

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

22 February 2023

School Admissions Review

Recommendations

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. considers and comments on the Review of the in-year school admissions process (Appendix 1);
2. asks the Chair to share the Review with the Chair of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
3. notes the position in respect of legal powers in respect of school admissions (Appendix 2); and
4. notes and comments on progress with the systems review of the Admissions Service.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In February 2022, we reported on the work and plans to improve our arrangements for school admissions. Since then, over the summer of 2022, there were significant problems with in-year admissions process, which culminated in unacceptable service levels and challenges for pupils, parents/carers and schools.
- 1.2 This report builds on a verbal update provided to the Committee on 15 December 2022, and shares the Review of In-Year Admissions, commissioned by the Chief Executive and undertaken by senior officers on her behalf. It explains what happened, reports the main findings of the Review, and sets out the improvement programme for school admissions.
- 1.3 Until 1 January 2023, the Admissions Service was delivered by the Business Support team, commissioned by Education Services, who were responsible for setting policy and strategic direction, and overseeing service delivery, resourcing and performance.
- 1.4 From 1 January 2023, the service was transferred to Education Services to ensure there was a more integrated approach to providing school places combining admissions, school sufficiency planning and the schools capital programme.
- 1.5 The school admissions team undertakes the following activity:

- processing the main annual transfer application process for children entering primary and secondary education, and transferring from infant to junior school (over 18,600 applications for school year 2023);
- 11+ testing for grammar schools– c2,500 for school year 2023 (620 places);
- In-year admissions (8,260 in 2021/22, 5,200 in 2020/21), where a child moves into the County or wishes to change school during a school year, many of whom have an existing school place. These can be especially challenging cases as most school places are taken and there can be a mismatch between parental preference/expectation and places we can offer (given constraints in terms of statutory class size limits for infant classes and the flexibility schools can offer); and
- the team is also required to provide supporting information for the appeals process where parents appeal the outcome of their application (1,221 appeals lodged during the 2021/22 academic year; of these 645 were heard and 122 of them – 19% - were upheld).¹

1.6 Most school places are allocated during the main school transfer window. These processes went well in 2021, reflecting changes introduced as part of our change programme, and the secondary transfer process for 2022 has gone well again.

1.7 It is important to note that as an Authority we are bound by the [Schools Admissions Code](#) which requires us to process applications in a fair and equitable manner and in line with regulations set out in the Code, with some differences between arrangements for academies and maintained schools.

1.8 As an authority we have a statutory duty to ensure there are sufficient school places available. This paper does not include details on our sufficiency strategy as this is covered within our Sufficiency Statement, last approved on 10th November 2022 by Cabinet. The Statement provides details of places, vacancies and pressure points across Warwickshire at planning area level and our plans to address any shortfalls. The current statement runs to 2028.

2. The background to the In-Year Admissions Review

2.1 The Review (Appendix 1) outlines the problems that occurred with service delivery in the summer of 2022, and the key reasons for them.

2.2 As a result of problems with the way the service had previously been delivered, the service introduced some important but high-risk changes to the in-year process ahead of the summer holidays. These changes moved from

¹ At the meeting in December 2022, the Committee asked whether we knew the percentage of appeals getting their first, second or third choice. We only have the percentage of appeals that are upheld. The appeal relates to a single, specific offer, not necessarily a first choice, and the outcome of the appeal determines where the child goes to school, so even if we held the data, it would not be a reliable basis for interpretation.

processing applications on a manual, case-by-case basis, which did not look at all applications in the round, to a process of fortnightly batch processing of all in-year applications, which should provide a significantly quicker, fairer and more transparent process.

