

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 20 March 2025 at 6.00 pm in Council Chamber, Third Floor, Southwater One, Telford, TF3 4JG

- Present:** Councillors J Jones (Chair), J Jones (Chair), P Davis, A R H England (Vice-Chair) P Davis, L Parker, K Tonks and J Urey
- Co-optee: S Fikeis
- Also Present:** Councillor S A W Reynolds (Cabinet Member for Children, Young People, Education, Employment & Skills)
- In Attendance:** P Starkey (Senior Democracy Officer (Scrutiny)), D Thomas-White (Lead Lawyer: Children and Adults), S Wellman (Director: Education & Skills) and A Womack (Access & Sufficiency Service Delivery Manager)
- Apologies:** Councillors S P Burrell, C Chikandamina and A S Jhawar
- Co-optee: C Morgan

CYP42 Declarations of Interest

None.

CYP43 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 30 January 2025 be confirmed and signed by the Chair.

CYP44 School Admissions and Placements

The Access and Sufficiency Service Delivery Manager presented an update to the Committee on the admissions processes for Telford and Wrekin schools. The presentation outlined the statutory framework which the Council was required to follow when allocating school places, the roles and responsibilities of admission authorities in relation to admission arrangements, the Fair Access Protocol and the appeals process.

The School Admissions Code 2021, which was underpinned by the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, provided the legal framework for admissions to all maintained schools in England. The purpose of the code was to ensure that all school places for both maintained schools and Academies had been allocated fairly and transparently. The relevant admission authorities for each school were required to ensure that the admissions policy and practice followed complied with the code.

Members heard that different types of schools had varying admission authorities responsible for compliance with the code and handling of appeals. Community and voluntary controlled schools were Council-owned and operated by the local authority acting as the admission authority, whilst voluntary aided and foundation schools which had replaced grant-maintained schools had their own governing bodies as the relevant admission authority. Academies and free schools also operated independently from the local authority with the academy trust acting as the responsible admission authority.

In Telford and Wrekin, there was a mix of school types including 23 primary schools owned by the local authority, 17 academies for primary and 11 for secondary with two selective grammar schools. Admission authorities were required to set the number of available places and the oversubscription criteria for each school but had a duty to prioritise children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) and looked-after children and arrangements could be objected to and referred to the Schools Adjudicator.

The code defined the common criteria used by admission authorities, such as siblings, distance, catchment areas, social and medical need, selection by ability or aptitude, banding, testing arrangements, faith-based criteria, children of staff and children eligible for pupil, early years or service premium.

Members heard that oversubscription criteria for community and voluntary controlled schools in the Borough had prioritised children with EHCPs, looked-after children, children attending linked infant schools and children in catchment area. If places were unavailable for these children, places would be given first to those with exceptional health reasons, those who on the day of admission have a sibling living at the same address and attending the same school, pupils in receipt of early years or pupil premium and other children living in the school's catchment area.

For children who lived outside the school's defined catchment area, priority had been given to those with exceptional health reasons, those who on the day of admission have a sibling living at the same address and attending the same school, pupils in receipt of early years or pupil premium, children of staff and other children living outside the catchment area. Primary academies and foundation schools had used similar criteria including the use of catchment area and straight line distances with variations for faith-based schools. Generally, faith based voluntary aided and controlled primary schools had prioritised children of Christian faith above those that lived nearest the school.

Selective Grammar schools such as Haberdashers' Adams and Newport Girls' High School required applicants to sit entrance tests as part of their admission arrangements and applicants who had reached the required standard were prioritised based on their oversubscription criteria. Priority was given to children with EHCPs, looked after children, children eligible for pupil or service premium and those attending local schools. Newport Girls' High School also gave priority to children with EHCPs and looked after children but reserved up to 15 places for children eligible for pupil premium, children attending a local

primary school and children within their catchment area before those living in all other areas.

