

Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

19 September 2023

School Admissions Service Progress Report

Recommendation

That the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers and comments on the content of the report.

1. Executive Summary

1.1 School Admissions has a new leadership structure in place and returned to Education services within the People Directorate on 1 January 2023.

1.2 The seven recommendations from the In Year review, commissioned by the Chief Executive in 2022, have been or are in the process of being acted on to ensure lessons have been learnt from previous issues experienced within the service.

1.3 The service has undertaken significant improvement work via a designated plan to ensure it meets its statutory duty, underpinned by robust processes and procedures. A core part of improvement activity has been to ensure children and families are not left in unnecessary distress without school places for unacceptable periods of time. Two thirds of the key actions in the plan have been met since the start of the year. Remaining actions are on track for the conclusion of the plan in March 2024.

1.4 Following the issues associated with In-Year applications in 2022, the service has successfully implemented an auto-allocation process. All applications are now processed within statutory time limits with a fluent procedure in place that is understood by parents and schools. This has reduced manual input and subsequently the possibility of errors.

1.5 Secondary and Primary offer days were both co-ordinated successfully with 94.4 % of families gaining one of their first three preferences in Secondary and 98 % of families in Primary.

1.6 Complaints have reduced by 72% from the corresponding period twelve months ago. This has been achieved following dedicated work from the leadership team to ensure that emails are managed and triaged effectively, and calls are answered promptly without unnecessary delays. Cases identified that could escalate are shared on a Challenging calls log and case records are recorded accurately with all Admissions Officers having access. This avoids families having to share their story multiple times. Responses are provided with empathy and due consideration, even if the service cannot provide families with the outcome they want.

1.7 A comprehensive exercise has been undertaken with Admissions Officers to identify skills and training requirements with our internal Organisational Development

team. The service is currently working through key actions to further support staff development.

1.8 The Improvement Plan runs until March 2024. The service is currently developing a Roadmap for future years to ensure that continuous improvements can be made to the service to ensure overall efficiency and effectiveness in the long term.

2. Scope of School Admissions Service

2.1 Admissions arrange school places for:

- all children starting school.
- all children at an infant school moving to junior school.
- all primary school children moving to secondary school.
- children moving schools within Warwickshire.
- children moving into Warwickshire.
- all Warwickshire Grammar schools.

2.2 In addition the service:

- promote and process every application for Free School Meals including those applications where the family want to apply for vouchers.
- manages the process for families wishing to delay their children starting school or educating them out of year group.
- manages the process for Fair Access, which supports children and families who require additional assistance with getting a school place (for example children who have been excluded from a school).
- attends all legal appeals where parents have been refused admission into a school and ensure all the paperwork is ready for the family and Appeal Panel.
- allocate school places for all children moving into Warwickshire and support families from overseas, endeavouring to make the process easy to navigate and a supportive experience.
- support families wanting to change school, including offering advice to ensure this is the right decision for their children.
- work with schools to ensure they are at capacity where possible and that they follow the Admissions Code.
- supports split families where parents cannot agree on the school application for their children.
- provide advice where support is needed from additional services within the council such as Family Information Service.
- manage all 11+ testing arrangements for our grammar schools, ensuring all children with additional access requirements are given equal opportunity.
- work with services such as Children Missing Education and Access for Education, to ensure that we reach all families to support them and help get children back into school.
- support SENDAR with places for children with Education, Health, and Care Plans.

- provide webinars, websites, information, advice, for our children and families, face to face meetings with our family of schools and colleagues to achieve the best experience with our service.

3. Progress on Recommendations from the 2022 Review of Schools In-Year Admissions

3.1 In 2022, the Chief Executive commissioned a review into the issues that had been experienced regarding In-Year applications. The review findings and recommendations were presented to Fire and Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22nd February 2022 due to the service having previously been located in Resources.

3.2 Progress against each recommendation is detailed as follows:

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.

A new leadership team is in place within Education. This is led by Director of Education Johnny Kyriacou, Matt Biggs Head of Access to Education, Louise Church Admissions Delivery lead and three further staff (Structure chart is in Appendix 5). The Admissions Delivery Lead acts as the champion of parents and children and ensures the Admissions Code is adhered to.

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.

The focus of the current Improvement Plan has been to ensure the In-Year service provided is efficient and effective. The service is now running smoothly with statutory time limits being met. Further decisions regarding the future of delivering an In-Year service will be reviewed in future years.

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.

