

PARENTAL PREFERENCES IN SCHOOLS

To: **Children & Young People’s Committee**

Meeting Date: **13th November 2018**

From: **Executive Director: People & Communities**

Electoral division(s): **All**

Forward Plan ref: **Not applicable** *Key decision:* **No**

Purpose: **To consider the outcome and recommendations to result from the Cambridge University Science and Policy Exchange’s (CUSPE) research into the parental preference in Cambridgeshire.**

Recommendation: **The Committee is asked to:**

- a) Note and comment on the findings of the research undertaken by CUSPE into parental preference in Cambridgeshire;**
- b) Consider the recommendations made by CUSPE and officers’ responses to these as detailed in section 2; and**
- c) Approve the proposal that officers proceed to develop a plan with clear timescales for the identified actions.**

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1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In October 2016, the Council initiated a collaboration with the Cambridge University Science and Policy Exchange (CUSPE), involving teams of researchers to explore some of the challenges faced by the Council.
- 1.2 In December 2017 the Committee received a report from CUSPE which outlined the education achievement gap. Two further reports were commissioned around rurality and its impact on education and parental preference. The focus of this report is to share the findings and recommendations in relation to the latter. The research focused on the following question: ‘What factors influence parental preference of schools, and what are the outcomes of those preferences (and for whom)?’
- 1.3 To address this question, the research team reviewed international school choice policies followed by an examination of other research on parental preference in school admissions in England. They then evaluated four Cambridgeshire-specific data sources:
 - School admissions statistics in respect of the 12,745 first round applications received from parents for September 2018 entry;
 - A survey of Cambridgeshire parents on their experiences and opinions of school admissions which was completed in full by 282 parents;
 - Summaries of 34 parental appeals lodged against school admission allocations and the outcomes of those;
 - Interviews with a Headteacher and a School Business Manager.
- 1.4 Initial meetings with Councillors and Council senior officers identified differences in equal access to state-funded primary and secondary schools based on parental preference, whether due to rurality, family socioeconomic resources, or other factors. Post-16 educational options are being addressed by another Policy Challenges team.

2. MAIN ISSUES

- 2.1 The key conclusions of the research team are detailed below.
- 2.2 **What factors do parents take into consideration when deciding on school preferences?**
- 2.3 According to the parent survey, the qualities that Cambridgeshire parents highly value in prospective schools include characteristics that affect child development; such as school leadership, school climate, curriculum, and academic achievements. Many parents are also highly concerned about the distance from home to school, which relates primarily to family resource constraints, but also to possibilities for links between the home, school, and neighbourhood community. The emphasis on school quality is supported by our analysis of secondary school admissions data, which found a correlation between a school’s Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) rating and its popularity. The school admissions data also suggests that not all parents prioritise a short home-to-school commute: only 41% of parents named the catchment school as their first preference. However, both the free-text comments in the parent survey as well as the summarised appeals data—in which ‘transport’ and ‘convenience’ were by

far the most common reasons to lodge an appeal—indicate that home-to-school transport is a source of considerable stress for some families. Thus, our Cambridgeshire data align with other studies of parental preference in England, which found that parents care about both practicality and educational quality.

2.4 What sources of information do parents use to influence their preference of schools?

2.5 Based on the parent survey, Cambridgeshire parents are most likely to refer to school open days, word of mouth, school websites, Ofsted reports/Parent View, and their own experience and knowledge of local schools. At least half of the survey respondents used one of these five sources. These findings correspond to national-level findings from the Sutton Trust's recent 'Parent Power' survey. School open days were, by far, seen as the most useful source of information by those Cambridgeshire parents who completed the survey.

2.6 What demographic factors influence differences in parental preference of schools?

2.7 One key factor influencing how much parents can take advantage of the school admissions system is where in the county they live. As with England as a whole, Cambridgeshire has uneven geographic variation in the distribution of popular and unpopular schools, and in the likelihood of a family receiving a placement in their first preference. Another key factor is the family's socioeconomic background. While the parents that we surveyed prioritised the same school characteristics regardless of background, socioeconomically disadvantaged parents referred to fewer sources of information in making school choices—with especially big gaps for school open days and Ofsted information.

2.8 What are the outcomes of those preferences (and for whom)?

2.9 Based on the research into school choice policies around the world, parental preference systems usually aim to serve the following three goals:

1. To improve the overall quality of schools through market-based competition, with parents acting as consumers who spur schools to raise their quality in order to attract more students. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to draw any conclusions about whether parental preference has improved the overall quality of Cambridgeshire schools from the research undertaken by CUPSE.
2. To give parents the freedom to choose the schools that would best suit their children. The data on this outcome are mixed. On one hand, in March and April 2018, 95% of Cambridgeshire families applying for primary school entry and 88% of families applying for secondary school entry were offered places in their first-preference schools. On the other hand, the parent survey revealed a great deal of frustration among some parents who felt that they did not have any meaningful choice of schools because desirable schools were out of their reach due to reasons including oversubscription, transport logistics, catchment boundaries, or childcare availability.

3. To raise socioeconomic equity by giving lower-income families access to a range of schools, a form of access that more affluent families already enjoy due to their capacity for paying fees at private schools. The data suggest that the opposite is true in Cambridgeshire, as other studies have found for England as a whole. Although it has not been possible to trace direct causal pathways from family income through parental preferences to student outcomes, the data sources suggest that the parental preference system reinforces, rather than weakens, the relationship between family affluence and pupil education. Firstly, the parent survey found that parents of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) referred to relatively fewer sources of information in making school preference decisions. This indicates that less privileged families are less likely to have the information needed to fully take advantage of the parental preference system. The parent survey also found that many parents had great concerns about home-to-school transport, a constraint more likely to be faced by less privileged families. Some comments also noted the benefits of buying houses in the catchment areas of desirable schools—an avenue that would likely be out of reach for less privileged families. All of this indicates that socioeconomically underprivileged children are more likely to be enrolled in less popular schools. This was borne out by the analysis undertaken of school admissions data, which found that schools with higher proportions of FSM-eligible pupils are, on average, likely to have lower Ofsted ratings and more unfilled school places.

