

Choice Advice

Introduction

1. Admission arrangements can appear complex. This Code makes clear the importance of ensuring straightforward procedures that are easily understood and that all parents can access and navigate. However, there will always be some parents who will find the system more difficult to understand and challenging to operate than others or who are unwilling to engage with the process.

2. Children **must not** be disadvantaged because their parents have difficulty accessing the school admissions process or do not engage with the process of applying for a school.

3. Section 86(1A) of the SSFA 1998 places a duty on local authorities to provide advice and assistance to parents when they are deciding which schools to apply for. However, some of the parents most in need of support may be reluctant or unable to access help from traditional sources. Such parents require more intensive support from professionals who act independently from the local authority and work pro-actively to identify and reach them.

4. Choice Advice will enable those parents who find it hardest to navigate the secondary school admissions system to make informed and realistic decisions about which schools to apply for in the best interests of their child. This will place these families on a level playing field with other families who are better able to navigate the admissions process.

5. The Department provides funding through the Area Based Grant to enable each local authority to provide an independent Choice Advice service in their area.

Requirement to provide support to those parents who most need help in navigating the secondary school admissions process.

5. Local authorities have the flexibility in deciding how best to deliver their Choice Advice service locally, but they **must** provide an independent service that is focused on supporting the families who most need support in navigating the secondary school admissions process. They may also provide Choice Advice at the primary school admission stage and for in-year admissions.

6. The service **should** be made available to all members of the family who have caring responsibility for the child and require extra support, including parents who are not normally resident with the child. 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 the school they would like to attend.

7. Where a parent requiring support lives in one local authority area and their child attends primary school in another local authority area, **Choice Advice** should be provided by the local authority in whose area the family resides, the home local authority. However, by local agreement, it could be provided by the local authority in whose area the child attends school.

Independence

8. Choice Advice **must** be independent and free from any potential conflict of interest between the need of the local authority to allocate places and the advice that parents receive. It **must** include impartial advice on all relevant local schools, including those not within the local authority's own area.

9. Local authorities can secure the independence of the service in a variety of ways, for example, by contracting with a voluntary sector organisation or incorporating it into the Family Information Service or Parent Partnership Service. They **must** ensure that, as a minimum, Choice Advisers are not in the same management chain or reporting lines as the local authority's admissions staff.

Targeting Choice Advice

10. Choice Advice **must** be targeted at those parents who most need support with the secondary school admissions process. Target groups will vary between local authorities depending on local circumstances but are likely to include disadvantaged parents and those who are unwilling to engage with the secondary school admissions process.

11. Local authorities and Choice Advisers **should** market their service to ensure that they reach the families most in need of their support and that other relevant agencies and professionals are aware of the service they provide.

12. Many parents in need of Choice Advice will be 'hard to reach' and unlikely to approach the service themselves. Choice Advisers **should** be proactive in reaching these parents and **should** develop good links with organisations that may be able to refer parents to them e.g. local schools, education welfare officers and the Parent Partnership service.

The role of the Choice Adviser

13. The role of the Choice Adviser is to support parents who are most likely to struggle with the admissions system in securing the best possible secondary school place for their child. Choice Advisers will not take decisions for parents and cannot guarantee a place at a particular school.

14. Choice Advice **should** be provided in the way that best meets parents' needs. In many cases this will involve face-to-face and one-to-one meetings.

15. Choice Advisers **should** support parents in accessing and making best use of the information available to them. As part of this, they **should** know about and be able to help parents interpret:

- a) The co-ordinated admissions system in their own and neighbouring local authority areas;
- b) The admission policies of all local schools including independent schools, boarding schools and schools in neighbouring local authorities;
- c) The performance and value-added data for local schools;
- d) The Ofsted reports for local schools;
- e) Admissions data from previous years including the number of applications received by and the number of children admitted to local schools and the proportion of appeals for each school which are successful;
- f) Local schools' own description of their offer as contained in their prospectus or online School Profile, including information about their ethos and any special facilities;
- g) Details of each school's curriculum offer including their specialism in the case of Specialist Schools;
- g) The special needs and disability policies of local schools, plus information about the statementing process and its implications when applying for a school place;
- i) Times of the school day and term dates for local schools, including any proposals to change these;
- j) Information about the distance to local schools and the transport available, plus information about any financial assistance that may be available to help with the cost of travel;
- k) Details of the uniform policy of local schools, plus information about any financial assistance that may be available to help with the cost;

l) The range of relevant professionals, specialists and organisations available and how to contact them e.g. for special educational needs issues; and

m) E-admissions and online applications.

17. In order to provide parents with the best possible advice, Choice Advisers **should** develop strong links and working relationships with other local organisations such as the local authority admissions team and the Parent Partnership service.

Appeals

18. Appealing against the decision of an admission authority can be stressful and challenging for parents. It is good practice for Choice Advisers to provide support during the appeals process, particularly to those parents who accessed Choice Advice at the application stage. Choice Advisers may support parents in preparing their appeal and may accompany parents to the appeal hearing. With local agreement, they may also present an appeal on parents' behalf.

Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Network

19. The Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Network (CAS&QAN) supports local authorities, Choice Advisers and Choice Adviser managers in providing a high quality, independent Choice Advice service. Its activities include providing support on-line, by email and by phone, organising regional events, and providing opportunities to share good practice so that local authorities and their Choice Advice teams can provide an effective, pro-active service.