
CHOICE ADVICE SERVICE: RESULTS OF A PILOT EVALUATION

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Introduction

Between September 2006 and July 2007 a pilot evaluation was conducted by Sheffield Hallam University, commissioned by DCSF, of the first operational year (2006/07) of the Choice Advice service in six local authority areas. This report presents the findings of that pilot evaluation. The study was small and the findings necessarily provisional and its main purpose has been to inform a larger evaluation of the second year of operation, which is due to report later in 2008.

Key Findings

- Three of the six case studies had based their new service close to the existing Admissions team (the admissions-based model). Others opted for a more arms-length delivery model, using existing transition programmes, Children's Information Service (CIS) and employing independent consultants. Admissions-based models tended to 'hit the ground running' more easily, whilst the other models operated more independently but tended to take longer to establish effective, close working relationships with the Admissions teams.
- Across all areas and model types, the Choice Advice services commonly offered phone enquiry lines, visited school events, and provided drop-in sessions in order to reach the greatest numbers of parents/carers¹. Whilst most enquiries related to the admissions system and process, Choice Advisers were also providing more intensive advice, information, guidance and reassurance than admissions staff had the capacity to deliver previously.
- Reaching targeted groups of parents with the most support needs required Choice Advisers to develop good links with admissions teams, local schools, Local Authority (LA) teams and community organisations. The extent to which these links were developed at this early stage varied considerably. Most were challenged by the balance between meeting both the needs of self-referring parents and committing sufficient resources to the more difficult task of accessing the more hard to reach.
- Some Admissions-based staff felt that they had always offered a fair, unbiased service to parents and thought Choice Advisers' 'independence' was over-emphasised in the guidance². However, arms-length based advisers and parents, made it clear that the independence of the service was very important to them.
- Few services had set outcome targets or were formally evaluating their service, perhaps partly due to the early stage of service development. Advisers reported that they saw positive comments from parents as an indicator of their effectiveness.
- Interviews with parents across the six areas revealed that overall, they were very positive about the service they received. In particular, they valued the support, advice and reassurance from Choice Advisers, as they had found navigating the Admissions system confusing, difficult and stressful. For some, rushed deadlines and lengthy time delays between the submission of applications forms and allocation were a particular source of stress, especially in selective areas where children sat additional tests.

¹ For brevity, the remainder of this research brief will use the term 'parents' to refer to parents/carers.

² At the time of the research the Admissions Code of Practice, with Appendix 5 guidance for Choice Advisers did not yet exist. The *guidance* therefore refers to an earlier document for LAs to guide them through the initial set up of the service.

Background

The *Education and Inspections Act 2006* (DfES 2006a) places a duty on Local Authorities to provide advice and assistance to all parents with children of school age in their area who are deciding which school to send their children to. One way of doing this for secondary school applications is by providing a Choice Advice service. The role of Choice Advisers is designed to make the school admissions process for secondary school clearer, fairer and more equitable by supporting those families most in need of help. While acknowledging that local circumstances should be taken into account, it was expected that the service would target parents/carers who already have difficulties engaging with their existing primary school; those with language or literacy problems; parents of children in care; new arrivals; frequent movers; those living in deprived areas; and those who self-refer for advice and support.

Aims

The aim of this work was limited in scope to providing some examples of initial feedback, to inform a further, more substantial evaluation which is due to report later in 2008.

This initial work aimed to:

- describe the models of delivery being used;
- record the nature of the advice offered;
- understand the experiences of a small sample of parents who had had advice;
- identify examples of good practice; and
- provide a basis for a further investigation

Research Design

For this pilot evaluation a small scale qualitative approach was employed. Six case study Local Authorities were chosen to give a range of local contexts. In-depth face-to-face interviews were carried out with seven Choice Advisers and six Choice Advice managers from these areas. Nineteen parents/carers in these LAs who had received advice were interviewed face-to-face before receiving notification of the outcome of their application. Access to parents was through the Choice Adviser. Following notification of the outcome, a short follow up telephone interview was conducted with the parents.

Findings from interviews with service staff

Choice Advice models

Four different models had been adopted, based on the organisational locations of the service. All were options suggested in the original *Guidance to Local Authorities* (DfES, 2006b). Three of the six LAs had adopted an admissions-based model. The other three were delivering Choice Advice at 'arms-length' from Admissions via an existing transition programme, Children's Information Service (CIS) and independent consultants, respectively.

