

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

23 February 2022

School Admissions Process Improvements

Recommendation

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

Considers progress on the improvements that have been made to the Schools Admissions Service and endorse the direction of travel set out for further work.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. In 2020 the Schools Admissions Service was under significant pressure and was struggling to cope with demand. Since then, significant work has been taking place to make improvements. This paper provides a high-level overview of the original problems faced, the improvements that have already happened and signals further work in train.
- 1.2. In Spring 2019 the Schools Admissions Service moved to Business Support from Education. The service processes approximately 15,000 school place applications every year; of which 55% are for primary (including junior) and 45% for secondary as part of the normal admissions cycle. The team also process approximately 6,000 in-year applications annually, around 2,500 11+ exams, as well as school appeals, free school meals and support work linked to School Transport, School Exclusions, Fair Access Panel, Children not on a School Roll (NOSR) and SEND.
- 1.3. We have been reviewing our admissions arrangements since Autumn 2020 to look for ways to improve what we do. This was to help us respond to significant operational issues that created risks for the Authority, with specific challenges for children, parents and schools who were trying to access the Service. This included:
 - High volumes of calls.
 - Significant call abandonment.
 - Increased email demand.
 - Officers being distracted from core duties to respond to the above demands.
 - Increased backlog of cases.

- High levels of failure demand as a result of parents and schools not having their issues resolved first time.
- High numbers of children with outstanding in year applications contributing to the number of children registered as Not On a School Roll (NOSR) and therefore missing education
- A risk that school vacancies were not filled by students without a school place ahead of DfE's school census date, with the associated risk of a reduced funding allocation from DfE.

2. Understand the Challenges

- 2.1. Analysis in the autumn term of 2020 highlighted some key issues that contributed to the challenges within the service. These included:
- 2.1.1. Staffing challenges within the team had reduced effectiveness. This included a gradual reduction in staffing over an 18-month period, including a significant loss of experience. Replacing staff had taken longer than expected and the effectiveness of induction training was compromised by demand pressures.
- 2.1.2. Moving to remote working in March 2020 made the use of the IT system, Synergy, challenging. This has now been addressed by moving to a different version of the software but initially contributed to a backlog.
- 2.1.3. The processes were not always efficient, often due to a lack of system capability and integration. This included lots of duplication of effort and use of spreadsheets outside the main Synergy system. This impacted performance and presented difficulties obtaining data and management insight, making the management of case work more challenging.
- 2.1.4. The work of Admissions is based on various policy and statutory deadlines across the school year, e.g. Reception and Secondary place allocation, 11+ exams, etc (see appendix 1). We identified weaknesses in our planning that created challenges with peaks and troughs within the year; making the achievement of our 10-day target for In-Year applications challenging, contributing to the NOSR figure.
- 2.1.5. Customer service for parents was not at satisfactory levels, both through failure demand, and because pressures on the team led them to focus on the transactions associated with each application, rather than the child.
- 2.1.6. Available information (via the website and post) was not always clear, helpful, or up to date. This contributed to the large volume of telephone and email demand, where parents were seeking clearer information.
- 2.1.7. Significant failure demand in the team existed due to unhappy parents and schools, adding to the existing backlog.

- 2.1.8. The absence of a manager with single accountability for all admission functions was challenging.
- 2.1.9. Data sharing with schools is time consuming, with the system used by schools (SIMS) not integrating with our system (Synergy) resulting in a lack of live data for the Admissions team, creating challenges in allocating school places.
- 2.1.10. From a parent's perspective, once the application is submitted there is no functionality to amend applications or obtain a status update. This results in further failure demand from parents contacting us to make changes or wanting updates. As an authority, we are using an old version of the parent portal, which is reflective of the issues there are with the wider Synergy system.