- 2.3 Although the changes to the process were important ones intended to address prior challenges with in-year admissions, the change was not planned or executed effectively, nor was it escalated quickly enough to senior officers given the level of risk involved. This led to some significant problems at the start of the September 2022 school term, in particular as a result of an inappropriate decision to hold 450 applications from early June and only process them later in the summer within the new process.
- 2.4 This was exacerbated by very high volumes of applications, in part due to people moving into Warwickshire, and issues obtaining data on school places from schools, which was a key requirement for the new process but was not planned effectively. At the Committee's meeting in December, Councillors asked about the extent to which the Council can prioritise Warwickshire residents in allocating school places. The legal position is that we are legally bound to work to the school over-subscription criteria and cannot discriminate in favour of Warwickshire residents.
- 2.5 Towards the end of the school holidays, in late August, the risks to effective delivery of the new process became visible to senior officers, when it became apparent there was a significant gap (99 schools) in the school place data we had collected from schools. Urgent action by Council teams, with considerable help from schools, secured the data for all schools by 5 September, and the backlog of 1,657 applications was processed by-mid September (secondary applications by Friday 9 September and the primary applications by 16 September).
- 2.6 As a result of the problems the poorly managed changes created, the Council's communications with parents, carers and schools were not clear enough and created confusion. This led to extremely high call and email volumes which the team was unable to manage adequately given the need to process the backlog at pace and bed in the new system.
- 2.7 Since September, we have run 13 fortnightly batch processes, and have significantly stabilised the new in-year process which is now working more effectively, making a total of 2,742 offers during the Autumn term.
- 2.8 The team has also improved the response to calls and emails through recruitment of additional call handlers through the Customer Service Centre, creating more capacity for specialist admissions officers to deal with more complex activity and proactive work with parents, carers and schools.
- 2.9 It is also important to stress that some admissions casework reflects wider systemic issues in terms of school places and parental preference/expectation, especially at a time of particularly high numbers given

the number of children requiring a school place coming into the County.

- 2.10 Although the percentage of parents receiving one of their top three preferences is high (97% of primary parents receive one of their top three choices, and 90% their first choice; 94% of secondary parents receive one of their top three choices, with 82% their first choice), there are always some disappointed parents who do not get their first choice.
- 2.11 These systemic factors are the main driver for the decision to move the service back into Education Services from the Resources Directorate with effect from 1st January 2023. This change aims to provide further improvements through closer alignment with other relevant and inter-dependent services, including commissioning, sufficiency, school transport, fair access and other key dependencies. This change will also underpin ongoing implementation of our longer-term change work.

3. The findings of the In-Year Admissions Review

- 3.1 The Review can be found at Appendix 1. The key findings about the causes of the problems are:
- 3.1.1 high demand for in-year applications, caused in some part by increasing demographic movement into the County and children arriving into Warwickshire through the Homes for Ukraine scheme; this was compounded by an inappropriate service decision in June to place on hold 450 applications;
 - 3.1.2 the decision, without proper governance, planning and change management, to deploy an untested automated process for in-year admissions;
 - 3.1.3 a lack of consistent and appropriate communication with families and schools; this left them unclear as to the status of their application and next steps, causing levels of demand on phone lines and email which could not be managed, and understandable frustration and upset;
 - 3.1.4 the Council and schools not sharing timely data and school place availability;
 - 3.1.5 a lack of live data and management information to enable effective oversight of service performance; and
 - 3.1.6 unclear responsibilities and accountabilities for the admissions process, which contributed to problems with leadership and direction of the service.
- 3.2 The Review sets out the actions being taken to address the problems:

- 3.2.1 designating a single 'go to' lead officer for all aspects of school sustainability, including admissions;
 - 3.2.2 review, once Government policy is clear and the new operational process fully embedded, whether the Council should continue to provide in-year admissions services for which it is not the admissions authority;
 - 3.2.3 reducing 'failure demand' by changing the purpose and focus of the admissions service, allowing admissions officers more time to process applications through more effective arrangements to handle incoming calls;
 - 3.2.4 building clearer accountability for the admissions service in the wider context of school sufficiency; the first step towards this has been taken by moving the service into Education Services;
 - 3.2.5 making it easier for families to apply for a school place by simplifying the admissions process, in particular by integrating school places, transport and Free School Meals into a single application process;
 - 3.2.6 support the career development of service leaders, and consider the structure of teams; and
 - 3.2.7 building better relationships between the Admissions Service and schools.
- 3.3 The Review recommends that the Admissions Service publish an improvement plan incorporating the recommendations of the Review by the end of March 2023, for delivery by March 2024. This will require input from various Council services and a strong, one Council approach.

