



## **OFFICER REPORT TO EXECUTIVE**

### **School Admissions Review**

**5 June 2007**

#### **KEY ISSUE/DECISION:**

To consider action in light of the School Admissions Review carried out by the Policy and Performance Directorate.

#### **BUSINESS CASE:**

##### **What is the problem we are trying to address/what are we trying to achieve?**

1. The Admissions Policy and process for school entry in 2007 received in the region of 28,000 applications in November 2006. Of those applications, 84% of secondary applicants gained their first ranked preference and 94% of secondary applicants obtained one of their ranked preferences. For primary applications 88.5% received their first ranked school and 98.5% received one of their ranked preferences. The national deadlines for secondary applications were met. However, difficulties were encountered which resulted in issues concerning, the policy itself and its impact, management of operations and communications.
2. The review sought to identify issues and recommend remedial options.

##### **Background**

3. **Change to the Admissions Policy:** The Surrey Schools admissions process was changed for 2007 following two years of work and consultation with stakeholders. Consultants carried out a Schools Admissions Survey in the autumn of 2005 to collect a wide range of stakeholder views. The results were reported to The Admissions Forum and debated fully at a meeting of the Executive on 17 January 2006. A further consultation letter on proposed criteria and process was sent to stakeholders on 19 January 2006, with a request for responses to be returned by 28 February 2006. The consultation included the introduction of an 'Equal Preference' system for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools. Some Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools would remain on the 'First Preference' system for one more year. The consultation also suggested more objective criteria and that feeder schools should be considered for some areas.

4. On 9 March 2006, The Schools and Communities Select Committee debated the issue, in particular the possibility of feeder schools being placed as a criteria above distance.
5. At The Executive meeting on 28 March 2006, special arrangements were put in place to safeguard some specific areas, i.e. Tandridge and Waverley, by the introduction of a catchment area in the case of the former and the feeder school criterion for the latter in order to mitigate for the possible impact of the new policy on rural areas. Full Council then agreed the policy and process in April 2006. The following criteria were agreed. This met the DfES timetables.

‘That the County Council change its admissions arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools as follows:

The admissions criteria for the September 2007 intake should be agreed as follows:

- i) Looked After Children
- ii) Exceptional Circumstances
- iii) Siblings
- iv) Nearest School
- v) Any Other

Although the feeder school criterion should be deleted from the overall admissions arrangements, in recognition of ‘one size’ does not ‘fit all’ and bearing in mind local circumstances and the differences between urban and rural areas, special cases could be made to incorporate the feeder school criterion to protect schools’ traditional admissions priority areas.

- b) In Tandridge, where neither the nearest school criterion or the feeder school criterion will ensure the admission of pupils from rural areas who have been able historically to gain places for secondary schools, fixed catchment areas after LAC, exceptional circumstances and siblings could be drawn up as a pilot, subject to confirmation by the Executive Director and Executive Member following further consultation including local Members.
  - c) Surrey should change to an equal preference system for the September 2007 intake.
  - d) The pilot admission arrangements for the Brockham and the Acorns schools should continue for one more year.’
6. A parent’s/carer’s information guide on the process was available to parents in the autumn of 2006. The deadline for the return of applications was November 2006.
  7. The policy and process put in place complied with the guidelines in The School Admissions Code 02/2003. The policy was a departure from previous SCC practice in that the implementation of Admissions Priority Areas after the closing date for applications was no longer permissible. In addition offers over a published Pupil Admission Number (PAN) were not considered appropriate by the Admissions Forum and had been questioned by Appeals Panels and the Ombudsman and therefore were not used in the 2007 process. Adhering

to school PANs is also compliant with the Code of Practice. The policy resulted in the application of two systems – ‘Equal Preference’ for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools and ‘First Preference’ for some Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools.

8. Through a variety of factors, specific geographic areas experienced change and difficulty. There were increased calls/emails/letters of concern to the Contact Centre, to head teachers, Members, MPs and Surrey officers. In response, the Executive committed to an immediate review of the 2007 Admissions Policy and its process.
9. **Review of the Admissions process:** Between 26 March 2007 and 4 May 2007 the review team from the Policy & Performance Directorate carried out a number of interviews with key stakeholders, examined written documentation, accepted written submissions from parents and met with parent groups to gather evidence. This evidence forms the basis of this report and recommendations.
10. **The ‘Equal Preference’ system.** This could not be fully modelled because data held by SCC from previous years reflected patterns of application based on Admissions Priority Areas and the First Preference system and therefore intelligence on its possible implications could not be fully communicated to stakeholders. Stakeholders found the new policy confusing. Some boundaries overlapped, and because of the geographical distribution of schools in Surrey, resulted in children in some areas being within the distance criteria for a number of schools.
11. The new policy has impacted more heavily on certain communities. In addition, despite officer input at the headteachers’ phase councils and area headteachers’ meetings, some schools reported feeling that they were not sufficiently well informed to contribute, or to inform their parents of the changes and potential outcomes.
12. **Management:** Clarity is needed regarding the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of Surrey County Council in order to support the operation of the admissions process. In order to achieve this it may be necessary to re-examine future resource allocation.
13. **Systems and processes:** Operationally there were problems with the technical processes needed to support the system, which caused delays and concerns for children, parents/carers, head teachers and staff.
14. Completed applications forms were returned to the Admissions Team in November and a manual quality check was carried out before the forms were electronically scanned. Distance measurements were unable to be imported into the system, which resulted in a delay to the start of the operational process. Data processing capacity was too slow and could not deal with the demands of the Equal Preference system (which is more complex and, in reality, multiplies the number of applications needing to be processed by 3).
15. The EMS database supported by Capita complied with statutory requirements but did not meet the need of the admissions team to produce management reports on specific schools or areas. Data Services Limited (DRS) scanning of paper applications was inconsistent. The EMS database and SIA Limited’s (SIA) Geographical Information System were not compatible. GIS

