

DETERMINATION

Case reference: ADA/2333

Objector: A parent

Admission Authority: The Governing Body of Reading School

Date of decision: 8 August 2012

Determination

In accordance with section 88H (4) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I do not uphold the objection to the admission arrangements determined by the governing body, the admission authority, for Reading School, an Academy Grammar school.

The referral

Under section 88H (2) of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998, (the Act), an objection has been referred to the Adjudicator by a parent, (the objector) about the admission arrangements (the arrangements) for Reading School, an Academy Grammar school for boys aged 11 to 18 years, day and boarding, (the School), for September 2013. The objection is to the catchment area which the objector contends is not reasonable and thus contravenes paragraph 1.14 of the School Admission Code (the Code).

Jurisdiction

1. The terms of the Academy agreement between the proprietor (in this case the governing body) and the Secretary of State for Education require that the admissions policy and arrangements for the Academy School are in accordance with admissions law as it applies to maintained schools. These arrangements were determined by the governing body, the admission authority for the School, under section 88 C of the Act, on that basis.
2. The objector submitted the objection to these determined arrangements on 29 June 2012. I am satisfied the objection has been properly referred to me in accordance with section 88H of the Act and it is within my jurisdiction.

Procedure

3. In considering this matter I have had regard to all relevant legislation and the Code.

The documents I have considered in reaching my decision include:

- the objector's form of objection dated 29 June 2012;
- a copy of the determined arrangements and the minutes of the governing body meeting at which these were agreed;
- details of the catchment area and a map of the postcode areas;
- correspondence from the School dated 9 and 10 July 2012;
- a letter dated 19 July from the objector and an e mail dated 29 July 2012;
- a copy of 'A guide for parents and carers on admissions to secondary schools', from Reading Borough Council, the local authority, (the LA); and
- an email from the LA dated 23 July, 2012.

The Referral

4. The objector resides in the hamlet of Bix, in postcode area RG9 6, in Henley on Thames, Oxfordshire. She explains that this area is excluded from the catchment area of the School, which is in Reading, even though Bix is nearer to it than other residential areas that are within its catchment. The neighbourhood of Bix is also outside the catchment area for admissions to the nearest grammar school for boys, in the neighbouring local authority of Buckinghamshire. The objector contends that as a result of the catchment areas of the grammar schools that are nearest to her home, the area is a 'no mans land' for families wishing to apply for a selective school for boys. The objector believes that this situation contravenes paragraph 1.14 of the Code which says that catchment areas must be designed so that they are reasonable and clearly defined.'

Background

5. The School which became a selective Academy on 1 February 2011 has a published admission number for Year 7 of 112, comprising a total of 12 boarders and 100 day boys. The number on roll is 890.

6. The LA area provides secondary education in a mix of comprehensive and grammar schools. It is bordered by several neighbouring local authorities some of which, including Slough and Buckinghamshire, have grammar school provision.

Consideration of Factors

The School's response

7. In response to the objection the School explains that the catchment area is defined by postcode areas and thus has the advantage of being absolutely clear cut. While accepting that the boundaries of the postcode areas are not regular and that there might be some slight anomalies, the School believes that the arrangements are easy for parents to understand and that because the catchment area consists of specific areas, this provides clarity and transparency.

8. Governors note that the hamlet in question lies within postcode area RG9 6, just over the north eastern edge of the catchment area. This area has not been included because it is very large and because there are no obvious major roads within it that could be used to provide an alternative boundary line.

9. Nettlebed Community School, which is the primary school that the objector's children currently attend, is situated just within the School's catchment. However, during the period in which the School maintained a record of the primary schools from which pupils were recruited, that is, from 2000 to 2008, there were no applicants from Nettlebed and there are currently no pupils on roll from the postcode area in which the objector lives. The governing body, as the admission authority, has therefore concluded that families in RG9 6 have not generally considered the School to be a natural choice and this provides evidence that the catchment has been reasonably, indeed generously drawn. The governors point out that the postcode area, within which the objector resides, is within the catchment area of grammar schools in the neighbouring LA, Buckinghamshire and that in addition to the grammar schools, there are many good quality comprehensive schools that are in reach of the objector's home.

10. The objector remains of the view that it is the very fact that the catchment area is based on postcodes, which precludes some areas that are closer to the School than others, that is not reasonable. She says that the selective school for girls uses different criteria on which to base its catchment area and it is possible for girls within the area to apply successfully for a selective school. The objector accepts that the School is trying to be fair by designating a clear catchment area and agrees with that the area is generous. She maintains however that it is less fair to parents who want a selective school and who reside to the northeast.

11. The School says that its policy is to offer day places to applicants who meet the academic selection criteria and who reside within the catchment area and if there are places available it will consider candidates who live outside the catchment area based on nearness to the School.

Local authority comments

12. The LA confirms that the School catchment area is actually larger than the area of the borough and it believes that the use of the postcode system ensures that the catchment is clearly defined and this enables parents to understand easily whether or not they are in the catchment.

13. There are a number of selective, comprehensive and Academy schools available within the borough and in neighbouring local authority areas. The Code is clear that parents may express a preference for any state funded school regardless of whether or not it is in the LA area where they live and for this reason the LA provides information about schools and contact points for the admission teams in neighbouring areas.

14. There is nothing in the Code which provides for parents to have certainty that places will be made available at a selective school, nor does the Code specify how an admission authority must design its catchment area. Unless an admission authority has a catchment area with the school at the centre of a perfect circle, it is more likely than not that there will be some discrepancies in the comparative distances to the edges of the boundary and in my view it is not realistic to expect that every point on the boundary line will be equidistant from the School. As the Code says in paragraph 1.10, it is for each admission authority to decide which criteria within their arrangements are most suitable for the school and the local circumstances.

15. The catchment area covers a very large area and the School admits children from over 60 primary schools each year. The governing body has designed a catchment area that is reviewed annually but which has remained stable for the past six years. I agree with the point made by the School that whenever a boundary line is drawn, there will always be families who live just over the border line. The Code says in paragraph 1.14 that, 'Catchment areas do not prevent parents who live outside the catchment of a particular school from expressing a preference for the School.

16. In my view the use of postcode areas provides absolute certainty, which enables parents to make an accurate assessment of their chances of gaining admission. I believe that the arrangements, in the matter of the catchment area, are both transparent and clearly defined. Schools are not required to use any particular system when drawing up a catchment area and I do not accept that the catchment area of the School has been drawn up in such a way as to be unclear for parents. In fact the reverse is true, in that parents have absolute certainty about the boundaries of the catchment and can thus make an assessment of the likely outcome of an application for admission.

Conclusion

17. While I do have sympathy with the objector's wish to be resident within the catchment area of a particular type of school, in this case, a selective school for boys, there is no requirement for either the LA, which is not wholly selective, or the School, as the admission authority, to ensure that such a choice of a selective school is available to all parents.

18. In drawing up the catchment with reference to postcode areas, the governing body has in my view produced arrangements that are transparent, reasonable and which are clearly defined to enable parents to understand easily the likelihood of making a successful application for admission. The boundary is clearly defined and covers a very wide area and has been used consistently for the past six years. For these reasons and those included above I do not uphold the objection.

Determination

19. In accordance with section 88H (4) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I do not uphold the objection to the admission arrangements determined by the governing body of Reading School, an Academy Grammar school, the admission authority.

Dated: 8 August 2012

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Mrs Carol Parsons