

SCHOOL ADMISSIONS REVIEW

Report of the Education and Children's Services
Scrutiny Sub-committee

April 2011



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1. Introduction and background

- 1.1 The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee decided to conduct a review on school admissions on 12 July 2010. The focus was on reviewing the clarity of information available alongside reviewing support networks to help parents negotiate the system.
- 1.2 The sub-committee chose this subject because of concerns about the complexity and about the ease with which parents and carers were able to negotiate the schools' admissions process. It was noted that even parents and carers with a lot of information could find the process stressful. It was particularly important to ensure that parents had the right information and support to make the best choices for their children and to minimize the difficulties involved.
- 1.3 The review's focus was a result of the sub-committee's interest in evidence which indicated that supporting parents had a major positive impact on their children's wellbeing and educational attainment. In the last administrative year the previous sub-committee had produced a report on the importance of parental involvement in children's education. This concluded that there should be an emphasis on enabling parents to have the skills, knowledge and confidence to help their children. Alongside this the sub-committee looked at a volunteer programme which demonstrated success in addressing child protection issues by using mentors to support parents. Members also held concerns that there was insufficient support for parents with children with disabilities.
- 1.4 This review is therefore part one of two reviews looking at parenting support. The second review will look at volunteer and peer support, with particular attention paid to support available for parents and carers of disabled children.

2. Context

- 2.1 School admissions are regulated through government legislation. The current School Admissions Code (the Code) came into force on 10 February 2010 and applies to admissions to all maintained schools. Academies are also required to adopt practices and arrangements that are in accordance with the Code and admissions law.
- 2.2 The Code sets out the regulations in place for management and implementation of school admission arrangements which includes:
 - i) Equity and fair access to school places and consultation
 - ii) Setting fair oversubscription criteria
 - iii) Coordination schemes for admission applications
 - iv) Referral of objections
 - v) Admissions forums
 - vi) Choice adviser service
 - vii) Support for parents and carers

- 2.3 Local authorities are responsible for coordinating and processing all primary, secondary and in-year admission applications to schools in their areas. Southwark processed 3725 primary and 4048 secondary applications for 2010/11 admissions and has received 292 in year applications from 1 September 2010 to date.
- 2.4 Parents and carers apply for places online or by completing a paper Common Application Form (CAF). Parents are able to apply for up to six schools of their preference; these must be listed in priority order. Many voluntary aided schools and some academies also require a supplementary information form to be completed which is used to rank all applicants in priority order against their published admissions criteria.
- 2.5 Local authorities have a duty to establish an Admissions Forum for their area with a membership that reflects the types of schools in the locality. The main focus of the Forum is to consider the fairness of admission arrangements in their local context. Southwark's Admissions Forum has the following ethos: *To consider and promote a fair and effective schools admission system which advances social equity and inclusion, serving the interests of local parents and children collectively.*
- 2.6 Local authorities are required to provide advice and assistance to all parents of children of all ages in their area to help them navigate the school admissions application process. This must be provided through an independent service that is focused on supporting the families who most need support. Southwark delivers this role through a School Preference Adviser (Choice Adviser), term time only as a member of the Parent Partnership Service which is also an independent service.
- 2.7 The School Preference Adviser supports parents through the process through: i) one to one and group meetings with parents at schools and community centres to explain admissions processes; ii) telephone and email requests; iii) explaining the admissions appeals process and accompanying parents to admission appeal hearings. Between September 2009 and July 2010, the following support was given to parents by the School Preference Adviser:

Number of group meetings held	Number of parents seen	Number of phone calls taken	Number of appeals attended
38	771	106	17

- 2.7 The election of a new coalition government in May 2010 means that arrangements for school admissions are in flux and subject to imminent policy and legislative changes. In addition the loss of central government grants and the requirement to make significant savings may affect current provision of admissions support.
- 2.8 The Government set out in the White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching', that in early 2011 it would, 'consult on a simplified and less prescriptive School Admissions Code'. The aim is to publish a revised Code by July 2011.

