

Meeting: Schools Forum
Date: 20 November 2017
Subject: School Admissions Team Funding
Report of: Director of Children's Services
Summary: To provide an overview of the current funding of the School Admissions Service, associated performance and recommendations for future funding

Contact Officer: Leo Jones
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Council

Reason for urgency
(if appropriate)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. The high performance of the School Admissions Service is noted by the Schools Forum, including changes made to improve responsiveness and customer satisfaction**
- 2. The DSG continues to fund the School Admissions Service in Central Bedfordshire, as is the case in most LA's across the country and members of the team who do not currently have permanent contracts are made permanent**
- 3. An annual report is provided to the Schools Forum on the work delivered by the team, performance nationally and changes in demand volumes to ensure the team remains high performing and of sufficient depth to deliver the required functions**

Background

1. Duty

School Admissions is a statutory service which is primarily funded through the Dedicated Schools Grant. The breakdown below shows the sources of funding for 2017/18:

- 85% from Dedicated Schools Grant funding (£313,004)
- 15% from traded services income (£58,519)

2. **Service**

School admissions deal with two types of applications concurrently; in year applications (where places are required within the school year or for a year group which is not the first point of entry) and point of entry applications (Starting School, Transfer to Middle/Secondary/Upper). On average this equates to approximately 13,000 applications annually for the 127 mainstream schools in Central Bedfordshire.

The size of cohorts for admissions has increased in line with the increasing population in Central Bedfordshire Council. Year on year the starting school admissions round is growing with a 24% increase in applications received between 2013 and 2017.

Since 2013 the pupil population in Central Bedfordshire has increased by 15.1%; from 34,749 in January 2013 to approximately 40,000 in January 2017. Total pupil numbers are expected to rise further by approximately 9,700 to 49,700 pupils in 2022.

Notwithstanding the population increase, the School Admissions Team has experienced further demand due to the increased number of schools who have become their own admissions authority, mainly through the academy route. Although academies are independent from the Council, the School Admissions Team is still responsible for coordinating the admissions process for all schools and academies in the area as well as providing advice on a wide range of admission issues. The monitoring of admission arrangements of all own admission authorities is one of the Council's statutory duties and this has to be overseen on an annual basis.

The statutory duties that the Local Authority must adhere to in relation to school admission legislation that are fulfilled by the School Admissions Team are detailed in Appendix 1.

The School Admissions Team is funded through Dedicated Schools Grant, as are other School Admissions Teams in neighbouring authorities.

3. The Team

The team consists of nine full time officers, who fulfil the following duties to ensure statutory requirements are met and high level of customer service to both schools and parents:

Role	Number of officers	Brief description of duties
Admissions Manager	1	Lead the team, ensuring all statutory duties are met Formulate, develop, implement and review the LA's admission policies and practices adhering to admission legislation Manage and lead statutory admission consultation process for community and VC schools Lead the admissions services to schools Monitor own admission authority policies, referring them where necessary to Office of Schools Adjudicator Presenting officer at admission appeals Deal with MP letters, complaints and member enquiries
Senior Admission Officer	2	Coordinate and manage annual transfer rounds Presenting officer at appeals Deal with in year admission issues Deal with delayed admission (summer born requests) Support manager in monitoring own admission authority admission arrangements Producing admission booklets, leaflets and admission round marketing
Admission Officer	4	Process in year applications for the 91% of Central Bedfordshire schools opted into LA's coordination Assign criteria to point of entry applications for Community/VC schools as well as own admission authority schools who buy back this service Maintain waiting lists for both in year and point of entry rounds Offering places from waiting list
Admission Assistant	2	Responding to queries from parents through the following channels - calls to the admissions helpline (8.30am to 5.30pm) - emails - face to face at the Council office Logging applications Filing/archiving applications

4. In Year admissions

On average the School Admission Team receives 3,000 in year applications throughout a school year. Since September 2013, local authorities were no longer required to coordinate in year admissions for their area and own admission authority schools were able to process in year applications themselves. However, 91% of schools and academies within Central Bedfordshire have chosen to remain within the Council's in year coordinated scheme; the benefits of this include having a centralised point of contact for parents making applications, efficient processing of applications and effectively identifying children out of school or unable to access a school place.

