

TOPIC GROUP REVIEW OF CASUAL ADMISSIONS

Report of the Director of Children Schools and Families

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1. Purpose of the Report

To advise the Scrutiny Committee on the recommendations of the Scrutiny Topic Group following their further review of secondary and primary casual admissions in the light of the new Code of Practice on Admissions.

2. Summary

The aims of the scrutiny were to review and scrutinise the casual admissions process in respect of children moving into Hertfordshire or within the county and to consider:

- a. concerns expressed by parents and schools about the current process; and
- b. alternative approaches to the casual admissions process, which might be beneficial to children, parents and schools

3. Conclusions

The Committee is invited to consider recommendations proposed by the Scrutiny Topic Group.

1. Background

- 1.1 Hertfordshire County Council introduced the current casual admission arrangements for secondary schools in March 2001, in response to the need for a co-ordinated approach to ensuring that children of compulsory school age who move into or within the county were allocated a school place. The allocation system runs every two weeks and processes all new and existing applications on the continuing interest list for community and voluntary controlled secondary schools.
- 1.2 Prior to 2001, the parents of children of secondary school age, moving into the county and requiring a school place, approached schools directly. Concerns were expressed by parents who were unhappy with the length of time it was taking for them to identify and obtain a school place for their child, and the fact that admission rules were not used.
- 1.3 Places are now allocated according to the published admission rules and headteachers are required to contact the parents of children who are allocated by this process within 5 days of the allocation date.
- 1.4 In the year following September 2001, 1159 casual admission applications for secondary schools were received.
- 1.5 The benefits of the process (Appendix 1) introduced in March 2001 were that :
 - a. It provides a single point of contact for parents moving into Hertfordshire when they are looking for a suitable school.
 - b. It speeds up the allocation process for children moving into the county.
 - c. It provides transparency and consistency through the application of admission rules.
 - d. Data is collected to monitor trends and pressure points across the county.
- 1.6 Although benefits have accrued, a number of concerns have been raised by parents and secondary schools about the casual admission arrangements.
 - a. Frustration at not being able to secure a school place for their child close to their home. The result is that children can often be transported out of their area, which can affect their ability to integrate fully into their new school and places pressure on the transport budget. This is often the result of places having to be offered to others who are on the continuing interest list for the school, but already attend another school in the area. The offer is often turned down by the parents of the established pupil, but cannot be offered to another pupil until the fortnightly process runs again. This can result in a place at a popular school remaining vacant for several weeks. This problem could be resolved through the recommendation set out in 3.1.c.

- b. Frustration at not being able to secure a place in a school that they really want for their child. In these circumstances, parents lodge appeals for alternative schools. This too is often the result of popular school places remaining vacant whilst the admission rules are applied each fortnight to the continuing interest list. Pupils without a Hertfordshire school place have to be allocated a place immediately and cannot wait until the casual admissions process runs. This problem could be resolved through the recommendation set out in 3.1.c.
 - c. The length of time taken to admit a child into school after submitting a completed casual admission application. This can make integration problematical and increases the disruption to a child's education. This problem could be resolved through the recommendation set out in 3.1.c.
 - d. The difficulty of matching subjects and meeting the needs of children at Key Stage 4. Discussions have taken place with HASSH with a view to developing a process where the best local curriculum match could be achieved.
 - e. A feeling by schools that challenging children admitted via the casual admissions route are not being fairly distributed. This makes it far more difficult for those schools who admit high numbers of children through casual admissions to channel their resources as well as they would like to ensure successful integration. This particular issue has been considered by the Achievement Panel and was not part of the remit of the Topic Group.
 - f. That schools can sometimes be called upon to admit over their standard numbers, so problems arise from the pressures of overcrowding in schools. This issue is not easily resolved since it is not likely that there will ever be sufficient places at the most popular schools to meet parental demand. This having been said, CSF's planning ensures that there are sufficient places locally to meet needs.
 - g. Sometimes children remain out of school for four weeks whilst they await an appeal hearing. This problem could be resolved through the recommendation set out in 3.1.b.
- 1.7 The Topic Group met on four occasions to listen to the views of head teachers, parents and admissions staff, and on a further two occasions to consider the views of representative stakeholders in respect of the primary process.
- 1.8 Co-ordinated casual admission arrangements are not in place for primary school admissions. Children of primary school age moving into the county and requiring a school place are referred directly to the schools who will admit them if they have a spare place.
- 1.9 The Topic Group reported to the Scrutiny Committee on 16th October 2002, and was asked to reconsider recommendations in the light of the draft Code of Practice, which was received from the Department for Education and Skills earlier in the month.

- 1.10 The Topic Group reviewed its work in light of this development and considered the Code as laid before Parliament on 15 November. Furthermore, the Topic Group considered how well the unco-ordinated casual admission arrangements for primary schools were working, and listened to the views of parents, headteachers and officers.