Admissions-based models (i.e. those staffed and managed from within the admissions team) tended to '*hit the ground running*' as they could build on existing staff, admissions knowledge and services. Admissions staff were closely involved in the recruitment and training of new or existing advisers. Although attempts were made to manage Choice Advisers at a distance from the admissions team, in some cases the day to day operation and line management meant that advisers were working closely with, and less independently from, Admissions.

Arms-length delivery models, established through the expansion of existing transition programmes, CIS services and networks of consultants tended to operate with more independence from Admissions. Initially, time was needed to establish close working relations with the Admissions team, but this was usually achieved with relative ease.

The nature of the advice and issues with establishing the service

At this early stage, all six case study services had a phone enquiry line and were running group events for parents in local primary and/or secondary schools. Some offered drop-in sessions or additional appointments, but take-up of these varied. Home visits were uncommon.

The main types of advice given focused on the admissions process itself, particularly oversubscription criteria, transport, distance from schools, and the prioritisation of preferences. Relatively few parents requested information from Ofsted reports or league tables, in some cases because they already had this information, in others it was not an important concern for them.

Most Choice Advice services were offering similar sorts of information and advice as Admissions teams had done previously, but staff could work more intensively with parents who required more

support. They were also able to target particular groups of parents more directly.

In some cases, there was initial resistance to the introduction of the Choice Advice service. Some Admissions staff felt the new service was replicating aspects of their work, but these issues were generally resolved when the added value of the new service became apparent.

A number of Choice Advisers felt very strongly that the use of the term 'choice' in relation to their service was problematic. In their view, 'choice' unrealistically raised parents' expectations of gaining a place in their desired school, making their advisory role more complex. They explained to parents that 'choice' meant the right to express preferences. A few also reported that the term 'choice' attracted parents from non-target groups who were seeking every possible means to exercise choice and gain their preferred school.

Staffing the service

Depending on the LA's size, priorities and funding allocation, services varied in terms of the number of staff in post, ranging from one part-timer based in the Admissions team to six Choice Advisers on differing seconded, seasonal, fractional and full time contracts. Some existing staff had Choice Advice added as an additional role.

Some authorities were still in the process of recruiting staff at the time of the interviews, so had only introduced a partial service. Some services were staffed all year, while others focused resources on the main activities in autumn (prior to submission of applications) and spring (following allocation of places and appeals in March). This limited the amount of preparatory and development work that could take place during the rest of the year, such as developing links with potential referral teams/contacts.

Recruitment methods and emphases on different skills-sets varied. Where local admissions issues were complex, internal staff with good admissions knowledge had been seconded or employed. Others had used the LA's redeployment register or recruited externally to appoint staff with more customer-focused, Information Advice and Guidance (IAG), or outreach skills and then provided additional training around local admissions.

The differences in skills and experience of Choice Advisers appeared to influence the direction and priorities of the developing service. For example, the independent consultants

included retired Headteachers and senior directors of education who had good senior-level contacts with schools and Admissions staff. This enabled them to establish the new service structures with speed, but they had fewer community-based contacts for targeted outreach work.

Choice Advice links with other services and schools

Although the degree of integration with the Admissions team varied, close links were critical for effective working. This was achieved through formal and informal meetings and discussions which facilitated information-sharing, clarification of roles and activities, and mutual collaborative working. Links with schools were also emphasised as being important, particularly with key members of staff such as transition mentors.

Given the early stage of the evaluation, the development of other organisational links varied. These were most effective where relationships were already established through long-standing contacts, e.g. with traveller teams, EMAS (Ethnic Minority Achievement Service), education welfare or community support groups.

Targeting the Choice Advice

Most Choice Advice services were promoted universally, mainly through the inclusion of information in letters and through the application pack to all parents. Many also informed or accessed parents at secondary school open evenings or other group events. However, both of these methods generally attracted self-referring, information-seeking parents and fewer parents from their target groups.

As suggested in the guidance, local authorities adapted their targeting plans to suit local needs. Most commonly, needs were defined both in terms of the admissions process (e.g. targeting those not returning forms) and in terms of parents who find it difficult to engage with the admissions process (e.g. those with literacy/language difficulties; those not on the school roll and newly arrived parents).

