

Item No. 7.	Classification: Open	Date: 22 November 2011	Meeting Name: Cabinet
Report title:		Response to the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee's Review of School Admissions	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
Cabinet Member:		Councillor Catherine McDonald, Children's Services	

FOREWORD – COUNCILLOR CATHERINE MCDONALD, CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Providing an effective and efficient admissions service is vital in supporting families to find the school best suited to their child's needs and to navigate the process successfully. The council recognises the importance of providing school places that meet parents' preferences by guaranteeing a place in a local primary school for every child who wants one. This year, this was achieved for all children who made an on-time application, bar one who was offered a place slightly further afield and subsequently pursued a place at a school in another borough.

The admissions service recognises that although most families are able to successfully submit application forms on time and receive a school of their preference, a significant number of families require additional help and support to understand the process and be able to make appropriate school preferences for their children. We have a duty and commitment to ensure that these families are supported to do so. In particular, we recognise parents/carers with a child who has special educational needs require as much information as possible, and we strive to provide this.

The service handles significant volumes – over 6,200 primary and secondary mainstream applications were submitted on time by families last year for children due to start school this September. There were a further 700 applications submitted after the closing dates, as well as over 3,000 in-year applications, mainly from families who have recently moved to the borough or are new to the UK.

The service seeks and welcomes feedback which enables it to improve the support it offers, and it continues to identify areas for improvement. The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee's report and recommendations are received in this context. The recommendations will help the service ensure that all families in Southwark receive the support and information they may need to apply to schools and receive a fair and equitable chance of obtaining a place of their preference.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Note and agree the response to the recommendations of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee.
2. Agree the action plan attached as Appendix 1.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee

3. On 12 July 2010, the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee decided to conduct a review on school admissions. The review's findings were reported to the sub-committee on 28 June, and then presented to cabinet on 20 September. Cabinet agreed that the recommendations be noted and that the cabinet member for children's services bring back a report to cabinet in order to respond to the sub-committee by 22 November 2011.

Report summary

4. The review focused on the clarity of information and availability of support networks to help parents negotiate the admissions process for mainstream and school admissions for children with special educational needs (SEN). Evidence submitted to the review included a survey of parents/carers who had used the secondary admissions service, as well as consultation with the Southwark School Admissions Forum and the Parent Participation Forum.
5. The review identified 18 recommendations. These, broadly, included steps to: make information simpler and easier to understand; extend and enhance communications with parents/carers; and make it easier to complete the application form and accept an offer.
6. Children's services accept the recommendations made by the sub-committee. This report contains a detailed response to each of the recommendations and a summary action plan is included in Appendix 1.

Response to recommendations

7. The report and its recommendations complement ongoing work in the admissions team to continually improve the quality of the service it provides. The 2011/12 admissions round was the first undertaken under pan-London coordinated admissions arrangements. This system has improved the experience of families by requiring them to fill in only one application form detailing up to six preferences for any London school, and by providing them with a single offer of a place. This process has enabled local authorities to eliminate surplus offers more quickly, resulting in vacancies being filled more quickly and efficiently.
8. Ensuring that information is accessible and easy to understand is a key service priority. The service annually reviews and seeks to improve the information provided in printed material and online, and will use the intelligence gathered by the review to support this process. In addition, the SEN and admissions teams are working to improve the information available to parents/carers of children with additional needs in light of the recent SEN and disability green paper's drive to publish a local offer of support. This includes an SEN school booklet, with details of the building and staff resources available at each school, as well as a SEN A-Z, which details resources and support available locally and nationally.
9. Another service priority is continually seeking to improve the support to parents/carers who need additional help, such as those who have a child with SEN or who have language or literacy difficulties. The programme of outreach

provided by the parent partnership and SEN teams has been expanded, and the service will continue to look for opportunities to address the needs and concerns of these parents/carers, many of which were articulated in the review's findings.

