

Over the summer a group of nine parents from 'Don't Drive our Children Away' ("DDOCA") referred an objection to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator about the admission arrangements for the Howard of Effingham School ("the School") for September 2011. The Adjudicator issued his decision on 8 October and has not upheld DDOCA's objection. The Adjudicator has clarified certain aspects of the School's admissions criteria but has not made any substantive changes.

All of the key aspects of the carefully developed arrangements which have served all local communities well in the period since 2008 are preserved, although the Adjudicator has recommended that the School keep the arrangements under regular review with particular regard to the Eastern boundary of the catchment area and the possibility of introducing a sibling policy giving priority to in catchment area siblings.

DDOCA's objection related to the part of the tie-breaker applicable to children living within the School's catchment area (which includes the Horsleys in the West and extends to Bookham in the East). The tie-breaker states that: 'Within the catchment area the tie-breaker will be the nearest alternative school and outside the catchment area the Surrey standard tie-breaker with home to school measurement.'

DDOCA objected that the within catchment tiebreaker provision (known as Nearest Alternative School, or "NAS") :

- did not comply with requirements of parts of the Admissions Code;
- did not accord with the 'ethos of fairness and equity'; and
- was being used with criteria that are different from those for which it was introduced.

The Adjudicator did not uphold DDOCA's objection. The full explanation of how he arrived at this judgement is contained in his adjudication, a link to which is here:

<http://www.schoolsadjudicator.gov.uk/upload/ADA1970-75HowardofEffingham.doc>

In summary, the adjudicator concluded that:

While the standards achieved at the Howard are, at least in the past, superior to those at Therfield School, Therfield is a good school, and therefore parents living to the eastern side of the Howard should have no reason to be over-anxious about not necessarily being able to obtain places at the Howard.

The distances involved for Horsley children to travel to alternative schools in Guildford and Woking would be significant, if they were not admitted to the Howard.

The Council has a responsibility to ensure that as many children as possible find school places without excessive travel implications. NAS contributes to such provision.

Although there are social distinctions between certain parts of Horsley and certain parts of Bookham, there is no reason to suppose that SCC or the Howard incorporated NAS as a means of favouring one socio-economic group of parents above the other or that this is the unintended result of NAS.

Whilst NAS is more difficult to understand than straight-line measuring, it should be possible for all parents to grasp the simple concept behind NAS, and the reason for its use. So it does not breach the Code by unintelligibility.

In arriving at this conclusion, he noted that the objectors have expressed anxiety as to the future destination of children from the eastern part of the catchment area who might not readily obtain alternative places at Therfield School if they are not admitted to the Howard. SCC had, however, responded by stating that 'should a situation arise whereby all children living within the catchment area and attending a named feeder school were not offered a place at the Howard the Local Authority would negotiate with the Governing Body to offer places in excess of the Published Admission Number wherever possible'. SCC also informed the Adjudicator that in practice Therfield is likely always to be able to accommodate all children whose parents apply for places there, and that if necessary the admission number at Therfield could be increased to accommodate additional children if, for example, they were unable to obtain a place at the Howard.

A few minor wording changes were made to the admissions policy, in order to make the policy clearer.

The revised policy is now on the School's website.

Lastly, the Adjudicator recommended that the Howard, with the advice of the Council, keeps the arrangements and their effects under regular review and in particular the catchment area boundary and the sibling criterion.

These two focus areas for any future review of the policy arise from discussions at the meeting the Adjudicator had with the objectors, the Howard and SCC, where the possibility of adjusting the Eastern end of the catchment, and/or introducing a tiered sibling policy, was considered.

In conclusion, KHITH is genuinely pleased that DDOCA have finally been able to have a detailed discussion of the full range of their concerns about the Howard's admission policy and have had the chance to present all of their many arguments for change to the Adjudicator, the School and SCC. We understand that one of the key factors which have sustained DDOCA in their campaign is their belief that they were unfairly excluded from the original Adjudication of September 2007. On many occasions since then, DDOCA have maintained that the NAS tie-breaker would have been unlikely to have been introduced by the Adjudicator if DDOCA's many arguments against it had been heard in 2007. Now that DDOCA's views have been fully considered by the Adjudicator, we sincerely hope that the admissions arrangements which have been in place since 2008 - and which have been proven to work well for everyone for whom the Howard is their nearest school - can be left unchanged and this long running controversy can finally be laid to rest.