

School Admissions Inquiry Day

3rd February 2017

1. Introductions

Councillor Brenda Massey, Chair of the People Scrutiny Commission and Councillor Claire Hiscott, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills welcomed attendees to the meeting.

Paul Jacobs, Service Director for Education and Skills provided a brief overview of workshop held in December;

- Due to Place Planning parents now have more options. Bristol City Council (BCC) would like all parental preferences to be met.
- BCC continued to work with secondary schools to meet the expanding need.
- In addition to expanding existing schools, one more Free School had been approved and more applications were expected.
- The workshop considered the legal framework and the role of the Local Authority (LA) which had changed since the introduction of academies etc. Councillors were provided with an overview of the application process, including the online application form, and information about the support provided by the admissions team via outreach work and engaging with communities.
- The Inquiry Day would focus on received information from external representatives – both from schools and the community.

Community stakeholder information:

a) The Somali Forum

- The community have found criteria to be inconsistent and unclear - past experiences of children from near the school not getting accepted whereas people from farther afield did.
- Main problem areas reported as St Pauls and Easton – children had gone to school out of the city because of this.
- The community believes that children were not accepted at some schools, even when they live next to the school. Schools say we need to attend City Academy.
- Parents have strong feelings that the system is unfair and inconsistent in nature. The mothers ask the question “why can’t my child who is living next door get into the school and some living 10 miles further can?” Hopefully this meeting will answer the question.
- Someone parents don’t get their choices so they stay at home. We need to do something about it. Sometimes brothers go to a school but others aren’t accepted. We need to know why this is happening and look for a solution. When children are sent to schools far away it costs too much money.
- Thanks were provided to Cllr Ruth Pickersgill who held a workshop in September which was really helpful.

- The Forum believed education is the best tool when looking at alleviating deprivation and the challenges facing BME communities. It was not uncommon in the Somali community for children to end up staying at home and revert to home schooling.
- The problem links to equality and deprivation and there are a lot of problems around this. What more evidence is needed?

b) Christine Townsend – Former Mayor Candidate who campaigned on school admissions

CT circulated additional information Councillors and provided a presentation.

- Was invited to speak due to her position as a former mayoral candidate with special interest in education. CT outlined her long standing experience as a teacher and educational advisor who had also sat on school appeal panels.
- Christine gave a presentation that outlined the of a “two tier system”: new schools disproportionately favour and serve affluent areas.
- Has seen a clear correlation of children from deprived backgrounds going to school with other children with similar backgrounds and vice versa for affluent. 153 places in schools were taken up by pupils from out of the city.
- Sutton Trust – “Double Disadvantage” – correlation between low attainment groupings - it becomes the norm for those children and the social value they bring to the school gates reinforces deprivation.
- Bristol Cathedral Choir and Colston’s girls take from three LA areas- she felt they could prioritise people premium and urged Bristol City Council to scrutinise their approach to get better service for Bristol children.
- Highlighted that faith admission was a choice; catchment areas are a choice. Largely allowed by law to choose as they wish to accommodate pupil premium and free school meals. Therefore if church hierarchy can be influenced/lobbied change was possible.
- Admission arrangements don’t sit at a strategic level and requires leadership from Cllrs and education leaders. System needed to work more effectively and encouraged those present to delve beyond the surface of the problem

c) African Voices Forum –

- Found schools had low expectations of certain demographics and aspirations matched accordingly.
- Many members found they do not get their first choice and have to appeal – racial profiling effects children outside catchment areas where there is less diversity due to bullying etc. This makes parents reluctant to send children outside catchment area.
- BME children faced increased inequality in next ten years – the impact of the systemic failings was being felt and the inequalities entrenched.
- Accountability needed to be built into the system with equality at the heart of the system not just as a side measure. Losing potential of many children to flourish as they are stuck in home education.
- School access and support for newly arrived refugees and immigrants was raised, urged for more help to get immediate access and reduce waiting.

