

Bridgend County Borough Council

**Approved minutes of the
Bridgend Admission Forum meeting
held 10 January 2023, 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

Mrs Catrin Coulthard

Headteacher, Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Calon y
Cymoedd

Mrs K John (KJ)

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)

Heronbridge 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.

RD introduced MT, Education Engagement Co-ordinator, Bridgend County Borough Council as new additional member to the forum.

Apologies were noted from CC and RM.

DD informed the forum that Cllr JPB has joined the as a local authority representative, AS had retired and WB had resigned.

2. Minutes of the meeting held on 27 September 2023 and matters arising

The minutes were approved as an accurate record, with one amendment to be made to Capita rather than Capital in Section 9.

DD informed the members that she had met with JT to discuss the draft admission policies for the VA schools. JT confirmed that he had informed the cluster of the need to tighten up on their procedures relating to their admission policies.

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, and highlighted the following:

- Legal advice had been received that as Cllr JPB is an elected member of the local authority, legislation does not permit him to be a community representative on the admission forum. Therefore, Cllr JPB was a local authority representative.
- In consequence of there being five core local authority members, MT, an Education Engagement Co-ordinator for Bridgend County Borough Council, had joined the forum as an additional member.
- AS had retired as Head Teacher at Porthcawl Comprehensive School. DD had made enquiries as to a headteacher replacement for AS on the forum.
- WB had resigned his governorship and membership of the forum.
- Letters inviting expressions of interest in becoming a member of the forum had been sent to all parent and community governors.

4. Draft work programme 2022-2023

DD confirmed that the draft work programme was approved at the last meeting with minor changes.

Section 4.1 - DD highlighted that the draft forum annual report which was on the agenda for discussion, had been sent to all members for consideration in November 2022, due to the Welsh Government deadline for receipt being 10 November 2022. The report was agreed and the final report was provided to Welsh Government on 21 November 2022. The report was published, in both English and Welsh, to the BCBC website in accordance with the requirements.

Section 4.2 - DD reminded members of the requirement for every admission authority to consult on its arrangements for a determination year between 1 September and the 1 March, with the arrangements being determined by 15 April. The determination year begins two years before the school year in which the arrangements actually apply.

DD clarified for the forum that for the VA primary schools, there is a need to consult with the maintaining local authority, every local authority whose area joins the relevant geographical area and the governing bodies of all the other primary schools within Bridgend. The VA secondary school must consult with all the schools in Bridgend and not just the other secondary schools in Bridgend. These arrangements then need to be determined by 15 April, and the requirement for notification to all the bodies who have been consulted, within 14 days, to inform that the arrangements have been determined.

DD has sent a reminder to the VA schools of these requirements and was waiting for responses to the status of their arrangements.

DD confirmed that the admission arrangements for the local authority were on track in terms of compliance with the requirements. A minor change had been made to the information on ALN learners to reflect advice from the Learner Support Team in relation to the new ALNET Act. BCBC legal services had reviewed and approved the draft, which had been sent to all governing bodies in Bridgend, the neighbouring local authorities and the Roman Catholic and Church in Wales dioceses with a deadline of responses by 6 January. DD advised that the proposed policy would be submitted to Cabinet in early February 2023.

RD raised the point that the regulations do not stipulate how long to consult for and the tight deadlines to determine by 15 April. DD confirmed that BCBC generally consults for a minimum of one month. CC confirmed that RCT also consults for one month and reported that Cardiff does the same.

JT requested clarification on consultation and determination process. DD re-confirmed the information (as detailed above) and advised that the emails to all VA schools had provided comprehensive explanations of the requirements.

Section 4.3 – DD apologised that the admissions report was not yet completed but explained that the report provided a range of admissions-related information and served to assist the forum to discharge its responsibilities, which include monitoring compliance with the arrangements for school admissions as detailed in policy.

DD highlighted that the information in the report related only to schools for which the local authority is the admission authority. Activity was required to acquire and integrate information from the voluntary aided schools.

DD highlighted the following points:

- Regarding changes in the number of Part-time Nursery places available for January and April 2023, DD explained that variation year-on-year is inevitable given the factors that determine the number of such places.
- The implications of applications that are received late, which are a small percentage. Late applications can be due to families moving into the area, or from those who have simply missed the deadline. DD assured the forum that all admission dates are clearly advertised by the local authority and are also in schools' communications to parents/carers.
- Submission of applications via the online facility remains high. Parents are encouraged and supported to complete online applications, although hardcopy, versions are available for those who require them..
- Despite the potential implications of only recording one school preference being outlined in the application forms, a stubborn percentage of parents/carers do not record the maximum number of school preferences.
- Parental preference enables a parent/carer to express a preference for any school, but if the preferred school is not the catchment, or nearest suitable schools in terms of Welsh-medium, there are implications for those children if there is oversubscription.
- For 50% of the applications where the first preference school was a Welsh-medium school, the second preference, where recorded, was not a Welsh-medium school. For Part-time and Full-time Nursery applications, there was a reduction in the trend, although the figure was still over 50%. In relation to Reception admissions, that was a flat trend. DD referred to the local authority being regularly challenged as to why parents/carers who applied for an oversubscribed Welsh-medium school and a place had been refused, then opted for their children go to an English- medium school. DD highlighted that parental preference applies, and parents/carers often request that the expressed second preference, English-medium school, is processed, rather than give consideration to any other Welsh-medium schools with available places.
- There was continuing oversubscription at Bryntirion Comprehensive School.
- There continues to be a percentage of Year 7 applications where the request is for transition from a Year 6 Welsh-medium school to a Year 7 English-medium secondary school.

