

Children and Young People Select Committee

Scrutiny Review of School Organisation and Admission Arrangements (Phase 2)

March 2016

Children and Young People Select Committee
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Municipal Buildings
Church Road
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Select Committee – Membership

Councillor Carol Clark (Chair)
Councillor Tracey Stott (Vice Chair)
Councillor Elsi Hampton
Councillor Di Hewitt
Councillor Ross Patterson
Councillor Lauriane Povey
Councillor Rachel Proud
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Original Brief

Which of our strategic corporate objectives does this topic address?

Council Plan Objective – Children and Young People

- No Child Left Behind
- Ensuring that all young people are in receipt of education, employment and training

What are the main issues and overall aim of this review?

This is the second phase of this review. Phase one of the review took place between September 2014 and March 2015. The focus of phase one was:

- An understanding of school organisation, school place planning and the admissions process
- A consideration of the sibling link aspect of the over-subscription criteria for admissions
- A review of the admission zones for the 6 primary schools in Ingleby Barwick
- An examination of options relating to the admissions zone for Egglecliffe School.

The outcomes of phase one were reported to Cabinet in April 2015.

Phase two of the review will focus upon the following:

- Understanding and meeting the increased demand for primary places across the Borough, particularly in reception. It is proposed that this is prioritised as any changes to published admissions numbers in schools for 2017 will be subject to a consultation exercise that must now take place in an 8 week period between 1 October and 31 January (in previous years between 1 October and 31 March).

The main issue and overall aim of this aspect of the Review is to consider the challenge which the Council will face in relation to reception intake in 2016, 2017 and subsequent years to provide assurances that there is sufficient capacity in each of the six planning areas so that we can meet parental choice at acceptable levels.

- Reviewing the wider aspects of the approach to school organisation in the Borough.

The main aim of this aspect of the review will be to listen to the views of parents, governors and school leaders as part of a consideration of options and alternatives in school organisation.

The Committee will undertake the following key lines of enquiry:

- To understand the demand for primary places in the six planning areas and to be assured of sufficiency and acceptable level of meeting parental choice
- To examine the wider aspects of school organisation, the different approaches that can be undertaken and the zone system which currently operates in Stockton.
- To have an open dialogue with parents, governors and school leaders on the different approaches to school organisation and which is the best system for Stockton

Expected duration of review and key milestones:

10 months:

Agree Scope and Project Plan – July 2015
 School Organisation Plan 2015- 2019, Background Presentation/ Consultation Proposals;
 Admissions proposals for 2017 and additional capacity plans for 2016 – September 2015
 Obtaining Evidence/listening to the views of parents, school governors and school leaders on
 the approaches to school organisation September – December 2015
 Report on consultation and recommendations - January 2016
 Consideration of views and evidence on the approach to school organisation March/April 2016
 Report to Cabinet - March 2016

What information do we need?

Reports from phase one.
 Existing background information and legislative framework etc.
 School Organisation Plan 2013-17
 Pupil data and projected numbers
 School Capacity (SCAP) 2015 return (as submitted to DfE)
 Summary of recent and planned capital investment in Schools
 School Admissions Code
 Primary and Secondary Admissions booklet
 Applying for a primary & secondary school place information sent to parents
 Maps of zone boundaries/scatter grams showing take up of places

Who can provide us with further relevant evidence? (Cabinet Member, officer, service user, general public, expert witness, etc.)

Lynda Brown
 Jane Wright
 Darren Coulton

 Garry Cummings

What specific areas do we want them to cover when they give evidence?

Service Overview and feedback, Statutory Responsibilities, current Issues

 Capital Programme

How will this information be gathered? (e.g. Financial baselining and analysis, benchmarking, site visits, face-to-face questioning, telephone survey, survey)

Desk Top survey, meetings with parents, governors and school leaders. Discussion at Committee Meetings

How will key partners and the public be involved in the review?

Organised discussion/focus groups

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This report presents Cabinet with the outcomes of the Scrutiny Review of School Organisation and Admission Arrangements (Phase 2), undertaken by the Committee during the Municipal Year 2015/16. The topic was identified for review at Scrutiny Liaison Forum and included in the 2015/16 Work Programme by Executive Scrutiny Committee.