- 2.9 The Education Bill 2011, currently before parliament, removes the requirement on English Local Authorities to establish an admissions forum.
- 2.10 The Area Based Grant (£49,425) supporting the Preference Advisers was 'protected' from the significant in year budget cuts for 2011-12; however, funding beyond the end of this financial year remains uncertain. Southwark's Admission Forum is due to consider support options for parents and carers post August 2011

3. Methodology

3.1 The methodology consisted of:

- Officer reports on School Admissions
- Sub-committee members sharing good practice
- Consultation with Parent Participation Forum (PPF)
- Southwark Governors Association (SGA) submission
- Consultation with the School Admissions Forum
- Questionnaire distributed to parents and carers making secondary school admissions (Data from this will be available in the beginning of May)

4. Findings and recommendations

Information for parents and carers

- 4.1 The council produces information for parents in two main ways - on the website and through two guides; one for starting primary and one for starting secondary school. These are printed as booklets.
- 4.2 Parents were positive about the information on the website. Most felt that the booklets were useful and the school information good. However there was feedback that the guide should be easier to navigate, as parents whose first language was not English found it difficult to use. It was felt that it might be helpful for there to be a short simple version for these parents and consideration should be given to translating a short, simplified guide. Parents with special needs wanted more information in the guide.
- 4.3 The parent participation forum wanted to give feedback on the guide and requested that next year's version come to them for comment.

Recommendations:

1. The guides [to starting primary and secondary schools](#) should be made easier to navigate.

2. There should be more information in the guides on special needs.
3. Consideration should be given to producing short simplified versions and/or versions in different languages to meet the needs of parents where English is not the first language.
4. Next year's draft guide for primary school children should be brought back to the Parent Participation Forum for feedback.

Communication with parents and carers about the admissions process

- 4.4 Feedback from parents and officers was that the school preference advisor was very successful at reaching parents and carers to advise, support and assist them with the admissions process.
- 4.5 Parents, officers, teachers and governors all held the view that parents whose first language was not English, and who did not have good language skills, struggled the most in the admission process. Events at children's centres, school and nurseries were endorsed. It was suggested that these were expanded to all schools and centres and one be held at Tooley Street.
- 4.6 Outreach through links with predominantly BME communities and through specialised workers was endorsed.
- 4.7 Parents and carers recommended that children's centres and other providers used their databases to contact people and send reminders. These databases should be maintained and regularly updated.
- 4.8 Many parents are in contact with services through the use of nurseries, schools, children's centre and other providers. Some of these providers intensively targeted parents through advisory sessions, and speaking to parents as they picked up and dropped off their children. They ensured that all parents got a form and appropriate information and regularly reminded them. Kintore Way was held up as an example of good practice. This should be promoted.
- 4.9 Council officers already reach out to Private, Voluntary and Independent ["PVI"] early years managers. Parents and carers also noted that they use university nurseries and other early year provision so these providers should also be targeted.
- 4.10 It was pointed out that there are many parents and carers who might not be in regular in touch with services and these parents might be the ones that particularly struggle with the admissions process. Parents thought that health visitors 2½ year check would be a good time to alert parents to the nursery and primary admissions process. They also felt that more use should be made of databases that health and social services hold to do targeted mail outs.

- 4.11 The service already uses one stop shops and parents welcomed this and suggested that this is expanded so that information and training is also given to front line staff in libraries and community centres.

Recommendations:

5. Retain the school preference advisor for outreach and one to one support; particularly focus their work on the needs of parents whose first language is not English and parents of SEN children.
6. Hold open days at schools, [the council's principle offices](#) and in the community; particularly focus these on the needs of parents whose first language is not English, and parents of SEN children.
7. Contact university [and hospital](#) nurseries as well as Private, Voluntary and Independent ["PVI"] early years managers.
8. Train workers and keep booklets on the admissions process at settings such as libraries, one stop shops and community centres.
9. Use networks and contact details more smartly to distribute information and send reminders (health visitors, children centres, nurseries). Ensure they have sufficient information and CAF forums.
10. Use face to face contact – health visitor 2 ½ year check ups with parents, parent mentors at the Parent Participation Forum, nursery school attendance.

Choosing a place and taking a test.

- 4.12 Parents found visiting lots of schools on the same day stressful. Disabled parents and children, for example wheelchair users, found access difficult to negotiate during these busy times.
- 4.13 Parents and children found the amount of tests for secondary schools very stressful and unnecessary. They wanted one common test for all the schools so that a child would only need to take one test. Officers have advised the committee that they have been seeking to negotiate one common test for all Southwark schools, and there has been some progress. All the local secondary schools, apart from the Harris academies, will use one test next year. Harris academies will use one test for all their local schools. This will reduce testing for Southwark schools to two tests, however the best local outcome would be one test for all Southwark schools. The ideal outcome would be the same test for all London schools as some Southwark children will apply out of the Borough.

Recommendations:

11. Cabinet do everything within its power to introduce a common test for secondary school entry where this is required by schools.
12. Draw up an open day schedule for parents of children with SEN.

