BRISTOL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

An overview of the School Admission Arrangements in Bristol

Conclusions of the People Scrutiny Commission

May 2017



1. Executive Summary

Overview and Scrutiny, known in Bristol as 'Scrutiny' is a process that ensures that decisions taken by the Council and its partners reflect the opinions, wishes and priorities of residents in Bristol.

School admission arrangements were highlighted as a priority area by the People Scrutiny Commission in the 2016/17 work programme. Councillors had questions about how the Local Authority approached school admissions and school appeals, and further clarity was required around the relationship between Bristol City Council and Academies. Councillors felt it was important to receive information from residents on their experience of school admission arrangements in Bristol.

In addition to this Bristol elected a new Mayor in May 2016. Mayor Marvin Rees identified School Admissions as a priority area in The Bristol City Council Corporate Strategy 2017 - 2022. The strategy outlines seven key commitments, with one of them being *'We will increase the number of school places and introduce a fairer admissions policy'.*

The Mayor recognised the need for in depth consideration of the complex issue and the item was referred to the People Scrutiny Commission.

Two Scrutiny events were held:

- **Overview:** A workshop in December 2016 provided Councillors with a detailed overview of how School Admission arrangements were administered in Bristol.
- **Scrutiny:** An Inquiry Day provided a forum for community stakeholders and school representatives to present their views on the school admission arrangements in Bristol.

Following the events the People Scrutiny Commission proposes the following five recommendations:

Recommendation 1. Strengthen Bristol City Council's oversight of Admissions through an Annual update:

a. Scrutiny to review school admissions information annually and submit a report which tracks the inquiry day recommendations, to the Executive Board.
b. It is recommended that the update is presented to scrutiny in late May/early June so observations can be included in the comments section of the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) annual report.
c. An annual meeting with key school representatives and the Council should be set up to review the annual report.
d. The report should include information on the percentage pupil premium intake in each Bristol school to present to schools for consideration.



Recommendation 2. Councillors recommend that the Mayor:
a. meets with Principals and Chairs of Academy Boards, that have a catchment area that extends beyond Bristol, to discuss increasing the percentage of places reserved for Bristol pupils
b. requires all new or expanding schools, which receive capital investment from Bristol City Council, to prioritise Bristol pupils as part of their admission criteria.

Recommendation 3. Officers to work with Councillors and community groups to strengthen advice and support available for parents on admissions processes, building on the successful Health Champions model in Public Health (Appendix 1 provides an outline of Health Champions). Councillors should actively encourage parents / carers to use all three of their preference choices and include a local school.

Recommendation 4. Councillors recommend that the Mayor endorses a campaign, to include social media, faith groups and City Partners, to recruit more Black and Minority Ethnicity members on BCC Appeals Panels

Recommendation 5. Request the Mayor, Councillors and City Partners take opportunities to promote Bristol schools and offer targeted support for under-subscribed schools, for example Councillors and City Partners could:
a. Meet with Head teachers and attend school open days
b. Promote local business links
c. Become a school governor.
d. Share key achievements and improvements in individual schools

2.1 Background and context

As the Local Education Authority (LEA) Bristol City Council has legal roles and responsibilities which include:

- Ensuring sufficient school places are available
- Reducing surplus places by closing or reorganising schools
- Assessing and providing home to school transport
- Providing support services for schools
- Assisting the government in implementing initiatives and legislation relating to schools, children and families
- Allocating finance to schools to act as the admission authority for Community and Controlled schools and the coordinating authority for all schools.

In previous years the majority of schools were state funded and were accountable to the Local Authority. Since the Academies Act 2010 the number of academies in Bristol has increased dramatically. Academy schools are directly funded by the Department for Education and independent of local authority control. Academies are run by academy trusts and do not have to follow the national curriculum. They have greater freedom to set their own term times and admission arrangements. If a parent/carer has been refused a place for their child at a preferred



school they have the right to appeal against the decision of the Admission Authority. Academies can choose to administer their own school appeals. Appendix A provides an explanation of some key terms.

