

ANNUAL REPORT BY DEVON LOCAL ADMISSIONS FORUM

JULY 2010

SIGNED OFF BY: Christine Channon

COUNCILLOR CHRISTINE CHANNON
CHAIR, DEVON LOCAL ADMISSIONS FORUM

Background

Devon Local Admissions Forum is making this report using its powers under section 85A(1A) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

It should be read in conjunction with the Local Authority Annual Admissions report submitted 30 June 2010 to the School's Adjudicator.

At its meeting in March 2010 the Forum appointed a small working group to review the Local Authority annual report in advance of its submission to the School's Adjudicator, and to decide whether as a body it wished to make its own report. The working group comprised the following members:

- Mark Juby representing Community Secondary Schools
- Christina Mabin representing the C of E Diocese
- Deborah Booth, CYPS Strategic Lead for the achievement of children in care;

and was facilitated by Lisa Boon, Schools Access Services Manager.

The group met once, on 26th May 2010, to review the working draft of the Local Authority Annual Report and to agree the content of this report.

This report is the outcome of that working group's discussions and analysis. Not wishing to duplicate the content and focus of the Local Authority report, the Forum working group nevertheless wanted to comment on some specific areas of admissions practice, as well as undertake some analysis in some key areas to ensure parents and children in Devon are being supported as fully as possible through the admissions process.

This report was shared with the full Forum at their meeting on Thursday 15th July 2010 prior to its submission to the School's Adjudicator and was 'signed off' by Councillor Christine Channon, Chair of Devon Local Admissions Forum.

In-Year Co-ordination

The Forum welcomes the introduction of full in-year co-ordination in September 2010 and recognises the benefits for parents who will experience a more consistent process. However, the Forum shares the concerns of the Local Authority, set out in section 2 (a) and (b) of its report, regarding the potential for vulnerable children to remain out of school longer under the new system.

The Forum is aware that children seeking school places in-year are often vulnerable and may be experiencing difficult family circumstances. Some may have been out of education for some time - for example on elective home education, or some moving schools in Key Stage 4 due to family circumstances. The Forum recognises the stress these families and children can be placed under when awaiting the allocation of a school place. School representatives also report the challenges they face in trying to re-engage pupils who have been out of education for extended periods. The Forum is concerned that the potential for these pupils to be out of school longer than they are

currently would increase difficulties and have a detrimental effect on vulnerable pupils and their families.

Specifically the lack of guidance to Local Authorities regarding how regularly in-year applications should be considered and allocated makes for inconsistent arrangements between Local Authorities. The requirement for parents to apply to their 'Home' Local Authority also, in the view of the Forum, introduces an unnecessary 'step' in the process to exchange data with other Local Authorities. The potential delays are exacerbated by the requirement for own admission authority schools to convene a panel of governors to make admissions decisions - where a school is undersubscribed this seems particularly unnecessary - and will leave parents and children without the security of a school place for longer than is strictly necessary.

The absence of an in-year online admissions facility compounds the possible delays. The Forum has commended Devon's admissions team for their very high online admissions take-up during normal round admissions processes and this has become the admissions 'culture' for parents applying for places in the county. Such a facility would undoubtedly expedite in-year applications for parents and it is extremely regrettable that this will not be available to coincide with the launch of the in-year co-ordination scheme.

The Forum welcomes a more transparent and fair admissions system for parents and children in-year, but believes that it should be made as simple as possible to ensure timely admission.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Applications are made to the maintaining Local Authority 'in-year'
- The requirement for own admission authority school governors to meet and decide on all in-year requests be reviewed
- An in-year online admissions facility be introduced for the 2011/12 academic year

Admission Appeals

Recognising the stress caused to families navigating the admission appeals process, as well as the cost to admission authorities in defending them, the Forum were keen to examine the area of admission appeals in more detail as part of this report. Whilst the Local Authority report records the levels of appeals resulting from the 2010 intake in terms of numbers, it does not provide any context regarding how Devon compares with its neighbours on levels of appeals upheld in parents favour. The Forum believes that this is an important measure as it believes that parents should not be required to undertake the appeals process unless absolutely necessary. They also recognise the issues often posed for schools who have pupils allocated to them but who either do not take up the place or refuse to engage whilst they wait for a place at their preferred school.

Nor does the Local Authority report differentiate relative levels of 'success' between appeals defended by the Local Authority and those defended by own admission authority schools.