measurements could not be fed automatically into the EMS database. This had to be done manually by officers at a very late stage.

16. The Service Delivery Agreement with Four S currently provides for the statutory requirements of the data handling i.e. to manage data within the co-ordinated admissions process. The Service Delivery Agreement could be changed to support planning (e.g. production of management reports) although Four S has the capability to produce this information. Clarity is needed about the management of IMT issues.
17. The statutory deadline for letters to parents/carers informing them of the place their child had been allocated at secondary school was met; considerable extra staffing support was needed to achieve this. Primary offer letters were sent out some nine days after the SCC published deadline. This also required extra staffing. Throughout the process, staff in the Admissions and Transport team worked extremely hard to try and deliver the system successfully.
18. **Communications**: There was a general lack of understanding of the new criterion resulting in a vast increase in the volume of calls taken by the Contact Centre and the Admissions team, which sometimes meant inaccurate information was given to stakeholders. Stakeholders state that there is currently too much information on schools and schools admissions on the SCC website, with a large number of links to various pages. It is not user friendly or straightforward making it difficult to find and understand information. Parents have complained that when 'phoning the CC, they were given inconsistent information.

#### **Are there choices?**

19. The choices are (a) to not move to any changes or improvements, (b) to implement changes to policy, management and operations for 2008 or (c) to review the policy and process for 2009. The changes would be designed to improve the efficiency of the process and ensure stakeholders have a clearer understanding of the policy and its likely impact in their area.
20. The Policy for 2008 had to be communicated to the DfES by 15 April 2007. The policy for 2008 could be left unchanged, with the policy for 2009 being reviewed in the autumn of 2008. This could result in the same difficulties being experienced in 2008 as have been experienced in 2007. There is an expectation from stakeholders that as the 2007 process encountered some difficulties remedial action will be taken.
21. A further option is to make an application to The Office of The Schools Adjudicator for an in - year variation to the Admissions Policy for 2008 under Section 89 of 'The School Standards and Framework Act 1998'. Change would be sought for the application of catchment areas and/or feeder partnership status between specified schools where need is identified. Before the application is made, stakeholders must be notified of the intended variations.
22. The Adjudicator's Office would pass the application to an adjudicator. He or she would look at the issues raised. The adjudicator might ask for further information, and might also seek evidence from other sources. The adjudicator might decide to visit the school(s) and/or convene a meeting on

the procedure. He or she would then make an independent decision based on:

- the information received
- any further evidence
- the School Admissions Code, and the relevant legislation
- other legislation such as on equal opportunities, racial discrimination, disability discrimination and human rights.

23. The adjudicator would aim to make a decision within six weeks of receiving the core information but this could take longer. Everyone who was consulted about the initial arrangements must be notified of the application. There is a risk that the adjudicator might reject the application. Whilst the aim of the changes is to increase the percentage of applicants achieving their first ranked preference, it is very unlikely that any admissions policy will enable 100% of all applicants to achieve this. It is also possible that some individual applicants may secure a lower ranked preference.

24. Options for variations for specific areas are.

1. **Oxted School.**

- Maintain the current fixed catchment area giving priority to residents of the following Divisions in the following order:

1. Lingfield
2. Godstone
3. Oxted
4. Any other Divisions

Within each category, the 'distance' tiebreaker (measured by straight line from home to school) will apply

- Implement no change

2. **Waverley – Weydon, Woolmer Hill, South Farnham and Schools in the Weyside Confederation.**

- change criteria to give priority to pupils in partner schools ahead of children for whom the school is nearest to their home.
- Implement no change

3. **Reigate and Weybridge areas.**

- Implement no change to the criteria, but carry out a school places review.

4. **Howard of Effingham.**

- Designate Raleigh School as a "partner school" to give priority to pupils at the school ahead of children for whom it is nearest to their home.

- Give priority to residents in the following Divisions in the following order:
  1. The Horsleys
  2. Bookham and Fetcham West
  3. Any other Division

Within each category, the 'distance' tiebreaker (measured by straight line from home to school) will apply.

