

CITIZEN LED INSPECTION

FEEDBACK REPORT FOR WEST LoTHIAN COUNCIL

Pupil Placement

June – September 2011

INSPECTION TEAM:

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1. INTRODUCTION TO THE INSPECTION FEEDBACK REPORT

- 1.1. This feedback report has been produced following an inspection of **Pupil Placement** in West Lothian Council against the Citizen Led Inspection framework and using the framework rating system.
- 1.2. The inspection process took place over 9 days between **June and September 2011** and included the following steps:
 - Evidence review and site visit planning
 - Onsite observation and interviewing
 - Telephone surveys with a small sample of customers
 - Consensus on strengths, areas for improvement and scores by the citizen inspection team
- 1.3. The focus of the inspection was on three distinct processes delivered by the Pupil Placement service; pre-school placements, primary school placements and secondary school placements. The special school placement process was not included within the scope of the inspection.
- 1.4. The inspection process was planned and completed by Citizen Inspectors, who are residents and volunteers from the West Lothian community. The team comprised:
 - Ms Liz Liddell
 - Ms Lindsay Gillespie
 - Ms Lisa Borst
- 1.5. During the inspection process every effort has been made by the team to ensure that conclusions and feedback are based on fact and are the result of consensus.
- 1.6. The team have interviewed **5 Education Staff, 5 of their key partners** and **14 customers** individually or in groups and visited **various** locations, including; Civic Centre, Customer Service Centre (contact centre), two primary and two secondary schools.

2. KEY STRENGTHS

2.1. Pupil Placement has demonstrated good practice/performance in the following areas:

- Committed, motivated, approachable, professional and knowledgeable staff
- Dedicated leader who has made some important changes
- Suitable processes to deliver the service
- Awareness that they need to continue to improve processes and correspondence

3. KEY AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

3.1. Pupil Placement requires improvement in the following areas:

- Simplify pre-school admission policy and guidelines
- Simplify primary and secondary policy and guidelines
- Clarify and reduce number of letters to their customers
- Easier navigation and more relevant information on the website
- Continue to improve communication with Contact Centre staff
- Development of meaningful Performance Indicators

4. RATINGS

4.1. The Citizen Inspection team have rated the service as follows:

CRITERION	RATING (✓)				
	<u>E</u> (Excellent)	<u>G</u> (Good)	<u>A</u> (Adequate)	<u>W</u> (Weak)	<u>U</u> (Unsatisfactory)
1 LEADERSHIP		✓			
2 SERVICE PLANNING		✓			
3 PEOPLE RESOURCES		✓			
4 PARTNERS & OTHER RESOURCES		✓			
5 SERVICE PROCESSES		✓			
6 CUSTOMER RESULTS			✓		
7 KEY RESULTS			✓		

5. OVERVIEW OF THE SERVICE

1 Leadership

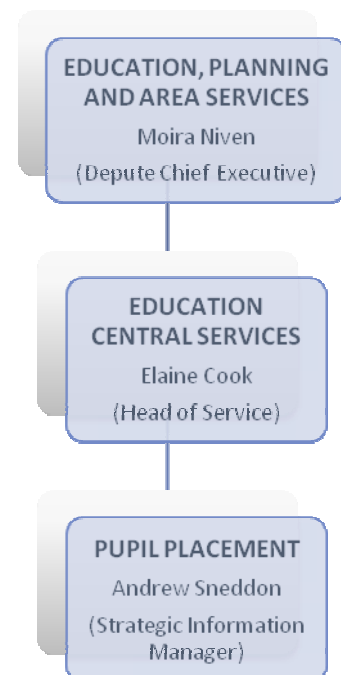
Leaders:

- Identify a clear direction for the service
- Set long-term outcomes
- Are open, honest and accountable
- Put in place scrutiny to challenge performance

5.1. Pupil Placement sits within the Education, Planning and Area Services directorate, under Depute Chief Executive Moira Niven.

5.2. The aim of the Pupil Placement service is to maximise parental choice efficiently through planning and legislation, ensuring the best education for children with the most economical number of buildings and staff.

5.3. Andrew Sneddon, the Strategic Information Manager (SIM), was appointed as manager of Pupil Placement in January 2011. Although this is a short period of time, the new manager and the Head of Service¹ (HoS) at this time demonstrated a clear and shared understanding of the objectives of the service and their accountability for ensuring the service met its legal obligations. In the last year the service, under the leadership of the SIM, has made some positive changes for the customer.