5. Point of entry admissions

For the 2017 intakes the team received the following number of applications from Central Bedfordshire residents:

Admission round	Number of applications	Applications made on time	Applicants offered 1 st preference school
Starting School	3,669	93.5%	95.6%
Transfer to Middle	2,592	97%	94.4%
Transfer to Secondary	788	92%	91%
Transfer to Upper	2005	94.5%	97%
Total/Average	9,054	95.5%	94%

In addition to the applications from Central Bedfordshire residents above, the team also allocated 766 school places to applicants from outside Central Bedfordshire.

6. The School Admissions Team is responsible for coordinating the annual admission rounds which includes: -

- Promoting the admissions rounds, making application form (including online application system) available for parents to apply
- Admissions from parents applying to their home LA
- Logging applications, exchanging applicable applications with other LAs and providing applications to schools and academies (which we do via SAM)
- Allocating places (ensuring pupils receive only one offer of a school place)
- Producing, printing and posting decision letters for parents in line with the national offer days
- Providing parents with information on waiting list procedures, the appeal process and how to make change of preferences for the round
- Verify addresses using Council records for all oversubscribed schools and academies, and where anomalies occur pass these to Corporate Fraud for further investigation

In addition to this the School Admissions Team assigns the correct criterion to all applications for Community and VC schools, as the Council is responsible for these admissions.

Own admission authority schools and academies are responsible for ranking each application by assigning the correct admission criterion. They can either do this using the secure online school admissions module or can buy back the service from the School Admissions Team. For the 2017 intake 73% of these schools/academies delegated their responsibility to the School Admissions Team through the buy back service.

7. Appeals

By law all parents/carers who are not allocated a place at their preferred school(s) have the right of appeal

The Council, as the admission authority for community and VC schools, is responsible for presenting the case as to why the child has not been allocated a place at a specific school. This would also include answering detailed questions about the case at the appeals panel and any questions about the school. Senior officers from the School Admissions Team fulfil this statutory function, ensuring all relevant legislation is adhered to.

The governing body/academy trust, as the admissions authority for foundation/trust/VA schools/academies are responsible for this function. These schools can delegate this responsibility to the Council through the buy back service available. 22% of the income generated by the team in 2017/18 was through the appeal service buy back. It is worth noting that the number of appeals lodged on a yearly basis fluctuates quite significantly and therefore the revenue raised through this service can vary considerably.

8. Admission Arrangements

The Council, as the admission authority for community and voluntary controlled schools, is responsible for determining the admission arrangements each year for these schools, and where changes are proposed consult on these with the relevant stakeholders as set by the legislation which underpins the admissions process. The School Admission Team carries out this function through engaging with community and voluntary controlled schools regarding proposals, presenting these to Executive for their approval to consult and then determine the policy, conducting the consultation for the required period ensuring all stakeholders are engaged and their views are recorded.

Although not a statutory duty, the School Admission Team also provides advice and support to own admission authority schools and academies regarding the consultation and determination process for their admission arrangements free of charge. This offer is welcomed by schools/academies to ensure they are complying with the relevant legislation and make use of the expertise/experience of officers in the School Admissions Team. This process also ensures coordination and fairness across the wider admissions landscape.

The Local Authority is required to refer any admission arrangements by own admission authority schools or academies which it does not believe complies with the requirements of the School Admissions Code to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator. The School Admissions Team therefore monitors the policies of all these schools/academies in the area, advising them to ensure their policy comply and referring them where required.

9. Service improvements

The team continually strives to ensure the admissions process is as efficient and accessible for both parents and schools. The following initiatives implemented in the last few years demonstrate this commitment to providing a customer focused, effective and fair admissions system:

Reducing the number of late applications

Over the last few years the School Admissions Team has reduced the number of late applications from approximately 15% to on average 4.5%. The benefits of this includes;

- Applicants more likely to be offered their catchment school
- Fewer appeals from catchment applicants
- More accurate numbers of new intake for schools/academies and other teams
- Implications for transport; fewer children offered next nearest places by Council due to catchment school being oversubscribed

Centralised late allocation

Before the 2014 annual allocations, late applications were processed during the summer months on an adhoc basis, with officers logging forms as they processed them and decision letters posted to parents sporadically. In 2014 an internal centralised late allocation process was implemented which made the process considerably more efficient: -

