

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

6 February 2024

Subject: School Admissions Policies 2025-2026

Cabinet Member: Cllr Laura Mayes – Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Skills

Key Decision: Non-key

Executive Summary

The Local Authority has a statutory duty to act in accordance with the School Admissions Code and has a statutory duty to formulate and operate schemes to co-ordinate the admissions to all maintained schools and Academies within its area. We are proposing two co-ordinated schemes; one that covers primary schools (including infants and juniors) and the other is for secondary schools.

There is a legal requirement to have schemes in place for the co-ordination of admission to the schools within Wiltshire.

The Local Authority is also the statutory admission authority for Voluntary Controlled and Community Schools in its area. As such, it is required to formulate admission arrangements which outline how it will admit children to those schools. There are two proposed schemes one for secondary and one for primary (including infant and junior schools).

There is also a legal requirement to have these policies in place.

The report presents the four elements of the Admissions Policy which, following consultation, are required to be determined by Cabinet.

Proposal(s)

Cabinet is asked to approve the appended schemes which will become the determined Admissions Policy for Wiltshire for 2025/26.

Reason for Proposal(s)

It is a legal requirement to have these policies in place.

The schemes and arrangements as presented have been sent out to all schools for consultation and no alternative suggestions have been received to date.

Terence Herbert
Chief Executive

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

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Purpose of Report

The Local Authority has a statutory duty to act in accordance with the School Admissions Code and has a statutory duty to formulate and operate schemes to co-ordinate the admissions to all maintained schools and Academies within its area. We are proposing two co-ordinated schemes; one that covers primary schools (including infants and juniors) and the other is for secondary schools.

There is a legal requirement to have schemes in place for the co-ordination of admission to the schools within Wiltshire.

The Local Authority is also the statutory admission authority for Voluntary Controlled and Community Schools in its area. As such, it is required to formulate admission arrangements which outline how it will admit children to those schools. There are two proposed schemes one for secondary and one for primary (including infant and junior schools).

The report presents the four elements of the Admissions Policy which, following consultation, are required to be determined by Cabinet.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

The Local Authority has a continued statutory responsibility to provide a school place for all children living in Wiltshire. The four documents have been put in place to ensure that all places are allocated in an open, fair and transparent way.

One of Wiltshire Council's Business Plan outcomes is to achieve inclusive communities where everyone can achieve their potential. Key to this is that everyone has access to high quality education. A functioning, fair admissions policy is required to achieve this.

Background

The purpose of co-ordinated arrangements is to make the application process simpler for parents by ensuring that each child gets one offer for one school place.

This requires the School Admissions Team to work with colleagues in Academies, Foundation and Aided schools in Wiltshire and other local authorities.

The co-ordinated process is accepted by schools and the scheme does not need substantial revision. The proposed schemes are substantially the same as those currently being used. All four schemes have been drafted in line with The School Admissions Code which came into force on 1 September 2021.

The Local Authority is the admissions authority for all Community and Voluntary Controlled schools in the county. The governing bodies or Trusts of Academies, Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools are each their own admissions authority.

Each admission authority must determine the arrangements to be used when allocating school places. These proposed arrangements will be used solely for admissions to Wiltshire Community and Voluntary Controlled schools. They incorporate the criteria used to prioritise applications in situations when a school is oversubscribed (i.e. when more applications are received than places available) as well as showing how all admissions will be processed.

Main Considerations for the Council

The proposed co-ordinated schemes and admission arrangements have been sent out for consultation to all relevant stakeholders including pre-schools / nurseries, schools, and Dioceses; they have also been placed on the Council's website for parents and the public to view as well as being sent to neighbouring authorities. The consultation began in November and ended in January 2024.

We received three responses to the consultation. The first related to an academy admissions policy. We therefore directed the parent directly to the academy to discuss their proposal.

