

<b>TITLE</b>	School Admissions Report
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<b>FOR INFORMATION</b>	Schools Forum
<b>DATE</b>	28 <sup>th</sup> June 2018

## **SUMMARY**

Update and common trends around School Admissions over the last academic year.

## **1. Purpose of the Report**

The purpose of this report is to provide members of the Schools Forum with an overview of the work of the school admissions service over the last 12 months. The report identifies the activity delivered to address the challenges facing the service and seeks School Forum approval to fund the function. The budget was reduced from £304k in 2017/18 to £289k in 2018/19. The team were working with reduced team members due to the ongoing 21<sup>st</sup> Century restructure and the need to hold vacant posts during the transition. Following the restructure, this saving has remained and no new posts have been created, however resilience for front line customer interactions will be maintained. The team forms part of the Customer and Locality Services directorate.

As Wokingham continues to be rated one of the best places to live in Britain there will always be a demand for school places. In processing applications, the school admission team are responsible for validating and processing all applications. The team adheres to strict deadlines, documented within the Wokingham Borough Council published admission arrangements, set in line with the statutory governance of the School Admissions Code. This includes in year applications from parents from outside the Borough and validation of data from other authorities in respect of main cyclical processes.

Admission authorities must set their admission arrangements annually, following public consultation, and once determined publish them. These enforce the guidelines that the team must adhere to. This includes the main cyclical processes for Entry to Primary, Infant to Junior and Primary to Secondary Schools, as well as in year applications and, where any application is refused, the subsequent appeals process. This responsibility is currently discharged by the WBC Strategy and Commissioning Team (Place), who act as senior specialists and set direction, leading on admissions arrangements, providing advice on

admission policies and respond to Government Agency information requests. The long term arrangements for holding these responsibilities are subject to ongoing review.

School admissions needs to work closely with this team, sharing knowledge and seeking advice and guidance when necessary. The Senior Specialist within Strategy and Commissioning and Lead Officer Governor Services are involved in the co-creation of guides for parents.

All admission decisions must comply with the School Admissions Code and the team is trained to provide advice and guidance in respect of current Government legislation to parents, schools and Council colleagues who provide support.

## **2. Report Summary**

The school admissions service has continued to meet a range of challenges driven by the nature and level of its work, particularly in relation to in-year admissions, fair access and appeals. This has been exacerbated by the shortage of places in some year groups and with the increasing demands of parents.

When school admissions moved across to Customer Service in 2017, a review was undertaken of all school admissions processes, workload, technology and resources. Improvements across all areas were implemented and as a result, the service has become more efficient. The admissions team now structurally sits within, and forms part of, the wider Customer and Locality Services directorate. This enables the team to maximise support and resilience, using the skills of a customer management function who deal with initial customer interactions. The aim is to resolve as many questions and queries at first point of contact as possible. The service can be contacted via the telephone, web chat, face to face or email, with support provided from the admissions team for more complex enquiries, especially those in respect of the legal framework or prescribed published timelines.

In 2017 (Jan-Dec) the customer services team dealt with 6315 calls, 626 web chats and 220 emails, for school admissions. Before school admissions joined customer services, they were receiving around 20,000 calls per annum. Most of these were repeat callers trying to get through to busy phone lines. At that time, the team could only answer 9500 of these calls, and did not have the ability to offer alternative contact channels such as web chat.

By partnering with the wider customer service team has meant a significant increase in the school admissions team's ability to deal with applications, and continue to make allocations within statutory timescales. Further improvements and efficiencies have been:

- Upgraded technology allowing customers to apply online, at a time and place that suits them (ensuring that this is a safe and secure service)
- Families receiving their offers online, which can also be accepted online
- Auto acknowledgement emails sent to families confirming receipt of applications

- Reduction in print costs, signposting families to online information wherever possible i.e. parent guides
- Emailing correspondence, such as offers thus reducing the number of paper responses
- Some automated checking, saving time for the team
- Process efficiency has led to a reduction in team members, leading to cost savings – albeit increasing demands in other work such as in-year applications and appeals, are now impacting on the capacity of the reduced resources to deal

There has also been some development of a new fair access protocol. This is critical to improving the in-year admissions process for some of the most vulnerable and challenging children, improving the effectiveness of the fair access system, improving relationships with schools and supporting compliance to the School Admissions Code. This area is a priority for the wider education system.

