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Our proposals for making admissions fairer in 2015

As the parties prepare their manifestos for the 2015 election and the last party conferences approach, we set out our ideas of what we would like to see in those manifestos. Please support our proposals by lobbying local and national politicians. For more background material on these proposals see the *Comprehensive Future* website.

At the very least – a manifesto commitment to a review of school admissions

A wide-ranging review of school admissions should be commissioned by Government. This should be an objective study which reviews current practice and provides an informed basis for future policy so that the system can be fair and beneficial to all. *Comprehensive Future* proposed this in 2012 and it was supported by CASE, SEA, IPPR and Compass.

Legislation to end selection at 11

Legislation should be introduced to end selection on ability and aptitude. This can be done gradually starting with Year 7; no school should close; no child's education need be disrupted and all schools would be comprehensive in eight years.

Changes to the School Admissions Code

The School Admissions Code should apply equally to all schools regardless of their status. The introduction of banding should be a local decision, include all schools in the area and the test should take place in the primary schools. Banding across the local area profile must be used rather than across those applying to the school. *Comprehensive Future* welcomes the adoption by some faith schools of an open admissions policy which welcomes all children regardless of faith.

More consultation, coordination and decision making at local level

Local authorities should be supported as the middle tier in between schools and national government ensuring fair admissions. They have democratic legitimacy and local accessibility. All local authorities should be encouraged and funded to carry out their existing duties to the highest standard – to ensure fair access, challenge all local schools to have lawful admission arrangements and provide clear information for parents. The local authorities' role should be extended by giving them a new statutory duty to manage school admissions in all local schools, so that they would make the decision about whether applicants meet the schools' admissions criteria. This would ease the burden on schools and make the process more open. Local authorities should manage the appeals for all local schools. The duty to provide a local forum involving stakeholders to consider school admissions should be reinstated and supported. Admission Forums should agree the admission criteria for all local schools.

More monitoring at national level

The regulation of admissions and appeals to be the same for all schools, whether academies or maintained. There should be strengthened national monitoring of admission and appeals by extending the powers of the Adjudicator to make changes.

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We need your support

If we are to be an effective campaign, the next two years are going to be expensive. We need your support. Postage costs have gone up. If you would like your newsletter emailed do let us know – we know many prefer paper so do understand, but if you are happy with email it saves us money. Please, if you can, send us a donation or take out a standing order (form can be downloaded from the website). There must be many more supporters of comprehensive education – please encourage your friends to go to our website and sign up!

Two relevant research reports published

“It might be best if you looked elsewhere”

Concerned about reports that schools misuse the admissions system to manipulate their intake, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner has carried out an investigation. The report states that it is in fact unlikely that large numbers of schools are misusing the system but it has found practices it considers unfair and makes several recommendations:

1. The Department for Education, working with the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA), should issue further clarification on the difference between criteria based on religious observance, which are lawful, and those based on non-religious service, which are not. OSA should seek consensus from faith bodies on the differences between these criteria, drawing on existing good practice in faith schools in England.
2. The Local Government Ombudsman should be given jurisdiction to examine admissions appeals for all state-funded schools.
3. The OSA should examine whether there have been cases where it has taken a different view regarding the legality of admissions arrangements from that taken by appeals panels, and take appropriate steps should this prove to be a significant issue.
4. The DfE should commission large-scale, qualitative research to enable all concerned to understand the specific nature and scale of inequality in admissions outcomes and the reasons for this.
5. All admissions authorities should conduct an assessment of the extent to which existing arrangements meet their duties as specified in the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) under the Equality Act 2010 to see whether they dissuade particular groups from applying, and if so consider what they should do to counter this effect and comply with the Duty.
6. Local authorities should be given powers to collect anonymised demographic information on the characteristics of children applying for a place at the state-funded schools across their areas, alongside data on places offered and accepted.
7. The DfE should issue a clear statement on the degree to which it is lawful for schools to act in any way that has the effect of dissuading certain parents or carers from applying for a place. Should legal advice indicate any such action is currently lawful, urgent steps should be taken to amend the law. Being dissuaded from applying to a school should become grounds for parents to appeal against an admissions decision. Appeals on this ground should be treated in the same way as other appeals.

Parties invite policy ideas

The Your Britain section of the Labour Party website has the report of the Education and Childcare policy commission. It does not refer to admissions or ending selection; you can have your say by June 13th.

Meanwhile, Liberal Democrats invite manifesto ideas on www.manifesto2015.org/submit_an_idea

“It might be best if you looked elsewhere”: An investigation into the schools admission process. Office of the Children’s Commissioner, April 2014 www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_798

Banding and Ballots

In February, the Sutton Trust published research by Philip Noden, Anne West and Audrey Hind of the LSE examining the admissions criteria of secondary schools for the 2012 September intake.

The report has an informative explanation of how banding works, a description of how it operates in three areas and a very useful summary of historical and policy context relating to secondary school admissions. It found that distance and sibling criteria remain the predominant oversubscription criteria for non-selective state schools. Only 5% of comprehensives were using either banding or random allocation for the 2012 intake. Partial selection by aptitude had increased from 5% (133 schools) to 6% (155) since 2008. This form of selection was found more in academies, with 10% of academies selecting on aptitude.

The authors define local or area-wide banding as where the planned admission number of the school is distributed across the ability bands in proportion to the profile of the local area. Even though in some areas the children all took the same test in the primary schools, some schools then banded their applicants using what the authors define as ‘proportionate banding’ so the intake was banded in proportion to the attainment level of those who expressed a preference for the school rather than purely in the proportions of the local area. Also, some of the schools required pupils to sit their own banding tests at the school. This was criticised as inconvenient for parents, demanding of children and wasteful of resources. The authors recommend that pupils should sit only one banding test and that should be valid for any school using banding to which parents apply.

Some 13% of schools require parents to fill in supplementary information forms. Although 39% of academies with a religious character did not use any religious oversubscription criteria, some faith schools were using up to 16 different religious criteria. Most grammar schools appear to use test scores as a threshold before ranking applicants by other criteria, such as distance.

The researchers concluded that there is a need for greater coordination. In one town with seven schools, five different methods were used for taking feeder school and distance into account in the admissions process; in another local authority, 22 schools used the same admission criteria despite two being an own admission authority. They also found differences in the quality of information provided by the local authority prospectuses, some making it easy for parents to see the criteria for all schools, others requiring parents to search them out even though the prospectuses are intended to provide information on all local schools.

Banding and Ballots: secondary school admissions in England Sutton Trust February 2014 www.suttontrust.com/our-work/research/schools/