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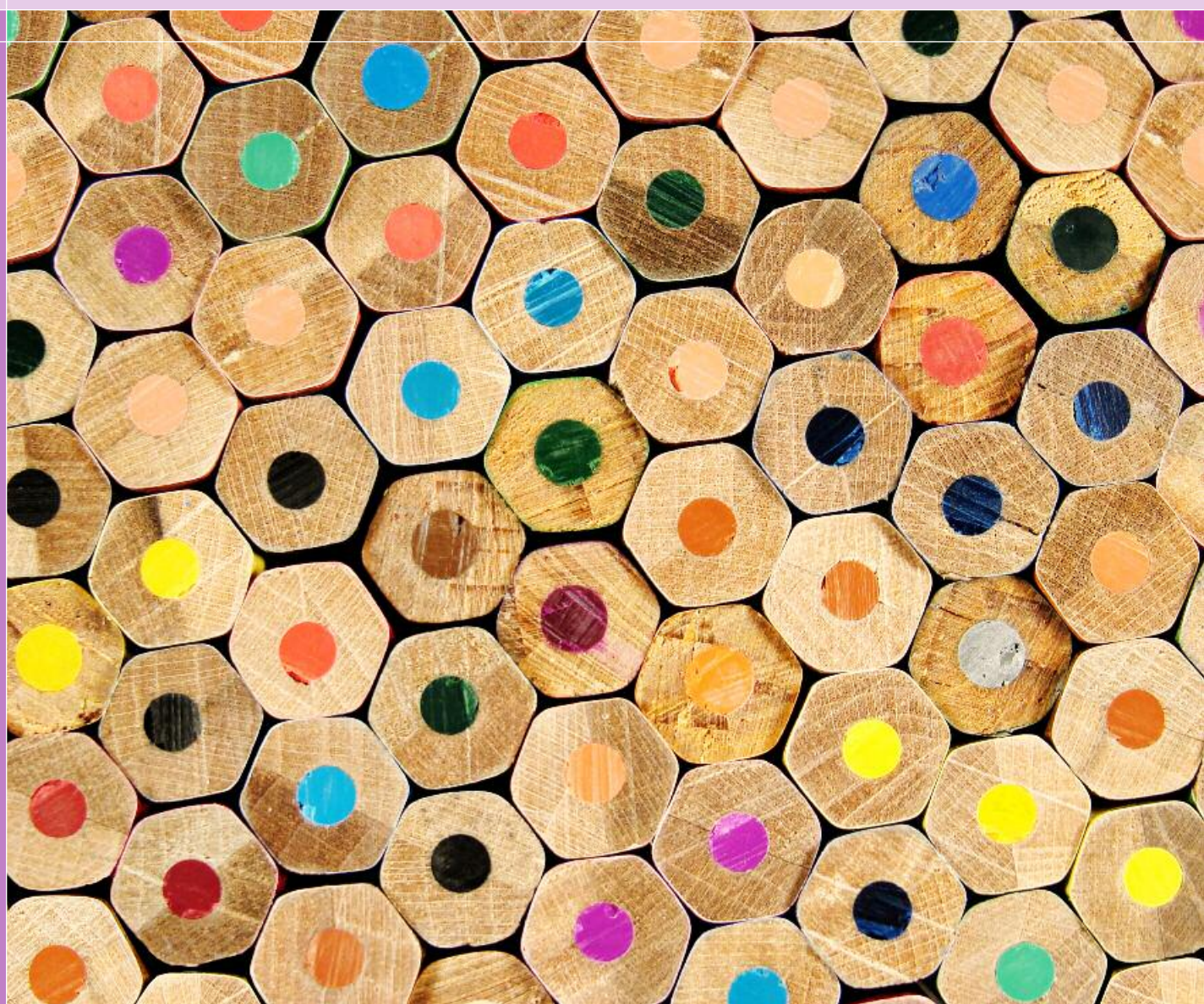
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local authority approaches to the school admissions process

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local authority approaches to the school admissions process

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All quotations made in this report are taken directly from the local authority schools admissions officers involved in the research.

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Executive summary

Background

School admissions are clearly of central importance to parents, since they represent a major potential influence on a child's life chances. They are also important and high profile for both local and national government, since these bodies will wish to demonstrate that such processes are fair, efficient and serve the best needs of their populations.

Over the past few years there have been attempts to clarify and strengthen the role of local authorities (LAs) in school admissions by means of a revised School Admissions Code and other relevant measures. Much of the emphasis in the revised code is on ensuring a balanced and representative intake that reflects the local community and ensures that the process is not only transparent to parents, but also enables them to be heard and to contribute to shaping school admissions policies.

It was in this context that the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned an investigation into the various approaches of LAs to the admissions process, with the aim of establishing an overview of the challenges, barriers and facilitating factors connected to the various approaches used. The investigation was carried out by a research team from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and this summary sets out the key findings from this study.

The research, carried out in 2009–10, involved a survey questionnaire sent to admissions officers in all 152 LAs (102 were completed and returned), in-depth interviews with 13 school admissions officers, scrutiny of LA documents and websites and a one-day workshop to discuss the key issues, with 26 LA and LGA representatives in attendance.

Key findings

Overview of the admissions process

There were many similarities in the admissions processes and the time cycles described by LAs, for example, in terms of dates, procedures, collating applications and appeals procedures. In this respect, attempts to introduce greater uniformity and transparency across LA processes appear to have been successful. One important new theme that emerged from both the survey and the interview responses, in some authorities at least, was the developing importance of using computerised packages and online applications procedures.

Views on school admissions mechanisms

Survey and interview respondents were asked what they thought about various mechanisms associated with the school admissions process. Their views can be summarised as follows.

- **The School Admissions Code.** The large majority of survey respondents (81 per cent) had found the code to be very helpful or helpful. Interviewees expressed a view that the code had been improved and refined over time and was now at a point where it provided useful guidance for school admissions officers.
- **The Admissions Forum.** Interviewee comments on the role of the admissions forum were mixed, though positive comments outweighed negative assessments. Concerns centred on the difficulties of recruiting participants and a perceived increased bureaucracy associated with the forum.

- **Choice Advisers.** All but one of the 13 LA interviewees spoke positively about choice advisors. Their roles included helping parents with completing application forms (especially parents who do not have English as a first language) helping parents with ‘technical’ and ‘tactical’ questions, attending school open evenings and meetings to support parents and helping with chasing up application forms.
- **Appeals panels.** It was evident that the appeals process often required much time and effort from school admissions officers. The number of appeals varied by LA, but most anticipated several days of appeal hearings. The majority of the interviewees, however, felt that the appeals panels did a good job.

Working with schools and parents

Relationships between LAs and schools in general were frequently described as either ‘pretty good’ or ‘very good’. These good relationships usually reportedly extended to relations with schools that were their own admissions authorities, though there was often, understandably, less LA contact with these schools (and 38 per cent of survey respondents said that the number of schools that were their own admissions authority ‘caused problems’ for them). The most popular form of consultation with schools was an annual consultation with either the school or the governing body: this was identified by 58 per cent of survey respondents.