Bristol City Council works with partner organisations, including Academies as part of the Bristol Learning City partnership. The main aims of the Partnership are to:

- champion learning as a way to transform lives, communities, organisations and the city; we want everyone to be proud to learn throughout their lives
- take responsibility for learning across the city, to tackle the systemic challenges that lead to inequality, by sharing our expertise, targeting our resources and taking collective action to add value to the work we do individually
- realise a shared vision, deliver change and make a greater impact

2.2 Bristol Data

The Integrated Education & Capital Strategy (2015-2019) Published September 2015 (Revised January 2016) provides the following Bristol data:

Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
• 108 settings with primary age children in the city • 45 are designated as Academies • 6 are Trust Schools organised into two hubs • 2 are Free Schools • 25 are Faith schools (13 Church of England and 12 Catholic)	• 22 settings for secondary age children in the city • 18 are designated as Academies • 1 is a Foundation Trust forming part of the South East Co-operative Trust and • 2 are Voluntary Aided schools (one Church of England and one Catholic). • 16 schools use geographical catchment as part of their admission criteria • 6 schools use other admission criteria, i.e. faith or random allocation

Bristol is a multicultural city with a population of 449,328 (2015) of which 83,800 are children: almost 19% of the population. There are 34 Wards in Bristol and the age profile in each Ward varies significantly. Wards where more than a ¼ of the population are under 16 are Lawrence Hill (27%), Filwood (26%) and Withywood (25%)

3. Scrutiny planning

Councillor Brenda Massey, Chair of the People Scrutiny Commission and Councillor Claire Hiscott, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills met with a steering group of Councillors, the Service Director for Education and Skills and Officers from the Bristol City Council School Admissions team to agree the remit of the work and to plan the scrutiny activity.



Councillors had a multitude of questions about the admission process and it was agreed that a briefing would be required to provide Councillors with a detailed overview of school admission arrangements. This would provide Councillors with an overview of admission arrangements in Bristol.

Discussions highlighted anecdotal evidence received from residents which suggested that the admission arrangements were more challenging for some communities in Bristol. Councillors agreed it was important for stakeholders from the community to input into the discussion to ensure all views were captured.

The steering group agreed the following key areas which required further clarification:

Issue	**Key questions to be considered**
A. The school admissions application process	• Is the process in Bristol accessible to all communities? • What are the challenges faced by Bristol families? • Why are some applications received late? • Are more late applications received from Black and Minority Ethnicity (BME) families? • How many children are allocated a preference choice?
B. The Admissions criteria of schools in Bristol	• Schools who set their own admission criteria are required to consult on the proposals. Does Bristol City Council contribute or challenge as part of this process?
C. Pupil composition	• Do schools reflect the communities where they are located in terms of ethnicity and numbers of children eligible for pupil premium?
D. Alternative approaches to school admission arrangements	• How do neighbouring Local Authorities and other Core Cities approach school admissions? • What are the advantages and disadvantages of community schools versus schools with wider catchments areas?

Due to the complexity of the issue it was agreed that two scrutiny events would be required:

i. Councillor workshop – December 2016

The workshop aimed to:

- Provide Councillors with an in-depth knowledge about School Admission arrangements in Bristol. The information provided at the workshop would assist Councillors to support and sign post constituents and manage public expectations prior, during and after the admissions process.
- Provide the knowledge required for the Inquiry Day, including information on the Local Authority's strategic responsibilities.

The outcome of the workshop would shape the planning of an Inquiry Day.



ii. Inquiry Day – February 2017

The aim of the event was to receive information from external representatives;

- to receive information from community groups on their experiences of school admission arrangements
- to receive information about school admission arrangement from school representatives.

The event would provide a forum for Councillors to ask questions and at the end of the Inquiry Day Councillors would reflect on the information received and consider if any recommendations should be made to the Mayor and Cabinet.

4. Overview of the events:

4.1 The Workshop

A workshop is an informal meeting which could be used for a variety of purposes, in this case to provide detailed information on a specific subject and to act as a forum for Councillors to ask questions ahead of a further scrutiny event.

The internal workshop was delivered by Bristol City Council Officers from the School Admissions team who used a combination of presentations and group discussions to provide a detailed overview of the school place planning and admission process in Bristol. The workshop provided a forum for Officers to challenge pre-conceptions and 'myth bust'. Councillors were able to ask in-depth and technical questions related to the school admission process.

The workshop was held on the 19th December 2016 and 23 Councillors attended. Officers from the Home to School Transport and Education Welfare teams were also invited to attend.

3.1 Background Information

A preparation pack of information was circulated to Councillors prior to the workshop this included:

- A programme for the workshop and background information about Scrutiny (appendix 2a)
- Bristol data, including information about school appeals (appendix 2b)
- Public documents including:
  - The Integrated Education & Capital Strategy (2015-2019)
  - A guide for Parents and Carers on applying for a Primary School Place
  - A guidance Parents and Carers on applying for a Secondary School Place
  - The School Admission Code
  - The School Admission Appeals Code
  - Information about Trading with Schools



In order to ensure the workshop provided the information Councillors required a survey was circulated prior to the workshop. 13 out of 70 Councillors completed the survey (18%). The survey indicated that the level of Councillor case work related to school admission was low. Appendix 3 provides a summary of the survey results.