1.2 The review has sought to understand the demand for reception places across the Borough and has examined the wider aspects of the approach to school organisation in Stockton.

2.0 Background

What is School Organisation?

2.1 School Organisation is the means by which a Local Authority ensures it has sufficient quality places in schools and academies in every year group. Access to schools can be organised in a number of ways including using an open system where distance is part of the admissions criteria or operating a zone system; a secondary school feeder system can also be used.

2.2 In Stockton, a zone system operates for primary and secondary which means where a child lives governs where they go to school. Secondary zones follow the same boundary lines as primary zones. Academies / Free Schools have the option to change their zone and changes to zones require consultation.

How does the School Admissions System Work?

2.3 Local Authorities and Trusts have to follow the Schools Admission Code and annually determine admissions for the following year then publish by 15 March (for 2017). Any changes must be consulted on.

2.4 The Local Authority is responsible for the co-ordination of admissions to schools, academies and free schools and acts as a clearing house for all admissions using a system known as equal ranking. The equal ranking system ensures that the admissions criteria is applied independently to each choice of school regardless of whether the choice was first, second or third. Depending on the number of applications received for individual schools the child may be eligible for a place at all or none on the schools applied for. Where a child does not secure a place at one of the three choices of school, the admissions team would seek to offer the child a place in a school close to their home.

2.5 Voluntary Aided, Academies and Free Schools set their own admissions policy/ criteria whilst the Local Authority set this for maintained schools. An online prospectus must be published and there are two national offer days (1 March for secondary; 16 April for primary). There is also a statutory appeals process which parents/ guardians may choose to follow where a child does not get their preferred school.

Phase One

2.6 Phase one of the review took place between September 2014 and March 2015. The focus of phase one was:

- An understanding of school organisation, school place planning and the admissions process
- A consideration of the sibling link aspect of the over-subscription criteria for admissions
- A review of the admission zones for the six primary schools in Ingleby Barwick
- An examination of options relating to the admissions zone for Egglecliffe School.

2.7 The overall aim of the review was to ensure that the process and criteria for identifying priorities for 2014/15 had been transparent and robust and then to be involved in ensuring that the public consultation December 2014 – March 2015 was carried out appropriately and that the outcomes and report to Cabinet on recommendations in March 2015 have been subject to Scrutiny, prior to lodging with Secretary of State in April 2015.

2.8 Phase one of the review did not result in any changes to admission zones but it was agreed that further consideration of admission arrangements would take place in the context of Phase Two of the Review.

Phase Two

Increased demand for primary places

2.9 Current primary and secondary schools planning areas – pupil place profile (October 2015) reveals that there is still some surplus in secondary schools, generally in the higher year groups but there are consistent increasing numbers throughout primary schools. In 2008 there was a demand for 2100 reception places across the Borough. This has steadily increased with a projection of 2565 applications for reception places in 2016.

2.10 In 2015 there were 2501 applications at the close of the Admissions round on 15 January 2015. Although there were sufficient places available in the Borough as a whole, there was a significant increase in demand for places in North Stockton, Central Stockton, and Thornaby and, to a lesser extent, Billingham. There was a corresponding decrease in demand for places in the South of the Borough, most notably in Ingleby Barwick, but also in Yarm and Egglecliffe. To accommodate the additional demand in the over-subscribed areas, an additional 140 places were created.

2.11 The main issue and overall aim of this aspect of the Review has been to consider the challenge which the Council will face in relation to reception intake in 2016, 2017 and subsequent years to provide assurances that there is sufficient capacity in each of the six planning areas so that we can meet parental choice at acceptable levels. In 2015 94% were allocated their first choice school and over 97% were allocated one of their schools of choice. Whilst it is not always possible to meet parental choice, the challenge is to provide places in schools close to their homes. The current policy states that children should be offered a primary place within two miles of home.

2.12 There are also significant housing developments across the Borough which needs to be taken into account.

Reviewing key aspects of the wider approach to school organisation that prevails in Stockton

2.13 Within Stockton there are six planning areas. These are Billingham and Wolviston, North Stockton, Central Stockton, Thornaby, Ingleby Barwick, Egglecliffe and Yarm.

2.14 Schools are associated to one of these planning areas and the issues relating to sufficiency and place planning are conducted in the context of these planning areas.