10. The admissions team also works closely with education planning colleagues to ensure there is a sufficient supply of places to meet parental demand. This has involved developing and refining processes to plan bulge classes and permanent enlargements to meet the significant uplift in pupil numbers over recent years. These service improvements support the council's priority commitment to guarantee a place in a local primary school for every child who wants one. For the admissions round to enter reception year this September, the council offered a place within 2 miles of the parental home for all children who made an on-time application, bar one who was offered a place slightly further afield and subsequently pursued a place at a school in another borough. This process is under constant review and refinement in order to enable the council to meet future demand effectively and efficiently.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Recommendations from sub-committee/response

11. The Education and Children's Services Sub-Committee made 18 recommendations, to which responses are set out below.
12. *The guides to starting primary and secondary schools should be made easier to navigate.*

Response

Agreed. The service strives to ensure the information in the admissions brochures is written as clearly and simply as possible within the minimum requirements of the School Admissions Code of Practice. Following the sub-committee's report, officers obtained comments from parents through the parent partnership service and also benchmarked the brochures against other publications with a view to producing 'starting school' guides for 2012 which are more parent-friendly and easier to navigate. Changes include simplifying the text, cutting duplication, using colour-coordinated tabs to identify types of schools, and using an easier-to-follow design. Further communication with groups such as the Parent Participation Forum are planned to support continuous improvements in the booklet's readability.

13. *There should be more information in the guides on special needs.*

Response

Noted. There are additional guides to support families with a child with a statement of SEN, and the SEN team is working to expand this information in light of the green paper's recommendations. The service, however, recognises that parents/carers of children with low-level special needs which may fall below the threshold for a statement of SEN may find it difficult to access information about which mainstream school would be most appropriate for their child. It will continue to work with schools to improve the quality and availability of this information, as well as to consider how this information can be made more widely available.

14. *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.*

Response

Noted. Consideration will be given to producing information in additional languages. Families tell us that face-to-face support, with a translator, is more helpful than printed material, and work continues to improve this aspect of the service's support within reducing budgets. This also includes working with voluntary and community organisations to support the parent through the process as well as improving the information available online.

15. *Next year's draft guide for primary school children should be brought back to the Parent Participation Forum for feedback.*

Response

Agreed.

16. *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.*

Response

Funding for the post was established following the cessation of central government choice adviser funding because the level of demand for this kind of support has increased year on year, demonstrating significant need within the borough. This demand includes not only parents/carers who require language support or have a child with SEN but also those who have literacy and/or learning difficulties. The post is focused on providing outreach support via one-to-one and group sessions.

17. *Hold open days at schools, the council's principal offices and in the community; particularly focus these on the needs of parents whose first language is not English, and parents of SEN children.*

Response

Noted. As noted above, the school preference adviser provides support through a programme of outreach work, including visits to schools with parents, one-to-one and group meetings at community groups and schools, and drop-in sessions at Sunshine House. The SEN team additionally provides special school open evenings for parents. The service will continue to seek to expand and improve the outreach on offer in response to families' needs and the review's findings within the constraints of reducing budgets.

18. *Contact university and hospital nurseries as well as Private, Voluntary and Independent ["PVI"] early years managers.*

Response

Noted. The admissions team distributes information widely to a comprehensive range of key contacts which includes university, hospital and PVI nurseries, and this list is reviewed and updated regularly. Further support for children with a statement of SEN prior to primary school entry is provided by the early intervention team, which advises and supports parents and schools about the process for school entry and transition from pre-school to school.

19. *Train workers and keep booklets on the admissions process at settings such as libraries, one stop shops and community centres.*

Response

Noted. The brochures are available in a range of settings including libraries and one stop shops. Training is provided to customer service representatives and one stop shop staff, and work is ongoing to improve the support offered through these routes in response to feedback from parents/carers and customer-facing staff.

20. *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 forms.*

Response

Agreed. Children's centres, nurseries and schools already assist with the distribution of information and application forms to families. This information is also provided to health professionals including health visitors but the service does not currently send forms or booklets for distribution by these agencies. Consideration will be given to expanding the support roles these and other agencies are willing and able to provide to families in respect of the school admissions process.

21. *Use face to face contact – health visitor 2 ½ year check ups with parents, parent mentors at the Parent Participation Forum, nursery school attendance.*

Response

Agreed. Further consideration will be given to how this recommendation can be developed and implemented across the school admissions process.

