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Admissions policy – the muddle continues

Since last Summer, Ministers have referred to a forthcoming consultation on a new School Admissions Code. It seems some time in coming. There have been several Parliamentary Questions. The typical reply has been:

“The Government is giving careful consideration to the report of the Office of the Schools Adjudicator as part of our current review of the School Admissions Code, in addition to other research and publications. We will be conducting a full public consultation in due course and will give careful consideration to all the views expressed in that consultation.” (Lord Nash, March 2016.)

However there are indications of what we might get in a draft Code, arising from the most recent Office of the Schools Adjudicator’s Annual Report and the White Paper.

The OSA report

In November 2015 the then Chief Adjudicator, Dr Elizabeth Passmore, produced her Annual Report. It came out quietly from the DfE later. She has now retired and civil servant Shan Scott has replaced her. The Annual Report is further evidence of the need for the wide-ranging review of the whole system of school admissions which *Comprehensive Future* has called for.

The report raises many of the concerns that *Comprehensive Future* found in our survey in 2014. It highlights the problem of own admission authority schools failing to meet the requirement of the Code, with admission arrangements that are “unnecessarily complex and lack transparency” and raises questions about so-called fair banding. She found that one in five own admission authority schools failed to notify their local authority of their admission arrangements by the deadline.

She reported: “For popular schools that have complicated arrangements, especially if they include tests for banding purposes and/or for places allocated for aptitude and/or for some selective places by ability, the first hurdle in gaining a place is to take the test. In some areas the local authority administers a single set of testing arrangements for all the schools concerned so that children take only one set of tests. In other areas children may have to attend test centres to take different tests for different schools on more than one day.”

These problems will only increase as more schools become academies. One comment from the report says it all:

“Questions asked last year remain: why do some schools decide to have complex arrangements and what is their aim? Also, when the objection to the arrangements in 75 per cent of cases was upheld or partially upheld, and in some of those not upheld there were some other aspects that did not comply with the Code, how confident can we be that the arrangements for other schools not subject to an objection do not contravene the Code? The majority might be fully compliant, but we do not know.”

Limiting the right of objection

The OSA has dealt with many objections from the Fair Admissions Campaign about faith schools and also three from *Comprehensive Future*. The majority have been upheld. However, Elizabeth Passmore in her report raised the possibility of limiting the right of objection just to parents.

The report says: “There have been instances of pressure groups and individuals making use of the provision to object when it appears to be more about trying to influence a policy matter than concern about the arrangements of a school for which parents might legitimately be considering applying for a place for their child.”

This comment was seized upon by Nicky Morgan and Nick Gibb, both expressing the intention to limit the right of objection, although this would require a change to

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primary legislation. There have been many questions in the Lords about this.

Comprehensive Future has written to Nicky Morgan to object to this change. In the letter Melissa Benn, the Chair, said:

“Over the years, we at Comprehensive Future have watched as the admissions process has become ever more bewildering and difficult to navigate, particularly when schools have multiple, overlapping criteria. It takes an exceptionally determined and well-informed parent to pursue a complaint with the Adjudicator. Civil society organisations therefore play an extremely valuable role, and one entirely in the public interest, in ensuring that the rights of parents and their children are safeguarded in this matter.

Dr Passmore’s comments are best interpreted as a need for more robust support, and funding, for the Adjudicator, not for the elimination of the rights of certain groups to lodge an objection in the first place. To claim that such groups are ‘vexatious’, as you did in a recent speech, is therefore to misunderstand the crucial interaction of civil and political society in safeguarding our democracy, and therefore to risk degrading the very quality of that democracy.”

The White Paper

Unless there are far-reaching changes alongside those in the recently published White Paper, the wholesale academisation proposed will produce 24,000 own admission authorities and admissions that will be chaotic, unfair and divisive.

In the White Paper the Government says its priority is to “ensure parents can easily understand how to get a place at their local schools”.

Views on “a number of changes to the school admissions system to make it simpler and clearer” will be

Sevenoaks and beyond

We are continuing to press for more information through Freedom of Information requests. When we asked for the proposal that Nicky Morgan has agreed we were told that disclosure “would prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs”.

We will continue to lobby for the information. Meanwhile other attempts are now being made to set up “annexes” of grammar schools. In comprehensive Maidenhead there are plans to build a satellite of Sir William Borlase’s Grammar School in Marlow. In Kent, a Canterbury grammar is proposing an “annex” seven miles away in Herne Bay.

Both are being opposed by local campaign groups. However, there is some good news. March 15th was a special day in the history of Guernsey’s education system when the States of Guernsey finally voted to end selection. There is an election at the end of April though and there are fears that an incoming government might try to change the decision.

Are you a Labour party member?

Labour, even with Jeremy Corbyn, does not have a commitment to end selection if in office. Please contact the party leader, the National Policy Forum and your MP if Labour.

Please invite *Comprehensive Future* to speak at your CLP. See an article on the website by our first Chair, David Chaytor.

Admissions – what we want

- Abolish selection, whether by aptitude or ability.
- Reduce the proportion of children that can be selected on faith grounds to a maximum of 50% for all faith schools.
- Set up a wide-ranging review of how admissions are carried out, reporting on the merits of banding, lotteries, neighbourhood schools, etc.
- Stop allowing academies and free schools to “opt out” of parts of the admissions code.
- Reinstate local forums to consider and challenge admissions locally.
- Empower local authorities to enforce the code, administer as well as co-ordinate admissions and conduct appeals for all local schools. Give local authorities sole responsibility for ensuring sufficient school places are available.
- Give the Chief Adjudicator power to change admissions arrangements directly.

sought, including requiring local authorities to coordinate in-year admissions (only recently taken away from local authorities!) and handle the administration of the independent admission appeals function. There is also a proposal to “streamline” the functions of the Office of the Schools Adjudicator so objections to admission arrangements are resolved more quickly. Views will also be sought on creating a single route for escalating any complaints about the maladministration of appeals to a public service ombudsman.

So watch this space and be ready to respond.

Changes to note at CF

New address

Comprehensive Future has changed its postal address to: PO Box 3176, Mitcham, Surrey CR4 9DR

Fundraising

Fundraising for a paid worker is now underway. We hope to have some large donations and many small ones. If you can, please make a donation by standing order. Details on the website.

Steering Group

The next meeting of the steering group is on May 18th. Please contact info@comprehensivefuture.org.uk if there are items you want the group to consider.

Contact details

If you have changed your contact details please remember to let us know.

If you are a CF supporter in one of the 36 areas where there is selection, do join the Google group. Email becks_hickman@hotmail.com to go on the list.