

Business case for proposed changes to catchment area

With a view to any potential change being enacted for the **2016/17** academic year, the Local Authority in its duty as the Admission Authority for schools in Stockport wishes to gather input from stakeholders about potential changes to catchment areas in the Heatons area.

Legal Context

The Local Authority is preparing to consult on admission arrangements for the 2016/17 admissions round. In considering what items to take forward to consultation it has reviewed a number of areas;

- Current legislation
- DfE consultations that may affect relevant legislation
- Historic trends and data from past admissions rounds
- Birth rates, planning applications and pupil projections
- Legal precedents, LGO decisions and determinations from the Office of the Schools Adjudicator

The Local Authority is aware of the challenge presented over the next three to four years in both the Primary and Secondary sector by growing pupil numbers, caused by rising birth rates and inward migration.

In line with the Admissions Code of Practice 2012, Stockport cannot offer a guarantee of a school place at a preferred school; however reasonable attempts must be made to facilitate parental preference. This statutory duty is enforceable by the DfE and the Office of the School's Adjudicator.

The glossary to the Admissions Code of Practice 2012 makes clear that a *'catchment area is part of a school's admission arrangements and must therefore be consulted upon, determined and published in the same way as other admission arrangements'*, and states at s.1.14 that catchment areas *'must be designed so that they are reasonable and clearly defined'*, however they *'do not prevent parents who live outside the catchment of a particular school from expressing a preference for the school.'*

In light of the statutory duty on the Local Authority to comply with s.1.14 of the Admissions Code of Practice 2012, and the changing environment of school provision in the Heatons area, the Local Authority proposes to review the catchment areas for three primary schools in the Heatons area – Norris Bank Primary School, St Thomas' CE Primary School, and Tithe Barn Primary School – with effect from the academic year 2016/17 for both allocation and in-year admissions.

Background

In recent years, Stockport's admissions arrangements have been scrutinised by the Office of the School's Adjudicator with regards to the formulation of some catchment areas where parental preferences within catchment were not met.

In 2013, an objection was raised by a group of parents living in the Heatons area who did not gain a place at their catchment school. One of their primary concerns was that the catchment area was not fit for purpose and it failed to serve the community. Their basis for this argument was that there were more children in that catchment area applying for a place than there were places at the school, thus it did not give all parents living in the area a reasonable expectation of gaining a place at their catchment school, as required by s.1.14 of the Admissions Code of Practice 2012.

They argued that the Local Authority had *“failed to take adequate steps to ensure reasonable provision for children living in the catchment area.”*

Statutory timescales regarding consultation and determination of admission arrangements are such that this is the first opportunity for the Local Authority to review catchment areas since the determination of the School's Adjudicator. Had the Local Authority attempted to make changes immediately following the determination of the Schools Adjudicator in November 2013, any parents who had already made an application would have been disadvantaged by a change to the admissions criteria part way through the application process.

Similarly, the Local Authority did not have the opportunity to consult on any changes in time for determining the admissions arrangements for the 2015/16 academic year, which were determined on the 15th April 2014.

Catchment figures will fluctuate on an annual basis due to changes in the pattern of preference for a particular school which can vary from year to year. Simply increasing or reducing the size of the catchment area would not eradicate the underlying need for additional places in the Heatons area, however it is anticipated that this proposal will allow greater opportunity for residents within catchment to access their catchment school, while allowing for a percentage of surplus capacity for residents living outside those catchment areas.

Consideration of a move from catchment areas to distance may indeed put more pressure on admissions in the Heatons area by the possible admission of more Manchester families, particularly as s.86(8) of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 places an equal duty on local authorities to comply with parental preference in respect of parents living within and outside their boundary

The Local Authority has given consideration to the issue of retaining catchment areas in recent years, and a specific question regarding the inclusion of school catchment areas in the oversubscription criteria was included as part of the consultation for the 2013/14 admissions arrangements.

The findings of the consultation showed clear support for the retention of catchment areas as oversubscription criteria for schools admissions. Almost 80% of respondents opted to retain catchment areas, and the profile of these respondents showed that support for catchments was broadly spread across all groups.