Making an application by completing the CAF or using the online form

- 4.14 Parents gave very positive feedback on the CAF and online form, if they had a straightforward application; they liked the simplicity and the receipt received. A parent/carer with two children (not twins) noted a problem, as she received an offer for only one of the children. Other parents who made late applications had a few problems.

Recommendations:

13. Ensure that carers and parents with more than one child in the same academic year (who are not multiple births) can make a successful application.

Receiving an offer

- 4.15 Offer day is a very stressful time and it was suggested that more information and support is given at this time. Parents need more information on waiting lists, for example that their child's place in the queue can go up and down. Sometimes parents and carers hear nothing for some time and this can create anxiety. Parents would like more accessible real-time information on school availability, local waiting lists lengths and their child's place.
- 4.16 Currently parents are asked two or three times to accept a school place. Once via the online process, once by the school, and once by the local authority. They have to accept both the school and the local authority place and it is not clear what the purpose of the eform acceptance is. This is confusing.

Recommendations:

14. Simplify the process so that parents and carers do not have to accept and respond to both the local authority and school to successfully accept or decline a place. Disable the automatic eform acceptance unless it is functional.

15. Offer more support around offer day and including additional information explaining waiting lists and managing places.
16. Before the date when allocations are announced, a briefing note be circulated to all members giving information about the process.

Supporting parents

- 4.17 Offer time is a busy period for officers and a stressful time for parents. Officers would like to be able to meet parents at Tooley Street as this would be much more efficient than booking slots in one stop shops etc. It would also mean that officers are more accessible to parents.

Recommendations:

17. Make meeting space available in [the council's principle offices, in addition to one-stop shops](#), for staff to take appointments with parents.

Local coordination and the admissions forum

- 4.18 The education bill currently before parliament will mean that having an admissions forum is a local choice. The admissions forum believe that this body enables a more coordinated and robust process across the local authority and advances social equity and inclusion.

Recommendations:

18. Retain the Admissions Forum.

5. Summary of recommendations

1. The guides [to starting primary and secondary schools](#) should be made easier to navigate.
2. There should be more information in the guides on special needs.
3. Consideration should be given to producing short simplified versions and/or versions in different languages to meet the needs of parents where English is not the first language.

4. Next year's draft guide for primary school children should be brought back to the Parent Participation Forum for feedback.
5. Retain the school preference advisor for outreach and one to one support; particularly focus their work on the needs of parents whose first language is not English and parents of SEN children.
6. Hold open days at schools, [the council's principle offices](#) and in the community; particularly focus these on the needs of parents whose first language is not English , and parents of SEN children.
7. Contact university [and hospital](#) nurseries as well as Private, Voluntary and Independent ["PVI"] early years managers.
8. Train workers and keep booklets on the admissions process at settings such as libraries , one stop shops and community centres.
9. Use networks and contact details more smartly to distribute information and send reminders (health visitors, children centres, nurseries). Ensure they have sufficient information and CAF forums.
10. Use face to face contact – health visitor 2 ½ year check ups with parents, parent mentors at the Parent Participation Forum, nursery school attendance.
11. [Cabinet do everything within its power to](#) introduce a common test for secondary school entry [where this is required by schools](#).
12. Draw up an open day schedule for parents of children with SEN.
13. Ensure that carers and parents with more than one child in the same academic year (who are not multiple births) can make a successful application.
14. Simplify the process so that parents and carers do not have to accept and respond to both the local authority and school to successfully accept or decline a place. Disable the automatic eform acceptance unless it is functional.
15. Offer more support around offer day and including additional information explaining waiting lists and managing places.
16. [Before the date when allocations are announced, a briefing note be circulated to all members giving information about the process.](#)
17. Make meeting space available in [the council's principle offices, in addition to one-stop shops](#), for staff to take appointments with parents.
18. Retain the Admissions Forum.

Appendices

1. Consultation with Parent Participation Forum (PPF)
2. Southwark Governors Association (SGA) submission and School governor interview
3. Consultation with the School Admissions Forum

All available on the Southwark website and published for the 14 March 2011 committee meeting :

<http://lbsth-dtr01/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=303&MIId=3563&Ver=4>

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References

- 1 School Admissions Codes and Regulations:
<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/adminandfinance/schooladmissions/a00195/school-admissions-codes-and-regulations>
- 2 Education Bill 2011
A Summary of the Government Bill, Ref. Bill 137, February 2011 Document Summary Service