2.10 In light of the findings that some Cambridgeshire parents face informational and logistical constraints on fully expressing their preferences via the school admissions system, and that these constraints may worsen educational inequities within the county, the Committee is asked to consider the following recommendations. An officer response has been made to support the Committee's decision making.

2.11 **Recommendation 1: Use web-based tools to facilitate families' access to information on schools and admissions processes.**

- (a) Create microsites on the Council web page containing the guidance that is currently presented in the 'First Steps' and 'Next Steps' booklets, along with:
 - An acknowledgement that many families may have a limited range of choice in schools, due to limited educational budgets at the county and national levels.
 - Advice about the grounds on which school admissions appeals are usually upheld.
 - We also suggest highlighting pieces of information that are of particular concern to parents.
- (b) Enhance the Council website's Schools Directory by adding admissions-related information to each school's page, along with space for each school to give a brief statement of values and to upload a limited number of photographs.
- (c) Investigate the viability of establishing an online carpool board to help parents coordinate school runs, especially to out-of-catchment schools.

2.12 **Officer Response to Recommendation 1:**

- (a) It would be much harder to ensure that the LA's published information remains accurate and up-to-date if it is duplicated in the micro sites suggested. In addition, we do not consider it to be appropriate to publish information in relation to the outcome of appeals as each case is considered on its own merits. There are no generic reasons as to why cases are successful, or not, just the facts of each individual case.
- (b) This information can be included in the school directory and could be in place for summer 2019. We are currently working with schools to update our Teach in Cambridgeshire website and this will hold more details on the school including photographs. A link to this website could be included in the schools directory.
- (c) It is proposed an online car pool board is considered as part of the wider transport review agreed by the Committee in October. Consideration over safeguarding will need to form part of this discussion. It would also be important to consult with schools over this proposal.

2.13 **Recommendation 2: Ensure that schools have sufficient information to plan strategically for future admissions**

Specifically, we recommend:

- (a) Increased communication between the Council and schools, especially in terms of long-term strategy as well as anticipated changes in incoming student numbers (e.g. due to academy openings or housing developments).
- (b) Council brokerage of collaboration between schools (especially between high-and low-performing schools), to foster school improvement.
- (c) An automated system of email notifications from the school admissions portal to schools when a change in admission allocations is made.

2.14 **Officer Response to Recommendation 2**

Points (a) and (b) were considered as part of the Education Strategy at the September Committee. Building collaboration across Cambridgeshire is key in our improvement journey and we have strengthened our data capability to support this aspiration. Updated demographic data will be published later this term. This will be shared with schools to ensure we make appropriate decisions in relation to school place planning. Discussions will be scheduled with Capita, to determine how the Admissions and Transport module of the ONE system could be adapted to produce automated email notifications (point (c)).

2.15 **Recommendation 3: Investigate the possibility of including Pupil Premium (PP) eligibility as an oversubscription criterion for community and voluntary controlled schools.**

2.16 **Officer Response to Recommendation 3**

The principle concern would be if this recommendation were to be adopted that children may not be able to access their local school. In addition it would be necessary to ask all parents to complete a Supplementary Information Form (SIF) in order to determine eligibility under this proposed criterion, adding further complexity to the

admissions process. This would be an added administrative task.

- 2.17 It is proposed that the overall findings of the CUPSE research report are shared at Headteachers forums for further discussion.

3. ALIGNMENT WITH CORPORATE PRIORITIES

3.1 Developing the local economy for the benefit of all

Providing high quality education should enhance the skills of the local workforce and provide essential childcare services for working parents or those seeking to return to work. Schools and early years and childcare services are providers of local employment.

3.2 Helping people live healthy and independent lives

No significant implications.

3.3 Supporting and protecting vulnerable people

No significant implications.

4. SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Resource Implications

All the recommendations in the report can be met within existing resources.

4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications

No significant implications.

4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications

Any proposed changes to published admissions arrangements will need to follow statutory process and times i.e. they would need to be subject to the annual consultation process. The earliest date by which any changes could come into effect would be for admission to school in the 2020/21 academic year.

4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

No significant implications.

4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications

It is proposed the report by CUPSE is shared with all schools in the county.

4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement

No significant implications

4.7 Public Health Implications

No significant implications

Implications	Officer Clearance
Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance?	Yes Name of Financial Officer: Martin Wade
Have the procurement/contractual/ Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by Finance?	No Name of Financial Officer: Paul White The report contains no procurement issues.
Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by LGSS Law?	Yes Name of Legal Officer: Shahin Ismail
Have the equality and diversity implications been cleared by your Service Contact?	Yes Name of Officer: Jonathan Lewis
Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications?	Yes Name of Officer: Matthew Hall
Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact?	Yes Name of Officer: Jonathan Lewis
Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health	N/A Name of Officer:

SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Source Documents	Location
<p>What factors influence parental preference of schools, and what are the outcomes of those preferences (and for whom)? Bence Börcsök, Erin Cullen, and Yue-Yi Hwa September 2018</p> <p>Cambridge University Science and Policy Exchange (CUSPE) in collaboration with the Cambridgeshire County Council</p>	Shire Hall, Cambridge