

Bridgend County Borough Council

**Approved minutes of the
Bridgend Admission Forum meeting
held on 27 September 2022, via Teams**

Local authority representatives

Mr R Davies (RD) – Chair
Mrs D Davies (DD) - Secretary
Ms R Garner (RG)

Group Manager - Business Support
Principal Officer - Business Strategy and Performance
ALN (Additional Learning Needs) Lead Early Years,
Cognition and Learning and CMMI (Complex Medical
and Motor Impairment)
Childcare Team Manager
Cabinet Member for Education

Ms B Davies (BD)

Cllr J-P Blundell (Cllr JPB)

School (community and voluntary controlled) representatives

Mr A Slade (AS)
Mrs K John (KJ)

Headteacher, Porthcawl Comprehensive School
Headteacher, Brackla Primary School

School (voluntary aided) representatives

Mr J Tarran (JT) – Vice-chair

Headteacher, Archdeacon John Lewis Church in
Wales Primary School

Roman Catholic Diocesan representatives

Ms Anne Robertson (AR)

Director of Schools, Archdiocese of Cardiff

Church in Wales Diocesan representatives

Ms Rebecca Morteo (RM)

Acting Diocesan Education Lead for the Llandaff
Diocese

Community representatives

Mr W Bond (WB)

Héronsbridge School

Additional members

Ms C Christy (CC)

Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council

1. Welcome, introductions and apologies

RD welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

Apologies were noted from BD and RM.

2. Election of the Chair, Vice-chair and Secretary for the 2022-2023 school year

RD, JT and DD were proposed as the Chair, Vice-chair and Secretary. The proposal was approved by all present. RD, JT and DD accepted the positions for the 2022-2023 school year.

3. Membership of the forum for the 2022-2023 school year

DD referred to Attachment A, which was a document detailing the proposed membership of the forum for 2022-2023. As had been previously stated,

DD informed the members that Ms Delyth Nicholls, the Acting Headteacher of Ysgol y Ferch o'r Sgêr, was originally due to take up membership following the retirement of Mrs Rhiannon Dixon. However, this would not be the case and confirmation of the Welsh-medium headteacher who would join the membership was expected shortly.

DD highlighted that AR and RM had become members of the forum and RD extended thanks for the commitment from the dioceses to the forum.

DD reminded the members that a request had been made for contact with the Welsh Refugee Council regarding possible future membership of the forum. DD advised that there had been contacts with the Welsh Refugee Council and an invitation had been extended, but no responses had been received.

DD referred to a change within the Education Engagement Team of the Education and Family Support Directorate. This had resulted in an Education Engagement Co-ordinator post with responsibilities relating to vulnerable groups of learners aligning well with the fair access groups. DD suggested consideration of an invitation to join the membership being extended to that postholder. The proposal was supported.

4. Minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2022 and matters arising

The minutes were approved as an accurate record.

The members reaffirmed that invitations to join the membership should be extended again to all parent and community governors during 2022-2023.

DD provided a verbal update regarding the school admission of children arriving in Bridgend from Ukraine. In April and May 2022, shortly after the children started arriving in Wales from Ukraine, Public Health Wales (PHW) introduced a requirement for screening for active tuberculosis (TB). PHW issued advice that children should not attend school before screening and medical clearance. This was subsequently changed to advice that secondary-age children did not attend school before medical clearance but that primary-age children could attend school before medical clearance if they were presenting as well. Therefore, while admission decisions had proceeded as normal,

parents/carers were advised of the position as regards starting school and schools were asked to make decisions on start dates for individual children reflecting the PHW advice.

A recent update from PHW had stated that no cases of active TB had been identified through screening. Accordingly, the advice had changed, and Ukrainian children no longer need medical clearance before attending school.

As at 9 September 2022, there had been 66 applications for school places for children from Ukraine. Of these, 30 were in respect of primary-age children, with 28 being made to the local authority and 2 to voluntary aided schools. There were 36 applications for secondary-age children with 26 being made to the local authority and 10 to Archbishop McGrath Catholic High School.

DD highlighted that many of the Ukrainian families were being hosted by families just a few geographical clusters, with school places in those areas already being under pressure. DD reminded members that children from Ukraine do not have any exceptional status as far as school admissions are concerned. Where a place could not be offered at the requested school, a place at the nearest suitable alternative school had been offered. There had been one occasion of a parent refusing the offered alternative school and the parent had, instead, pursued an independent online learning package. In addition, there had been one appeal against the local authority's refusal of a place at the requested school. The independent appeal panel had not upheld the appeal.