- Late applications are now logged on receipt therefore data is more accurate (and timely) for schools and other teams within CBC
- Work of the admission officers is maximised due to ensure economies of scale
- Allocation takes place using database functions rather than manually
- Parents are notified at same time of the outcome of their late applications
- Late applications are now processed several months earlier than previous years allowing more time for school transport to be arranged, schools to have accurate numbers on new intake, longer time for school transition events

Digitalisation

The team has continued to embrace new technology to ensure their work is as efficient as possible, that parents can contact the team and submit applications electronically and that the team can share data with schools/academies and other agencies safely and electronically. The benefits of adopting such technology allows the team to minimise printing/postage, respond to queries swiftly and communicate application outcomes as soon as possible.

Verification of addresses

Since early 2016, the team has collaborated with the Corporate Fraud Team to identify and investigate fraudulent school place applications. In a few instances, this has led to the offer of a place being withdrawn and reoffered to the rightful applicant. The response from schools and parents from this has been welcomed; feedback has included a greater level of confidence in the allocation of school places, a visibly fair and consistent approach to fraudulent applications and a clear route for concerned parties to confidentially report suspected fraudulent applications.

10. Summary

The School Admissions Team delivers value for money for schools and parents. In the 2017 admission rounds over 95% of applications were received on time and 94% of parents were allocated a place at their first preference school. For Starting School admissions in 2017 **Central Bedfordshire Council came 5th in all Local Authorities in England** in allocating parents their first preference school, and for secondary and upper rounds came 15th.

In addition to being reactive to national developments and embracing new ways of working, the School Admissions Team has been very responsive to local demands such as academies and schools who wish to change their age range. In the last few years this has been centred around the Dunstable and Houghton Regis area and currently involves a number of schools in Sandy. This has increased complexity within the admissions process and impacted on the team's work providing additional support to parents, academies and schools to ensure the admissions process is effective and transition arrangements are robust.

The effectiveness of the School Admissions Team continues to be recognised by non-maintained schools who continue to purchase support from them as part of the teams buy back offer as well as the effective coordination of admissions across the authority. Currently the team is fully utilised and continues to perform strongly, despite the growth of school place requirements inevitably putting increased demands on the team. The capacity of the team will need to be closely monitored to ensure an effective service is maintained as additional capacity will be required as the demand for school places continues to grow – with over 9,500 new school places anticipated over the next 5 years.

Appendix – Statutory duties that the School Admissions Team fulfils

School Admissions Code (2014), School Admissions Appeal Code (2012), School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

- Local Authorities must publish online a composite prospectus for parents by 12 September in the offer year which contain the admission arrangements and any supplementary information forms for each of the state funded schools in the local authority area to which parents can apply. The information within this prospectus must be kept up to date throughout the period in which parents apply.
- Local Authorities must produce an annual co-ordinated scheme for the normal admissions round within their area.
- Parents must apply to their home local authority in the normal admissions round (point of entry applications).
- Local Authorities must provide a common application form for parents to make their application for the normal admissions round.
- Home Local Authority must then pass information on to other local authorities about applications for schools in their area.
- The offer of school places must be made by the home local authority.
- Where a place is available for a child at more than one school the home local authority must ensure that child is offered a place at whichever is the highest preference.
- If the Local Authority is unable to offer a place at one of the parent's preferred schools it must offer a place at a school which has places available
- The admission authority must maintain a clear, fair and objective waiting list for unsuccessful applicants (for Community and VC schools this is the Council).
- Local Authorities must, on request, provide information to a parent about the places still available within its area.
- Local Authorities must refer an objection to the Schools Adjudicator if they are of the view or suspect that the admission arrangements that have been determined by other admission authorities are unlawful.
- Local Authorities must produce an annual report on the admissions for all the schools in their area for which they coordinate admissions to be published locally and sent to the Schools Adjudicator by 30 June following the admissions round.
- Where a school or academy is to be closed, the local authority must collaborate with all schools in their area to consider the best ways to secure provision for children in other local schools.
- When a local authority informs a parent of the decision to refuse their child a place at a school for which they have applied, it must include the reason why the admission was refused and information on their right to appeal and details of this process.