

## PUPIL ADMISSIONS – TRANSFER OF YEAR 6 PUPILS TO HIGH SCHOOLS, SEPTEMBER 2004

Report By: SCHOOL SERVICES MANAGER

### Wards Affected

Countywide

### Purpose

1. To consider the outcomes at 15th March, 2004 of the newly introduced admission arrangements for high schools under which parents are entitled to express three preferences for admission of their children into Year 7.

### Financial Implications

2. The costs of implementing the scheme, including purchase of an appropriate software package to assist analysis of parental preferences and the process of allocating places, have been covered within the Education Service budget.

### Report

3. During 2003, the Council's admissions criteria for transfer between primary and secondary schools were the subject of a major review. A number of changes were agreed by the Herefordshire Local Admissions Forum, with final confirmation by the Herefordshire Council in June 2003.
4. Within the consultation, and the approval process, it was also decided that the Council should introduce, at the first opportunity in 2004, the new national arrangements that will become compulsory for all LEAs from 2005, under which parents have an entitlement to indicate three preferred high schools for their child's education from the age of transfer (age 11 in Herefordshire).
5. Following that decision, the Education Directorate prepared a Herefordshire scheme which after approval by the Local Admissions Forum, as accepted by the DfES as a recognised scheme provided in accordance with the terms of the Education Act 2002.

### Key features of the new three-preference admission arrangements

6. The key features of the three-preference admissions scheme are set out in the following paragraphs.
7. Herefordshire's defined a **closing date** of 7th November 2003 following consultation with its neighbours, with a **national offer date** of 1st March 2004.

8. Under the arrangements, LEAs have a new responsibility to **co-ordinate all admissions** of their residents, in consultation with relevant Aided Schools and neighbouring LEAs. Each LEA is required to circulate a **common application form** to all relevant parents. LEAs must then receive, and analyse applications and allocate places for all students living within their boundaries, after asking relevant Aided schools and neighbouring LEAs whether or not they can accommodate the individual preferences expressed for their school(s).
9. In this first year of the new scheme, the necessary co-ordination has been achieved by ready agreement with voluntary aided high schools (Bishop of Hereford Bluecoat and St Mary's RC High) and with Shropshire who are also part of the nationally agreed arrangements. In the case of the other neighbouring LEAs, co-ordinated arrangements were agreed on a voluntary basis, as a temporary measure until the full national arrangements apply in 2005. Relevant voluntary aided schools and other LEAs were sent details of parental applications relating to their school(s), (without knowing those parents' other preferences), so that they could apply their admissions criteria and send back to the LEA the list of parents in priority order. That information was then analysed alongside the parents' other preferences before the allocations were finalised.
10. It should be noted that all three of the parents' preferences are regarded as a **first preferences** even though parents are able to indicate the sequence in which they wish their preferences to be considered. Each parent receives the highest of their preferences that can be achieved after all the admission criteria have been applied. Most parents will receive an offer of one of their three preferences. However, in some cases it may be necessary for an alternative school to be offered, i.e. if a parent's highest priority applications are for over-subscribed schools at which all the available places are taken by higher priority applicants.

### **Interim report on the outcome of parental applications for places in September 2004**

11. Initial applications were received from 2,000 parents for high school places. A significant number of parents indicated only one or two preferences rather than the three permitted, so that the combined total of preferences amounted to 4,500.
12. The applications received were analysed very carefully in the period after the November closing date. The analysis was complex as it had to begin with a priority weighting of every single preference for each of the named schools. That exercise involved sorting all 4,500 expressed preferences into priority lists for each of the County's high schools, including the information provided by Aided schools, and also taking note for relevant parents of decisions made by neighbouring LEAs. In the case of the 12 community high schools, every preference then had to be ranked according to the key criteria of the County's main admission priorities, as follows –
  - (i) highest priority to families living within the school's catchment area;
  - (ii) next priority to children with brothers or sisters already at the school;
  - (iii) next priority to measured distance from the family home to the school.