The resulting report to the Executive Meeting on 28 May 2012 concluded that *'the perception is that catchment areas provide a number of important functions including: building and maintaining community identity; protecting Stockport school places for Stockport residents; and allowing primary and secondary schools to develop meaningful relationships to enable smoother and more supportive transfer arrangements.'* Consequently, it was agreed that the current catchment areas as an oversubscription criteria for schools admissions would be retained as they were *'well established and on the whole understood by parents and the local community.'*

In her November 2013 determination, the Schools Adjudicator stated *'I note what the council says about catchment areas being well established and understood by parents and the local community. It does not seem to me that there is an issue about whether or not to have a catchment area for the school, rather the problem arises when the entirely reasonable expectation of having a high chance, but not a guarantee, of a place at the catchment area school is lost because of a higher priority for siblings outside the catchment area.'*

While this statement references the sibling aspect of the oversubscription criteria which is not in question with regards to this proposal, it also provides clear support for the continuing use of catchment areas for admissions to schools.

Proposal

- Increase catchment for St Thomas' CE Primary School following addition of capacity (anticipated completion last quarter 2015)
- Proportional reduction of Tithe Barn Primary School and Norris Bank Primary School catchment areas, better reflecting the admissions limit of the schools
- Interim arrangement inserted into over subscription criteria to mitigate impact for displaced families
- Implementation expected to be determined for September 2016 for both allocation and in-year admissions

Due to statutory timescales surrounding determination of admissions arrangements, the 2016/17 academic year would be the earliest opportunity since OSA determination to introduce any changes to catchment areas, while ensuring that applicants are fully informed of the changes in advance of making any application.

Rationale and Evidence

Following the announcement and subsequent commencement of a significant housing development within the Heaton; capacity has had to be added to the area by means of a new school to be located at Peel Moat.

All schools in the Heaton area were given the opportunity to expand into the new school site. Following confirmation that St Thomas' CE Primary School (Heaton Chapel) will be increased to a 3FE school (located at the new build site) this presents the opportunity to rationalise the catchment area for the school to ensure the catchment areas reflect the capacity of the school.

Considering the need to rationalise the catchment area for St Thomas' CE Primary School, the Local Authority also took the opportunity to consider bordering schools' catchment areas in its review. The catchment areas for three primary schools border St Thomas' CE Primary School: Norris Bank Primary School, Tithe Barn Primary School, and Broadstone Hall Primary School.

The pressure on Norris Bank Primary School with regards to admissions is similar to that experienced at Tithe Barn Primary School. While Norris Bank Primary School has expanded to a 2FE both schools have been oversubscribed for a number of years and residency within catchment has risen amongst young aspiring families. The Local Authority anticipates further challenge by way of objections to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator if it fails to take action.

As the catchment area for Tithe Barn Primary School came under particular scrutiny by applicants for the 2013/14 academic year, and in light of the expansion at Norris Bank Primary School it was felt appropriate to include both schools in the catchment area review.

Whilst the catchment area for Broadstone Hall Primary School also borders St Thomas' CE Primary School, changes to its catchment area are not considered necessary at this time as Broadstone Hall Primary School's catchment area is considered 'fit for purpose' for its admission limit, and it benefits from a natural boundary created by the A6.

Other schools in the Heaton area enjoy popularity however don't face the same pressures with regards to applications for residents within catchment. As a result, the scope of this proposal is limited to the three outlined schools.

School	PAN	2014 Catchment	2015 expected Catchment
Tithe Barn	30	37	42
Norris Bank	60	72	57
St Thomas' CE	45 (90*)	25	27

*PAN following occupation of new build

In identifying the roads to be transferred from one catchment area to another the Local Authority has considered a number of factors.

Firstly, the natural borders that are created within the area by roads and railways lines and how they can be used to ensure a logical catchment area. As new properties have been developed and incorporated into catchment areas the border shapes have changed, making them difficult to comprehend by residents. The proposal allows catchment areas to be rationalised and easily understood by applicants.

Secondly, the Local Authority must have regard to the numbers of families living in particular areas that would be expected to require school places in the future. While it is impossible to predict the level of parental preference when it comes to an application, information gathered from previous allocation rounds provides a strong basis upon which to develop any proposals.

The Local Authority is also conscious that it does not wish to increase one catchment area to the detriment of the surrounding schools, particularly as the three schools are all of varying capacity. As a result, a percentage formula of approximately 30% has been applied to ensure that the number of families and potential future catchment applicants being removed from one catchment area is proportionate to the size of the school.

Fig. 1. Impact of catchment change on number of residential properties remaining in catchment area. Objects of interest and commercial properties removed.

School	Residential properties removed from original catchment area as a consequence of catchment change	Total number of residential properties in original catchment area	Proportion of residential properties removed as a consequence of catchment change
Norris Bank	769	2232	34%
Tithe Barn	557	1723	32%

The attached appendices demonstrate the proposed updated catchment areas and the affected roads.