4. The Admissions Systems Review project

- 4.1 In the first half of 2022, the service has been working with key stakeholders to understand and redesign the overall system and process for school admissions. This work was focused on the transfer process rather than in-year admissions.
- 4.2 The team used existing data, surveys, focus groups webinars and other methods to understand demand on the admissions system and where problems existed. We worked with parents, carers, schools, early years settings wider education colleagues and other professionals such as those in our Children and Families services.
- 4.3 This identified that over 90% of families apply relatively easily and get one of their top three choices, but approximately 10% often need additional support. Parents often lacked the information they needed to make appropriate decisions, often leading to unrealistic expectations, conflict and resource

challenges. What matters most is being able to:

- visit schools and meet staff;
- easily compare schools;
- access clear information, helping them to understand the likelihood of being offered a place at their preferred schools and their ability to transport their child to the school; and
- having quick and effective responses to any questions.

4.4 As a result, we are redesigning the service around a simple purpose of 'Helping me (parent/carer) decide and secure a suitable place (for my child) to learn.' This will be a more proactive and coherent approach, that provides families with all the information they need to know to express well-informed preferences, for example school transport which is an important factor for consideration. The new approach focuses on helping people, especially those likely to be the more complex cases, and aims to reduce the impact of the 10% of more complex cases on the system by reducing appeals and increasing the likelihood of a successful application.

4.5 We have worked with families to redevelop our [website](#) and application portal, by:

- a) improving our home page, with simpler information and improved navigation;
- b) providing a timeline and step by step instructions on each application stages;
- c) providing information to help parents decide including open day information; and
- d) upgrading our application portal to take advantage of improved functionality, using more family-friendly language and considering the steps parents take whilst making their application.

4.6 Our most popular schools receive more applications than places available. Where this happens, we are required to apply criteria that can be difficult for families to understand. This is because academies can set different criteria to maintained schools, so that some schools may place greater importance on siblings, location, faith, or other characteristics. This year we changed our approach by providing information from the previous year to help parents understand what criteria children had been accepted with.

4.7 We have also provided new materials to improve information available to parents to help them apply for a school place. This has included:

- a) a guide for parents and carers;
- b) producing videos to help parents navigate the application process for both Secondary and Primary applications, with over 3k views of the secondary video since times since its launch in August 2022 and 641 views of the primary video since its launch on 1st November 2022; and
- c) hosting webinars to help families and schools during the application window which included over 1,500 parents accessing an 11+ session and

over 500 parents accessing the secondary school sessions.

- 4.8 We learned that families access information about school places from various sources and that professionals who work with parents and carers are often best placed to help families most in need of support. To help professionals support parents with admissions issues, we have:
- a) produced a guide for professionals to support parents and carers;
 - b) worked directly with teams, especially Early Help and Family Information Services to identify families that may need extra support;
 - c) developed an advocate model that allows professionals to help those families most in need of help to apply for a school place;
 - d) spent time with schools and early years providers through our consortia network to discuss how they can support families during applications; and
 - e) hosted webinars for schools to help them work with those families in Years 5 and 6 to help encourage or support them with their secondary application. 42 schools attended, and all have received copies of the webinar to view in their own time.
- 4.9 To demonstrate impact, we have developed a set of measures, aligned to our purpose to help us understand where our changes are working. As we roll-out our changes we are baselining performance so that we can compare year-on-year. We are building metrics into key processes and interactions with parents. It will be difficult to measure the impact of the above changes until we have been able to provide a 'suitable school place' in Spring 2023.
- 4.10 For secondary applications in Autumn 2022, the average feedback about 'how would you rate your experience of choosing which schools to apply for a school place?' on a scale of 1-5 (where 1 = very difficult, 5 = very easy), the average score was 3.86. Similarly, for 'how well informed did you feel when you submitted your application (where 1 = very uninformed, 5 = very informed), the average rating was 3.91.

