

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE  
SCHOOL ADMISSIONS FORUM  
HELD ON 11 JANUARY 2017 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.15 PM**

**Councillors**

Richard Dolinski

Beth Rowland

**Diocesan Representatives**

David Babb

Church of England Diocesan Representative

**Representatives from the Local Community**

Patricia Cuss

Early Years Forum

**Schools Representatives**

Sue Runciman

Shinfield St Marys Junior School

Celia Thatcher

Grazeley CE Aided Primary

**Also Present**

Luciane Bowker

Democratic Services Officer

Piers Brunning

Service Manager, Policy, Strategy and Partnerships

**1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN**

David Babb was elected Chairman of School Admissions Forum for the remainder of 2016/17 academic year.

**2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIRMAN**

Beth Rowland was appointed Vice-Chairman of School Admissions Forum for the remainder of 2016/17 academic year.

**3. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were submitted from Ben Godber, Edward Hunter and Nicci Morris.

Councillor Beth Rowland, Vice-Chairman asked for clarification on the membership status of members who had not attended the last three meetings of the Forum. Luciane Bowker, Senior Democratic Services Officer explained that the School Admissions Forum was a non-statutory consultative Forum, therefore it was up to the Forum to decide the rules around its own membership.

After a brief discussion it was agreed that Luciane would contact the relevant members and ask if they wished to continue taking part in the Forum. If necessary Luciane would attempt to recruit new members to the Forum.

**4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 2 November 2016 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**5. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**6. SCHOOL ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS 2018/19**

Piers Brunning, Service Manager Policy, Strategy and Partnerships presented the School Admissions Arrangements 2018/19 report which was set out in agenda papers 11-20. The various appendixes displayed in the agenda were also presented by Piers.

Piers explained that the proposed school admission arrangements for 2018/19 were currently under consultation, this consultation would run until 31 January 2017. Piers stated that the Council was responsible for setting the school admissions arrangements for community and voluntary controlled schools. Individual governing bodies were responsible for setting the admission arrangements for the nine voluntary aided schools and the nine academy/free schools in the Borough.

Piers informed the Forum that there were only four main changes from the previous arrangements. Piers expected that as and when a new School Admissions Code was issued more changes would be necessary.

Piers went through the proposed changes to the arrangements:

- 1) *That the designated area of Loddon Primary School be extended to include that of Aldryngton Primary School.*
- 2) *That the designated area of Whiteknights Primary School be extended to include that of Radstock Primary School.*

Piers explained that historically the Council had been unable to offer places at Radstock and Aldryngton Primary Schools to some children living in the designated areas of those schools. Amending the designated areas as proposed would give families living in the current Radstock and Aldryngton designated areas additional priority for another local school.

In addition, Piers stated that although there was a proposal for the expansion of Aldryngton Primary School, this would not be determined by the date at which the admissions arrangements must be determined. The arrangements for Radstock and Aldryngton schools would remain unchanged.

Piers stated that Whiteknights Primary School was more popular with Reading parents than with Wokingham parents. These changes would enable more parents to secure a place for their children in a local school.

The following comments were made in respect of these proposals:

- Members of the Forum generally thought that this was a good idea and stated that most schools in Wokingham were either good or outstanding;
- Members felt that the explanatory notes were very helpful;
- In response to a question Piers confirmed that local ward Members had been informed of the proposals;
- Councillor Rowland emphasized that it was important to publicise this change so that parents were aware of it when filling in their application forms and expressing their preferences;
- Councillor Dolinski was supportive of the changes as it extended parental choice.

- 3) *That the community are invited to consider wording to make it more difficult for owner occupiers to game the admissions arrangements of popular schools by moving temporarily to their designated areas.*

Piers explained that this was an attempt to address the issue of families 'gaming' the admissions process by moving temporarily to addresses close to popular schools intending to move back to their permanent homes outside the designated areas once their child had started school. Piers stated that this was not fraud (such as a claim to live at an address while actually living elsewhere) and fraud was already dealt with under existing arrangements.

The following comments were made during the discussion of this proposal:

- David Babb pointed out that it was cheaper for families to pay for temporary rental accommodation than to pay for many years of private education. Therefore, many middle class families were prepared to incur such costs;
- Sue Runciman was interested to know which circumstances would raise suspicion;
- Piers informed that this often involved families that owned properties quite some distance from the school. Piers stated that this was an attempt to put every family on the same level of opportunity when applying for a school place; it was not aimed at disadvantaging families that rented;
- In response to a question Piers stated that this issue was more evident with admissions to primary schools, due to the fact that the designated areas are much smaller for primary schools than secondary schools' designated areas. However, Piers believed that the same issue happened to some degree with secondary school admissions;
- David Babb stated that often these issues came to light when other parents informed school admissions; it was important to look at ways to stop people trying to manipulate the system;
- David stated that local knowledge was very useful and that no system would be completely fool proof;
- It was clarified that maintained schools do not get involved in the school admissions process;
- Sue Runciman stated that due to changes in the assessment criteria the schools' results were changing. She questioned if it was possible to anticipate which schools would be oversubscribed reflecting their results. Piers stated that the majority of schools in Wokingham were good and that schools that were doing well were likely to be oversubscribed;
- Piers explained that he intended to use the expression 'habitual address' rather than 'permanent address' in an effort to better describe the living arrangements of people who were renting;
- Sue Runciman expressed concern with the wording as in her opinion the vast majority of people made genuine attempts to obtain a school place in their preferred school. Sue was worried the wording might intimidate some people;
- Most members were in favour of this proposal and were interested to receive a report in the future about the impact of this change in the admissions process.