2. Revisions to the School Admissions Code of Practice

- 2.1 The Code of Practice indicates a number of significant changes in the way that admissions processes operate within Hertfordshire and nationally. Sections 2.2 to 2.7 summarise the changes in the Code which are pertinent to the casual admissions process.
- 2.2 From January 2003 Admission Forums become mandatory with a defined membership and significantly enhanced role. Each Local Authority's Admission Forum will be required to advise on a range of important issues including co-ordinated casual admissions and local agreements. Once a Forum agrees and publishes advice, all local admission authorities are required to have regard to this advice.
- 2.3 Co-ordinated admission arrangements will be introduced from 2005 throughout the country, with LEAs required to co-ordinate admissions processes for all parents within their area. This will include the casual admissions process. There will be a requirement to pass the scheme to the admission forum for review, prior to consultation with all admitting authorities within the area.
- 2.4 A more significant change will be the requirement for a single application form for all children living in Hertfordshire whether or not they are seeking to transfer to a Hertfordshire school. There is currently no co-ordinated scheme for casual admissions, and all admitting authorities use their own form. The Admissions Forum will be required to consider this.
- 2.5 The duty on local authorities to secure the educational placement for children taken into care within 20 school days is highlighted and it is recommended that priority should be given in admission arrangements to Looked After Children. The County Council's proposed admission rules for community and voluntary controlled schools from 2003 emphasise priority for Looked After Children under Rule 2, which will ensure that this requirement can be met.
- 2.6 The Code clarifies that parents will have the right to express a preference for a place for their child in any school. This will require the County Council to widen co-ordination to include neighbouring LEAs and admitting authorities in other LEA areas. This should mean that in future certain children do not hold on to more than one offer of a school place, and should help to speed up the casual admissions process and ensure that places at popular schools with vacancies are maximised.

- 2.7 The circumstances listed in the current Code where schools may refuse to admit a challenging child have been added to. They will include Fresh Start Schools, those subject to formal warning notice and secondary schools where less than 25% of the pupils are achieving 5 or more GCSEs at A-C. This will require the LEA to review its casual admissions policy and is likely to lead to a wider distribution of casual admissions, which will also include schools that are already at their admission limit. This would add to the pressure on popular schools, identified in 1.6.f.
- 2.8 The Code suggests that, whilst there is not a requirement to maintain waiting lists, it is reasonable to maintain a waiting list until a month or so after the admission date to fill places that may become available at the beginning of the school year. It emphasises the waiting list should be clear fair and objective, and should not raise undue expectations about the likelihood of being offered a place in due course.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 On the basis of the information provided to the Topic Group and the requirements of the Code of Practice, the following recommendations in respect of the procedures were agreed by the Topic Group:

Secondary schools

- a. The allocation process should be run when a place becomes available at a school, or when a request is received. The success of this change would depend on schools informing the LEA promptly when they have a vacancy.
- b. Standing Appeals Panels should be set up in each Quadrant to meet every four weeks and parents should be given the opportunity to waive their right to 2 weeks' notice of appeal. Parents should be informed in advance of the dates.
- c. As recommended by the Code of Practice, the newly constituted Admissions Forum should consider the issue of waiting lists. In particular it should consider whether a time limit of one term after the start of the academic year should be set for children remaining on the continuing interest list and that the letter to parents should explain clearly how the list was managed and should not raise expectations. This would ensure that children could still get the opportunity of securing places not taken up or vacated at the start of the year, without raising expectations unreasonably.
- d. The casual admissions form completed by parents should be redesigned in light of the requirements of the revised code of practice. This will ensure that schools have more information about a child and will ease integration.

- e. The timescale of casual admissions should be changed so that a school is given 10 days to put a child on roll, rather than 5 days to first see parents (Appendix 2). This will help to address the difficulties experienced by some children waiting a considerable time for an admission date, despite having visited a school.

Primary schools

The Topic Group felt that in respect of primary casual admissions primary schools should be consulted about the possibility of piloting a centrally co-ordinated admissions process within one or more areas of the county.

- 3.2 The Code requires admission arrangements (including casual admissions) to be considered by the Admissions Forum. It is proposed therefore that the above recommendations should be discussed by the Admissions Forum at its meeting of 27 February so that its comments can be taken into account by the Director of CSF when implementing the new arrangements.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 There would be financial implications in terms of additional staffing if a centrally co-ordinated admissions process for primary schools were to be introduced. It is not possible to quantify the exact impact, as data on the volume of casual admissions to primary schools is not currently collected centrally. In order to assess the cost associated with this, a survey of primary schools will be undertaken to determine the number of children admitted on a casual basis in the last academic year.

Background information referred to by the author:

DfES Consultation Document 0703/2002: September 2002: School Admissions and Appeals Codes of Practice and draft Regulations

Draft School Admissions Code of Practice, laid before Parliament under Section 85(3) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 on 15 November 2002.

Scrutiny Report: Topic Group Review of Casual Admissions 16 October 2002.