middle and for Secondary, Upper and the University Technical College as attached in Appendix 1 and 2 to this report.

Consultation Responses – Admission Criteria for all Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools

25. The admission criteria for all Community and Voluntary Controlled schools in the event of oversubscription for the Academic Year 2014/15 was proposed and consulted on as follows:

- 1) All 'looked after' children or children who were previously 'looked after'
- 2) Pupils with siblings at the school
- 3) Children who live nearest to the school determined by straight line distance from the school site to the pupil's home address

26. 84 responses were received to the consultation. 44% stated support for the proposals and 45% of respondents objected, with 11% neither agreeing or disagreeing.

Key Objections to the Proposals regarded the following:

27.
 - Different systems could be in operation as academies and own admission authority schools can set their own admissions criteria.

This is currently the case and academies and own Admissions Authority schools have admissions criteria which differs from that of the Council's.

28.
 - Catchment areas promote a sense of community and this could be lost. There could also be areas where children fail to gain a place at their local or nearest school.

Respondents in some rural areas identified local issues where some children in the current catchment area would be further away from the school than others on straight line distance and thus would not be able to gain a place at the school if it was oversubscribed. Other respondents raised examples of how children who are currently in the catchment school are nearer to another school on straight line distance which would change their current transitional destination.

Some attendees at the drop in sessions expressed concern that if straight line distance was applied, pupils in rural areas could gain a place at their local lower school on a distance basis, however when transferring to middle or upper school, these pupils would live further away and in the event of oversubscription could therefore find themselves without a place at their nearest middle or upper school due to the fact that they live further away than children from urban areas.

29.
 - School transport arrangements for children.

Concerns were raised regarding school transport. For many children living in rural areas the local lower school is the nearest to them, however the catchment middle or upper school is further away and may not be the nearest school on straight line distance. Some schools were concerned that the continuation of education within an established pyramid of schools could be disrupted if parents opted for the nearest middle or upper school on straight line distance in order to qualify for transport (if eligible, rather than opting for what was the catchment school and being responsible for transport costs as this is further away on a straight line distance basis).

30.
 - The sibling criterion could result in children who live further away from a school gaining a place to the detriment of more local children.

This could be the case where a family has gained admission to a school for an older child and has moved further away. The proposed sibling criterion was intended to keep siblings together and ease the logistical burden for parents.

The current policy gives priority to 'Pupils living in the catchment area with siblings at the school' as criterion two and then prioritises 'Other siblings' after 'Very exceptional' medical grounds' and before 'Any Other children'. The proposed change would give priority to siblings regardless of the distance from the school.

31.
 - Feeder school/nursery criterion.

Comments were received in relation to the removal of this criterion which exists in some of the policies for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools. The criterion aids a pupil's continuation and progression to the school. However this disadvantages those children who are unable to attend the feeder school or nursery, for instance where it is oversubscribed or where parents opt for a non-feeder school in order to fit in with child care arrangements.

Key Comments of those in Support of the Proposals, made the following Remarks:

32.
 - Removing catchment areas would simplify a process which can feel confusing as a result of the variety of age ranges and provision that operate in the Central Bedfordshire school system.
 - Straight line distance would make more sense than the current catchment rules and would assist in situations where the current catchment school is further away and oversubscribed and where a place can be gained at a nearer school.

The two points listed above were the objective of the proposed criteria and the reasons behind this were outlined in the consultation on the admission arrangements.

33.
 - Sibling criterion

Most parents prefer their children to attend the same school where possible as it is more convenient and provides a family with continuity. It was suggested that the sibling rule should be expanded to include other relatives (e.g. cousins) which would be beneficial where grandparents provide childcare to families.

The consultation document detailing the proposed admission arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools set out the reasons for proposing the sibling criterion which were to ease the logistical burden for parents by having children at the same school. However, priority should not be expanded to include other relatives as this would disadvantage other families.

34.
 - It was suggested that while the policy would be practicable in urban areas such as Leighton Buzzard, Dunstable and Houghton Regis, rural areas would be better served by a catchment area.