5. Financial Implications

The Admissions Service is funded from the Central School Support block (CSSB) of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). The increase in capacity in the Service needed to manage both demand and the transformation programme means the contribution from the CSSB to fund other Council activity in support of schools and pupils is reduced. As a result, the 2023/24 budget, approved by Council on 7 February 2023, included a one-off allocation of £266,000 to offset the loss of the contribution from the DSG to the Council's overheads as a result of the need to provide additional temporary capacity to support the transformation of the Admissions Service. Once the transformation set out in the report is implemented this contribution will no longer be required."

6. Environmental Implications

None

7. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

- 7.1 An improvement plan will be produced by Education Services for delivery by April 2024.
- 7.2 Primary applications recently closed on 15 January, with offers to be made on 17 April.
- 7.3 Secondary offers will be made to families on 1 March.

Appendices

Appendix A – Review of Schools In-Year Admissions Process

Appendix 1 of Appendix A – Service performance – comparison with other county councils

Appendix 2 of Appendix A– Note on legal position on admissions (exempt item)

	Name	Contact Information
Report Author	Rob Powell	robpowell@warwickshire.gov.uk
Assistant Director	Assistant Director for Education	chrisbaird@warwickshire.gov.uk
Strategic Director	Strategic Director for Resources	Robpowell@warwickshire.gov.uk
Portfolio Holder	Portfolio Holder for Education	kamkaur@warwickshire.gov.uk

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

Local Member(s):

Other members:

Review of Schools In-year Admissions Process

1. Review of the Schools 'In-Year' Admissions Process: Terms of Reference

Following significant challenges with the 2022/23 In-Year Admissions process at the start of the September term, the Chief Executive called for an urgent review. The purpose of the review is to determine the cause of the problems and to ensure that changes are made to prevent future recurrence. The Chief Executive has instructed the Strategic Director for Resources to expedite the Review and to report findings and recommendations for improvement by 30th November 2022. An action plan is to be produced to deliver change and improvement.

Terms of Reference for the Review:

- To map the end-to-end process for in-year admissions and identify any failure points.
- To review decision-making governance arrangements within the Service. To determine where decisions were taken which led to the challenges.
- To review the arrangements for escalation of concerns within the Admissions Service, and to determine why escalation did not take place to raise concerns with senior managers.
- To clarify accountabilities and responsible roles within the Admissions Process: specifically, the roles and responsibilities of Schools, Officers and Parents/Applicants.
- To review service arrangements for management of change, including an assessment of service change-leadership; skill levels; governance; risk management and project management.
- To review the Service's approach to performance management including that of process and people.
- To review the capacity of the Service and the sufficiency of staffing to run the in-year Admissions Process effectively and efficiently.
- To review the Service's arrangements for communications. This to include communications with Schools, Parents/Applicants, and other relevant services within the County Council.
- To document the Service's approach to Data Management including commissioning, storage, quality assurance and security.
- To review the Service's approach to Customer Relationship Management including service standards for handling and responding to, customer contact and enquiries.

Monica Fogarty, Chief Executive. 20th September 2022

2. Background

The school admissions team undertakes the following activity:

- processing the main annual transfer application process for children entering primary and secondary education, and transferring from infant to junior school;

- 11+ testing for grammar schools;
- processing applications for in-year admissions, where a child moves into the county or wishes to change school during a school year, many of whom have an existing school place; and
- supports the appeals process where parents appeal the outcome of their application.

Until 1 January 2023, the Admissions Service was delivered by the Business Support service in the Resources Directorate, commissioned by Education Services who were responsible for setting policy and strategic direction, and overseeing service delivery, resourcing and performance.

From 1 January 2023, the whole service transferred to Education Services to ensure there was a more integrated approach to providing school places combining admissions, school sufficiency planning and the school capital programme.

Most school places are allocated during the main school transfer window. These processes are generally working well, reflecting changes currently being introduced as part of our change programme which is redesigning the main admissions process around a simple purpose 'helping me (parent/carer) decide and provide a suitable place (for my child) to learn'. This wider change is outside the scope of this Review. Although the percentage of parents receiving one of their top three preferences is high (90% of primary parents receive their first choice, 97% one of their top three; 82% of secondary parents receive their first choice of secondary school and 94% one of their top three), there are always some who are disappointed parents who do not get their first choice.