3.2 Presentations and discussion overview

Presentations and notes from the workshop are appended to this report (appendix 4). Following the presentation the following headline information was noted in relation to the key areas initially outlined:

A. The school admissions application process

- The School admission team work to capacity and deal with 6000 primary age and 4000 secondary age children plus in year admissions.
- The team participate in proactive outreach work with all communities which aimed to ensure information about school admissions processes and deadlines were widely known. Outreach work would be targeted, based on where late applications were received the previous year. The team work pro-actively and suggestions for further outreach activities would be welcomed.
- Information about pupil ethnicity cannot legally be requested as part of the application process so it would not be possible to know if there are higher rates of late applications by people when English is a second language.
- The Wards with the highest number of late applications (21 to 33) in September 2016 were Southmead, Lawrence Hill, Filwood, Hartcliffe & Withywood.
- In March 2016, 92.5 % of preferences were met for Bristol Schools. The majority of young people not offered a preference school applied for schools which allocated places by random allocation, were outside Bristol, or were faith schools.
- Councillors referred to anecdotal evidence which suggested that children from a BME background were less likely to be offered a preference choice school. Current data collection techniques would make it challenging to obtain information on ethnicity and preference choice school. The information could be ascertained but would require a data specialist officer to be assigned to the task. The school admissions team would shortly be moving to a new database which should make data more accessible.

B. The Admissions criteria of schools in Bristol

- Academies are their own admissions authority and must meet all the mandatory provision of the School Admissions Code (the Code).
- BCC generally has a strong relationship with most of the schools and works collaboratively when possible.
- Analysing academy admission arrangements in detail would not be a priority – there were currently no resources for this function.



C. Pupil composition

A variety of data was provided to Members as part of the information pack, including;

- An overview of each secondary school which included the number of children receiving free school meals, pupil premium and ethnic background
- A map showing the numbers of children living in income deprived households
- A graph showing Ethnicity of Secondary School Pupils based on pupil numbers

D. Alternative approaches to school admission arrangements

Information was provided on the legislative framework which outlined how Local Authorities administer school admission arrangements. Councillors discussed the advantages and disadvantages of community schools versus schools with wider catchments areas.
Further information on alternative approach was provided as part of the Inquiry Day.

3.3. Outcomes

The following key priorities and actions were identified:

i. Diversifying the school appeals panel

It was recognised that the school appeals panels were not reflective of the Bristol population. In order to address this, residents from non white British backgrounds should be encouraged to apply for the role of school appeal panel member. The job advert would be sent to all Councillors to be circulated to community groups and additional support could be provided with the application process.

ii. Supporting Local Schools

The high performing schools that allocate randomly were in high demand. Parents were recommended to always select a local school as one of their preferences as relying on getting a place in the highest performing schools, which might issue places based on random allocation or be located a significant distance away, would be a risky approach.

Although the school admission team provided parents / carers with this information it was sometimes not understood which caused confusion and frustration. Councillors should build strong links with local schools in their community, i.e. regularly visiting the school / attending school events and considering becoming a School Governor. Local schools should be championed with residents. Schools in Bristol have improved and Councillors should challenge lingering reputational misconceptions, encouraging residents to include local schools as a preference.

iii. Supporting residents

Councillors could offer support to residents prior to the admission deadlines, sign posting residents to the support that's available and assisting residents with their application forms.



3.4 Conclusion

The workshop provided contextual information that Councillors could use to support residents. Councillors praised the School Admissions team who worked hard to meet the needs of residents and were pro-active in addressing issues when possible. The team worked closely with schools and were targeting outreach work in areas with high numbers of late applications.

Councillors outlined expectations for the Inquiry Day which included the following requests:

- Information and evidence from school representatives and community stakeholders.
- Information from other Local Authorities – including neighbouring Local Authorities and other Core Cities.

4.1 The Inquiry Day

An Inquiry Day is a focussed, structured one-off event consisting of presentations and group work which engages a range of members, officers, community and partner representatives, and other stakeholders to take an overview of a particular issue and provide a forum for questioning invited speakers and witnesses etc.