As part of the Customer Improvement Work, we are currently working with the Customer Service Delivery Lead looking at all the options available. One of these options includes the Customer Service Centre managing all non-complex communication.

We have kept the temporary Customer Service Advisers as this has been beneficial to managing our call volume and allowing Admission Officers to deal with the more complex workloads.

There are currently 12 Admission Officers in post. We are ensuring that they are multi-skilled and provided with relevant training and information.

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.

The return of the service to Education means there is no longer a commissioning/delivery arrangement in place. Clear accountability rests in one place and the service works closely with all interfacing areas to Admissions across Education and Children and Families.

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.

The service is looking at an option for offers for Primary, Junior and Secondary places to be made via an auto-accept model in future. This would reduce the burden on parents having to accept places and on officer time. This approach is currently being modelled ahead of a decision being made prior to 2024 offers.

In relation to seamless applications:

- Free School Meals

The FSM (Free School Meal) process has been simplified to make navigation easier for parents with a link is now available in the 'Application Submitted' screen following an application for a school place. Parents also have an option to provide feedback via a link on the 'Application Submitted' screen, so the FSM link has also been added to the "Thank you" screen that appears once feedback has been submitted. This therefore means that the FSM link appears regardless of the pathway the parent uses. If a parent applies for FSM following an application for a school place, relevant core data will have already populated the FSM application.

- Transport

It is planned to add a tick box to the parent portal on the school place application screen.

This will have text added 'Would you like to be assessed for home to school transport?'

Data will be shared automatically and the next step will be to investigate how to import Synergy (Education Management Information System) data into Flexi-route (Transport Management Information System). Applications would then be assessed in the usual way.

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.

Leaders are supported within education through regular 1 2 1s and annual appraisals are conducted alongside personal development plans. As part of the

transformation work taking place, the education service is looking at the span, scope and coverage of individual areas.

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.

When the service moved to education, we communicated early to schools to share our commitment to them and ambitions to deliver an improved service.

Staff have been visiting schools, offering support and guidance and are available when they are needed. The Schools' Direct Line has been promoted to schools and is available for them to contact the service and additional call handling capacity has helped to ensure enquiries are dealt with promptly.

Newsletters are now available for schools to share updates and information twice a term. Webinars for schools are available along with guidance including 'how to' videos. A Schools' Intranet is also under construction which will be a valuable source of information.

Feedback is welcomed and responded to in a timely fashion. We have received many compliments from schools which has been a good sign of the positive direction the service is moving in.

4. Admissions Service Improvement Plan and progress within the service.

4.1 The Admissions service is committed to providing the best possible service to families and schools. The service ethos acknowledges that the support a family needs may stretch beyond the need for a school place and signposting and referrals to other council services is an important part of the services remit.

4.2 A core issue for the service in moving to education was managing incoming calls and emails. All emails are now answered within five working days and calls are answered with an average wait time of two minutes.

4.3 The Improvement Plan is underpinned by six themes:

- Customer Service
- High Quality Service Delivery
- Workforce Development
- Performance
- Finance
- Communications

4.4 The core focus of the plan is to ensure the service is fit for purpose and meets both statutory requirements and those which we are commissioned to deliver on the behalf of schools such as 11+ and In-Year Admissions.

4.5 The golden thread running throughout the plan is business continuity and resilience underpinned by a requirement to build greater knowledge across the service, reduce single points of failure and ensure a robust set of processes, procedures and guides are in place for the future.

4.6 Restoring confidence amongst members, schools and parents is also paramount to the improvement being undertaken. Regular performance updates are now scheduled with members and engagement takes place with schools through conferences and network meetings.

4.7 Whilst the Improvement project end date is not until March 2024, 66% of set actions have already been met.

5. In-Year service and progress

5.1 The council co-ordinates an In-Year service for Warwickshire schools. This is to allocate places for children who require provision outside of the normal point of entry for Primary and Secondary education.