2.15 Every school in Stockton has an 'admissions zone' which is a defined geographical area in which the school is located and from which it will draw most or all of the pupils who attend the school. In Stockton where you live determines your admissions zone school. Of course, parents are entitled to apply for a place at any school, although they do so on the understanding that strict criteria will apply where there is over-subscription and that children living in zone will have priority over those who live out of zone (with the exception of SEN, LAC and those with siblings in the school). When a school is over-subscribed, the following admissions criteria are applied to allocate places:

- Looked After Children
- Complex Needs
- Sibling Link
- In zone – social medical
- In zone – distance
- Social medical
- Distance

2.16 Although Stockton has an excellent record of children securing a place at their in-zone school, there have been circumstances recently where this has not been possible.

2.17 An alternative approach to school organisation operated by some local authorities is known as a catchment/feeder system. In this system primary schools have catchment areas (like zones) and secondary schools have feeder primaries, with the primary school that a child attends denoting which secondary school they would go to. This is a very different arrangement to the zone system which operates in Stockton.

2.18 The main aim of this aspect of the Review was to listen to the views of parents, governors and school leaders as part of a consideration of options and alternatives in school organisation. This will take into account over-subscription criteria, boundaries and what constitutes an exceptional circumstance.

2.19 Predicting pupil numbers is fundamental to both aspects of the review and Committee have taken the opportunity to scrutinise the approach that is taken to predicting demand.

3.0 Evidence

The Consultation Process

3.1 In order to inform the review a series of information gathering sessions were held which were also attended by Members. Details of the sessions are set out below:

Stakeholder Meeting (Diocesan leads and multi academy trust leads) – 13 October 2015 and follow up meetings with Diocesan representatives and multi academy trust leads.

Open Member Session – 28 October 2015 [was planned but didn't take place due to limited take-up]

Secondary Heads and Chairs of Governors Session– 13 October 2015 – North Shore Academy

Primary Heads and Chairs of Governors Sessions:

Billingham and Wolviston Planning Area – 20 October 2015
North Stockton Planning Area– 21 October 2015
Central Stockton Planning Area– 22 October 2015
Thornaby Planning Area– 2 November 2015
Ingleby Barwick Planning Area – 3 November 2015
Eaglescliffe and Yarm Planning Area – 4 November 2015

Secondary Heads Meeting – 3 December 2015

3.2 42 Head Teachers and 28 Chairs of Governors attended the sessions. Presentations were also made at Primary Head Teacher termly meetings to ensure the widest coverage and securing of views of all schools.

Parents Meetings:

Footsteps Children's Centre – 13 December 2015
Redhill Children's Centre – 19 January 2016
High Flyers Children's Centre – 27 January 2016
Sunrise Children's Centre – 29 January 2016

St Marks – 4 January 2016
Junction Farm – 6 January 2016
Hartburn – 7 January 2016
Bewley – 11 January 2016
Christ the King – 12 January 2016
Barley Fields – 19 January 2016

3.3 76 parents/ governors attended the Information Gathering Sessions.

3.4 The sessions were in the format of presentations from officers with the following key questions discussed:

School Organisation

- Would you support a move from the zone system that operates in Stockton to an open system for all primary and secondary schools?
- Would you support a move to feeder primary schools for secondary schools?
- Would you support a change to the admissions criteria for secondary to place in zone distance above sibling link?

Admissions to Reception

- How well does the system work?
- Are there ways in which we could improve projecting numbers and meeting demand?
- Are there ways in which we could improve communicating with schools through the admissions round?
- Which should be the key indicator – meeting parental preference or placing children within two miles from home?

Feedback from Information Gathering Sessions

(Head Teachers, Chairs of Governors, Councillors and Stakeholders)

Overarching Issues:

- Economic factors were affecting changing patterns of admission applications with an increase in admission applications from south Stockton to North and Central Stockton
- Primary admissions could also be affected by childcare considerations
- In year transfers were increasing. What measures can the local authority, schools and academies make to reduce the number of in-Borough in year transfers?
- The increased demand for primary places meant that it was difficult finding places for all siblings where families were moving into the Borough
- There was strong collaborative working between the Local Authority, Academies and maintained schools which is not always the case
- There was a need to take account of further planned housing development
- There are unlikely to be as many places available in neighbouring authorities e.g. Middlesbrough as there have been in the past, so less out of Borough placements for Stockton residents.
- Year on Year review of PANs could be beneficial
- Information on the new summer birthday rule would be provided to parents, schools and governors
- There needs to be clarity on what defines a sibling
- The implications for schools in taking children under managed moves under current sibling link arrangements need to be noted.