Survey and interview respondents were also asked about consultations with **parents**. One survey question asked ‘How straightforward do you feel that it is for parents to use the admissions process in your LA?’ There was a feeling that LAs did their best to make the process as straightforward as possible, with over four out of five respondents saying that the process was either ‘very straightforward’ or ‘straightforward’. There was a high degree of commonality in LA interviewees’ accounts of the means for consulting with parents about admissions, largely reflecting the statutory requirements for such consultation. The methods of consultation identified by interviewees included use of the press advertisements, school and LA newsletters,

the LA website, posters in libraries or community centres, choice advisors, having parent representatives on the admissions forum and attendance at open evenings.

The questionnaire survey provided an opportunity for the research team to obtain respondents’ view on the issue of fraudulent applications for school places. We asked ‘Does your LA monitor possible school admissions fraud?’ – 98 respondents gave an answer to this question, with 82 individuals saying that their authority did monitor possible fraud, and 16 saying that their LA did not conduct such monitoring. In other words, around one in six of the responding LAs were not monitoring fraud at this time.

Demographic changes and over-subscription

Questionnaire respondents were asked if demographic and other changes were creating increased pressures for school places in their LA. Answers to this question indicated that the large majority of LAs (83 per cent) were experiencing these pressures, at least ‘to some extent’. In the interviews, several factors were identified as causing over-subscription, including an increasing birth rate and changing migration patterns, with the latter sometimes being linked to building and housing developments. Mention of the increasing birth rate was nearly always made in relation to nursery–primary aged groups, and nearly always in what could be described as urban authorities, though many respondents also reported that some secondary schools in their area were also over-subscribed.

The point that LAs have to plan, not only for how many school places will be needed, but also for *where* these places will be needed, was stressed by several interviewees. It was not unusual for a respondent to say that ‘we have enough places, but not in the localities where we want them’. In these cases, migration –people moving into certain parts of the authority – was important. Planning for this was compounded by economic uncertainty – would employment patterns continue as they were and would certain housing and building developments go ahead?

Strengths and challenges in the school admissions process

Questionnaire respondents were asked to give an overall rating, of between one and ten ('very poor' to 'excellent') for their LA's school admissions process (including its coordination, quality and efficiency). A rating was requested for the process in both the primary and secondary sectors. Most respondents rated their admissions process highly: 84 per cent of respondents rated their primary admissions process with a score of 8 or higher and 82 per cent of respondents rated their secondary admissions process at 8 or higher. Almost one in four respondents gave their LA the top score of 10.

School admissions officers gave a variety of reasons for the successful coordination and perceived high quality of these processes. The predominant reasons were, broadly, three-fold: fairness and clarity in the arrangements, good communications and explanations (with both schools and parents) and the hard work, experience and efficiency of LA the admissions team.

A further question in the survey asked respondents to identify up to three **issues or challenges** they had encountered in the school admissions process. What was noticeable here was that, firstly, far fewer survey respondents were able to identify issues than were able to identify strengths and, secondly, that, despite this, a much larger and diverse range of issues was identified than strengths. This suggests that much of the variation in issues and challenges can be explained by localised aspects of the process, including the contributions of schools. The challenges that were identified by ten or more respondents were: having limited places in schools, high mobility or an increasing population, the difficulties of meeting deadlines in the admissions process, dealing with schools that are their

own admissions authority and coordinating with other admissions authorities.

Conclusions

A theme that runs right through this report is that the admissions process, in most areas, has been improved year-upon-year, based on the experiences of school admissions officers and feedback from schools and parents, along with national developments such as greater coordination of the process and the refining of the school admissions code. There were, of course, a few exceptions to what might be called a 'standard' approach to school admissions, usually arising from local circumstances, and these threw up some interesting questions about admissions processes generally.

These exceptions raised interesting questions about the relationship between admissions and school improvement: 'What is the best type of intake for school improvement?', 'What are the benefits of "balanced intakes" in terms of achievement and how could such intakes be achieved?' Some admissions officers had clearly put some thought into these broader questions.

'Joined-up-ness' may be particularly important here: school admissions are very important at the 'micro' level, in that they affect individual children, families and schools, but there are also implications and ramifications at the 'macro' level of, for example, school improvement across an LA. Perhaps more attention should be given to the latter dimensions? This would clearly require some 'lateral thinking' across the various roles and functions of LAs and, of course, across education and children's services: it may be worth LAs asking, for example, if more could be done to link school admissions with other broad functions, such as safeguarding.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This report sets out the key findings from a project investigating local authority approaches to the school admissions process. The research was funded by the Local Government Association (LGA) and carried out by a team at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Although this is already a high profile and important element of the work of local authorities (LAs), their role in school admissions is due to be strengthened in 2010, by which time uniform arrangements will exist in each LA and a parent will only ever need apply to the authority in which they live.

Implementing a fair and straightforward school admission system has been an ongoing concern for the Government. The Education and Skills Act 2008 strengthened the statutory admissions framework, which aims to ensure that all schools adopt fair and lawful admissions practices. To this end, the School Admissions Code (DCSF, 2009) updated the guidelines and regulations in relation to admissions criteria and detailed the important role of LAs in promoting equity and fair access for all. Much of the emphasis in the document is on ensuring a balanced and representative intake that reflects the local community and ensures that the admissions process is not only transparent to parents, but also enables them to be heard and to contribute to shaping school policies.

It was in this context that the LGA commissioned an investigation into the various approaches of LAs to the admissions process, with the aim of establishing an overview of the challenges, barriers and facilitating factors connected to the various approaches used.

1.2 Purpose and aims

The central aim of this research was to provide the LGA and other stakeholders with an up-to-date, evidence-based overview of different approaches to dealing with school admissions. The specific research questions for this project included the following.

- Are there any particular 'models' for dealing with school admissions, and how are these related to LA size, context and capacity?
- To what extent, and how, are models for dealing with school admissions, related to the different types of school that are available within the authority (such as academies and voluntary-aided schools) and how does this impact upon parental choice?
- What has been the impact of demographic changes upon schools admissions processes, including the rise in demand for places, especially in the primary phase?
- What are the relationships between schools, and between schools and LAs, in the various types of authority (including such relationships where schools, such as academies, are their own admissions authorities)?
- What are the main LA approaches to school admissions processes within the context of the school admissions code, what criteria for admissions are used and how are these criteria interpreted?
- What are the timings of admissions and the criteria and processes for addressing over-subscription? How do LAs deal with in-year admissions and admissions of particular groups, such as young people in care / at risk?
- To what extent do coordinated admissions processes at the LA level currently exist, and what are the implications and challenges of these processes?
- What are the current forums (including the admissions forum) and mechanisms for consulting, informing and involving schools in the admission process? How effective are these forums and mechanisms?
- What are the current forums and mechanisms for consulting, informing and involving parents in the admission process (including choice advisors)?

- What measures are LAs taking to ensure that as many parents as possible obtain as high a preference as possible in terms of admissions choices?
- How do appeal panels operate and what is the nature of the involvement and responses of school adjudicators? What are the common themes and issues which school adjudicators deal with?
- To what extent, and how, are LAs monitoring possible school admissions fraud, and what is the impact of such monitoring (and subsequent actions) on LAs, parents and children?

1.3 Methodology

This research study consisted of four key methodological strands:

- analysis of LA documents and websites
- a detailed survey of all LA school admissions officers
- in-depth telephone interviews with LA school admissions officers
- a one-day workshop for LAs and the LGA.