5.4. The inspection team noted the role of Elected Members in the development and review of placement policy through the Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel (PDSP).

5.5. The Pupil Placement Team is responsible for administering pre-school placements, primary 1 and secondary 1 stage placements and processing wraparound care applications. Working with Planning Services, they must ensure that there are a sufficient number of placements to meet the needs of children in West Lothian. They must also allocate children to schools that suit their needs with as little disruption to the child's schooling as possible.

¹ At the time of the Inspection, the Head of Service interviewed was Mary Rankine – prior to Ms E Cook's appointment

- 5.6. There is a clear structure within the service, with well defined roles and responsibilities for the manager, the team leader and the frontline staff. The service has a staff with a strong understanding of their role and the Citizen Inspection team found them to be professional, knowledgeable and customer focused.
- 5.7. An External Review of the pre-school process and officer review of pre-school and primary/secondary process was undertaken in 2010 by the HoS and the SIM and as a result of that review, some changes have already been implemented. Although the decision-making process was put in place by the SIM and the HoS, the staff feedback was positive. The staff interviewed felt that managers at all levels were approachable and that they were encouraged to put forward their views or suggestions for improvements on delivering the service.
- 5.8. The service reports on its progress to their senior management team, Elected Members and the public:
- The service give an update to the senior and corporate management team and they can now also access the up-to-date status through the Covalent² system
 - Staff are updated through team meetings
 - Reports are submitted to Elected Members through the PDSP (committee) three times each year
 - This information, along with Annual Standards and Quality Reports, are available to the public online
- 5.9. Staff performance is reviewed annually during their Performance Review and Personal Development Plan (PRPDP) session where any issues or concerns would be raised. However, it was stated that if at any time the managers were not satisfied with any aspect of a member of staff's performance that this would be challenged immediately.
- 5.10. A regular weekly meeting is in place to discuss and 'recap' on that week's work. Away-Days are held annually, where all aspects of the service are discussed. The SIM has recently introduced performance indicators to enhance the Pupil Placement service and in future will carry out performance reviewing on a regular basis. This is a considerable improvement for the Pupil Placement Service as previously they had limited information to track performance. Information on performance was not available for previous years.

Rating: Good

² Covalent is the Council's corporate performance management system. It is a central system that can be accessed by all members of the Corporate Management Team and is used to manage, monitor and report on service performance.

2 Service Planning

The service:

- *Develop clear strategies*
- *Has effective annual planning that outlines the key activities*
- *Uses reliable tools and methods to engage and consult with customers*
- *Sets and meets targets for performance in all the key areas of activity*

5.11. Pupil Placement is driven by legislation and national policy and this has a significant impact on local Pupil Placement policy. However, Pupil Placement does set local policies and plans to provide a service that meets the needs of West Lothian. These policies include; Admission, Pre School Wrap Around, Primary and Secondary.

5.12. Following the Review in 2010, the Head of Service (HoS) and Strategic Information Manager (SIM) put in place a Pupil Placement Team Plan for 2011/2012 covering all areas of service provision, including an activity and improvement plan.

5.13. During the Annual Away Day the Pupil Placement team have the opportunity to discuss any issues or problems that may have arisen in the past year and to evaluate the team plan. This meeting is also used to review the Pupil Placement Service Standards and partners are invited to take part in the review activity. Managers and staff meet with partners to involve them in the planning process and share information, for example; schools, Finance, Legal Services, Planning Services and the Customer Service Centre (contact centre). The team plan will be reviewed and updated annually.

5.14. Pupil Placement engages and consults with customers in the development of the service plan by a variety of methods, including:

- A customer survey, with questions relating to the Pupil Placement service, is issued to some users of the service. One of the suggestions from this year's survey is the development of an online application form for admission to school. This application is currently being worked on.
- By accessing focus groups and Parent Council group; one of the suggestions from a Parent's Group was to ensure the 'oversubscribed' letter was only issued to the relevant parents and not all applicants.
- By analysing customer complaints and enquiries

5.15. The service publish information about the pupil placement process in West Lothian by:

- Publishing its policy and plan on the council's website³
- PDSP reports
- Local newspapers

³ Link to Education pages on the council's website: www.westlothian.gov.uk/education