Further improvement and modernisation is required, over the next 12 months, which will include a review of the production of parent guides, traded services, review of back office technology, back office processes and re-design of the team structure in line with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century reorganisation.

### **3. Introduction & Background**

The School Admissions team provides the following key functions:

- Primary & Secondary normal admissions round
- Infant to Junior normal admissions round
- In-year admissions
- Fair Access and Vulnerable Pupil Protocol support
- Managed Moves Liaison
- Appeals
- Pupil tracking

There were 56 on-time bulk secondary appeals in 2018 which was an increase from 24 in 2017. This does not include the figures for Oakbank or Bohunt (who now present at their own appeals), or for St. Crispin's who now use Brackell Forest Council to support their appeals. More appeals were actually withdrawn or settled which was partly due to Bohunt school's appeals all being allowed at Stage 1 and the fluidity of movement after the main allocation. As all parents refused a place at a preferred school are able to appeal for multiple maintained or certain academy schools, we cannot predict either the demand or regularity of appeals, but trained staff will need to be available should the need arise as this is a legal requirement of the Local Authority.

*A summary of appeals outcomes for 2017 can be seen in appendix 1.*

The number of 2018 primary bulk appeals at 24 being lodged is the same as last year. This is despite the decrease in the birth population and space

availability across the local authority, so represents the demands of the parents within and outside the Borough to secure a preferred school place.

Any level of appeals puts additional pressure on the service, including its ability to meet statutory deadlines. The present level will be a challenge to sustain within the current arrangements as limited team members are trained and experienced in presenting appeals. As demand for our Traded Services increases, so does the demand to present at appeals for academy schools/trusts. Without the right level of resource we may be unable to continue generating increasing funds, whilst building relationships with the schools/academies to support their admissions and appeals functions.

In-year admission activity amounted to 1690 applications in 2017/2018 and we have also processed 1171 applications up to the end of May 2018 - not taking into account our busiest period from June until the beginning of September. Evidence in Wokingham and neighbouring authorities suggests these figures include an increased number of families moving to the areas from abroad. This will put additional pressure on both schools and the school admissions service to deliver on statutory obligations.

#### Secondary Transfer September 2018 intake – offers as at 1 March 2018

2790 applications processed for children living in the Borough or residing elsewhere transferring to secondary school in 2018 (the majority expressed four preferences that were validated by the team)

2001 places were allocated at Wokingham schools - of which:

95% applications were made on-line (3.1% increase on the previous year)

1631 (81.51%) were offered their first preferred school

1944 (97.15%) were offered one of their preferred schools

#### Reception 2018 intake – offers as at 18 April 2018

2155 parent/carers submitted an application requesting a reception place for their child for September 2018. (the majority expressed four preferences that were all validated by the team)

87.57% applications were made on-line

1885 (90.23%) were offered their first preferred school

2074 (99.23%) were offered one of their preferred schools

## Infant to Junior 2018 intake – offers as at 18 April 2018

582 allocations were made for a place in a junior school for September 2018

88.8% applications were made on-line

574 (98.63%) were offered their first preferred school

580 (99.66%) were offered one of their preferred schools.

Checks, balances and validation are required to ensure that all requests are dealt with fairly and effectively, with any misleading applications identified promptly. Four senior officers are trained to present at appeals. These are becoming more complex and time consuming in view of limited place availability in some areas/year groups. The team also answers e-mails in respect of admission enquiries which require knowledge of all the legislation and published admission arrangements. The number received by the team varies each month and is recorded by the Customer and Locality Service - *appendix 1*. The highest number per month recorded this year was in March 2018 when the team in-box received 2427 e-mails. This does not include those enquiries made to individual team members, from other Council departments, or from Local Authority Members seeking advice for their constituents.

The purpose of the Fair Access Protocol is to ensure that outside the normal admissions round, children without school places, especially the most vulnerable, are admitted to a suitable school as quickly as possible. The protocol is triggered when an eligible child has not secured a school place under in-year admission procedures. In 2017/18, the Lead Officer dealt with 8 referrals (7 primary and 1 secondary). This figure is subject to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable students but statistics may change as a result of the implementation of the new Fair Access Protocol and how it is applied/operated by the schools and Local Authority.

