
CHOICE ADVICE - AN EVALUATION

*Bernadette Stiell, Lucy Shipton, John Coldron and Mike Coldwell
Centre for Education and Inclusion Research, Sheffield Hallam University*

Introduction

An evaluation of the Choice Advice services in 15 case study Local Authorities (LAs) was conducted between September 2007 and July 2008. It was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), carried out by Sheffield Hallam University and builds on an earlier pilot study (Shipton and Stiell et al, 2008). This report presents the findings of the full evaluation.

Key Findings

- Choice Advice is being offered through a variety of models nationally.
- Arms-length organisations - particularly Parent Partnership (PP) based services - were most effective at providing Choice Advice for disadvantaged parents.
- Best practice involves the service operating with independence; careful targeting; good links to local schools, LA Admissions Teams and other referral organisations; and being staffed by dedicated, knowledgeable staff.
- When these factors are present, the Choice Advice service can play a small but important part in making the admissions process fairer and easier to navigate.
- The initiative as a whole has been successful in helping parents with a range of needs, although it is apparent that some approaches are better at meeting the needs of some groups more than others, depending on the local context and circumstances.

Background

Section 86 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (as amended by Section 42 of the *Education and Inspections Act 2006*), places a specific duty on Local Authorities in England to provide independent advice and support to all local parents¹ when they are deciding which schools they want to send their children to. Appendix 5 of the *School Admissions Code* requires Local Authorities to provide an independent service offering independent information, advice and support to the parents who would normally find secondary schools admission arrangements difficult to negotiate. The initiative is focused on supporting families most in need of help, including those who have difficulties engaging with the admissions process; those with language or literacy problems; parents of children in care; new arrivals; frequent movers; and those living in deprived areas. The guidance to LAs highlighted the need for impartiality and independence, but also gave LAs the freedom to develop services to meet local needs and priorities – including the type of organisational model adopted and identification of target groups.

¹ Reference to 'parents' throughout this document relates to parents/carers and includes anyone who has parental responsibility for the child.

Aims

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- Examine the nature of Choice Advice provision for secondary school admissions;
- Examine the process by which Choice Advice is provided and identify which models of delivery of Choice Advice are used, and which are most effective;
- Examine the impact of Choice Advice provision for secondary school admissions; and
- Identify good practice to inform further development of the programme.

Research Design

15 case study areas (representing a 10% sample of all 150 LAs in England) were selected from the 73 services known to be starting their second year of operation in August 2007. The sample covered a range of Choice Advice models, geographical, socio-economic contexts and admissions arrangements. In each area, in-depth interviews were carried out with Choice Advice staff, Admissions Officers (AOs) and headteachers/key school staff in the autumn/winter of 2007/08. Parents who had received Choice Advice in 2007/08 were interviewed in spring 2008, after their child had been allocated a secondary school place. 151 interviews were conducted and triangulated with quantitative data provided by each LA on the background characteristics of the parents they had advised, with additional information provided by staff at the Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Network².

Findings

Experience of Parents

- Information-seeking, self referring parents were generally most anxious overall, in spite of their access to all available information and determination to 'leave no stone unturned'. Choice Advisers were able to provide much needed reassurance and clarification, which was very much appreciated by these parents. These were not necessarily all middle-class parents, but included, for example, large numbers of parents from less wealthy immigrant backgrounds living in deprived areas.

- Referred or targeted parents tended to have more difficulties completing the forms, but were generally less stressed about the decision-making process. They were more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds and favour their local catchment school, unless they had specific reasons for avoiding it (e.g. bullying or Special Educational Needs (SEN)). For many, school accessibility and their child's happiness were more important than the educational performance of schools. They were also less likely to visit their preferred schools.
- Parents supported by Parent Partnership-based Choice Advisers seemed to have received more in-depth support and guidance than those in some other models. This often included multiple contacts, lengthy and repeated home visits and even being accompanied on school visits. Common complex issues included SEN and appeals.
- The independence and impartiality of the service was generally highly valued, as was the quality of the service most parents received. Parents' satisfaction with the advice they received seemed to relate to the degree of personalisation they experienced – particularly for disadvantaged parents who required (and received) more support in Parent Partnership-based services.