- Implement no change
25. **Further review:** Additionally a thorough review of School Admissions for 2009 should be undertaken with stakeholders. Any identified options for change for 2009 should be modelled. Impact and risks should be assessed and stakeholders informed of the results. This should result in a transparent and clearly communicated policy for 2009.
26. **Operations:** A clearer and cohesive operational plan should be established, and the EMS and DRS systems should be thoroughly reviewed in order to ensure they are fit for purpose. Additionally specific technical problems that have been experienced in relation to Capita and GIS inter - functionality during 2007 need resolution and a review undertaken to ensure that the GIS data is accurate and up to date. The content of the Service Delivery Agreement between SCC and Four S should be driven by the school admissions process and fully reviewed annually.
27. **Communications:** A clear, comprehensive and cohesive Communications Strategy for School Admissions should be developed by the SCC Communications team, schools, parents and other stakeholders and reviewed annually. The Admissions and Transport Team should continue to develop their work on communication protocols for Contact Centre staff, head teachers and school support staff. A new 'Information on School Admissions & Transfers' booklet should be produced for 2008, explaining and clarifying the implications of the Equal Preference System.

### **What are the implications? (Financial, equalities and risk management implications)**

#### **Financial**

28. There will be possible financial implications as a result of an in-year variation application and as a result of further consultations with stakeholders for the 2009 process.

#### **Equalities**

29. The changes would aim to increase the percentage of applicants achieving one of their ranked school preferences.

#### **Risks**

30. The risks are that if no action is taken the process will experience the same pressure in 2008 as it has in 2007.  
The time frame within which application for variations must take place for 2008 admissions is very tight.  
The School Adjudicator may not approve variations for 2008.  
It is highly unlikely that the changes will answer all stakeholder aspirations.  
Changes may lead to achieving a higher ranked preference for some applicants.  
It is also possible that some individual applicants may secure a lower ranked preference.

**Are there any important sensitive issues Members need to be aware of in taking the decision?**

31. Stakeholders are aware of the review and are expecting a response from SCC.

**Are there any legislative requirements?**

32. Any changes must conform to the 'The Code of Practice on School Admissions 2007'.

**Has consultation been undertaken?**

33. The review consulted with staff and stakeholders.

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| <b>RECOMMENDATIONS:</b> |
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It is recommended that:

1. The Admissions Criteria for 2008 is revised for approval by the Council, to propose catchment areas and/or feeder partnership status between specified schools where need is identified.
2. Stakeholders are notified of the intended in –year variations.
3. Application is made to The School's Adjudicator for proposed variations under Section 89 of the 1998 Act.
4. A review of School Admissions for 2009 is undertaken with stakeholders.
5. Specific technical IMT problems that have been experienced in relation to the 2007 process are addressed.
6. The content of the Service Delivery Agreement between SCC and Four S is driven by the school admissions process and is fully reviewed annually.
7. A clear, comprehensive and cohesive Communications Strategy for School Admissions should be developed with the SCC Communications team, schools, parents and other stakeholders.

### **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- The policy has impacted more heavily on certain communities than others and there is a need to implement action attempt to remedy this.
- Schools reported that they were not sufficiently well informed to contribute to the consultation for 2007 or to inform their parents of the changes and potential outcome, a review for 2009 would enable a full consultation to take place.
- A clearer more cohesive process needs to be established in order to support the operation of the applications system.
- In order for the process to work well, an efficient and reliable technical system is vital.
- The Service Delivery Agreement has the capacity to support the admissions process.
- Clearer communications should ensure that there is wider understanding of the policy, equal preference system and its implications and the admissions process.

### **WHAT HAPPENS NEXT:**

- Stakeholders are notified of the proposed in-year variations
- An application to The School Adjudicator's Office for an in- year variation is made.
- Recommendations are brought to the County Council on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2007 alongside the decision of the Schools Adjudicator.

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**Sarah Baker, Acting Principal Solicitor**

**The Department for Education and Skills**

**The Office of The School Adjudicator**

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**Sources/background papers:**

- Reports to Executive
    - Proposed change of Admissions Criteria for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools for September 2007 (17/01/06)
    - Consultation on Surrey's Admission arrangements for September 2007 for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools (09/03/06)
    - Consultation on Surrey's Admission arrangements for September 2007 for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools (28/03/06)
    - Consultation on Surrey's Admission arrangements for September 2008 for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools (27/02/07)
  - Admissions Criteria 2006/07
  - Stakeholder interviews (as stakeholder plan above)
  - School Admissions Policy for September 2007
  - Secondary Admissions Process (compiled by Admissions & Transport team 18/01/06)
  - Information on School Admissions & Transfers 07/08 (Primary)
  - Information on School Admissions & Transfers 07/08 (Secondary)
  - Schools Bulletin Service – Surrey's proposed Admission arrangements for September 2008
  - Letters and emails from parents (various)
  - Press releases (various)
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