

Choice and Access for All



Summary:

We will improve choice and make the admissions system fairer at secondary level by:

- providing accessible, face-to-face advice on choosing the right school, including choice advisers for those parents needing most help;
- extending the rights of free school transport to give more choice to disadvantaged children; and
- promoting fair admissions in order to give parents access to a wider range of schools. **There will be no return to the divisive 11-plus.**

3.1 School improvement has been helped not only by the reforms since 1997, but also by published data and inspection reports, and the ability of parents to express a preference for the school they want their child to attend. There are those who argue that there is no demand for choice, but this ignores the reality. YouGov found that 76% of parents with children in state schools wanted a genuine choice over which school their child attends.

3.2 The affluent can buy choice either by moving house or by going outside the state system. We want to ensure that choice is more widely available to all and is not restricted to those who can pay for it. This chapter sets out our plans to make sure that the admissions system works for all parents. There are two keys to success:

- First, we must ensure that there are more good places and more good schools. We are making good progress: we have five times more high-achieving non-selective comprehensives – those where 70% of pupils gain at least five good GCSEs – than in 1997. Some of the once weaker inner London boroughs have doubled the proportion of high achieving schools in the same period. And we set out in Chapter 2 our proposals to ensure that this improvement continues and that it is easier to create new schools and to expand existing good schools.
- Second, we must ensure that all parents have a decent chance of securing places for their children at the school they want. Some schools will inevitably be oversubscribed and will not be able to offer places to everyone who would like one. We must be sure that the process for deciding who secures a place is open and fair – and that the less affluent are not disadvantaged. We will continue to ensure that priority is also given for the most vulnerable groups such as children in care (Looked After Children) and those with Special Educational Needs.

3.3 We have a good deal to build on. In 2004, for the first time, local authorities were required to co-ordinate the secondary school admissions process for their areas. From this year, local authorities will also co-ordinate primary admissions.

3.4 Co-ordination has made it easier for parents to exercise the choice already available to them by cutting down on the number of forms they have to complete and by introducing a common timetable for each area. It has put an end to a system where different schools made offers on different dates; where some parents received several offers of places and others received none. In the first year of operation, a greater number of children received an early offer of a school place than in previous years. Co-ordination has also made it easier for local authorities to identify and follow up cases where no application has been made for a child.

3.5 We know that the system has improved. Fewer parents are now appealing for places at schools: in 2003/04 there were 46,480 appeals out of a total of 688,020 admissions to secondary schools, compared with 49,980 in the previous year. Most parents are able to secure a place at a local primary school of their choice. We believe that appeals can be further reduced with the opportunities to improve admissions arrangements set out below.

Choice in a specialist system

- 3.6** There are already more than 2,300 specialist schools. Within two years, we will have a fully specialist school system, where every secondary school that wishes to and meets the required standards will have at least one curriculum specialism. Particularly in urban areas, this will offer greater choice so that parents can choose a school that suits their child's strengths and interests.
- 3.7** However, for this to happen we must ensure that we have the right mechanisms in place to give everybody an opportunity to access choice. That requires us to:
- improve the quality of information;
 - extend rights to free school transport; and
 - allow schools to offer places to children over a wider area, within a fair admissions system.