School Organisation

Would you support a move from the zone system that operates in Stockton to an open system for all primary and secondary schools?

3.5 With the exception of one group which was spilt, all groups were against a changing from the zone system to an open system. Reasons were:

- An open system may over promise and under deliver
- Partnership working/ cluster arrangements between primary and secondary would be more difficult in an open system
- A zone system enables schools to be better prepared and help to plan for the needs of the community. An open system may disadvantage particular communities in both primary and secondary
- Such a change might lead to adverse competition between schools
- An open system could appear as a “free for all”
- Parents are far more likely to want to attend their local school especially at primary level. Zones reinforced the idea of schools being at the heart of their local community which was important
- A structured system enabled an audit trail to be kept
- An open system could appear disorganised
- Retaining zones also made it easier for parents to navigate the system. If places were available, children could still be taken out of zone

3.6 Other comments

- Under an open system, distance would be the main criteria and families living in certain localities would always be disadvantaged
- With the zone system parents still had the right to express a preference for any school and a number of parents made reference to the fact that the zones provided some security and reassurance
- A benefit could be seen for not having zones because pupils would simply go to the nearest school. Looking at the map schools can be located on the edge of zones and pupils could be coming some considerable distance whilst someone just over the road from a school is actually in another zone
- There was a recognition that Barleyfields operated an overlapping zone
- There was felt to be some benefit in reviewing zone boundaries within planning areas taking into account developments, population and safe routes to schools.
- RC Diocesan Directors wished it to be noted that the admissions criteria for their primary schools operated on distance and secondaries operated with feeder primaries, in practice.
- Carmel Multi Academy Trust sponsors four schools in Stockton – two primary and two secondary. The Trust are keen to stress that whilst they are RC Academies they are open to children of different and no faiths and beliefs and that they are committed to working in partnership with other Stockton schools and academies as part of Campus Stockton.

Would you support a move to feeder primary schools for secondary schools?

3.7 Whilst recognising that there were advantages to feeder primary schools, the general consensus was to retain the existing arrangements with a preference for the more informal partner primary school arrangements in operation. It was recognised that there was still scope for partnership working and that the transition guarantee should ensure a standardised approach for transition from primary to secondary no matter what schools were attended.

3.8 Reasons for retaining the current system were:

- It was felt that such a huge change would be difficult to manage and could become over complicated particularly given Academy freedoms
- Many pupils are able to opt to go to different secondary schools
- The choice of secondary school would influence the choice of primary school, this could have an adverse impact on some primaries
- It was not fair that decisions made at four years old should determine secondary choices
- The choice of primary could be determined by childcare considerations
- The drawback of making the change to a feeder school was that choices would be made at four years old on how good a secondary school was and this would influence primary applications. The choice of primary school and the education they provided should be seen as being important in its own right

3.9 One Head was in favour of moving to feeder primary schools on the basis that it wasn't good for children to attend a secondary where they did not know any other children.

Would you support a change to the admissions criteria for secondary to place in-zone distance above sibling link?

3.10 Views were mixed in relation to this question but with those attending the sessions acknowledging both arguments. There was continued strong support for retaining the current priority for the sibling link for primary admissions. For secondary, however, there was a degree of support for reviewing the criteria to place in zone distance above sibling link. A number of sessions suggested the following alternative over-subscription criteria:

- LAC
- Complex Needs
- In Zone Siblings
- In Zone Distance
- Out of Zone Siblings
- Out of Zone Distance

3.11 Some parents and head teachers suggested a means by which children – in and out of zone – who attended a local ‘family’ primary school should be prioritised access to the secondary school.

3.12 Arguments against reviewing the criteria were:

- Making the change might lead to a rise in in-year transfers and could cause anxiety for parents and children
- Did the system need to change given that there had not been a consistent long standing problem of this type arising?
- Retaining the sibling link at secondary might also support minority groups.
- Parents usually wanted siblings to stay together
- It was important to consider what worked for families. Where siblings attended the same school it helped with holiday alignment, uniform hand me downs etc.