DD advised that information received to date reports that statutory education in Ukraine begins at a later age than in the UK and continues until a learner is aged 18. However, all except two applications received had been for admission to the correct year group for the learner's chronological age. Towards the end of the last school year, several applications had been received for admission to Year 11. Given the obvious difficulties associated with an admission to Year 11 at that time, parents/carers and learners had been signposted to Bridgend College. This was known to be the standard practice in other local authorities in Wales for learners of that age.

RD and DD also highlighted various layers of complexity with some applications and consultation with appropriate services in the local authority, as needed. In one instance, the child had received a diagnosis, just before arriving in the UK, of a condition associated with additional learning needs. The parent had expectations as regards how the child should be supported in education; however, in the UK, the diagnosis would not have been made for a child of such a young age.

5. Draft work programme 2022-2023

DD presented the draft work programme, which reflected the responsibilities of the forum, as set out in the School Admissions Code, and proposed the means by which the forum could discharge those responsibilities in the 2022-2023 school year. It was highlighted that three meetings were proposed for the year.

DD suggested that in light of the agreement earlier in the meeting that an invitation for membership be extended to the Education Engagement Co-ordinator, a presentation could be scheduled for the third meeting regarding processes in respect of vulnerable

groups, linked to fair access. The proposal was supported and it was confirmed that this should be added to the work programme.

DD highlighted that some aspects of the work programme were reliant on information provision from the voluntary aided schools. JT advised that the information will be shared with the cluster.

DD advised that the timetable for provision of the forum's annual report for 2021-2022 to Welsh Government had not yet been received, but the expectation was that it would be around mid-January.

6. Draft School Admissions Policy 2024-2025 – local authority

DD outlined that the base document was the 2023-2024 policy, with all proposed changes for 2024-2025 tracked. Questions and discussion on any proposed changes were invited but it was noted that many changes were minor, such as dates. The more significant changes that were highlighted were

- Standardisation of all admission rounds being open for broadly 14 weeks, apart from the Part-Time Nursery Admission round, which would continue to be open for broadly 8 months.
- Changes to the wordings in certain sections to reflect the increase in the number of schools for which a parent/can express a preference at the time of application to three, for the Part-time Nursery, Full-time Nursey and Reception admission rounds.
- No introduction of catchment areas for the Welsh-medium schools. However, RD explained that a report would be prepared in the future for the Corporate Management Board and then Cabinet on the merits and implications of creating hard catchment areas for the Welsh-medium primary schools, rather than maintaining the approach based on the nearest Welsh-medium school. RD explained that as there is only one Welsh-medium secondary school in Bridgend, the boundary for that school would remain the Bridgend County boundary. It would be for Cabinet to then determine whether there should be progression to a public consultation. At this time, it would be inappropriate to include something in the policy as such a change has not been formally agreed. Ultimately, if catchment areas for the Welsh-medium primary schools should be introduced in the future, there could be an application to Welsh Government for formal amendment of the policy for the relevant policy year. Cllr JPB highlighted that it would be important for Cabinet to assess the pros and cons of any proposals and understand the public's view, to ensure such a change would result in real advantages.
- Regarding the section on arrangements with neighbouring authorities, it was proposed to improve clarity by changing the reference to 'pupils attending Abercerdin Primary School' to 'pupils living within the catchment area of Abercerdin Primary School'. CC was invited to consider whether Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council may also wish to make any changes to the content of this section. It was agreed that some change would be needed to ensure it was clear that RCT would not provide transport to Pencoed Comprehensive School for

any pupils already residing in Bridgend but attending a primary school in RCT. It was agreed that DD and CC would liaise outside the meeting regarding the changes needed to the wording.

CC referred to concerns recently raised by the parents/carers of pupils living in Bridgend who are attending Ysgol Gynradd Dolau or Ysgol Llanhari, regarding the removal of transport to those schools by Bridgend County Borough Council.

RD explained that the provision of transport was removed in February 2019 for the 2020-2021 policy following strong representations made during the consultation period by the Welsh-medium schools in Bridgend. The principal concern was the impact on the sustainability of Welsh-medium education in Bridgend if pupils were being supported to attend Welsh-medium schools outside of Bridgend. Given the objective to grow Welsh-medium education in Bridgend, as reflected in the targets of the Bridgend Welsh in Education Strategic Plan, those representations had to be taken on board.

Given the investment in Welsh-medium education and the capacity to accommodate in Welsh-medium provisions in Bridgend, Cabinet took the decision to remove transport support to Welsh-medium schools outside Bridgend.