Targeting methods tended to vary depending on the background and existing contacts of the Choice Advisers (e.g. through schools or community). Where relationships with schools were well established, parents identified as needing support could be referred on directly to the Choice Adviser. Links with local services and community organisations tended to reach

different groups of parents who may not have been picked up through schools. Although a multi-pronged approach seemed to be effective at targeting a more diverse range of parents, reaching disengaged parents was still the most challenging element for all advisers. This was particularly challenging where the new service had few established links with schools or local agencies and where advisers felt they had limited time or resources available to establish effective links.

In a number of cases, there was a tension between providing general support for all parents wanting it, whilst also targeting those thought to be in more need of help. Some Choice Advisers “*subtly turned away*” time-consuming enquiries from non-target group parents, signposting them instead to websites and schools for further information if necessary, so that staff could focus on harder to reach parents. Others highlighted how erroneous assumptions could be made about need, if simplistically based on ‘group’ characteristics alone. For example, there were parents from ‘non-target’ groups who had real difficulties and anxieties that required support. On the other hand, some reported that targeting groups or schools using ethnicity or Free School Meals status was not always a reliable indicator of the actual need for Choice Advice.

Training, Quality Assurance and CASQAN

Funded by DCSF, and run by A4E in partnership with CENTRA, the Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Network (CASQAN) was set up to support Choice Advisers who often work in relative isolation. CASQAN organise regional events for Choice Advisers and provide opportunities for Choice Advisers to share good practice, including online support. The network also has a role in the development of measures to monitor and evaluate the provision, working with and supporting Choice Advisers to ensure their impartiality and provide a quality assured service.

The regional workshops and events were reported to have improved greatly since their inception. Choice Advisers felt that these events were particularly useful for information-sharing and building links with other Choice Advisers, and had prompted some to develop their own informal networks.

At the time of the interviews, CASQAN were still in the process of developing Level 2 accreditation for Choice Advisers, which had initially received mixed responses. Misgivings were expressed by a few Choice Advisers about the appropriateness

of a qualification at that level for experienced or senior staff.

Service Independence

Given the LA’s roles as provider, broker and regulator of school places, the Choice Advice Guidance for Local Authorities (DfES, 2006b) stressed the importance of service independence, neutrality and impartiality to best support the needs of parents, rather than the concerns of the LA, Admissions Department or local schools. A common view expressed by staff working in admission-based models related to their initial dismay and resistance to what they took to be the implication that Admissions teams had been previously giving biased advice to parents.

Admissions-based services, by definition, worked more closely with Admissions staff in terms of the day-to-day operation of the service and, in some cases, in relation to line management or reporting arrangements. For example, attending the same meetings, and sharing the same offices and databases. This sometimes meant they operated less independently from Admissions teams compared to arms-length service models. Where Choice Advisers were being line-managed by Admissions managers, the view was expressed that independence was over-emphasised in the guidance.

In contrast, arms-length providers were much keener to stress their independence, particularly to parents. Separate service branding of their written materials and uniforms also reinforced their detachment from the LA, yet co-operation was still essential.

Outcomes, Monitoring and Evaluation

Formal outcome targets had not been set in the case studies areas as most found it difficult to assess how many parents in the locality were in their target groups. Some had simply aimed to improve the number of applications returned in comparison to previous years, as a measure of monitoring the success of the service.

Choice Advisers referred to positive comments received from parents as an indicator of the quality and success of the service, but expressed some difficulties in *measuring* success, and suggested the need for clearer guidance on how this could be judged.

Although it was not mandatory for Choice Advisers to keep standardised records, most were keeping notes and were planning to

informally review their first year of implementation, to consider lessons learned and introduce changes for the second year of operation.

In terms of their plans for 2007-08, most intended to prioritise improvements in their links with local services and community groups; develop service advertising and promotion; and target more parents from hard-to-reach groups. Some were also considering extending the service to primary school admissions.

Examples of good practice

Ensuring effective promotion

- Using a panel of parents who quality assure and give feedback on leaflets. A long process, but one that ensures the Choice Advice information is appropriately pitched for different target groups.

Effective targeting through schools

- Using school cluster meetings as an efficient way to promote the service to Headteachers.
- Repeated targeting of schools where there has been a low turnout for Choice Advice sessions/talks, as building trust takes time and persistence.
- Building up a good relationship with schools so that they pass on the contact details of the parents known to be disengaged from school or who need support, so that the Choice Adviser can contact them directly.

Effective targeting through other agencies

- Contacting translators and interpreter services who are already in contact with families where language is a barrier.
- Establishing trust with organisations and individuals through repeated personal contact rather than via letter; the importance of informal, word-of-mouth, snowballing effect.