The second was from Princecroft Primary school requesting that out of catchment siblings are given priority over in catchment children. They referred to one other school which does temporarily have this arrangement. It should be noted however that this was put in place at the other school, as the school's catchment area expanded and this change may have disadvantaged families with children already on roll. No changes have been made for Princecroft catchments area.

The Council's admissions policy has long been based on the principle 'local schools for local children' and it is for this reason that this change will not be implemented as requested.

The third response was from a parent who requested that we amend the over-subscription criteria to include 'elder siblings of younger previously looked after children'.

At present our policy gives equal priority to siblings whether or not the child / sibling is previously looked after. This is in line with the School Admissions Code.

The sibling criteria is only implemented when one child is on roll at the preferred school, which then means siblings have a higher priority. In this instance the parent is requesting that we give a higher priority to the elder child who is not previously looked after, solely because they have a younger sibling that is previously looked after.

This change has not been made to our policy as the code is clear in that priority is given to looked after children and previously looked after children and not their siblings.

As in previous years, it is clear that there is confidence and that with suitable communication systems being in place, the co-operation between the Admissions Team and the Foundation, Voluntary Aided schools and Academies which is essential for the smooth operation of a co-ordinated scheme, will be forthcoming.

The proposed timetables for the primary and secondary co-ordinated schemes are based on those used in previous years and so they are familiar to schools and the Admissions Team at Wiltshire Council.

The statutory regulations give clear deadlines for admissions applications, to which the co-ordinated admissions schemes must adhere.

- Secondary Deadline 31 October 2024
- Primary Deadline 15 January 2025
- Secondary Notification Date 1 March 2025
- Primary Notification Date 16 April 2025

The co-ordinated schemes include the provision to co-ordinate all admissions to all schools for the main years of entry. The main years of entry are Reception, Year 3 (Junior) and Year 7. In line with the School Admissions Code, there is no longer the requirement for In Year applications to be co-ordinated within county or cross border. In the attached schemes, however, it is proposed that all In Year applications continue to be made directly to Wiltshire Council for places at Wiltshire schools. This is so that we can monitor which children are potentially out of the school system for safeguarding purposes. We do however currently have 18 schools which have opted out of in year co-ordination for this academic year as it is not a legal requirement to co-ordinate in year applications. These schools are still required to inform the LA of all applications that are received as well as the outcome. Should the school not be able to offer a place and if the child is a Wiltshire resident, the LA will make an alternative offer to ensure that the child is not without a school place.

The co-ordinated scheme for main round applications for places at primary schools (Reception intake) mirrors that which operates for secondary schools (Year 7 intake). Wiltshire residents may apply for an out of county school on a Wiltshire form. Out of county residents can apply for a Wiltshire school through their own local authority.

It is clear from previous years, that there is widespread agreement with the proposed admission arrangements for Voluntary Controlled and Community schools which are also considered to be fair and objective as required by the School Admissions Code.

Currently children living within a school's designated area are given priority over children from outside that area. The tie break used if a school is oversubscribed within any criterion is that of distance (straight line) from the school.

The proposed co-ordinated schemes and admission arrangements have all been drafted in accordance with the requirements of the School Admissions Code which came in to force on 1 September 2021.

The admission arrangements for Voluntary Controlled and Community schools will be operated within the appropriate co-ordinated scheme for admissions within Wiltshire and are compatible with the timetables laid down by the co-ordinated schemes.

Following the period of consultation and once determined by Cabinet, the schemes and admission arrangements will be circulated to all schools in Wiltshire and to our nine neighbouring local authorities and published on the Council website. They will be implemented from September 2024 when the process of admitting children to the intake year in 2025 begins.

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

Not applicable

Safeguarding Implications

In the interest of safeguarding, the Local Authority continues to co-ordinate all in year applications for children to the majority of Wiltshire schools, this ensures that the School Admissions Team can monitor which children are potentially out of the school system. If a parent is unable to secure a place at their preferred school, the School Admissions Team will ensure that a place is allocated at a reasonable alternative.