Better information for parents

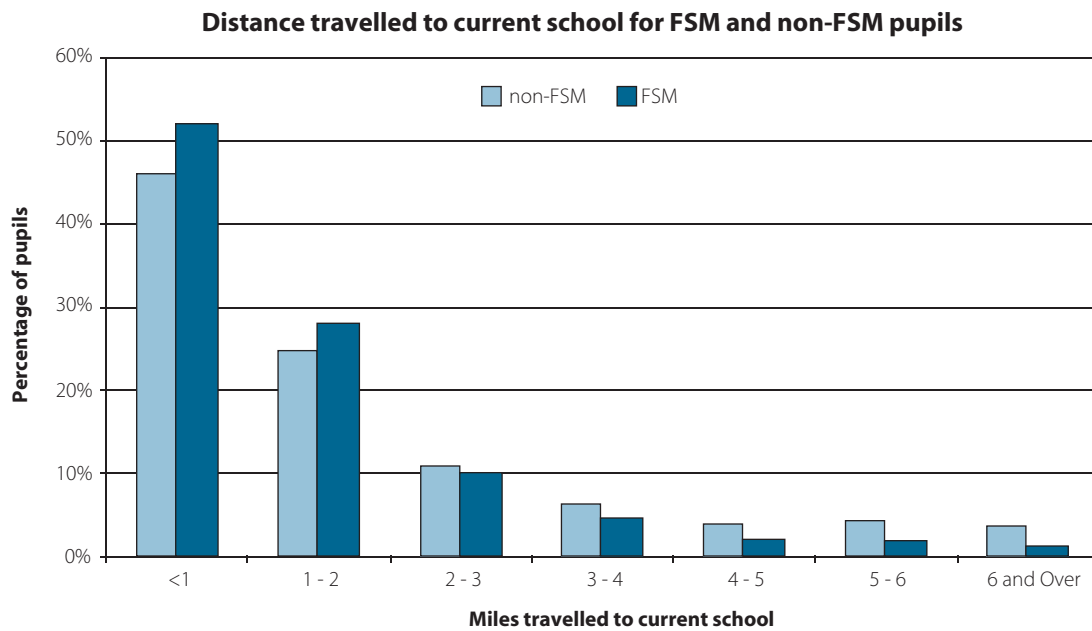
- 3.8** Parents need clear, accessible information when they are choosing a primary or secondary school. Achievement and Attainment Tables and published inspection reports have greatly opened up the system, with internet access making it relatively easy to find independent information about every school in the country. We have now added extra performance information, making it easier for parents to see the value a school adds to children's attainment, given their starting point. From February 2006, we are introducing a new school Profile, for primary and secondary schools, which will present the key information that parents need to know. The new three-yearly Ofsted inspections will ensure that their reports are more up to date. School Improvement Partners will pinpoint areas of strength and weakness within schools, highlighting the performance of specific subject areas or groups of children.
- 3.9** For all this information to be of most use to parents, they need to be able to compare school with school on a number of dimensions (academic performance, ethos, curriculum), as well as understand the admission arrangements. We already have a national website (www.parentscentre.gov.uk) which allows parents to run a simple postcode search to identify all the primary and secondary schools near to their home and gives them access to key information about the school. We will develop this website further so that it provides links to more information, such as the school Profile, admissions arrangements, transport information and the extended services on offer.
- 3.10** However, many families, particularly in the least well-off communities, have no internet access at home and rely on written and word of mouth information. Local authorities are also required to provide information to parents about school

choice. Some produce excellent material; others rely on the basic information required by law, written by the schools themselves. We want all local authorities to look again at how to improve the independent information they provide, to ensure they enable all parents to make well-informed choices, including through the parents' information booklet (the composite area prospectus).

- 3.11** Armed with information about the schools in their area, many parents can navigate the system successfully. But – even with the best paper and web-based information – some will continue to find the system difficult to understand. These parents and their children have just as much right as others to say which school they would prefer. We will work with local authorities to provide independent advice on how to compare secondary schools and decide which one is best for a child. This choice advice and support needs to be differentiated and targeted so that it benefits those who are currently least well-equipped to make effective choices.
- 3.12** We envisage a system that combines public sessions where parents can come and ask any questions that they have with targeted one-to-one sessions for parents who need more support. We want to see a network of choice advisers – people based within the community who can offer independent, unbiased advice and raise the interest, expectations and aspirations of those who may not previously have felt they had any real choice. By 2008, every local authority will have a network of choice advisers in place. We will provide £12 million over the next two years to support this; and we will work with local authorities to ensure that choice advisers target disadvantaged areas and parents.

Extending rights to school transport

- 3.13** For some, choice of school is hindered by concerns about the cost of transport. Since 1944 parents have had a right to free transport for their child only to their nearest suitable secondary school, where this is more than three miles from their home (for children over 8 years old) or more than two miles from their home (for children under 8 years old).
- 3.14** The graph overleaf shows that a greater proportion of pupils who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) travel less than two miles to school, while a greater proportion of pupils not eligible for free school meals travel three miles or more. For them, distance is less of an obstacle to getting a place in the right school.



- 3.15** We will introduce legislation to entitle disadvantaged pupils (eligible for free school meals or in receipt of the maximum level of Working Tax Credit) to free transport to any of the three suitable secondary schools closest to their home, where these schools are between two and six miles away. This will not affect the existing transport rights of parents who are eligible for free transport to their nearest school. And, of course, those aged under 16 already enjoy free bus travel in London. This will be extended up to the age of 18 from September 2006.
- 3.16** Improved school transport could also help to deal with other issues, including reducing environmental pollution and accidents. Greater access to subsidised school transport will help to reduce car use on the 'school run' and make an important contribution to safety and the environment.
- 3.17** In this context, we will work, with local authorities, to develop pilot projects to test the impact of an extended transport offer for all pupils and explore the links between better transport and fair admissions. These pilots may include a charging regime for better-off families.
- 3.18** We will also expect local authorities to consider all home-to-school and other travel as part of their new duty to support choice, diversity and fair access (see Chapter 9). This could include innovative schemes such as the development of safe walking routes and the use of customised yellow buses'. Local authorities may also consider the additional journeys – between schools and other providers, both within and beyond the school day – that will arise from more out-of-hours activities in extended schools and a broader range of 14-19 provision.