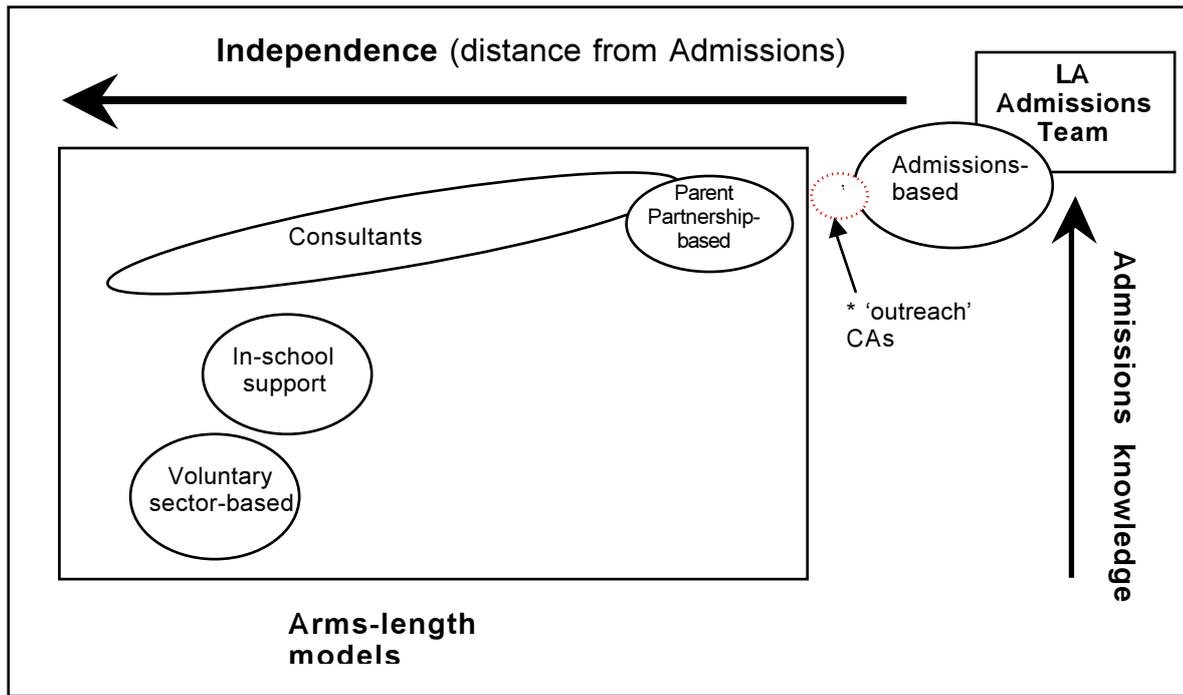
Models of delivery

Amongst the sample, five different model types were identified, based on organisational arrangements put in place by the LA to deliver the service. Four Choice Advice services were based in or near to the existing Admissions team. The remainder were run at arms-lengths from Admissions/the LA: seven were delivered through the local Parent Partnership service (PPS) organisation; two were run by Independent Consultants; one was provided through a voluntary sector organisation; and one through staff already based in particular schools.

Each model type varied in terms of its approach to independence and degree of access to admissions information and knowledge (see Figure 1) but also in terms of the nature of provision and staffing; the ways in which parents' needs and demands were considered; their approach to targeting; parents' experience of the service; and the effectiveness of the service at supporting disadvantaged parents.

² CAS&QAN - an organisation set up to support the work of Choice Advisers.

Figure 1: Models of delivery and their independence from Admissions



These aspects of the evaluation shall be discussed for each of the model types.

