

Decision Maker: EDUCATION POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date: Tuesday 17 September 2013

Decision Type: Non-Urgent Non-Executive Non-Key

Title: UPDATE ON ONLINE APPLICATION SYSTEMS - CHANGES

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Chief Officer: Terry Parkin, Executive Director of Education, Care & Health Services

Ward: All

1. Reason for report

The purpose of this report is to update members with the latest progress on moving towards on line applications for school places and free school meals.

2. **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

That the Education PDS Committee consider the contents of the report.

Corporate Policy

1. Policy Status: Existing Policy: Extending on line applications for Council services
 2. BBB Priority: Children and Young People
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Financial

1. Cost of proposal: Not Applicable:
 2. Ongoing costs: Recurring Costs: as below
 3. Budget head/performance centre: School Access
 4. Total current budget for this head: £446,660
 5. Source of funding: DSG £259,450
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Staff

1. Number of staff (current and additional): Admissions team 8.14 FTE
 2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours:
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Legal

1. Legal Requirement: Statutory Requirement: School admissions operates under the Statutory Guidance School Admissions Code 2012 issued under School Standards and Framework Act 1998
 2. Call-in: Not Applicable The report is for information:
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Customer Impact

1. Estimated number of users/beneficiaries (current and projected):
Primary and secondary applicants: 6985 (2013) rising to 8243 (2020)
Free schools meals 6000 currently
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Ward Councillor Views

1. Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? Not Applicable
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments:

3. COMMENTARY

- 3.1 School admissions for primary and secondary schools are managed through the Pan-London Co-ordinate Admissions System operated by the on behalf of all the London Boroughs using a Common Application Form (CAF). From 2007 on line versions of the CAF have been available and in Bromley, primary on line applications this year reached 64% and secondary 49%. Whilst both were significantly up on previous years, this report described the measures that are being taken to move towards a system that is substantially accessed and delivered on line.
- 3.2 The system for applications for free school meals in Bromley commenced in June 2012 and some 50% of claims are now made by this route. Schools encourage applicants to apply not least because their funding for the Pupil Premium is driven by the numbers receiving free school meals. Applications have to be renewed each school year or when circumstances change.
- 3.3 A Pan-London on line system has been set up to manage applications for 14-19 places mainly at University Technical Colleges such as Royal Greenwich at Woolwich (opening in 2013) and The Leigh at Dartford (opening in 2014).
- 3.4 In the first year of new institutions such as free schools the DfE allow admissions to be managed by the governing body should they so wish, when there still may be some uncertainty about opening dates, staff and premises. This means that applicants may receive more than one offer. In the second year they must become part of the on line co-ordinated system.
- 3.5 Applications for school places require the submission of additional information to prove entitlement, such as for reception admissions a birth certificate, Council Tax payment and child benefit entitlement. Other documents that may be required include proofs of recent change of address, residence, care or custody orders or to support applications made under medical or social need. Places are not normally offered until applicants are resident save for members of the armed forces who can apply with evidence of a confirmed posting.
- 3.6 For free school meals, eligibility is mostly determined with reference to on line systems maintained by the DfE with links to the tax and benefits system. The Harris Federation and Coopers School process their own applications for free school meals.
- 3.6 Parents can submit additional documents where they are required by scanning and attaching them to their application. Facilities are available free of charge in public libraries although many smartphones and tablets have a built in scanner. The quality of scanned documents is very variable and many applicants still find it easier to submit these in paper form.
- 3.7 Applicants for voluntary aided schools also require submission of a Supplementary Information Form (SIF) which has to be returned to the school by the application dates. Some foundation schools and academies also apply additional criteria. These forms are provided by the schools.
- 3.8 Parents are advised of the outcome by e-mail if they have applied on line and in all cases by letter. Written communication is a requirement of the Pan London system and is the most reliable way to ensure that parents are all made aware of the outcome at the same time. It also include information about how to appeal, go on to waiting lists or add preferences should they not obtain their first choice. Parents are asked to return a form accepting or rejecting the place. This is considered essential in order to ensure that places can be freed up for other applicants, whether on the waiting list or coming into the system late. Places are not withdrawn even after the due date until the parents has advised what arrangements are in place for the child to be educated, to ensure the best available offer for all residents.

3.9 Reception Class applications for September 2014

For 2014, the information produced for parents has changed. The large A4 colour application booklet hitherto produced with details of all schools will now be available mostly on line although small numbers of reference copies are being printed to distribute to early years settings, schools and public libraries. It is a requirement of the DfE Admissions Code that a hard copy is available for parents who do not have access to the internet. An A5 booklet is being produced for all applicants which will contain the list of schools, a map and an outline of the application process directing the parent to school websites and the on line process. QR (Quick Response) codes (similar to bar codes) will be included to provide direct links to the on line system for smart phones and tablets. Applications have to be made by the deadline of 15 January 2014. Schools and early years providers have been briefed for on line applications and there will be very limited criteria for allowing paper applications, e.g. people with disabilities.

3.10 Secondary admissions for September 2014

In the same way the secondary system is being geared towards on line applications. The production of information for parents will follow the same format as the primary above, with A5 booklets replacing the A4 for the most part. Pre-printed forms will no longer be supplied. Most parents are more familiar with the admissions process and have less difficulty than those who are dealing with it for the first time. Again, on line applications will be expected to be the 'norm' with only exceptions allowed for those that meet the criteria outlined above. Schools have been briefed at parent transition meeting regarding the new process.

