

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE SCHOOLS FORUM

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School Admissions Annual Report 2019/20

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This report relates to a decision that is Non-Key

Purpose of this report

To provide an overview of the performance of the School Admissions Team during the 2018/19 academic year and seek approval for the 2019/20 continued funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Forum is asked to:

- 1. Approve the continuation for 2019/20 of the Dedicated Schools Grant funding to the School Admissions Service in Central Bedfordshire, as is the case in most LA's across the country at £313,004. This is the same rate as in 2018/19.**
- 2. Note the annual report provided to 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.**

Duty

1. School Admissions is a statutory service which is primarily funded through the Dedicated Schools Grant. The breakdown below shows the sources of funding for 2018/19:
 - 86% from Dedicated Schools Grant funding (£313,004)
 - 14% from traded services income (£52,336)

Service

2. 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 125 mainstream schools in Central Bedfordshire.
3. Since 2013 the pupil population in Central Bedfordshire has increased by 15%; from 34,749 in January 2013 to approximately 40,835 in January 2018. Total pupil numbers are expected to rise further by approximately 9,700 to 49,700 pupils in 2023.
4. 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.
5. 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 paragraph 23.

In Year admissions during the 2018/19 academic year

6. 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.

Point of entry admissions – 2018 intake

7. For the 2018 school 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	3,675	93%	96%
Transfer to Middle	2,357	97%	96%
Transfer to Secondary	851	90%	92%
Transfer to Upper	1,976	96%	95%
Total/Average	9,132	94%	93%

In addition to the applications from Central Bedfordshire residents above, the team also allocated 688 school places to applicants from outside Central Bedfordshire.

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
- Logging applications, exchanging applicable applications with other LAs and providing applications to schools and academies (via SAM)
- Allocating places (ensuring pupils receive only one offer of a school place)
- Producing and sending decision letters (email or post) 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
- Verifying addresses stated on application forms 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.

8. 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 2019 intake 74% of these schools/academies are delegating their responsibility to the School Admissions Team through the buyback service.

Appeals

9. 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.

Admission Arrangements

10. 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.
11. 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.
12. 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.

Service improvements during the last year

13. 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 year demonstrate this commitment to providing a customer focused, effective and fair admissions system:

14. Utilizing online application system more effectively

During the last year the team has utilized the following enhancements of the online application system to increase the efficiency of the team in processing in year applications and provide a faster service for parents

- Online in year applications are imported into the database, without the need for manual logging by officers
- Late applicants are now able to make their application online, whereas previously these were made on a paper application which then had to be manually logged
- Decision letters and other correspondence is sent to applicants via secure online portal where possible, rather than through post
- Applicants can upload supporting documents (e.g. proof of address/DOB, supplementary forms) as part of their application rather than sending these separately via email or post. These are imported directly into the database rather than requiring manual logging by the team.

15. Starting School 2019 promotion

As part of the team's promotion strategy to raise awareness of the Starting School admission round for parents of pupils starting Reception Year in September 2019, the team is trialing a new method of communication. Information packs have been created and via the NHS, have been posted to all households in Central Bedfordshire where a child due to start school in September 2019 is registered with a GP to that address. The team are also building closer links with the Council's Early Years department to utilize networks with Early Years providers to promote the round to parents and carers.

Demand in the current academic year (2018/19)

16. In addition to the team's usual demands as stated within the report, the team will have an increased workload due to the known following situations;

- Closure of Sandye Place Academy in August 2019
- Possible closure of Shelton Lower School (although this is no longer taking place)
- Opening of Pix Brook Academy in September 2019

17. The closure of an academy in the authority has required the team to provide advice and support for parents in making applications for their children to transfer following the closure of the school as well as processing these additional applications in a timely manner to ensure robust transitions can be in place between the closing school and their local schools.

18. Although the closure of Shelton Lower School is no longer taking place, the proposed closure brought additional work for the School Admissions Team including answering queries from affected parents and processing applications for alternative school places.

19. Pix Brook Academy is a free school which will be an extended secondary academy (Years 5-11) and is due to open in September 2019 with a Year 5 intake, as part of the Transfer to Middle 2019 admission round. As the Secretary of State has not yet entered a funding agreement with the academy trust which will run the free school, applications for the school cannot be processed as part of the Local Authority's coordinated scheme and only provisional offers can be made for the academy. This will require parents to make a Transfer to Middle 2019 application as normal, for existing schools/academies, and then submit a separate application should they want their child to be considered for a place at Pix Brook Academy. This will require the team to make further contact with applicants once the funding agreement has been signed to finalize their applications, and until then processing these applications in tandem.

Council Priorities

20. The School Admissions Team supports the Council's priority of improving education and skills in that it enables a transparent and effective service processing school place applications for Central Bedfordshire families to minimize the disruption of children transferring schools.

21. The team is also continuously seeking improvements to the service for customers, by maximizing digital opportunities for parents using the service, as well as ensuring processes are as streamlined as possible. The team regularly reviews the processes and information available to customers to ensure it is responsive to local and national changes in the educational landscape.

Legal Implications

22. 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.

Financial and Risk Implications

23. Similar to all other local authorities the Schools Admissions team is totally funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant, approved by the Schools Forum.
24. To maintain the quality of the service, Schools Forum are asked to approve the total funding for 2019/20 of the Schools Admission Team. This is at £313,004, supplemented by an additional income source from the buyback service operated by the team. This is set at the same rate as 2018/19, with no increase.
25. The service provided by the team is a statutory requirement and the risk of not funding the service means parents and carers will not have a coordinated admissions process leading to confusion and children with no school places.

Equalities Implications

26. Public authorities have a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and to foster good relations in respect of the following protected characteristics: age, disability, gender re-assignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
27. This statutory duty includes requirements to:
 - i. Remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics.
 - ii. Take steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people.

iii. Encourage people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low.

28. The proposal is not envisaged to have an adverse impact on any of the listed groups below: -

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| ▪ Sex | N/A |
| ▪ Gender Reassignment | N/A |
| ▪ Age | Parents and carers will have access to apply for school places |
| ▪ Disability | N/A |
| ▪ Race & Ethnicity | N/A |
| ▪ Sexual Orientation | N/A |
| ▪ Religion or Belief (or No Belief) | N/A |
| ▪ Pregnancy & Maternity | N/A |
| ▪ Human Rights | N/A |
| ▪ Other Groups (rural isolation etc) | N/A |

Conclusion and next Steps

29. The School Admissions Team delivers value for money for schools and parents. In the 2018 admission rounds 94% of applications were received on time and 93% of parents were allocated a place at their first preference school. The Department for Education's scorecard published in May 2018 for Central Bedfordshire Council shows that the authority had 99.3% of applicants to secondary schools receiving one of their top three preferences, compared to the national average of 94.6%. For primary applications this was 98.6% against a national average of 97.2%.

30. 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 year this has been centered around the Sandy cluster. 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.

31. The effectiveness of the School Admissions Team continues to be recognized 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 utilized 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.

Appendices

None

Background Papers

None

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