

Distance Measuring for Primary School Admissions

Background

Currently the Brighton & Hove school admissions arrangements use home to school distance as the tie-break in each admissions priority. This is measured by the shortest available route from home to school, measured from a point in the property supplied by Postal address data, to the nearest point on the road network, and from there to the nearest of the school's gates to the child's home. It uses the road network supplied by Ordnance Survey and some other public rights of way which are paved and lit (these are listed on the council's website).

The computer generated measurement is often disputed by parents as it measures down the middle of the road, rather than along the footway. It is occasionally disputed because it measures in a straight line from the address point in the property to the nearest point in the road network. This can be contentious where families live in blocks of flats which have an address point further from the school than the actual flat occupied by the child in question, or where the system produces a route through the side or rear of the property. As a rule, this is only disputed where it produces a distance further from the school than would actually be travelled. To date, no-one has complained that their home has been measured to be closer to the school than it really is.

Following discussions with the company that produces the software, the latter issue is likely to be resolved, insofar as the system is to be altered so that where it would be possible to measure from the address point to more than one point in the routing network, the system will choose the point which is nearest to the school, rather than the point which is nearest to the address point. *It will still not measure from the door or gate of the property as we do not have this data in our system and are do not have the resources to conduct the necessary survey to collect it.*

The system has its limitations. As outlined above, it measures along the middle of the road, so as not to disadvantage families living opposite one another, and to prevent disputes regarding road crossing points. It also only uses such footpath data as we are able to manually input, which means a certain amount of officer time each year is spent visiting sites and verifying whether footpaths should or should not be used.

The routing database does not include routes across public paths, even where these are paved and lit. There are two reasons for this- firstly we have not surveyed these routes and do not know where they are, and secondly because these routes are not public rights of way, and many are not accessible at all times of day. Anecdotally, there is also evidence that many members of the public regard some of these routes as unsafe for children to use (eg the Level), although this could also be said of many routes that are in use.

The use of the routing database causes confusion among some parents, in that they find it difficult to understand that the route measured is only a tool to allocate school places, or that it is not our expectation that any child would (or even could) walk this way. Parents often wish us to measure via routes that are only open to themselves (eg through private property) or via the grounds of other schools (eg from Surrenden Road, through Varndean College & Dorothy Stringer School grounds in order to access Balfour Primary School).

Proposal

In view of the perceived disadvantages in the above measuring system, and the amount of officer time which is spent managing these, the proposal has been put forward to discontinue using the routing system and instead measure distance as the crow flies from the address point in the property in question to the address point in the school. Hertfordshire County Council carried out a consultation and changed their measuring system to as the crow flies for admissions from September 2011.

Advantages

This system would be much more straightforward to operate. This would save a great deal of time for the School Admissions team in terms of resolving queries. It would also make it much easier for parents to estimate their chances of being close enough to the school as we could publish maps with concentric circles showing the radii within which children were admitted in previous years.

It would also be less open to challenge- although some may take issue with the fairness of the system, it would be very difficult for parents to dispute that it had been operated correctly as the system measures in a straight line between two points. Only the location of the two points would be open to discussion. As the point in the school would be the same for everybody, this would really only leave the location of the family home open to question.

Disadvantages

Will produce anomalous results- e.g. children living in parts of Bevendean will be offered a place at Woodingdean Primary School before children in Rottingdean or even the extreme south of Woodingdean. These anomalies will be more problematic in terms of directing families to the nearest school with a space available- if a child moves into northern Woodingdean, and Woodingdean School is full, we want to offer them a place at Rudyard Kipling School, not Bevendean.

Does not take into account features such as railway lines. This means that there will be situations where we are offering places at schools such as West Hove Infant/Junior School to children across the railway line, who will then have to travel past the homes of unsuccessful applicants in order to reach the school. This is likely to prove difficult for the disappointed parents to accept.

Other factors to be considered

Changing to measuring as the crow flies would not obviate the need for a routing database as home to school transport entitlement would still be dependent on a child living 2 (or 3) miles from the appropriate school as the child walks.

Measuring as the crow flies would not lead to fewer disappointed parents or to more parents being offered a place at a preferred school. It will not create more school places.

Measuring as the crow flies may alter the pattern of allocations across the city slightly. It is not possible at this point to predict whether the impact of this will be positive, negative or neutral.