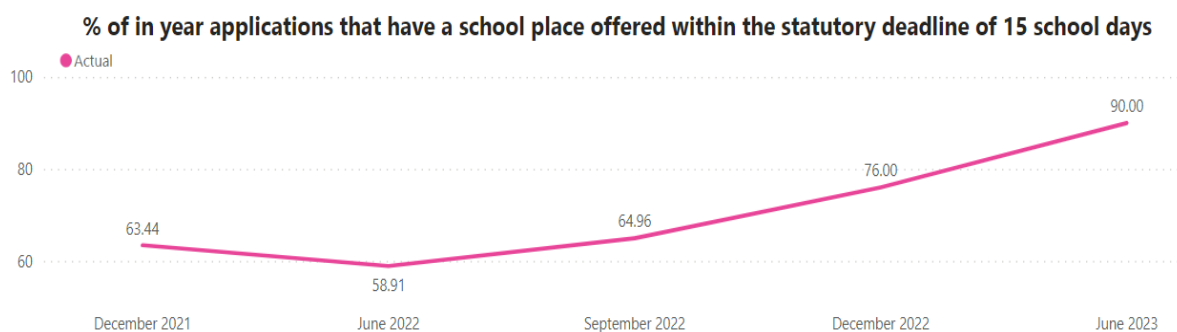
5.2 Schools are given the opportunity to opt-in or opt out with only 9% in the county choosing to opt out.

5.3 In 2022, this area of the service was not functioning well and a decision to move to the auto-allocation of places led to a backlog of application un-processed over the summer period.

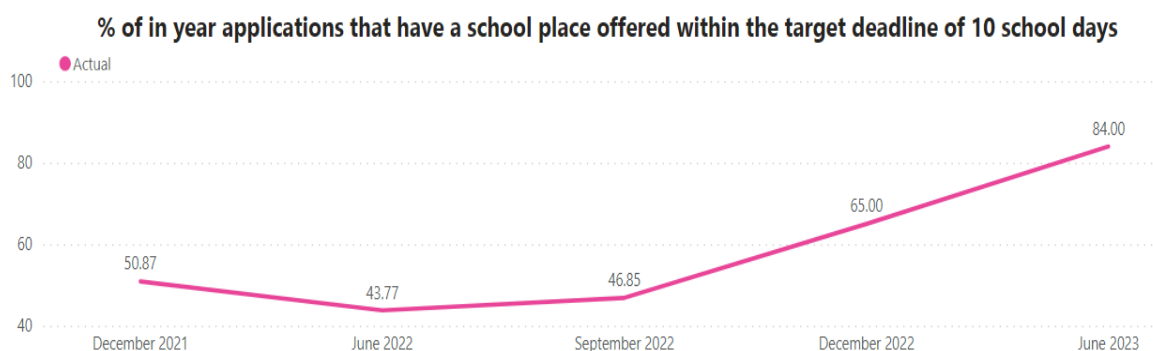
5.4 The service has received 9090 In-Year applications this year (a 5% rise from 2021/22) attributed to the popularity of Warwickshire schools and significant housing growth across the county.

Admissions Round	Number of 2021-2022 Applications (whole year)	Number of 2022-2023 Applications (whole year)
Yr R	889	1262
Yr 1	737	761
Yr 2	697	722
Yr 3	787	759
Yr 4	686	692
Yr 5	661	629
Yr 6	406	476
Yr 7	2270	2013
Yr 8	573	646
Yr 9	510	572
Yr 10	348	400
Yr 11	120	158
Total	8684	9090

5.5 Applications are now processed weekly, excluding school holidays, for children moving schools or into the area (in year) within statutory timescales (15 days) being met consistently.



5.6 Admissions also report on allocating school places within 10 school working days and from the same period last year and we have led improvement in activity from 43.77% to 84%.



5.7 The positive data has been supported by the successful implementation of an auto-allocation process with data exchange shared between schools and the council via a digital platform. This has reduced the possibility of errors from traditional manual processing which was also time-consuming.

6. Primary and Secondary Transfer

6.1 The council has a statutory duty to co-ordinate places for the year of entry for Reception, Junior (where applicable if children are attending Infant School) and Secondary places.

6.2 Despite changes to the entire leadership team and the introduction of many new personnel to the service, detailed preparation meant that Offer Days went smoothly with all families receiving offers on time. Advance planning with ICT meant that anticipated call traffic was managed without issues with 83% of all calls answered within two minutes or less.

6.3 For Secondary, 94.4% of on time Warwickshire applicants received one of their first three preferences on Offer Day, in line with the previous year. 80% received their first preference, down 2% from 2022.

6.4 For Primary, 98% of on time Warwickshire applicants received one of their first three preferences on Offer Day, up 1% from 2022. 91% received their first preference, up 1% from 2022.

7. Complaints

7.1 When the service moved to Education, a high number of complaints were being handled directly from parents and often via MPs and local councillors on their behalf.

7.2 The service processes in excess of 25,000 applications every year and therefore a small proportion of complaints are to be expected.

7.3 The service identified that some of the complaints could have been prevented by better communication from the outset.