It is imperative that school admissions fulfils the statutory admissions service for parents and all schools in accordance with the School Admissions and School Admissions Appeals Codes. Own admission authority schools (academies/free schools) may participate (as determined in school admission policies) in elements of the admissions process as part of the Traded Services Agreement. This includes:

- Acting on behalf of the school at appeal
- Advice and guidance on admission arrangements
- Allocation services (transfer group and in-year)
- Monitoring of wait lists and subsequent allocations
- Distance routines/validation checks/council tax checks

In providing this service, we liaise closely with schools to ensure we provide a timely and quality driven service, delivering a process that is fair whilst using specialist admissions software. This saves school staff time and ensures that such school are compliant with the School Admissions Code. The traded services fees generated for 2017 amounted to £16,051.35, which is above the figure of £14,170 forecast for the

year. With new multi academy trusts evolving, it was anticipated that with team members and systems to support, more funds could be generated, however there is a risk that this may no longer be the case moving forward due to the pressure on the teams capacity.

#### **4. Service Modernisation and Improvement**

The service requires a focus on back office technological improvements to meet the range of team challenges that have arisen over the last two years. The team is now smaller than two years ago. There will be a first point of contact team in the new operating model, (Customer Management) who will continue taking these interactions to support the operational activities surrounding admissions to ensure they are completed within the published deadlines. Any improvements were not because of the move to Customers Services – e-mail volume continues to be high as customer service staff are unable to answer complexity of enquiries.

#### **5. National and Statutory Context**

All school admission services make an important contribution to the safeguarding of children and young people by ensuring that every child is offered a school place. Wokingham and other local authorities track children who are out of school because their parent/carer has refused a school place, and take appropriate action. Good working relationships with Education Welfare, Special Educational Needs Team, Fair Access Panel and our Virtual Head for Looked After and Previously Looked After Children, as well as our schools, allow us to support the most vulnerable students in the Borough.

The admission service provides and supports the provision of a range of statutory requirements as identified within the Schools Admission Code 2014. It should be read alongside the School Admission Appeal Code and other guidance as this law affects all admissions and admission appeals in England. The Code imposes mandatory requirements and includes guidelines setting out aims, objectives and other matters in relation to the discharge of functions relating to admissions by the bodies listed below:

- a) **Admission authority of maintained schools** as defined in Section 88 (1) (a) and (b) of the SSFA 1998
- b) **Governing bodies and local authorities (when not admission authorities)**
- c) **School Adjudicators**
- d) **Admission Appeal Panels**

These bodies have a statutory duty to act in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Code.

All Academy Schools (including those that are Free Schools), University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools are required by their funding agreements to comply with the Code and the law relating to admissions.

It is the responsibility of admission authorities to ensure that admission arrangements are fair and compliant with this Code. Where a school is the admission authority, this responsibility falls to the governing body or Academy Trust.

The table below identifies the types of school with related governance and admission authorities.

<b>Type of school</b>	<b>Who is the Admission Authority</b>	<b>Who deals with complaints and arrangements?</b>	<b>Who is responsible for arranging/providing for an appeal against refusal of a place at a school?</b>
Academies	Academy Trust	School Adjudicator	Academy Trust
Community Schools	Local Authority	School Adjudicator	Local Authority
Foundation Schools	Governing Body	School Adjudicator	Governing body
Voluntary aided schools	Governing Body	School Adjudicator	Governing body
Voluntary controlled schools	Local Authority	School Adjudicator	Local Authority

It is difficult to find an accurate benchmark to present, as there are significant variations between local authority structures, policy, number of schools and allocation mechanism. Even when compared to our statistical neighbours, this does not give a like for like comparison when analysing data from school admissions functions.

Wokingham does have a high level of demand for school places in relation to its size, with many families moving to the area to secure school places in schools with “Good” or “Outstanding” Ofsted ratings. Most importantly, it has taken pride in the past in delivering an admissions service that other authorities have used as an example of “good practice”.

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