Appendix 7 demonstrates the impact a proposed change to the catchment area would have on historical allocation figures from 2013/14 and 2014/15 intakes, and the projected figures from the upcoming 2015/16 intake.

Appendix 8 demonstrates the current catchment area for Norris Bank Primary School, the proposed new catchment area for Norris Bank Primary School, and the affected roads.

Appendix 9 demonstrates the current catchment area for Tithe Barn Primary School, the proposed new catchment area for Tithe Barn Primary School, and the affected roads.

Appendix 10 demonstrates the current catchment area for St Thomas' CE Primary School, and the proposed new catchment area for St Thomas' CE Primary School, with the transferred areas highlighted.

Appendix 11 demonstrates the proposed new catchment area boundaries for Norris Bank Primary School, St Thomas' CE Primary School and Tithe Barn Primary School.

Additional considerations

The Local Authority is keen to mitigate against the impact of any change on existing residents, particularly those living in a transferred catchment area, who may have siblings in their former catchment school and therefore have a greater expectation of gaining a place at that school.

Should the proposal be approved, the Local Authority would consider an interim arrangement to be introduced in the oversubscription criteria for any sibling of a child who at the start of the academic year 2016/17 is already on roll at a school with a transferred catchment area.

Anyone currently residing in either the Norris Bank Primary School or Tithe Barn Primary School catchment area, as a sibling of a child already on roll in the school and whose residence will be transferred to St Thomas' CE Primary School catchment area will be prioritised above siblings not resident within catchment as long as the older sibling is still on roll at the time of admission and their circumstances remain the same.¹

The change in catchment area arrangements is not intended to deny parents the right to express a preference for alternative schools. Parents would still be able to express a preference for other schools if they wish. Should any parent apply for their child to attend alternative schools then the published oversubscription criteria in respect of parental preference applications would continue to apply.

The determination of the Schools Adjudicator in November 2013 made particular reference to the fact that due to the ordering of the oversubscription criteria in previous admission years, catchment children were being displaced by the previous transitional arrangements. The Local Authority is keen to avoid this situation reoccurring, and therefore the proposed interim criteria is displayed below, in the order that it will apply. The LA proposes to operate this additional criteria for 3 academic years, therefore it will apply to to all applications for the affected schools for the 2016/17 academic year and for all subsequent academic years until 2018/19.

Oversubscription Criteria

Regulations require that places **must be** provided for pupils who have a Statement of Special Educational Needs naming the school.

After the placement of the above pupils, and where there are more applicants than the school's Published Admission Number*, places will be allocated to applicants in

¹ 1st December 2014: Paragraph has been amended, as further clarity needed. Sentence stating child would be eligible to be considered as 'sibling living within catchment' has been removed.

accordance with the Admission Authority's published Oversubscription Criteria, in the following order:

- a** Children in Care (Looked after children and previously looked after children*)
 - b** Children considered to have highly exceptional medical/social reasons
 - c** Children who live in the catchment area of the school and will have a sibling at the school at the time of admission
 - d** Children who live in the catchment area of the school
 - e** ***Children who now live outside of the catchment area due to the changes to catchment from 2016/17, with a sibling on roll at the time of admission and fulfils one of two criteria:***
 - 1. Sibling originally admitted to the school as a child resident within catchment area***
 - 2. Sibling originally admitted to the school as a sibling resident within catchment area***
- AND**
The family's address has not changed since the sibling on roll was admitted to the school.
- f** Children who live outside the catchment area and will have a sibling at the school at the time of admission
 - g** Any other applicants in order of straight line distance measured between home and the school
 - h** Applications received after the closing date ordered by the criteria detailed at a – g above

*See Stockport School Admissions Glossary of Terms for a full explanation of the highlighted terms.

Example practical scenarios of how the new oversubscription criteria will apply can be found in Appendix 6.

Conclusion

Any changes to the three outlined catchment areas are not going to provide a definitive solution to the pressure on school places in the Heatons area, and the proposal is to be considered alongside the wider duty of the Local Authority to provide school places across the borough and ensure catchment areas are fit for purpose.

The Admissions Code of Practice 2012 s.2.1 states that an admission authority must not give any guarantees that a preference will be met, and this will continue to apply to the proposed catchment areas – there will be no guarantee of a place in a catchment school, as is the case across the rest of borough. However, it is the Local Authority's assertion that the proposed catchment areas will provide applicants residing within the catchment areas of the outlined schools with a greater chance of gaining a place in their catchment school.

Stakeholders are invited to share their thoughts on these options in order to ensure that any debate around the issue takes place within the context of local opinion.