7.4 Through better management of calls and emails, families are receiving prompter responses to their enquiries. Notes are accurately recorded on the Management Information System which means families do not have to re-tell their story. A challenging calls log is now also in operation so that officers are aware of cases that could escalate and can seek advice and support to resolve.

7.5 A process is in place to ensure an expression of dissatisfaction from a school or family is escalated automatically to a senior member of staff and dealt with accordingly.

7.6 Responses to enquiries from Councillors, MPs and Senior Colleagues are all dealt with within corporate guidelines ensuring responses are robust and offer next steps for the affected families.

7.7 As a result of the approaches taken, we have seen complaints reduce by over 72% since January in comparison to the same period last year.

Date Range	Complaints Received
01/01/2023 – 25/08/2023	18
01/01/2022 – 25/08/2022	64

8. School Appeals

8.1 All parents when applying for school places have a legal right of appeal. The Admission Service attend every appeal representing the admission authority and on occasion the school.

8.2 We have seen over 40% rise of appeals in 2022-23 academic year compared with the previous year for In-year school places which requires robust planning to ensure staff availability and all legal paperwork ready for statutory timescales. This is attributed to greater demand for places In-Year which we are working to address with schools.

8.3 We have increased the number of staff members trained and attending appeals within the service and to support with the legal paperwork.

Warwickshire Appeals for a five-year period for each academic year (including In-Year)

	1 September 2022 - 20 July 2023	1 September 2021 - 31 August 2022	1 September 2020 - 31 August 2021	1 September 2019 - 31 August 2020	1 September 2018 - 31 August 2019
Dealt with	1539	1196	886	849	1071
Heard	893	659	534	536	536
Successful	198	131	70	73	108
Unsuccessful	695	528	464	463	428
Settled	276	235	170	148	255
Withdrawn	248	193	113	84	166
Rejected	122	109	69	81	114

9. Future roadmap for the service and improvements

9.1 The service recognises that improvements must continue beyond the lifecycle of the Improvement Plan which is due to be completed in March 2024.

9.2 We are developing a roadmap to focus on further improvements within the service over future years.

9.3 Future efforts will focus on:

- how we can harness and utilise innovative technologies to improve the way we engage and interact with families and schools and improve efficiency in the way we work.
- Providing future resilience by working with our Customer Service Centre to look at how initial enquiries can be managed and responded to more efficiently and effectively.
- Reviewing the way Appeals work and consider innovative approaches.
- Pursuing options regarding auto-acceptance for families at Transfer stage to ease the burden on them and reduce traffic and demand into the service.
- Further improving our website, communications, and work with some of the big employers in the surrounding areas which bring families into Warwickshire. Providing a welcome pack to support families with their move to Warwickshire and finding school places. We will also explore how we can enhance online tools like one showing school vacancies. This will help families with making informed decisions.
- Further seek active feedback from all our customers and use this intelligence to shape our service now and in the future. We will undertake continued liaison with other local authorities to review our processes, procedures and performance and seek best practice.

10. Financial Implications

None – Service has a balanced staffing budget with funding from Central School's Block.

11. Environmental Implications

None

12. Supporting Information

See Appendices

13. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

Not applicable

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Complaints Received
Appendix 2 - Compliments
Appendix 3 - Secondary Offer Day Data
Appendix 4 - Primary Offer Day Data
Appendix 5 - Structure Chart

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

Local Member(s):

