

Choice Advice

An Evaluation

Bernadette Stiehl, Lucy Shipton, John Coldron and
Mike Coldwell

Centre for Education and Inclusion Research,
Sheffield Hallam University



**Research Report No
DCSF-RW072**

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

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ISBN 978 1 84775 270 3

Acknowledgments

This evaluation was funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and we are grateful to The Department and steering group for their advice and guidance with the execution of this project. We would particularly like to thank our research manager Joseph Lovell and policy adviser Ian Morrison for their support and encouragement.

We gratefully acknowledge all those who took part in the research. We are indebted to Choice Advice, Admissions and CAS&QAN staff, headteachers and all the parents who took part in interviews and provided other useful information for the evaluation.

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Glossary of Terms

ABC Awards - Awarding body

ABG – Area Based Grant

AO – Admissions Officer

CA – Choice Adviser

CAF – Common Application Form

CAM - Choice Advice Manager

CAS&QAN – Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Network

CEIR – Centre for Education and Inclusion Research (at SHU)

CIS - Children's Information Service¹

CVA – Contextual Value Added

DCSF – Department for Children, Schools and Families (until June 2007 was DfES)

DfES – Department for Education and Skills

EAL - English as an Additional Language

EPS – Equal Preference System

ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages

FIS - Family Information Service

LA – Local Authority

MI – Management Information

OSC - Oversubscription Criteria

PP – Parent Partnership

PPS - Parent Partnership Service

SEN – Special Education Needs

SENCO – Special Education Needs Co-ordinator

SHU – Sheffield Hallam University

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

¹ Also called the Family Information Service (FIS)

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1 Introduction and background

Section 86 of the School Standards and Framework Act, as amended by Section 42 of the *Education and Inspections Act 2006*, places a specific duty on English Local Authorities (LAs) to provide independent advice and support to all local parents when they are deciding which secondary schools they want to send their children to.

Appendix 5 of the School Admissions Code places a duty on LAs to provide Choice Advice to those parents most in need of support to navigate the admissions process at secondary transfer stage, to ensure the most vulnerable are supported to make informed choices. The overall aim of the Choice Advice service is to provide information for parents to make the school admissions process clearer, fairer and more equitable by supporting those families most in need of help.

The then Department for Education and Skills (DfES), now the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), commissioned the Centre for Education and Inclusion Research (CEIR) at Sheffield Hallam University to evaluate the effectiveness of this initiative and identify good practice to date. This report builds on the pilot evaluation which examined the first year of the service (Shipton and Stiell et al, 2008), and presents the findings from the fuller evaluation conducted between September 2007 and July 2008.

This introductory chapter outlines the policy and research context for the study, the aims and methodology of the evaluation and the coverage of the report.

1.1 Policy context

Parental choice has been promoted by the Government as a driver for positive change within education and a way of making the school system more responsive to parents. However, evidence shows that the intakes of all types of school differ in terms of the socio-economic background of their parents (Atkinson and Gregg, 2004; Gibbons and Telhaj, 2007; Sutton Trust, 2006; Allen & West, 2007). This has led to concern about the way parental choice is operating and, by implication, the fairness of the admission system (Gewirtz et al, 1995; Ball, 2003; Coldron et al, 2008; Brook, 2008). Policy debate (e.g. Education and Skills Select Committee, 2004; Brook, 2008) has tended to conceive the unfairness as a problem of unequal access to the best schools, whereby more advantaged parents have an increased chance of getting into the 'better' and more popular schools. This leaves the children from less advantaged families to be allocated to the less popular and 'worse' schools. The fact that the children of more affluent parents generally attend the schools with the best results is taken as evidence that the problem is indeed one of fair access².

² It is the case that social segregation of school intakes is associated with unequal educational opportunity with those educated with more advantaged peers achieving higher educational performance (OECD/UNESCO-UIS, 2003). Coldron et al (2008) argue that the impact of intake on making the school either popular or unpopular, high performing or low performing needs to be fully taken into account in thinking about the nature of the unfairness.

There are various ways in which covert social selection by some schools and their admission authorities could occur such as manipulation of their admission arrangements, the adoption of selective over-subscription criteria, requirements for certain kinds of supplementary information, or the use of interviews (Coldron et al, 2008; Flatley et al, 2001; West and Hind, 2003). To counter this, the Government has introduced stronger regulation of admission authorities through the School Admissions Code (DCSF, 2007 and see Coldron, 2008 for an overview of the governance of admissions). A possible source of inequity in admissions is the way parents manage the process of choice. There is a great deal of evidence (Gewirtz et al, 1995; Flatley et al, 2001; Ball 2003; Coldron et al, 2008; Reay and Lucey, 2007; Jordan et al, 1994) that advantaged parents are likely to be strongly engaged with the process of choice and access a wide range of information. On the other hand, less advantaged parents (with lower levels of education and in lower occupational groups) are likely to use a more restricted range of information and advice and are more willing to opt for the local school, and are thereby not gaining access to the best and most popular schools. This suggests that one way of making the system fairer would be to provide more advice, guidance and information to help parents who are less engaged or less informed to help them choose.

This was the rationale for the Choice Advice initiative. The *White Paper*³ (DfES, 2005) announced the Government's plan to develop a national network of Choice Advisers. Section 86 of the *School Standards and Framework Act 1988*, later amended by Section 42 of the *Education and Inspections Act 2006*, places a duty on LAs to provide advice and assistance to parents expressing their preference. Appendix 5 of the School Admissions Code requires them to provide an independent Choice Advice service focused on the needs of children in the transition between primary and secondary school whose families would normally find this process difficult to negotiate. Dedicated Choice Advisers offer a way of targeting parents from less affluent backgrounds, those who experience difficulties in understanding the admissions system, or parents who are disengaged from the admissions process. Choice Advisers support parents through the process of making this important, but often difficult, decision and in exercising their choices more effectively. As stated in the 2007 *School Admissions Code* (DCSF, 2007):

'The primary aim of Choice Advisers is to empower those parents who may struggle with the admissions system, to make informed and realistic choices of which secondary school to apply for in the best interest of their child... the service will place these families on a level playing field with all other families when making the important decision of which secondary schools to apply for'

(Para 6 Appendix 5 Choice Advice - Guidelines for Local Authorities)

Other related policies, such as the emphasis on subsidised travel also support less affluent parents in making wider choices. Choice Advice is therefore only one of a number of policies aimed at greater equality of educational opportunity through a fairer admissions system.

³ Higher Standards, Better Schools for All - More Choice for Parents and Pupils (DfES, 2005)

The Government provided £12 million for Choice Advice during 2006/07 and 2007/08. Ring-fenced funding was available to LAs as a Standards Fund Grant to create a network of Choice Advisers. This consisted of a basic grant of £15K for each LA with additional funds calculated according to the number of children on Free School Meals (FSM) transferring to secondary school that year.

In September 2006 (at the start of the first year of the scheme's operation), around 83 LAs were known to be setting up a Choice Advice service for parents of children commencing secondary school in September 2007. This number steadily increased as the academic year 2006/07 progressed (DfES correspondence, Sept 2006). During 2007/08, most LAs had established a service, but not all were running fully. By 31st July 2008 there were reported to be 250 Choice Advisers operating in 139 LAs (DCSF personal communication, 2008).

By September 2008, it was expected that every LA would be running a dedicated Choice Advice service which would:

- Provide independent advice, support and guidance to parents on accessing information about schools (performance and value-added tables, Ofsted reports, school prospectuses and admissions policies etc);
- Offer group and one-to-one sessions for parents as appropriate, tailoring services to individual needs and circumstances; and
- Enable all parents, carers and children to make well informed choices about the best and most realistic preferences for secondary schools, by advising but not deciding for them.

The initial guidance for LAs (DfES, 2006b) makes clear that the service should be targeted at local parents most in need of support. These include those who are disengaged from their child's primary school or from the admissions process; experience literacy or language difficulties; have children in care; are newly arrived or frequent movers; or live in areas of deprivation. It was envisaged that the proportions and types of families targeted would vary across LAs according to local circumstances.

Under this guidance, LAs had considerable flexibility and freedom in deciding how to organise and deliver their services, according to locally defined priorities and needs. The 2006 guidance suggests that this could include extending the existing Admissions service role by providing 'arms-length'⁴ Choice Advice; mainstreaming existing transition programmes; expanding current Parent Partnerships or Family Information Service provision; or contracting a voluntary sector organisation to deliver Choice Advice. Although mainly focused on the transfer from primary to secondary schools, LAs could also extend the service to primary school admissions and in-year school transfers.

In order to support the initiative, CAS&QAN (Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Network, run by A4E in partnership with CENTRA) was set up in September 2006. CAS&QAN provides support for all Choice Advisers, Choice Adviser Managers and local authorities, as well as providing light-touch quality assurance. Support and guidance is offered in an integrated service via email, telephone, through regional network meetings focusing on key themes, and sharing good practice. A website provides information, comment and resources, and has daily chat rooms and forums for queries and peer support. CAS&QAN have also been involved in developing accreditation for Choice Advisers at Level 2 (with Level 3 still to be developed).

The current statutory guidelines for the running of Choice Advice services came into force in February 2007 as part of the new *School Admissions Code* (Appendix 5) (www.dcsf.gov.uk/sacode) (DCSF, 2007). Whilst still encouraging LAs to develop their services flexibly to meet local needs, the Code was much stronger and more specific on the issue of independence:

'[LAs] must ensure as a minimum, that the Choice Advisers are not in the same management chain or reporting lines as the Local Authority Admissions staff. They must also satisfy themselves that the advice they offer is genuinely independent...'

(DCSF, 2007:110)

Parental choice continued to form a central theme in government education policy with the publication of *Every Parent Matters* in March 2007, this further promoted the Choice Advice initiative as a way of helping parents make informed choices of secondary schools.

⁴ The independence of the Choice Advice service is vital in order to assure that there is no conflict between the advice given to parents and the requirement of the local authority to allocate places at its schools. Choice Advice services can ensure arm's length independence both through where they choose to place the service in relation to the LA Admissions team and by making sure that Choice Advisers are not in the same management chain as the local authority Admissions staff.

In February 2008, the Government announced that funding for Choice Advice would no longer be via the ring-fenced Standards Fund Grant but would form part of the new Area Based Grant (ABG) allocated to LAs for 2008-11. As such, the ABG has fewer restrictions and Local Authorities are free to spend the funding as they see fit to support the delivery of local and national priorities in their areas. The Government has again provided £6 million for Choice Advice in each year from 2008/09 - 2010/11 with LA allocations being based on the same £15K and FSM calculation as in previous years. Whilst ensuring further funding of the initiative, this change allows LAs more flexibility in the way they choose to prioritise and develop their local Choice Advice service.

In April 2008, *Primary and Secondary School Admissions and Appeals: A Guide for parents* (DCSF, 2008a) suggested that parents contact their LA to find out whether they are eligible for help from the Choice Adviser, but does not mention Choice Advisers in relation to the appeals process. However, the School Admission Code does state that:

*'Choice Advisers **may** wish to support parents in preparing for their appeal as part of their role in supporting parents with their secondary school choices. Where this is part of their locally-agreed role, Choice Advisers may accompany parents to the appeal as an adviser but cannot present an appeal on their behalf'*

(DCSF, 2008b:23)

Therefore the current policy provides LAs and Choice Advisers with considerable leeway in defining who receives the service and whether that extends to supporting parents around appeals.

1.2 Pilot evaluation findings

Between September 2006 and July 2007 Sheffield Hallam University conducted a pilot evaluation of the Choice Advice service in six LAs during the first year of their operation (Shipton and Stiell et al, 2008) as part of a larger project on secondary school admissions. This initial evaluation found that the services that had been placed close to the existing Admissions team found it easier to 'hit the ground running', whereas other models⁵ operated more independently but tended to take longer to establish close working relationships with Admissions teams.

⁵ The sample included services based within existing secondary transition programmes, Children's Information Services, and those run by Independent Consultants

The pilot evaluation established that Choice Advice enquiries mainly related to the admissions system and process, but that the services were also providing more intensive advice, information, guidance and reassurance than admissions staff previously had the capacity to provide. Although services were required to set up links with their Admissions teams, schools and local agencies in order to reach the target groups of parents, the development of these linkages varied considerably across the small sample. Given that this was the first year of the services' operation, a number had found it challenging to address the needs of self-referring parents whilst also accessing those who were more hard-to-reach.

Overall, parents were very positive about the service they had received, and particularly appreciated the support, advice and reassurance provided by Choice Advisers, whilst many also noted that the admissions process as a whole had been confusing, difficult and stressful. This was particularly the case in selective local authorities where children were sitting additional tests.

1.3 Aims of the current evaluation

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.

The next section of this report will outline the methodology used to conduct the evaluation. The main findings will then be discussed in relation to the models of delivery; the nature of the provision; the different services' approaches to the needs and demands of parents; targeting; headteachers' views; and finally parents' experiences of Choice Advice. The particular issues surrounding admissions and SEN, and appeals, will then be considered drawing together the perspectives of both parents, Choice Advice staff and headteachers. The report will explore several indicators of the services' success, impacts and effectiveness, before highlighting some examples of good practice and concluding with a number of recommendations.

2 Methodology

The evaluation used a case study approach to gather a range of data from the 15 LAs that were selected and agreed to participate.

2.1 Sample selection

2.1.1 Selecting Local Authorities and Choice Advice Services

Fifteen case study areas (representing a 10% sample of all 150 English LAs) were selected from CAS&QAN's list of 73 LAs known to have been providing a Choice Advice service in 2006/07 and were therefore about to commence the second year of operation in August 2007. The selection process excluded the original six LAs studied as part of the pilot evaluation in 2006-07, to encompass a wider range of Choice Advice services at the next phase of their development.

A purposive sampling frame was developed based on CAS&QAN information around their models of delivery⁶; population density; geographical region; LA types⁷; extent of school selectivity; and preference data⁸ for 2006⁹. A random number generator¹⁰ was used to select LAs within each of the different sub-groups across the full range of attributes. The named Choice Advice Managers (CAMs) in these LAs were then contacted in turn and asked if they were willing to participate, until the required 15 LA participants were achieved. The final sample of 15 LAs covered areas with different Choice Advice models and socio-economic characteristics that varied both between and within the case study areas. Indices of Deprivation from 2007¹¹ were later used to assess gross differences across the four main model types (see Figure 2).

Follow-up letters and project information was sent to Choice Advisers and their managers in July and August 2007 (before they made contact with parents). An information letter was also sent to their Heads of Service, informing them of the research project. Choice Advisers were also involved in assisting us set up the fieldwork interviews with their managers and Admissions Officers (AOs).

⁶ CAS&QAN information indicated that the most common model types were Admissions-based and Parent Partnership based. There were small numbers of others including CIS/FIS (which have increased in number over time), voluntary sector, integrated services, and Independent Consultants. This initial information on model types informed this aspect of the sampling frame (In Feb 2008, additional information on the number and description of models was released by CAS&QAN. Appendix Table 1 compares the national CA picture in Feb 2008 with the sample drawn 6 months previously).

⁷ To ensure a mix of LAs this included city councils, metropolitan boroughs, unitary authorities, county councils and London boroughs.

⁸ Data on the proportion of applicants being offered a place in one of their preferred schools

⁹ Data on the percentage of parents expressing a preference in each LA for 2006 was the latest available at the time of sampling.

¹⁰ <http://www.mdani.demon.co.uk/para/random.htm>

¹¹ www.communities.gov.uk

2.1.2 Choice Advice staff and Admission Officer interviews

All face-to-face interviews with Choice Advisers, their managers and Admissions Officers were conducted between September and November 2007. Choice Advice staff interviews explored their roles; their views on the development and implementation of the Choice Advice service; staffing; targeting; service independence and quality; support and training; linkages and signposting; and their evaluations of the service impacts.

Admissions Officer interviews explored their perspectives on local secondary admissions issues; the support offered to parents prior to Choice Advice; their views on the service and its impact on their team since its implementation.

2.1.3 Parent sample and interviews

Parents of children in Year 6 (ages 10 and 11) were recruited using an opt-in method whereby at the end of their advice session/contact, Choice Advisers asked parents whether they would be willing to participate in the evaluation. Parents or Choice Advisers would then fill in a simple proforma which the CA would return to the research team using a Freepost address. Given the various (and often brief) forms of contact some CAs had with parents, this approach generated insufficient numbers of participants. In many cases Choice Advisers later re-contacted some of the parents they had advised, explaining the research and asking whether they were willing to participate. If they were, the Choice Adviser sought the parent's verbal permission to pass their contact details on to the research team so that the researchers could arrange an interview directly.

To achieve the required sample - particularly with hard-to-reach parents in the more deprived areas - a £20 cash or voucher incentive was paid which helped secure the interview. The use of interpreters also enabled interviews with parents who did not speak English. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face in the parent's home and, where this was not possible, telephone interviews were arranged. Parent interviews were conducted between March and June 2008, after secondary school places had been allocated and parents had been informed about the initial outcome of the process. This provided parents with a greater chance to reflect on their experience of the admissions process; their satisfaction with the outcome; their experiences of the Choice Advice service and, where relevant, the appeals process. Although the aim was to achieve five parent interviews in each of the 15 LAs, in practice the actual number varied between from none in one LA and 10 in two LAs - depending on the nature of the advice given and the number of parents Choice Advisers had contact with. To make up for the lower numbers of parents in some authorities, three LAs were over-sampled where the Choice Advisers could provide additional willing participants. In addition to the semi-structured interview, researchers also collected personal background information of the interviewed parents for later analysis.

2.1.4 Headteacher sample and interviews

Primary school headteachers were identified using the information provided on the parent proformas¹² or from information provided by Choice Advisers, their managers or Admissions Officers. In the first instance, this enabled us to identify named schools or headteachers where there had been some direct or indirect contact or knowledge of the service, or where headteachers may have referred parents to the Choice Adviser. This information was then used to select two primary schools with differing characteristics in terms of location or pupil profile, in each of the 15 case study areas. In areas where there were weak relationships between Choice Advisers and local primary schools, recruiting headteachers to participate was generally more problematic. Telephone interviews with headteachers, or other nominated staff members, took place between November 2007 and January 2008.

Headteacher interviews sought to ascertain their views on local admissions issues; the support needs of parents in their school applying for secondary school; the role played by school staff in supporting parents; their views of the Choice Advice service; and its local impact.

2.2 Parent background (tracker) data

Choice Advisers in the 15 case study areas were asked to collect background information on all the parents they advised in a standardised database format. This was based on CAS&QAN's Activity Tracker form which had been available to Choice Advisers since March 2007, but was not mandatory for them to complete or submit. The requested data included reason for contact; nature of the enquiry; the type of advice given; whether the parent was targeted; and information about the parent's socio-economic background.

Despite designing the database in line with CAS&QAN's tracker and with guidance from the DCSF Steering Group (which included Choice Advice representatives), a number of issues arose with the collection of this information. This resulted in the research team collecting parental background in four different formats (CAS&QAN's tracker, the Choice Advice services' own Management Information (MI) data, and paper and electronic versions of the research team's parent background database). All the submitted data was combined and cleaned in one database which is described in this report as *parent background (tracker) data*.

¹² The parent proforma recorded the current primary school attended by the child whose parent(s) received Choice Advice.

Some Choice Advisers collected information or completed the database in an *ad hoc* fashion, either not logging every parent they had advised, or only recording certain data about them. For example, a number of Choice Advisers reported their sensitivities in asking parents about their household income, level of qualification, ethnicity, home occupancy and free school meal entitlement. Furthermore, not all of the records submitted by Choice Advisers were of equal weight, as was also confirmed by CAS&QAN staff dealing with the Activity Trackers. Some Choice Advisers may complete a tracker only for parents given in-depth help, whilst others collect details after each brief contact. Therefore this dataset does not provide a comprehensive picture of all the work Choice Advisers do with parents. Nonetheless, it is indicative when triangulated with additional interview and other evidence.

2.3 Data sources in summary

Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered and analysed from each of the 15 case study areas, which included:

- 45 face-to-face interviews with Choice Advisers, their managers and Admissions Officers (three in each area);
- 30 telephone interviews with primary headteachers or other nominated school-based staff (two in each area);
- 75 face-to-face or telephone interviews with parents (varying numbers in each area);
- Attendance at CAS&QAN network meetings; MI data; and face-to-face interviews with key staff; and
- Background (tracker) data submitted by Choice Advisers on the parents who received Choice Advice between September 2007 and February/March 2008.

2.4 Analysis

Across the 15 case study areas, the research team carried out 151 qualitative interviews with Choice Advisers, managers, Admissions Officers, headteachers, parents and CAS&QAN staff. All case study interviews were tape-recorded, anonymised and used to prepare a case interview report shortly after the fieldwork. Partial transcriptions of key discussions were made, with additional summaries of other information and issues. A thematic framework was used for the analysis, which allowed us to explore the emerging issues within and across case studies, model types and contexts. The reports then fed into thematic matrices, which were systematically interrogated and analysed by the team.

The background (tracker) data of parents receiving Choice Advice submitted by the 15 Choice Advice services and the additional comparable background data collected from interviewed parents were captured on Excel and analysed using SPSS¹³.

¹³ A statistical analysis software package

Given that all LAs, Choice Advice staff, headteachers and parents participated in the research on the understanding that their identities would remain anonymous, the analysis and discussion in this report tends to focus on generalised model types throughout. Discussion at a more detailed level would be likely to reveal identifiable characteristics of the participating services or LAs.

3 Models of delivery and independence

Key points

- **The different model types can be mapped and described according to the degree of independence or distance from the Admissions team and the relative importance of ‘admissions knowledge’, as expressed by Choice Advice staff.**
- **Different model types tended to highlight different rationales and advantages associated with their position.**
- **None of the Admissions-based services had fully independent or separate line management arrangements in place at the time of the interviews.**

Amongst the sample of 15 local authorities (LAs), five different model types were identified, based on the organisational arrangements put in place by the LA to deliver the service:

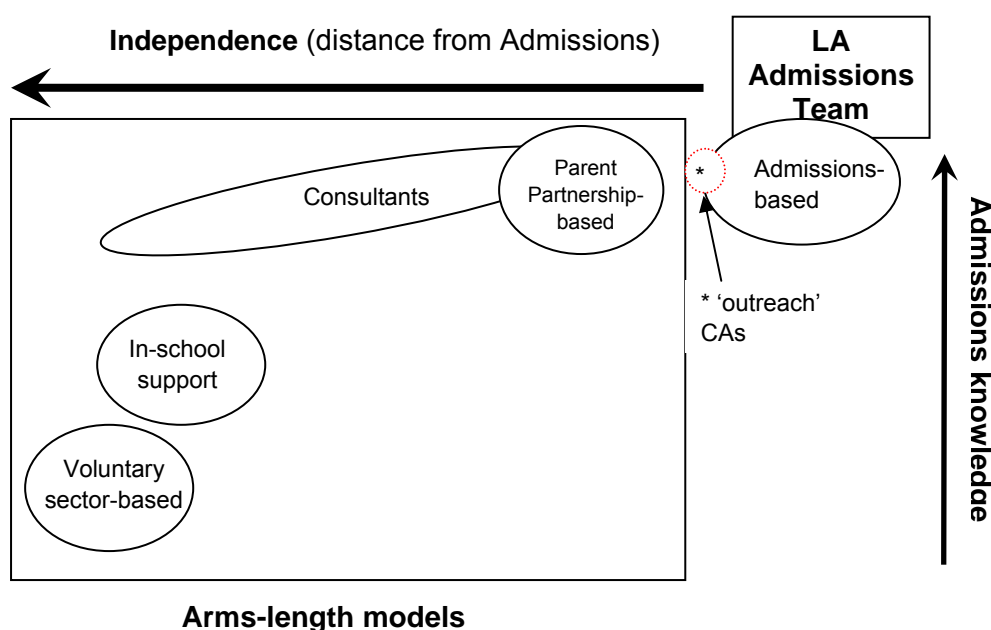
- LA Admissions-based services (4LAs)
- Parent Partnership-based (7 LAs)
- Independent Consultants (2 LAs)
- Voluntary sector-based (1 LA)
- Other in-school support (1 LA)

These were based on CAS&QAN’s early categorisation of models which broadly followed the range of options outlined in the original DfES guidance (DfES, 2006b). Although the guidance stressed LAs’ discretion over developing services to fit local priorities and needs, most of the case studies followed one of the suggested models. Their decisions about which one to adopt were mostly determined by balancing a number of pragmatic considerations: the desire to establish the service quickly over summer 2006 to ensure support to parents over the autumn admissions period; the priorities or fit with the Admissions service; the existence of, and relationship with other services through which the delivery could be outsourced; and additional staffing arrangements.

