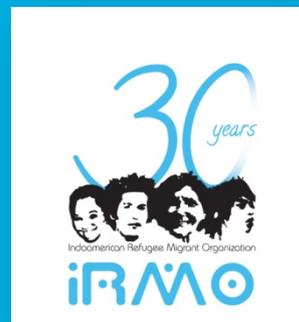


IRMO Research Briefing

Children out of School in Lambeth

October 2016



Introduction

This briefing provides an overview of the difficulties that Latin American families face accessing mainstream education in the UK. The data is drawn from a project run by IRMO that has worked with Latin American families for three years. Based on 24 individual cases, this briefing presents the **waiting times for school places in Lambeth** for children who arrive mid-year.

Local authorities have a duty to provide suitable full-time education for all children of compulsory school age resident in that local authority in line with the section 13 and 14 of Education Acts of 1996. Public authorities have a legal duty to work in the children's best interests. Being out of school for sustained periods of time means that children fall behind in their education, don't have as many opportunities to make friends, and may take longer to integrate into British society. It can also have a huge impact on a child's confidence and self-esteem. Further, it creates many complications for families. Parents may decide to stay at home with their children, rather than going out to work, adding to financial pressure on families. In other cases, parents are forced to take children to work with them, which can interrupt children's sleeping patterns, as most work anti-social hours.

Key findings

- In the last year, IRMO helped 24 school aged children access school in Lambeth. **Combined these children waited 444 weeks** for school places.
- Children waited on average **18.5 weeks** for a school place, despite the fact that school applications are supposed to be processed in 3 weeks. This is almost half the average school year of 39 weeks.
- **54% of children** missed **more than a term of school** while waiting for a place.

About IRMO

IRMO is a community-led organisation, and registered charity (1080813), that provides Latin Americans with tools and information in an empowering process to build fulfilled, independent and integrated lives in the UK using a rights-based approach.

IRMO is based in Brixton and has been working with the Latin American community for over thirty years. We work with over 18 nationalities, and provide services in four main areas:

- Education, training and employment
- Advice and case-work
- Wellbeing
- Campaigning for the rights of all migrant communities

About IRMO's Family Project

IRMO's Family Project started in 2013 and works with newly arrived children and families to support integration and develop skills. The project is funded by BBC Children in Need and has recently received a grant for a further three years. The project's main activities include:

- English classes, homework club and creative 'Learning Parties' – provided at IRMO, to support the transition to English schools and build children's English language skills
- Family outings - to support out-of-school learning and help families spend quality time together and discover London
- Parental workshops – practical information on the UK education and health system, plus parenting workshops
- Individual advice and support to parents
 - Supporting access to schooling and the admissions process
 - GP registration
 - Welfare advice
 - Interpreting at school meetings with parents

Overview of the Latin American community in London

According to *Towards Visibility*¹, the Latin American community is one of London's fastest growing groups. 145,000 Latin Americans live in London, with particular concentrations in Lambeth and Southwark. Latin Americans are increasingly arriving in the UK as part of a second migration having previously lived in Spain. The Latin American community is well-educated with around half having a university education, however, most experience downward occupational mobility on arrival in London. Employment rates are high in this community, although large numbers are concentrated in low paid jobs, working fragmented and anti-social hours and experiencing in-work poverty. As a result and in order to cope with living in an expensive city, almost a third of Latin Americans share their housing with other families in Multiple Occupancy Homes and as a result many live in cramped, overcrowded conditions.

In-year application school waiting times

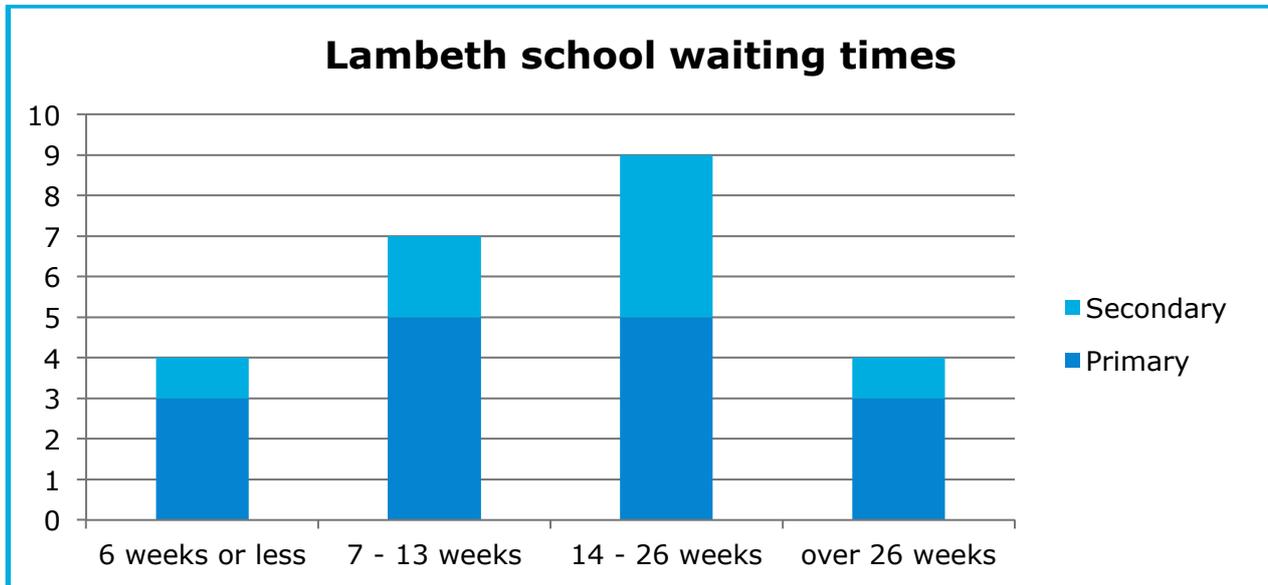
Very little research has been conducted with Latin American families looking at issues affecting children. One report found that the average time spent waiting for a school vacancy was 28 weeks.²

