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How technology can improve the school admissions process



Admissions is one of the biggest challenges schools face each year. With a set of processes to follow, it is impossible to please everyone, and appeals are inevitable. Terry Lovegrove, implementations consultant at CACI, outlines how the latest technology can help ease the burden.

In the 2018/19 school year, 59,420 appeals were lodged in the UK, amounting to 3.9% of all school places administered. Of those appeals, 45,855 were heard by an appeals panel and 10,177 were successful.

This places a great administrative burden on top of the usual admissions challenges for teams deciding where these children will attend school. But what if there was an easier, more streamlined way of handling this?

Most schools rely on spreadsheets to manage their admissions process, which is generally cumbersome and can be disjointed. It's also wide open to human error and is incredibly time consuming for administrative staff. Furthermore, there's the risk of inconsistent decision making, which can make the whole process unfair, albeit entirely unintentionally.

Spreadsheets also make it harder for administrative staff to work through appeals resolution. Information must be checked and evidence gathered manually to prove that the correct process was followed, and that all necessary factors were considered.

A technological advantage

It makes sense, therefore, for schools to use technology more prevalently in the admissions process. By deploying a central digital hub for admissions, schools can create a single source of truth for the entire process, enabling research and appeals to be conducted much more swiftly.

Technology can also help schools to reduce the number of appeals they face. By implementing a rules-based, consistent approach, schools can make their admissions process more transparent and fairer.

With everything channelled through a

single source, workflows can be triggered and communications, with multi-lingual capability, automatically raised with concerned parties. This is a two-way street, too, since having a single system makes the process easier for parents, since they can register their submissions and appeals via the system.

This is something that Birmingham City Council has been working towards using CACI's IMPULSE platform. Birmingham has, so far, trained 150 of its 400 schools to use the software, with significant efficiency, quality and safeguarding benefits expected.

Training will be completed by the end of the year. Integrated and streamlined workflows allow decision-making processes which used to take weeks to be completed in minutes, helping Birmingham's school authorities to allocate staff and resources more efficiently.

IMPULSE also enables Birmingham's school and council admissions teams to better manage their workflows, by processing applications and referrals on an ongoing basis, rather than in batches. The automated system has been used to process over 14,000 primary and 16,000 secondary applications in the first six months of use.

Faster, fairer and more efficient

The efficiency and reliability gains of using technology to underpin the admissions process are clear. During these uncertain times, technology is also enabling increased flexibility for schools in how they can communicate with staff, parents and children.

New procedures and timetables are being drawn up regularly in response to a phased return during this pandemic, so communicating quickly and clearly with

everyone is crucial. Having a central hub can make this process easier, faster and less time intensive.

Technology like IMPULSE can add further benefits for vulnerable children and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Schools and their administrative teams can consider a child's circumstances more dynamically, providing a fairer and more consistent approach.

The platform also helps schools to cater for these children more easily, with the added ability of immediate oversight of aspects such as school meals and school uniform eligibility. This provides a joined up and holistic overview of every student.

Because of this, we believe that using technology in this way democratises the school admissions processes, making it easier for schools and local authorities to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable children in our society are met, with fewer let down by an inefficient system.

Looking ahead

The future of the school admissions process can be simpler and fairer with the appropriate application of tailored technology. If schools can implement, adhere to and evidence a reliable and robust admissions process, they can more fairly and transparently allocate places and handle appeals.

It will also help staff to determine where appeals are likely to be successful and where they need to be heard by a panel. If the evidence shows that correct processes have been followed, then appeals can be dealt with quickly and efficiently.

We really feel that schools and local authorities are on the cusp of a digital admissions revolution and are very excited for what the next few years will bring to the sector.