3.11 **All other applicants:** An A5 booklet is being produced, also available on line, setting out the processes for primary and secondary above but also including details about applying for infant to junior transfer, 14-19 places and in year admissions, directing applicants to on line systems where appropriate.

4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The extension of on line applications for reception class places is expected to settle as parents become accustomed to the increasing use of computerised systems for public services as well as consumer products. The withdrawal of paper systems is likely to be accepted as parents become aware of the different means to apply on line. In addition to desktop terminals, smartphones and tablets, other electronic devices may be able to access the systems.
- 4.2 However, many parents, perhaps whose first language is not English or who find it challenging to manage an on line process, may have difficulties. As on line applications have to be manually verified and cleared within the system, staff report that many contain uncertainties or inconsistencies which have to be validated manually with the applicant. This remains a time consuming process but without it there could be rejection of the application by the system or dissatisfaction by parents with the outcome if it went forward with incorrect information. The difficulties with attached documentation have been noted.
- 4.3 It is proposed to provide additional help in early years' settings to assist parents who may be applying on line for the first time. Support will be available through nursery providers, pre-schools and day care centres to provide assistance to ensure the submission of valid applications on time and on line. There is an on-line help service within the Pan-London system which should resolve many queries. Admission staff are also on hand by email and phone to support parents and clarify what is required. It is expected that the costs of this additional support in the first year will not exceed £10,000 and this can be contained within existing

budgets. It will be evaluated to determine how and in what form it should continue. Staff in libraries may be available to assist applicants with the application and scanning process.

- 4.3 For secondary admissions, staff give assistance to schools on request and provide information and advice sessions to parents whose children are about to enter the transfer process. These are well attended and help to resolve many of the issues parents may find if they are applying for the first time. The error rate in secondary applications is lower than primary.
- 4.4 The extension of on line applications for free school meals is being encouraged. However, as schools have an interest in ensuring the application is made they will often distribute application forms to parents who may be eligible, and see that they are returned. In many cases eligible parents do not apply for their own reasons and there is overall some 2% difference between those eligible and who apply. Schools are also in a position to advise where fraudulent claims may be suspected. The LA will consult with schools following this year's applications to refine the process for next year.
- 4.5 Other authorities carry out validation checks using a separate IT team. At this stage there is sufficient expertise within the admissions team to carry out this function
- 4.6 Although much of the information is available on the web site, parents do make use of phone services to pursue queries about waiting lists and other concerns. Whilst they are encouraged to use e-mail, many prefer to use the phone or the public counter. Many repeated calls come from relatively small number of applicants, mainly those whose eligibility for places has not been established or who are dissatisfied with the offer they have been made.
- 4.7 The checking of eligibility for places is a significant element of the admissions workload as part of the validation process, whether on line or on paper. Many applications are found to contain errors, misleading or false information which if unchallenged might lead to the incorrect award of a place. In many cases, parents submit the addresses of relatives or temporary accommodation in order to secure a place at a cherished school. The present system of checking Council tax and benefit records enables such applications to be detected. It is considered essential that these are continued to maintain the integrity and fairness of the system. As it is a statutory service, the allocation of places to the application or to others is often challenged either at appeal, letters to elected members, MPs or recourse to law. Whilst the overall number of cases is relatively small (some 50-100 per year) the knowledge that these are discovered is a deterrent to wider misuse. In the wider context, the emphasis being given to the reduction in fraud in public services makes it even more important to ensure the fairness of this system.
- 4.8 The Pan-London system is managed externally by the London Councils and whilst links are available on the Bromley website, is maintained centrally along with the help line. Although there is regular consultation with all the partner authorities and the DfE, changes can only be made by consent of all the participating users.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The move to on line applications for primary and secondary will generate cost savings in terms of the more limited production of paper booklets and leaflets. The saving on the production of A4 colour booklets is of the order of £5,000 although that is to some extent offset by the increased size of the smaller A5 booklet to contain all the information. At this stage it is considered essential that all parents for reception admissions and secondary transfer are alerted to the need to apply by the issue of a booklet setting out their responsibilities and how these can be met. In time these too may be met in other ways.
- 5.2 There will be further savings in terms of staff time in the data entry of paper forms and reductions in printing costs as the system develops. Already application acknowledgment letters are only issued on request with SAEs. Schools will be encouraged to produce and administer

Supplementary Information Forms on line. The greater use of scanned documentation will reduce the volumes of paper that need to be held.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The provision of school places is a statutory function and is governed by the DfE School Admissions Code 2012 made under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. It is the responsibility of school admissions authorities to ensure that they are compliant with the Code. The local authority operates and manages the admissions process in its area. In London this is carried out by the Pan-London Admissions Board managed by the London Councils and its procedures need to be consistent across all authorities.

7 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Numbers of staff in the Admissions Team remain under review and will be reconsidered in the light of changing needs. At present, it is broadly equivalent to other London boroughs and is sufficient to provide an efficient service, manage the process of checking eligibility as required and respond to a continuing high level of queries from applicants throughout the year.
- 7.2 Other authorities have designated IT support staff within the admissions team to validate and process on line applications. In Bromley these functions are carried out by the team members in addition to their other duties.

Non-Applicable Sections:	
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	26 June 2013: E&R PDS New Technology Working Group: minutes and references to previous papers