3. The Challenge

The problems seen in the Summer of 2022 were caused by a number of related factors:

- 3.1 high demand for in-year applications, caused in some part by increasing demographic movement into the County and children arriving into Warwickshire through the Homes for Ukraine scheme; this was compounded by an inappropriate service decision in June to place on hold 450 applications;
- 3.2 the decision, without proper governance, planning and change management, to deploy an untested automated process for in-year admissions;
- 3.3 a lack of consistent and appropriate communication with families and schools; this left them unclear as to the status of their application and next steps, causing levels of demand on phone lines and email which could not be managed, and understandable frustration and upset;
- 3.4 the Council and schools not sharing timely data and school place availability;

3.5 a lack of live data and management information to enable effective oversight of service performance; and

3.6 unclear responsibilities and accountabilities for the admissions process, which contributed to problems with leadership and direction of the service.

4. Review recommendations

The report makes several recommendations. Should the recommendations be endorsed, the Review Team will support leaders within the Service and the systems change project, to design and implement an action plan for improvement for Corporate Board's approval.

5. Specific Recommendations

1. Designate a single officer to be accountable for all aspects of school sustainability, including admissions. This officer should adopt the role of "champion of parents and children", understand the Admissions Code and be empowered to lead this vital Council service to improvement and sustainable performance.
2. Review provision of the in-year admissions service. The demand created by in-year admissions is high. WCC is not obliged to provide this service for all schools and could, subject to Government education policy being clearer, consider giving responsibility back to those schools for which we do not statutorily need to provide the service.
3. Reduce failure demand. Admissions officers should spend more time on processing applications. The standard approach of other councils is for permanent call handlers in the Customer Contact Centre handling most admissions calls.
4. Clear accountability for admissions. The admissions service requires designation of responsibility for the commissioning and delivery of admissions in the wider context of sufficiency, and work to align these colleagues with those responsible for school transport provision, to deliver the most integrated service to families.
5. Simplify the application process. It should be easier for families to make an application. Families applying for a place for their child should expect their application for a school place, transport, and Free School Meals, to be handled seamlessly, in one contact.
6. Support leaders to develop and succeed. Support the career development of the service leaders to develop the skills required to deliver these recommendations. Assistant Directors should also consider the structures of their teams, including the span and scope of their organisations.
7. Build better relationships between the Admissions Service and schools. The team need relationships with schools to be one of partnership, working together to place children.

The recommendations of the Review need to be addressed in an improvement plan which needs a strong one-Council approach to delivery. The Admissions Team is subject to several reviews and change projects. The Improvement Plan must integrate and respond to the observations and recommendations of these multiple

processes. The Improvement Plan should phase activities over the next 12 months with rigorous and regular progress checkpoints.

6. Conduct of the Review.

A review team was established which consisted of senior officers from the Resources Directorate and subject experts drawn from two other county councils. The Review was led by senior officers reporting to the Chief Executive.

The Review took place between October and December 2022. The process comprised of meetings and interviews with:

- admissions service staff;
- admissions service management;
- commissioning support unit officers;
- schools;
- elected members;
- parents of affected families; and
- other council officers key to the delivery of the admissions process.

The Review Team gathered best practice from other county councils who deliver the admissions process well, and in compliance with the DfE Admissions Code.

The Review explored the change decisions taken by the Service in the summer of 2022.

The Review Team sought data and management information which was described as supporting the management decision of that time, including the decision to implement a new system.

7. Analysis and Findings.

Applying for a school place, particularly an in-year admission, can be a stressful and challenging process. There is much uncertainty for families and their children. It is important that we make this experience as smooth and simple as possible, demonstrating empathy and understanding.

What happened in the summer of 2022?

The decision to move from the manual in-year allocation process to the current auto-allocation process was taken by the admissions service management at the end of May 2022, for processing of cases from 1st September 2022. The change (move to auto-allocation) can generally be explained as a change to how school place vacancies and applications were matched. The manual process (pre-summer 2022) relied on officers processing each application individually; the auto-allocation batch process should be quicker, fairer and more transparent by using current vacancy data for all 256 schools in Warwickshire to ask *Synergy* (the IT system for education services, including Admissions) to match applicants to them.