A further critical consideration was the extent to which each LA prioritised the independence that was expected of the service. Although sometimes viewed differently by staff within the same LA, it is possible to represent the 15 case studies according to the five model types on a continuum (Figure 1), based on the degree of independence and distance from the Admissions function of the LA.

Varying degrees of importance were attached to independence and its outward projection and operationalisation (in terms of organisation, finance, branding, premises, uniforms, line management, and information sharing) by Choice Advice staff. Choice Advice staff views on independence were also linked to the way in which they perceived trust/mistrust between the different stakeholders (e.g. Choice Advisers who attached importance to independence were more likely to emphasise parents' mistrust of the LA and vice versa). Similarly, the relative importance of knowledge of the admissions system varied, sometimes related to the perceived complexity of local issues. It did not necessarily follow that LAs with the most independent approaches to the service were any more likely to champion parents' concerns.

Figure 1: Models of delivery and their independence from Admissions



3.1 Admissions-based models

Four of the case study LAs based their Choice Advice service in, or very close to the Admissions service. Choice Advice staff in these areas tended to emphasise the importance of detailed admissions knowledge, often highlighting the issues that they considered added to the complexity of local admissions arrangements (e.g. selective schools, cross-boundary transfers, over-subscribed or Voluntary Aided schools etc). Here, close working with Admissions teams was seen as the priority, above independence. Managers and staff believed that Admissions Officers had always provided accurate, impartial advice before the introduction of Choice Advice, so some stated that they were initially sceptical about the need for a 'duplicating' service.

Compared to other models, Admissions-based services did not tend to feel that local parents attached importance to the service's independence from the LA¹⁴. Staff in one case study highlighted instead, the need for dual role Choice Advisers/Admissions Officers (CA/AOs) to be independent from local schools. In some services there was little or no distinction between the role or work of the Admissions Officer and the Choice Adviser.

As was also highlighted in the earlier pilot evaluation (Shipton and Stiell et al, 2008), the advantage of this model was that staff felt able to 'hit the ground running' in the first year of operation, but this has become less of a relative benefit now all the models have been established. The service was often seen as an extension of the existing Admissions service, developed by providing Admissions Officers with additional Choice Advice training and enhancing their role and responsibilities. This is represented by the overlap between the Choice Advice service and the Admissions team in Figure 1.

Two Admissions-based services extended the remit of their existing Admissions Officers in this way. In one case, the additional Choice Advice funding enabled Admissions staff to attend open evenings, give presentations at school meetings and provide drop-in sessions for parents in the autumn application period.

The other two Admissions-based services recruited or seconded new 'outreach' Choice Advice staff (see * in Figure 1), who brought a different range of community-focused skills and experience to those provided by the existing office-based Admissions team. Although often based in or near the offices of their AO colleagues, outreach CAs tended to spend varying amounts of their time visiting and working directly with schools, organisations and parents. In contrast to using AO staff already in situ, the recruitment of new outreach staff delayed the full start of the service until much later in 2006 or 2007. As potentially isolated staff with an evolving role, outreach Choice Advisers in these LAs still tended to continue working for, or closely with, Admissions managers and AOs. Given the clear guidance on independence and line management, this arrangement compromised their ability to be truly autonomous and independent from the Admissions service and LA. However, outreach Choice Advisers acknowledged the advantages of this arrangement, in that it enabled them to gain valuable information and support, particularly during the initial period:

'If I wasn't working so closely with Admissions, and had a different line manager, like in Parent Partnership, I feel I wouldn't have as much support as I do from the Admissions, because I'm linked so closely with them I do get a lot of support off them and that's really beneficial to me.'

(CA, Admissions-based service)¹⁵

¹⁴ Many parents interviewed in these areas did stress the importance of having a service they could trust as being independent and separate from the LA that was making the allocation decisions.

¹⁵ Quotes are attributed using the format (Interviewee/role, Choice Advice model type).

'I know we're not supposed to work so closely with Admissions but they've been absolutely brilliant. I know I have my impartiality and independence but the information they have has been really beneficial for the Choice Advice service.'

(CA, Admissions-based service)

Both Admissions-based Choice Advisers quoted here were aware of the DCSF's independent line management requirements, but at the time of the interviews line management arrangements were not always separate or clear cut. In all four Admissions-based areas, Choice Advisers were still being managed - directly or indirectly - by the person with responsibility for Admissions, or some aspect of Admissions. One of these services had plans to re-structure management responsibilities once the CA had established her role. The implications of line management arrangements being based within, or close to the Admissions team (e.g. the potential for conflict of interests regarding appeals) is discussed in further detail in Section 9.

CAs were aware that they were 'giving the impression' of being independent from Admissions to parents even though their service was often 'branded' in the same way as LA (e.g. uniforms, LA logos on literature), and in reality they often shared the same office or premises, information, and manager as the Admissions Officers. In one case, the senior manager justified this by stressing her 'light touch' management approach which was intended to encourage Choice Advisers to work with more autonomy and independence.

3.2 Parent Partnerships models

Of the 15 case studies, seven had used the local Parent Partnership (PP) organisation to deliver the Choice Advice service. As a separate initiative, all LAs have a duty to provide Parent Partnership Services (PPS) to ensure that parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) have access to information, independent advice and guidance on SEN, so that they can make informed decisions about their child's education. Some PPSs also extend their remit to cover parents whose children are at risk of, or have been excluded from school. They are either run at arms-length from the Local Authority (LA), or partly or wholly provided by another provider.

For the seven LAs in our sample, PPSs were selected as suitable arms-length organisations to outsource the Choice Advice service to, as they have an established reputation for providing independent advice to vulnerable groups of parents. In these case studies, PP staff were often experienced advisers and advocates of parents of children with SEN, with an active approach to providing confidential support and advice to local parents, in addition to also having well-established links with the LA and other local partners.

As Figure 1 illustrates, these PP-based Choice Advisers operated at arms-length from Admissions but in relative proximity to them, given their close partnership working relationship. This enabled Choice Advisers to access accurate information and guidance about which families or areas to target their activities for example. Although it took longer for some newly appointed PP-based Choice Advisers to establish good working relationships with their local Admissions Officers (compared to Admissions-based models), there were many examples where they were able to support parents in complex admissions and challenging local contexts whilst also providing a genuinely independent service.

Compared to Admissions-based services, the notion of independence and separation from the LA was given much greater emphasis by PP-based staff. In some cases this was marked by separate branding from the LA. Where this wasn't the case (e.g. where the LA logo had to be added to Choice Advice materials), it was seen as compromising the independence of their service and trust with local parents. Choice Advisers also commented that where the PP-based service had very close links with the LA, they sometimes felt that that independence was 'more of a perception than a reality'.

PP-based Choice Advice staff at all levels tended to be more aware of, and emphasise parents' concerns and mistrust of the LA and the Admissions team (more so than Admissions-based Choice Advice staff), and saw their more independent arms-length position as being important to establishing parents' trust:

'I think they are more likely to open up to you, because as soon as you mention you are from the LA, parents can get very protective and, be 'oh I don't want to speak to you anymore', so on all my publicity I haven't got the education [LA] logo, and I do make sure that I am as far away from that as I can be'

(CA, PP-based service)

The distance PP models had from the Admissions team also enabled some Choice Advisers to act as a 'critical friend', as they felt more able to challenge Admissions staff and their decisions or practices, for the benefit of parents.

3.3 Independent Consultant models

Two of the case study areas used Independent Consultants. Both LAs had opted for this model partly because of what they considered to be relatively straightforward local admissions arrangements which meant that relatively few demands on Choice Advisers were anticipated. Hiring Independent Consultants on a freelance basis enabled the LA to offer the service flexibly, as and when the Admissions team referred cases or as the Advisers identified unmet needs.

As was also found in the pilot evaluation (Shipton and Stiell et al, 2008), these were the most senior group of Choice Advisers, often retired staff from senior posts across the education sector. They often had many high level contacts, but only some had good access to admissions information when required. Some Consultants worked on a number of concurrent, educational-focused projects for the LA and were already known to the parents they gave Choice Advice to in another role or educational context (e.g. as an adviser on home schooling issues). While some had flexible, part-time contracts, others confined their Choice Advice role to one day a week, which limited their availability to parents, AOs and schools who may have wanted Choice Advice. Concomitantly, this reduced their capacity to actively promote the service and deliver Choice Advice flexibly and as required. As Figure 1 suggests, more than any of the other models, Independent Consultant Choice Advisers tended to have considerably more autonomy and freedom in defining their role and degree of independence and distance from Admissions, as summed up by one consultant:

'Independence is really good – I'm not beholden to anyone, I can criticise Admissions, schools, anybody and get away with it'

(CA, Independent Consultant-based service)

In reality though, most did not feel the need to exercise their independence, power and authority, but instead focused on providing information and support to parents at a fairly basic level. They did not see themselves as powerful 'champions' or advocates for parents (as some PP-based Choice Advisers did). Given that they were still employed by the LA in a number of roles, one consultant expressed concerns about compromising their position by supporting parents through appeals, as they would be opposing their LA and employer.

3.4 Voluntary sector model

The one voluntary sector provider of Choice Advice in the case study saw their independence as being critically important to the ethos of their Choice Advice service. The organisation had also been delivering support to local parents and schools prior to the Choice Advice contract, so they considered that they had a good understanding of local needs and well-established community relationships, partly because of their complete separateness from the 'state sector'. This charity operated furthest from the Admissions team in terms of their independence (see Figure 1), but in this particular case the separateness was also associated with weaker ties with the Admissions team, other Choice Advisers and CAS&QAN support, and consequently, weaker knowledge on admissions issues. Given the complex local admissions context and changes to legislation, the Choice Adviser tended to refer parents with complicated queries back to Admissions Officers who had the necessary expertise. The Choice Adviser's main role involved advising parents post allocation and through the appeals process.

3.5 Other in-school support

One case study used professional support staff already in targeted primary schools to deliver Choice Advice. These Choice Advisers saw themselves as being completely independent of the Admissions team and the LA. Their independence was also closely tied to their professional identity and trusted status amongst staff and parents - all of which was seen by these Choice Advisers as being 'absolutely vital' to their role. As will be discussed later in this report, their additional Choice Advice role did not appear to be one that parents had a particular need for in these schools.

4 Nature of provision

Key points

- **Although most services provided similar types of provision (advice via the telephone, open evenings, one to ones etc), the nature of the provision varied depending on the rural/urban and admissions contexts.**
- **In the sample, PP-based services served slightly more deprived areas overall, but the average Indices of Deprivation scores mask considerable variations between and within LA areas, which can also impact on provision.**
- **Staffing levels and individual Choice Advice skills and experience also varied across the case studies, and affected the nature of service provision.**
- **In most cases, telephone advice was the most frequent recorded form of contact with parents, followed by face-to-face, 1:1 contact.**
- **Choice Advisers reported that the majority of enquiries were relatively straightforward to answer, whilst a smaller proportion were more complex and required more time to resolve.**

4.1 Service provision

Regardless of model type, most Choice Advice services were promoted and delivered through all or some of the following: letters and leaflets to schools and parents; dedicated phone line for enquiries; attendance at school open days; follow up face-to-face appointments; pre-arranged drop-in sessions; referral route contacts; and, in some cases, support around appeals. In addition, most Choice Advisers chased late applications and helped with form filling.

Some services also offered support for in-year admissions. Advice on primary admissions (new infants and juniors) was also seen as an important aspect of some Choice Advisers' work, as it prepared parents early for the procedure at subsequent transition points. To avoid the autumn rush and give parents more time to carefully consider their options, a few services were starting the secondary admissions process in Year 5 - often in the summer term when the bulk of the secondary admissions work was over.

The extent to which each of these activities was prioritised varied greatly across the case studies in response to their different local contexts and notions of local 'needs' and 'demands' (see Section 5), and staffing arrangements.

4.1.1 Rural areas

Choice Advisers in rural areas often faced particular challenges because of the geographic spread of schools and dispersed locations where parents needed support. Many had difficulties arranging face-to-face meetings with parents, covering school visits and attending open evenings, some of which were scheduled on the same day in different parts of the county. Similarly, parents in rural areas often experienced different concerns to their urban counterparts. As was also found in the pilot evaluation (Shipton and Stiell et al, 2008), the logistics of distance and transport often meant there were fewer realistic choices available to them, and therefore sometimes fewer dilemmas as well. On the other hand, in rural areas admissions considerations were often more closely tied to transport provision.

The original guidance to LAs suggested that in these circumstances, parents could be offered support for transition to secondary school rather than advice focused on 'choices' per se (DfES, 2006). Indeed, in some rural areas, Choice Advisers reported that there was limited demand or need for their services as most parents were relatively satisfied with their local secondary school and the additional support already provided by staff in primary schools.

Hard-to-reach groups in rural areas, including traveller communities and recent Eastern European migrants were often more dispersed and were harder to identify and support because of their lower numbers and relative lack of visibility. The support infrastructure (e.g. translation services) was also less likely to be well developed in regions where the ethnic minority population was relatively low.

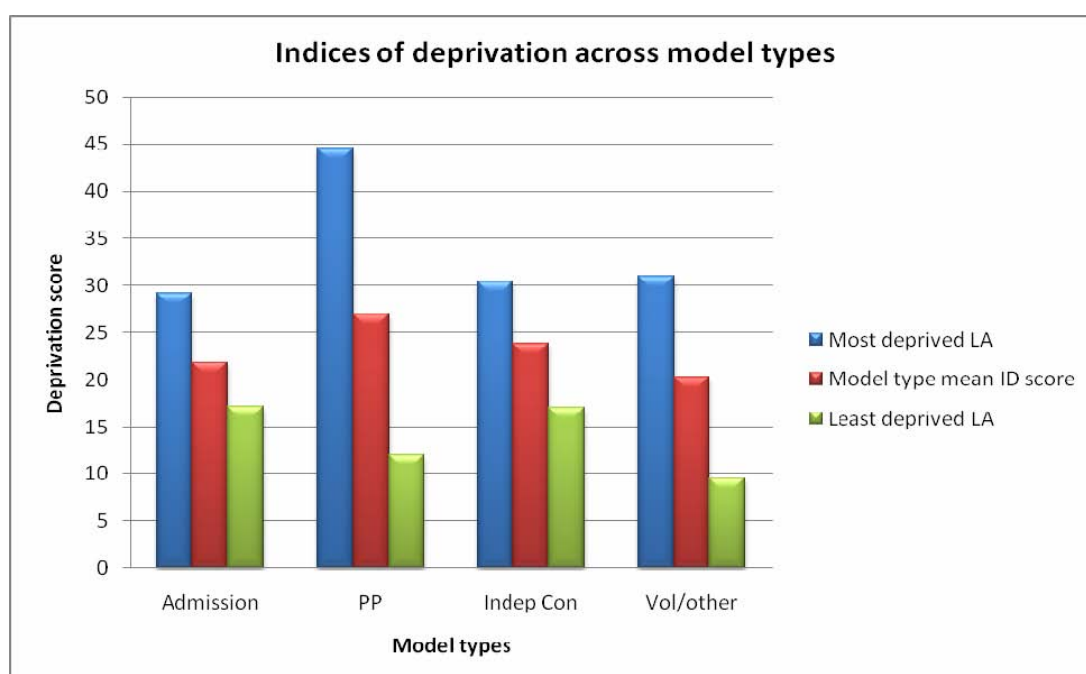
4.1.2 Urban areas

These areas are characterised by: population pressure; residential segregation; high levels of residential mobility; visible and contiguous social inequality; the close proximity of 'popular' and 'failing' schools; and relatively easy access to transport/travel. This results in a hierarchy of schools and therefore a highly competitive market for school places in large cities and urbanised areas. Choice Advisers in the London case study areas also had to deal with the Pan-London co-ordinated admission system (which in many ways simplified some of the procedural issues), as well as the complexities of neighbouring boroughs' schools and admissions systems that many other areas had to deal with. A number of the case studies in urbanised areas also dealt with higher numbers of appeals.

4.1.3 Levels of deprivation

Cutting across urban and rural areas were differing levels of deprivation in each of the case studies. Figure 2 illustrates the range of Indices of Deprivation scores for 2007 (highest, least and mean) for each model type, providing additional contextual background in relation to the possible needs of the target groups in their local population which may also have an impact on levels of provision. The higher the score, the more deprived the LA, with the national LA average scores ranging from four (least deprived) to 47 (most deprived). In this sample of 15, PP-based services had the greatest range of scores between the seven LAs with that model type, but also the highest mean (27) overall, skewed by one very deprived LA in this group. The average scores for services provided by Independent Consultants was 24, followed by Admissions-based (22) and Voluntary/other services (20) (see also Appendix Table A2). However, these group averages conceal marked variations in poverty and affluence within and between LAs.

Figure 2: 2007 Indices of deprivation across model types



Source: www.communities.gov.uk

4.1.4 Admissions complexities

Parents in areas with (or bordering areas with) selective or grammar schools; banding; faith schools; middle schools; academy and foundation schools tended to experience more complex issues regarding choice and expressing a preference. There were often more demands on Choice Advisers from highly stressed parents who needed much more information, advice and reassurance in the face of these often complicated decisions. In the light of the new Admissions Code, a small number of Choice Advisers played what they considered to be an important role in 'policing' schools, ensuring that information provided to parents by schools was accurate and that the Code was being followed correctly:

'We see our role as working for the children, not for the schools...[But] our relationship with schools is generally very good, because they know that day in day out, we apply the rules and regulations. And if any of them says why have you done that, why have you done this, we say, it's on page 25 of the Code of Practice. So you can't have an argument with that'

(CA, Admissions-based service)

4.1.5 Staffing arrangements

The staffing arrangements put in place to deliver the service, varied greatly across the 15 case study areas, model types, and local contexts. The decision about how to staff the service was mainly affected by the level of funding, its initial two year duration, and the need to get the service established quickly. Consequently, some services opted to select Choice Advisers from within their existing Admissions or PP teams, or from Consultants already known to the LA. Others seconded Choice Advisers from other parts of the LA, or recruited them externally.

There was a range of employment contracts and hours across Choice Advisers, including:

- part-time seasonal Choice Advisers drafted in to cover the busy autumn admissions period and post-allocation/appeals advice in the spring;
- one part-time, term-time only Choice Adviser;
- full-time Choice Advisers;
- teams of Admissions Officers tasked with additional Choice Advice duties;
- PP SEN advisers/advocates with additional Choice Advice responsibilities;
- school-based support professionals, with additional responsibility for Choice Advice for that school; and
- freelance Consultants.

There was evidence that some Choice Advisers – particularly those working in an outreach capacity alone or in a small team – were working very long and stressful hours during the busy autumn and spring periods, which was sometimes described by parents, and school staff as 'going beyond the call of duty'. Much of this work related to intensively supporting individual parents over sustained periods, when Choice Advisers were often over-stretched and understaffed.

In February 2008, 132 LAs were able to confirm with CAS&QAN that they had named Choice Advisers in post. Of these, 84 had one Choice Adviser in post; 42 had between two and four Choice Advisers; and six employed between five and 17 (CAS&QAN personal correspondence, 2008). However, it is important to state that the number of staff in post was not a measure of the level of service delivery. There were several examples where a lone-working Choice Adviser was providing a full, focused and effective service, whilst other large teams of dual role AO/CAs were recording and reporting relatively limited additional Choice Advice activity.

As described earlier, some of the Choice Advice staff tended to emphasise the importance of either independence or admissions knowledge, or tried to balance both – and this too, determined local staffing decisions. For example, some Admissions-based services sought to encourage independence and extend the teams' skill-set by recruiting new staff with community outreach experience, even though these staff still worked closely with the Admissions-team and/or the Admissions Manager. In defining the new Choice Advice role and developing the person specification, a number of services were guided by the exemplars provided by DfES/DCSF and CAS&QAN.

The skills, backgrounds, approach and organisational context of the appointed Choice Advisers seemed to have had a strong bearing on the nature and scale of the service delivered, and its effectiveness at reaching vulnerable parents. For example, Choice Advisers with strong admissions experience in selective areas were more likely to provide information and advice in more of a 'matter of fact' manner, and were in an authoritative position to 'police' schools. In comparison, those at arms-length from Admissions were in a more neutral position to act as critical friends and challenge the LA whilst also adopting a more affable, informal approach with distrustful or reluctant parents. Arms-length Choice Advisers (particularly those in PP-based services) tended to have staff with the skills, experience, time and commitment to work in an intensive 'hands-on', persistent and patient manner which was effective in supporting the most vulnerable families. They also had the freedom to explore more innovative and creative approaches to promotion, targeting and supporting parents, without the same organisational or bureaucratic strictures experienced by some of their peers in LAs. There were occasions when this extended to them actively championing the needs of parents who needed additional support.

Although Choice Advisers working alone were often constrained by what they could deliver, in a number of cases, their effective, determined working style enabled them to reach a greater number of targeted parents than much larger teams of Choice Advisers.

4.2 Methods of delivering advice

The parent background (tracker) data submitted to the research team by the 15 case study services recorded a total of 480 parents who received advice between September 2007 and 29 February 2008. Of these, information was available on how the advice was given for 365 (76%) parents during this period. Of these 365 recorded contacts with parents, the data suggests that nearly half (47%) took place over the telephone, with around one in five parents receiving advice face-to-face (see Table 1).

