

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE –
7 NOVEMBER 2023

UPDATE ON ADMISSIONS SERVICE

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICE

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee that:
 - (a) for autumn 2023 the School Admissions Service secured nine out of ten children a place at their first preference school for both First Time Admissions and secondary transfers and for all children transferring from Infant to Junior schools. Appendix A shows a full performance breakdown of this year's outcomes.
 - (b) the Service experienced a challenging 2022/23 academic year, resulting in delays in processing mid-term applications. Service improvements have addressed this, and mid-term applications are now processed more efficiently.
 - (c) as part of this improvement journey, the Council is consulting on its admissions policy and associated arrangements this year to improve the parent journey and the process.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The Education Act 1996 places a statutory duty on the Local Authority to;
 - (a) Ensure a sufficient supply of school places with a view to securing diversity of provision and increasing opportunities for parental choice;
 - (b) Exercise its education functions with a view to promoting high standards;
3. More specifically, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (SSFA 1998), outlines through the associated School Admissions Code the statutory responsibilities on local authorities in terms of admissions and appeals.

Background

4. Mid-term challenges experienced last year included embedding the new Synergy database system and recruiting and training new staff, whilst at the same time prioritising a significant backlog of mid-term school applications.
5. A plan for Service improvement, supported by the Transformation Unit (TU), over the course of the 2022/23 academic year was successful in managing, stabilising and

eliminating the backlog of overdue applications. In addition, recruitment of permanent admissions officers and a focus on resource management to meet key performance indicators has helped better target priority demands, further improving the parent journey and significantly reducing the volume of incoming queries.

6. There is a proposal to amend the Leicestershire School Admissions Policy and associated admission co-ordinated schemes as part of this improvement journey. To make these changes, there is a mandatory requirement as detailed in the School Admissions Code 2021 to run a formal public consultation for six calendar weeks between 1 October 2023 to the end of January 2024. There is also a requirement to seek approval of the changes from the Cabinet by 28 February, following which the policy must be published on the County Council's website by 15 March.
7. Leicestershire's School Admissions Policy and associated co-ordinated schemes is published on the County Council's website.

Local Authority Admissions Statutory Requirements

8. School places are not automatically allocated in England, even when children are attending an attached pre-school or feeder school or have older siblings already attending. Parents or carers must apply for a school place.
9. The LA's statutory responsibilities are for the following phased rounds:
 - First time Admissions (FTA) – this is when 4+ children apply for a place in reception class;
 - Infant to Junior Transfers;
 - Year-7 Secondary Transfers
10. Key dates for these application rounds and further below links to the Schemes:

Primary (Reception class)	Infant to Junior (Year 3 Entry)	Secondary (Year 7 Entry)
Closing date 15 January LA exchange dates with other LAs late February Provisional allocation list March Final allocation list late March 16th April National Offer Date	Closing date 15 January LA exchange dates with other LAs late February Provisional allocation list March Final allocation list late March 16th April National Offer Date	Closing date 31 October LA exchange dates with other LAs late November Provisional allocation list January Final allocation list late February 1st March National Offer Date

11. The Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme for Primary and Infant to Junior, and Secondary Transfers are published on the County Council's Website.

Local Authority Admissions Non-Statutory Requirements

12. Applications to other year groups not part of the phased rounds do not form part of the statutory obligation on the LA to deliver. However, Leicestershire continues to offer a co-ordinated scheme on a traded basis to support parents seeking a school place outside the normal admissions round or part-way through an academic year.
13. Most schools in Leicestershire co-ordinate their admissions processes through the LA because the LA offers a 24/7 online application system, a helpful website, a Service that operates throughout the school holidays that ensures parents' rights are upheld, and, where applicable, access to the appeals process.
14. This offers a seamless process for parents in securing a school place. To the LA it ensures early identification of children who are refused a school place and allows it to make the parent aware of where vacancies exist at other local schools. The mid-term co-ordination scheme also plays a vital role in ensuring Children Missing Education (CME) are identified and supported back into education. See Appendix A for the number of applications processed in 2022/23 academic year.
15. It is significantly more challenging to identify and safeguard children who have applied to academies that have not bought into the co-ordinated scheme as, although there is an obligation to do so, information received about applications by these academies is of poorer quality and timeliness.
16. The Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme for Mid-term Transfers are published on the County Council's Website.

Proposals/Options

17. The LA will be seeking to consult on its Admissions Policy and associated co-ordinated schemes, to improve choice and diversity, Code compliance and more transparency:

Proposal 1:

A catchment school change at Little Bowden Primary School as detailed at Appendix B.