The Forum would like, through its analysis, to identify any Local Authorities where levels of appeals upheld in parents' favour are significantly lower than levels in Devon so that officers involved in admission appeals can understand the approaches to appeals of these other Local Authorities. The Forum, having discussed the issue of appeals with Local Authority Officers, is similarly keen to identify the numbers of appeals conceded as a proportion of appeals lodged, as it believes that this has a direct impact on the success rate of the Local Authority or own admission authorities.

Devon Local Authority takes a measured approach to appeals, conceding in advance of a hearing wherever it feels that the case lacks sufficient robustness, in order to spare parents the stress of the process. This is, however, complicated by the need to support undersubscribed schools by defending determined admissions levels. It is not clear to the panel whether this approach is replicated by own admission authority schools, many of whom may defend appeals very infrequently and therefore lack the Local Authority's level of experience in this area.

NATIONAL COMPARISONS

In reviewing the DCSF Statistical First Release information relating to admission appeals for maintained primary and secondary schools in England for 2008/9 (published 10 June 2010) (Appendix 1) the Forum noted the following salient points:

- **Primary Appeals (including Infant Class Size appeals)**

There is a relatively large number of other Local Authorities across England (38) where appeals won by parents as a percentage of appeals heard by an Independent Panel are lower than the Devon percentage of 17.6%.

Many of the other Local Authorities are small London boroughs or more urban authorities. However there are three shire counties where the percentage of appeals won by parents is lower: Worcestershire, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire.

In Devon the number of appeals heard as a percentage of those lodged by parents is 56.8%. In these other shire counties the percentages are

Worcestershire - 71.6%

Bedfordshire - 61.4%

Hertfordshire - 66.6%

Therefore Devon concedes more appeals prior to the hearing taking place - either because a place has become available at the preferred school (for example through the waiting list) parents withdraw their appeals, or the Admissions Team decide that the case is not sufficiently robust to defend.

- **Infant Class Size Appeals**

Within the statistical first release infant class size (ICS) appeals are disaggregated and examined in more detail. These are one-stage appeals where to admit a further child would breach KS1 class size legislation and require the school to take qualifying measures.

The number of ICS appeals won by parents in Devon as a percentage of those heard is 16.1%. There are 32 other Local Authorities where the percentage of appeals won by parents is lower. Of these again many are small and/or urban Local Authorities, although the following shire authorities lost fewer ICS appeals than Devon during 2008/9:

Northamptonshire - 14.7%

Staffordshire - 14.7%
Bedfordshire - 9.8%
Hertfordshire - 4.6%
Hampshire - 8.8%

The number of ICS appeals heard, as a percentage of ICS appeals lodged in Devon is 59.5%. Of the authorities listed above, only Northamptonshire concedes more ICS appeals (52.5% of those lodged are heard) with the other identified LAs hearing between 61-66% of those lodged.

- **Secondary Appeals**

There are 27 other Local Authorities across England where appeals won by parents as a percentage of appeals heard by an Independent Panel are lower than the Devon percentage of 18.9%. All of these are either London Boroughs or large urban Local Authorities and there are none that are obviously comparable to Devon in terms of issues/geography.

It is to be noted that Devon has by far the lowest percentage of secondary appeals won by parents in the South West, with North Somerset the next nearest performer at 26.2%.

- **Conclusions**

Based on the national statistics Devon's performance in defending secondary appeals is to be commended.

For primary appeals, both ICS and two-stage, a number of comparable Local Authorities have lower numbers of appeals being upheld in parents' favour. Devon also hears a lower percentage of appeals lodged than these other Local Authorities.

The complexity of the appeals process, competence of the Presenting Officer, experience and competence of the Independent Panel Members and their Clerk, how compelling an individual parent's case might be, and the different approaches of own admission authority schools as compared with the Local Authority in defending cases are all factors that contribute to make any direct comparisons between Local Authorities extremely difficult - all are invisible within these statistics.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- That the Forum continue to monitor Devon's appeals outcomes annually in the context of the national and South West picture;
- That Devon make contact with other named Local Authorities to compare practice around Primary Appeals (including ICS appeals) and to identify any learning points;
- That the Clerk to Devon's Independent Appeal Panel be asked to provide data to the Devon Local Admissions Forum at a future meeting which shows appeals outcomes split by Local Authority and own admission authority schools so more localised analysis of practice can be undertaken.