- 4) *That where processes are referred to these are made fully electronic (removing any formal reliance on paper systems) in accordance with the Lean principles underpinning the transfer of admissions arrangements to Customer Services.*

Piers explained that most applications were already received electronically; most people were used to doing many transactions online in their daily lives. Piers stated that families that could not use online systems would be supported by Wokingham Borough Council's customer services team.

During the discussion of the item the following points were made:

- Sue Runciman was concerned that a move to a completely electronic system would further disadvantage Pupil Premium children. In her experience children who were entitled to Pupil Premium often did not have internet at home. Sue informed that due to social expectations these families were reluctant to come forward to ask for help. Sue pointed out that the South East of England had a bad record with Pupil Premium children not making the expected progress; she believed this proposal would make it even more difficult for those families. Sue worried that if those families were not able to complete their forms they may be allocated a school that was far from their home address and given the circumstances these families were likely not to own a car, making it very difficult for the children to attend school;
- Sue felt it was important to still keep the option of a paper application for certain families;
- Patricia Cuss suggested that Children's Centres may be able to help people filling in their forms;
- Councillor Rowland suggested that the children that were likely to need help could be identified by Early Years;
- Piers stated that it was not sustainable for the Council to continue with paper forms;
- Sue stated that it was worth finding out from schools which families did not have access to the internet;
- David Babb stated that for some families there was also a language barrier. David believed that Children's Centres, libraries and Early Year's settings were equipped to help families if necessary;
- Councillor Dolinski believed that a move to an electronic system was unavoidable, and as with any new initiatives it was likely that there would be some issues initially;
- David Babb stated that problems could occur when schools helped parents to fill in forms. He had witnessed school admission appeals where this had been an issue resulting in parents winning the appeal;
- Councillor Rowland felt it was important that Members were aware of this change as often Members were asked to help residents;
- Sue stated that it was important to have different systems in place in order to meet people's needs. Sue believed that disadvantaged families would need friendly, known faces to help them.

In response to a question Piers explained that the electronic form would always contain the same basic questions, even if the layout was updated.

After much debate Members asked to receive a report after the first year of implementation of the fully electronic application process, reflecting on the effects of this change.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) The School Admissions Forum supports the implementation of the proposed changes to the school admission arrangements for 2018/19;

- 2) A report containing details of the effects of the changes be brought to the Forum after its first year of implementation.

## **7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

### **Early Years Admissions**

Piers asked the Forum for their views in relation to Early Years admissions. David Babb stated that it was usual for Local Authorities to set the criteria for its own maintained nurseries, but for the schools to administer the admission arrangements. Academies could set their own admission arrangements.

Patricia Cuss informed that Ambleside Centre had concerns over the current timeframe of their admissions arrangements. Ambleside felt disadvantaged in relation to other Early Years providers in that they were only able to offer places to parents in February. They expressed the intention to write their own admissions policy.

Patricia stated that it was becoming increasingly difficult to offer places in Hare Hatch, she believed that other providers were facing the same difficulties. She had not started considering the offer of 30 hours a week as there were uncertainties around the funding for the additional hours. Patricia stated that it was difficult to plan without knowing exactly what funding would be available.

Piers Brunning recognised that there issues around the funding arrangements for the extra 15 hours a week of childcare. Piers stated that he would undertake further investigations before formulating a proposal to be submitted to Executive.

David Babb clarified that the Early Years policy did not follow the same timescales as the primary and secondary schools policies, so there was time to investigate further.

### **Timing of entry to primary education**

Sue Runciman raised the issue of loss of funding where parents take up a place at a school but decide to defer it until the child reaches compulsory school age.

Piers stated that Wokingham Borough Council's policy had to adhere to the national guidelines; therefore it was not possible to change this parental right.

David Babb stated that this issue was raised with DfE and it was expected that the new code would address it.

### **Waiting lists**

Sue Runciman felt that the wording needed to made clearer for parents to understand that they would have to apply every year to keep their child's name on the waiting list. Piers would look at strengthening the wording around waiting lists.

### **Net capacity**

Celia Thatcher stated that the net capacity number for Grazeley CE Primary needed updating and Piers agreed to change it.

Piers explained that the net capacity for maintained schools had to be measured in a certain prescribed way and explained how the calculations were made.

### **Consultation**

Sue Runciman informed that she wished to propose changes to the admissions criteria for Shinfield St Mary's Junior School to remove the church category. However, she had missed the deadline for this year's consultation period. It was her intention to put forward the proposal for this amendment, with the support of the governors of the school.

David Babb stated that the Church of England Diocese recommended that schools should not have a church criterion in their school admissions policies. However, it was up to schools to decide. David informed that initially church schools had been set up to offer education to the poor in the community. David pointed out that the Catholic Diocese held a different view on this.

### **Reports to Forum**

Members asked that papers be circulated in more advance to allow time for reading and preparation for the meeting.