Although the Service took the decision to change the process, the failure to collect vacancy data from all schools before the start of the 2022 summer holidays meant that the allocation of school places could not run automatically. Therefore, the Team had to wait until early September 2022, when the schools reopened, to collect the data and allocate school places. This was the first failure point leading to the summer 2022 issues.

For the 450 families who had applied for an in-year place in June for September 2022, they were expecting (as told to them when they applied) for their applications to be processed by the 21st of June. In reality, they waited until 9th (all secondary) and 16th (all primary) September to receive an offer of a school place for their child. The stress to families and children was further compounded by a poor communication to explain the situation and the timescales they could expect.

The Service only raised the situation with the senior leadership of the Council in late August.

Over the course of ensuing days, the number of complaints increased. Complaints became two-fold:

Family concern about the delay in receiving confirmation of a school place ahead of the beginning of the new school term; and

Understandable anger and frustration at the inability to get through to the Service by 'phone or other means, as a result of the very high demand for updates. Admissions officers did their best to respond but had to balance dealing with calls with the urgent work to process the backlog of applications.

Senior leadership of the Council intervened to manage the situation, rapidly securing data from all schools, and processing all secondary applications by 9 September and primary by 16 September, 1,657 in total.

A plan for recovery and communications was implemented. Schools were contacted to determine availability of places and applications were processed.

6.1 Decision-making and Management of Change.

The decision to introduce a new 'batch processing' approach to admissions applications was taken in isolation, within the Service without reference to or authorisation from senior management within the Council. A lack of effective change and risk management coupled with no systems testing or provision for service continuity meant that the overall admissions process experienced a serious service failure. In a bid to understand how the decisions were taken in summer 2022, the Review Team sought data and management information which informed the decision at that time. It became apparent that no such management information existed.

The change to the in-year admissions process made in summer 2022 was a significant and high risk one. It moved from individual applications being managed when they arrived by a single admissions officer, who liaised with schools and parents to allocate a place, to a bulk system approach, where places and children were matched in a fortnightly batch process through an auto-allocation model. This approach offers significant long-term benefits compared with the old model but moving from one to the other was a complex undertaking that required rigorous, effective change management and communication.

The service management considered the transition to auto-allocation of places as business as usual rather than a 'change' project. With hindsight it is clear that a considered change management approach would likely have prevented the issues that arose in summer 2022. In reality, the changes were made without following standard change processes such as thorough planning, IT systems testing, communication to schools, affected teams and parents, impact assessment and risk analysis. The Review Team asked for project documentation to evidence this and was told none existed. Testing of the auto-allocation system in advance of the event may have highlighted that the lack of data should have halted the switch-over. An impact assessment on families, schools and colleagues of potential failure would have highlighted the high-risk potential of the change on them, and plans could have been created in accordance to deal with each scenario. A more thorough risk assessment would have identified legal risks of holding back the 450 cases in June, which led to breaches of Admissions Code timescales.

6.2 Relationship with Schools.

The Admissions Service relationship with schools has been referenced by several officers as having been historically poor. This likely contributed to missing data on school places and children. Schools had not consistently provided place availability in sufficiently good time ahead of the summer break. With an inability to access such information over the holiday period, and with the usual problems processing applications over the summer holidays because of the need to engage with schools, the Admissions Service could not process applications until the schools returned.

Officers in the review noted that the Admissions Service had a remote approach to schools, not wanting to burden or upset them. Building a more collaborative culture with schools would benefit families and the service the Council can deliver.

Communication messages were sent frequently to schools from 10th June. These came from different members of the Admissions leadership to different members of schools' staff, to ask for different actions to be carried out. There was a significant gap in communications until 18th July 2022, the final week of the school year. This gap of 21 days without chasing schools for essential data is key when considering the summer 2022 issues. It is worth repeating that this cultural resistance to contacting Warwickshire schools for information which schools are required by the 'Code' to provide within two school days, is not echoed in other Councils, who demand, expect, and receive this information.

Designated points of contact within the Service, for each school, would help build relationships and improve accountability within the Service.