IRMO comes into contact with hundreds of families each year who are facing difficulties accessing services and formal education for their children. In the last year we worked with 118 children through our Family Project. Of those, we supported **41 children aged 5 to 16 years to access schooling**. 24 of those children were seeking school places in Lambeth.

¹ McIlwaine, C and Bunge, D. (2016). *Towards Visibility: the Latin American Community in London*. Queen Mary University, London.

² Mas Giral, R. and Granada, L. 2015. *Latin Americans migrating from Europe to the UK: barriers to accessing public services and welfare*. London: Latin American Women's Rights Service and Care Connect.

For each child, we record the time taken between applying for a school place and starting school. Last year, the children that IRMO helped to place in schools in Lambeth waited **on average 18.5 weeks** from their initial application to starting school. This is almost half of the average school year – a loss of valuable learning time. In the worst incident, one primary age pupil waited for over a year for a school place. **More than half (54%) of pupils waited for over 14 weeks** for a school place; the equivalent of missing a whole term of school.



What delays school placements?

There are a number of issues that can delay access to schooling.

- **Limited English:** Parents often arrive in the UK with very limited knowledge of English. Although education is a statutory requirement, Lambeth Council only provides information and forms relating to schooling in English. The Language Link service that is provided by Lambeth Council to facilitate access for parents with limited English language is not widely advertised due to cost considerations, and as a result parents do not know that it is available.
- **Lack of knowledge:** Many parents lack knowledge of the UK education system and do not understand how to apply for school placements. The system is quite different to the system in Spain where you are automatically assigned a place in a school near your home.
- **Difficulties providing required documents:** Many people cannot provide the documents that are required by Lambeth Council as part of the admissions process (see box on next page). A recent survey found that 46% of IRMO beneficiaries do not have a tenancy agreement, and many do not have work contracts either. Often living in overcrowded conditions in Multiple Occupancy Homes, many do not pay bills directly and therefore cannot use bills as proof of address. Most do not claim any benefits so cannot use benefit letters as proof of address. More recently we have seen some council admission teams, although not all, prepared to accept affidavits which parents must pay for.

- **Slow processing of admissions:** Many of the above obstacles delay parents in presenting their initial applications. These are steps that IRMO aims to support with. However, the waiting times presented above show times from initial application to receiving a school placement. This suggests that the Lambeth School Admissions team is regularly failing to meet its target of processing applications within 21 working days.
- **Poor communication from admission teams:** Admission teams do not provide information on which schools have places available. As parents can only apply to three schools in each application this means that parents may often apply to schools that have no places. Councils do not then automatically offer a place at an alternative school with a place, but instead requires parents to re-apply (again without knowing which schools have places) further delaying the process. Whilst the shortage of school places is a consideration, it seems counterproductive for Admission teams to withhold information on which schools have places available. Once an application is made, Admission teams often provide contradictory information to parents and/or IRMO's staff who are supporting on the case.

Proof of address documents accepted by Lambeth Council

- **Council Tax Letter:** Most Latin American families live in Multiple Occupancy Houses and do not pay the council tax directly. Getting letters of proof of payment of council tax from landlords can be difficult.
- **Utility bill:** Similar to above, rent in Multiple Occupancy Homes usually includes the cost of utilities, so most individuals do not have utility bills in their name.
- **Tenancy agreement:** Many recently arrived parents live in precarious housing without tenancy agreements. A recent survey undertaken at IRMO found that 46% of IRMO's beneficiaries do not have a tenancy agreement.
- **Income support/Benefit letter:** The majority of recently arrived parents are not claiming income support or any benefits. In fact, with changes to the law many are precluded from doing so within the first 3 months of residence.
- **TV licence:** Most recently arrived Latin American families are struggling to make ends meet, so do not buy TVs or a TV licence.
- **Driving licence:** Converting an EU driving licence to a UK licence is usually not a top priority for recently arrived Latin American families. Converting your licence also often requires a utility bill as proof of address.