3.13 Arguments in support of reviewing the criteria were:

- It was unfair that children living on the doorstep of a school couldn't get a place due to siblings from further afield attending
- There were differences between primary and secondary in that children did not necessarily need an adult to take them to school; secondary age children could travel independently to school and this might also help to foster independence
- Parents tended to express preference based on the quality of the school rather than siblings attending
- Children did have different needs and placing them in different schools might also be beneficial

3.14 Other comments included:

- One academy reported that they already prioritised in-zone distance over sibling link
- Any changes, if made, would need to be phased in gradually
- Officers undertook to investigate how the sibling link applied in respect of special resource units
- The needs of the community had to be considered
- One school/ academy used sibling link as a tiebreaker and not as a specific criteria

- Some parents felt that transport to separate schools was still an issue with secondary aged children whilst others felt that children of this age should be able to travel independently

Should we establish locally determined benchmarks for the percentage of first preference and the percentage of stated preferences?

3.15 Heads were in support of this and felt that it would provide evidence of the high number of parental preferences which were accommodated in Stockton.

3.16 Governors questioned whether this was really necessary.

3.17 It was noted that increased demand for places could have an adverse effect on first preferences and that awareness of this was important.

Admissions to Reception

How well does the system work?

3.18 The Admission team were commended for their excellent support.

3.19 Councillors commented that parents do sometimes feel threatened by the appeals process and need to be supported.

3.20 The equal ranking system needed to be explained in simple terms to parents

3.21 It was suggested that there was a role for nursery schools in facilitating meetings with parents about primary admissions and for primary schools in facilitating meeting with parents about secondary admissions

3.22 Suggestions for ways of enhancing information for parents included workshops, Q&As, plain language, YouTube

3.23 It was felt frustrating that children did not necessarily get a place in reception at the same school as the nursery they attended although the reason for this was accepted and understood.

3.24 Where numbers changed dramatically for primary admissions, could the LA instigate an information sharing procedure between schools so that opportunities for secondments of staff could be maximised?

Are there ways in which we could improve projecting numbers and meeting demand?

3.25 It was suggested that more consideration is given to nursery numbers and the trends of nursery places following through into reception. It was also suggested that nursery waiting list information may be of use.

3.26 There was a comment that the system had worked well until 2015 and that predictions in planning areas had been accurate on the whole.

3.27 At the Ingleby Barwick Heads meeting it was proposed that an in depth analysis be undertaken in respect of the unusual demographics in this area. This 'task and finish' piece of work should involve representative governors, Heads and SBC officers and if possible

statisticians from TVU with findings being reported by Summer 2016. This would enable the approach to be reviewed and if appropriate used in other areas of the Borough. It would also identify any proposed changes that required further consultation.

Are there ways in which we could improve communicating with schools through the Admissions round?

3.28 Heads felt that communications with schools could be improved with indications of numbers being provided at the earliest opportunity to assist in budget setting.

3.29 Officers advised that regular updates could be provided on the number of first preferences received.

3.30 It was also suggested that an admissions pack could be sent to schools for them to send out with school prospectuses.

Which should be the key indicator – meeting parental preference or placing children within two miles of home?

3.30 Attendees at the schools sessions felt that placing children within two miles from home was the most important indicator.

3.31 Attendees at the Councillor and Stakeholder Session felt that parental preference was most important.

Feedback from Information Gathering Sessions – Parents

3.32 Similar views were expressed by parents. Almost all parents attending the sessions had been through the admissions process. Parents were aware that:

- Having a nursery place did not guarantee a place in reception at the same school
- There were timescales for applying for a school place
- That schools had an admissions number
- That parents were told allocations on the same day

3.33 Most parents were familiar with the zone arrangements operating across the Borough but there was a lack of understanding about the equal ranking system.

3.34 A small number of parents would support a move to an open system but the vast majority were in favour of retaining zones. Parents felt that this helped them to navigate their way around the system and have some degree of understanding about the school they would have the greatest chance of obtaining a place at.