6.3 Communication.

Communications with families and applicants should be clear and timely. This was not the case in 2022. The Service was not proactive, structured or focused in messaging to either parents or schools. Nor did it make appropriate use of on-line channels when parents had difficulty in contacting the Service by 'phone.

The Service did communicate in the summer 2022 period. Numerous and comprehensive communications were sent to schools and families. These however were not always timely or effectively followed up with schools; nor were they always clear or helpful enough for families.

Discussions with the Team highlight that the approach to 2022 admissions did not follow the normal well-established pattern for introducing major changes. The notable evidence for this was the Council's Communications team confirming that in 2022, there was no agreed communications plan for the change in process, as was usually the case.

Communications sent to families should have been more regular and compassionate. This is particularly the case for those 450 applicants most impacted. The Service should have demonstrated an understanding of how the lack of definitive information was impacting on them. Some emails were impersonally signed "Warwickshire School Admissions" showing a lack of empathy for the families and children.

It is positive however that the Council's reputation has been partly protected by the actions of specific colleagues. In Review conversations, one parent did share that the Council "has individuals who care(d)" and referenced a colleague as being "empathetic and caring, just brilliant" when they answered a call from them.

6.4 Performance Management.

In the absence of dynamic performance data and feedback, the Service was unable to understand fully what was happening. When the failure of the admissions process became apparent there was insufficient support in place, or capacity to allow the staff the space to respond to the difficulties. Without such support, the admissions staff bore the brunt of the service failure and had no recourse to help to manage the situation.

The responsibilities of schools, parents and the Admissions Service are clear and well established in The Admissions Code. In summary:

- Schools must provide the latest vacancy data for each year group in a timely way to the Council, within 2 school days. They review applications made and inform admissions officers whether they accept or reject an application. On acceptance, schools must contact parents and working with them, get the child started and settled into school.
- Parents are responsible for providing complete and truthful information when applying for a school place and accepting (or not) the place once it has been offered.

- The Council should aim to inform parents of outcomes within 10 school days but must in writing by 15 school days. It must liaise with schools to find a suitable school place and respond to parental questions throughout the process.

Monitoring of the performance of the Service in relation to these requirements was scant. The absence of real time performance data and management means that the Service could not easily see when there were problems. Given the stringent requirements of the Code, it is imperative that the Service monitors its performance accordingly. Timelines and decision-paths should be mapped and managed to ensure the Service is meeting its requirements. This is critical and urgent. New standing Key Business Measures have been added to the Council's performance framework to measure compliance with the Code for in-year admissions.

6.5 Capacity of the Service.

The Team carries an establishment of 17 FTE. However, the Team currently has 22.14 FTE allocated to all admissions activities. The Review Team compared levels of demand and the capacity of other admissions authorities. It suggests that other authorities are managing application volumes differently than we do. The Review Team considers that it is that the current size and shape of the Team which seems to be out of kilter with others, who have spent considerable time and energy transforming their admissions operations to remove failure demand and therefore require fewer staff. This is apparent when considering that the Councils exemplified are managing activities beyond admissions applications.

The Team's capacity has been increased in response to increasing failure demand associated with in-year admissions, without tackling the root causes. There has been positive progress redesigning the main transfer process and encouraging feedback from parents about a more purpose-driven and supportive approach to parents and families.

If failure demand does not reduce, officers are unable to give sufficient time to managing applications. Dealing with queries arising from failure demand is not rewarding work, nor does it make best use of their potential and capacity to add value to families' school choices. Officers state they were increasingly stressed, unable to raise concerns with unmet welfare needs due to the strains arising from the summer 2022 issues. These pressures have been reflected in high turnover and vacancy levels.

While the situation has had a significant impact, once failure demand is brought under control, and turnover begins to settle, the Team can begin to plan for a new phase, one of supporting families to find places, not firefight.

6.6 Data Management.

The Service's approach to the management of data was a key failure point. The challenges around data reflect issues with the commissioning and oversight of service delivery.

The Council holds many different sources of data linked to Admissions. It is unclear whether any of this data was commissioned for a purpose, or just existed because of operational activities. There is no evidence of data being joined up to give a holistic view, such as integration with wider sufficiency factors such as lack of local places, transport provision and FSM applications. There is work continuing to provide a single view of the child outside this review, but further development is necessary.

