

Volunteers Needed for the Independent Appeal Panel

We are looking for volunteers who are interested in education and would like to serve on the Independent Admission Appeals Panel. We welcome volunteers from all backgrounds.

Information about the role is provided below and any prospective applicants can contact us for an informal conversation via appeals@buckinghamshire.gov.uk or 01296 383384.

1. What is an admission appeal?

Parents apply for school places for their child, but admission authorities may refuse the application if the school has no space, or the parent wants a grammar school place for an unqualified child. Where parents are refused a place in a preferred school, they can make an admission appeal to an Independent Appeal Panel.

2. What is the Independent Appeal Panel?

The Independent Appeal Panel (IAP) is an independent body set up to consider admission appeals made by parents. It is made up of three unpaid, but trained members who are not connected to the parents, school, local authority, or admission authority.

The IAP will:

- read appeal papers which are circulated before the appeal hearing,
- consider the cases put forward by parents and admission authorities/schools,
- follow the decision-making process in the School Admissions Appeals Code,
- conduct a fair, transparent, independent, and impartial hearing,
- make a reasoned decision to uphold or dismiss the appeal.

The IAP consists of a chair and 2 other panel members, including at least one each of:

- a lay person, i.e., someone without personal experience of managing a school or the provision of education in a school (except as a school governor or in another voluntary capacity)
- someone with experience in education (such as a teacher), who is acquainted with the educational conditions in the local area, or who is the parent of a registered pupil in a (different) school.

Regulations disqualify certain specific categories of people from panel membership, such as employees of the local authority.

3. What skills and qualities are required to sit on the Independent Appeal Panel?

Some of the skills and qualities required to perform the role include the ability to:

- Communicate effectively with a wide range of people,

- Employ active listening skills/awareness,
- Ask clear and relevant questions in a calm, non-confrontational manner to elicit the relevant evidence and facts,
- Assess information and identify key points of the case,
- Analyse information to form conclusions,
- Properly weigh the sufficiency and quality of evidence,
- Participate in the decision-making process by considering all the relevant facts and issues and expressing options in discussion,
- Form reasoned decisions based on the relevant law and facts,
- Understand and apply the rules of natural justice (fairness),
- Be sensitive and respectful of the need for confidentiality,
- Recognise and disclose any potential conflict of interest,
- Uphold the principles of independence and impartiality in performance of the role,
- Embrace and promote equality regarding disabilities, cultural differences, gender, beliefs, and lifestyle choices,
- Have commitment, integrity, and punctuality.

4. Is the work paid?

To maintain the impartiality of the Independent Appeal Panel, the panel members are not paid by the Council or admission authority/school, but expenses are reimbursed.

5. How are the panel members supported in their work?

Panel members are supported by the Education Appeals Team, who administer appeals, arrange hearings, and provide advice on law and procedure. Trained Clerks attend the hearings to ensure the correct process is followed and support the IAP.

Training on relevant law and procedure is provided to new volunteers, and all panel members are invited to an annual training meeting in the spring term and ad hoc sessions during the year.

6. When are appeals heard?

Appeal Panels hear school admission appeals in term time only throughout the year, however, the peak period is between May and July.

Appeals take place on school days and are normally scheduled from about 9am to 3pm.

Most appeals are heard and concluded on the same day, however, during the busy summer season, appeals for popular schools may take up to 6 (or even more) days, and these must be heard by the same panel members. It is, therefore, very helpful to have panel members who can commit to this occasionally.

7. How much availability do panel members offer?

Volunteers are contacted in advance to confirm their availability to hear appeals. Some panel members sit for a few days a year and others offer more time.

8. Do the Panels hear appeals for all schools?

We arrange appeals for almost all Buckinghamshire schools and some schools in Milton Keynes.

9. Are the appeals heard in person or remotely?

Since 2021, the appeal hearings have been conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams. Parents and schools find this more convenient and can avoid travel time and costs. Panel members are provided with Council iPads to use for the hearings and hard copies of appeal papers. Their use of the technology is supported by Clerks and the Appeals and ICT Teams.

10. Why do panel members volunteer to hear school admission appeals?

Panel Members may:

- Be interested in education,
- Enjoy meeting other panel members,
- Want to find out more about the school admission and appeals process,
- Want to be of service to parents, schools, and appeals,
- Have relevant experience which they want to use,
- Have been through the appeal process as parents themselves,
- Have backgrounds in education or law, or have worked as teachers or headteachers or been school governors or magistrates,
- Be or have been parents of school age children,
- Wish to develop skills for current or future careers,
- Want to support families and schools in the local community.