- Long standing issues that have rarely altered. Viewed this chance to work in partnership to tackle the inequalities of the system head on. Engagement was seen as key and that these were not isolated issues - many BME parents feel the same.

D) Bristol Somali Women's Group

- Schools were actively limiting entry of children from Somali community.
- Some members of the community had been unable to request application forms as the phone operator had disconnected the call when they could not understand the accent. Highlighted issues of being turned down for first choice and given placement elsewhere.

E) Abdul Jama - Bristol Education Welfare Service, Bristol City Council

- Highlighted to work of the school admissions team.
- In year applications only take a maximum of 2 weeks. **Academies can take weeks to confirm if a place is available.** Whether there are spaces is a very simple question.
- Getting asylum seeker children in to schools has improved a lot – Year 7 and below ok. Year 8 onwards is tricky. Issues could be that they don't have financial resources to meet child's education.
- The timespan also needs to be addressed as it can be weeks before children can start school which is not acceptable.

Councillors were invited to ask questions and the following was noted as part of the discussion;

- When Christine Townsend was asked how she would change the admission policies she noted that some high achieving schools have wide catchment areas so the majority of their pupils are from out of the local area. Other, less well achieving schools only take from the local areas so children are forced to go to the local school which no one else want to go to. Similarly, faith school located in areas of deprivation are not required to take pupils from the local area because they use faith as criteria for admission. Policies should be changed to ensure a consistent approach across the city – each school should be required to take a share of the children from lower socio economic backgrounds.
- Cllr Geoff Gollop expressed concerns about the suggestion that schools should be required to take a certain number of pupils receiving free school meals (i.e. the City average)– this could negatively impact on other children living the local area. If children in the BS9 area were required to attend schools far away parents could opt to pursue fee paying education. In addition, children attending schools further away from their home address would increase road congestion.
- Cllr Anna Keen highlighted the barrier to applications and access to certain high achieving schools. Incidents of discrimination were more widespread than reported and difficult to evidence. Anecdotal evidence had been reported;
 - schools attempted to dis-encourage parents from applying by making the application process difficult to understand
 - schools putting the phone down because the parents accent was challenging to understand
 - schools have a reputation for bullying / racism so parents are encouraged to apply for alternative schools.

- AK suggested that schools should focus on the community where they are located.
- Cllr Claire Hiscott referred to the rationale for the scrutiny activity: if every school in Bristol were outstanding we would not require this discussion as everyone would go to their local school. The quality of our schools is a major issue. Bristol is a victim of its own success: a lot of children used to take buses to South Gloucestershire but now the other way around. It was noted that the new Free school planned to have a 30% pupil premium admissions policy.
- Cllr Harriet Clough suggested that social class had an impact. The high achieving schools relied heavily on middle classed children.
- Representatives from the Somali forum agreed that class was a factor. Families in Barton Hill do not want their children to attend the local school, i.e. City Academy.
- Cllr Ruth Pickersgill highlighted that City Academy had improved greatly. Data should be provided to show if BME communities get disproportionate % of preference places. Although some schools band pupils there is evidence to suggest this is discriminatory. The question is - what would help?
- Representatives from the Somali community suggested that Somali children were not welcome at certain schools because English was not their first language. More help is needed to assist families.
- Christine Townsend suggested that the responsibility lies at the strategic level.
- The importance of parental choice was noted – some parents want their children to attend school outside the local area.
- Cllr Eleanor Combley suggested that part of the problem related to the inconsistency in admission arrangements. Modelling of school admission using primary arrangement only could be useful.

Break

The community stakeholders left the meeting.

Part 2

Representatives from secondary school across Bristol were in attendance to present information about school admission arrangements. A web link to the admission arrangements for each school had been provided with the agenda papers.

F) Ms Jo Butler, Head teacher – Cotham School

- The commission received an overview of admissions arrangements at Cotham School which had seen many intake changes over previous years and was seeing a much more diverse background including BME with the largest proportion from Black African background and a decline in white middle class.
- Colston had above average children with ESL but needs to be higher and the school had appointed someone to look into this specifically. Large contrast between socio-economic backgrounds – especially along ethnic lines.