Table 1: Methods of delivering Choice Advice to parents (Sept 07-Feb 08), across all 15 LAs

| CA delivery method | No. of parents (across 15 LAs) | Rounded % |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|------------|
| Face-to-face (1:1) | 78 | 21 |
| Telephone (1:1) | 173 | 47 |
| Group of parents | 10 | 3 |
| Open evening | 49 | 13 |
| Other | 55 | 15 |
| Total | 365 | 99* |

Source: Parent background (tracker) data. Missing data for 115 parents not included

* Rounding to whole numbers results in total appearing less than 100%

Given that some of this data is incomplete, these figures are likely to under-represent the total number of parents Choice Advisers had contact with, so are intended to be indicative rather than an absolute measure of activity. Interview evidence suggests that the Choice Advisers most likely to have under-recorded this aspect of their work were those based in very pro-active and productive PP organisations where there was insufficient time to record their more fleeting contacts with parents, and in Admissions-based services where some Admissions Officers with a dual Choice Advice role found it difficult to distinguish between their substantive job of giving admissions advice to parents (as before) and giving 'new Choice Advice'. In both cases this often related to straightforward telephone queries and in some instances, the brief contact with parents at group events, school visits or parents' evenings where Choice Advisers felt it was inappropriate to collect this additional data. Notwithstanding the limitations of the data collection and these caveats, this data indicates that PP-based Choice Advisers still recorded advising considerably more parents overall (averaged at 41 per PP-based LA, compared to 23 per consultant LA and eight in Admissions-based LAs – see Table 2). These general trends seem to reflect the other evidence that emerged from the interview data, including the very low numbers recorded in the poorly performing voluntary and 'other' services - as discussed in later sections.

Table 2: Methods of delivering advice to parents (Sept 07-Feb 08), by model type

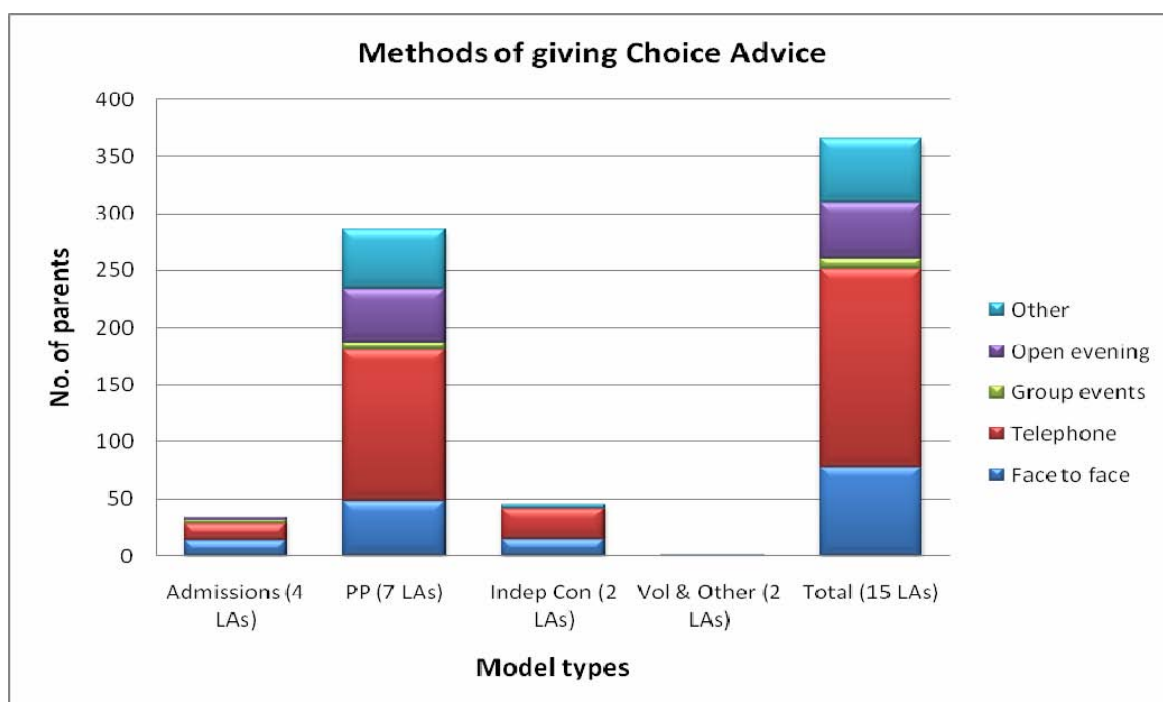
| Model type | No. of parents (by model type) | Mean no. of parents/LA | Method of advice giving (no./model type) | | % method for model type | |
|--|--------------------------------|------------------------|--|----|-------------------------|------|
| Admissions (4 LAs) | 33 | 8.25 | Face-to-face | 14 | Face-to-face | 42% |
| | | | Telephone | 14 | Telephone | 42% |
| | | | Group events | 3 | Group events | 9% |
| | | | Open Evening | 2 | Open Evening | 6% |
| PP (7 LAs) | 286 | 40.8 | Face-to-face | 48 | Face-to-face | 17% |
| | | | Telephone | 13 | Telephone | 46% |
| | | | Group events | 2 | Group events | 2% |
| | | | Open Evening | 7 | Open Evening | 16% |
| | | | Other | 47 | Other | 16% |
| | | | Other | 52 | Other | 18% |
| Independent Consultants (2 LAs) | 45 | 22.5 | Face-to-face | 15 | Face-to-face | 33% |
| | | | Telephone | 27 | Telephone | 60% |
| | | | Other | 3 | Other | 7% |
| Voluntary (1 LA) | 0 | 0 | - | - | - | - |
| Other (1 LA) | 1 | 1 | Face-to-face | 1 | Face-to-face | 100% |
| Total | 365 | 24.3 | | | | |

Source: Parent background (tracker) data. Missing data for 115 parents not included – see Section 2.2 for further explanation.

As Figure 3 suggests, overall PP-based services seemed to have been able to advise more parents, partly as a result of taking higher numbers of phone enquiries and their attendance at open evenings.

CAS&QAN's information for England indicates that 97 of the 149 LAs had submitted their Activity Tracker forms by April 2008. By this point (which included some post allocation/appeals advice work) a total of 4,363 forms had been received, an average of around 45 per LA, compared to case study average of 24. Their data combined all 1:1 sessions with parents (face-to-face and telephone contact) and found that 85% of Choice Advice activities fell into this category. Eleven per cent of Activity Tracker submissions related to open meetings with other organisations, teams or schools to promote the service and develop referral routes; and five per cent recorded activities with groups of parents (at parents meetings, open days etc). Again, given the partial completion and submission of CAS&QAN's Activity Tracker forms, these figures give only a partial indication of some the activities Choice Advisers have been involved with.

Figure 3: Methods of giving Choice Advice (Sept 07-Feb 08)



Source: Parent (tracker) data. Missing data not included

4.3 The nature of the advice given

From both the tracker data and interviews with Choice Advice staff, it appears that much of the advice given was relatively straightforward:

'I was very surprised at how little in-depth information I have to give, I don't get asked about complex school reports. On the whole the majority of parents need just talking through, at a fairly basic level, the process and their choices'

(CA, PP-based service)

'Most of it [the advice requested] is at a really more basic level, 'where is there a school in my area that I can get my child into?', especially for the in-year admissions; 'am I going to get transport there?' or 'I need to change my child's school''

(CA, Admissions-based service)

However, in some cases, more complex admissions arrangements could require more detailed explanations (e.g. in selective areas), or a child's or parent's complex individual needs may require more time to resolve (e.g. specialist SEN requirements, appeals advice – see Section 9). Across all services, Choice Advice staff reported also providing some degree of more in-depth support:

'Some of our work requires repeat appointments, writing to parents, finding out information, on-going intensive work, follow-up phone calls and posting out other information that they need'

(CA, Admissions-based service)

Overall, therefore, the nature of provision was highly varied, depending on several common as well as place/context specific factors.

5 Needs and demands

Key points

- **Five types of advice that meet parents' differing needs for support on admissions and preferences were identified. The extent to which different models focused on these varied according to the profile of the parents they saw, the skills and background of the Choice Adviser – hence observable patterns across model types.**
- **A range of factors lead to high and low demand and needs.**
- **The evidence highlights the importance of careful targeting to uncover more hidden pockets of need.**
- **Socio-economic disadvantage is not always an accurate indicator of the need for Choice Advice. Targeting approaches should be flexible enough to continually identify and seek out hitherto unmet need.**

Choice Advisers' and their managers' perceptions and descriptions of local needs influenced the focus and delivery of the service. Needs were referred to in terms of the Admissions process (e.g. the return of completed applications); meeting parents' expressed demands (often from self-referring, info-seeking parents); and meeting more hidden needs for advice and support that required pro-active targeting.

From the triangulated analysis of Choice Adviser and parent interviews, and the parent background (tracker) data, it is possible to group the different types of information or advice that Choice Advisers commonly offered to meet parents' needs.

- Reassurance (type 1)
- Information, explanations, clarifications (type 2)
- Advice and guidance (type 3)
- An advocate or champion (type 4)
- Influencing/advisory or policing role (type 5)

As described and represented in Table 3, the extent to which these forms of support were predominant varied across the case studies, with some generalised patterns emerging across the model types.

Some Admissions-based services continued to focus on providing parents with accurate, factual information on schools and the admissions process, whilst offering additional in-depth support as required. Both aspects were particularly important in areas with complex admissions arrangements where anxious parents required more reassurance. Where out-reach Choice Advisers had been recruited by Admissions, or links with PP (and Consultants to a lesser extent) were well-established, Admissions officers would often transfer parents to the Choice Adviser to provide more intensive support.

Overall, the PP-based case studies seemed to focus on providing more in-depth advice and guidance, particularly around order of preferences, SEN and appeals issues. Most Independent Consultants tended to provide some information as well as advice and guidance, but this obscured differences in activity and workload between individual Choice Advisers, even in the same LA service.

Table 3: Predominance of different forms of advice and support to meet parents' needs, by model type

| Types of Choice Advice given to meet parents' needs | Examples/details | Extent/focus of activity by model type | | | | |
|---|--|--|----|-----|------------------|-------|
| | | Adm | PP | Con | Vol (post alloc) | Other |
| 1. Reassurance | Often for anxious, self-referring parents who may already have some information and understanding of the process. | ● | ● | ● | ● | |
| 2. Information, explanations, clarifications | Such as 'objective' information on the admissions process and procedures; equal preference system (EPS); oversubscription criteria; distance and transport; 'dispelling myths'; school performance (e.g. Ofsted report; league tables; Contextual Value Added data); signposting; appeals process etc. Much of this is standard information that Admissions officers would have dispensed in the past. | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| 3. Advice and guidance | When parents required further help in understanding or interpreting information; making realistic choices; considering other options; ordering their preferences; filling in the form; appeals advice etc. Tends to be more time-consuming and in-depth. Reported by some as additional support that many Admissions staff would not have been able to provide prior to the introduction of Choice Advice. Includes instances where the CA explained to parents why some schools were considered more popular than others – something some Admissions staff stated they would not have done. | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| 4. An advocate or champion | Where a CA would support or challenge schools or the LA directly, on the parents' behalf, or accompany a parent on school visits to help facilitate their decision-making. Some CAs provided extensive support throughout the appeals process but, as the new Code makes clear, were not able to represent the parents at the appeals hearing. | | ● | | ● | |
| 5. Influencing/ advisory or policing role | Feeding back information from schools and parents to affect change. | ● | ● | ● | | |
| ● | A major focus/element of Choice Advice work for that model type | | | | | |
| ● | A moderate focus/element of Choice Advice work across for that model type | | | | | |
| ● | A minor focus/element of Choice Advice work for that model type | | | | | |

Evidence from the staff and parents interview data has enabled the identification of a range of factors, circumstances and Choice Advice approaches that can determine whether areas are of high or low 'demand' or 'need'.

'Demand' refers to the incoming enquiries from local, information-seeking parents which creates pressure on the service to be reactive, whereas 'needs' refers to latent, but sometimes unrealised demand from local parents who may require help and support but are often unaware of the service or do not/can not access the service. These factors can then have a critical impact on a service's focus, delivery and effectiveness and, to some extent, satisfaction for different groups of parents.

5.1 Factors leading to a high demand for Choice Advice

There is a high demand if all or some of the following factors are present

- The service is deemed 'universal' and equally open to all local parents, is well-publicised and is becoming increasingly well known locally by self-referring parents.
- There are many selective, faith or banded schools which results in highly complex, confusing admissions issues for local parents.
- There is high population pressure in areas with marked social segregation and good transport links (e.g. London and other large cities).
- High levels of competition exist for limited places in popular 'good schools' which neighbour undersubscribed 'failing' or unpopular schools (this requires Choice Advisers to dispel myths around 'good schools' and 'bad schools'; i.e. polarised perceptions).
- There are many aspirational, information-seeking parents who are likely to self-refer and 'leave no stone unturned'. This includes some disadvantaged but engaged parents, many from ethnic minority and/or faith backgrounds who feel their choices are limited because of their deprived residential location or catchment.
- Changes to the admission system/process have taken place (e.g. recent introduction of equal preference/default ranking system; promotion of on-line applications), which have a local impact.

Where Admissions Officers had dual Choice Advice roles, the Admissions-based services tended to operate more on a universal, demand-driven basis than other models, particularly where admissions issues were complex. In this context, all parent enquirers were seen by these Choice Advisers as having legitimate needs they should be meeting, regardless of the parents' background, ability to access information, or understanding of the system. This reactive, (sometimes high volume) service provided reassurance (type 1 on Table 3) and neutral, accurate admissions process information and clarification to stressed and anxious callers (type 2). Given this, the time consuming challenge of also targeting more hidden, hard-to-reach groups became more difficult:

'Most of the parents that approached me are quite well aware of the system and how it works. Their main concerns were around applying for popular out of catchment schools. They weren't really the parents I wanted to target, I'll be honest, I wanted to target the more deprived families'

(CA, out-reach Admissions-based service)

5.2 Factors leading to high need for Choice Advice

Factors leading to high need are often found in areas of deprivation, where parents experience multiple and complex disadvantages, including:

- Chaotic family situations; complex social support needs; challenging personal circumstances; ill health etc.
- Traveller families; families in temporary accommodation; frequent movers¹⁶ ; recent arrivals (including professionals moving into the area; foreign students, as well as more disadvantaged groups).
- Parents needing language support, whether from established ethnic minority communities or recently arrived immigrant groups in areas with limited support for ethnic minority groups (e.g. rural areas with high numbers of recent Eastern European immigrants).
- Parents with learning difficulties or literacy problems.
- Large numbers of 'disengaged parents' including those who do not submit application forms.

The main aim of the initiative is to address the admissions and preference advice needs of more vulnerable or disadvantaged parents, many of whom fall into these groups and may live in identifiable communities or parts of the LA. Others are often hidden (e.g. isolated pockets or smaller numbers) or find it difficult to access mainstream services and sources of information because of the structural and personal barriers they face. Meeting the needs of these parents requires a much more pro-active, innovative, persistent, trust-based, patient and personalised approach to providing Choice Advice which is time-intensive (type 3). Targeting is critical and achieved through good links with Admissions teams, schools and community-based organisations, as these provide potential referral routes and access to translators and interpreters:

¹⁶ The interviews did not pick up any issues relating to families of those in the armed forces, but in some LAs, this would be another highly mobile group with specific needs around CA.

'I target specific primary and secondary schools on the basis of conversations with the Admissions manager - these schools are historically those with the highest incidence of parents not applying or applying very late. So far I've done two or three rounds of visits to schools, around 35 – 40. But there has to be some sort of mechanism in place to try and engage with the parents that aren't necessarily going to be at any of my events and that takes a lot of work, so I've already formed good community links, gaining access to translation services from within schools themselves, cultivating parent volunteers to help with translation and interpreting... I work with voluntary groups including Catholic nuns who provide support for Polish families'

(CA, PP-based service)

Instead of mass information dissemination, different approaches to advertising are needed to reach these groups, including promotion in specific community venues and groups, targeted schools and organisations that may already have contact with these families.

5.3 Factors leading to low demand for Choice Advice

At the other extreme, a small number of Choice Advisers identified their LA (or parts of it) as an area of no/low need or demand. This was also corroborated by local headteachers and Admissions Officers and formed part of the LA's rationale for employing part-time Consultant Choice Advisers who could work flexibly as and when the need arose. Areas such as these reported there were no real admissions issues because:

- Parents were generally happy with their local comprehensives which were seen to be 'much of a muchness'.
- Choice was limited to whichever school was most accessible (e.g. prefer nearest school for convenience, or reliant on transport availability which often reduced other options).
- None of the local options was oversubscribed.
- There were no/few selective, faith or banded schools.
- There were minimal cross-boundary transfers.
- Nearly all parents complete and return the forms on time, often supported by primary schools.
- Late applications can be quickly targeted and generally straightforward to resolve.
- Some parents opt for private education if they see local schools as less preferable.

Given this background, most Consultants in these sorts of areas had a low-key approach to this aspect of their work, offering Choice Advice opportunistically to Year 6 parents they had contact with in relation to their other roles, or following up referrals from the Admissions team or schools. In one case, a large team of Choice Advisers 'blanket covered' the LA and realised that the more deprived and complex areas where Choice Advice was needed were relatively small and localised. Awareness of the service amongst local primary schools in most of these areas was very low, with Admissions Officers and some headteachers questioning the need for Choice Advice in the LA at all. In one area, headteachers had mixed views and felt there were parents who could have benefited from Choice Advice support who were unaware the service existed (implying some level of unmet need in seemingly low demand areas).

In another, mainly affluent, LA, primary schools with the highest levels of parents with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and children on Free School Meals had been targeted for in-school Choice Advice support, but advisers were surprised at the very low levels of take-up of their service. Even in these most deprived schools, parents had virtually no difficulties with the admissions process, expressing their preferences, accessing information or completing the forms on time. As their substantive posts were each in one school, there was little these Choice Advisers could do to address unidentified needs in other parts of the LA. This highlights the importance of having a targeting approach that is flexible enough to continually adapt and refine the ways needs are identified and met. It also highlights the fact that targeting based on socio-economic indicators alone can be an unreliable predictor of where Choice Advice support is most needed.

A few Choice Advisers commented on the difficulties of identifying and targeting more hidden pockets of need in relatively low demand areas, and the importance of not making assumptions about levels of need:

'Just because there isn't a take up of the service doesn't mean that there isn't a need for it...likewise.... just because someone is in the target group doesn't mean that they have a secondary school admission need'

(CA, Independent Consultant-based service)

5.4 Factors leading to low demand for Choice Advice, despite high need

In two case study areas there was evidence of considerable potential need, in that these were all highly urbanised areas with marked socio-economic disparities; a number of juxtaposed oversubscribed and undersubscribed schools, coupled with some relatively complex admission arrangements; high percentages of parents who did not get their first or second preferences; and/or high numbers of appeals. These contextual factors would be expected to lead to high demand for Choice Advice but both services had unexpectedly low levels of take up, the reasons for which varied.

In one case, the LA adopted the Admissions-based model. Existing Admissions Officers were trained to provide additional Choice Advice to parents on an opportunistic basis, when parents required more in-depth support. But much of the time there was a blurred distinction between the information they provided to self-referring parents as an AO or as a CA. Staff reported disappointing take up of their offer to visit schools. They explained that this was partly due to historically weak links between the Admissions Team and the large number of Voluntary aided and Foundation schools in the area. Furthermore, few parents attended twilight Choice Advice sessions or events, despite leaflets in local libraries, schools and community venues.

The other service also had difficulties with several aspects of their targeting, marketing, delivery and admissions knowledge, but managed to provide some support to parents around the appeals process, post allocation.

6 Targeting

Key points

- As stated in the Guidance, ‘targeting’ could be (and was) interpreted and identified differently across the services, depending on local priorities and needs.
- There were marked variations in the numbers and proportions of parents Choice Advisers identified as having been targeted across the types of models. On average, each PP-based service advised and targeted more parents than the other models: 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.
- Most tried a multi-pronged approach to proactive targeting of schools, areas and local community organisations, but the emphasis and effectiveness of this varied greatly.
- Demand-driven (mainly Admissions-based) services dealt mainly with self-referring parents so had less time for sustained proactive targeting beyond their already established links, whilst Independent Consultants tended to provide Choice Advice opportunistically. In both cases, chasing late or error-ridden applications was central to, and often the extent of their targeting efforts.
- ‘Outreach’ Admissions-based services reached fewer targeted parents than PP-based service working in comparable ways and circumstances.
- PP-based services were able to more effectively target parents because of their strong links with local referral agencies, Admissions Officers and schools, and particular approach to intensive, informed support around more complex issues.
- Some parents from vulnerable groups would not have received Choice Advice if it were not for the direct targeting of specific referral routes.
- There was some tentative evidence that PP-based services were more likely to see parents from BME, FSM and non-English backgrounds compared to other models.
- Self-referring parents were also seen by some Choice Advisers as having valid queries and concerns about the admissions process.

The Choice Advice guidelines for LAs state that the service is intended to target resources and practical support *'at those parents who are most likely to need extra help in navigating the admissions system'* (DCSF, Feb 2007:17). Services were free to interpret and apply this guidance to meet local priorities. Their response to local need and demand (as outlined in the previous section) often determined their approach to advertising and targeting parents. In general, this ranged from meeting:

- universal need with high profile advertising;
- universal need with limited targeting;
- some general need and extensive targeting; and
- focused targeting through referrals only.

Admissions officers were often an important source of guidance and information to Choice Advisers about priority groups, areas or schools for targeting, and most Choice Advisers found this was a useful starting point for this aspect of their new role, facilitated by good communication between Choice Advisers and Admissions staff.

6.1 'Soft' targeting – chasing late applications

Interview evidence shows that in some demand-driven services, Choice Advisers tended to receive higher numbers of calls from self-referring parents which, in some cases, reduced the emphasis on identifying those beyond easy reach. This was mainly done through writing to schools and informing them of the Choice Advice service and 'looking out' for vulnerable families they came across. In some other model types there was also evidence that Choice Advisers targeted opportunistically, as and when a parent from their existing client group happened to also require support with admissions. Soft targeting often tended to focus on chasing late and error-ridden applications, which was emphasised as being important in the Guidance and Admissions Code. It is also a key requirement of the Admissions process, so was also given particular prominence in interviews where this was the main form of targeting. Unlike targeting 'hidden' need, identifying late applicants usually meant contacting names on a list. Making contact with some parents could be time-consuming but, once contact was established, the process of completing the form was usually relatively straightforward with few real issues around 'choice-making' and limited need for in-depth advice and guidance:

'[The CA] picks up the schools where parents aren't returning forms in time; we send letters to the schools for the parents who haven't applied by then. She then rings around and follows up those parents, offers to help fill in the forms. That's our main method of targeting'

(CAM, Admissions-based service)

6.2 Pro-active targeting

Other services - including some PP-based operating in high demand contexts - also received high call volumes (46% of all PP-based contact with parents was by telephone - see Table 2). But interviews with parents revealed that unlike Admissions-based services where parents were self-referring, parents telephoning PP-based services were more likely to have been referred through links the Choice Adviser had already established (i.e. Admissions teams, schools, or other agencies). Choice Advisers based in PPs and outreach-focused Admissions-based services, often undertook more strategic promotion, sometimes using a deliberately low key approach to avoid creating 'universal' demand/uptake. Their strategies included offering reassurance to any well-informed, self-referring callers then tactfully steering them to websites and schools for further information. This enabled them to spend more time focusing on relationship-building with referral organisations in order to better target parents who could/would not access mainstream sources:

'There is a lot of very good information out there and if they can't access that they're not going to access [our advertising] so we've been very concerned to keep ourselves very quiet and so our targeting is very much focused at schools, other organisations and agencies.'

