

School Admissions

While in most overseas locations our needs are well looked after by SCE, in the UK the responsibility for finding school places rests with the parents. This can often seem like a daunting task, especially when undertaken at a distance. Below are the questions we receive most often, followed by some suggestions about how to go about finding and getting school places for your children.

Q: What should I do when I find out we're moving?

- Contact the local HIVE at your new location - they will have information on schools in the area;
- Use the internet - websites such as schoolswebdirectory.co.uk can provide basic information about UK schools and often provide links to the schools' own sites and Ofsted reports. Most Local Authorities (LAs) have comprehensive websites of their own detailing the admissions procedure in their area;
- Contact the schools you are interested in and ask them to send you a copy of their prospectus; they will also be able to tell you whether any spaces are available and how to apply;
- Visit schools before you make a choice - unfortunately this is not always possible, but most heads are only too happy to show prospective parents around and nothing will give you a better feel for a school.

And don't worry about having an address before you apply! Recent changes to the School Admissions Code of Practice state that schools and admissions authorities must accept either a unit address or, if appropriate, a "quartering area" address (the address of the closest house in the nearest "quartering area") for applications from service personnel in the absence of a new home postal address. They must also allocate places in advance of a family moving to an area if the child will meet their admissions criteria when they do arrive.

Q - How do I make my application?

The school or LA will be able to tell you how to apply. Application procedures vary depending on the type of school, so it is best to speak directly with them. On-line applications are becoming increasingly common as well - very helpful for those of us applying from overseas!

Q - What about application deadlines?

These apply when you are applying for places in either Reception (YR), Y7 (the first year of secondary school), or Y3 if applying to a junior school. Deadlines for these year groups are often as early as the November of the year preceding entry, with offers of places made around February/March time - all of which is far sooner than many of us have notice of postings! The Code of Practice says that it is up to Admission Authorities or Local Authorities to

decide how they will deal with late applications, and many cite 'exceptional circumstances' as a reason for accepting a late application. Therefore if you make a late application before offers of places have been made, it is worth asking for your circumstances to be taken into consideration. Admission authorities are now also obliged to consult with parents and other local groups on their admission arrangements.

For other year groups, admissions outside the normal round are known as 'casual' or 'in-year' and depend largely on the number of children already in that particular year group. In Key Stage 1 (infant) classes the government has made it illegal for class sizes to exceed 30.

Q - What if my child does not get into the school of our choice?

- Put your child's name on the waiting list if one is operated. Find out exactly how you are required to do this; some schools insist on having a formal written letter. Unfortunately - or fortunately, depending on your situation! - how long you have been on the waiting list compared with others does not determine who is offered a place if one becomes available. A child's place on a waiting list is determined by how closely, in relation to the other children on the list, he or she matches the published admission criteria for the school (usually found in the school's prospectus).
- Appeal. Information on how to appeal will be contained in the letter rejecting your application. You can also contact the Children's Education Advisory Service (CEAS) who will be able to guide and support you through the process. They can be contacted at enquiries@ceas.detsa.co.uk or on 01980 618244.
- Contact the LA to find other schools in your area. It may not be ideal, but by doing some extra research you may be able to find another school that you are happy for your child to attend. In some cases, the LA will pay for transport to and from the school.
- Try not to worry too much, although we all know that this is easier said than done! Schools in an area with a military presence tend to have a high turnover, so it is always possible that places will become available for your child.

Q - I am moving to one of the devolved administrations. Do I need to do anything different?

The suggestions above remain the same, but it is worth remembering that Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales all operate slightly different education systems. It is worth checking these out in more detail at www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet.co.uk (follow the links to education).

In **Northern Ireland**, the education system is centrally administered by the Department of Education and locally by 5 Education and Library Boards. A selective system is also operated, with children sitting the 11+ examination to determine entry into grammar school.

In **Scotland**, the school year begins in the second or third week in August. Children born between September and February have the option of starting school either in the August preceding their fifth birthday or of deferring to the next August. Children born between March and August must start school in the year that they become five.

In **Wales**, there is access to both primary and secondary Welsh-medium education in all areas. If you are moving to an area where Welsh is the main or sole teaching language you can apply for Day School Allowance so you're your children can attend an independent school where they are taught in English.

Remember, CEAS is always there to help Service families with education and schooling issues (see contact above). You can also follow the 'Links' button at the top of the AFF homepage to find other useful education sites. We at AFF are keen to hear about your experiences - good or bad! - as it is these which help us to make a difference. Contact us at education@aff.org.uk