Other members: Chair & Spokes of Children & Young People OSC

Appendix 1

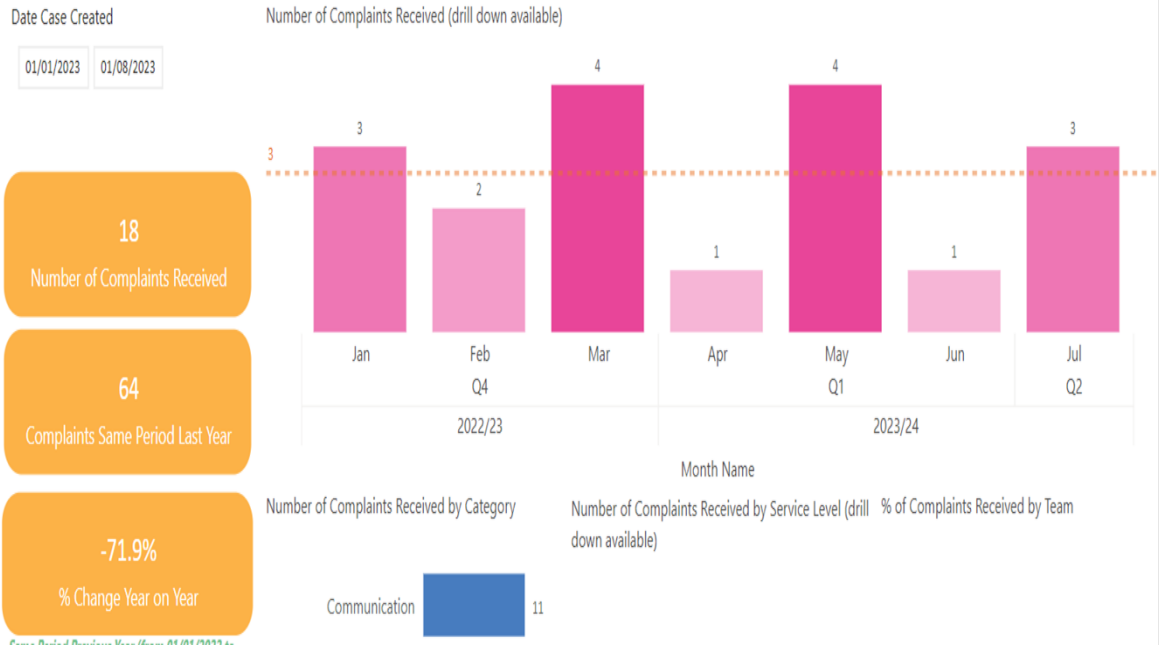
Complaints received between 1st January and 1st August 2023



Complaints Received

analysis of all complaints received by date and service

Vers
IDAP Environment:
Status



Page 1 of 1

Appendix 2 Compliments

I am writing to share my sincere gratitude with you both for helping to rectify these two problems so quickly. You really have relieved a lot of worry from two families and this is going to make such a difference to two children's lives. I appreciate that you're both very busy so your support is truly appreciated
A School

CXXX is an amazing admissions officer even when she delivers bad news (could not get XXX into the primary I wanted) she was very clear, transparent and offered alternatives. I appreciate your jobs are demanding especially with parents like me but please know I am grateful to CXXX for both my experiences with her.
A Family

I just wanted to send a heartfelt thank you for helping me resolve xxxxx getting into xxx All this wouldn't have been possible without you in my corner and I'm so happy they're starting at xxx I could cry! Thank you a million times over!
A Family

Hi KXXX, I cannot thank you enough for all this essential information. It will help to give our grandson a chance to achieve his potential and for us all to understand how the 11 Plus works administratively and educationally. It's an example of kind efficiency and a very impressive example of public service at its best. Thank you once again.
A Family

I wanted to say a big thank you for enabling NXXX to come and visit our school last week. She has been so supportive during the first two years of my role and it was really great to meet her and show her around our school. It is great to put a face to the voice! She is always so friendly and helpful and we are very lucky to have her on hand. Thanks again.

A School
Thank you and really well done. Some positive feedback for you, I've had several head teachers at the Head Teachers conference this morning saying really positive things about you and the service as a whole. Speak soon and thank you again
A Colleague

Appendix 3 Secondary Offers

The table below shows how this compares to the past 3 years and was accurate as of Offer Day 1 March 2023:

Applications from Warwickshire residents	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of on-time applications received	6,155	6,352	6,771	6,720
Warwickshire on-time applicants offered their first preference school	4,943	4,993	5,526	5,395
	80.3%	79%	82%	80.3%
Warwickshire on-time applicants offered one of their first three preferences	5,759	5,538	6,380	6,342
	93.5%	87%	94.2%	94.4%
Warwickshire on-time applicants not offered one of their preferences	255	260	290	284
	4.1%	4%	4.3%	4.2%
Total number of Warwickshire secondary school places available	6,962	6,507	7,228	7,456

Appendix 4

Primary Offers

The table below shows how this compares to the past 3 years and was accurate as of Offer Day 17 April 2023

Applications from Warwickshire residents	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of on-time applications received	5962	Data not recorded	6237	6333
Warwickshire on-time applicants offered their first preference school	5543	5521	5607	5746
	93%	92%	90%	91%
Warwickshire on-time applicants offered one of their first three preferences	6073	5887	6042	6221
	95%	98%	97%	98%
Warwickshire on-time applicants not offered one of their preferences	111	164	151	80
	2%	3%	2%	1%
Total number of Warwickshire school places available	7186	7196	7134	7143

Appendix 5

Structure Chart