Free School Meals

Linked to Section 4 of the Local Authority report around Free School Meals, the Forum wishes to record its support for the Extended Services Disadvantage Subsidy made available to families meeting low income criteria to facilitate participation of their child(ren) in extra curricular activities across the County. Launched in Devon as 'Don't Stop Me Now', five areas of the county (based on Barnstaple, Exeter Beacon, Tavistock, Teign Valley and Teignmouth Local Learning Communities) have participated in a pilot and as at March 2010 1029 children whose families are on low incomes have received help to broaden the educational experience of their children. Whilst the Forum has as yet no written evidence of the impact of this initiative, school representatives report the general positive impact on the young people who have benefited from the additional funding - positivity which has extended into the classroom.

Devon is undertaking local monitoring and evaluation over the lifetime of the subsidy.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- That national analysis is undertaken on the impact of the ESS Disadvantage subsidy and dependant on outcomes it be extended nationally, beyond August 2011 when the current Standards Fund allocation is due to be spent by.
 - That the national infrastructure funding that has been provided to Local Authorities alongside the Standards Fund be maintained to enable them to continue to support this work.
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Raising Parental Awareness

The Forum is aware that some families make late applications and risk securing a place at their local or preferred school by missing the admissions deadline. This has been a particular development across primary parents in Devon since the introduction of primary co-ordination in 2006. Unlike secondary school admissions the Local Authority does not have a definitive database of pre-school parents and has to combine health and early years data to establish an approximate list. Before the co-ordination scheme all primary admissions in Devon were devolved to schools themselves. Some parents would add their child's name to a school maintained 'list' which constituted an application. Whilst significant progress has been made to break with this historical practice in the minds of parents, some confusion still exists and despite the best efforts of the Local Authority admissions team some parents still appear unaware of the need to make a school application for their child and the timescales for doing so.

Recognising this as a concern, the Forum has received regular reports from the Local Authority on its activities to raise awareness of admissions processes for the 2010 intake which have included:

- Distribution of promotional materials - bugs, pens, paper clips, post-it notes - all displaying the 'Don't be Late' logo at secondary open evening events;

- Distribution of 'Don't be Late' flyers at secondary open evenings to all parents attending;
- Display of 'Don't be Late' posters at secondary open evenings, in primary schools, early years settings and Children's Centres;
- Inclusion of information in Devon Libraries' 'Treasure Boxes' for four year olds;
- Sending promotional materials and posters to Citizens Advice Bureaux;
- Press releases;
- Emails to all Headteachers and school administrators;
- Articles in various internal and external publications - Devon Talk, Insider, Primary Times, Early Times, Nursery News, Devon Governors newsletter;
- Adding a banner to all admissions literature stating 'Don't be Late';
- Writing directly to parents with children on Elective Home Education;
- Liaising closely with Education Welfare Officers so they can raise awareness during home visits and meetings with parents;
- Close working with social care colleagues - particularly for children in care;
- Writing directly to all parents who have expressed an interest for a place at a Devon primary school;
- Writing directly to all parents on the authority's database - both those attending Early Years setting and those due to transfer to secondary school and attending Devon primaries;
- Attending Early Years co-ordinator meetings;
- Linking with Choice Advisers, who have covered primary as well as secondary admissions over the past admissions, and using them to help 'chase' late applications.

Whilst a large number of these activities have been in place in previous years, many were new for the 2010 intake. On examining the number of late applications for 2010, as compared to 2009, the Forum was pleased to note the positive impact:

LATE APPLICATION RATES:

2009	Primary	1121	14% of transfer group
	Secondary	574	7% of transfer group
2010	Primary	503	6.5% of transfer group
	Secondary	358	4% of transfer group

However, the Forum does not underestimate the difficulties caused for families who continue to make late applications and are often denied places at their local school as a result. This can impact on the engagement of the child or young person at the allocated school, as well as place immense stress on the family as they navigate the appeals process.

Whilst the efforts of the Admissions Team are to be commended in reducing the scale of late applications in Devon, the Forum believes that too many families are still applying late. Capacity within the Admissions Team means that the scale of any campaign is restricted to the resource available. There appears to be little or no data available to compare late application rates in Devon against those of other comparable Local Authorities to identify good practice and adopt it. The Forum strongly believes that in order to ensure all reasonable steps are being taken to engage parents in the admissions process a national awareness-raising campaign should be launched by the Department for Education on both television and radio -

similar to campaigns about timely tax returns - to ensure that the number of parents who remain unaware of the timescale for school applications is minimised. This could also deliver some economy of scale, removing the need for all individual Local Authorities to invest such significant time and resource in raising awareness.

RECOMMENDATION:

- That the DfE launch a national awareness-raising campaign regarding timescales for school admissions
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