- 5.16. Whilst senior managers could demonstrate an understanding and awareness of the core service standards and targets, the staff did not have the same level of awareness. However, it was noted that the recent Away Day was used by the service to discuss standards with the team.
- 5.17. The inspection team appreciate that there is a responsibility and a need for the Pupil Placement service to support schools to operate efficiently by managing school occupancy levels effectively. However, the team would highlight the importance of customer choice and that the service should make sure that this remains an important consideration – albeit balanced against other priorities.
- 5.18. The inspection team's consultation with customers highlighted the issue of customer expectations regarding the placement process. One customer in particular felt that some users of the service have very high expectations and that, coupled with the nature of the pupil placement service, the rising population in West Lothian and the financial climate means that there may be disappointment for an increasing number of parents and pupils. The service should consider how they are going to manage these expectations and make sure they communicate these challenges to customers.

Rating: Good

3 People Resources

The service:

- Identifies the right people resources it needs to achieve outcomes*
- Sets out desired qualities and acceptable behaviours for staff*
- Reviews and improves individual people's performance*
- Communicates effectively with people*
- Involves people in reviewing and improving the service*

- 5.19. The Strategic Information Manager (SIM) is sensitive to the importance of ensuring the service has the right mix of people – with the right skills, knowledge and experience – to deliver an effective service. Pupil Placement has management and staff development training programmes in place and regular training on policies and procedures is made available to all staff.
- 5.20. All staff have the opportunity to contribute and get involved in reviewing and improving the service delivered, informally at team meetings or formally at away days. One such example of a staff suggestion was for Pupil Placement staff to deal with all placements in schools, not just the new intakes for P1 and S1. The staff felt this could be carried out with the present quota of staff and without any additional costs to the service. No action has been taken yet on this suggestion.

5.21. Interviews with Pupil Placement staff and managers identified the following advantages and disadvantages of the service's approach to managing and developing its staff.

5.22. *Advantages* are that the staff:

- Understand the needs of customers
- Listen to customers
- Are friendly
- Have a positive attitude to work
- Ensure procedures are always adhered to

5.23. *Disadvantages* are that the staff:

- May have to handle difficult situations, as a part of delivering the service, where the customer is unhappy with the outcome of the process. This can sometimes result in customers being verbally abusive.
- Had a lack of awareness of service standards (at the frontline level), which raises questions about the consistency of the service delivery.

5.24. As a result of problems in previous years, an External Review was implemented to look at the pre-school placement process and an officer review of the pre-school, primary and secondary placement processes were completed. Subsequently, the service has undergone a significant redesign and the following improvements have been implemented:

- Information is sent out to customers in a more timely fashion
- Streamlined nursery places for two years instead of one year
- Staff now spend more time with customers to help and resolve enquiries and less time on administrative processes
- Increased liaison with Finance to identify greater efficiencies in the service

5.25. The manager and the staff should continue to use the Pupil Placement Service strategy to:

- Identify the right people, with the required mix of knowledge, skills and abilities to deliver the service effectively
- Maintain good quality standards that are communicated to staff to encourage the right behaviours and attitudes
- Review and develop staff performance
- Hold multi-lateral communication with staff, managers and Head Teachers
- Use staff ideas as part of service improvement

5.26. During our activity it was evident to the inspection team that there is a depth of knowledge about the Pupil Placement policies and procedures amongst line managers and staff.

5.27. Pupil Placement should continue to:

- Develop training further to boost staff performance
- Ensure all staff are aware of service standards

Rating: Good

4 Partners & Other Resources

The service:

- *Manages partnerships to add value for the customer*
- *Manages finances to deliver quality services sustainably*
- *Uses information and knowledge to support and enhance service delivery*
- *Uses assets (land, buildings, vehicles and equipment) to optimum effect*

5.28. West Lothian Council has a good history of building local partnerships that encourage more efficient use of resources. Pupil Placement has identified key partners and together they form a working relationship to provide an efficient Pupil Placement Service to customers. The associated benefits achieved play a key role in the performance of Pupil Placement.