The 14-19 pathfinder in Hampshire

Hampshire schools have worked together to provide integrated transport between schools in the New Forest, to give all young people access to a full range of 14-19 options.

The ten secondary schools and two Further Education colleges in the New Forest wanted to make sure that young people could make full use of the new vocational training opportunities available. They developed a joint timetable to make sure that vocational training runs at the same times in different schools and set up a central database of pupils and transport routes. Local coach companies and taxi firms agreed to use their 'empty runs' in the mornings and afternoons to provide extra, shared transport between schools and colleges.

As a result of this innovative approach, they now have more environmentally friendly transport arrangements, and young people have a much wider range of educational opportunities.

Fair admissions

- 3.19** Our new system will be underpinned by fair admissions in order to extend choice and open up access for more parents. At present, non-selective schools that have more applicants than places usually offer available places to pupils living nearest, or to those with brothers and sisters already at the school.
- 3.20** In a system of specialist schools, it is particularly important that parents' choice of secondary school is not restricted to their immediate neighbourhood. We want schools to be able to offer some of their places to pupils living beyond their traditional catchment area; and we will encourage schools to work together to help make such choices meaningful for parents. We will continue to allow schools that wish to do so to give priority for up to 10% of their total places to pupils with particular aptitudes for some subjects – sport, modern foreign languages, performing and visual arts. We believe that this option should be available to schools as part of their approach to developing a specialist ethos.
- 3.21** We are clear that this is entirely different from an 11-plus system that divides children into different schools on the basis of academic ability. There will be no return to the 11-plus.
- 3.22** No one approach towards admissions will work in all circumstances. This is why we want to ensure that all self-governing schools (Foundation, voluntary aided and Trust) are free to use the approach to fair admissions that they think will best meet their local circumstances, as long as it is compatible with the Admissions

Code. We want them to be able to do so without having to go through a complex and bureaucratic process.

- 3.23** There are a number of alternative approaches that could be used to extend choice and access. One approach already used by some schools is banding, which means that schools offer places based either on the range of abilities of applicants, or on the local or national ability range, to achieve an all-ability intake. Some schools have long used locally-based banding systems and, since 2000, thirteen maintained schools and eight Academies have adopted banding.
- 3.24** While we recognise that for many schools traditional catchment areas will be the most appropriate option, we will make it easier for schools that wish to do so to introduce banding. Schools can combine banding with the use of inner and outer catchment areas. This approach would give priority for some places to those living further away from the school.

Fair banding at Mossbourne Academy

Mossbourne Academy operates a system of fair banding to ensure the intake is representative of the full range of abilities of those that apply.

If there are fewer applications than there are places available, then all applicants will be admitted. In the event of over-subscription, fair banding will be applied for the 180 places available. Each applicant will be required to take verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests to place them in one of four ability bands.

After children with Statements of Special Educational Needs are admitted, the Academy will normally offer 60% of the places in each band to local pupils who live inside the local catchment area and 40% of the places to pupils living outside the catchment area. If there are too few local applicants in any band, all pupils will be offered a place and the remaining places filled by children from outside the catchment area.

- 3.25** We recognise that no form of admissions arrangements can increase the number of places at an oversubscribed school. This is why we are continuing to increase the number of good schools – and the number of places in good schools. Of course it will still be the case that, where schools are oversubscribed, some parents will be disappointed.
- 3.26** We set out in Chapter 9 our plans to ensure that all new schools should be subject to a competitive process, judged by the local authority in their role as the commissioner of provision, and with the opportunity for local parents and others to have a say about who should provide the new school. Parents want to know about admissions arrangements just as much as they want to know about the school's ethos and character.

- 3.27** All proposals for new schools will need to set out their proposed admissions arrangements and indicate how these will promote community and social integration and choice. As part of the competition process, local authorities will be able to specify the community that a new school should serve, and will have the power to make modifications to proposed admissions arrangements to bring them into line with the Admissions Code of Practice. We will issue best practice guidance that will assist promoters of new schools in designing admission policies that are consistent with the Code.
- 3.28** In addition, every popular and successful school that expands will be required to prove to the local authority that their admissions arrangements are in line with the Code. No new or expanded school will be able to vary its admissions arrangements for the first three years of operation.
- 3.29** All these measures underpin our determination that parents should be able to choose schools rather than schools choosing parents. We are confident that these changes will allow more access to a greater variety of schools for all parents, including those from more deprived backgrounds. We will review progress in 2008 to consider whether any adjustments to transport, advice or admissions are needed to ensure that this is the case.