

CHOICE ADVISER FOR HEREFORDSHIRE

REPORT BY ADMISSIONS & TRANSPORT OFFICER

LOCAL ADMISSIONS FORUM

8TH MARCH 2007

Purpose

To explain to the Committee the role of the Choice Adviser in the admission process.

Financial Implications

There is a cost to the employment of this additional member of staff. In the present financial year the DfES has offered a grant of £18,000.

Report

Herefordshire have appointed Carol Weston as Choice Adviser. Carol started in post on Monday 12th February 2007. In line with DfES guidance, outlined below, Carol is line managed by the Parent Partnership section within the Children & Young People's Directorate and therefore "independent" of the Admissions & Transport Department.

Choice Advice – Guidelines for Local Authorities

Introduction

1. All children of all backgrounds, race or religion, must have the same degree of access to good quality schools. Children must not be disadvantaged because their parents have difficulty in accessing the information they need to make a choice of school or because their parents do not, for whatever reason, engage with the process of applying for a school. In order for all children to have the best chance in life, it is essential that their parents and carers have the information they need to make decisions about which schools to apply for and, where they need it, support in making the application.
2. The transition between primary and secondary school can be one of the most difficult times for families and children. Most parents and carers recognise the critical importance of getting a place in a secondary school that will meet their children's academic and developmental needs, is easy to travel to, and where their children will be happy and want to attend.
3. Admission arrangements can often appear complex and this Code makes clear the importance of ensuring straightforward procedures that are easily understood and that all families can access and navigate. Whilst the majority of families, armed with information about the schools in their area, are able to navigate the system successfully and gain a school place that meets their requirements, there are a number of families who will still find the system difficult to understand and challenging to operate. There are also a small number of parents who, for one reason or another, are unable or unwilling to engage with the process. This tends to happen more frequently in the most deprived communities and puts the children affected at a significant disadvantage.

4. In order to ensure that these children are able to attend a school that will meet their needs and have the opportunity to realise their full potential as all children should, the Government has provided funding for local authorities to establish an independent Choice Advice service in their area. Choice Advice will enable those parents who find it hardest to engage with, and navigate, the admissions system to make informed decisions about which schools will best meet their child's needs.

Statutory duty to provide support for parents

5. Section 42 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 amends section 81 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 to place a duty on local authorities to provide advice and assistance to all parents with children of school age in their area, when they are deciding which schools they want to send their children to. Choice Advice is one way that local authorities can discharge this duty for more disadvantaged parents at the secondary school transfer stage.

Choice Advisers

6. The primary aim of Choice Advisers is to empower those parents who may struggle with the admissions system, to make informed and realistic choices of which secondary school to apply for in the best interest of their child. Choice Advisers do not take decisions for parents and cannot guarantee a place at a particular school, but the service will place these families on a level playing field with all other families when making the important decision of which secondary schools to apply for.
7. The role of Choice Advisers **is to** help families optimise their choices using all the information to hand as detailed below, and use local knowledge of what individual schools have to offer to ensure parents are more likely to get the best place for their child. Where appropriate, this will include information about schools, which might be in different local authority areas with additional advice covering local authority school admission regimes and individual schools' admission criteria.
8. Choice Advisers are expected to know about:
 - a) How the **co-ordinated admissions** system works in their own, and neighbouring, local authority areas when schools in that area might be available to the child to attend.
 - b) **Admission policies** for the appropriate community, voluntary aided, foundation, Trust, independent and boarding schools and Academies, which might be available to the child to attend.
 - c) **Performance and value-added data** for appropriate schools.
 - d) **The Ofsted report** of the last inspection of the school.
 - e) **Admissions data** from previous years including the number of applications received, number of children admitted and success rate of appeals.
 - f) The **school's own description** of their offer contained in their prospectus and their online School Profile, including their ethos and any special facilities.
 - g) **Special needs and disability policy and provision**, drawing on the knowledge and experience of local parent-partnership services.