Effective service provision

- Holding drop-in advice sessions in neutral or familiar public locations away from school and LA offices (libraries, community centres, advice centres), to reinforce the independence of the advice.
- Offering on-line admissions and computer workshops to help with electronic form filling.

Effective support

- Establishing contact with other local Choice Advisers is particularly effective for those Choice Advisers working alone who use it to bounce ideas off one another, share good practice as well as a support mechanism.

Findings from interviews with parents

Self-referring sample of parents

Very few of the hard to reach parents who had received Choice Advice support would agree to be interviewed. Most of the parents who did participate could be described as information-seeking self-referrals, who were not from any of

the target groups. This was particularly the case in those areas where there were selective or grammar schools, and partly reflected the groups proactively seeking Choice Advice in these areas.

Given the atypical and self-selecting nature of the sample, the views expressed by the 19 respondents are not intended to be in any way representative of those receiving Choice Advice either in those specific areas or nationally.

The admissions process

Many of the parents' concerns focused on the particular issues around the 11+ entrance exams; the perceived lack of choice in these areas; and the socially segregating nature of the selective system. Some disadvantaged parents in these areas identified perceived financial, social and academic pressures as reasons not to apply for a grammar school place.

Difficulties with the admissions system varied from area to area, depending on the local complexities of admissions arrangements. This was often the key reason for seeking support from a Choice Adviser. Although some parents viewed making an application as *'really easy... self explanatory'*, others found the process to be highly stressful, *'to be honest I was absolutely dreading it'*. Some parents reported difficulties navigating the system, and were left feeling *'totally confused'*.

Catchment areas emerged as a contentious issue, one parent likened this to *'a post code lottery'*. Despite the right to express a preference some felt effectively excluded from the schools they believed were most appropriate for their child. Travel and transport was a particular concern in rural areas.

In some cases, parents felt they had insufficient time to visit all the schools of interest before submitting their application (particularly where open evenings were scheduled close to the application deadline). Some were also frustrated at the length of time then taken before being notified of the result of their application – prolonging their anxiety.

The Choice Advice service

Relatively few parents had been specifically targeted for the service; instead the majority of the interviewed parents had self referred. Some parents expressed concerns over the Choice Adviser's availability, suggesting that demand may be outstripping supply, particularly during peak times. Some parents had very

straightforward queries, requiring clarification or reassurance, whilst others had complex issues and needed more intensive help.

Parents were overwhelmingly positive about the quality and professionalism of the advice they received, describing Choice Advisers as very helpful and supportive: *'absolutely fantastic, without her I don't know what I would have done', 'she was like a rock to me'*. Parents were happy to recommend the Choice Advice service, and were in general agreement that Choice Advice support for transfer to primary school would also be helpful.

Service independence and impartiality were appreciated by parents; one stated how she had found it *'helpful, talking it through with somebody who isn't involved'*, emphasising the importance of trust in the service. Some parents stated they would not have been happy to use the service had it been attached to the LA.

Twelve out of the nineteen parents were satisfied with the outcome of their application. The remaining seven expressed anger and upset at the decision, although none of this was directed at the support they had received from the Choice Adviser. Appeals emerged as a further source of concern for these parents *'I'm absolutely petrified'*. Despite being highly apprehensive about the appeals process, many felt it was a necessity in order to get the most suitable school for their child, one parent voiced their concerns over the complexities of the process: *'to actually fill in the appeals form you have to be a highly qualified solicitor'*. There was an intention from some parents to recontact the Choice Adviser for help around the appeals process.

Conclusion

Given the very small sample, and the embryonic stage of the Choice Advice services at the time of this pilot, these findings are merely indicative of some of the issues the larger evaluation is currently examining. A number of the concerns raised here may have been resolved since the interviews took place, whilst other challenges may have arisen with the subsequent development of the service. Despite some initial concerns from admissions staff and reservations about its introduction, the Choice Advice service has, even at this early point, been perceived as having added value to the support offered to some parents applying for secondary schools.

These initial findings have highlighted a range of emerging issues and perspectives that are currently being examined in more detail in the more extensive evaluation of 15 case study areas, due to be completed in Autumn 2008.

References

DfES (2006a) *Education and Inspection Act 2006* – Received Royal Assent on 8 November 2006

DfES (2006b) *Choice Advice: Guidance for Local Authorities*

Additional Information

All DCSF research briefs and the full reports can also be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Jo Lovell, Fl 4, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT

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