Views expressed at the drop in sessions were that while removing catchment areas and moving to an open admissions policy was a good idea, such a policy should be delayed while changes to age ranges for schools and academies were taking place in such areas as Dunstable and Houghton Regis.

Conclusion to Consultation on the Admissions Arrangements

35. Following feedback received during the consultation period it became apparent that although an open admission system would introduce simplicity and freedom of choice to the admissions process for parents, some of the complex local issues need further exploration in order to ensure that children in rural areas are not disadvantaged or that a child's transitional pathway is not changed from what was traditionally regarded as their local school.
36. Although some expressed concern over the removal of the feeder school/nursery criterion, removing this criterion would create greater fairness to the admissions process by not giving children priority for a place based on their attendance at a feeder school/nursery. The removal of the 'very exceptional' medical needs criterion did not generate significant concerns and will be removed.
37. Following the consideration of all of the responses received during the consultation, it is recommended that Executive approve the following admissions criteria for all Community and Voluntary Controlled schools for the academic year of 2014/15.
- 1) All 'looked after' children or children who were previously 'looked after'
 - 2) Children living in the catchment area with siblings at the school
 - 3) Children living in the catchment area
 - 4) Other children with siblings at the school
 - 5) Children who live nearest to the school determined by straight line distance from the school site to the child's home address

The above criteria will apply to all Community and Voluntary Controlled lower and middle schools except Greenleas Lower School (Sandhills site) in Leighton Buzzard, where the following will apply:

- 1) All 'looked after' children or children who were previously 'looked after'
- 2) Children with siblings at the school
- 3) Children who live nearest to the school determined by straight line distance from the school site to the child's home address

The reason why Greenleas Lower School is treated differently is that the admissions criteria for Greenleas Lower School (Sandhills site) was approved by Executive on 6 November 2012. The school is an expansion to the existing Greenleas Lower School on a separate site and will not serve a defined catchment area, but will provide school places to children living primarily on the new Sandhills development.

Admissions Arrangements for Specific Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools

38. The admission arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools comprise of the admissions criteria and the published admission numbers (PAN) for each school. The published admission number (PAN) for each school is the maximum number of pupils that can be admitted to the relevant year group.
39. In the proposed admission arrangements the admission number for Watling Lower School was consulted on as 30, however a PAN of 45 will be determined instead, which is the school's current PAN. This amendment does not require further consultation, as regulations only require admissions authorities to consult on a published admission number where a decrease is proposed.
40. Two Community and Voluntary Controlled schools expressed a wish to increase their published number from September 2014, as follows:
 - Russell Lower School: increase of PAN from 54 to 60.
 - Slip End Lower School: increase of PAN from 22 to 24.

Method of Determination

41. Central Bedfordshire Council, acting as the local authority is required to determine the co-ordinated admissions scheme and admissions arrangements for Community and Voluntary controlled schools by 15 April. The appropriate bodies must therefore be notified upon determination which are:
 - a) Parents of children between the ages of two and eighteen
 - b) Other persons in the relevant area who in the opinion of the Admissions Authority have an interest in the proposed admissions
 - c) All other admission authorities within the relevant area
 - d) The Governing Bodies of Community and Voluntary Controlled schools
 - e) Adjoining neighbouring local authorities
 - f) The body or person representing religious denomination schools.

42. A copy of the determined arrangements for Community and Voluntary controlled schools must be published on the Council's website. The Council also has a duty to publish details of admission arrangements for Academies and own Admission Authority schools by 1 May in the determination year.

Conclusion and Next Steps

43. As the Council, acting as the Local Authority, has conducted a consultation on the co-ordinated scheme for admission and the admission arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled school according to regulations and has sought and considered responses from all consultees it is recommended that these are approved so the Council can determine the admission arrangements by 15 April 2013 as required by legislation.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Lower, Primary and Middle 2014/15 co-ordinated admissions scheme

Appendix 2 – Secondary, Upper and UTC 2014/15 co-ordinated admissions scheme

Appendix 3 – Community and Voluntary Controlled schools admissions policy 2014/15.

Appendix 4 - Community and Voluntary Controlled schools admission numbers 2014/15.

Background Papers:

Equality Impact Assessment