(CA, PP-based service)

A similarly targeted approach was also used in relation to school open events, where only those in areas considered to be in greatest need were attended or, in one case, these were deliberately not attended at all:

'We made a decision that the majority of vulnerable parents are unlikely to access any formal events, so to date I haven't done any formal parents evenings in schools'

(CA, PP-based service)

Outreach Choice Advisers in Admissions-based services also developed pro-active targeting strategies. Trying to work directly with some targeted families (e.g. in chasing up late applications) could entail lengthy, persistent effort which could be frustrating at times, but was ultimately worthwhile:

'Targeting the hard-to-reach families is still frustrating because you have to keep going back to the same families, re-iterating what I've already said to them and pushing them. After a couple of weeks you're back to square one, so you have to constantly keep at it. That's the only way I seem to reach the hard-to-reach families – you have to be persistent.'

(CA, Admissions-based service)

6.2.1 Establishing multiple referral routes

For some, the focus on key referral routes - as opposed to a mass advertising and coverage strategy - was a pragmatic decision based on directing limited resources most effectively and ensuring demand did not outstrip supply. Most services attempted a multi-pronged strategy, but with varying degrees of emphasis and success depending on the time available to pursue alternative leads and establish good relationships. One way of raising awareness in targeted communities was through active outreach leg-work:

'I specifically targeted the three main mother tongue languages. I put my [translated] posters up in the local churches, temples, social clubs, shops, and community groups. I specifically walked up and down roads, and asked people to put posters in their shops, so that it was very targeted. And I had interpreters available for sessions which were held very locally'

(CA, PP-based service)

Good links with Admissions Officers who receive calls from parents and could flag up schools with admissions issues was critical. Choice Advisers found that developing direct links with some primary headteachers and key primary school staff was also necessary but sometimes more challenging than they had anticipated. Some reported that dogged persistence and tenacity was required to overcome a school's resistance to 'another bewildering LA initiative' and convince them the new service could reduce staff workload and better support parents. Likewise, establishing strong working relationships with other LA teams, - including Education Welfare, Educational Psychology, Asylum Seekers support teams, English as an Additional Language (EAL), Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS), SEN teams, traveller community support and community groups - was also time-consuming and the results weren't always immediately apparent. As one Choice Adviser commented:

'They are hidden and called hard-to-reach for a reason, so by definition, finding them will not be easy'

(CA, Admissions-based service)

In an area of relatively low demand, an Independent Consultant adviser had made considerable efforts to raise awareness of the service locally, but was dismayed by the lack of response:

'Its potential is huge. It's like opening Harrods and not having very many customers'

(CA, Independent Consultant)

Another Choice Adviser suggested that unlike other outreach services, Choice Advice does not support parents 'over the long haul'. The often brief nature of the intervention does not allow much time to gain the trust of vulnerable parents. Referral agencies who have already established that trusted relationship with vulnerable parents are therefore key, but they too need convincing:

'There's a lot of agencies involved in different families and it's whether or not they want to include another person [the CA] - and a lot of hard-to-reach don't like the [Local] Authority'

(CA, PP-based service)

Although PP-based services developed better links overall, compared to some of the other model types, there was evidence that individual PP services placed differing emphases on establishing new referral routes. Some were kept very busy just supporting parents they or their colleagues already had contact with (mainly those with SEN and related issues). This highlighted the potential for some PP services to extend their existing networks and links to cover other areas of targeting, and the need to establish a separate Choice Advice identity, with wider appeal to all Y6 parents, and not just those with SEN-focused concerns.

6.3 Differences between targeted and self-referred parents

There was no direct question on the tracker about *why* parents were targeted or self-referred, but cross-tabulations from two separate questions about whether they were targeted¹⁷ and their reason for seeking/needing advice, provide a useful yardstick of the association between these factors.

Although the following tables and figures are based on patchy data collection by some Choice Advisers (see Section 2.2 for further details), which compromises its overall robustness, it nonetheless confirms patterns of strengths and weaknesses identified in each of the LAs through the much more extensive and detailed interviews with a range of staff and parents. Incomplete recording of data on targeting seemed to be most prevalent in services which were poorly focused, targeted and managed. However this also occurred in some very over-worked services where interview evidence suggested that pro-actively targeting Choice Advisers often had limited time to complete their paperwork. Hence this data is most likely to underestimate the efforts of some of the most productive Choice Advisers, rather than those with poorer performance figures overall.

¹⁷ The tracker asked CAs 'was this parent targeted – Y/N?'. As 'targeting' and 'target groups' were defined locally by the CAs, its exact meaning may vary between LAs. Self-referrals are taken to mean all those recorded as 'No' to the target question.

Given these provisos, Table 4 indicates that the largest single group of targeted parents (73 or 28%) were those who had not completed the application form on time. Referrals from other professionals accounted for seven per cent. For certain highly vulnerable groups of parents there were no recorded instances of self-referrals for Choice Advice, as they were supported (albeit in small numbers) solely as a result of the proactive efforts of the Choice Advisers. These groups were highly mobile families, children in care (five parents) and asylum seekers. Other vulnerable groups were seen in larger numbers because of successful targeting, although a minority of these groups had also self-referred. These included EAL parents; parents requesting information on selective schools ¹⁸; those from overseas; those with children with SEN; parents who lacked knowledge or had reading difficulties; and parents of children not on the school roll.

This suggests that certain disadvantaged groups are far less likely to come forward for advice without the Choice Advisers' careful targeting with specific referral agencies. This is also backed up by interview evidence discussed later.

Self-referring parents recorded on the parent background trackers were more likely to be seeking general advice on admissions criteria and procedures (50% of the 93 recorded self-referring parents), or in-year admissions (12%). All three parents recorded as seeking advice on appeals before the application deadline were self-referred.

¹⁸ Some CAs in LAs with selection targeted particular schools where this was a particular concern for parents

Table 4: All reasons¹⁹ for Choice Advice contact - for targeted and self-referred parents (all case studies, Sept 07 – Feb 08)

| | No. targeted (% of targeted) | No. self-referred (% of self-referred) |
|---|------------------------------|--|
| [Reasons]/groups advised solely as a result of targeting (zero instances of these groups self-referring) | | |
| Application not received by hand-in date | 73 (28.1) | 0 (0) |
| Referrals from professionals e.g. headteachers, social workers | 19 (7.3) | 0 (0) |
| Highly mobile group of parents | 7 (2.7) | 0 (0) |
| Asylum seekers | 4 (1.5) | 0 (0) |
| Children in care | 5 (1.9) | 0 (0) |
| [Reasons]/groups advised mainly as a result of targeting (minority who also self-referred) | | |
| Parents for whom English is not their first language | 63 (24) | 5 (5.4) |
| Parents requesting information on selective schools | 36 (14) | 25 (27) |
| Parents from overseas | 13 (5) | 5 (5.4) |
| Child has SEN | 11 (4.2) | 7 (7.5) |
| Parent lacks knowledge or has reading difficulties | 9 (3.5) | 8 (8.6) |
| Parents of children not currently on school roll | 6 (2.3) | 1 (1.1) |
| For 'other' reasons | 75 (47) | 52 (56) |
| [Reason]/groups who mainly self-referred (with minority who were targeted/referred by school etc) | | |
| General advice on admissions criteria or procedures | 29 (11) | 46 (50) |
| In-year admissions | 3 (12) | 13 (14) |
| [Reason]/group who only self-referred | | |
| Advice about appeals (pre allocation) | 0 (0) | 3 (3.2) |

¹⁹ CAs could record up to 3 reasons for each parent contact, hence the column totals could be much greater than the 353 parents recorded.

| | | | |
|--|------------|-----------|------------|
| Total number of parents (not column totals) | 260 | 93 | 353 |
|--|------------|-----------|------------|

Source: Parent background (tracker) data. Missing data for 127 parents not included – see Section 2.2 for further explanation.

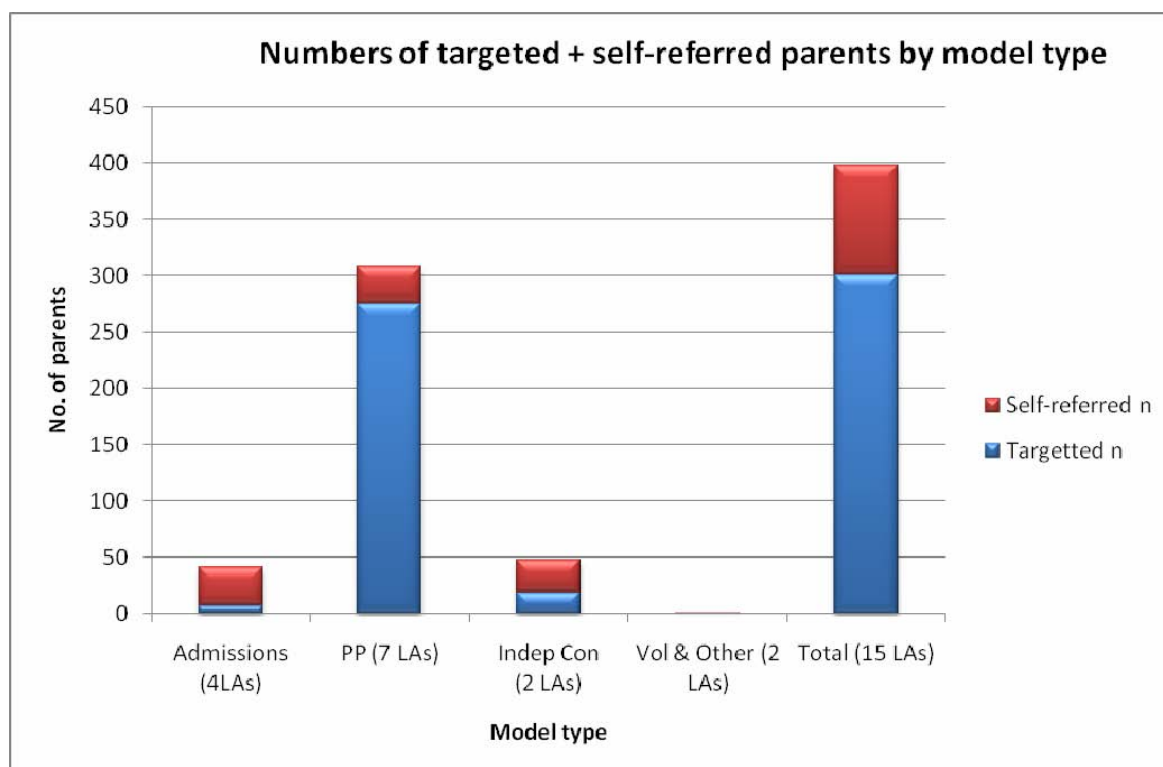
Table 5: Targeted and self-referred parents (Sept 07-Feb 08), by model type

| | No. targeted (% of total parents in model type) | Mean no./LA | No. self-referred (% of total parents in model type) | Mean no./LA | Total no. (% of all reported parents) | Mean no. /LA |
|-------------------------------------|--|--------------------|---|--------------------|--|---------------------|
| Admissions | 7 (17%) | 1.8 | 34 (83%) | 8.5 | 41 (10.3%) | 10.3 |
| PP | 275 (89%) | 39.3 | 33 (11%) | 4.7 | 308 (78%) | 44 |
| Indep Con | 19 (40%) | 9.5 | 28 (60%) | 14 | 47 (11.8%) | 23.5 |
| Vol & Other²⁰ | 0 | 0 | 1 (100%) | 0.5 | 1 (0.25%) | 0.5 |
| Total | 301 (76%) | 20.1 | 96 (24%) | 6.4 | 397 (100%) | 26.5 |

Source: Parent background (tracker) data. Missing data for 179 parents not included - see Section 2.2 for further explanation

²⁰ Based on one parent only.

Figure 4: Numbers of targeted and self-referred parents (Sept 07-Feb 08)



Source: Parent background (tracker) data. Missing data not included.

As Table 5 suggests, not only did PP-based services advise more parents overall, (an average of 44 per LA, compared to 23.5 parents for Independent Consultants, 10.3 in Admissions-based, and 0.5 in Voluntary/Other models) – they also reached far more of the target group parents (see Figure 4). When broken down by model type, PP-based services advised a significantly greater proportion of targeted parents than all of the other types of service - 89% of parents accessing PP-based services had been targeted²¹, compared to just 40% for Independent Consultants and 17% for Admissions-based services. The two Voluntary and Other models had disappointingly poor figures to report between September 2007 and February 2008 (covering the main admissions process period) which reflected the significant weaknesses in their overall approach to, and operation of the service, including promoting and targeting the service, their links with the Admissions teams and their ability to effectively identify and meet the needs of local parents (see also Sections 5.4, 7.2, 10.3).

²¹ A number of CAs (particularly PP-based) commented that they had learned much from their first year of operation and their more refined targeting approaches are now producing result. This updates the pilot evaluation findings (Shipton and Stiell et al, 2008) and suggests that services are increasing the proportions of disadvantaged parents they are reaching over time.

6.3.1 Understanding differences in targeting and self-referral patterns

Admissions-based services and Independent Consultants attracted a much higher proportion of self-referring parents - 83% and 60% respectively. Admissions teams who extended their remit to include an element of Choice Advice tended to continue to be demand driven, mainly answering in-coming calls from parents. Interview evidence suggests that one or two Consultants were reaching a relatively small number of targeted families, but that most of their CA colleagues had limited time and capacity to promote and target their services. They tended to follow leads from Admission staff and/or provide advice opportunistically to parents they were already working with in their other roles.

Although outreach Choice Advisers based in/near Admissions (see Section 3.1) adopted a more targeted approach, they were able to support fewer parents compared to PP-based services operating in comparable circumstances. Outreach Admissions and some PP-based Advisers were staffed by a lone Adviser or a very small team, worked with similar groups of parents, in 'hands-on' ways in socio-economically comparable areas and with constrained resources. Yet PP-based CAs seemed to be able to establish trust more quickly, work more flexibly, creatively and autonomously to help more targeted parents. As the evidence in Section 9 suggests, much of their success related to their genuine independence and specialist knowledge to enable them to advise parents with more complex needs, for example around SEN issues and appeals²². Also key to effective targeting for a number of PP-based services was their good links with the Admissions teams, who forwarded on their more complex queries to the PP Choice Adviser. This was not always in place for other arms-length services.

Even though PP-based services served slightly more deprived areas overall (see Section 4.1), grouping the LAs by model type masks diverse socio-economic variations, both within and between these groups. Whilst the figures for some PP-based services may reflect their diverse local population and high levels of local need, there are others where the service was able to target and reach more disadvantaged parents because they deliberately avoided promotion that would attract the well-informed, self-referring parents who were more typical of their local area. The converse is also true. Two (non PP) services operated in deprived areas with complex admissions problems where high levels of need might have been expected, but their weak links and targeting strategies resulted in very low levels of awareness and take up of Choice Advice (see Section 5.4).

²² Figures on the post allocation appeals work was not collected as part of this evaluation, so is not reflected in the tables.

6.4 Backgrounds of parents advised

Another way of analysing the extent of targeting is to examine the background characteristics of the parents advised in each LA or model type. The data in Table 6 may seem to fit with the earlier findings on PP-based services being most successful in advising higher numbers and proportions of disadvantaged parents (defined here in terms of parents from BME and non-English backgrounds, and those with children in receipt of FSM). Although the amount of missing data²³ on parent characteristics means that this finding is particularly tentative, when it is combined with the other emerging evidence it suggests that in some areas these figures mainly reflected their local socio-demography, whilst for others it represented the services' abilities to reach the more disadvantaged local parents.

Table 6: Disadvantaged background characteristics of parents

| | % relates to prevalence of characteristic across model types | | |
|-------------------------------|--|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| | No. BME parents (%) | No. FSM parents (%) | No. non-English parents (%) |
| Admissions | 30 (33%) | 12 (13%) | 11 (14%) |
| Parent Partnership | 131 (58%) | 68 (48%) | 116 (39%) |
| Independent Consultant | 3 (25%) | 3 (30%) | 2 (15%) |

Source: Parent background (tracker) data. Missing data not included. Voluntary/Other services not included in this table, as there was just one parent recorded in their samples.

However, the amount of missing data on parent characteristics means that this finding is particularly tentative. The same applies to the ACORN²⁴ analysis of parents' postcodes (see Appendix Table A3) which is also weakened by the limited data. With only partial data on these characteristics, it is difficult to determine whether observed differences are due to service provision and targeting, or simply reflect socio-economic and residential variations in the local populations.

²³ Many Choice Advisers felt it was inappropriate to ask additional questions on parents' characteristics, so much of this information is missing from the trackers: 15% of ethnicity data is missing; 48% of FSM; 70% of 'main activity'/employment status; 73% of qualifications; 70% of household income and 70% of home occupancy.

²⁴ ACORN uses over 125 demographic statistics and 287 lifestyle variables to categorise all UK postcodes into 56 typical household types. These are then grouped into 5 categories: wealthy achievers, urban prosperity, comfortably off, moderate means and hard-pressed. <http://www.caci.co.uk/acorn/acornmap.asp>

Evidence from a number of interviewed Choice Advice staff suggested that parents who were not in the target groups also presented needs for reassurance and advice that they met, whilst also being aware of the emphasis on advising more disadvantaged groups:

'Obviously we answer whoever requests advice, but some of them, sometimes the middle-class parents, we can direct them to websites, but sometimes they say they're not very IT literate then [the CA] would help them. You can't always tell someone's ability just by their address - that's making assumptions.'

(CAM, Admissions-based service)

'...you feel that you shouldn't be helping those parents who are going to hand in forms because that's not necessarily what the role is supposed to be about, but having said that if they're handing in a form that has preferences that are totally unrealistic and they're going to end up in a school that they really don't want you're better to help them beforehand than have a load of work with appeals and bad press in the papers saying the school system doesn't work, because obviously that's got implications that are wider than that school or family'

(CA, PP-based service)

In some areas, Choice Advisers identified that there were existing services in the LAs already helping the target group families with admissions support:

'...there's a lot of services already in there helping parents in a variety of areas. I thought English as an additional language would be a real big area for [the Choice Advice service]...but we've got [a service] that works with every family that they're aware of in a variety of ways...I've probably only had two or three families in [needing language support].'

(CA, PP-based service)

This highlighted the tensions many Choice Advisers felt in balancing the requirement to target needs, as well as meet the demands of other parents. It also suggests that a targeted group-only approach to Choice Advice would not meet all the needs of parents who might genuinely require Choice Advice support in the locality.

7 Headteachers' views and experience of Choice Advice

Key points

- **School staff were generally positive about the help provided for parents and felt the Choice Advisers' role complemented or replaced the roles of existing support staff.**
- **In some instances, parents prefer to go to staff they already know and trust.**
- **Comments by headteachers in low demand or low take up areas indicated that some unmet need may still exist here.**

Primary headteachers' views and experiences of Choice Advice were sought to determine the roles schools played in supporting local parents; their awareness of the service and its perceived impact on them.

In most cases the Choice Adviser provided the details of primary schools they had contact with, so this could be seen as a sample biased towards those who have at least some experience of the service. Some headteachers delegated the interview to another member of staff who had more experience of the secondary admissions process. These included Transition Co-ordinators (usually a Year 6 teacher), Learning Mentors, Family Support Workers and school secretaries.

7.1 School staff views where links with the Choice Adviser are established

Awareness and views of the service were usually good where there was an established link and the Choice Advisers had provided the contact details of the headteacher or school. In most cases, staff in these schools had received some information on the initiative and had referred parents to the Choice Advisers when they had a query or needed further help with the application form. Some had had direct contact with the Choice Adviser at school drop-in sessions, school-based events or through supporting a parent together. The support provided was thought to be very beneficial to local families in nearly all of these cases.

Staff stated that Choice Advisers had also helped ease the pressure on the schools who had previously spent varying amounts of time talking through the process, options or forms with parents. One headteacher described the service as '*a gap that needed filling*'; whilst others saw it as complementary to the work they were also doing to support parents in their schools.

This partnership working sometimes meant parents trusted the recommendation to call the Choice Adviser if it came from a respected person at school. In other situations, parents preferred supportive staff they already knew to assist with form filling etc rather than approaching 'a stranger'. A drop-in session in a primary school where the Choice Adviser was going to provide the community language support herself, failed to attract any parents despite being well promoted and supported by the school. In this instance, the school secretary and transition teachers continued to support parents after the session.

School staff tended to have less contact with Choice Advisers compared to the Admissions teams with whom they already had a well-established relationship, mainly with regard to admissions to primary school. In one example, the headteacher's contact with the Choice Adviser related to a parent's (successful) appeal to get their child into the primary school. The headteacher thought that had been a very positive experience for both the family and the school staff who had to liaise with the Choice Adviser, and as a result was planning further opportunities for the Choice Adviser to come in to support Year 6 parents with secondary admissions.

In one LA, both headteachers commented positively on the appeals workshops run by the Choice Advisers for highly anxious parents who were not allocated a school of their choice. One headteacher remarked:

'It was wonderful – it took a lot of the onus off the school to provide that specialist support. The [school] staff learned from the Choice Adviser too, and the parents found it very helpful'

(Headteacher, PP-based service)

In most cases, the views and experiences of headteachers corroborated the patterns of evidence that were emerging from the parent (tracker) data and interviews with Choice Advisers and parents. For example, headteachers provided additional confirmation that particular Choice Advisers had persisted in their supportive targeting of the school which had resulted in larger numbers of disadvantaged parents being helped with their applications:

'When children were in Y5, the Choice Adviser came to the summer parents' evening; he talked to parents, took their names and followed things up. The Choice Adviser came again for the October parents evening to really flag up to them how important it all was and to help them with queries. There was a mix between parents voluntarily attending events at the school and the Choice Adviser actively chasing up parents who hadn't filled in the form yet, liaising with the school and offering the parents assistance with filling in the form. I would guess he followed up at least 15 parents individually.'

(Headteacher, PP-based service)

Collaborative working between the school and the Choice Adviser was essential in order to help parents to this extent. Other headteachers gave examples of how the Choice Adviser complemented the role of the school in helping more vulnerable families, including:

'There were two particularly difficult Y6 boys [that the school asked the CA to support] - one was on part-time education due to his poor behaviour. His parents hadn't filled in a form at the right time and they weren't happy with the allocated school. The Choice Adviser helped ensure they got a school they were happy with in the end... The role of the school is trying to ensure parents understand how important it is to return forms and to advise them to attend schools during a normal school day, read prospectuses etc, whereas [the CA] is much more supportive, still giving the same message but he has got more time to do it'

(Headteacher, PP-based service)

'We're merely there to facilitate, it's an admin exercise for us, chasing the folks to fill the forms in and bring them back... the Choice Adviser managed to liaise with the community bi-lingual support staff and done a really good job at helping those parents'

(Headteacher, PP-based service).

7.2 School staff views in areas of weak CA-school links or low take-up

In areas where Choice Advisers were actively advising parents through their existing contacts but admitted having very limited contact with primary schools, there were often few school leads for researchers to follow. Calls to members of school staff usually revealed they knew nothing or very little about the service. When asked about the local admissions system more generally, some staff commented that sufficient support already existed through local schools or Admissions teams and stated that few parents had issues, confirming the points made by the Choice Advisers and Admissions Officers in those areas.