Schools such as Haberdashers' Abraham Darby gave priority to children with EHCPs and looked after children, with 10% of places reserved for children with an aptitude in music and sport, children within their catchment area, children with siblings, children of staff and straight line distance. Holy Trinity Academy allocated up to 60% of foundation places on faith grounds and open places for children based on EHCPs, looked after children, medical/social needs, siblings, children of staff and straight line distance. Madeley Academy required applicants to sit a non-verbal reasoning assessment in order to place applicants in ability bands, with equal places allocated from each band. Thomas Telford, which was a City Technology College, allocated places based on a founding agreement, with 30-40% of places reserved for pupils residing in Wolverhampton and the remaining places allocated to pupils in Telford.

Coordinated admissions involved a process whereby parents were required to apply to the local authority for school places and express a preference for at least three schools. Undersubscribed schools were required to offer places to all applicants, whilst oversubscribed schools ranked applicants based on published criteria. The National Offer Day for schools in Telford and Wrekin was 1 March 2025 for secondary schools and 16 April 2025 for primary schools. The Council had published guidance for parents containing information on local schools, the application process and allocation criteria to help parents to understand how to apply for a school place and how allocations are made.

In-Year Admissions catered for children who had recently moved into the Borough or were applying to change school outside of the normal entry points. Whilst local authorities were not statutorily required to coordinate in-year applications for schools which they are not the admission authority for, they may coordinate in-year applications for any or all own admission authority schools in the area with agreement of the relevant admission authorities. The Council was required to published guidance for parents on how to apply for school places and how applications are processed. In Telford and Wrekin, the Council's Admissions Team was responsible for the coordination of in-year applications for all maintained schools and academies in the area and parents could apply for up to four school places. Applications were required to be processes within 15 schools days and offers would be made in line with the oversubscription criteria for each school. Where a child is out of school and could not be offered a preferred school place, a place would be allocated at the catchment or nearest school available.

In 2024/25, approximately 2,150 children in Telford and Wrekin applied for reception school places as part of the normal entry process with 93.8% of children offered their first preference which was in line with the regional average and slightly above the national average. For secondary schools, approximately 2,650 children in Telford and Wrekin applied for places as part of the normal entry process with 81.2% of children offered their first

preference which was higher than the regional average but slightly below the national average. Approximately 2,300 in-year applications are received each year with 1,625 applications received for primary aged children and 675 applications for secondary aged children.

Each Local Authority was required to have a Fair Access Protocol to ensure that school places are allocated quickly to unplaced and vulnerable children. The protocol had been developed in partnership with schools and ensured the fair distribution of pupils with challenging behaviour or children who have been permanently excluded. The Council's protocol covered how places are secured for children who had not been offered a school place as part of the normal in-year process, how places are secured for vulnerable or hard to place pupils and how managed moves from one school to another operate to avoid permanent exclusions.

Members heard that when parents are informed of the outcome of their school application, the Local Authority must provide a written explanation if the admission is refused and inform them of their right to appeal. The appeals process must be transparent, accessible and completely independent to the authority. Most admission authorities commissioned the Council to administer appeal hearings. A total of 237 appeals had been received for coordinated admissions and 367 appeals for in-year admissions. Approximately 17% of appeals are upheld in favour of parents which was lower than the national average.

Following the presentation, Members posed a number of questions:-

What was the current population of secondary school-aged children within Telford and Wrekin, given that 27,112 pupils have been placed in the Borough? Additionally, based on the local plan currently in consultation, what was the estimated population of children in this age group expected to be in five years?

The Director: Education & Skills advised that the Council receive school census data and information on other cohorts such as children who are in elective education. Whilst the Council did not hold specific figures around estimated populations, relevant Teams had started to form projections based on birth data, housing development data and migration data. Whilst birth rates were declining nationally and across the West Midlands, the Borough was anticipating cohorts to rise over the next five years. To accommodate this growth, the Council had planned to invest £46m as part of its capital programme into the development of new school places for both primary and secondary phases. The local plan also included proposals for five new primary schools and one new secondary school in the Borough.

Is the Committee able to receive that data?

The Director: Education & Skills advised that the Council were only able to provide data which was publicly available.

Did Haberdashers' Adams School offer boarding for pupils and did the pupil roll include students from outside of county borders?