The first phase of the study involved the **analysis of LA documents and websites**. Nine LAs were chosen, one from each Government Office Region. The analysis of these documents enabled the research team to gather a 'parent's eye view' of the admissions process, including details on the types and amounts

of information that were publicly available. The **questionnaire survey** was sent to 151 local authorities and was completed and returned by 102 respondents from 99 LAs. Respondents had a range of different roles and job titles, but all were involved in the schools admissions process in some way. The **in-depth interviews** were of a semi-structured format and were conducted with respondents from a range of different LA types. The survey questions and interview questions were linked, so that the latter could explore and seek elaboration on issues identified in the survey responses. The **one-day workshop** also provided a useful opportunity to explore school admissions issues further: this allowed the research team to feed back and 'test' some of the initial findings from the survey and interviews.

The remainder of this report presents the findings from these four data sources. (Readers who are interested in the broader LA context for school admissions, or who are less familiar with admissions processes, may wish to read Appendix 1 prior to looking at the research findings.) The next chapter presents respondents' views on various mechanisms associated with the school admissions process: the school admissions code, the admissions forum, choice advisors and appeals panels. Subsequent chapters examine the way in which LAs consult with schools and parents about the admissions process, the impact of demographic and other changes (and how these are dealt with) and the perceived strengths and potential for improvements in LAs' admissions processes. The main instruments used for collecting respondents' views are available in Appendix 2 (questionnaire survey) and Appendix 3 (interview schedule).

2 Views on school admissions mechanisms

2.1 The School Admissions Code

Questionnaire respondents were asked how helpful they had found the DCSF's School Admissions Code (SAC) (published in 2009) to be. The large majority (81 per cent) had found this code to be very helpful or helpful, though about one in ten (10 per cent) were ambivalent and seven per cent found it 'unhelpful' or 'very unhelpful' (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Perceived helpfulness of the School Admissions Code

Response	Percentage (N = 102)
Very helpful	17
Helpful	65
Neither helpful nor unhelpful	10
Unhelpful	5
Very unhelpful	2
Don't know	0

Due to rounding percentages may not sum to 100

Source: NFER Survey on local authority approaches to the school admissions process 2009.

Interviewees were asked what was helpful about the code and what could be improved. The overarching response to these questions was that the code was very helpful: it had been improved and refined over time and was now at a point where it provided useful guidance and pointers for school admissions officers. The following quotations reflect what the majority of respondents felt about the code:

I remember the days before the School Admissions Code where you had to make everything up and rely on lawyers, precedents and your experience, so each time we have had a SAC it's tightened things up so we are all working in the same way. Schools know what they should be doing and we know what they should be doing so you can refer to the SAC as the reason why we are taking this action or that action.

I think over the years, it's been clarified, and it can be seen now that it covers most of the questions which come up ... the code itself is actually gradually getting to a stage where, because of its refinements... we use it as our bible and can happily do so.

From my point of view it gives a clear statement in most cases... So it's a point of reference. I think the fact now that schools are required to act in accordance with the code rather than just have regard to it as previously was the case, is very helpful.

Well, I like the stresses put into the directions, the musts and shoulds and the must nots and should nots, because that supports me really well, I like that direction. I just feel that they have done their best in the new code to try and cover all eventualities and cases... I do like the way it's set out and I think it's easy to navigate your way through. I like the set out, the presentation.

When interviewees were prompted for ideas about improving the code, most suggestions were to do with a specific aspect of the code, or a specific personal, but professional, interest, not the overall direction or thrust of the code. Examples included the following points:

I personally find it disappointing that looked after children do not have absolute priority for admission in any school.

Work is needed to tidy it up to be clear about what we are saying about children who present challenges.

I would like more detail in the mid-year policy that they want us to follow.

The index is not brilliant and it doesn't link together in a smooth way.

2.2 The admissions forum

Interviewee comments on the role of the admissions forum were more mixed, although positive comments outweighed negative assessments. Examples of positive comments included the following:

I think it's starting to acquire a slightly more independent edge than it's had before.

The forum here has been quite active.

I am quite a fan of admissions forums and they can do a great deal of good if they are given the lead, so I'm quite optimistic about the new forum here.

Concerns about the role of the admissions forum generally centred on the difficulties of recruiting participants and increased bureaucracy, including the additional work that could be created for the LA admissions team. For example:

It could become bogged down with petty conflicts rather than grappling with the wider issues such as the role of admissions and actually helping young people.

It is bit of a talking shop; it does shy away from anything contentious and hasn't really sorted anything out.

It's quite difficult I find to get people particularly interested... unfortunately what it tends to do is get down to people who've got an axe to grind, rather than a valid sort of overview of the admissions arrangements for the authority.

Finding school representatives for it is very difficult... even though it's only three times a year.

The main difficulty we have with the admission forum is the amount of work it generates for the school admissions team.

2.3 Choice advisors

All but one of the 13 interviewees spoke positively about the role and input of the choice advisors. One important role tended to involve helping parents with

completing the application forms, especially parents who do not have English as a first language:

Sometimes it's really basic information, and I think the cases that I'm aware of, they've been parents that have poor English, and understanding of the system, and I think they just find it totally overwhelming, so the choice advisor will go through the process with them, and obtain any support for them in the way of interpreters, and just explain the process as clearly as they can to them.

Choice advisors can help with parents' 'technical' and 'tactical' questions. They were reported, in most authorities, to attend school open evenings and meetings to be on hand to support parents. They were also used to help chase up the application forms: 'they'll go knocking on doors and last year I think they got every single form back for us in terms of secondary schools'; and in some cases they supported parental appeals. Reported general contact with parents, largely reflecting the different sizes of LAs, ranged from 'extensive' or 'about a thousand a year' to 'tens rather than hundreds'.

As noted above, comments made about the usefulness of choice advisors were almost all positive:

I would fully support the choice advice service and what they can do for us.

It's pulled together quite a few little areas that needed, that were in danger of escaping, you know.

They've been very useful and, I think, very cost-effective.

Yes, I think so, yes definitely [a useful role], because it enables us as a local authority to direct parents to someone who can give advice as we wouldn't be able to.

The one respondent who was not enthusiastic about the usefulness of the choice advisor (in contrast to the fourth quotation above) said that, in her opinion, the role is 'unnecessary, because we believe that we here in the admissions team would support any parents about admissions'. In this authority, however, there had been a turnover of individuals in the choice advisor role – 'We keep getting a new one!' – and this may have contributed to the perception that LA staff were in a better position to offer advice to parents.

2.4 Appeals panels

It was evident that the appeals process often required much time and effort from school admissions officers. The number of appeals varied by LA, but most anticipated several days of appeal hearings. In some cases parents were informed of their right to appeal when a school place was not granted, and given contact details, and in others the appeal process was set up automatically. The majority of the interviewees felt that the appeals panels did a good job:

They have a very difficult job to do – balancing the needs of parents with the needs of schools. I think they make some tough decisions and it's not easy for them.

They are very good, very effective ... I think they are very good, in that they are there so that parents can experience the process ... they are entitled to that process, and I think parents, if they feel strongly about it, they're able to go through that process.

And I think, generally speaking, the parents feel that it's a fair process, whether or not they get their place, I feel that they feel that they've had a fair deal, a fair crack at it, really.