3. Improving what we do

- 3.1. Following our initial review, we started an improvement project in December 2020 focusing on the following:
- Understanding and responding to customer demand.
 - Improving our forward plan to ensure all activities delivered on time.
 - Enabling greater flexibility and resilience amongst staff.
 - Opportunities for digital improvements.
 - Opportunities for working better together with other services in Education and school partners.
- 3.2. As a result we:
- Temporarily increased staffing to clear backlogs and implement changes.
 - Created planning tools covering the school year, ensuring activities and processes are captured and planned into a weekly, monthly, and annual cycle.
 - Reviewed processes and templates to streamline activities.
 - Reviewed and improved information available online to better ensure parents have access to the information they need to make decisions.
 - Proposed a new structure for the Admissions Services to address capability and resilience issues.
 - Comprehensively reviewed correspondence to ensure the important messages are clear.

- Improved collaborative working with colleagues in Education on issues such as NOSR and escalations.
- 3.3. As a result of this work, the admissions process has already seen the following improvements, when comparing the first three weeks of the academic year of 2021 with 2020:
- A reduction of incoming emails by 62% year on year.
 - An increase in the uptake of online portals from 69% in the previous year to 84%.
 - Inboxes being better managed with no significant backlogs. Last year there were more than 1,000 emails in a queue compared to 100 at any one time this year.
 - Calls into the team had reduced by 50% which is linked to reduced case backlogs and improved information on website.
 - Call abandonment rate reduced by 82%. This reflects staffing changes, improved information on the website and increased focus on good customer service and team working as well as the improved performance on inboxes, improved processing times on In Year applications.
 - The 11+ exams were well delivered in challenging, COVID-19 restricted circumstances, with compliments from parents.
 - This year we have not received any complaints from Members and Schools compared to many in the previous year.

4. Next Steps

- 4.1. The staff consultation on proposed changes to the structure including revised roles and responsibilities, is scheduled to close on 7th March. Assuming the consultation outcome is positive, this will allow recruitment to key roles in March and April 2022.
- 4.2. We have learnt through this improvement work, that there is so much more to do to improve the way in which the admissions team works with schools, parents, and other parts of the council in finding a suitable education place for our children. We are therefore taking this improvement work a stage further, using systems thinking to involve all these players in helping us understand how parents take the decisions they do, the impact that has on school sufficiency and our ability to offer them their preferred choices.
- 4.3. Since October, with some external support, we have been using systems thinking principles to design a better service and improve performance. This

work is in its infancy and expected to last 12-18 months, but to date has already engaged many schools and parents to help shape our thinking.

- 4.4. In the meantime, we continue to focus our attention on the delivery of admissions activities as they happen through the school year, with the next significant milestone being the offer of secondary school places for September 2022 (taking place on 1st March 2022).

5. **Financial Implications**

- 5.1. School Admissions is a function that is funded via the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Budget with a small element of funding via the 11+ examinations Traded Service with our Grammar Schools.
- 5.2. There are no specific savings in the MTFs that have been attributed to the system-wide work as the focus first and foremost is to ensure that Warwickshire has the capability it needs to deliver a service that meets the needs of parents and schools. However, as highlighted in the paper, some issues with our processes, technology and overall performance remain, and the realisation of savings through efficiencies is anticipated over the next few years once we have implemented the redesigned service.

6. **Environmental Implications**

- 6.1. The environmental impact associated with the Admissions Service is not significant, but there are potential changes we can make that will benefit our services users and the environment.
- 6.2. Feedback from a recent workshop with parents highlighted that a factor in their decision making when applying for a school place is proximity to home, with an aspiration that children and parents can walk to school. Delivering this will be dependent on several factors including school admissions policies, how information is presented and school place sufficiency, but it will be explored further during the system-wide change project.
- 6.3. We aim to minimise printed correspondence wherever possible, and the opportunity to do this best will be realised through our digital capabilities, including improved communications between us and parents along with improved system integration between our systems (such as Mosaic and Synergy) and those of schools to achieve a single view of the child.

7. **Supporting information**

None specific to this report.

Appendices

1. [Admissions Timetable](#)

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Other members: As above