In others cases however, school staff thought Choice Advice would be of value to local parents if they were made aware of it, suggesting some potential unmet need in a small number of cases:

'...sometimes [parents] tend to come to me and I haven't got the answers for them or they come with concerns about a particular school and things, so yes it would be useful if I had known somewhere to refer them to'

(Headteacher, Independent Consultant-based service)

Where take-up of Choice Advice was generally poorest, there was often very little information from the parent background (trackers) and parent interview data to indicate how these services were received. In these cases, the views of school staff were of particular interest. In one of these authorities, the headteachers' comments suggested that the Choice Advisers' attendance at their respective school events was beneficial for parents, and contrasted this with the approach and impression given by LA Admissions Officers that parents also had contact with:

'[When the CA offered to come to our meeting] we said 'yes', because what [the CAs] do much better than the LA Admissions is explain it in language the parents can understand'

(Headteacher, Voluntary organisation-based service)

'The Choice Advice people look less middle class and more like the client group and so the parents are happier to ask questions they would not have asked of the suits from the LA – [CAs] are more approachable. The Choice Advice Manager looked like he could be one of them - it was very successful'.

(Headteacher, Voluntary organisation-based service).

These parents' evenings/meetings were not recorded on the tracker for that service, perhaps because the Choice Adviser had very limited personal contact with individual parents. Other remarks illustrated some of the possible reasons for this particular service not replacing the support these school staff already provided for their disadvantaged parents:

'It is very nice to know that there is somebody going to be there fighting a parent's corner but as I say it was not terribly widely used and it may not be as effective as it could have been. I would imagine that Choice Advisers just help them with the paperwork as we do, in fact I would imagine that we do more because we actually post [the application form] off, email it off or walk it in ourselves because [they can't always manage that]... I would like [the CA] to be proactive and I would have asked them to go and work one-to-one with some parents that I knew were going to be difficult.'

(Headteacher, Voluntary organisation-based service)

In the Other services with poor take-up, school staff corroborated the views expressed by the Choice Adviser and Admissions Officer, suggesting that the Choice Adviser's targeted in-school approach did not work in practice because of other forms of support already in place for these parents:

'[The CA] targeted parents who she thought would benefit - those with poor English skills, poor writing skills, and told the ESOL classes. But there was very little for [CA] to do, as the other Parent Liaison Officer was already involved with parents in ESOL classes. Parents would ask me [the PLO] questions rather than the [CA]. The PLO can be more of a friend, and give more of an opinion.'

(Parent Liaison Officer, Other in-school support-based service)

However, in another school, the headteacher was pleased with the support (albeit limited) that the Choice Adviser could provide for parents and relieve her of:

'There wasn't a high take-up; just two parents received advice over both years. She completed the form for one parent with lots of intensive support; the other parent had children with SEN who was interested in a church school, so she gave him advice about how to make the case on basis of his needs... Parents usually contact me to talk on a personal level about their application, which can be difficult because I wouldn't want to give one-to-one in-depth advice like that, or assist in form filling, so our roles complement each other. The Choice Adviser is very reliable and knows the families well'

(Headteacher, Other in-school support-based service)

Evidence from school staff therefore helps triangulate and corroborate many of the other emerging findings and issues from this evaluation.

8 Parents' experiences of Choice Advice

Key points

Although most parents found completing the form relatively straightforward, the decision process itself was highly stressful for many. This was even more marked where there was greater competition for a limited number of 'good schools'.

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 form, 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 SEN). 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.

Not all late/missing forms were the result of parents being 'disengaged'; those who might be described as 'disengaged' had varied and often understandable reasons for not completing the form. Most were appreciative and engaged with the Choice Advice support on offer.

Parents supported by PP-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.

Mixed views were expressed about having 'choice' – some were pleased to be able to exercise it whilst others felt that their options were highly constrained in reality.

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 PP-based services.

The extent to which parents felt the Choice Advice support they received had an impact on their allocation outcome varied. Those who received most support were more likely to perceive a positive association. This was most evident where the Choice Adviser's considerable support resulted in the parent winning an appeal.

8.1 Interviews

Interviews with 75 parents across the 15 case studies were conducted to ascertain their experience of the admissions process in general, contact with the Choice Advice service, experience and views of the Choice Adviser (expectations, quality, independence) and outcomes of the process (including appeals).

Interviews were carried out post-allocation, from early March to June 2008, so that information on the outcome of the process (to that point) could be gathered. Most parents had received Choice Advice during the application period in September-October 2007, and were still able to recall these details and reflect on the experience (and ongoing appeals, where this was the case). In a small number of LAs parents only became aware of the service in March, when considering appealing against their allocated school²⁵.

Table 7: Number of parent interviews

| | No. of LAs | No. of parent interviewed |
|--------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| Admissions-based | 4 | 19 |
| PP-based | 7 | 44 |
| Independent Consultants | 2 | 8 |
| Voluntary/Other | 2 | 4 |
| Total | 15 | 75 |

As Table 7 indicates, parents who were advised by PP-based services were predominant in the sample. The over-sampling of PP-based parents was due to lower numbers of parent contacts provided by Choice Advisers in the other LAs and models. This was generally because some Admissions-based services, Consultants, and voluntary and other services tended to work with comparatively fewer parents, often having much briefer contact with them.

8.2 Experience of the admissions process and contact with the CA

The experiences of parents who received Choice Advice varied somewhat depending on whether they had contacted the service with a concern or query, or had been contacted or referred to the service by another professional.

²⁵ Because of the scheduling of the research, the main tracker data collection did not pick up CA activity from March onwards, when a number of parents (re)contacted the CA service for advice around appeals.

8.2.1 Information-seeking self-referrers

The largest group of interviewed parents were those that had self-referred to the service during the main September-October secondary school applications period²⁶. Many first became aware of the service through 'mass information' provided in the admissions pack, school prospectus, a letter from school or through seeing or hearing about the Choice Adviser at a school event, then initiated contact with the Choice Adviser. Similarly, others had self-referred after receiving a Choice Advice leaflet with their allocation letter and contacted the Choice Adviser in March for support with appeals.

Most parents who sought Choice Advice had found the application process (i.e. completing the actual form) relatively easy and straightforward, but many described the decision-making process as traumatic, highly stressful and daunting. For some it was what they perceived to be the enormity of the decision coupled with too much or too little information; having to make a choice at all; having too many possible options or too few good alternatives. These comments were typical:

'I understood the procedure but the process [of choosing] was awful, worrying about what to do for the best because it was such a big decision to make. Sometimes too much choice makes you question whether you're doing the right thing'.

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

'It's probably one of the most stressful things I've ever done, I didn't know which way to turn because not having done it [before], there were so many questions...I'd think to myself 'well what about if this happens and what if I did that'. It really was stressful'.

(Parent, PP-based service)

Others linked their stress to the complexities of their local admissions systems (e.g. sitting entry tests, banding, cross-border issues, or supplementary forms and criteria for voluntary aided schools) or the difficulties in finding a school to meet their child's particular needs, including considerations about the implications for other siblings.

The scheduling of the process was also identified by some of these parents as a factor leading to more parental stress – they reported the autumn rush to visit schools; speak to teachers and other parents; research different options; seek advice; complete and submit the form which was then followed by the long, nail-biting wait until Allocation Day before rushing through the traumatic appeals process a short while later. A few also commented that this anxiety was even more heightened for them and their children if entrance tests for selective schools were being prepared for and sat - echoing the pilot evaluation findings from the first year of operation (Shipton and Stiell et al, 2008).

²⁶ The parent sample is skewed towards more confident, self-referring parents as they were more likely to agree to participate in the evaluation.

Many of these information-seeking, highly-engaged, aspirational parents would not necessarily be described as ‘middle-class’. This group also included parents from disadvantaged groups, those experiencing difficult personal circumstances, and many from immigrant backgrounds, often living in deprived areas, who also felt that this was a critically important and nerve-wracking process. For some, their concerns about the quality of local schools meant they felt they had fewer alternatives or had little chance of getting into their preferred school:

[My son with special needs] has been offered the 25th worst school in the country, its either that or we get done for not having him in school, so we were really worried about what will happen to him'

(Parent, PP-based service)

[The school my son has been allocated] is a bit of a dumping ground... [I've found the process] absolutely daunting... If he doesn't go to a good school, then actually what I'm doing is not setting the foundations for him to become a good man and be a good citizen...it was awful, it is really on your head and the responsibility of being a parent in this day and age'

(Parent, PP-based service)

Most of these parents were able to navigate the system fairly well, access Ofsted reports and school performance data, visit potential schools and were searching out all the available help they could find – including the Choice Advice service – in their bid to explore and assess every option and opportunity:

'...we were trying to talk to as many people as we could before we made the final decision and so we felt we owed it to [our son] just to talk to everybody. We didn't want to leave a stone unturned; we felt that we only had one shot to get this right'

(Parent, PP-based service)

Some of the interviewed Choice Advisers felt they had a valuable role in helping these ‘worried but already well informed’ parents, who often had valid questions and issues that could not always be answered by the general information parents had access to. Similarly, these parents usually reported that they understood what they needed to do but that the Choice Adviser had been able to help reduce their anxieties by addressing their specific concerns or queries. Particularly in areas where the admissions system was more complex and confusing, this much-needed reassurance, confirmation, clarification and information was often valued and appreciated by these worried parents:

'She was very knowledgeable she knew what she was talking about... was it useful? Well yes because it just reinforced what I was thinking... and gave me the confirmation that the way I intended to fill all the forms in was the right way to do them'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

'I would have been much more anxious without the reassurance I got. I was grateful for the service, I think it was important, because at that point you wanted every scrap of help and information you can get so that you're making the best choice for your child'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

Other 'confused and worried' self-referrers (particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds) felt that they had a lot more 'stacked against them' and generally required much more information, guidance, advice and intensive support over a longer period before they felt ready and confident to submit their application.

Despite Choice Advice intervention, a very small number of parents (from Admission-based services) remained extremely stressed and unhappy with their experience of Choice Advice and the outcomes, and believed the admissions process, including the problematic advice they had received had worsened their physical and mental health (see Section 9).

8.2.2 Referred or targeted parents

A smaller proportion of interviewees were referred after coming to the attention of another professional as needing help with the admissions process. Amongst the sample, the referral 'agents' included teachers, social workers, a school liaison officer, an MP and a GP – all of whom personally and directly encouraged the parent to call the Choice Adviser. A small number of parents in the sample had been targeted by the Choice Adviser after being identified as a result of chasing late, missing or lost forms. Referred and targeted parents tended to be from more disadvantaged backgrounds (but not always). Some seemed to have been less stressed about the decision-making process itself but had more difficulties understanding and/or navigating the system or completing the forms. They were more likely to be generally satisfied with their local schools, unless there was a specific reason why they did not want their child to attend them - such as concerns about bullying or, their child's SEN or medical condition. A narrower range of alternatives was often considered, with more emphasis placed on schools being local and whether their child might be happy there, rather than differences in Ofsted reports or school performance. Far fewer of these parents visited their preferred schools or referred to additional information or literature on the schools:

'You get taught the same stuff wherever you go, but we just didn't want the bullying'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

8.2.3 Parents targeted for late or missing forms

Not all of the parents who had been targeted and chased for late/missing forms were 'disengaged'. The interviews revealed a group of parents with complex, varied and often understandable reasons for their forms being late. Some had submitted their form on time but later found out that it had been lost in the process or due to postal strikes etc. Others (from a range of backgrounds and circumstances) were newly arrived to the area and didn't know where to turn for help whilst others needed language or literacy support.

For those who were experiencing particularly difficult circumstances at that time (e.g. serious ill-health, being evicted, family breakdown, death of close relative etc), choosing a school and returning the application form was seen as a relatively low priority, or just another stressful decision they had difficulty facing at that point in time. The uncertainty about some families' future circumstances or housing situation meant selecting their preferences at that point was almost immaterial to them.

In some areas, a few parents assumed - usually correctly from what the Choice Advisers reported - that their child would automatically get a place at the local, undersubscribed comprehensive²⁷. For these parents, completing the form had little bearing on the allocation outcome, so form filling was sometimes viewed as being for the LA's convenience, not the parents.

Most parents in these situations were able to 'engage' with the support on offer and valued the assistance of the Choice Adviser in addressing their particular needs and helping them through the process:

'I'm not too great at filling in forms so it was a great help to me that she actually did it for me'

(Parent, PP-based service)

'I just appreciate that they have that [service], like I said, with not being from this country and not understanding the school system here, it was fantastic to have that resource, so it was very much appreciated'

(Parent, PP-based service)

However, there were also examples where parents felt forced into filling in the 'meaningless' form for the sake of the administrative process:

'We are supposed to be moving, they are knocking the houses down so they pressured me into putting down a secondary school so that my other lad has at least got one place, somewhere'

(Parent, Independent Consultant-based service)

8.3 Nature of the advice received

Parents requiring confirmation, clarification or reassurance were more likely to call the Choice Adviser and have their questions answered quickly over the phone or at school-based events. Few required further follow-up or 1:1 support. Parents who had used Admissions-based services were more likely to have these types of enquiries:

²⁷ However, CAs also reported that schools with a history of being undersubscribed, could 'buck the trend', leaving some children without a place at their 'assumed' available school.

'I probably phoned them up, I'm not sure. It was probably a fairly general question actually just about changing preferences. It wouldn't have been terribly complicated, about which school was offering what, because I had got all that information from prospectuses and just visiting the schools'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

A few parents did not get the information they needed from the Choice Adviser and were referred back to their local Admissions team (examples of this occurred for parents using Independent Consultants and the Voluntary sector service). Other examples of referrals included Admissions-based Choice Advisers signposting parents of children with SEN to the local PP organisation for further support.

Comparing parent interviews across the model types, those who had been advised by PP-based Choice Advisers appeared to have had more complex questions which required more intensive support - typically several phone calls, sometimes with additional and repeated face-to-face meetings. In some PP-based services these included home visits, one of which lasted 4.5 hours. Others accompanied parents on visits to schools:

'I felt at ease because like I say she came to the house, she read through all the leaflets with me and stuff, whatever was in there, she filled them out with me. I felt relieved - a total weight off my shoulders, seriously'

(Parent, PP-based service)

'They actually phoned the [secondary] schools for me, and arranged all the meetings and she took me out there to visit the schools on certain days. I mean she was the one who approached the staff and said 'this is [my son's] needs - what provisions do you have?'

(Parent, PP-based service)

Across a range of parents and contexts, common issues and concerns related to: bullying (avoiding the local catchment school where the primary school perpetrators were applying, or where the school had a 'poor reputation for behaviour'); advice on SEN provision; Equal Preference System; ranking preferences; oversubscription criteria; transport (particularly in rural areas); and making a strong case in their initial admissions application.

8.4 Parents' views on aspects of the Choice Advice service

8.4.1 Choice

The concept and reality of 'choice' emerged as an issue during the interviews, with a wide range of perspectives and views expressed by parents. Most were very pleased at not being limited to choosing their catchment school, whilst others were pleasantly surprised that they could access support in helping them through the admissions process:

'In the States you just go to whatever school is in your catchment area, you don't really have a choice, so to speak, like you do here...I was thankful that we could make a choice'

(Parent, PP-based service)

However, some parents felt that, in reality, they had few choices and were highly limited by transport, oversubscription criteria (OSC) and catchment:

'Although we have choices we don't feel as if we have any choice at all because you may not get any of your preferences'

(Parent, Voluntary organisation-based service)

'It's a choice you're forced into; it's the only viable option on the whole form'

(Parent, PP-based service)

'At the end of the day I just feel that we were limited, there wasn't really a choice - we had to go where the bus takes us'

(Parent, Independent Consultant service)

'[We don't have] a huge choice, no, because we live in a village that has no secondary school in walking distance'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

A few parents felt that the current emphasis on choice made the whole application process far more difficult and socially divisive:

'...this whole 'choice' rubbish, it is rubbish...[without choice] the [social] mix would be much better...all this 'good' school, 'bad' school, is rubbish...this choice that you have, forget it, forget it! Go back to the days when you were expected to go down the road and that's the school you're going to'

(Parent, PP-based service)

In contrast, where competition for places at popular 'good' schools was high and parents felt they had a limited chance of a place because of the OSC, a small minority expressed the view that bright, hard working and ambitious children (which is how they characterised their own children) deserved more choice and a better chance of getting into their preferred school than their less motivated peers.

8.4.2 Impartiality and independence

The overwhelming view of parents was that the Choice Adviser's impartiality and independence from the LA, Admissions teams and schools were very important features of the service. Having 'someone on their side' to give them unbiased advice they felt they could trust was often contrasted with the possibility that schools, the LA and Admissions might have their own agendas:

'[Independence is] very important. I suppose each school is trying to flog you their school, they want your kids to go there - it's all to do with money and the Choice Adviser's nothing to do with that, so that's important'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

'I feel it's better that [the CA] is separate [from Admissions] as I feel they're here for me basically. If they were joint, I'd think 'are they telling me this because it suits [the Education Department] better?''

(Parent, PP-based service)

'It's so important - [the LA] only promote [LA] schools. I think I was offered a low grade school to help with its future league table position'

(Parent, Voluntary organisation-based service)

However, not all parents were aware of the nature of the links between their local Choice Adviser and their LA:

'[After previously meeting the CA in relation to his other LA role] I weren't aware that he was separate. I think [being independent] keeps things a bit more separate and he can see things from a different aspect, so maybe he wouldn't be able to do that. Sometimes if you work for somewhere you can be swayed by their opinions or what they do'

(Parent, Independent Consultant-based service)

A few parents stated that the accuracy of the advice was more important than independence per se, whilst others felt that the Choice Adviser was too impartial because they would not give their opinions.

'Impartial is absolutely right, but sometimes you just want an opinion from someone'

(Parent, PP-based service)

8.4.3 Quality of the service

Parents were generally positive about the advice and support they received from the Choice Advisers, but the degree to which they expressed this depended on the nature of the contact with the Choice Adviser. Where the main contact was through a group presentational-style event at school (more typical of some Admissions and Consultants-based services) parents thought this was useful, but sometimes rather limited:

'It was quite helpful [but] I was expecting more information about the schools rather than the process...it wasn't hard to ask a question if you wanted to but the content of the event was too focused on the secondary to which the primary school is a feeder'

(Parent, Independent Consultant-based service)

'It 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 and she was able to give some quite good advice to the parents who did have concerns. She was very knowledgeable she knew what she was talking about'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

Very few of the sample re-contacted the Choice Adviser after the event, and those that did generally elicited mostly factual information. Parents gained much more benefit from 1:1 discussions over the phone or face-to-face that addressed their specific concerns or queries. Most parents were pleased with the information or reassurance they received as a result of this, which abated many of their anxieties.

Where a service was personalised and flexible (for example through PP-based advisers or, to a lesser extent, outreach Admissions-based Choice Advisers offering home visits or acting in an advocate role) parents were much more positive and effusive about the level of support. This was particularly the case for more disadvantaged parents with multiple issues and difficulties who required more intensive assistance over a longer period of time. Parents were particularly complimentary about the time and attention Choice Advisers took to listen to them and, in some cases, the child's views:

'At last I thought that my voice had been heard... when [the CA] came she actually sat down and she listened to what I'd got to say and it's the first time that somebody had said 'right, this is what we'll do and this is how we'll go about it''

(Parent, PP-based service)

'It was excellent quality he knew what he was talking about...it needs somebody like that [CA] to talk to the kids to see what they really want'

(Parent, PP-based service)

'It's a really good service, I'm really glad I found it... I would've had no confidence if I hadn't spoken to her, from the minute I spoke to her I just had confidence, she was so honest...that's absolutely priceless what she told me!'

(Parent, PP-based service)

8.5 Outcomes for parents

Parental outcomes in relation to the Choice Advice they received were generally positive:

- Without exception, parents expressed far greater levels of satisfaction overall with the PP-based services²⁸ than any other model types, although generally they were moderately happy with most of the other types and would recommend the service to others.
- Most interviewed parents were allocated their first or second choice and were happy with the outcome. Parents who had received lower levels of input from the Choice Advisers did not think that the advice had a direct impact on their good outcome, but the reassurance made parents feel a lot better about an otherwise difficult process:

'[without the advice, the outcome] probably would have been the same. I think it was more for my reassurance. I certainly felt better and more confident about the process'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

- In a lot of cases parents found it hard to know whether the outcome would have been different without the Choice Adviser's help, but some recognised they may not have got into their preferred school.
- For some who had been intensively supported by the Choice Advisers in difficult circumstances, they felt that the impact had been substantial:

'I would have considered home school if [I had] not spoken to [CA]'

(Parent, Independent Consultant-based service)

'It wouldn't be the same outcome if it had not been for the Choice Adviser. I hadn't even thought about that school, it was from talking to him that we actually came to that conclusion. I hadn't realised my daughter would be eligible as we're not in catchment'

(Parent, PP-based service)

²⁸ See Section 3.2 for more information on the nature of PP-based services

- These interviews suggest that most Choice Advisers provided important information and advice to directly answer parents' queries, reduced their anxieties and enabled them to submit their applications with confidence.
- There is also evidence that Choice Advisers used factual information to help change parents minds where their preferences were unrealistic, or where their opinions were based on outdated reputations.
- Some parents expressed surprise and appreciation for the value added data and other factual information on different schools given to them by the Choice Advisers. This helped dispel common myths about local schools with supposed 'good' and 'bad' reputations.
- In two cases Choice Advisers encouraged less confident parents to apply for a school they wanted but originally felt they had little chance of getting into – with successful results.
- Choice Advisers encouraged and supported parents to make a stronger case in their application for their first choice school (e.g. by providing additional supporting evidence) – again an outcome they attributed to the input of the Choice Adviser.
- The clearest impact was around appeal outcomes (discussed in more detail in the next section).

A small number of parents expressed some minor dissatisfaction with elements of the process or advice service they received (the Choice Adviser being too young and inexperienced; receiving rushed or partial advice; a meeting that was too focused on the process and the local catchment school; and those who were unhappy with their allocated schools). More serious issues arose in relation to SEN advice and appeals, which are discussed in the next section.

The suggested improvements to all types of service included: making the service better known; changing the name 'choice'; and employing more Choice Advisers as they were seen to be overworked (particularly 'outreach' CAs in PP- and some Admission-based services). A number of parents suggested changing the scheduling of the admissions process in general to reduce the autumn anxiety, whilst a few specifically mentioned local clashes of open evenings which could be alleviated by increasing the length of time parents have to visit schools.

9 Advice and support for SEN and appeals

Key points

- **The evidence suggests that Special Education Needs (SEN) and other related, complex needs arose as an issue for one in three of the interviewed parents who had received Choice Advice. Many of these parents were from disadvantaged backgrounds.**
- **Parents who had access to the specialist support of the PP-based services were generally very well supported. For parents in other areas – particularly those with a child without a statement of SEN enquiring about mainstream schools – there appeared to be higher levels of frustration and disappointment.**
- **The application process could be improved for parents of children without a statement if there was better and more readily available information and advice about specialist support for pupils in mainstream provision.**
- **Choice Advisers (in non-PP services) could improve their liaison with Inclusion Co-ordinators / SEN Co-ordinators in schools and develop their training in these issues to build their knowledge and referral routes.**
- **The evidence on appeals in general suggests that one in five of the parents interviewed needed support with the appeals process – even more so than when they first made their application. Often, considerable individual guidance was needed in preparing the case, in addition to basic information on the process.**
- **Arms-length Choice Advisers based some distance from the LA/Admissions, were in a much better position to support appellants than those intimately involved in the process on the LA's side.**
- **Admissions-based services seemed most likely to encounter potential conflicts of interest over appeals (e.g. a Choice Adviser supporting parents could be in direct opposition to their Manager presenting the LA's case against the parent). Staff in these services tended to view this tension as unproblematic and dealt with this by providing only basic information on the process. They interpreted the Appeal Code guidance to mean no additional support would be offered to parents.**
- **As a direct result of their experiences, some parents suspected Admissions-based Choice Advisers were not independent from the LA and had lost trust in the whole service and process.**

9.1 SEN advice and support

Parents' need for support and advice around Special Educational Needs (SEN) (and other specific inclusion issues) and appeals in general, arose as two particularly important themes in this research. Both of these key issues were often associated with a number of vulnerable and disadvantaged families. This section will draw together the perspectives of parents, Choice Advice staff and headteachers on these issues.