3 Working with schools and parents on admissions

3.1 Involving schools

When asked how effective the involvement of schools (for which the LA is the admission authority) was in his/her LA, the large majority of survey respondents provided a positive response: 84 per cent of respondents said that this involvement was either 'very effective' or 'effective'. Seventy per cent of respondents expressed a view that collaboration between schools, in relation to school admissions, was either 'very good' or 'good' – though it might also be worth noting that nearly one in five respondents (19 per cent) felt that collaboration between schools was 'neither good nor poor'.

The interview evidence supported this mainly positive view. In line with the overview of school admission processes, most authorities were doing similar things in terms of informing and involving schools in the admissions process, and the standard answer was:

We have followed all the requirements.

We follow the school admissions code and adhere to all the correct dates in the timetable...We do it like every other authority I imagine.

The most popular form of consultation with schools was an annual consultation with either the school or the governing body: this was identified by 59 survey respondents (58 per cent of the sample). Consultation with schools, however, included a variety of formats including informal meetings, formal consultations, checking of admissions policies, by means of the admissions forum and so on. It was apparent, however, that some LAs were more proactive than others in communicating with schools. One authority, for example, was targeting families based on an 'equalities impact assessment'. Another respondent stressed that:

With regards to lines of communications with schools, we have been doing a great deal of work... We've had a lot of discussions with them about where we're going in the future not just about building programmes, but more with the ethos of where we're going and starting to discuss issues around governance.

One respondent was concerned that the schools were consulted too much, and that these consultations could become an annual 'chore' for them.

The extent to which LA admissions officers were required to work with schools varied, of course, in line with the proportions of schools that were their own admissions authorities. In order to obtain some sense of the scale of this variation, one survey question asked respondents to identify how many schools there were within their authority for which the LA was not the admissions authority. There was found to be a great deal of variation in these responses: for primary schools the numbers ranged from 1 to 487 (and the mean was 48 schools), while for secondary schools the numbers ranged from 0 to 83 (and the mean was 13).

These are numbers of schools, of course, not proportions, but a subsequent survey question provided an opportunity to ask respondents whether the number of schools that were their own admissions authority 'caused any problems' for them: 38 per cent of respondents said that this did cause problems for them, 57 per cent said that this did not cause any problems, with the remainder saying 'don't know' or not answering the question. Where a 'yes' answer was given we asked respondents to list up to two problems they had experienced. A relatively small number of respondents provided information, but the most popularly identified 'problem', cited by 12 respondents in total, was ensuring understanding of, or compliance with, the school admissions code.

3.2 Involving parents

Survey and interview respondents were also asked about consultations with parents. One survey question asked 'How straightforward do you feel that it is for parents to use the admissions process in your LA?' The general response here was a feeling that LAs did their best to make the process as straightforward as possible, with 81 out of 102 respondents saying that the process was either 'very straightforward' or 'quite

straightforward'. Only five per cent of respondents felt that the process was 'difficult' (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Perceived straightforwardness of the admissions process for parents

Response	Percentage (N = 102)
Very straightforward	19
Quite straightforward	62
Neither straightforward nor difficult	13
Difficult	5
Very difficult	0
Don't know	0

Due to rounding percentages may not sum to 100

Source: NFER Survey on local authority approaches to the school admissions process 2009.

There was a high degree of commonality in LA interviewees' accounts of the means for consulting with parents about the admissions process, largely reflecting the statutory requirements for such consultation (there was also a substantial degree of commonality in LAs' website information for parents – see Appendix 1). The methods of consultation identified by interviewees typically included use of the advertisements in the local press, school and LA newsletters, the LA website, posters in libraries and community centres, by means of choice advisors, having parent representatives on the admissions forum and attendance at school open evenings. One respondent echoed the views of most interviewees when she said: 'So we do as much as we can possibly do without writing to each individual parent.'

Two of the interviewees described how, in their authorities, there was currently a special push on engaging parents. In one of these, this was being done through widespread public meetings and the use of e-consultation:

For example, this Saturday coming we've got a public event at the Town Hall as part of a wider thing that the city council are doing about trying to involve residents... our new Chief Executive is certainly very big on public consultation... What we've actually tried to do, we've tried to work with our Customer Engagement Team, to actually see if we could put it on the part of the website that involves consultation, so e-consultation. We have an e-panel in the county, and they know about whether people have got children, their age groups, so we could maybe

focus, you know, ask those people if they would like to comment, and actually engage people.

Around half of interviewees, on the other hand, expressed at least one negative comment about involving parents. These included the issues of receiving responses 'from the usual suspects', or one parent 'getting on a hobby horse'. One interviewee summarised his thoughts on this as follows:

Parents are not on the whole going to be hugely interested in the eight-week consultation on the admission criteria unless there is something particular that will affect them directly ... Unfortunately parents look at it from their perspective and their child's perspective rather than from a general perspective.

Another stated a view that:

Inevitably there are going to be more parents wanting the popular schools then can actually go there. The rhetoric is good about involving parents in admissions in that respect, but, in reality, I'm not sure that many parents are able to look at this in a dispassionate way.

A follow-up interview question asked respondents what measures were being taken, if any, to ensure that as many parents as possible obtained as high a school preference as possible in their admission choices. This elicited an interesting range of responses, including the following:

There are a number of ways in which you can ensure a higher percentage of parents are given their first preferences. The best way of doing that actually is not through admissions at all. It's about ensuring your schools are good schools and serve the local community well and parents want their children to go to the local school.

Another respondent echoed this, stating: 'We believe in local schools for local children. We try to make sure that every school is a good school so that parents will want their children to go there.' Other factors that affected the allocation of high preferences included the geography of the area, the number of surplus places available, and the physical capacity for building and expanded school premises to provide extra places.

A further question asked respondents about the extent to which they felt that parents were generally listened

to by schools in the LA. Again, there was a predominantly positive response, with three-quarters of respondents (76 per cent) stating that parents were listened to either 'to a great extent' or 'to some extent', but it is also interesting to note that nearly one in four respondents (24 per cent) gave a 'don't know' answer to this question.

The questionnaire survey provided an opportunity for the research team to obtain respondents' view on the

topical issue of fraudulent applications for school places. We asked 'Does your LA monitor possible school admissions fraud?' Ninety-eight respondents gave an answer to this question, with 82 individuals saying that their authority did monitor possible fraud, and 16 saying that their LA did not conduct such monitoring. In other words, there appeared to be at least 16 authorities, or around one in six of the responding LAs, who were reportedly not monitoring fraud at the time of the survey.

4 Demographic changes and over-subscription

4.1 Pressures on school places

Questionnaire respondents were asked if demographic and other changes were creating increased pressures for school places in their LA. Answers to this question indicated that the large majority of LAs (83 per cent) were experiencing these pressures, at least 'to some extent' (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Extent to which demographic and other changes are creating increased pressures for school places

Response	Percentage (N = 102)
A great extent	31
To some extent	52
Not at all	13
Don't know	2

Due to rounding percentages may not sum to 100

Source: NFER Survey on local authority approaches to the school admissions process 2009.

We also took the opportunity, where the LA was experiencing such pressures, to ask how it was dealing with, or planning for, the increased demand in school places. Of the 36 individuals who responded to this survey question, the majority (27 individuals) said that the LA strategy for this situation was to 'create more places in existing primary schools' (the remaining nine individuals used the 'other' box to describe a specific strategy for their LA).