Rationale: To improve diversity of choice by increasing the school's catchment area with two schools sharing a single catchment area.

Proposal 2:

To reduce the Admission Number at four primary schools:

- Foxton Primary School from 17 to 15
- Hallaton Primary School from 18 to 15
- Newbold Verdon Primary School from 45 to 30 (temporary reduction)
- St Bartholomew's C of E Primary School from 75 to 60 (temporary reduction)

Rationale: This will eliminate the risk of the school breaching the requirements of the Infant Class Size rules for Foxton PS and Newbold Verdon PS, and of the remaining two both have experienced very low birth rates impacting funding.

Therefore, a temporary reduction will assist with finances, and once births increase the Admissions Number will be restored.

Proposal 3:

To adopt a simpler model of highest single criterion plus distance when determining school places Appendix C.

Rationale: To make understanding how criteria are applied simpler for parents to understand and for the LA to operate.

Proposal 4:

To increase the number of school preferences from 3 to 5 on Leicestershire school application form.

Rationale: Leicestershire now has some catchment areas with 5 schools within a single a catchment area, therefore, to improve likelihood of securing a catchment school the form need needs to allow parents to 5 preferences to optimise their success of securing a catchment school.

Proposal 5:

To clarify several points in the admissions policy and in the coordinated schemes concerning the mid-term applications processes including late applications and from what point the waiting list will operate from, see Appendix D.

Rationale: Currently some aspects of the policy remain too ambiguous, and the policies would benefit from improved clarity concerning mid-term applications.

Consultation

18. The consultation process is already underway. The School Admissions Code states that where changes are proposed a public consultation must be undertaken to engage and gain feedback from: schools; governors; parents of children between 2 and 18; neighbouring LAs; if relevant religious bodies; other interested parties. It must run for six calendar weeks in the period between 1st October and the end of January.
19. The consultation will be publicised widely through the LA public media channels, headteachers' briefings, Leicestershire Matters, and local press.
20. Once the consultation is complete and responses are considered recommendations will be offered for approval to Cabinet by the 28 February, following which it must be published by 15 March. Objectors will then have up to 15 May to lodge their disagreement with the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA). Where no objection is received by 15 May the revised policy will come into force for school application entry 2025.

Resource Implications

21. The changes being proposed will not impact on human resources within the School Admissions Service, ICT or other Council areas. Advice from Legal Services has been included in the consultation.

Financial Implications

22. It was taken into consideration that moving from three preferences to five may increase the time Admissions Officers would have to process five preferences. However, it was concluded that a small amount of additional time at the start of the application process would be more than mitigated by a reduction in the processing of repeat applications. Therefore, it is not envisaged that the changes will have a negative financial impact whilst improving outcomes for parents.

Timetable for Decisions

23. Views expressed by Scrutiny will be reported to Cabinet within the final Cabinet Paper that must be presented to Cabinet by 28 February.

Conclusions

24. In summary Scrutiny are made aware of the positive and high outcomes to Leicestershire children in this year's admissions rounds for first time admissions and secondary transfers where 9 out of 10 children secured their first preference school for entry 2023. Whilst for Infant to Junior transfers all children secured their first preference school.
25. Scrutiny is offered reassurances that the issues experienced last year regarding mid-term application backlogs have been addressed and cleared.
26. Finally, that additional performance improvement strategies have been employed, that are having a positive impact to the parent journey when seeking to secure a school place part-way through an academic year; and that the consultation has sought to make further improvements to ensure future outcomes for Leicestershire remain high.

Background papers

27. Leicestershire County Council's School Policies:
<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/schools-colleges-and-academies/school-admissions/school-policies>
28. The School Admissions Code 2021:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-admissions-code--2>
29. School Admissions consultation for entry 2025 and beyond link:
<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/have-your-say/current-engagement>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

30. Mr Barry Champion CC, division Market Harborough East.
31. Mr Phil King CC, division Market Harborough West and Foxton.

Equality Implications

32. The Council must show how it has paid due regard to equality, diversity and community cohesion in its decision-making, and an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been completed at Appendix E.
33. It is noteworthy that the EIA reinforced the positive impacts of the policy changes being proposed, and that no protected characteristic would be negatively impacted.

Human Rights Implications

34. There are no human rights implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Other Relevant Impact Assessments

35. There are no other relevant impact assessments implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Appendices

Appendix A – Performance breakdown

Appendix B – Proposed School Catchment change for Little Bowden Primary School

Appendix C – Leicestershire's oversubscription criteria

Appendix D – Proposed policy paragraphs

Appendix E – Equality Impact Assessment

Officer(s) to Contact

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