Admissions-based services

The four Admissions-based Choice Advice services operated closest to the LA’s Admissions team. Two used existing Admissions Officers (AOs) to provide Choice Advice to parents requiring more support, offering drop-in sessions or attending open evenings in addition to their substantive AO role. Admissions knowledge tended to be emphasised as more important than independence from the LA, and services were often more reactive and demand driven, particularly where the service was promoted universally. Proactive targeting mainly involved AO/Choice Advisers chasing late/incorrect applications, whilst their links with primary schools (where these existed) were their main sources of referrals. These two services tended to mainly provide information and reassurance to self-referring ‘worried but well-informed’ parents, particularly in areas with more complex admissions arrangements. It is important to note however, that self-referrals were not always from ‘middle-class’ groups, but included large numbers of parents from less wealthy, often immigrant backgrounds, living in more deprived areas. Given the levels of take-up generated in some high demand areas, these services reached relatively few specifically *targeted* parents from more disadvantaged groups. Although self-referring parents’ decision-making or the final

allocation outcomes were often not directly impacted by Choice Advice, the information and reassurance they received was nonetheless helpful and welcome:

‘[the Choice Advice] was very useful... I can’t say that they really told you anything more than was actually in the booklet... but it just sort of personalised it’ (Parent, Admissions-based)

The other two Admissions-based services recruited additional staff with outreach skills who were based close to the Admissions team (represented as * in Figure 1). Compared to their AO/CA peers, they had a more targeted approach to reaching vulnerable parents, but were aware of the challenges inherent in reaching the hardest to reach, and that self-referring parents often took time away from their targeting activities.

At the time of the interviews, the four Admissions-based Choice Advisers were line managed directly or indirectly by Admissions managers, which sometimes compromised their ability to be truly autonomous and independent from Admissions and the LA. (Guidance on line management arrangements has subsequently been strengthened). This emerged as an issue for a small number of parents who were seeking support around their appeals. Admissions-based Advisers provided basic information on the appeals process, but unlike other arms-length models, were unable to fully support parents in preparing their case, due to the potential conflict of interests. Admission-based services were

quickly established and their close links with AOs were reported as beneficial in helping Choice Advisers develop their role, identify priorities and access admissions information.

Parent Partnership-based services

Seven case study LAs used their local Parent Partnership (PP) service to deliver Choice Advice. PP services are existing arms-length providers of independent advice and guidance to parents on Special Education Needs (SEN) related issues. PP-based staff were often experienced advisers and advocates for parents who were able to develop good links with Admissions staff to gain access to the necessary admissions information/knowledge needed to provide independent Choice Advice.

Compared to the other model types, PP-based services advised the highest volume of parents *and* pro-actively reached more target group parents³ – often delivering more intensive and personal levels of support, which included home visits and accompanying parents on school visits. This type of service also tended to result in more satisfied parents who felt that the support had a direct impact on their final allocation outcome. These services tended to strike a good balance between having good access to admission knowledge (through their close working with Admissions Officers) and independence. This was particularly evident in relation to their significant support of parents with children with more complex needs including SEN, and their helping parents win appeals:

'If it weren't for [the CA] I'd still be in limbo. It's down to her, telling me what to write and what to put... I think it was down to her the reason why I won this second appeal'
(Parent, PP-based service)

In common with Choice Advisers working in other models, PP-based advisers often worked alone or with a minimal support team, but were able to strategically focus their targeting efforts, e.g. by avoiding universal promotion of the service and tactfully steering some self-referring parents to other sources of information. Despite this, some PP-based advisers were described as regularly working intensively with families who required more support, often 'beyond the call of duty' in areas of high demand or need.

The extent to which individual PP-based services developed links with the local Admissions teams

³ 89% of the parents advised by PP-based services were targeted, compared to 40% of those seen by Independent Consultants and 17% in Admissions-based services.

and pro-actively extended their contacts and networks beyond their existing client group varied across the group. Their close links with the PPS sometimes meant other agencies and parents identified them as primarily supporting parents of children with SEN, highlighting their need to be accessible to all eligible Year 6 parents.

Independent Consultants

Some LAs considered that there was likely to be low demand for Choice Advice in their areas – often because there were few faith or selective schools; choice was often effectively limited to the most accessible school (e.g. in rural areas); parents were happy with their undersubscribed local comprehensives; and primary school staff provided any additional support needed by parents. In two such case study areas, Independent Consultants were employed to work part-time and flexibly to provide Choice Advice when needed. The Consultants often had other senior roles within the LA that brought them (opportunistically) into contact with disadvantaged Year 6 parents who may have needed some support with their applications. Targeting mainly involved following up AO leads on late applicants, or giving a small number of Choice Advice presentations to parents that focused on the admissions system and procedures.