Documents accepted as proof of child's address

- **Child Benefit letter:** Most Latin American families are not claiming child benefit. Eligibility rules require residence of 3 months before a claim can be made – potentially an additional 3 months for a child out of school.
- **Child Tax Credit Award:** Similar to above, families do not claim this, may be initially ineligible and/or may be unaware of it.
- **Child's NHS registration card:** Many GPs now no longer send NHS registration cards and are not obliged to do so. Lambeth Council used to accept a letter from the GP instead (for which GPs charge), but recently has also been refusing this document.
- **Immigration documents:** Most Latin American families that have recently arrived in the UK are EU nationals and so do not have immigration papers.

Ways forward

In many cases there are a number of factors that come together to cause prolonged delays. Whilst some of these factors may be outside the control of councils and schools, we believe there must be further steps that can be taken to improve the process. Whilst children are out of school, they lose the rhythm of learning, their English does not improve, and their self-confidence suffers. Older children in particular are at higher risk of under-achievement in education, which will have consequences for the rest of their lives. IRMO's Family Project tries to ameliorate this with our English classes and homework clubs and we prioritise places in the project for children that are out of school.

It is clear that waiting times in Lambeth are still unacceptably long. IRMO would welcome any steps that can be taken to work more collaboratively with Lambeth Council and the Schools Admissions Team to speed these up.

We have also recently collaborated with Middlesex University to produce a Schooling Toolkit in Spanish to provide information to newly arrived migrant parents about the schooling system in the UK.

Recommendations:

- **Greater flexibility in required documents:** School Admission teams should operate greater flexibility in the documents they will accept as proof of address
- **Improve processing times:** School Admission teams should work to improve processing times in order to keep within the 21 working days
- **Only one in-year application:** Children should only need to apply once for a school place in their borough. If no place is found in any of the schools a child has applied for, the Admission team should offer a place at an alternative school. This is particularly important for in-year applications and would reduce further delays in children accessing education
- **Improve communication:** Admission teams should make publicly available which schools have spaces and/or communicate this to IRMO
- **Signposting:** local school admission teams should signpost to sources of support such as the toolkit in Spanish and IRMO
- **Investigate indirect discrimination:** Councils should investigate whether schools are indirectly discriminating against BME pupils by turning away children on the basis of English language ability, particularly in years 10 and 11 and in secondary schools.

Katarina's story

13 year old Katarina* arrived in London from Spain in April 2015. After not hearing back from Lewisham regarding a school application she made in September 2015, Katarina's mother came to IRMO in October of that year to seek help. From October 2015 her daughter participated in the project, taking part in English classes and seeing a pro-bono psychologist to help her with the trauma of having been bullied repeatedly in Spain throughout her school life.

IRMO contacted Lewisham council to chase up Katarina's application and found out that they were awaiting proof of address. Not having any of the suggested documents, Katarina's mother was referred to known lawyers to get an affidavit and submitted it to Lewisham council. In January 2016 Katarina's mother came back to IRMO, having not heard anything 4 months after her submitting her application. Again IRMO called Lewisham council and they said they were still waiting for a proof of address; however, Katarina's mother had a receipt proving that Lewisham Council had received her documents on the 2nd November 2015. After looking for it, the person IRMO spoke to found the evidence and said it would be processed and the family should hear back within a week. However, no response was ever received. IRMO phoned the council again only to be told that the only proof of address they would accept was a signed letter from the person paying council tax on her home stating that the family have permission to live there, alongside a copy of a recent council tax bill. This was not possible for Katarina's mother to secure as she did not know who paid the council tax as she was subletting the room the family lived.

Towards the end of January 2016, the family moved to Lambeth where they submitted another application on the 12th of January. On the 20th of January, they received a letter explaining their application had not been successful. IRMO called Lambeth to find out which schools might have places and which Katarina should apply to. They could not give us this information and advised we call all the secondary schools in the borough. IRMO helped the family send applications to 3 schools in the borough on the 2nd and 5th of February. Finally, **after 11 months out of school**, on the 9th of April Katarina started school.

Roberto's story

Roberto* is 14 years old. After arriving in the UK in 2011, **he spent two years out of school**. Roberto's family applied to schools in Lambeth in 2012 and were offered a place in Lambeth Academy in October of that year. In November, Lambeth Academy declined the place offered due to Roberto's lack of English.

Roberto joined IRMO's children's project in April 2013. We immediately contacted the Admission team and they informed us that his case had been referred to Park Campus and that he needed to make a new application, which had been sent in March 2013. In May 2013 we sent a letter to Lambeth Academy and to the Lambeth Admission team, but did not get an answer.

Having worked together with IRMO for a number of months, and applying to schools directly, Roberto finally got a place in a school in Westminster in September 2013. He has to travel for an hour to get there and back.

* Names have been changed