The Inquiry Day took place on the 3rd February 2017. The event focussed on secondary school admissions and received information from community stakeholders and secondary school representatives. All Bristol secondary schools and a range of community groups were invited to attend. The Clifton Diocese, who were unable to send a representative, submitted information prior to the meeting (appendix 5).

A programme and supporting information was circulated prior to the inquiry day (appendix 6).

4.2 Information from Community Stakeholders

The following community stakeholders attended:

- Abdul Ahmed, Said Burale and Hanna Ahmed - The Somali Forum
- Christine Townsend – former Mayoral Candidate (May 2016) - additional information (appendix 7a) and presentation (appendix 7b)
- Peninah Achieng-Kindberg and Sauda Kyalambuka - African Voices Forum
- Nimo Ibrahim and Iman Abdi - The Bristol Somali Women's Group
- Abdul Jama – Bristol Education Welfare Service, Bristol City Council

Each stakeholder presented information on their experience of school admissions in Bristol and there was also a question and answer session (see appendix 8 for notes from meeting).



4.3 Headline issues

a. Representatives from the Somali community

- The information provided suggested the community experienced an inconsistent approach to admissions and school places were not allocated to children, even when they lived very near the school.
- Sometimes children were not allocated places at the same school as their siblings.
- Home schooling was popular within the Somali community, largely due to children being allocated schools not chosen as a preference.
- Better education would be the best tool to alleviate deprivation and the challenges facing BME communities.

b. Christine Townsend (see additional information – appendix 7a and 7b)

- Information was presented which suggested that Bristol operated a two tier system which disproportionately favoured the more affluent areas: high achieving schools in disadvantaged areas had wide catchment areas (which allocated randomly) which meant local children missed out. Conversely, less well achieving schools tended to have plenty of places available for the local community. The approach should be consistent across the City to ensure fairness and each school should be required to take an equal share of the children from lower socio economic backgrounds.

c. African Voices Forum

- Information was presented which suggested that some schools had low expectations of certain demographics and aspirations matched accordingly.
- Some members of the community were reluctant to choose certain schools due to the lack of diversity and the perception that bullying would take place.
- Accountability needed to be built in with equality at the heart of the system not just as a side measure.
- School access and support for newly arrived refugees and immigrants needed to be addressed.

d. Bristol Somali Women's Group

- The information provided suggested that schools were actively limiting entry of children from the Somali community. Many families were not allocated a preference choice and given a place at an alternative, local school.
- Some community members had been discouraged from applying to certain schools: phone calls had been disconnected because the phone operator was presumably unable to understand the accent of the caller.

e. Abdul Jama - Bristol Education Welfare Service, Bristol City Council

- The information presented highlighted the good work of the school admissions team: in year applications took maximum of 2 weeks to process. In comparison, some Schools took weeks to confirm if a place was available which often caused difficulties for parents.



- The process for finding school places for children who were asylum seekers had improved for year 7 and below. Finding places for year 8 onwards was more challenging because the schools would be required to provide more resources to support these children.

f. Anecdotal evidence

- Councillors referred to other anecdotal evidence which could discourage parents / carers from applying to certain schools:
  a) the high cost of school uniforms (the requirement to set up direct debits)
  b) the cost of mandatory music lessons.

4.4 Representatives from Schools

All secondary schools in Bristol were invited to attend with a cross section across the city invited to provide an overview of the schools approach to admissions. The admissions criteria for each school that attended the inquiry day were provided to Councillors prior to the meeting (hyperlinks included below).

The following representatives attended:

- Ms Jo Butler, Head teacher – Cotham School
- Mr Alistair Perry , Executive Principal – Colston's Girls' School (Presentation – appendix 9a)
- Mr Graham Diles , Deputy Head – Saint Mary Redcliffe and Temple School (Presentation – appendix 9b)
- Ms Keziah Featherstone, Head teacher - Bridge Learning Campus
- Mr Rupert Moreton, Vice Principal – Bristol Cathedral Choir School (Appendix 9C - Additional information was requested and subsequently provided on Music Specialists/Choristers)
- Ms Janice Callow representing Fairfield School (late addition - not on the programme).

Each School provided a comprehensive overview of the school admission arrangements, including the ethos of the school and any challenges the school faced.

4.4 Headline issues

a. Catchment areas and school admission arrangements

- When some independent schools converted to academies the admission catchment area and admission arrangements were specifically designed to draw learners back into Bristol at a time when children were leaving the City in large numbers. This approach was supported by the Local Authority at the time. The arrangements also aimed to limit the impact on other, less well achieving, local schools. Bristol schools have become more popular which has increased the pressure on school places. This has resulted in calls for the arrangements to be reviewed.

b. Reputational challenges

- Anecdotal evidence suggests that some primary school teachers have advised parents to avoid certain secondary schools. This adds to the challenge for schools to overcome lingering reputational issues.