3.35 Parents were not in favour of introducing feeder primary schools. It was felt that parents should have the flexibility to express a preference at secondary rather than for decisions to be made at primary.

3.36 Views were split about changing the admission criteria to place in zone distance above sibling link. A number of parents suggested that there should be a higher priority in respect of in zone siblings over out of zone siblings. All parents were clear, however, that sibling link was more important than distance at primary.

3.37 There were generally positive experience about the admissions system and there was support for admissions champions and workshops for parents prior to the admissions process. There were also suggestions for greater use of social media.

4.0 Key Findings

Increased Demand:

4.1 For admissions into primary in 2015 there was an unprecedented shift in the demand for places from the south of the borough to north/central Stockton and Thornaby than was previously forecasted. Whilst at a borough level we have sufficient primary places, they are not necessarily in the right planning area, therefore the Council agreed to make some temporary expansions across a number of schools in order to meet the Council's policy for ensuring that wherever possible and if requested, a primary aged child is educated within two miles of their home address.

4.2 Work has been undertaken to assess whether the shift in demand for places was peculiar to admissions for 2015. It is anticipated that this trend will continue and that the Council will need to ensure that there are sufficient places in a number of planning areas in order to meet current and future demand. A feasibility study was completed to identify suitable schools for capital investment alongside some interrogation of primary census data which would ensure that at least 5% surplus was created in North Stockton, Central Stockton and Thornaby. This has resulted in a plan to create an additional 840 places in the following schools, with increased PANs from 2017:

1. Hardwick Green Primary Academy from 30 to 60
2. St John's CE Primary from 30 to 45
3. St Mark's Elm Tree CE Primary from 45 to 60
4. Bowesfield Primary from 30 to 60
5. Christ the King RC Primary from 45 to 60
6. Thornaby CE Primary from 45 to 60

4.3 It is also anticipated that the proposed phased delivery will allow for some additional capacity in September 2016, with further works in 2017 to complete proposals.

4.4 Projections also suggest that there should be sufficient places in our secondary schools for the coming next few years. However, as higher numbers of primary pupils begin to move up into secondary schools there will be a need to increase capacity as demand for places exceeds supply from 2018 onwards. Further work will be undertaken to identify priority areas and solutions.

Wider approach to School Organisation:

4.5 The Committee found:

- The approach that the local authority takes regarding annual consultation on determination of admission arrangements was well received
- There is widespread support for retaining the zone system with a small number of requests to look at individual zones boundaries
- There is little support for a move to feeder primary schools

- There were mixed views on whether the sibling link criteria for secondaries should be revised
- RC schools working practice is around distance and feeder schools
- Need for more regular updates on admissions numbers and preferences for schools
- The equal ranking system is not always understood

Draft Recommendations

1. That further work be undertaken with Secondary Head Teachers and Principals to plan for the increasing pressure on secondary places.
2. That a further piece of work be carried out to examine the particular socio and demographic trends in Ingleby Barwick. This Task and Finish piece of work to involve representative Governors, Heads and SBC Officers, Ward Members and statisticians from TVU with findings being reported by Summer 2016.

(This would enable the approach to be reviewed and if appropriate used in other areas of the Borough. It would also identify any proposed changes that required further consultation.)

3. That the approach taken by the Local Authority regarding annual consultation on determination of admission arrangements should continue.
4. That the current zone arrangements remain in place but that a feasibility exercise be undertaken to conclude whether any small adjustments could be made.
5. That informal working arrangements continue between families of schools together with implementation of the transition guarantee.
6. Further consultation take place with secondary schools and academies regarding the priority of the sibling link over-subscription criteria for secondary admissions.
7. That RC schools working practice in respect of their admissions criteria around distance and feeder schools be reflected in admissions documentation.
8. That timely reporting on admissions numbers and preferences be agreed with Head Teachers.
9. That workshops with parents should take place to explain the equal ranking system at Children's Centres, nurseries and primary schools as part of an improved programme of communication with parents.

Glossary

LA	Local Authority
PAN	Published Admissions Number
LAC	Looked After Children
SEN	Special Educational Needs
TVU	Tees Valley Unlimited
LAC	Looked After Children
SCAP	School Capacity Action Plan
DfE	Department for Education
RC	Roman Catholic
CE	Church of England
SBC	Stockton Borough Council