In order to obtain some sense of the scale of over-subscription, one survey question asked respondents to identify how many schools within their authority were over-subscribed. There was a great deal of variation in these responses: for the primary sector, the numbers ranged from 1 to 404 (and the mean was 48 schools), and for secondary schools the numbers ranged from 0 to 96 (and the mean was 12). Again, these are numbers and not proportions, but they do provide some idea of the scale of over-subscription issues. These numbers suggest that over-subscription is just as

much of a problem for secondary schools as for primary schools (given the different numbers of schools in each sector), despite the emphasis (in the interviews) on the effects of an increasing birth rate on nursery and primary places (see next section).

The survey also sought respondents' views on which types of schools tended to be over-subscribed, but because this required 'top of the head' answers and the patterns of school types will vary enormously by area, these findings should be treated with caution. In the primary sector, 92 per cent of survey respondents reported that community schools were over-subscribed, 85 per cent identified voluntary-aided as over-subscribed and 46 per cent voluntary-controlled. In the secondary sector, the types of schools most likely to be over-subscribed were community schools (82 per cent), foundation schools (58 per cent) and academies (36 per cent). Grammar schools were fourth in the list (22 per cent), though of course these would only exist in certain LAs.

4.2 Factors behind over-subscription

In the interviews, several factors were identified as causing over-subscription, including an increasing birth rate and migration patterns, with the latter sometimes being linked to building and housing developments. Mention of the increasing birth rate was nearly always made in relation to nursery–primary aged groups, and nearly always in what could be described as urban authorities (though there was at least one exception, an authority where there were 'thousands of surplus places in primary schools'). One respondent from a city authority described the situation as follows:

The biggest problem is the dramatic increase in the birth rate. It's gone up 25 per cent over the last five to six years so we've got a great squeeze on early years and reception and need to ensure that we have a sufficiency of places. In an urban area such as ours, it isn't always obvious how to create additional places. There aren't a huge number of

green spaces to put extra classrooms or mobiles on, so that's quite a challenge.

Another interviewee in another large city authority made very similar comments and gave an example of how this affects school place planning numbers:

Our population is growing... it is growing from the bottom end, so people coming into reception... The normal cohort per year has been around 2,700 per academic year group coming up from the bottom end. Over the last three years, and carrying on as far as we can see for the moment, with births, that's gone up by 500 or so, so from 2,700 to 3,200, which is a significant growth [and which] tends to be focussed in one part of the city.

This interviewee, along with several others, stressed the importance of linking planning for school places with school building programmes: 'That, of course, does feed into the Primary Capital Programme and... Building Schools for the Future (BSF)'.

The point that LAs have to plan, not only for how many school places will be needed, but also for where these

places will be needed, was stressed by several interviewees. It was not unusual for a respondent to say that 'overall we have enough places, but they are not in the localities where we want them'. In these cases, migration – people moving into certain parts of the authority – was important. Planning for this was compounded by economic uncertainty – would employment patterns continue as they were and would certain housing and building developments go ahead? One interviewee noted:

There's a great deal of uncertainty about large-scale developments in the city...one or two prime sites where nothing has been firmly decided...and there's another whacking great possible development...which would attract families from outside the area, so we're waiting with bated breath to amend our BSF programme even as it's going through, and probably Primary Capital too.

Most interviewees indicated that they worked closely with planning colleagues to try to address these pressures, for example, by means of regular 'school futures' meetings.

5 Strengths and possible improvements in the school admissions process

5.1 Rating the process and identifying strengths

Questionnaire respondents were asked to give an overall rating, of between one and ten ('very poor' to 'excellent') for their LA's school admissions process (including its coordination, quality and efficiency). A rating was requested from each respondent for the process in both the primary and secondary sectors. Most respondents rated their admissions process highly. For the school admissions process for primary schools, no respondent gave a rating of five or less, and for secondary schools, no respondent gave a rating of six or less. For both sectors, the mean rating was between eight and nine. The mean rating for the secondary process, at 8.72, was slightly higher than that for the primary process (8.61).

Perhaps the most significant overall finding from this question is that nearly nine out of ten respondents rated their admissions process highly: 84 per cent of respondents rated their primary admissions process with a score of eight or higher and 82 per cent of respondents rated their secondary admissions process at eight or higher. Almost one in four respondents gave their LA the top score of ten.

Following the ratings question, the survey included an open question that asked respondents to briefly identify up to three strengths in their LA's approach for dealing with school admissions. The great majority of respondents took the trouble to identify at least one strength for their authority and responses to this question are summarised by frequency reported in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Perceived strengths of the LA's approach in dealing with school admissions

respondents Area of strength strength	Number of identifying this
Experienced or knowledgeable staff	34
Effective coordination / communication	30
Partnership working	28
Clear and/or high-quality information	20
Fairness in dealing with applications	12
Ease of access to information for parents	11
Positive engagement / communication with parents	11
Committed team	11
Clear / transparent criteria	11
Accuracy / rigour	10
Deal with process on time / in accordance with timetable	10
Ability to offer high percentage of first preferences	8
Systems in place to assist process	6
Effective ICT	4

Figures given are numbers of respondents, not percentages

Table lists all strengths identified by four or more respondents

Source: NFER Survey on local authority approaches to the school admissions process 2009.

The interviews provided an opportunity to seek some explanation for the ratings of LAs provided in a survey question, a further chance to find out more about the perceived strengths of the admissions process and ways in which the process could be improved.

Reflecting very closely the survey findings set out above, interviewees gave a variety of reasons for the successful coordination and perceived high quality of these processes. The predominant reasons were, broadly, three-fold: fairness and clarity in the arrangements, good communications and explanations (with both schools and parents) and the hard work, experience and efficiency of the admissions team. Comments identifying these factors included the following:

I believe we operate it fairly. We operate it according to the code and we try our best to explain it to parents ... [and] we get everything done on time.

We ensure that the parents in our area understand the process ... I feel that we're got a very strong team, and we give good, clear information to parents.

5.2 Potential improvements

One of the later questions in the survey asked respondents if, in their opinion, there were any improvements that could be made to the admissions system in their LA, which could lead to a higher number of parents obtaining their first preference schools. Responses suggested that there was some scope for such improvements, though of course increasing the proportion of achieved first preferences may not necessarily be the priority for an LA: 39 per cent of respondents said 'yes', improvements could be made, 45 per cent said 'no' and 13 per cent of respondents were 'not sure'.

A further survey question asked respondents to identify up to three issues or challenges they had accounted in the school admissions process. What was noticeable here was that, firstly, far fewer survey respondents were able to identify issues than were able to identify strengths (see Table 5.1) and, secondly, that, despite this, a much larger and diverse range of issues was identified than strengths. This suggests that much of the variation in issues and challenges can be explained by local circumstances, localised aspects of the process, including the contributions of schools. The issues and challenges identified by at least four respondents are listed by frequency in Table 5.2.