- In situations where children have been allocated a place at a school that neither the parents nor the child has chosen it presents challenges for the school. Councillors were asked to provide support by promoting local schools in the community.

c. Understanding of the deadline requirements

- For schools that require additional information or a non-verbal reasoning test this information would be required by the admission deadline. For example:
  - Colstons Girls School allocates places using set proportions for different ability bands. This requires children to take a non-verbal reasoning test and a child cannot be allocated a place at the school unless a test has been taken. So even if a child would have been eligible for a place, i.e. they applied on time and a sibling already attends the school, they cannot be allocated a place if the test has not been completed if the school is oversubscribed.

e. Schools response to issues highlighted by the community stakeholders

- The Schools referred to work within communities which supports parents / carers during the admission process. Schools participated in outreach work, i.e. visiting primary schools.
- The schools were unaware of some of the issues highlighted but were committed to addressing the issues raised, specifically from the Somali community who felt they faced discrimination.
- Schools within Bristol worked collaboratively: there are strong links and co-operation.

f. The approach to school admissions in other Local Authority areas (appendix 10)
Information was provided on some alternative approaches to school admissions from Brighton & Hove, Hackney, Oldbury, Bradford, Burnley and Birmingham. The other Core Cities were contacted and information on alternative approaches requested.

Councillors were asked to consider the implications on Home to School Transport costs on possible changes to policy. Officers highlighted that although a small number of schools in other areas have policies that claim to prioritise children eligible for Free School meals there was little evidence available to show how these policies were applied in practice.

4.5 Conclusion

Councillors reflected on the wealth of information provided.

Conclusions:

- The School Admissions team were administering the process professionally and efficiently within the legislation and the Councils policies.
- The Inquiry Day highlighted issues within certain community groups which indicated that information was still not being communicated effectively in some instances. Targeted community work is recommended.
- BCC worked well with schools in Bristol, including academies. BCC should use these good relationships to suggest that Bristol residents should receive priority places at Bristol



schools. Liaison would be recommended with Principals and the Academy Board Chairs to look at catchment areas.
- More work should take place to increase the diversity of school appeals panels.
- Councillors should support local schools and work pro-actively to challenge reputational inaccuracies.

At the conclusion of the meeting the following recommendations were suggested:

- Scrutiny to regularly monitor the admission arrangements, i.e. annual report / admission board or forum
- Further work with schools who are expanding or new schools to ensure the admission policies meet the needs of the children in the area
- Councillors to support schools by building links and promoting schools to the community.

A steering group of Councillors subsequently met and expanded the recommendations.

The People Scrutiny Commission then agreed a final set of recommendations and these will be referred to the Mayor and Cabinet for consideration.

Recommendation 1. Strengthen Bristol City Council's oversight of Admissions through an Annual update:

a. Scrutiny to review school admissions information annually and submit a report which tracks the inquiry day recommendations, to the Executive Board.
b. It is recommended that the update is presented to scrutiny in late May/early June so observations can be included in the comments section of the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) annual report.
c. An annual meeting with key school representatives and the Council should be set up to review the annual report.
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Recommendation 5. Request the Mayor, Councillors and City Partners take opportunities to promote Bristol schools and offer targeted support for under-subscribed schools, for example Councillors and City Partners could:

a. Meet with Head teachers and attend school open days
b. Promote local business links
c. Become a school governor.
d. Share key achievements and improvements in individual schools

5. Next Steps

The report and recommendations to be referred to the Mayor and Cabinet for consideration.



Appendices:

The Appendices listed below can be viewed here.

Appendix	Title
1	Overview of Community Health Champions
1a	Explanation of some key terms
2a	A programme for the workshop and background information about Scrutiny
2b	Bristol data, including information about school appeals
3	Councillor survey results
4	Presentations and notes from the workshop
5	Clifton Diocese submission
6	Inquiry Day Programme and supporting information
7a	Information submitted by Christine Townsend
7b	Presentation submitted by Christine Townsend
8	Inquiry Day notes
9a	Presentation provided by Mr Alistair Perry , Executive Principal – Colston's Girls' School
9b	Presentation provided by Mr Graham Diles, Deputy Head – St Mary Redcliffe and Temple School
9c	Additional information provided by Bristol Cathedral Choir School
10	Information from other Local Authorities and from Core Cities