As above, we do have some schools which have opted out of in year co-ordination due to there being no legal requirement to co-ordinate in year applications. These schools are still required to inform the LA of all applications that are received as well as the outcome. Should the school not be able to offer a place and if the child is a Wiltshire resident, the LA will make an alternative offer to ensure that the child is not without a school place.

Public Health Implications

Education is known to directly impact health and wellbeing in terms of life expectancy, morbidity and health behaviours, and it can play a potentially significant role in reducing health inequalities and shaping life opportunities.

It is, therefore, important to have processes in place (as described above) to ensure all children resident in Wiltshire have a school place.

Procurement Implications

There are no procurement implications directly arising from this report.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

The Admissions Policy and Co-ordinated Admissions Schemes are put in place to ensure all applications for a school place are treated in fair, open and transparent way. Although not part of the proposed co-ordinated schemes or admission arrangements, it should be noted that all application forms can be produced in different languages on request.

Over 99% of applications for September 2023 intakes were received electronically.

Paper copies of the application forms are also still available for parents/carers who do not have online access.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

The Admission Policy of the local authority is to give local children priority when applying for their local school. This policy of 'local schools for local children' has been maintained for many years and is a way of encouraging parents to consider the environmental impact of long journeys to school.

Should the Admissions Team not be able to offer a place at a child's designated school and the child lives further than the statutory safe walking distance for the child's age, then free transport would be provided to the next nearest school with available places. The percentage of children this currently applies to in Wiltshire is 1%.

Workforce Implications

There are no workforce implications.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

Were the Local Authority not to determine co-ordinated schemes for its maintained schools, the Secretary of State would impose a scheme on us.

The Office of the Schools Adjudicator has a monitoring role to play in regards to admission arrangements. It is the statutory responsibility of admission authorities to ensure that these are in place by 28 February 2024.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

There is a small risk that confusion or challenge may occur over the 2025/26 proposed arrangements, however, this is mitigated as the changes in the proposed 2025/26 schemes have been kept to a minimum.

Financial Implications

The budget to support the staffing and the co-ordination of admissions is funded from the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) received by the Local Authority. In line with current school funding arrangements, the funding for admission arrangements will continue to form part of the Central Schools Services Block of the DSG for 2024-25 and is therefore determined by Schools Forum as part of the consideration of the overall central schools block. This is finalised at the January 2024 meeting of the Forum and ratified by Council at their February 2024 meeting. There are no plans currently to increase or, decrease the Admissions budget.

Legal Implications

The School Admissions Code, issued under Section 84 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, imposes mandatory requirements in relation to the discharge of functions relating to admissions to maintained schools. The Local Authority has a statutory duty to act in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Code. This includes a statutory duty to determine schemes for the co-ordination of admissions and admission arrangements for Voluntary Controlled and Community schools. Should the Local Authority fail to do so the Secretary of State may impose schemes. The proposed schemes and scheme changes have been drafted to comply with the requirements of the Schools Admissions Code

which came into force on the 1st September 2021.

Options Considered

It is a legal requirement to have these policies in place and therefore no alternative has been considered.

The schemes and arrangements as presented have been sent out to all school for consultation and no alternative suggestions have been received to date.

Conclusions

Cabinet is asked to approve the appended schemes which will become the determined Admissions Policy for Wiltshire for 2025/26.

Helean Hughes and Richard Hanks (Directors - Education & Skills)

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Date of report

Appendices –

- a) Appendix A - Proposed Scheme for the Co-ordination of Secondary Admissions 2025/26
- b) Appendix B - Proposed Scheme for the Co-ordination of Primary Admissions 2025/26
- c) Appendix C -Proposed Admission Arrangements for Voluntary Controlled & Community Secondary Schools 2025/26
- d) Appendix D -Proposed Admission Arrangements for Voluntary Controlled & Community Primary Schools 2025/26

Background Papers