Interviewees sometimes had difficulty trying to identify possible improvements to the school admissions process, but this is not to say that they were complacent in any way: indeed several acknowledged that 'we could do more' or 'we could do better'. One respondent said that life was made difficult for LAs by central government 'rhetoric' on parental choice: 'Actually, in reality, the amount of choice that parents have is very limited'. Another respondent mentioned the need for more coordination across school types: '[For] foundation schools and academies...we are not in control'. A third complained that the DCSF was not as helpful as it used to be: 'You phone them up and they just refer to the code, I can read the code, or [they say] take your own legal advice.'

Table 5.2 Perceived main issues and challenges encountered in the LA's approach to dealing with school admissions

respondents identifying this issue	Number of Issues / challenges
Limited vacancies / places in schools	17
High mobility / increasing or fluctuating population	15
Meeting deadlines / timescales	12
Schools as their own admissions authorities / heads not understanding or complying with code	11
Coordination with other admissions authorities	10
Volume of appeals	9
Fair access protocol	8
Frequently-changing school admissions code	8
Increase in admissions regulations	8
Online system	8
Problems with parents (general)	8
Volume of work	8
Placement of challenging children	7
Lack of cooperation from schools	7
Casual / mid-term admissions	7
Lack of staff / resources	7
Schools slow to exchange data	6
Workload / new initiatives from DCSF imposed without funding	6
Identifying / filtering out fraudulent applications	5
Late applications	5
Failure of ICT systems	5
Parents not applying on time / assumption of surplus places	5
Parents expressing unwise preferences	5
Varying practices within schools	4
Schools not applying admissions criteria correctly	4
Parents given incorrect information	4
Parents cannot access information easily	4

*Figures given are numbers of respondents, not percentages
Table lists all issues or challenges identified by four or more respondents*

Source: NFER Survey on local authority approaches to the school admissions process 2009.

Three respondents mentioned the possibility of improving their IT systems or the online applications process:

Thinking about this year's admissions process, possibly they could look at how the online process has worked this year – they have had a couple of enquiries from parents who haven't been able to access their forms. So maybe they could have a look at that again and try to resolve these issues.

The main factor limiting improvements, however, mentioned by several respondents, was the availability of human resources:

I think the thing which limits us is manpower, basically, and the actual time that it takes us to put applications into the system.

But the trouble is, more efficiently – more resources – more money, and we haven't got any money to pay for any more resources, so you're in a sort of circular argument, we could do better but we're probably not going to do better.

A one-day workshop, organised as part of this research study, included a number of questions

asking how schools admissions processes could be improved. The workshop was attended by 26 delegates who identified a number of ways in which these processes could be improved. In line with some of the interview comments set out above, the main suggested improvements were 1. ensuring 'joined-up-ness' across various services in the admissions process and 2. ensuring clarity and consistency at all stages. One delegate, for example, said that 'safeguarding is not joined up with admissions', and another stated that 'the code says to offer a place regardless of immigration status'. In addition, workshop delegates discussed means of dealing with fraudulent applications and suggested that there was room for improvement in ensuring consistency in dealing with these.

6 Conclusions

It is worth emphasising, in conclusion, that all respondents felt that their admissions process, although not perfect, was being implemented well and, despite the possible tensions, was successfully meeting the needs of the great majority of parents and schools. This qualitative finding is supported by the survey finding that respondents rated their process at between eight and nine out of ten.

There were, of course, a few exceptions to what might be called a 'standard' approach to school admissions, usually arising from local circumstances, and these threw up some interesting questions about admissions processes generally. These included: large numbers of mid-year applications (and appeals) arising from a 'very high level of turbulence' in terms of 'people moving to the city', differences in the way catchment areas were defined, including 'walking distance' and segments radiating from the city centre, 'like the segments of an orange'. These latter differences raised interesting questions about the relationship between admissions

and school improvement: 'What is the best type of intake for school improvement?', 'What are the benefits of "balanced intakes" in terms of achievement and how could such intakes be achieved?' Some admissions officers had clearly put some thought into these broader questions as well as more specific issues around admissions.

A theme that runs right through this report is that the process, in most areas, has been improved year-upon-year, based on the experiences of school admissions officers and feedback from schools and parents, along with national developments such as greater coordination of the process and the refining of the School Admissions Code. Media stories can often suggest that the school admissions process is hugely problematic, and no doubt individual parents can experience difficult issues, but the findings from this project suggest that, on the whole, the process is being implemented with fairness, efficiency and clarity in the large majority of local authorities.

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Appendix 1 Overview of the admissions process

The main findings from this project have been reported in Chapters 2 to 6 of this report. The research also provided the project team with an opportunity to obtain an up-to-date overview of the school admissions process in each local authority (LA), and these more general findings are presented in this appendix. This appendix may be useful to readers who are less familiar with the school admissions process, or who may wish to consider the broader implications of such processes, such as the timescale/cycle of admissions and the links between school admissions, intakes and school improvement.

As a first step in obtaining an overview of the admission process, the research team took a detailed look at selected LA documents and websites. The aim was, partly, to try to see what LA information looked like from a parent's point of view, especially when seeking information online. Documents and websites from nine selected LAs, taking one authority from each Government Office Region, were examined. The LAs reflected the usual range of authority types – some were urban, some were mainly rural, some had academies, some did not, some had a selective system, others did not. Analysis of these nine LAs revealed the following.

- All had a website with basic information about admissions, such as closing dates, and contact details for the local authority admissions team. Additionally, all had a link to the admissions booklet for primary and secondary schools in pdf form.
- Most LAs (but not all) suggested that parents could call the admissions team for advice. Most also suggested that parents could gain information from contacting schools directly. Most also pointed to the choice advisor as another source of information about admissions for parents.
- All nine LAs were operating an equal preference system (each preference is considered equally and separately). All encouraged parents to put their nearest school as one of their preferences: this prevents the child being sent to a school far from their home if they do not obtain any of their preferences.

- With one exception, all the authorities encouraged online applications. The exception, a large urban authority, encouraged postal applications, and provided a paper form, pre-paid reply envelope and confirmation postcard.
- Many of the admissions booklets stated that living in a school's catchment area did not mean that the child would automatically be admitted to this school – if too many applied to one school, over-subscription criteria would be applied. However, children living in these areas were prioritised over those who lived outside the area.
- All the booklets/websites stated what the over-subscription criteria were for use when schools had more applicants than places. Priority in all cases was what is stated in the admissions code: that is, children with special educational needs (SEN) allocated separately (have to give a place if allocated), then children in LA care and after this, the criterion tended to be siblings of children already in the school, then distance.
- The distance criterion was applied slightly differently in different LAs: for example, in one it was the shortest walking distance, and in another, it was the straight-line distance from the applicant's home to centre point of school.

Details of the general approach to school admissions were also obtained from the interviews. Interviewees were asked, for example, to set the overall context for school admissions within their area, especially in terms of LA–school relationships. The overall pattern here was for respondents to describe their current general relationship with schools as either 'pretty good' or 'very good'. The following comments were typical:

Generally speaking we work very well with them.

The relationship is good I would say.

We've got very good relationships with our schools.

In terms of co-ordination we have been able to work well with all our schools'.

These good relationships usually reportedly extended to relations with schools that were their own admissions authorities, though there was often, understandably, less contact with these schools. These relationships had improved over the last few years, partly because of improved coordination of admissions, nationally as well as locally, and also because, as one respondent put it, 'the school admissions code is getting clearer and clearer'. Despite this broad context of improving relations, a small number of interviewees reported occasional problems with schools that were their own admissions authorities:

There's always the odd glitch where we might not see quite eye to eye on something.