The Access and Sufficiency Service Delivery Manager confirmed that the school reserve 15 places for pupils outside of the county border.

What categories did the 17% of appeals which were upheld by the Panel fall into and was the sibling criterion one of the top reasons parents submitted an appeal?

The Access and Sufficiency Service Delivery Manager advised that the Admissions Team do attempt to collate information relating to reasons for appealing, however this information could be difficult to obtain at times as many parents were often reluctant to specify a reason for appealing if they felt it would jeopardise their chances of a successful case in obtaining a school place. As a result, many parents select 'other' when completing the reason section of the appeal form.

There have been many children in the area who have struggled to obtain school places due to transport issues and as a result of new housing developments in rural areas, children were not able to easily walk to school. Did the Fair Access Protocol (FAP) include support for transport and were catchment areas reviewed and changes made to address these issues?

The Access and Sufficiency Service Delivery Manager confirmed that the Fair Access Protocol (FAP) aimed to secure local school places for children, ensuring they were within a reasonable travelling distance. For those hard to place pupils, the Council had strived to distribute places evenly across the Borough. The Council's Admissions Team were also in regular contact with the Travel Assistance Team and children who were eligible for travel assistance would have this included as part of their school placement offer. In relation to catchment areas, the Team had undertaken regular reviews to ensure children could access school places effectively.

How often were catchment areas reassessed?

The Access and Sufficiency Service Delivery Manager advised that projections and access to school places were reviewed annually at every census point. In terms of catchment and planning boundaries, these were reviewed once every four years to ensure effective access to school places.

How did the Council address teacher and teaching assistant shortages and what initiatives were in place for teacher training and improvement?

The Director: Education & Skills advised that the Council had continue to work with admission authorities and academies to provide support and whilst the local authority was not responsible for teacher training, this was managed through teaching schools with funding provided by the Department for Education (DfE). The local authority no longer had a duty around training for

teaching staff however there was a focus on recruitment and retention as part of the Council's strategic partnership with Borough schools.

How did parents find out on the day if they were successful in obtaining a place at their preferred school? Was it through an online portal or via a letter and what provisions were in place for parents who were not proficient users of technology?

The Access and Sufficiency Service Delivery Manager confirmed that parents would receive their results by email and could also log into the Council's parent portal.

What happened in schools where all places were reserved for children with EHCPs but there were more applicants than places available? Were those children admitted places?

The Director: Education & Skills advised that the admission arrangements for special schools were different to the arrangements in place for mainstream schools. The Council's goal was to ensure that children who need special education could access it, however, the criteria for admission to special schools was very specific and not every request would result in placement at a special school. If a mainstream school was named in an EHCP, the school would be required to admit the child, however if the local authority named a maintained community school, then the local authority would be able to direct the school to admit the child.

How did the process work for those children who weren't allocated places?

The Director: Education & Skills advised that the Council faced challenges with demand for school places and that the Council could only name schools based on the places available. Once a school was named in an EHCP for a child, there was a requirement for that school to admit the child.

How did we support children with special needs and behavioural issues who may want to go onto higher education?

The Director: Education & Skills advised that the schools offered a comprehensive range of support services from early years and into post-16 settings. The continuum of support included psychologists, behaviour support specialists, neurodiversity experts and mental health professionals, ensuring that children would receive the necessary assistance at every stage of their educational journey.

Was there a trend in the number of appeals submitted over recent years and were we on a downward trajectory?

The Access and Sufficiency Service Delivery Manager advised that in terms of numbers, the Team had seen an upward trend in the number of appeals received which aligned with the population growth in Telford and Wrekin.

However, the number of appeals upheld had remained relatively stable and was below the national average.

CYP45 Work Programme

The Senior Democracy Officer (Scrutiny) presented the updated work programme to the Committee. The next formal meeting was scheduled to take place in May 2025 where Members would receive an update on the Council's SEND offer.

Members were reminded that suggestions could be put forward to formulate the next two year work programme for 2025/26 – 2026/27.

CYP46 Chair's Update

None.

The meeting ended at 7.05 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: Thursday 1 May 2025