- Development of student's cultural capital a key commitment to developing young people. Committed to ensuring every child attains the skills and attributes needed to achieve in modern society.

G) Mr Alistair Perry, Executive Principal – Colston's Girls School

- Provided an overview of the evolution of the vision and admissions procedure at the school and the criteria used.
- Wide range of backgrounds and capabilities SEN, Children in care, Foreign language aptitude, Siblings, staff, random allocation and fair banding.
- Geographically spread BS1-16 75% and 25% BS17-49.
- Roots of complexities come from 2008 when CGS became an academy – shaped by DFE, BCC, School governors.
- The approach was designed to limit damage to other schools and not incorporate it back into the system. And to draw learners back into city at a time when pupils were leaving the city for school in large numbers.
- Culturally diverse and welcoming to students of all faiths. Percentages on SEN, BME, and Deprivation indicator are good. The school is proud of the genuinely diverse make-up of the school.

H) Mr Graham Diles, Deputy Head – Saint Mary Redcliffe and Temple School

- Information provided as part of a presentation
- A mix of Church Applicants, Local Applicants and Other faith applicants. Complex admissions process. Increasing trend over time of % BME, ESL, Pupil premium.

I) Ms Keziah Featherstone, Head teacher - Bridge Learning Campus

- Bridge Learning Campus – Most deprived in Bristol serving predominantly Hartcliffe but this is widening – largely white working class.
- Had found Primary school teachers telling parents not to go to bridge, a real issue the school is now trying to address. Can BCC help promote it?
- A high quality school serving some of the most deprived areas and fighting preconceptions.
- Some parents leave it until last minute and don't want to come to bridge but are given as last option not good for the atmosphere of the school.
- Anti-selection in a way.

J) Martyn Gunn, Mr Rupert Moreton, Vice Principal – Bristol Cathedral Choir School

- Music core to the education – music specialists - 50% pupils involved in musical performance in some way.
- Musical aptitude test for yr 6s 10% (12 pupils) - multiple choice based on aptitude no playing of musical instruments allowed.
- 8 places to Cathedral Choir – programme run separately and can apply in yr 4 and become a chorister at yr 5 and offer places come yr 7.
- Random allocation – all applicants given a random number, picked out of a hat.

- Wide catchment area – give lots of people an opportunity to become a members of the school over 40 primary schools represented and enables them to be culturally diverse.
- 32% BME 16% Free school meals.
- Wide range of ability no selection policy based on academia – large number of SEN (12%) twice the average EHCP?
- Some negative aspects – heavily oversubscribed lots of applicants and some disappointment on not getting choice.
- Very aware of the need for fair admissions process and see face to face the impact it has.
- Actively trying to cater for more pupils from across the city. Acknowledge the huge amounts who want to come to the school but have to work with limitations of spaces. Big increase and continuing diversity.

Councillors were invited to ask questions and the following was noted as part of the discussion;

1. Schools cannot legally define catchment areas as Local Authority area which is why postcodes are used. Work takes place with governors to define the nature of the local community. Colston Girls School (CGS) work collaboratively with BCC and the policy is reviewed each year.
 - Musical aptitude tests operate within strict guidelines and is open to all communities.
 - The sibling rule applies but siblings would still be required to take the test so they can be banded. This requirement is set out in law- if other schools don't adhere to this then they are breaking the law. Information related to this is provided to parents in several languages. CGS is more diverse than other schools. The deprivation indicator is important – there is no lack of openness about this.
 - Bristol Cathedral Choir School (BCCS)
 - removed the requirement for the non-verbal reasoning test as some communities were put off by the concept.
 - currently consulting on the sibling rule and looking to remove it
 - looking at the wider post codes from which people can apply – consulting in Autumn
 - Cllr Keen referred to the information received from community stakeholder – the Somali community felt strongly that they were discriminated against - that they faced both formal and informal barriers and they were not treated fairly. Were the schools aware of this and has any action been taken? Is random selection really random and how are you attracting a cross section of Bristol society? BCCS confirmed that they would be happy to make improvements and learn new approaches. The school make up is 32.5% children from BME background to Governors want to make the school reflective of Bristol. Reps from BCCS attend every primary school but there may be more that could be done. This year we've over 1000 on time applications for 120 places. **Action – Breakdown by primary school to be provided.**
 - SMRT confirmed they worked closely with the community and meeting with the Redcliffe Community Association and Somali Women's group regularly. If this issue had been raised the school would have addressed it. The supplementary information form is for faith based application only. The school take children from every single electoral ward and the intake is