RD clarified that transport support was continuing for any pupil living in Bridgend who was attending Ysgol Gynradd Dolau or Ysgol Llanhari at the time of the policy change, until the current phase of their education ended. So, for example, pupils who were attending Ysgol Gynradd Dolau at the time of the change were continuing to receive transport until the end of their Year 6. If the parents/carers then exercised their parental choice to apply for Ysgol Llanhari, there would be no support from Bridgend for transport to that school.

RD highlighted that the numbers of affected pupils were low. DD advised that for September 2022, there were six pupils whose parents had originally applied for Year 7 places at Ysgol Llanhari but had since submitted applications for places at Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Llangynwyd. In addition, two applications had been received in respect of pupils wishing to transfer from Ysgol Llanhari to an English-medium school in Bridgend due to the pupils experiencing general difficulties with education through the medium of Welsh, and issues with friendship groups.

RD advised that the information indicated volatility in applications for Ysgol Gynradd Dolau or Ysgol Llanhari in respect of pupils living in Bridgend, with there being none in one year. Therefore, the impact of the policy change had not been fully appreciated earlier. Furthermore, it appeared that parents/carers had not checked the relevant documents published by Bridgend before making decisions on application for school places and both parents/carers and the schools had made assumptions that transport support was available.

CC enquired whether Bridgend had written to all parents to advise them of the impact of the policy change that came into force in 2020. RD confirmed that there had been no communications with individual parents as the position was clearly stated in the policy and supporting documents. In addition, care needed to be exercised that such a communication could not be interpreted as interfering with

the right of parents to exercise their preference for an out of county school. The policy change allows parents to make whatever decision they wish or need to in terms of which schools they apply for, but school transport would not be available if the preferred school was not in Bridgend.

DD advised that the school admission application forms already contain a large amount of guidance for applicants. Some additional guidance could be included regarding transport if applying for a school outside Bridgend, but such guidance would only be seen if the person was making an application for a Bridgend school.

CC and RD expressed the belief that both Ysgol Gynradd Dolau and Ysgol Llanhari were now fully aware of the position and that the schools had been in communication with any parents potentially affected.

RD reiterated that Bridgend had followed a formal, statutory process in terms of the decision to make the change and it was unfortunate that assumptions appeared to have been made by parents without the recommendation to refer to key documents being followed.

- Regarding the handling of late applications, DD advised members that the change proposed in the draft policy would not be progressed. Despite the operational challenges posed by late applications, the School Admissions Code had been checked and it would be necessary to maintain a position of willingness to progress late applications that come in before the offer date in certain circumstances.
- Section 16.3 proposed a standard, maximum period of two months from the date the application is received for any advance requests for in year admission or transfer applications. The reason for the proposal was the eradicate the variation in timescales that could naturally arise due to the wording in the existing policies.
- A change was proposed in section 16.5 to introduce an ability for the local authority to process an in-year application out of strict date and time order this may be judged to be warranted by the specific circumstances of a case.
- More information has been added into section 17.3 from the School Admission Appeals Code relating to persons prohibited from accompanying an appellant at an appeal hearing. The change was being proposed in consequence of occasions having arisen in the past year where parents had planned for prohibited persons to present to the panel on their behalf.
- The final change highlighted was the formalisation of the increase in the published admission number for Caerau Primary School from 45 to 60.

Members were invited to comment on any of the proposed changes.

JT was concerned that the wording relating to the local authority admitting children up to the school's published admissions number could be construed as applying to voluntary aided schools, who are their own admission authority. However, it was identified that this was addressed suitably in the draft v0.2 that had been distributed to members.

RD commented that as comprehensive as the policy is, every year some changes are proposed in pursuit of continuous improvement.

JT advised that he had remodelled the policy for his school on the local authority policy because of its comprehensiveness.

JT queried whether use of the term 'twice excluded' might be confusing. However, RD advised that this term had always been used as it appears in the School Admissions Code.

JT queried the final paragraph of section 5 relating to infant class sizes and DD explained how infant class legislation applied when a headteacher decides to implement mixed-year classes.

No further queries arose, and the members confirmed support for the proposed changes.

7. Draft School Admissions Policies 2024-2025 – voluntary aided (VA) schools

RD referred to the draft policies that had been distributed to members and the responsibility of the forum to ensure that all policies comply with the School Admissions Code. While the local authority's policy contained significant detail, the policies of the VA schools were notably succinct in comparison.

JT reiterated that he had remodelled the policy for his school on the local authority policy because of its comprehensiveness, which had the benefit of clarity and being 'tried and tested', making it easier to deal with any challenge, particularly in the event of an appeal. JT advised that he had shared his views with colleagues in the VA schools.