As needs were often more hidden and harder to identify, few Consultant advisers had the time to develop more effective referral routes or fully promote their service. This was evidenced by the low levels of awareness amongst most local primary school staff, whose comments suggested there may have been some pockets of unmet need. In one large LA, just one small area was identified as needing significant Choice Advice input. Although the Consultants were senior and potentially had more independence (hence their more fluid shape in Figure 1), few felt it was appropriate or necessary to provide more than a relatively basic level of assistance to parents. In one case however, a Consultant had some experience in supporting children with SEN and this enabled him to use this specialist knowledge to better support parents who required this additional advice.

Voluntary and other in-school support Choice Advice services

One voluntary sector organisation extended their existing role working with schools by also providing Choice Advice, whilst another LA used professional support staff already based in certain relatively deprived schools. In both cases, there were specific challenges and difficulties that limited their ability to provide an effective service.

Both were completely independent from Admissions and the LA. In one case the distance from their Admissions team was also associated with poorer access to admissions information and knowledge. Advisers often had other substantive roles that meant that their experience and knowledge was not as well developed as their peers' in a dedicated role who worked closely with AOs.

There was limited evidence of the wider promotion of the services, and links beyond their existing client group were poorly developed. Critically, their approaches to targeting were either ill-conceived or not effectively executed, often because other school staff were already supporting parents well:

'[The Choice Adviser] targeted parents who she thought would benefit - those with poor English skills, poor writing skills, and told the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes. But there was very little for [the Choice Adviser] to do, as the other Parent Liaison Officer was already involved with parents in ESOL classes' (Parent Liaison Officer, Other in-school support CA service).

The voluntary sector organisation was able to advise some parents considering appealing, following the inclusion of a Choice Advice information leaflet with allocation letters sent in March, but overall, the numbers of parents advised were low. Although neither of these services proved to be effective in these instances, it is possible that services using these models in other parts of the country could provide a good level of Choice Advice support to local parents.

Conclusion

This evaluation builds on the earlier findings from the pilot study (Shipton and Stiell, 2008) which also found that Choice Advice had been well received and helpful for the parents who accessed it. The nature of the services offered has remained similar (e.g. phone enquiries; attending school events; drop-in sessions; variable targeting; and some earlier support for Year 5 and primary admissions), with a number of initial issues regarding the setting of the service having been resolved. The initial advantage gained by the rapid set-up of Admissions-based services has been replaced by increasing concerns about their ability to effectively target hard-to-reach parents, the independence of their line management structures and the support and advice offered around the appeals process. Although they took

slightly longer to establish, some arms-length models (particularly PP-based services) have been better able to develop their targeting strategies and work more intensively to support disadvantaged parents. For some vulnerable groups, the service has had a measurable impact - e.g. in encouraging parents to apply – and gain a place – at an oversubscribed school; dispelling myths about 'good' and 'bad' schools to enable better informed choices; and most tangibly, helping parents win their appeal.

The initiative as a whole has been successful in helping parents with a range of needs, although it is apparent that some approaches are better at meeting the needs of some groups more than others, depending on the local context and circumstances. However, it does not follow that the patterns of delivery and impact examined in this study will necessarily be found in other areas. The individual contexts, staffing, funding levels and priorities vary enormously, and this may have more of an impact on the nature and effectiveness of the service than the model used to deliver it.

Choice Advice is just one of a raft of recent policies and initiatives designed to reduce inequalities in educational opportunities and reduce segregated intakes by making the admissions system fairer for all. When operated with independence; careful targeting; links to local schools, Admissions and other referral organisations; and staffed by dedicated, knowledgeable staff, this service can play a small but important part in achieving this overall aim.

References

- DfES (2006a) *Education and Inspection Act 2006* – Received Royal Assent on 8 November 2006
- DfES (2006b) *Choice Advice: Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DfES.
- DCSF (2007) *School Admissions Code*. London: DCSF.
- Shipton, L., and Stiell, B., et al (2008) *Choice Advice Service: results of a pilot evaluation*. Research Brief June 2008. London: DCSF-RBX-11-08

Additional Information

The full report (DCSF-RW072) can be accessed at: www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

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

Email: joseph.lovell@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.