5.29. The main partners of the service were interviewed, including representatives from:

- Head Teachers from primary and secondary schools
- Planning Services
- Appeals Committee
- Customer Service Centre (contact centre)
- Financial Management Unit

5.30. Pupil Placement staff have an effective working relationship with their partners. This was made clear when interviewing representatives from their partner services. The positive examples include:

Communication:

- Pupil Placement staff are very approachable and helpful and provide any necessary assistance or advice.
- The Contact Centre manager and team leaders are updated of any changes to the Pupil Placement service via briefings.
- Pupil Placement staff and Planning Services staff work closely and share a bespoke IT system. Planning Services staff provides vital information on the population in West Lothian and builds forecasts that are used by the Pupil Placement Service. They also undertake the catchment review work for the service.
- The Strategic Information Manager (SIM) works closely with Financial Management and the dedicated Group Accountant to ensure the service operates efficiently and within the budget. Forward planning and formalising all service and financial objectives together is crucial, especially as the Pupil Placement budget was reduced to make savings after the "Tough Choices" review.

Support:

- Since the review Pupil Placement have demonstrated a real element of commitment and support to schools.

- Pupil Placement have a rigid timetable in place with Committee Services to deal with appeals.
- Pupil Placement has a strong relationship with the Contact Centre staff and only trained Contact Service staff deal with Pupil Placement enquiries.

Issues/problems:

- Based on the testimony of the interviews, problems or issues that arise between the partner services are dealt with promptly.
- Since the review the SIM meets with Head Teachers to discuss any placement issues arising in their school.
- One suggested change to move placements (out with placements for primary 1 and secondary 1) from schools to the Pupil Placement Service does not appear to be supported by Head Teachers. The Head teachers interviewed felt that allowing schools to manage these placements helped to keep a 'personal touch' with the families – which would be lost if the work was transferred to Pupil Placement. Also, as a central service Pupil Placement is not aware of the range of subjects available in each secondary school and school-based placements support a greater choice and flexibility in creating timetables for these pupils.
- Although Contact Centre staff are given the opportunity to join Pupil Placement staff at an annual away day to discuss delivery of the service, no representative attended this year's meeting.

5.31. Some improvements should be considered by Pupil Placement to improve partnership working and service provision:

- To avoid incorrect information being passed to customers Pupil Placement staff should ensure updates and changes to information are passed to Contact Centre staff before customers.
- Consideration should be given to providing a central source (e.g. online) for information and updates that can be accessed by Pupil Placement and Contact Centre staff.
- Schools would benefit having information on admissions sooner.
- The service currently operates using a bespoke IT system which was developed in 1996 with regular upgrades. However, as only two people in the council have the technical expertise to make changes to the system this could pose a risk to the Pupil Placement service. As acknowledged by the SIM – who is currently investigating the SEEMIS IT System used by other councils.
- Although the current appeals system for customers (to appeal a decision on school placement) appears to be adequate, the representative from Committee Services suggested that there is room for improvement and that the panel should be totally independent.

Rating: Good

5 Service Processes

The service:

- *Designs processes to meet the needs of customers*
- *Ensures processes are efficient and effective*
- *Delivers services to customers in the way they want*
- *Reviews the efficiency and effectiveness of processes*
- *Uses customer feedback as part of the review process*

5.32. The focus of the Citizen Inspection process was on three processes delivered by the Pupil Placement service; pre-school placements, primary school placements and secondary placements.

5.33. PRE-SCHOOL PLACEMENT PROCESS: Parents are contacted by letter to inform them of the pre-school admission process when their child turns 2 years old. Parents are sent application forms when it is time to apply to primary school. Parents can apply to any nursery as nurseries do not have catchment areas.

5.34. PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACEMENT PROCESS (Primary 1): All primary one placements are processed by the Pupil Placement team and Head Teachers are given their role when it has been finalised.

5.35. SECONDARY SCHOOL PLACEMENT PROCESS (Secondary 1): The information on pupil intake for secondary school admissions is provided by the Head Teacher from the secondary schools.

5.36. Since implementation of the recent Review, many of the processes have been streamlined to improve delivery of service:

- The service is in the process of reviewing the letters that are sent to parents as a matter of urgency, redesigning and rewording the letters to ensure clarity.
- The service has removed the letter to ante-school parents about change of choice as this was deemed unnecessary.
- Decision letters are posted earlier to reduce the waiting time for parents and pupils.
- There is a greater level of liaison with Head Teachers on a more regular basis.
- The information booklets provided with the application forms have been simplified and the number of pages reduced to make them more accessible for parents

5.37. The information from the customer survey showed that customers contacting the Pupil Placement service found it was easy to access and were satisfied with the way the service was delivered. Also, the majority of customers interviewed for this inspection process were satisfied with the accessibility and with the overall quality of the service that they received.