AR confirmed that VA schools are required to take advice from their diocese regarding their policy wording. Regarding the Catholic schools, the diocese aims to ensure that advice given, and policies, are compliant with the School Admissions Code. With over 50 schools across the diocese, most of the policies were succinct when compared to those of the relevant local authority policy. If there were to be a strong feeling that the policies need more detail, the diocese could look at that. Queries were regularly received from headteachers and governors on aspects of admissions, and advice given. From time to time, a sample of school policies are reviewed, to check for compliance. The policies of the Bridgend schools had not recently been reviewed. However, having received the policies through the forum meeting papers, AR had undertaken a quick review. AR had spoken with the new headteacher of Archbishop McGrath Catholic High School to highlight an aspect that is not compliant with the Code and must be changed, relating to the governing body reserving the right to admit over their admission number in respect of applications from those of Catholic faith.

RD referred to the previous proposal that JT and DD support the cluster regarding reviewing their policy wordings and noted that JT and DD planned to meet to discuss the policies. DD reaffirmed the support available from the local authority in respect of any admissions-related matters and advised that, having reviewed the policies, there were some matters worthy of discussion, in particular, some aspects of oversubscription

wordings. DD also highlighted that all the policies are focused on admissions rounds, with minimal detail in relation to in-year admissions.

8. ADEW (Association of Directors of Education in Wales) Admissions Group update

DD advised the members that the principal item of discussion at the ADEW Admissions Group meeting on 1 July 2022 related to virtual admission appeal hearings.

The COVID-related emergency legislation had introduced the ability for admission appeals to happen virtually and in certain circumstances, for a panel to be comprised of two members rather than a minimum of three. On 30 September 2022, that legislation ends.

Welsh Government had sought advice on whether there was sufficient flexibility in the 2005 Regulations (the Education (Admission Appeals Arrangements) (Wales) Regulations) to allow virtual admission appeal panel hearings to continue and avoiding the necessity for an additional legislative process. Unfortunately, legal advice was that they 2005 Regulations did not allow that flexibility and, therefore, there would need to be legislative change.

Welsh Government had undertaken a survey with admission authorities and the feedback was that overwhelmingly that virtual appeals had been effective, convenient and the ability to continue to hold appeals panels virtually would be very beneficial. Welsh Government intended to progress legislation to allow virtual appeals in the future but from 1 October 2022, appeal hearings should return to being face-to-face.

DD highlighted that for those appeals involving the local authority, the ability to hold them virtually had been beneficial for appellants, panel members and the local authority. It had been beneficial for parents and carers to be able to conduct their presentation in the comfort of their own home, supported by their families. Virtual appeals had eradicated the need for travel as well as difficulties with finding suitable venues and sufficient parking. There was a real risk that panel members, already a small pool, may not wish to re-engage with face-to-face appeals.

RD voiced his concern that the ability to hold virtual admission appeals was ending. Virtual appeals had offered real benefits for all concerned over face-to-face appeals. RD highlighted that admission appeal panel members are volunteers and if they have concerns about returning to face-to-face appeals and start to withdraw, it will be difficult for admission authorities to discharge their statutory duties in respect of admission appeals.

CC commented that RCT agreed with Bridgend's views and wished to retain virtual appeals. Parents generally felt much more comfortable being involved in an appeal hearing when they were in their own home. RCT expected to have problems with accessing suitable venues again. England had already passed legislation to allow virtual appeals to continue and the hope was that it would not take long for legislation to be passed in Wales.

CC confirmed that RCT and Bridgend already share many appeal panel members, so the pool is very small, and there were some concerns regarding a resurrection of travel.

DD advised that the next ADEW Admissions Group meeting was due to take place on Friday, 30 September 2022, and it was hoped that there would be news on the consultation for the new School Admissions Code.

9. Any other business

RD advised members that the local authority had invested in the Capital One system and the system implementation had begun. It had become apparent that the system implementation might take longer than originally anticipated as it is a cloud-based system that is being hosted by Capita and not by the local authority.

The system has various modules, one of which is an admissions module with an online application facility. The local authority's own online application facility within My Account had been in operation for a few years and continued to be robust. The Capita One system cannot interface with My Account so the local authority may not initially use the Capita One system as the conduit for applications to be submitted. Future integration would be considered, but the concern was not to put parents and carers in a position where they need to access different systems to interact with council services. It may be that the admissions module is not implemented in the future, but if that should be the case, the Capita One system would still deliver many other future benefits for the local authority, partners and, potentially, for schools.

10. Date of the next meeting

The date for the next meeting was agreed as 10 January 2023, at 2pm.

RD thanked all attendees for their attendance and contributions.