9.1.1 Parents perspectives on SEN issues

Parents with concerns about their children's statemented, and non-statemented SEN, or additional needs, emerged as a significant subgroup during the course of the interviews. They were frequently mentioned in relation to bullying; behavioural and emotional difficulties; school exclusion; non-attendance at school; school 'phobia'; and medical issues - sometimes only identified as a result of the parent being targeted as a late applicant. In total, over a third of the interviewed parents had concerns of these sorts, which arose across all model types and most areas - they were not confined to PP-based services where Choice Advisers already had an established reputation with this group of parents. These often complex needs were more predominant amongst the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups that the initiative is aiming to support. Importantly, it was seldom the main, initial presenting issue. This suggests that the parent background (tracker) data with just 18 parents (3.5%) recorded as seeking Choice Advice support primarily because of their child's SEN (see Table 4) is an underestimate of the number of cases where SEN or other specific needs arise as a subsidiary concern or one of many complex issues.

These parents included those who had been targeted as well as self-referred. They usually required additional help in answering specific questions about a school's suitability for their child's particular needs. Parents' experiences tended to be shaped largely by whether or not they had access to specialist support for SEN and other complex issues.

Parents with access to specialist SEN support

The largest group of parents in the sample (44/75), received advice from PP-based services. As evidenced elsewhere in this report, PP-based services successfully targeted disadvantaged families and had established reputation for providing independent, specialist advice and support for SEN and other, often related, complex issues (e.g. bullying, medical needs, school exclusion etc). Given the earlier evidence from parent interviews, it follows that the large number of parents requiring this sort of advice were well supported. Two Independent Consultants were also able to provide similar sorts of support to some of the parents they advised. As well as their specialist knowledge, these advisers also had the ability to work intensively and sensitively in an informal, client-centred way to support these often vulnerable families.

Not only were these parents able to gain more detailed information, advice and guidance which aided their choice-making, in some cases the Choice Advisers arranged and accompanied parents on school visits – acting as their advocates, guiding their questions and providing a ‘sounding board’ until parents had the information they required to make a fully-informed, confident choice. Parents very much valued this support and would have been ‘completely lost’ without it. Typical comments included:

‘I didn’t know what to do. First of all I had to accept that my son needed a special school and then I didn’t know what school to choose because they were all different...I looked at two [with the CA] but until I looked at a few more I couldn’t really compare’

(Parent, PP-based service)

‘[The woman who came] totally understood what I was looking for when I explained, then she looked for the kinds of schools I was looking for...’

(Parent, PP-based service)

‘[I received advice on my son’s] dyslexia, they do cater for things like that, and there is teachers up there that do cater for children with special needs and things, [the CA] was brilliant’

(CA, Independent Consultant-based service)

The higher levels of parental satisfaction with PP-based Choice Advice support were also associated with more parents gaining a final outcome they were pleased with.

Parents with limited access to specialist SEN support

The other main types of Choice Advice service (Admissions-based and some Consultants) often reached far fewer parents with complex needs, so these parents tended to be much less well represented in our interview sample. Nonetheless, there was compelling evidence - albeit from a much smaller group of parents - that suggests that parents with complex needs are not always well served in the absence of specialist advice and intensive support. Some of these parents found it more difficult to get satisfactory information and answers. A few reported receiving some generic information about a school’s general approach or policy towards integration or specialist support from the school or Choice Adviser, but nothing specific enough to help them differentiate between schools:

‘We wanted advice about the different schools’ SEN provision, but they just say that all schools have a duty to provide. She gave us printed information, but she didn’t have the information [we needed], like the SEN info, it’s just not available, we can’t get it on websites, she can’t find it either’

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

'There's almost no information on how to choose a school. There's nice brochures, and you can find out how many people applied to the school, but there's no useful information about what they can do for a child with special needs'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

These problems seemed to be associated with cases where the child did not have a statement of SEN and parents were applying for mainstream schools, with little additional support. Given the size of this group, a common and strongly expressed view was that the Choice Advice they had received was disappointing and did not provide any additional help beyond the vague, generic information they had already received from the schools or the education department. In one case, a parent believed she had been given misleading information by the Choice Adviser which she then based her preferences on. Further frustrations arose when the Choice Adviser referred the parent onto the local PP²⁹ organisation or school, and visits and calls to the secondary SEN Co-ordinators or other staff also proved fruitless.

Parents sometimes turned to their primary school staff for information and guidance, but this help was also often limited (this was substantiated in interviews with headteachers and school staff who agreed that they were often asked about SEN related secondary admissions issues and did not feel able to adequately support parents with this).

Compared to the positive feedback from parents supported by PP-based services, these parents were mainly dissatisfied and highly critical of the admissions process and the Choice Advice service they received – and their allocation outcomes to that point.

9.1.2 Choice Adviser perspectives on SEN

Choice Advisers in some (non-PP-based) services stated that they did advise parents with a range of SEN and other specific needs, but the support they described offering was much less hands-on or intensive (compared to PP-based services). They confirmed some of the interviewed parents' comments about generally referring all SEN enquiries onto Parent Partnerships:

'We have a Parent Partnership officer who deals with the special needs children. They are part of special needs, they give advice to parents with special needs who are statemented about which school to go to, which would be able give the most help'

(CA, Admissions-based service)

²⁹ Two parents' separate experience would suggest that neither the CA nor their local PPS could provide the specific information they needed on both SEN and admissions issues.

'...Mostly I didn't directly deal with [parents of children with SEN], although I researched some information on schools that may be able to provide the support that their child needs. A couple I re-directed to the SEN team. One parent of a child who wasn't statemented but felt the child should have been, thought the school wasn't very helpful. But again I could only guide her to a couple of options that could provide support, so that was another referral'

(CA, Admissions-based service)

A number of PP-based Choice Advisers described the intensive support they provided to parents with SEN and often other complex issues, including accompanying frustrated, confused and anxious parents on school visits and ensuring they got to speak to the best person to answer their questions – supporting the evidence from parents in those areas.

However, PP-based Choice Advisers also expressed some concerns about the degree to which some people may link Choice Advice service to SEN issues alone, rather than wider advice on secondary admissions, relevant to all parents:

'I think there are some downsides of being sited in PP because some parents and services believe that I only work in Special Educational Needs'

(CA, PP-based service)

'We get quite a lot of SEN [enquiries] - that is probably a function of us being placed with PP, where people are concerned about choosing a school for a child who has special educational needs; particularly children who are not statemented because if they are statemented they go through a different system...but [statemented children] still have issues about finding the right school... there is a lot of basic discussion about what a school has'

(CA, PP-based service)

This highlights that PP-based services and advisers with specialist skills and knowledge may be able to utilise their particular contacts and expertise to work well with vulnerable parents with SEN and other specific needs. They were also aware of the need to promote their service in order to attract parents in need of secondary admissions support and 'non-SEN' enquiries.

9.2 Appeals

At the time of our interviews with parents, one in five had gone, were going through, or were considering, appealing against their allocated school. All had received some information or guidance from the Choice Adviser. The issue of appeals therefore emerged as a particularly important aspect of the Choice Advice experience for this group of parents, as well as being an aspect of Choice Advisers' work that they had commented on in their interviews the previous winter.

9.2.1 Parents' perspectives

A few appellants/potential appellants had been in contact with Choice Adviser during the autumn admissions process or before receiving their disappointing allocation letter, and had re-contacted the Choice Adviser for further advice or support around appeals. But a larger group had sought the assistance of the Choice Adviser *after* receiving their allocation letter – sometimes with information on advice for appeals offered by the Choice Adviser included with their letter.

For nearly all parents going through or considering appealing, this was a much more daunting and overwhelming prospect than their original decision-making (as also reported by Coldron et al, 2002). Parents very much valued the more intensive support and guidance they received in preparing their case, which occurred more often where Choice Advisers were in an established advocacy or in-depth support roles (mainly in Parent Partnership services and, to a lesser extent, in the voluntary sector model). In one PP-based service, nearly all appellants had won their appeals, which they directly attributed to the Choice Advisers' support. Many of these parents would be considered to be from disadvantaged backgrounds and often lacked the confidence and skills to take their cases forward without this level of support:

'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. Obviously it's my life and it's true what she's writing, but the way she puts it and stuff, I think it was down to her the reason why I won this second appeal'

(Parent, PP-based service)

'We knew nothing about how to make appeals and was pleased after coming off the phone [with the CA]; we knew where to go next'

(Parent, Voluntary organisation-based service)

'She helped us out with the application. I didn't know a lot about it, otherwise I would've gone around in circles. The outcome would've been different, and I would've ended up with a school further away and had to move or take my daughter by car there.'

(Parent, PP-based service)

'The support of this place didn't just make it easier; it made it 99% easier'

(Parent, PP-based service)

In two other areas, a small number of parents (three unrelated cases) had negative experiences of the (Admissions-based) Choice Advice service and support for appeals. They felt disappointed by the service as a result of what they considered to be incorrect, misleading or insufficient information and advice from the Choice Adviser and/or wider LA regarding SEN provision and other specific needs (as described above). In both areas, parents suspected there was a conflict of interest between the Choice Adviser and their colleagues. Unprompted and separately, two parents cast doubt on the 'independence' of the advice and service when they realised the Choice Advice manager would be representing the LA at the appeal hearing:

'They're giving the impression that this organisation called the Choice Advisory (sic) service is completely independent of the Local Authority and Admissions and therefore the parents actually think they're benefiting when all they're getting is exactly the same service that they would get if they phoned up admissions and asked the same questions. What really makes me furious is the fact that they don't make it clear that they are under the auspices of the LA, and whichever Choice Advice manager'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

'The further apart [Admissions and Choice Advice] are the better!... I'm quite glad [the CA] didn't go with me [to the appeal] as I wouldn't want to put her in that position, at the end of the day they're still her employers'

(Parent, Admissions-based service)

One of these families was particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable, but nonetheless all were determined and desperate for a place for their children at a school they thought appropriate for their various needs. All three reported feeling let down and unsupported at a very stressful point in the process.

9.2.2 Choice Adviser perspectives on appeals and potential conflicts of interest

The voluntary sector model and several of the PP-based Choice Advice services viewed supporting parents through appeals as particularly important part of their role. They often had previous experience as parent advocates in other contexts and recognised that there were few alternative sources of free, personalised support for parents during this very nerve-racking process. Their expertise, distance and independence from the Admissions service and LA enabled them to offer this kind of intensive guidance, although some acknowledged that the new Appeals Code prevented them from actually representing parents at the hearing:

'Quite a lot of the work for half of the year is around appeals, informing parents what their rights are, helping them fill in appeal forms helping them prepare their arguments, but I don't actually go to appeals with them'

(CA, PP-based service)

Other types of model tended to interpret the new Code to mean Choice Advisers could provide basic factual information on the appeals process, but drew back much further in terms of any additional advice, guidance and support they offered parents, particularly where the Choice Adviser was preparing the case for the LA (and, in effect, against the parent):

'I'm heavily involved in the appeals, I represent [the LA] at both assessment and allocation appeals. We don't discourage appeals, in fact we encourage them, because we don't have discretion, the panels have discretion... We can only work within the published criteria, but we will make sure they take up the right of appeal. We can't prepare the appeal for them, but we can give them an idea of what sort of thing would be helpful'

(CA, Admissions-based service)

A few CAs and CAMs recognised possible conflicts of interest inherent in this aspect of the work, and at the time of interview (before the new Appeals Code was published) were unsure how they were going to proceed with support for appeals. But in most Admissions-based services - particularly where AOs/CAs had dual roles - staff tended to express a very minimal level of awareness that these might coincide or conflict, dismissing it as generally unproblematic:

'...as [an] Admissions Officer [my] priority is to get that child into school wherever there's a vacancy. You [parents] often don't have a choice. You go where we send you, and we expect you to take that vacancy. With [my CA role] you can't do that because it's not down to us, we are there just to give advice. [We] wear two hats – you take off one and put the other one on'

(CA, Admissions-based service)

Some AO/CAs seemed to downplay the potential issues, particularly where they were already negotiating conflicts of interest on a more regular basis, for example where they switch from giving 'friendly' Choice Advice in October to being AOs the following August-September. One AO/CA said that for parents who were unplaced before the start of term, she often had the difficult AO job of 'firmly persuading' them to accept a school they did not want. This could possibly colour the nature of the Choice Advice she gave some parents.

In relation to appeals, parents going through this process stressed even more strongly the fundamental importance of receiving advice that was impartial and trustworthy. Yet, as some of the quotes from parents and AO/CAs signify, in the midst of this difficult, stressful situation, parents are clearly aware of the lack of genuine independence in some Admissions-based services - even though some staff seem reluctant to acknowledge these potential (and actual) conflicts of interest. This finding could potentially threaten to undermine one of the fundamental elements of the initiative specifically designed to engender parents' confidence and trust in the service.

Schools were not always in a position to help parents either, which left some appellants feeling let down and abandoned by a system they were now fighting alone, without access to free, independent, reliable support when they most needed it.

From the evidence here, there are clear differences between parents' experience and outcomes related to the appeals process – depending on whether or not they received independent support from a Choice Advice they trusted. This was particularly the case for less confident, vulnerable parents who would be most disadvantaged in taking forward their appeal without support. Indeed, some parents stated that they would not contemplate the extremely risky, highly stressful 'courtroom-style' hearing, with an intimidating panel in judgement, without substantial support throughout the process. Without support, some parents commented that they would probably feel forced to accept a place they were unhappy with.

10 Success, impacts and effectiveness

Key points

- **There were few formal indicators of impact, and measurable success was mainly stated in terms of admissions processes. Issues surrounded the interpretation of statistics on the impact of the service, which was seen as a challenge for Choice Advisers trying to demonstrate their impact.**
- **An important - but difficult to evidence - impact of the service was gained through Choice Advisers' highlighting of benefits of lower preference schools, and encouraging parents away from 'all or nothing' thinking about their first choice school.**
- **Involvement with CAS&QAN was seen as both helpful in enabling success and in supporting Choice Advisers to develop the quality of their service. This was especially the case for lone-worker staff.**
- **Organisations with established links to Admissions teams generally faced less initial resistance from them in setting up the service. In a small number of cases Admissions Officers felt there was a limited need for the initiative in their LA.**
- **Although many of the parents who received Choice Advice found the admissions process stressful and confusing, they were generally very satisfied with the service they received.**
- **PP-based models tended to be most successful in reaching the greatest number of parents overall, as well as the largest numbers and proportion of parents from target groups.**

In the absence of any mandatory data collection or external targets set by DCSF, most Choice Advice services did not have in place any formal indicators of success or internal outcome measures. In this section we will evaluate the performance and effectiveness of the Choice Advice services by assessing the following sources of evidence:

- CA/CAMs' own appraisal of their success and impact – from staff interviews;
- Parents' satisfaction with the process – from parent interviews;
- Numbers of parents advised – using parent background (tracker) data;
- Support for vulnerable/disadvantaged parents – from parent background (tracker) data; and
- Other beneficial outcomes as a result of Choice Advice (all sources).

10.1 Choice Adviser and managers' appraisals of success and impact

Interviews with Choice Advice staff in winter 2007 (after the main application period and before allocation) suggested that most advisers and managers had only a general sense of how they might measure the success or performance of their service.

This was partly because given the variety of LA contexts, there are currently no sets of 'Choice Advice standards' or target guidelines. Some Choice Advisers found it difficult to define their local goals, expectations and priorities in terms of the scale of the service:

'...it's hard to know how many parents you're supposed to talk to about the [admissions] process as there's no precedent. Even going through other authorities there's people dealing with 10,000 people going through the process and others dealing with 600, so it's hard to know how many you're supposed to get to. My basic theory was that anybody who asked for advice would get it in whatever format they needed, but obviously prioritising those cases that were hard-to-reach'

(CA, PP-based)

This confirms the difficulties raised by staff in measuring success, as outlined in the pilot evaluation (Shipton and Stiell et al, 2008), where it was suggested that clearer guidance on how to assess success and impact was needed.

Measurable success was mainly viewed in terms of the admissions process, citing possible:

- increases in the number of returned Common Application Forms (either before or after the deadline);
- increased numbers of children allocated a secondary place in March;
- increases in the first and second preference allocations;
- reduction in the number of parents not expressing a preference;
- reduced numbers of parents not allocated any of their preferences; and
- reduced numbers of appeals.

Only a few specifically mentioned success in terms of Choice Advice outcomes. These included increasing the number of parents given advice and support to make better informed choices. For example, one Choice Adviser working alone in a PP-based service reported dealing with 400-450 parents in the autumn, mainly at open evenings and over the phone (increased to 700 if multiple contacts were counted). This Choice Adviser also ensured 90% of the outstanding 120 application forms were completed in six weeks whilst providing additional intensive support (which was the main activity recorded in the parent background (tracker)). This Choice Adviser's hard working commitment was also corroborated by interviews with parents, Admission Officers and headteachers.

At the time of the interviews, some services were in the process of gathering feedback from parents who received advice and were conducting their own internal assessment which they intended to use to inform the future development of the service.

Many already had examples of the services' impact:

'I think the impact [of the Choice Advice service] is enormous. The day after the allocations have gone out we are staggered by how few phone calls we [now] get, because we have already done the work, sorting things out; there shouldn't be shocks and surprises, and there should already be contingency plans in place.'

(CA, Admissions-based)

'...we do get a sense that after parents have rung us they are glad they have had advice and clarity'

(CA, Voluntary-based)

'I think very targeted work, not trying to spread myself too thin, has helped. And personally I think I have been successful in reaching some of the parents where no other service has reached them'

(CA, PP-based)

'It's made an impact on the CAF [Common Application] forms, the returned forms, the clear up rate is very good, that has been our biggest success, getting people to make a choice'

(CA, PP-based)

10.1.1 Choice Advice staff concerns about data interpretation

- A number of managers and Choice Advice staff commented that interpreting the statistics on the impact of the service for 2007-08, compared to previous years, was likely to be problematic for a number of reasons:
- Many had just moved to the Equal Preference System for the first time and anticipated that the number of parents receiving their first preference was likely to decrease, even though more were likely to get one of their preferences.
- First preference measures are not the 'be all and end all'. Many parents know they only have an outside chance of getting their first preference and are pleased with their second or third, so preference success can be seen as relative for this group.
- A postal strike in October 2007 reduced the numbers of applications received on time in at least three LAs.
- Increasing numbers of parents applying on-line may improve applications received on time, even though Choice Advisers were not always directly assisting parents with this.
- Receiving more forms on time (a quantity measure) does not imply an increase in informed decision-making (a quality measure). Staff suggested that some forms were submitted early but without visits to schools. One Choice Adviser asked: 'are we trying to get parents to express more preferences or more realistic preferences?'
- The more intensively Choice Advisers work with target group parents, the fewer parents they are likely to reach overall.
- Encouraging disengaged/targeted parents to make alternative choices may raise their expectations but does not necessarily mean they will get their first preference or be more satisfied with the outcome.

Given these issues in relation to quantifiable, measurable success, Choice Advisers (and CAS&QAN in their interview) made it clear that demonstrating impact remains a challenge for Choice Advice services:

'I think it's very hard to show what the impact has been, even if you've worked with thousands of parents. Even if you'd spoken to every parent it would be hard to actually show what the impact has been'

(CA, PP-based)

'In a sense, here, the number crunching in and out - we're not going to see much difference in that, because our Admissions team is doing such a good job. But it's the case work that sits underneath that, so it's the quality aspect and that's why the stories the Choice Advisers can tell around families are what are going to provide an evaluation of their impacts'

(CA, Independent Consultant)

'I think it has to do with quality of information and support rather than number of preferences expressed... because historically we've had such a low level its not going to make a tremendous difference. But the difference...[will be whether] parents feel the quality of the information, advice and support that they have to inform those decisions is better than it was - but how we make that comparison is very difficult'

(CA, Independent Consultant)

Highlighting the benefits of other, lower preference order schools, and encouraging parents away from polarised or 'all or nothing' thinking about their first choice school is an important aspect of the advice and guidance-giving. But this can not always be captured easily as evidence of impact:

'[An unhappy parent] came in wanting an appeal, but by the end of the meeting she said 'okay right, let me go and see school X', she went and saw the school with her son, loved the school, and called up saying 'I'm not going for appeal'... That is what this [service] is about... once the explanation is given it just makes them feel a lot more engaged in the process and understand why it's happened'

(CA, PP-based)

10.1.2 Preference data analysis

To examine whether impact could be assessed quantitatively, preference data was collected by the research team for 2006 and 2007 and from DCSF in 2008, on the proportion of parents in the 15 case studies who gained their 1st or 2nd preference (combined), and the proportion who did not express a preference. However, differences between years in the way these data were collected at LA level meant that they were not directly comparable and therefore could not be used to examine the impact of Choice Advice.

10.1.3 Quality of service

Although services tended to emphasise the potentially quantifiable admission-related impacts, many also stressed the importance of ensuring the quality of the service to parents. Several cited their involvement with CAS&QAN as both enabling their success and supporting them to develop the quality of the service. Many Choice Advisers were working in relative isolation in a new role and found CAS&QAN an invaluable source of support and guidance – for example on targeting methods, or types and numbers of parents a Choice Adviser might be expected to advise.

Choice Advisers also had the opportunity to gain a Level 2 qualification awarded by ABC Awards³⁰. In order to gain the qualification, Choice Advisers have to demonstrate their competence in offering realistic, impartial, independent, quality advice; and develop an understanding of the relevant national policies and legislation relating to schools admissions³¹. Mixed views were expressed about the need and value of the Level 2 qualification, depending on the career experience and seniority of the Choice Adviser, echoing the findings of the pilot evaluation carried out a year previously (Shipton and Stiell et al 2008). For example, a number of highly experienced senior Choice Advisers felt it was insulting to them to suggest that their skills were accreditable at such a lowly level. Despite this response, other support, training, workshops and networking opportunities were generally thought to be helpful in enabling Choice Advisers to assess their progress relative to their peers, pick up new areas, and evaluate service direction and quality:

'I used the [CAS&QAN] website for Choice Advisers a lot when I first started because it was a new role, and I didn't really have anybody to approach here who'd done the job or knew where I should start, so I used to chat to the other Choice Advisers through the website'

(CA, Admissions-based)

'[CAS&QAN] have been fantastic, I think the meetings that we've had regularly are so useful, it's very good to meet with other Choice Advisers and see what common issues have come up and hear about the success stories as well'

(CA, PP-based)

Internal Quality Assurance measures were also cited as indicators of the quality of the Choice Advice service, e.g. Charter Marks, LA corporate QA measures in relation to equality etc, and charity QA standards. Other external measures of quality, such as one organisation's commendation by the Audit Commission for demonstrating good practice, were also mentioned.