We've had one or two problems with academies as you would expect.

This finding was supported by one of the survey questions: respondents were asked if the existence of schools that were their own admissions authority presented problems for them, to which 38 per cent replied 'yes', 57 per cent replied 'no' and five per cent did not answer or said 'don't know'.

All interview respondents were asked to provide a brief overview of how the school admissions process is implemented in their authority. There were many similarities in the processes described, for example in terms of dates, procedures, collating applications and appeals procedures. One respondent summed this up as follows: 'In many ways, the way authorities do things have to have similarities because of the constraints of the school admissions code and the associated regulation.' Interestingly, however, no respondents saw their LA's process as a 'model' for dealing with school admissions: 'I don't know that it's a particular model that we adopt, but I think most authorities are doing a similar thing.'

One of the survey questions asked respondents to enter the month and year for key events in the school admissions cycle, for each of primary and secondary schools, in their authority. Responses revealed a fairly standard pattern, in terms of timing, but with a few variations, across LAs. The following were the main findings in response to this question (for admission in September 2010).

- Admissions booklets and forms mainly became available for parents applying for places in October or September (of 2009) for primary schools (76 per cent of respondents) and September for secondary schools (88 per cent of respondents).
- The deadline for parents submitting applications for primary school places varied from October 2009 through to February 2010. The deadline for secondary applications, however, was usually October 2009 (86 per cent of respondents).
- The month when primary school place offers were sent to parents tended to be either March or April (78 per cent of respondents), and for secondary school place offers was almost always March (98 per cent).

One important theme that emerged from both the survey and the interview responses, in some authorities at least, was the developing importance of using computerised packages and online applications procedures. One interview respondent, making reference to over-subscription, for example, said: 'We've got a lovely fancy computer package that sorts that out for us'. Another stated, more generally: 'We are very pleased with the IT systems that we have ... It can work out every schools admissions policy and rank them.' Similarly, another reported: 'We then stick it all into the computer, press the button and then start doing all the mail-outs to people who didn't get one of their preferred schools.' In some authorities there had been a 'push' to encourage online applications and in one authority, for example, these had increased from 18 per cent the previous year to 58 per cent in the current year.

Appendix 2 Survey questionnaire

Local Authority Approaches to the School Admissions Process (LAW)

INTRODUCTION: The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has been asked by the Local Government Association (LGA) to carry out a national study into school admissions processes. The aim is to find out more about the various approaches to the admissions process used by local authorities and how effective these are.

On that basis, we would really appreciate your input about admissions processes in your authority: what works well, what challenges you face and what could be done to improve the process. Your responses will be treated as confidential and no local authority or individual will be identified in our report. The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. **We would appreciate your response no later than Wednesday 30th September 2009. Thank you.**

Respondents to this survey have the opportunity to attend a **FREE EVENT on sharing best practice** with other local authority staff.

Your Job Role

1 Please state the name of your local authority:

2 a Please state your name and job title:

b How long have you been in this role?

- Less than 6 months 6 months to 1 year 1 to 3 years
 3 to 5 years 5 to 10 years More than 10 years

3 In terms of your role, please tick the one most appropriate statement:

Please tick one answer only.

- My role consists *entirely* of dealing with school admissions
 My role *mainly* involves dealing with school admissions
 About half of my role involves dealing with school admissions
 Less than half of my role involves dealing with school admissions
 Dealing with school admissions is only a *small part* of my role.

Admissions Process Details

- 4 In the table below, please enter the month and year for each key event in the school admissions cycle in your local authority. Please enter details for primary and secondary schools in the relevant column as they apply for admission in September 2010.

Key events in school admissions cycle for your local authority	Primary schools Month / Year	Secondary schools Month / Year	Don't Know
Date admissions booklets and forms become available	____ / ____	____ / ____	____
Deadline for parents submitting applications	____ / ____	____ / ____	____
Deadline for parents submitting an appeal	____ / ____	____ / ____	____
Date offers are sent to parents ¹	____ / ____	____ / ____	____
Dates of entry examinations (if applicable)		____ / ____	____

Please list below any other key events and dates in the admissions cycle	Primary schools Month Year	Secondary schools Month Year	Don't Know
_____	____ / ____	____ / ____	____
_____	____ / ____	____ / ____	____

- 5 a How many schools are there within your local authority (geographical) area for which the local authority is not the admissions authority?

_____ Primary schools Don't know _____ Secondary schools Don't know

- b What types of schools are these? *E.g. Academies*

- c Does this cause any problems for you?

Yes No Don't know

If yes, please list up to two problems:

- 6 How many schools within your local authority (geographical) area would you estimate are over-subscribed?

_____ Primary schools Don't know _____ Secondary schools Don't know

7 Which types of schools tend to be over-subscribed?

Please tick all that apply.

	Primary	Secondary
Academies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Community schools	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Foundation schools	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grammar schools	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Special schools	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Specialist schools or City Technology Colleges (CTCs)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Voluntary aided schools	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Voluntary controlled schools	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other, please specify:		

8 In cases of over-subscription to schools for which the local authority is the admissions authority, in which order are the following criteria usually applied?

Please enter 1, 2, 3, 4 to show the order.

Children with siblings at the school	_____
Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)	_____
Looked after children	_____
Other criteria (e.g. distance between home and school, lottery).	
<i>Please specify:</i>	_____

9 In your role as it relates to school admissions, how helpful do you find the School Admissions Code, published by the DCSF earlier this year, to be?

Please tick one answer only.

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Very helpful | <input type="checkbox"/> Helpful | <input type="checkbox"/> Neither helpful nor unhelpful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unhelpful | <input type="checkbox"/> Very unhelpful | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know |

Effectiveness of Admissions Process

- 10** What overall rating would you give your local authority's school admissions process (including its coordination, quality and efficiency) for schools for which the local authority is the admissions authority?

	<i>Very poor</i>									<i>Excellent</i>	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Primary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Secondary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 11** In your opinion, what are the main strengths of your local authority's approach in dealing with school admissions?

Please briefly identify up to three strengths.

- 12** What are the main issues and challenges you have encountered?

Please briefly identify up to three issues.

- 13 a** Does your local authority monitor possible school admissions fraud?

Yes No Don't know

- b** If yes, what impact does this monitoring have?

Consultation

- 14 How are schools, for which the local authority is the admissions authority, currently involved in the admissions process?**

a How effective do you think this is?

Please tick one answer only.

- Very effective Effective Neither effective nor ineffective
 Ineffective Very ineffective Don't know

b In relation to school admissions, collaboration between schools in your local authority (geographical) area is...

Please tick one answer only.

- Very good Good Neither good nor poor
 Poor Very poor Don't know

- 15 How straightforward do you feel that it is for parents to use the admissions process in your local authority (geographical) area?**

Please tick one answer only.

- Very straightforward Straightforward Neither straightforward nor difficult
 Difficult Very difficult Don't know

- 16 With regard to the school admissions process, to what extent do you think that parents are generally listened to by schools in your local authority (geographical) area?**

Please tick one answer only.