- h) Details of the curriculum offer including the **school's specialism** in the case of Specialist Schools.
 - i) **Times of the school day** and **term dates** including any knowledge of proposals to change the pattern of education provision.
 - j) **Transport details** including financial assistance to help with the cost of travel to and from school and home–school distances.
 - k) Details of **school uniform policy** and how families can obtain financial assistance to help with the cost.
 - l) **E-admissions** and online applications.
9. Local authorities **should** make Choice Advice available to families living within their boundary irrespective of where their children attend primary school. Where a family requiring support is identified at a primary school in one local authority area and they reside in another, local authorities **should** work together to ensure that the family receives Choice Advice from the most appropriate source. This is very likely to arise in large conurbations covered by a number of authorities.
10. It is widely recognised that those working in local authority admissions teams have an important role to play in advising parents about school places and for most families, this, coupled with the information available about school places and the process, is sufficient enough to enable them to confidently choose which schools to express a preference for. Some families, often the most disadvantaged, require extra support and want this to be from a professional. Every local authority **should** provide Choice Advice for families in their area who need it. Local authorities have the flexibility in deciding how best to deliver their Choice Advice service locally, but **must** provide an independent service that is focussed on the needs of children in the transition between primary and secondary school whose families would normally find this process difficult to negotiate.
11. The independence of the service gives assurances that there is no conflict between the need of the local authority to allocate places at its schools and the advice parents receive. Local authorities can secure the independence of the service in a variety of ways for example, by contracting it out to the voluntary sector or incorporating it into the Children's Information or Parent Partnership Services. Where local authorities deliver the service through drawing together existing transition programmes or through their admissions team, in order to avoid any conflict of interests for the individuals, they **must** ensure as a minimum, that the Choice Advisers are not in the same management chain or reporting lines as the local authority's admissions staff. They must also satisfy themselves that the advice on offer is genuinely independent and includes impartial advice on all relevant local schools, including those not within the local authority's own area as appropriate. Whatever model local authorities choose, they **must** ensure that the Choice Advisers work closely with the admissions staff and schools to ensure the effective sharing of information, so that parents are offered the most appropriate advice and support they need.
12. These guidelines are intended to help local authorities develop their own approach to Choice Advice in a way that best suits their local needs. Further guidance on establishing an independent Choice Advice service, example delivery models, information on training and accreditation, and an outline person-specification and job-description are available on the Choice Advice website at www.dfes.gov.uk/choiceadvice. This also includes case studies of good practice

taking place around England.

Targeting Choice Advice

13. Nationally, research shows that around 6% of parents with children transferring to secondary school are not interested in choosing a school. This often means that there is a small group of children who do not have a secondary school place when they leave primary school and some are allocated a place that is not suitable. Traditionally these children are at the greatest risk of slipping through the net and disappearing from the system. These are the families that Choice Advisers will target and focus their advice on and they **should**, where appropriate, offer one-to-one support.
14. The Choice Advice service **should** also support disadvantaged families in maximising the likelihood of their successfully securing a place in the school that will best meet their children's needs.
15. The service **should** be made available to all members of the family who have responsibility for the child and want extra support, including fathers and mothers and those who are not normally resident with the child, as well as any adults with caring responsibility. Wherever possible, the child **should** be included in any discussions and provided with appropriate advice so that they are able to express an informed view about their future school place.

Quality Assurance

16. Parents must have confidence in the advice they receive and will need to know that it is unaffected by any potential political or administrative considerations at play in the local authority or local schools.
17. There are measures in place to secure the independence of the Choice Advisers, in particular through:
 - a. a clear status as an independent professional, accredited through the Support and Quality Assurance network;
 - b. an online forum at www.dfes.gov.uk/choiceadvice, where Choice Advisers can access support and advice about issues and share best practice; and
 - c. evaluation of the impact of the service, including analysis of parental satisfaction data.

Recommendations

That (a) the role of Choice Adviser be noted;

and;

(b) all admission authorities and all schools be advised of this new role.