- 5.38. Pupil Placement reviews and uses feedback from customers and the Parent Council to improve the service.
- 5.39. The service should consider how to disseminate information more effectively and proactively. It should be noted that:
- The customers interviewed found that the Pupil Placement pages on the website were unhelpful and a common suggestion was that the website should be made easier to navigate and that online content should be more up-to-date.
 - Dates for intake need to be decided earlier as the customers interviewed felt the information is held by Pupil Placement for too long.
 - The wording and the language used in letters should be improved and clarified.
- 5.40. Complaints for 2011 centred on placements relating to composite classes. It is suggested that the service should provide more clarification to parents on the purpose and/or benefits of the composite classes.

Rating: Good

6 Customer Results

The service:

- *Are measuring the right thing(s) in relation to customer results and what is important to the customer*
- *Can show positive and sustained good performance over a period of 3 or more years*
- *Have set and met challenging targets*
- *Compare their own performance against performance leaders in other councils or organisations*
- *Can explain any dips in their performance or positive changes*

- 5.41. A customer survey is undertaken annually and includes questions regarding; communication, customers' overall experience, standards, which choice of school their child received (for example; first or second), the quality of information and whether parents would like to be involved in improving the Pupil Placement service. The inspection team were given the results of a survey undertaken in 2010 – information on previous years' performance was not available.
- 5.42. The service can give examples of where customer feedback was used to make changes to the service. However, a lack of sustained (year-on-year) customer results suggests that improvements are based on anecdotal information about customers, or the results of alternative engagement activity and not on analysis of customer surveys/satisfaction.

5.43. As part of the inspection process, the team carried out telephone interviews with a random sample of customers that had used the Pupil Placement service in 2011. Much of the feedback was positive with most customers reporting that the service was easy to access and that the staff were approachable, knowledgeable and dealt with their enquiries efficiently. Several customers also confirmed having seen a huge improvement in the Pupil Placement service between 2010 and 2011.

5.44. Some areas for improvement from the feedback are:

- Two customers found that the volume of information received was confusing and not all information was relevant.
- The process for nursery application started too early for some customers to make a decision about a place.
- Letters and the language, or terms used, could be more user friendly.
- Dates for intake should be decided earlier.
- A few customers reported instances where a member of staff was unable to answer their questions.
- Customers found the website unhelpful and difficult to navigate.

Rating: Adequate

7 Key Performance Results

The service:

- *Are measuring the right thing(s) in relation to the key activities and the long-term outcomes*
- *Can show positive and sustained good performance over a period of 3 or more years*
- *Have set and met challenging targets*
- *Compare their own performance against performance leaders in other councils or organisations*
- *Can explain any dips in their performance or positive changes*

5.45. There are currently 7 performance indicators used by the team to measure their success and manage their improvement.

5.46. The inspection team acknowledge that the Pupil Placement service is in the process of developing new performance indicators to expand on limited information. The service uses the following performance indicators as the key measures:

- % of P1 & S1 of requests granted by school placement panel
- % of pre-school parents allocated first choice establishment by school placement panel
- % of pre-school parents allocated first or second choice establishment by school placement panel

- % of P1 forms acknowledged within three working days
- % of S1 forms acknowledged within three working days
- % of placing requests granted – full year
- % of pre-school parents allocated first choice establishment – full year

5.47. The service can provide evidence on performance over the past year in the performance indicators that mostly relate to the choice children are given and when letters are acknowledged.

5.48. The service should also provide the public with meaningful indicators on the cost of the service and whether the service delivered represents value for money.

5.49. The review undertaken by the Head of Service (HoS) and Strategic Information Manager (SIM) has set targets for performance levels which will be reviewed.

5.50. There does not appear to be any benchmarking with other local authorities

5.51. Pupil placement should

- Continue to develop a range of meaningful performance indicators that relate to their key activities and outcomes.
- Ensure all targets are reviewed to challenge service effectiveness and efficiency.
- Find appropriate benchmarking to compare, challenge and improve performance with good practice organisations/councils.

Rating: Adequate

6. REVIEW DATE

6.1. The Citizen Inspection team will return to the service in **November 2012** to review the progress in the areas identified for improvement.