- To a great extent To some extent
 Not at all Don't know

- 17 What are the main issues for parents in your local authority (geographical) area with regard to the school admissions process? Please list up to three main types of issue.**

Planning for the Future

- 18** In your opinion, are there any improvements that could be made to the admissions system in your local authority (geographical) area which would lead to a higher number of parents' first preference schools being achieved?

Please tick one answer only.

Yes No Don't know

- 19** Please identify up to two measures that would help to improve the school admissions process in your local authority (geographical) area.

- 20** In many local authorities demographic and other changes are creating increased pressures for school places.

- a** Is this happening in your local authority (geographical) area?

Please tick one answer only.

Yes, to a great extent Yes, to some extent Not at all Don't know

- b** If yes, how is your local authority dealing with (or planning for) the increased demand for school places?

Please tick all that apply.

- Build more primary schools
- Build more secondary schools
- Create more places in existing primary schools
- Create more places in existing secondary schools
- Other please specify: _____

Thank you for completing this survey!

Many thanks for taking the time to respond to this survey. Your responses will help us to build a picture of how school admissions operates in England and review the effectiveness of different approaches.

FURTHER RESEARCH: In order to expand on the data gathered via this survey, we will be conducting a number of short telephone interviews with admissions staff during late October and early November 2009. If you would be willing to be contacted for this purpose, please provide a contact telephone number.

Yes, please contact me about a telephone interview:

The best number to contact me on is _____

FREE EVENT: NFER will be hosting an event at The Royal Academy of Engineers in St James', London on **Tuesday 17th November 2009** to allow local authority admissions staff to share experience and best practice and to discuss the future of school admissions. All survey respondents will shortly receive further information about the event. If you would *NOT* like to receive this information please tick this box:

Please email completed surveys to schooladmissions@nfer.ac.uk or post to:

Sagina Khan, Project Administrator, REID Dept, NFER, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire, SL1 2DQ.

Thank you.

Appendix 3 Interview schedule

Local authority approaches to the school admissions process

LA Officer Interview Schedule (November 2009)

Name of interviewee _____

Job Title _____

Name of LA _____

Date of Interview _____

Interviewer _____

Introduction

As you may be aware, the NFER has been commissioned by the Local Government Association to carry out a detailed study of school admissions processes, particularly on what works well, what challenges local authorities face and what could be done to improve the process. You kindly completed a questionnaire related to this project and we'd now like to follow this up with some more detailed interview questions.

All interviews are confidential to the research team and no individual or local authority will be named in our reports. We estimate that the interview will take about 30 minutes.

*** Note to researcher** There are several questions which make reference to the respondent's previous questionnaire answers, so these answers will need to be looked up and noted prior to the interview. Also, if appropriate, please ask for permission to record the interview.

1 Firstly, how would you describe the general relationship between your LA and its schools?

- How would you describe the LA relationship with schools which are their own admissions authorities?

2 Secondly, could you please give me a brief overview of how the school admissions process is implemented in your local authority?

- How does this relate to the different types of schools that are available in your authority?
- Could this be described as a 'model' for dealing with school admissions? If so, what kind of model is it? Are you aware of any other models used by other LAs?

3 How does your local authority consult with, inform and involve schools in the admissions process?

- Could you please tell me more about the Admissions Forum in your LA?
- How does it work?
- How effective are these forums and mechanisms? / Would you change anything about them?

4 To what extent does your LA / schools in your LA consult with parents in relation to the admissions process?

- To what extent do you think that schools genuinely listen to parents' views and take these in board?
- What measures does your LA take to ensure that as many parents as possible obtain as high a preference as possible in terms of admissions choices?

5 Do you have Choice Advisors in your authority?

- What is their role?
- Do many parents use them? What sort of things do they need advice on?
- How useful are they?

6 You said in your survey response that you thought that the School Admissions Code (published by the DCSF earlier this year) was [See Q.9 of survey – helpful / not helpful etc.]

- Could you tell me a bit more about why you think this?
- What has been particularly helpful about it?
- What has been less helpful / do you think could be improved?

7 You said in the survey that demographic or other changes are creating increased pressures for school places [Check answer to Q.20 of survey]: why do you think that this has occurred?

- Could you please elaborate on how your LA plan to deal with this?
- To what extent do you liaise with place planning colleagues in relation to this?

8 You said in your response to the survey [Survey Q.6] that [...] schools in your authority are over-subscribed. Could you talk to me a bit more about that, please?

- How does your LA deal with over-subscription?
- How are over-subscription criteria applied in admissions?
- Are there any differences between schools under LA control and other schools, in terms of how over-subscription criteria are used and applied?

9 If a family decide to appeal against the LA's decision, how does that process work in your authority?

- How do appeals panels work in your authority?
- What is the nature and involvement of adjudicators?
- In your opinion, how effective are appeals panels and adjudicators?

10 In the survey, you gave the LA [...] marks out of ten (1=very poor, 10=excellent) for the co-ordination, quality and efficiency of the school admissions process.

- Why did you give this mark? Could you please explain the reasoning behind it?
- What do you think could be improved? (if less than ten)

11 Is there anything which you feel could be done within your local authority to make the admissions process run more smoothly for:

- Parents?
- Schools?
- LA staff?

Recently published reports

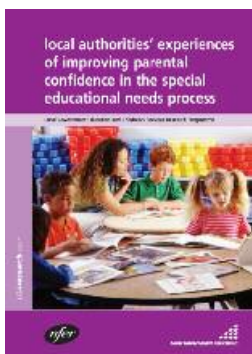
The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by the NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/



Children and young people's views on web 2.0 technologies

This research focused on how web 2.0 technologies allow users to share, collaborate and interact with one another. The project explored the potential of using these tools to collect the views of young people and to involve them in their local community.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LWT01/



Local authorities' experiences of improving parental confidence in the special educational needs process

This research focused on LAs with evidence of good practice in supporting children with SEN. Partnership working is enhanced where SEN teams have a positive ethos and approach towards parents. LAs need to ensure that parents have good quality, face-to-face contact with SEN professionals at the earliest possible stage in the process.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LAM01/



The impact of the Baby Peter case on applications for care orders

This study looked at the impact of the case of Baby Peter Connelly on LAs' applications for care orders and child protection more widely. There was evidence of a rise in applications for care/supervision orders and LA staff reported implications of the increase in care orders on staff workload, morale, recruitment and retention.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/BPI01/

For more information, or to buy any of these publications, please contact: The Publications Unit, National Foundation for Educational Research, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ, tel: +44 (0)1753 637002, fax: +44 (0)1753 637280, email: book.sales@nfer.ac.uk, web: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications.

What are the challenges, barriers and facilitating factors connected to the various school admissions approaches used by local authorities? This report gathers the views of local authority admissions officers on the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, as well as the issues and challenges they face in this important area. It covers:

- an overview of the admissions process
- views on school admissions mechanisms
- working with schools and parents
- demographic changes and over-subscription
- strengths and challenges in the process.

Key findings show that, in most areas, the process was being implemented with fairness, efficiency and clarity, meeting the needs of the majority of parents and schools. However, some exceptions to this standard approach emerged from local circumstances, and these brought up interesting questions about admissions processes generally and their relation to school improvement.

This report is important reading for local authority school admissions officers and staff working in pupil place planning, as well as for school staff and parents wishing to keep up to date on current developments in admissions.