mixed. The Pupil Premium rate is lower due to the lower rate of divorced / single parent families from faith backgrounds.

- CGS – last year children attended from 75 primary schools. The school needs to do work with communities to ensure that people understand the process. Further work required to gain the trust of the Somali community and to communicate effectively.
 - Would changes in CGS banding and BCCS adversely affect Fairfield and Cotham Schools? The representative from Fairfield school confirmed that the intake could be skewed towards more boys than girls. Keeping a well-balanced community that is representative is a challenge because of the CGS effect – overwhelmingly affects the nature of the year group. Cotham – A comprehensive intake is very important to the school and would have concerns about impact on that.
2. Representatives from Bridge Learning Campus – it appears that some schools are looking to rid themselves of children who are causing negative impacts. Some vulnerable children have been turned down from schools who say they can't meet their needs. There were strong links and cooperation in Bristol but this falls down when working with other authorities and needs to be strengthened to ensure a fair education for Bristol Children.
- Cotham – TVG status for our playing fields is a complete travesty. How has this happened? Against recommendations and legal advice. Some of those children have NO other access to green spaces.
 - Councillors could support their local schools by promoting them within their community and challenging historical conceptions.

The approach to school admissions in other Local Authority areas - Hayley Leman – School Admissions Lead and Ian Bell - Place Planning Manager

Background Information provided in the workshop pack.

- The School admissions team work to capacity. 8 team members take 9000 calls in March to August and also attend appeals - around 500 appeals a year. Officers also attend schools to provide information.
- When considering alternative model Cllrs need to consider what is best for Bristol.
- Some of the information / difficulties described at today's meeting relate to in year admissions – children applying for places when the school is already full. The appeal structure is the process for ensuring only the most deserving get a place. It was acknowledged that that the appeal process can be difficult for people to understand – especially when English is not the first language and if a family is not used to dealing with formality.
- Background information provides an overview of different approaches used to allocate school places in different authorities. Information was provided on the approach from;
 - ◆ Brighton and Hove
 - ◆ Hackney
 - ◆ Oldham, Bradford and Burnley Local Authorities
 - ◆ Birmingham.

- Following a query Officers confirmed that although some school policies suggest they prioritise children in receipt of free school meals it's challenging to find any evidence that they actually follow this. It's even harder to get information on pupil premium.
- All Local Authorities require parents to indicate preferences – the number of preferences can change. Officers confirmed that if a random allocation was 3rd preference they could get allocated preference 1 or 2 before this.
- School admissions are required to inform parents of test results before they choose their preferences. If schools are not adhering to this it is because no one had challenged them.
- Councillor Keen highlighted that the concerns related to the information provided by the community stakeholder rather than the Council processes. Cllr Keen posed the question 'what is our ask?'. The issue is a Mayoral priority –what could we realistically aim for? i.e. a more evenly distributed pupil premium? Is there any scope for requiring schools to have a minimum % of BME students?
- ◆ Paul Jacobs confirmed that BCC could negotiate with schools during school expansions discussions. The Capital team has suggested that investment discussions could include admissions arrangements. CGS and BCCS have indicated that they would be keen to engage. The new free school trust has proposed FSM criteria. As a City we need to support the schools that are a journey of development to encourage parents to choose these schools as a preference.
- ◆ Local Councillors could visit their schools and build links to support the community.
- ◆ Cllr Hiscott confirmed that she would be visiting schools (as Cabinet Member), especially the less popular schools.
- ◆ Cllr Harriet Clough– transport and geography. Terrible congestion – not helped by school traffic. Would like to see people from South Glouc accessing Bristol schools. We need to spread children from different bands around the city. We can't get away from geography not being a factor.
- ◆ Jacqui Price-Tippetts confirmed that home to school transport for SEN schools is dealt with differently than for mainstream schools. If families choose to send their children to a school far away from the home address then home to school transport will not be provided. FSM is a variable figure as people move in and out of eligibility.
- ◆ Councillor Massey asked for further comments to be email directly to the Scrutiny Policy Advisor.
- ◆ One additional submission was received from Cllr Gollop (appended to the notes).