13. At the allocation stage, the position of individuals in the lists altered as parents who could be allocated their first preference were removed from the other lists, with the process continuing until all available places were allocated. The final lists for allocated places at each school, therefore, were significantly different from the lists produced initially. The process is similar to that used in electoral systems that use proportional representation, when the final outcome depends on successive analyses of the multiple voting preferences.
14. After the allocation process had been completed, it was then necessary for the printed outcomes to be checked again with the application forms to ensure that the decisions to be reported to parents were actually in line with the intentions they had expressed in their applications. This stage of the analysis should be quicker in future years, now that the software package used for the complex analyses referred to above has now gone through a full, live test.
15. Parents were sent their notification letters, with supporting information, on Monday, 1st March (a copy of the letter and the main information are included at Appendix 1 to this report). It was possible for 87% of parents to be allocated a place at a school of their first preference, with 95% of parents allocated a place in one of the three schools they had indicated. This outcome is comparable with the results under the previous single preference system, after allowing for the fact that the earlier system constrained parents to balance their true wishes against the practical consideration that a school they might prefer most could be one for which they were unlikely to be successful if they lived outside the catchment area and at some distance from the school. In such circumstances, many parents under the previous single-preference system expressed a preference for a local school so as to avoid the risk of having to send their child to an under-subscribed school that would be difficult to reach from home. In contrast, the three-preference system allows parents greater flexibility to give their highest preferences for schools for which their position on the priority list may be relatively low.
16. The allocation letter indicated to parents that they had an opportunity to review their preferences in the light of the decision and to apply by 12th March for places remaining at the schools that were not over-subscribed (details given in Appendix 1 to this report). 12 parents took the opportunity to apply for unallocated places, including some parents who had been allocated one of their first three preferences. The scope for amended offers has increased since the notification letter, as some parent(s) have indicated that they do not wish to take up a place at a maintained school in Herefordshire. 40 parents changed their preferences or withdrew their application after the announcement, with the result that 140 further changes were possible as parents could be allocated places at a school of their higher preference.
17. Parents were also given the opportunity to appeal for a higher preference than had been allocated to them. 37 parents had done so within the 3-week appeal period, made up of 19 for community high schools (the lowest number since reorganisation) and 18 for the two aided schools taken together. The extent to which such appeals will need to be held will depend on continuing movements as parents accept alternative places and refuse others. The end result is likely to be that a higher proportion of parents will achieve one of their preferences than is apparent in the interim results at 15th March. A further report on the final outcomes will be presented to this Committee at their meeting on 22nd June.

### **Possible improvements for subsequent years (and for the new two-preference system for primary schools)**

18. The indications are that the system has been introduced effectively, with very few concerns expressed by a parent about the process, notwithstanding disappointment felt by some parents about the offer they received. This is a successful outcome, for which the Admissions Service, and the support teams (including the Legal Department) who assisted them, deserve commendation.
19. Notwithstanding the broad effectiveness of the new arrangements, some initial thought has been given to a number of improvements that might be made to the arrangements for September 2005. In particular –
  - (i) there was some lack of clarity about whether the offer letters would be **sent** to parents, or **received** by them, on the offer day. Such uncertainty meant that more than 200 telephone calls to clarify that point were received on 1st March, the day on which the allocations were being posted. The information for parents will be reworded to reduce the risk of such uncertainty next year;
  - (ii) it is also clear that it would be helpful to encourage parents in future years to raise initial queries by email when they receive their allocations, especially Herefordshire is a national pilot for the on-line application scheme devised through ODPM as detailed below. It may also be helpful to increase the number of staff briefed to handle the heavy volume of enquiries that can be within 48 hours of the announcement.
20. Other improvements being considered involve further developing the way in which schools relate to parents about their application, and the way in which incomplete or late applications are dealt with. The Herefordshire Admissions Service aims to ensure that 100% of parents with Year 6 children due to transfer to high school will fully understand and meet the requirement to complete an application form and return it by the national closing date, or give clear reasons for unavoidable delay.
21. These lessons will also be borne in mind when equivalent arrangements are made for primary schools which, from next year, will give parents an entitlement to express *two first preferences*.

### **On-line applications**

22. As previously stated, plans are now well underway to introduce the opportunity for parents to make direct, on-line applications for high school places: for the September 2005 admissions. The Herefordshire Admissions Service, which is now recognised as among the highest performing LEA admissions services in England, has been successful with 3 other LEAs in a joint bid to be part of the national pilot development for such on-line applications. A grant of £70,000 has been made available to the group (Birmingham, South Gloucestershire, Bristol City and Herefordshire). The necessary software should be available for trial in June 2004 for going on-line in September 2004.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**That the Committee consider the actions taken within the Herefordshire Education Service to introduce, monitor and deal with the new national arrangements for pupil admissions, and identify areas in which future development is required.**

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For further information on the subject of this report is available from  
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