³⁰ CENTRA Education and Training are currently an ABC centre for this award.

³¹ In April 2008, 115 CAs (47% of the 245 CAs CAS&QAN were aware of) had enrolled and registered on the course. Of these, 22 had completed the qualification, with the remainder still working on their portfolio and/or on-line test. A further 10 candidates were in the process of being registered with ABC Awards (CAS&QAN personal communication).communication, 2008).

10.1.4 Impact of Choice Advice on Admission teams

Across the model delivery types, a range of views were expressed by Admissions Officers, regarding the impact of the Choice Advice service on their workload and level of support offered to parents. These can be summarised as:

Positive impact from start (in 6 LAs)

This was a common response from Admissions Officers who were working most closely with Choice Advisers. This included services that were Admissions-based, but also some Parent Partnership based-services where links were complementary or pre-existing. These were characterised by mutually beneficial relationships, few difficult challenges and good information sharing (mostly from Admissions Officers to Choice Advisers, not both ways). The additional resources for the Choice Advice service meant Admissions Officers were relieved of some of the more time-consuming aspects of their work at peak times (e.g. chasing late or missing forms), which in turn meant that parents were better supported overall:

'The Choice Advice role has given the Admissions team a bit more time, [AOs] just give factual information on catchments, dates etc, but the Choice Adviser has the time to spend giving more details and more advice....I think she has made life a bit easier for them too'

(CAM, Admissions-based)

Positive, close links were still maintained even when the Choice Adviser in a PP played the role of critical friend to Admissions.

Initial problems but positive impact overall (in 4 LAs)

When Choice Advice was first introduced, some Admissions staff felt offended by what they perceived to be the suggestion that their prior support for parents was inadequate. In some areas this led to some initial resistance to what were seen as the new 'duplicating' roles of the Choice Advisers, and difficulties around role definitions and communication issues at the start. A few Admissions Officers reported their reluctance to advertise 'rival' Choice Advisers in their prospectus and there were 'cultural' barriers between different organisations. These issues were mostly ironed out with time, as good information sharing was established and Admissions Officers valued the additional support and capacity offered by the Choice Advisers:

'We were initially concerned about Choice Advisers stepping on Admissions toes, but soon realised that they add a lot, and support parents in a way Admissions couldn't. Choice Advisers were able to follow up problems and issues to the benefit of many parents. [It's] definitely helped us, we just didn't have the time to chase parents up before. It's much, much better for us'

(AO, Admissions-based)

'Initially, I'll be honest, I felt that I wasn't as welcome, maybe. I can understand [AOs'] point. [Giving advice] was part of their role and they were extremely good at [supporting parents] – I've heard [AO] on the phone, so I think it's quite difficult for them to re-direct parents to me, and they know it off the top of their heads....Slowly but surely it is working now, but initially not'

(CA, Admissions-based)

Mixed/differing views (3 LAs)

These included cases where the relationship was generally working well, but difficulties had arisen with the Choice Advisers accessing admissions information/data (Independent Consultants); or where it was felt that Choice Advisers had given Admissions some extra workload, despite now appreciating the complementary nature of their work:

'[The local Admissions team] are so understaffed and big mistakes are made. We had huge numbers of admissions forms disappear. Admissions claimed they hadn't got them, so initially it was very hard, but they asked if I would chase parents up. I constantly had questions for them, it was extra workload [for AOs answering Choice Advice queries], but I think they do see now that I complement their work'

(CA, PP-based)

In one Admission-based service, existing Admissions Officers had taken on the additional role of Choice Advisers which has increased their workload and responsibilities, led to extra late evenings, and raised some resentment, despite their acknowledgement of the extra support this gives parents.

One PP-based service felt the 'distance' from the Admissions team could be beneficially reduced:

'...it would work a lot better if you were based nearer Admissions, not necessarily employed or line-managed by them, but if you could sit with them it would be a big bonus because that way you'd feel a lot more comfortable about going to them and saying 'this is what I'm doing now, give me this, this, this and this...'

(CA, PP-based)

On-going problems/issues – neutral or negative impact (2 LAs)

In two LAs, Admissions Officers felt that the Choice Advice service was not having as positive an impact as it could have. Issues included: Choice Advisers duplicating Admissions Officer's activities by 'shadowing' on school visits; Choice Advisers referring choice and admissions queries back to Admissions; Choice Advisers not targeting schools as Admissions Officers suggested; and failure to establish planned drop-in sessions in either year – in spite of good interpersonal relations between the Admissions Officer and Choice Advice teams.

In two case studies, the Admissions Officers felt there was limited need for Choice Advice services. Both agreed that Admissions staff fulfilled the role adequately in the past:

'I don't feel the service has improved to be honest, it just means that my team who had that knowledge are no longer doing that role...what he does is fine, its just that the knowledge was in the team already and the function was being carried out, and that meant we could build up those relationships with schools with welfare and parents and that's stopped a little bit now because the Choice Adviser is doing that'

(AO, Independent Consultant)

'Workload has not gone down as [CAs] had additional trainees helping them and this has now gone, so in effect it has just made us as busy as we ever were.... the work hasn't decreased'

(AO, Independent Consultant)

10.2 Parents' satisfaction

As discussed in Section 8, many parents found aspects of the decision-making and admissions process stressful and confusing, but were generally highly satisfied with the advice they received and the final outcome (with some exceptions). Even where basic queries were answered or reassurances given, parents were appreciative of the difference that made to them, even if it did not impact their final allocation. Parents were particularly complimentary about the tireless dedication of Choice Advisers working 'beyond the call of duty'. Many of these comments related to Parent Partnership Choice Advisers.

10.3 Numbers of parents advised

From the parent background (tracker) data³² submitted by the Choice Advisers to the evaluation team, a total of 480 parents were recorded as receiving Choice Advice across the 15 services between 3rd September 2007 and 29th February 2008 inclusive³³. The numbers of parents recorded in that period ranged between 0 and 96 parents in each area; the mean number of parents recorded overall was 32 per LA (see Table 8 below).

³² As outlined earlier in the report, these figures discussed here for indicative purposes only, as not all LAs completed and submitted full datasets for every parent they advised. Some of these figures are likely to be an underestimate of the total work performed by CAs. This data is also not robust enough to allow for more detailed analysis.

³³ This did not include parents seen after March 2008 (post allocation, through to appeals and beyond) - an important period where support continued to be provided

Table 8: Numbers, range and mean number of parents recorded on parent background (tracker)

| Model type | No. of LAs | Total no. of parents | Range of parents recorded Sept 07 – Feb 08 | Mean no. of parents recorded for model type |
|-----------------------------|------------|----------------------|--|---|
| Admissions-based | 4 | 97 | 5 – 52 | 24 |
| Parent Partnerships* | 7 | 328 | 14 – 96 | 47 |
| Consultants | 2 | 54 | 7 – 47 | 27 |
| Voluntary* / Other | 2 | 1 | 0 – 1 | 0.5 |
| Totals | 15 | 480 | 480 | 32 |

**Includes services known to have been very active in supporting parents through appeals (not recorded here).*

Notwithstanding the limitations of this data, Table 8 suggests that of all the models, PPs were most successful in terms of reaching the greatest number of parents overall, whilst the voluntary sector/other models were least successful. This overall pattern, in terms of scale and reach of all the services, is supported by evidence gathered through staff, headteacher and parent interviews.

The particularly poor performances of the Voluntary and Other service (see Sections 5.4, 6.3 & 7.2) reflected significant weaknesses in each service's approach to targeting, marketing and delivery, as well as poorly utilised links with local schools, the Admissions team and other referral agencies. These problems arose despite both services being located in large urban LAs likely to lead to high levels of demand and/or (hitherto unmet) need. Other issues included inadequate or poor application of admissions knowledge and the evidence that these Choice Advisers offered little in addition to the support vulnerable parents were already receiving from (other) school staff. It is important to note that although these two services were not performing effectively, that does not mean that similar models already operating in England will encounter the same difficulties. Their problems were generic and could equally apply to other model types.

As discussed earlier - and as this Choice Adviser clearly perceived raw numbers by themselves are not an adequate indicator of effectiveness:

'...there is increasing emphasis on numbers, so when we met all together in London [Choice Advisers were saying] 'so and so has already done 17 parents evenings', but initially it was made very clear that we were supposed to be targeting the most vulnerable parents. I would still argue, how can they claim that those are vulnerable parents attending those events?...One of my home visits with an interpreter took four-and-a-half hours! I could have gone to a school, seen 50 parents and filled out 50 [tracker] forms - there is no recognition of that anywhere!'

(CA, PP-based)

10.4 Support for vulnerable/disadvantaged parents

Despite that Choice Adviser's scepticism, recognition of the more intensive work associated with targeting disadvantaged families can be assessed by the numbers in each area that the Choice Adviser recorded as being targeted for support. All services were free to decide and define which groups of parents would be targeted locally (see Table 9).

Again, compared to the other model types, PP-based services appear to reach their target groups in greater numbers. It is also worth noting that these figures do not simply reflect socio-economic differences between areas i.e. those targeting most (or least) were not necessarily in correspondingly deprived (or affluent) areas.

Table 9: Number of parents recorded as targeted for Choice Advice support

| Model type | No. of LAs | Total no. of parents | Number of targeted parents recorded, Sept 07 – Feb 08 (Range) | Mean no. (rounded) of targeted parents recorded for model type |
|---------------------|------------|----------------------|---|--|
| Admissions-based | 4 | 7 | 0 – 5 | 2 |
| Parent Partnerships | 7 | 275 | 12 – 90 | 39 |
| Consultants | 2 | 19 | 5 -14 | 9.5 |
| Voluntary / Other | 2 | 0 | 0 -1 | 0 |
| Totals | 15 | 301 | 301 | 20 |

Missing data for 179 parents not included.

The numbers of parents advised whose children were entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) though partial, further confirms the emerging pattern of PP-based services' success at reaching more vulnerable families (see Table 10).

Table 10: Number of advised parents with children recorded as being entitled to FSM

| Model type | No. of LAs | No. of FSM parents recorded Sept 07 – Feb 08 (Range) | Mean no. of FSM parents recorded for model type |
|----------------------------|-------------------|---|--|
| Admissions-based | 4 | 2 – 4 | 3 |
| Parent Partnerships | 7 | 4 – 29 | 13 |
| Consultants | 2 | 2* | 2* |
| Voluntary / Other | 2 | 0 – 1 | 0.5 |
| Totals | 15 | 82 | 6 |

* No data available for one of these LAs. Missing data for 231 parents not included.

10.5 Other beneficial outcomes as a result of Choice Advice

- In addition to improving parents' experience of the admissions process and satisfaction with the outcome (as discussed earlier), the evidence also suggests a number of other positive outcomes as a result of the service. Choice Advisers have:
- influenced and changed local practice and brought about improvements to the way schools and LAs deal with secondary admissions (e.g. an Admissions-based Choice Adviser was able to feed back information on parents' poor experience at an open evening to the LA's school improvement team);
- challenged and corrected erroneous information or actions taken by schools relating to the new Admissions Code;
- acted as a critical friend to Admission teams; encouraging improvements in their practice;
- helped to join up and enhance local support services; facilitated interagency working and improved the local community support networks for parents and children;
- positively supported vulnerable parents and children; re-engaged parents and children with education; facilitated the re-integration of excluded children to school;
- successfully signposted parents to other support services;
- provided key post-allocation advice on appeals procedures;
- presented 'the friendly face' of Admissions/LA to distrustful parents;
- reduced the burdens on primary school staff and Admissions teams; and
- supported the wider transition aims and work of the LA.

10.6 Future of the Choice Advice Service

At the time of the CA/AO staff interviews, most services described themselves as still evolving, in that they were making improvements and refinements as the service developed. A number of Choice Advisers and their managers were waiting to, or in the process of, reviewing their year.

There was an overall awareness that new services take time to establish and raise their profile locally. The process of targeting through developing referral links was seen as a gradual and on-going process, so many planned to build closer relationships in forthcoming years. Some had started, or were in the process of extending the service to include primary school admissions where this was a recognised need. Others were still developing tentative plans to support parents through the appeals process, whilst this role was already known to be central for others.

Much of the uncertainty about staffing contracts (many were on temporary, secondment, or consultant contracts) and tentative approaches to establishing referral links, related to uncertainty about future funding allocations. Many of the Choice Advice staff interviews were conducted before the November 2007 announcement about Choice Advice funding being combined with ABG funding and no longer being ring-fenced. Staff were therefore asked about their possible plans in the events of the funding stopping or no longer being ring-fenced. Most saw the need to continue Choice Advice support in their areas, so would try to incorporate aspects of these roles into AO work if necessary. A few foresaw there being more urgent priorities for funding if the resources were not ring-fenced.

11 Conclusions

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.

The evaluation case studies enabled us to comment on the nature of five different model types. Although the LAs varied in terms of their socio-economic and admissions contexts, a number of commonalities and differences emerged.

The findings on the processes used, their effectiveness and impact are indicative of some of the issues that may be arising in other parts of England, but are not intended to be generalisable to all model types or LAs. Although data from a 10% sample of LAs was analysed using a range of qualitative and quantitative sources, some model types such as Children and Family Information Services (which have begun to increase in number) and ‘internally-based’ in the LA, were not included³⁴. Therefore the nature or impact of these other services or models can not be directly assessed or commented on.

Given the limitations of some of the data submitted to the evaluation team, the qualitative interviews with Choice Advice staff, Admissions Officers, headteachers and parents formed an important element of the analysis. They also enabled us to substantiate and more confidently elucidate some of the emergent trends from the numerical data.

Overall, the evidence does raise a number of general issues that may be of wider relevance. Primarily, this research suggests that Choice Advice services were positively regarded by the parents who used them and had a beneficial impact on the vulnerable parents that were successfully targeted and supported through the initiative. Parents seemed to have been most satisfied where the levels of support were highest. This was particularly associated with many of the PP-based services.

The research also highlighted areas of low take-up of Choice Advice which were associated with either low need or low demand (e.g. in rural areas where travel distances mean most parents have few realistic choices and are satisfied with the local, undersubscribed secondary school) or services that were not operating effectively.

³⁴ See Appendix Table A1 for more recent CAS&QAN model descriptions.

The ultimate questions to answer in an evaluation of this type are: what works, for whom, where and why? It is to these questions that we next turn our attention, by considering each model in turn.

11.1 Admissions-based services

Admissions-based services staffed by dual role AOs/CAs tended to mainly serve the needs of the 'worried but well-informed' in areas with complex admissions arrangements. These self-referring parents were often stressed by the decisions and choices they had to make and sought reassurance, clarification and relatively basic, factual information on the system, process and individual schools. These services tended to be highly demand-driven and AO/CAs were often able to resolve most queries relatively swiftly. The Choice Advice funding enabled established Admissions Officers to attend more open/parents evenings and provide additional drop-in sessions for anxious parents. Major elements of the service provision were similar to that offered to parents before the introduction of Choice Advice.

Here, targeting was mainly focused on chasing late/incorrect applications, whilst good links with primary schools (where these existed) were their main referral routes. Relatively few targeted parents from disadvantaged groups were supported by these services. Issues arose around the independence of the service, as AO/CAs roles were often inter-changeable. Parents generally felt that the information they received was helpful and reassuring but had a very minimal impact (with some exceptions) on their decision making, or the final outcome.

The recruitment of outreach staff with community-focused skills enabled two Admissions-based Choice Advisers to operate a little more separately and independently, compared to their AO/CA counterparts. However, like their dual AO/CA colleagues, their independence was somewhat compromised by the line management arrangements that linked them closely to Admissions. Despite this, the close links to the Admissions teams were reported as beneficial in helping Choice Advisers initially establish their role, identify priorities and gain important admissions knowledge. Outreach Choice Advisers tended to have a more developed approach to proactively targeting disadvantaged parents compared to their AO/CA peers. However, compared to PP-based services that were also outreach-driven, fewer target group parents seem to have been reached by outreach Admissions Choice Advisers. Most parents were satisfied with the quality of the service they received from Admissions-based services in general. Nevertheless a few issues seemed to arise in relation to SEN advice (which related to their limited knowledge) and support for appeals (which was severely compromised by their lack of independence and potential for conflicts of interest). Overall, Admissions-based services had closer access to admissions knowledge, but this seemed to be at the expense of their independence and for some, their ability to develop effective links beyond their existing contacts.

11.2 Parent Partnership-based services

Of all the model types, PP-based services seemed to have advised the highest volume of parents and pro-actively reached more target group parents – often also delivering more intensive levels of support, which included home visits and accompanying parents on school visits. The quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that this resulted in more satisfied parents than other model types that were looked at. PP-based services tended to strike a good balance between having good access to admission knowledge (through their close working with Admissions Officers) and independence – which was particularly evident in relation to their support of parents with children with SEN, and through appeals. In some cases, the persistent, highly committed working ethos of some of these Choice Advisers often meant they were over-stretched and understaffed when workload pressures were high. The quality and quantity of their advice was confirmed by the views of local parents, headteachers and Admissions Officers, and was also reflected in the data on the numbers and types of parents they advised. Moreover, a number of these Choice Advisers worked alone or with a minimal support team. Some were described as regularly working ‘beyond the call of duty’ in high demand/high need areas. Though this is highly laudable, the funding levels and staffing arrangements were not always appropriate given the local demands and workload. This calls into question whether this approach would be replicable or sustainable in the long-term without further addressing the available funding and resource needs.

However, differences between some PP-based services were evident. Not all had strong links with the local Admissions teams for referrals, nor pro-actively developed their contacts and networks beyond their existing client group. These differences were evident from their parent background data and from the types of issues the interviewed parents and headteachers discussed with the Choice Adviser. As well as being independent of the LA, PP-based Choice Advice services also need to establish a separate identity from the SEN-focused part of the organisation, so that all Year 6 parents and other agencies are aware of the wider remit of the Choice Advice service.

11.3 Independent Consultants

The employment of Independent Consultants who were able to work part-time and flexibly, was one solution to providing Choice Advice in two LAs where demand was considered to be relatively low. The Consultants often had other roles within the LA that brought them (opportunistically) into contact with disadvantaged Year 6 parents who may have needed additional support with their applications. Targeting mainly involved following up Admissions Officer 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 thought to be low and harder to identify, few 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 also indicated some pockets of unmet need. Where their specific admissions knowledge was weaker, consultant Choice Advisers referred enquirers directly to Admissions Officers, so these Choice Advisers were seldom referred complex cases. In one large LA, just one small area was identified as needing significant Choice Advice input. Although the Consultants were senior and had more independence, 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.

11.4 Voluntary and other in-school support Choice Advice services

In both case study areas using these models, the individual services had a number of specific challenges and difficulties that limited their ability to provide an effective service. In one case, the independence and distance from the LA and Admissions team was associated with poorer access to admissions information and knowledge. Some of the Choice Advisers had other substantive roles that meant that their admissions knowledge was not as well developed as other full-time Choice Advisers who worked closely with Admissions Officers. There was limited evidence of the wider promotion of the service, and links beyond their existing client group were poorly developed. In both cases their approaches to targeting were either ill-conceived or not effectively executed. 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.

Although neither of these services proved to be effective here, 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. Similarly, it does not follow that the patterns of delivery and impact observed across the other models examined in this study will necessarily be found in other areas. The individual contexts, staffing and 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.

11.5 Final thoughts

This evaluation builds on the earlier findings from the pilot study (Shipton and Stiell et al, 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, but as time has progressed, a number of initial issues regarding the setting up of the service have been resolved. The early 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 have been better able to develop their targeting strategies and work more intensively to support disadvantaged parents.

A very common view expressed by Choice Advisers both in the current and pilot evaluations was that the name 'Choice Advice' was misleading to parents and raised their expectations of gaining the school of their choice. Many preferred to use the term 'express a preference' instead but were clear that neither the initiative (whatever its name) nor the advice and support they give can change or compensate for the other factors that determine or restrict parental choice. Although the initiative as a whole has been successful in helping parents with a range of needs, 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. Support for more complex issues, particularly SEN and appeals are particularly important benchmarks for determining the quality of services when needs are greatest. This aspect of support was one of the main, most tangible impacts of Choice Advice in terms of 'levelling the playing field' for disadvantaged or vulnerable parents.

The ultimate intention of the Choice Advice initiative is to ensure that children are not disadvantaged because their parents have difficulty accessing the information they need to make choices about which schools to apply for or do not engage with the application process. The evidence here suggests that the choice-making behaviour of some disadvantaged parents *had changed* as a result of them receiving appropriate support: for example, a reticent parent applying – and being allocated – a place at a 'long-shot' oversubscribed school; parents visiting schools; changing their views of schools with a 'bad reputation' after being shown accurate literature and data; pursuing (or not) an appeal. Many 'less engaged' or disadvantaged parents who received Choice Advice did not change the criteria for their decision-making: most still opted for their local secondary school (unless they had a very specific reason for avoiding it, e.g. bullying); many remained focused on their child's social and emotional happiness and ease of access and were less motivated by academic or other school differences; and a large number tended not to visit the schools, despite encouragement from the Choice Adviser. Regardless of whether their decision-making had been changed or not, the overwhelming majority of parents felt the service had been very helpful and beneficial to them at this often difficult point in their children's education.

This evaluation has shown that local freedom to interpret the guidance differently has resulted in a range of outcomes for different groups of parents. Services that mainly provided Choice Advice as an additional source of 'information' without strictly controlling access through targeting, tended to mostly serve self-referring parents wanting reassurance that they have, and understand, all the available information in their quest to leave no stone unturned. Services that have a targeted focus have found that many disadvantaged parents want and need more than just information – they often need *intensive support* to address a much wider range of concerns in relation to the admissions process. Moreover, some 'disengaged' parents can be bewildered and turned off by more 'information overload', and can have understandable and rational reasons for not engaging in a process that can feel overly-bureaucratic, especially if the Choice Advice service they receive is information heavy.

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.

The recent move to non-ring fenced Area Based Grant (ABG) funding, means that LAs have more freedom to prioritise the funding and resourcing of the service in line with local needs. This report, the set of specific recommendations and ideal model 'best practice' examples which follow should help LAs make more effective use of this funding to increase this impact still further.

12 Recommendations and areas to consider

This evaluation has identified a range of good practice (see also Section 13) that can result in Choice Advice making a positive difference to disadvantaged families. Therefore, the **overall recommendation** is that DCSF should consider issuing guidance to local authorities that focuses on developing more effective services which operate independently and at arms-length from the LA/Admissions team; proactively targets schools, local referral routes and parents that are hard-to-reach; develop excellent partnership working with the local Admissions service; and employs staff committed to personalised outreach support.

For each organisational context, a number of detailed recommendations and areas for consideration are presented (with references to the evidence base).

Admissions-based services

The **primary recommendation** is that LAs operating an Admissions-based service are advised to critically appraise and address their approach to independence - particularly in terms of line management arrangements and the provision of intensive support to parents preparing for appeals. LAs should be advised to explore shifting the service to an appropriate arms-length organisation that is in a position to work independently and pro-actively with disadvantaged parents, whilst also working in partnership with Admissions.