- The number of admission appeals had increased over the previous five years, both for admission rounds and in-year admissions. due to an increase in the number of oversubscribed schools.
- A Fair Access section would be added to future reports, to provide data in relation to applications for vulnerable and hard to place pupils.

Cllr JPB queried if there was a way of mapping those applications where a Welsh-medium school was the first preference and an English-medium school was the second preference. Cllr JPB wondered if parents/carers might be selecting a Welsh-medium school because it is the nearest school rather than a strong desire of their child to have a Welsh-medium education.

RD agreed that this may be the case and noted that while the Home-to-School Transport Policy would provide transport for eligible pupils to their next nearest Welsh-medium school, parent/carers often opt instead for the next nearest English-medium school.

RD noted that parents/carers may feel they can support a Nursery or Reception child accessing Welsh-medium provision, but may reconsider this at a later point in the child's education, especially if they opted for the nearest school rather than a strong wish for Welsh-medium education.

MT suggested data on the number of successful appeals be added to future reports.

RD stated it may be helpful to reflect on the number of out of county applications received and how they impact on capacity.

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

DD advised the members of the following items of discussion at the ADEW Admissions Group meeting on 30 September 2022:

- Welsh Government advised that work was in progress in respect of reforming the devolved tribunals in Wales. The recommendation of a First Tier Unified Tribunal system for Wales had been broadly accepted by Welsh ministers.

Two areas related to education panels, these being the admission appeals panels and pupil exclusion appeals panels. Following work with various local authorities , the recommendation was that pupil exclusion appeals panels should be brought into a unified tribunal service. Admission appeal panels should remain the responsibility of local government, given the significant benefit of the local knowledge and the spikes in the number of appeals received through the year.

- The COVID-related emergency legislation had introduced the ability for admission appeals to happen virtually, but the legislation ceased to apply from 30 September 2022. Therefore, all appeals panels should revert to being face-to-face.

Local authority representatives had expressed concerns. For example, some local authorities had seen a vastly more significant influx of children arriving from Ukraine than had been the case in Bridgend. In doing multiple admission appeals

for Ukrainian children, those local authorities considered there were significant advantages in handling those appeals virtually, especially given the pressure around Wales on suitable language interpretation services.

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.

The Welsh Government representative advised that it was ultimately a matter for individual admission authorities to interpret the regulations. DD advised that she had consulted with the local authority Legal Services Team and the decision taken was that Bridgend would continue to offer a virtual appeal, if that was the stated preference of the appellant.

RD was of the view that a hybrid approach way the best way forward. 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 would be difficult for admission authorities to discharge their statutory duties in respect of admission appeals.

MT confirmed they experienced difficulties and delays when trying to revert back to face-to-face panels for exclusion appeals.

CC confirmed that RCT was continuing to hold admissions panels virtually.

AR stated that the Diocese has a trained group of people who work across different local authorities doing appeals but also across borders, so potentially they have to work with two sets of regulations. The advice schools had been to offer parents the choice, with the assumption that the first preference would likely be for a virtual appeal panel meeting.

The Welsh Government representative reaffirmed that it is reliant on data from admission authorities in respect of Ukrainian children, to provide a map of where the pressures are arising. Local authority representatives expressed a view that the financial support available was inadequate to help with the challenges associated with accommodating these children. Concerns were also raised about the difficulty accessing the language interpretation services because of the scale of the demand from local authorities in Wales.

- The Welsh Government representative advised that there was no date for the consultation on the new School Admissions Code but the hope was this would be start in January 2023.

KJ requested the current position regarding Ukrainian children in Bridgend. DD confirmed that 34 primary school applications had been made. For 9 of the 34, the parents had either decided not to take up the offered school, or had since left Bridgend. It was not

known if the families had returned to Ukraine or had moved to a different local authority area for hosting. The position was similar in relation to the 26 secondary applications received and processed.

JT confirmed that he was aware of two children attending a VA school, and would be requesting an update.

AR advised that there was no data available statistics across the Diocese in respect of Ukrainian children.

RD confirmed that there is no special dispensation regarding admissions for Ukrainian children and that applications for school places continued to be received in respect of Afghan and Syrian refugees.

6. Any other business

No items were raised.

7. Date of the next meeting

No date was agreed. DD agreed to communicate with members as regards the next meeting date.

RD thanked all attendees for their attendance and contributions.