The quality and management of data collected by the service is inconsistent. The system can collect a range of data, but certain data fields are not deemed mandatory at the point of collection. These include the collection of full names, address, date of birth, school catchment area, distance to school, siblings, additional needs, FSM eligibility, any of which may be missing. This data can arrive from multiple sources including emails, post, the online portal and from telephone calls. But when data is missing it can result in an inconsistent view of the County's children.

It is the Review Team's observation that the lack of data or missing/incomplete data items has operational impact. The use of auto-allocation in Synergy will be of material benefit, but if data is missing from schools and/or parents then the automated process will suffer. In the context of the summer 2022 issues, there were numerous attempts to collect data from schools towards the end of the 21-22 school year. The data was the issue – not the system.

6.7 Customer Relationship Management.

Decisions taken in the Summer of 2022 demonstrate how the decisions made impacted directly on families' experiences.

When call volumes to the team increased, mainly from families trying to understand how their child's application was progressing, rather than address the root problem causing the calls, the Service responded by making it more difficult for families to contact them. This decision reflected a desire to focus resources on processing the backlog of in-year applications, but it impacted negatively on families and children. The impact was exacerbated by reducing the number of lines available for families to call and putting under-skilled officers on to call handling duties with little to no training or relevant information.

The Review Team saw no measurement of the volume of requests via the portal or email, therefore there was a limited understanding of the real demand being placed upon the Team. This supports the previous conclusion that the team lacked data to reliably inform them of the situation they were dealing with, and to manage it effectively.

There is no evidence of real time data, and little evidence of daily, weekly, or monthly reporting on volumes, requests or issues which would inform decision making. Robust and reliable performance information is key to improvement, and such information must be used to manage the Service.

7. Conclusions.

The problems with the in-year admissions service in 2022 were unacceptable, most significantly because of the obvious impact felt by children, families and schools. The

service was able to recover the situation to an extent by rapidly processing the backlog of applications at the start of the Autumn term. Subsequently, the new batch process is bedding in and is showing benefit, including in timeliness performance, having been run several times.

It is clear that a number of factors led to the initial problems, central to which was the inappropriate decision-making about, and management of, change.

It is important that this cannot happen again. Senior Leaders within the Council's Education Service will assume responsibility for ensuring the Admissions Service is fit for purpose, in terms of commissioning/oversight, service delivery and integration with wider aspects of education such as sufficiency, transport and Free School Meals. The recommendations of this review must be implemented swiftly, and this will be the responsibility of the new Assistant Director for Education who takes up his post in March 2023.

The Improvement Plan resulting from this review will be signed off by Corporate Board and is to be delivered in its entirety by March 2024. Those elements critical to the admissions process shall be prioritised for delivery.

Officers of the Council will keep progress under constant review to ensure the Service is equipped to manage admissions processes effectively for 2023 and beyond.

Service performance – comparison with other county councils

Warwickshire

The team serves a school cohort of 230 from a total of 256 settings. We understand that the team receives 20,000 admissions applications annually, generating 80,000 calls. That demand is currently managed with a permanent FTE of 22.14 FTE, with an additional 9 temporary FTE handling calls, totalling 31.14 FTE for 6 months.

Council 1

The team serves a school cohort of 220. They receive 26,000 applications from families annually, including 1,000 for transport, 20,000 for co-ordinated admissions, and 5,000 for in-year admissions. This generates 8,000 calls into their contact centre, of which c400 are transferred to admissions officers. The resultant demand is managed with an FTE of 7.

Council 2

The team serves a school cohort of 530. They receive 107,000 applications from families annually, including 20,000 for transport, 50,000 for co-ordinated admissions, 12,000 in-year admissions and 25,000 Free School Meals applications. This generates 67,000 calls annually into their contact centre, of which c3,300 are transferred to admissions officers. The resultant demand is managed with an FTE of 25.

Comparing the “application ratio” (number of applications / officer FTE) of each Council highlights their contrasting outputs:

- Warwickshire: 904 applications per FTE
- Council 1: 3,714 applications per FTE
- Council 2: 4,280 applications per FTE