Specific recommendations - DCSF should issue guidance in the following areas to LAs and Choice Advisers:

- 1) DCSF should advise LAs to address Choice Advice line management issues to ensure they have the ability to operate independently and thereby help to engender parents' trust. Independence should be genuine, not just an 'impression' that is given to parents (Sections 3.1; 8.3; 8.4; 9.2).
- 2) Where dual AO/CAs currently run the service, LAs should consider separating the roles and responsibilities. Admissions Officers can continue to provide basic admissions information and 'police' schools where necessary.
- 3) New outreach Choice Advisers should be recruited - preferably to work in the arms-length organisation. The emphasis should be on Choice Advisers with proactive outreach skills and parent-centred support experience, to strengthen links at 'grass roots level' with schools, community organisations, other LA teams and parents. They should not be directly or indirectly managed by the Admissions manager or by a more senior manager with responsibility for Admissions (Sections 3.1; 4.2; 5.1; 5.4; 9.2; 11).
- 4) LAs should critically appraise and address the potential conflicts of interest where AOs also offer Choice Advice, particularly in relation to support for appeals. Parents (particularly those with limited or negative experiences of the educational system, or lacking in confidence) need more than just basic information. They also require considerable support in the preparation and presentation of their case during the appeals process, without infringing the School Admissions Appeal Code (Sections 3.1; 9.2).

- 5) Where outreach Choice Advisers work closely with Admissions teams, ensure there is adequate and appropriate senior support and supervision (away from Admissions management or control) to avoid outreach staff working in relative isolation without senior backing (Section 3.1).
- 6) In high demand areas, universal promotion and advertising of the service should be limited in favour of more tailored marketing to specific, more disadvantaged target groups. Choice Advisers should consider ways of steering self-referring parents to other sources of information and support (including Admissions Officers), wherever possible (Sections 5.1; 6.1; 6.2; 8.2).
- 7) Links with primary schools are critical, particularly in LAs with fewer community schools. More persistent and innovative methods are needed to raise the profile and awareness of the Choice Advice service in areas where there are high levels of need and low take up of services (Section 5.4; 6.2).

SEN and appeals

The **second key area of recommendations** relate to the provision of information, advice and support for more complex admissions issues - in particular, around SEN and appeals. These are issues commonly experienced by families in vulnerable situations who require more specialised and intensive support (Section 9).

Specific recommendations - DCSF should issue guidance in the following areas to LAs and Choice Advisers:

SEN

- 8) Choice Advisers should be alert to the possibility that some parents' queries could have other underlying SEN or other related inclusion dimension for which they may require more intensive support. SEN concerns should not skew the focus of the service, but should be an issue that Advisers have the skills and knowledge to support appropriately.
- 9) LAs should be advised to review Choice Advisers' knowledge and support for parents around SEN, particularly for advisers who do not have strong links with the local PPS. Given the prevalence of SEN and other related, complex issues that affect parents' decisions about choosing secondary schools, Choice Advisers should not simply rely on referring on such parents to their PPS for admissions issues.
- 10) All Choice Advisers should develop strong collaborative links with their PPS, school SENCOs and Inclusion teams and develop their training on these issues to build their knowledge and referral routes.
- 11) Particular consideration should be given to the accessibility and quality of the information and advice offered to parents of children with SEN – specifically around admissions issues and in relation to those without statements. Where gaps in information are identified (e.g. on specific SEN provision in local mainstream secondary schools), additional research should be undertaken on parents' behalf.

- 12) Access to information on admissions to secondary school for parents of children with SEN concerns seems to be patchy and requires further investigation. This could be an issue for PPS to consider at a national level.

Appeals

- 13) Written information and basic advice on the appeals process is insufficient for a lot of parents facing this daunting prospect – particularly for parents who lack confidence and those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. To be equitable, intensive 1:1 support is required in all LAs, not just those that have Choice Advisers willing to help parents prepare and present their case. Independence from the LA/Admissions and impartiality is crucial in order that parents have trust in the support and so that CA/AO conflicts of interest are avoided.
- 14) DCSF should consider issuing clearer guidance to Choice Advisers on their role in supporting parents through appeals. Currently, the guidance states that Advisers 'may wish to support parents in preparing for their appeal' (DCSF, 2008b:23), which allows some Choice Advisers to withdraw all support at the point when parents are in most need of intensive guidance.
- 15) Equitable support for parents going through appeals appears to be an important issue that will require further research to examine the nature and extent of these local differences.

Arms-length services (in general)

Areas in which DCSF could consider issuing guidance to LAs and Choice Advisers:

- 16) Arms-length Choice Advisers should ensure they have strong links with the local Admissions team. This could include setting joint delivery targets and negotiating a service development plan so that roles and responsibilities are clearly set out. Progress should be reviewed and monitored regularly (Sections 10.1; 13).
- 17) Choice Advisers from arms-length organisations should consider spending some of their induction period based in the Admissions team, to enable them to gain the necessary local admissions knowledge and establish good working links with Admissions staff before returning to their independent posts (Sections 6.2; 10.1; 13).
- 18) Services should consider using some of the Choice Advice funding to cover a part-time Admissions Officer to act as a link-worker on an on-going basis, to directly support the Choice Advice service (Sections 6.2; 10.1; 13).
- 19) Organisations should consider extending their Choice Advice service well beyond their existing client groups and contacts, by identifying new referrals routes and establishing strong links with schools (Sections 6.1; 6.2; 7.2; 10.1; 11).

- 20) Where the Choice Advice service is located within, or part of another organisation with an established client group or function, consider re-branding and promoting the Choice Advice service as being distinct and separate from the parent organisation. This would raise the profile and appropriateness of the Choice Advice service to a much wider range of parents and agencies (e.g. not just parents with SEN concerns in the case of PP) (Sections 3.2; 6.2; 11;13).
- 21) Ensure that the service is resourced and staffed at a level to match local needs and demands. Avoid committed staff being overworked during busy periods (e.g. offer time-in-lieu, overtime payments or temporary changes to part time contracts) (Sections 4.1; 8.5; 11).

Consultants

Areas in which DSCF could consider issuing guidance to LAs and Choice Advisers:

- 22) Particularly in areas deemed to be low demand/low need, LAs should consider the appropriateness (and cost-effectiveness) of using Consultants with several other roles to support hard-to-reach parents, especially where they occur in isolated pockets (Sections 3.3; 4.1; 5.3; 6.2).
- 23) Advisers should have strong proactive outreach skills and be committed to providing intensive support where necessary.
- 24) Consultants should all ensure that the service is promoted and targeted appropriately, including by developing stronger links with Admissions, and local schools and agencies that may have more contact with target group families (Section 6.2; 10.1).
- 25) A more targeted approach to uncovering (potentially) unmet need should be adopted in areas of low demand/need. Blanket coverage of Consultants in all areas, regardless of local need and an over-reliance on opportunistic Choice Advice should be avoided (Sections 3.3; 5.3; 6.3; 11).
- 26) Consultants should be encouraged to explore resources on the CAS&QAN website and attend network events to remain well informed and focused on that aspect of their job – even though Level 2/3 qualifications may hold little appeal (Section 10.1).

Voluntary sector/other support services

Areas in which DSCF could consider issuing guidance to LAs and Choice Advisers:

- 27) Although the Voluntary-based service in this sample did not operate effectively (Sections 3.4; 5.4; 7.2; 10.3), this does not mean that this model is unviable. Providing the core principals of independence, strong links, pro-active targeting and appropriate staffing are followed, voluntary sector organisations could operate as an effective arms-length service (Section 11).

- 28) Given the different organisational cultures and distance from the LA and Admissions team, it is especially important that voluntary organisations and Admissions foster good working links, which are critical for referrals. Choice Advisers should be supported in developing an excellent admissions knowledge base so that they can advise parents effectively (Sections 3.4; 6.3; 8.3; 10.1iv; 10.3; 11).
- 29) CAS&QAN information and networks should be accessed, to keep Choice Advisers up-to-date and connected to other Choice Advisers (Section 3.4).
- 30) Advertising, promotion and targeting should be a carefully considered priority, especially for organisations that also offer other services (Sections 5.4; 6.3; 10.1).
- 31) School-based Choice Advisers should only be considered where there are known to be specific and pressing needs in that school/area around Choice Advice (and not just higher levels of disadvantage in general). Ideally, the Choice Adviser should have enough resource/time dedicated to the role to enable them to have a flexible 'roving brief' beyond the school, so that they can respond to Choice Advice needs wherever it may arise (Sections 3.5; 5.3; 7.2; 11).
- 32) Great care should be taken in identifying the most appropriate person/role in schools to be tasked with Choice Advice (Sections 7.2).

General areas in which DSCF could consider issuing guidance to LAs and Choice Advisers:

- 33) Services should be permitted to use alternative names to 'Choice Advice', which is generally disliked by a large number Choice Advisers and some parents (Sections 8.4; 8.5; Shipton and Stiell, et al, 2008).
- 34) At LA level, there should be a greater emphasis on joining up the plethora of similar initiatives – e.g. Transition support, parent support advisers, community liaison officers, mentors etc, all of whom are performing complementary and sometimes overlapping roles and functions (Sections 6.2; 6.4; 7.2).
- 35) Particularly in areas of high demand or high need, funding should be sufficient to staff the service adequately and flexibly all year round. Additional experienced staff should be brought in to help run the service in peak periods (Sections 4.1; 8.5; 11).
- 36) Choice Advisers (and Admissions) should be encouraged to start the secondary admissions process in Year 5 so that parents have more time to visit schools in advance and consider their options (Sections 4.1; 11).
- 37) Choice Advice services should be encouraged to engage in more critical self-evaluation – seeking feedback from parents, schools, organisations, Admissions staff etc, to inform the development of the service (Sections 10.1; 11).
- 38) In some areas where fewer target group parents visit preference schools, primary schools are well placed to promote and encourage this (supported by the Choice Adviser) (Sections 8.2; 10.1).

DCSF could discuss the following issues with CAS&QAN:

- 39) Consider developing a set of 'minimum Choice Advice standards' which would require each service to develop their own service development plan, set local objectives and targets, and collect and submit data to CAS&QAN for on-going monitoring and analysis. Genuine independent working and support for more complex issues (including SEN and appeals) should also form part of this standard. Examples of minimum to best practice should be included to support Choice Advisers progress towards their goals (Section 10).
- 40) Levels of funding did not always appear to match local levels of demand and need. Therefore the move to the non-ring-fenced ABG funding would enable LAs to assess the extent to which the Choice Advice service is a local priority. The funding formula should be re-evaluated to take account of geography and admissions context (Sections 10.6).
- 41) CAS&QAN could consider further developing their resources and networking opportunities for Choice Advisers in specific contexts such as LAs in rural areas, selective schools, faith schools etc (Section 10).
- 42) CAS&QAN could consider ways of attracting and engaging more 'senior' Choice Advisers with previous professional experience at a high level (e.g. events/resources focused on Choice Advice strategy development or service management). A range of alternative opportunities may be needed to support the skills and knowledge development of some Advisers who are currently turned off from studying for Level 2/3 qualifications (Section 10.1).
- 43) DCSF/CAS&QAN should continue to actively monitor line management arrangements in Admissions-based services and take steps to address cases where problems arise (Sections 3.1; 8.3; 8.4; 9.2).
- 44) CAS&QAN could consider clarifying the definitions of model types used in their information gathering from LAs. A number of services in our sample did not match the classifications given in CAS&QAN's information supplied to them by LAs (Appendix Table A1).

13 Ideal Choice Advice model

The following are examples of what an idealised Choice Advice model would look like, drawn from the interview data, to illustrate the ways in which Choice Advisers can work effectively at delivering a good service to local parents. These are 'best case scenarios' and are pieced together from more than one service to illustrate the general principles.

Service independence, links with Admissions and arms-length organisation

- Arms-length organisations that have excellent links with their local Admissions Officers are ideally placed to provide a Choice Advice service that balances the need for a high quality advice and guidance service with the requirement for genuine independence, particularly in terms of help around appeals.
- The arms-length Choice Advice service, branding, and premises are distinctly different from that of the LA and Admissions staff, to mark them out as separate and independent.
- Fostering good relations with Admissions teams is central to ensuring local knowledge on admissions issues, schools, guidelines and codes are up-to-date and understood. Where necessary, new practices are consulted on or developed collaboratively, e.g. promotional materials and targeting strategies.
- Mutual information sharing is enabled through regular meetings and informal contact. Arms-length Choice Advisers pass on relevant information from CAS&QAN and local Choice Advice service issues to Admissions staff. Admissions Officers update Choice Advisers on specific admissions-related matters. All admissions information, files, databases and updates are fully accessible to the Choice Adviser, but the Choice Advisers ensure individual parents' information remains confidential.
- Admissions Officers are a crucial referral route to Choice Advisers – passing on enquirers whenever parents need more intensive advice, guidance and support.
- A proportion of an Admissions Officer's time is paid through Choice Advice funding to provide dedicated support to the CAs. In addition, part of the Choice Advisers induction is spent with the Admissions team, gaining detailed knowledge, developing relationships and complementary working practices. Training events for Choice Advisers and Admissions Officers are co-ordinated and run jointly. Service development plans are jointly negotiated with appropriate targets and delivery objectives.
- The Choice Advisers' distance from Admissions, the LA, and schools enables them to act as their critical friends, bringing new perspectives to existing and evolving practices.
- Choice Advisers communicate to parents the genuine independence of the service from Admissions through all aspects of their approach (and not just by 'giving the impression' of being independent).

- In addition to being independent from Admissions/LA, the Choice Advice service is separately and uniquely branded, to differentiate it from the arms length organisation. Parents, schools and other agencies see the Choice Advice service as having a clearly defined function and image – a service applicable to all parents with Choice Advice needs. Choice Advisers do not have an over-reliance on the existing expertise and networks of the arms length organisation, but establish their own external links, contacts and referral routes. The Choice Advisers' roles, responsibilities and function in the arms length organisation are distinct and separately defined from the rest of the organisation.

Choice Adviser skills and staffing arrangements

- The background skills, experience and qualifications of the Choice Advisers follow DCSF guidance/job description. Staff have expertise in reaching and supporting vulnerable families, and have excellent interpersonal, organisational and self-management skills. Choice Advisers are highly motivated and committed to working both in teams and unsupervised/self-directed. Grade and pay levels are commensurate with levels of responsibilities. The Choice Advice teams' backgrounds are reflective of the targeted communities they serve (e.g. ethnic groups and languages spoken).
- Choice Advisers utilise a range of approaches that are appropriate to the needs of the parents they come into contact with, recognising that information-seeking self referrers typically need to be passed on to other services in a professional manner, whilst other groups may require intensive personal contacts to engender trust.
- Flexible teams of Choice Advisers (and a CAM) are employed with contracts that can accommodate the shifting cycle of Choice Advice priorities. Year-round cover is provided to continue the work of establishing referral routes and contacts in the quieter admissions periods. Staffing levels are matched to workload, with additional experienced staff available to cover the busier autumn application and spring allocations/appeals periods. In particular, extra staffing are brought in to cover Choice Adviser attendance at open evenings – many of which may clash.
- Choice Advisers are highly committed and outreach-focused and develop a 'persistent' working style - making extensive, repeated contacts where necessary and highlight the mutual benefits of 'joined up'/inter-agency working with referral agencies and schools. Choice Advisers demonstrate a sensitive, flexible approach to their work with parents, schools and agencies.

Identifying needs and demands

- Choice Advisers undertake to keep accurate records (e.g. on the Activity Tracker), and collect and analyse monitoring, evaluation and feedback data. Local intelligence is gathered from relevant agencies and schools to enable the Choice Advice team to regularly assess the needs and demands of different groups of parents supported by the service.
- Choice Advice teams are aware of who, how many, when and why parents had contact with the service, and set targets and priorities accordingly.
- Choice Advisers explore where there may be more hidden, unmet need - looking for patterns in late missing/forms and appeals records, to assess where new efforts should be targeted earlier in the admissions cycle. This could be a role for the Admissions Officer who is given time to work with Choice Advisers.
- Regular contact with primary schools and other key referral routes is maintained on an informal basis so that changing needs demands and issues are captured early. These contacts then remain aware of the service.

Targeting and referrals

- A proactive targeting strategy with clear priorities and targets is developed using all available information on local needs, identifying specific hard-to-reach groups, schools, areas or issues. All possible avenues for accessing them through existing services and support already in place are fully explored.
- Relationship building with local contacts, schools, other relevant LA teams, voluntary and community organisations is the prime focus of developing referral routes.
- Choice Advice services' approach to advertising and promotion is developed after the targeting strategy is agreed. Informal and 'word of mouth' community dissemination routes are identified.
- In addition to any of the usual forms of promotion, innovative methods of advertising and marketing are considered to ensure the target groups are reached (e.g. free pens and fridge magnets with Choice Adviser contact details, stalls at community events, supermarkets/shopping centres). Posters and leaflets etc, in community languages are appropriately distributed.
- Choice Advisers attend only key open evenings/school meetings, whilst acknowledging that alternative strategies are needed as the most vulnerable families are less likely to attend such events.
- Choice Advisers are mindful to not just 'cherry-pick' the target groups that are within easy reach. They review and adapt their targeting strategy to suit changing needs.

Working with schools

- Relationships are built with key staff in schools (e.g. Transition Coordinators/Mentors, Learning Mentors, Parent/Community Liaison workers, SENCOs, Inclusions Officers, the school secretary etc), as well as the headteacher.
- Choice Advisers negotiate data release with schools or the LA, so that the Choice Adviser can make direct contact with the parents to offer support, where necessary.
- Choice Advisers offer to run information sessions in schools at various points in the year, including initiating contact with pupils, parents and school staff for Year 5s in the summer term, to start the process earlier. Additional support is also provided for in-year admissions.
- Information/drop-in sessions in schools with particularly vulnerable families are run jointly with a trusted member of school staff, so parents are more encouraged to attend.
- Some support is also provided around primary admissions, which can be often seen as more of a priority for some headteachers. This can develop early engagement with the admissions systems for parents.

- Through their work, Choice Advisers reduce the burdens on school staff who previously supported parents through the admissions process.

Working with parents

- Interpreters and translators are offered and used whenever necessary (e.g. using parent volunteers to provide language support at school drop-in sessions foster trust).
- Children are encouraged to attend Choice Advice meetings and discussions with parents, so that they fully participate in the decision-making process.
- Where possible, information-seeking parents are encouraged to use websites, engage with Admissions Officers directly, or call schools direct for further information.
- Parents who require additional intensive support are offered a range of options including phone contact, 1:1 appointments and home visits. Choice Advisers arrange visits to schools or accompany parents if necessary.
- Additional (often intensive) support is provided around SEN issues by experienced, knowledgeable staff. Dedicated advice and guidance is provided in the preparation and presentation of appeals cases, with Choice Advisers accompanying parents to hearings for further support if required (but not representing the parents, as the new Appeals code stipulates). This may be more necessary for appellants from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Potential conflicts of interest are avoided where an arms-length organisation provides this assistance.
- For more complex issues, the Choice Adviser meets with both parents and the child, at a time and place most convenient for the family. For more vulnerable families, repeated home visits, telephone support and email contact is maintained until the application or appeals process is complete.
- Additional support is offered for on-line applications (e.g. drop-in sessions at school).
- Comprehensive information packs with additional details on local secondary schools are prepared in advance. These include maps and information on bus routes, travel, uniforms, SEN provision, Ofsted reports and performance data. In particular, value-added data and other information are shown to parents to dispel myths about schools with 'good' and 'bad' reputations.
- Choice Advisers encourage parents to consider the relative advantages of all their preferences, and reduce their often polarised 'all or nothing' thinking about their first preference.
- Choice Advisers help with the completion of the application forms, sensitively providing language and literacy support when necessary.

Quality, training and support for Choice Advisers

- Choice Advisers make regular use of CAS&QAN on-line resources, forums, events and networks to gain support, advice and to ensure their knowledge and local practices are up to date.
- Choice Advisers establish their own links with neighbouring and regional Choice Advice services, or other LAs in similar contexts (e.g. selective or rural LAs).
- Choice Advisers seek additional help from CAS&QAN where necessary to develop their quality assurance standards.
- Choice Advisers engage with Level 2/3 accreditation where appropriate and share their reflective practice with other colleagues and Choice Advisers through the CAS&QAN forum/website.

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15 Appendices

Table A1: CAS&QAN categorisation of Choice Advice models (Feb 2008)

| Model type | Description | Number reported to CAS&QAN in Feb 2008 | Evaluation sample (selected in July/Aug 07 before this CAS&QAN data was compiled) |
|--|---|--|---|
| Parent Partnership | Arms-length; mainly experienced advisers/advocates of parents of children with SEN ; service (partly) funded through LA. Can also be operated through vol sector organisation | 47 | 7 LAs |
| Children or Family Information Services (CIS/FIS) | Arms-length; information advisers; service (partly) funded through LA. These models have increased in number since the first year of operation. | 25 | 0 (but this model was included in the pilot evaluation. see Shipton and Stiell et al, 2008) |
| Admissions | LA Admissions-team based; current Admissions Officers or recruited outreach workers. Can include Consultants. | 19 | (3) of CAS&QAN's 19 (some of our sample was categorised differently by CAS&QAN) |
| Internal | LA team other than Admissions, e.g. Education Welfare, Transition team etc. Can include Consultants. | 51 | (4) Issue with variable definitions and descriptions of model types. Although we did not classify any of our case studies as 'internal', four of our sample fall into this CAS&QAN classification. Our analysis led us to describe them more accurately as Admissions-based (in two cases), PP and Consultants. |
| Other | e.g. voluntary sector organisation; school support staff; model under consideration | 7 | 2 |
| Totals | | 149 | 15 |

Source: based on CAS&QAN personal communication

Table A2: Indices of Deprivation averaged across the model types (the higher the index, the more deprived an area)

| | Mean score | Range |
|---------------------------|------------|--------|
| Admissions (4 LAs) | 21.9 | 17-29 |
| PP (7 LAs) | 27 | 12-44 |
| Indep Con (2 LAs) | 23.8 | 17-30 |
| Vol/other (2 LAs) | 20.3 | 10 -31 |

Source: www.communities.gov.uk

Table A3: ACORN postcode classification by model types (based on 78% of parents where postcodes were provided)

| | 'Advantaged' postcodes | | | 'Disadvantaged' postcodes | | Total |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|
| | Wealthy achievers, n (% of row total) | Urban prosperity, n (% of row total) | Comfortably off, n (% of row total) | Moderate means, n (% of row total) | Hard-pressed, n (% of row total) | |
| Admissions | 20 (24%) | 14 (18%) | 30 (36%) | 5 (6%) | 14 (17%) | 83 |
| | 77% | | | 23% | | |
| PP | 35 (13%) | 12 (4.3%) | 64 (23%) | 35 (13%) | 132 (47%) | 278 |
| | 40% | | | 60% | | |
| Indep Cons | 2 (22%) | 0 | 2 (22%) | 5 (56%) | 0 | 9 |
| | 44% | | | 56% | | |
| Vol & Other | 0 | 1 (25%) | 0 | 0 | 3 (75%) | 4 |
| | 25% | | | 75% | | |
| Total | | | | | | 374 |

Source: Postcodes from parent (tracker) data ACORN:
<http://www.caci.co.uk/acorn/acornmap.asp>

Ref: DCSF-RW072

ISBN: 978 1 84775 270 3

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Published by the Department for
Children, Schools and Families