The Councillors discussed the wealth of information received and considered what recommendations they would to make.

Initial conclusions:

- Although the Admissions teams were administering the process professionally and efficiently there were still issues within certain communities. Targeted community work would be required.
- 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 required 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.

Initial recommendations (required further expansion):

- 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.

Appendix A – Comment received from Cllr Gollop

The Enquiry day into school admissions was helpful in opening up discussion about the pressures and the challenges. I was concerned however that it gave much more emphasis to challenging the status quo, rather than considering supporting it with minor modifications.

Christine Townsend gave a powerful presentation which ignored the reality of the situation and was effectively proposing bussing pupils from more deprived areas to the schools with lowest numbers of free school meals and pupil premium, and then sending pupils from those areas to the most deprived.

This extraordinary proposal is flawed in so many respects that it needs to be ruled out before it is considered further. First and foremost, this sort of social engineering does not work in either direction.

I cannot help but look at the area I represent which is predominantly BS9. There has never been a state secondary school within this area and 15 years ago, the only schools on offer in Bristol were Portway, Henbury or Monks Park. However virtually no BS9 parents used those schools. They either use North Somerset and South Glos schools, Bristol Church schools, private schools, or moved out of Bristol to secure secondary education

As Redland Green and the Freeschool have come available, parents now tend to remain in the area rather than move, and there are now far more children living in the area, The surrounding schools have improved their standards significantly, but the numbers attending from BS9 have not increased.

The inevitable conclusion is that whatever form of reallocation takes place, parents can choose not to be part of it.

Redland Green and Bristol Feeschool provide 400 places each year that did not exist 12 years ago, and are very oversubscribed. If they had to offer the average number of places to pupils on free school meals, this would mean 49 places a year not available to local children, plus the knock on impact of reduced places being offered to BCCS and St Mary Redcliffe. These children would then be adding to the pressure on the already oversubscribed North Bristol schools and all the evidence suggests that these children would not go to another Bristol state school but would exit the Bristol state system.

There was also demand for schools to stop taking pupils from outside Bristol. We were however only presented with one side of the story in terms of the number of out of City pupils that come in to each school, but I do not recall seeing the information of how many Bristol Children and educated out of the City. It is important we understand that information before making unilateral decisions that could result in similar actions from our neighbours potentially increasing pressure on schools in Bristol.

I have specific area which I did not get chance to mention. Neither is straight forward to solve.

1. I understand the need for the sibling rule, but question whether there could be some distance element to this. It seems very unfortunate when a high number of sibling places at distance from the school actually prevents children living close to the school from attending. I understand some schools now only apply the sibling rule in their primary area which is a much fairer approach.
2. When neighbouring schools allocate on a distance from the school basis, some who live equidistant from both schools find they are too far away to be allocated a place, and then have to travel beyond their first and second choice to a school much further away. In these circumstances the designated area needs weighting.

I believe Bristols schools have performed much better in recent years and our aim should be to keep the highest possible number of any year group in the state system, with the continued

target of improving standards each year. The allocation system we have has helped achieve that outcome and therefore any changes to it should be in the form of minor adjustments not major changes.