22. *Cabinet do everything within its power to introduce a common test for secondary school entry where this is required by schools.*

Response

Agreed. As their own admissions authorities, Southwark's secondary schools can set their own entry test – this 'banding' test ensures that a fair mix of children of different abilities gains entry to the school. Some pupils in Southwark have had to sit up to six tests, depending on their choice of secondary school. Following officer negotiations with local secondary schools that require applicants to sit banding tests, agreement has been reached for two tests to take place: one for applicants to any Harris academy in the borough; and one for all other academies.

23. *Draw up an open day schedule for parents of children with SEN.*

Response

Noted. Implementing this recommendation will be considered. Open days are promoted to parents who request information, and the SEN team follows up open days with the offer of one-to-one detailed meetings as described above.

24. *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.*

Response

Agreed. The common application form has been amended for 2012 admissions to enable parents with children born in the same academic to make this known at the onset of the admissions process. This will ensure that they are able to successfully make their requirements known, although it will not affect the decision about the offer of a place, which is made according to the school's admissions arrangements.

25. *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.*

Response

Agreed. The acceptance process has been simplified for 2012 admissions. All offers will be sent to families and deemed to be accepted. Should a family wish to decline an offer, they will be asked to contact the admissions team to do so.

26. *Offer more support around offer day and including additional information explaining waiting lists and managing places.*

Response

Noted. Comprehensive information on how to add a child's name to a waiting list and how to submit an appeal against a decision is included with the offer letter. The school preference adviser also provides additional drop-in sessions during this time. The service recognises that offer day can be stressful for families and is working to improve and expand the support available.

27. *Before the date when allocations are announced, a briefing note be circulated to all members giving information about the process.*

Response

Agreed. This will be in place for the pan-London admissions processes. A briefing note will be circulated to members once all offers have been finalised, one working day before offer letters are posted to families.

28. *Make meeting space available in the council's principal offices, in addition to one-stop shops, for staff to take appointments with parents.*

Response

Noted. The parent partnership service, including the school preference adviser, meets with parents at one stop shops as well as providing weekly sessions at Sunshine House.

29. *Retain the Admissions Forum.*

Response

Noted. This recommendation will be put forward to the Admissions Forum at the next appropriate meeting when a decision on the forum's future is to be made in anticipation of provision in the Education Bill before Parliament to remove the duty to maintain admissions fora.

Community impact statement

30. The school admission application process applies to all families with children of school age. Parents of children with special needs often need to make additional considerations in respect of the schools they are choosing to meet their child's needs. To enable fair access to school places for all sections of the community it is essential that clear information is available and additional support to families that have difficulty understanding the admissions process is required. The recommendations detailed in this report and the action plan will help to achieve fair access to school places in the borough.

Resource implications

31. No additional resources are being requested to deliver the recommendations of this report.

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance

32. Cabinet are asked to note that the report is compliant with the relevant law and that there are no legal implications arising.
33. The School Admissions Code 2010 is made under s.84 of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998; and applies to admission authorities of maintained schools and also to academies under their funding agreements with the Secretary of State.
34. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the Code of Practice require local authorities to exercise their functions with a view to promoting the fulfilment of educational potential, and ensuring fair access to educational opportunity.
35. Southwark Council is also required to ensure that admission arrangements for schools in the area comply with statutory requirements and are clear, objective and fair.
36. The proposals outlined are a means of delivering all of these requirements by enabling potentially disadvantaged groups of parents to access information appropriate to enable informed choices.
37. The Local Authority is also compliant with its duties and responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010, in positively promoting access to information by diverse communities and parents and children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Finance Director (CS0191)

38. The financial implications are set out in paragraph 31 above.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
School Admissions Code of Practice 2010	160 Tooley Street London SE1 2QH	Glenn Garcia 0207 525 2717

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Admissions information and process Action Plan 2011/12

AUDIT TRAIL

Cabinet Member	Councillor Catherine McDonald, Children's Services	
Lead Officer	Romi Bowen, Strategic Director, Children's Services	
Report Authors	Glenn Garcia, Head of Pupil Access, and Yvonne Ely, Head of SEN	
Version	Final	
Dated	9 November 2011	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments included
Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance	Yes	Yes
Finance Director	Yes	Yes
Cabinet Member	Yes	Yes
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team		10 November 2011