

Education Scrutiny Committee
Meeting to be held on 13th March 2012

Electoral Division affected: All

Student Support Appeals Committee
(Appendices A & B refer)

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Executive Summary

The report sets out a brief review of the information available to aid decision-making by the Student Support Appeal Committee (SSAC), including issues identified by the membership of that Committee

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to consider what actions are required to address the issues identified by the Student Support Appeals Committee.

Background and Advice

The Student Support Appeals Committee hears appeals from Parents of Children and Young People who are dissatisfied with the decision taken by County Council Officers about the eligibility (or otherwise) of their child for support from the County Council particularly with Home to School Transport, but also in cases concerning other awards or benefits.

Following concerns about the information available to the Members of the Committee, a short review has been undertaken. Some suggestions to aid the decision making process of the Committee are set out below.

1. Current Arrangements

The current arrangements for the Student Support Appeals Committee were introduced in 2010 when the decision was taken to replace an officer panel with a Member Appeals Committee. A copy of the report presented to Full Council on 25 February 2010 is attached at Appendix A. A number of key principles informed the creation of the current arrangements:

- The Committee should be demonstrably independent of officers with transport responsibilities

- That the award of transport costs beyond statutory entitlement and cases clearly defined in the Council's Discretionary Transport policy would rest with the Committee
- That neither the appellant nor transport officers from the Pupil Access team would attend the Committee's meeting
- That the case would be considered on the basis of a written submission from the appellant together with a factual commentary from Transport officers on the submission
- That the officer's commentary would be shared and agreed (or the reasons for any remaining disagreements recorded) with the appellant before consideration by the Appeals Committee

2. Emerging Issues

The SSAC, when considering certain appeals in the past, have indicated the desire to have additional information available in order that they are better informed when taking a decision. In some cases this has been relatively simple to achieve, however, there are occasions where members of the Committee have also expressed the wish that they should be provided with further information about some issues which occasionally parents may raise as part of their appeal.

From initial discussions there appear to be three key areas in which Members feel that the decision-making in the Committee would benefit from more information being available:

- a) Information about parental preferences and distances to alternative schools
- b) Additional confirmation about LCC knowledge of family circumstances
- c) Information about previous cases considered by the Committee with similar circumstances

a. Available Places and Travel Distances

In most cases information is already provided by the Pupil Access Team as part of the agreed Appeal Schedule about:

- Parental Preferences
- Schools with Places and Travel Distances
- Other transport issues (for example unsafe routes)

The Pupil Access Team is happy to work with Committee Members to identify improvements to the factual information about Admission preferences, the availability of schools places etc. where this is required.

b. Family Circumstances

In line with the agreed principles, the appeal process is based on the validation of the submission from the appellant. The guidance to appellants is clear on their

responsibility to provide all the required information and contains a number of helpful illustrations. A copy of this guidance is attached as Appendix B. The validation process already includes contact with previous schools, for example, if there are allegations of bullying, in order to confirm the issue recognising that it will not always be realistic to obtain a shared interpretation of the facts.

There is merit in developing a simple summary record sheet that could be included as part of the commentary that records what validation checks have been undertaken as part of the production of the officers commentary.

It is accepted that improvements could also be made in the validation of information from other sources of information available within the Directorate, for example discussions are taking place to improve the process for validating information with the ISSIS Social Care system. The revised approach needs to reflect legislative requirements for example around the restrictions on the use of sensitive personal data supplied for other purposes.

c Previous Case Information

Clearly the provision of such information could be helpful to the Committee in ensuring a degree of consistency in its deliberations. However, it would need to be carefully used to avoid a situation where in effect an additional set of criteria were created based on precedence rather than each case being considered independently on its own merits and to ensure that it worked in a way that was consistent with the principles agreed for the operation. The Directorate and the Clerk would wish to work closely with the SSAC to determine how this could be effectively delivered.

Consultations

N/A

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Risk management

The paper contains proposals to improve the quality of information available to support the decision-making of the Student Support Appeals Committee.

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Directorate/Tel
None		

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate
N/A