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Will selection become an issue in Election 2015?

So far only Ukip has clearly advocated that it wants some schools to become grammar schools. It seems likely that the decision to allow a Kent grammar to expand into an "annex" several miles away will have to wait until after the election. Labour have made clear that this would not be allowed by a Labour government but Tristram Hunt said, in response to a question about ending selection, that *"I do think we need to resist the allure of English education's mania for debating secondary structures. Eighty per cent of the attainment gap at 16 is already present at the age of seven. The real fight against educational inequality begins with Sure Start and using early state intervention to help support families and better parenting."*

Meanwhile, grammar schools across the country, for example in Redbridge, Gloucestershire and Slough, are planning to expand on their sites. This is particularly controversial in Gloucestershire where there are falling rolls and the *Guardian* has reported that at least 11 comprehensive school heads have written strongly worded letters to the principals and governing bodies of the grammar schools Marling and Stroud High, which are proposing to increase their rolls by 25%.

Of course as grammar schools take few pupils eligible for free school meals they miss out on pupil premium funding. Some Southend grammars are complaining about funding whereas some Birmingham grammars plan a two-tier selection test to recruit some pupil premium students.

All of this illustrates that the idea remains strong in England that children must be divided at 11 into sheep and goats and that a selective system is an education system suitable for the 21st century. Clearly *Comprehensive Future* and all the other organisations opposed to selection need to redouble our efforts.

Our manifesto for the new Government – what we want

- Abolish selection whether by aptitude or ability.
- 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, carry out appeals for all schools and give them sole responsibility for ensuring sufficient school places are available.
- Give the Chief Adjudicator on admissions power to change admissions arrangements directly.

Leading head calls for independent review

In February, Dame Sally Coates, in an interview with the *Independent*, said the "time has come for an independent review of admissions across the country". She particularly criticised selection by aptitude. She said she would like to see banding tests set and marked independently of the school as schools were fixing so-called "fair banding" entrance tests. By setting the mark bracket for the lowest ability band artificially high, schools can rig the process to accept more of the brightest candidates. "If schools want to carry out 'fair banding' this should be nationally administered and tests should be centrally marked," she writes. "If schools want to cherry-pick students it should only be students from deprived backgrounds."

She also reportedly criticised covert selection in faith schools where parents can be asked to prove allegiance to a faith – information which is used as a "social filter" to take pupils from more affluent homes.

Chief Adjudicator calls for fairer admissions

The Annual Report of the Chief Adjudicator Dr Elizabeth Passmore was published in January after our last newsletter. In what is quite a damning report about school admissions she said that the recommendations she made last year seem to have been ignored. The report is wide ranging covering, for example, fair access protocols, the role of local authorities, and admissions to sixth forms and to reception classes for summer born children. Complaints about school admissions have gone from 162 last year to 274. The main offenders were schools which are admission authorities, i.e. foundation and voluntary aided schools or academies. Only 30 of the complaints were about community or voluntary controlled schools.

Referring to the arrangements of some own admission authority schools and comparing them with the simplest ones the report says:

"The complex arrangements compared with the clearest have some or all of: numerous oversubscription criteria and sometimes sub-categories within them; different

categories of places; more than one catchment area; feeder schools; tens of points available and needed to gain priority; banding and therefore tests to be taken; aptitude assessment; and several faith-based oversubscription criteria . . . For popular schools that set complicated arrangements, especially if they include tests for banding purposes and/or for places allocated for aptitude and/or selective places the first hurdle in gaining a place is to take the test. This may mean taking different tests on more than one Saturday if the schools being considered as preferences each set their own tests, unlike those local authorities where one test is used by all the selective schools."

Following our study last year of the admissions criteria of all English secondary schools we put in objections to the adjudicator about three schools. Two were selecting on aptitude criteria not allowed by the Code and a third was giving priority in its criteria to children of former pupils. In all three cases the objections were upheld.

Contact your candidates if you live here

You can make selection an issue. There are fully selective schools in the following constituencies:

Aldridge Brownhills, Altrincham and Sale W., Ashford, Aylesbury, Beaconsfield, Bexleyheath and Crayford, Birkenhead, Birmingham Ladywood, Birmingham Selly Oak, Birmingham Edgbaston, Boston and Skegness, Bournemouth E., Buckingham, Canterbury, Carshalton and Wallington, Chatham and Aylesford, Chelmsford, Cheltenham, Chesham and Amersham, Chingford and Woodford Green, Chipping Barnet, Colchester, Dartford, Dewsbury, Dover, East Devon, Edmonton, Epsom and Ewell, Faversham and Mid Kent, Finchley and Golders Green, Folkestone and Hythe, Gainsborough, Gillingham and Rainham, Gloucester, Grantham and Stamford, Gravesham, Halifax, Ilford North, Kingston and Surbiton, Lancaster and Fleetwood, Liverpool Wavertree, Louth and Horncastle, Maidstone and The Weald, Mid Dorset and North Poole, Old Bexley and Sidcup, Orpington, Penrith and the Borders, Plymouth Sutton and Devonport, Reading East, Ribble Valley, Richmond Park, Rochester and Strood, Rochford and Southend E., Rossendale and Darwen, Rugby, Salisbury, Sittingbourne and Sheppey, Skipton and Ripon, Sleaford and N. Hykeham, Slough, South Holland and The Deepings, South Thanet, Southend West, Stoke on Trent South, Stratford upon Avon, Stretford and Urmston, Sutton and Cheam, Sutton Coldfield, Stroud, The Wrekin, Tonbridge and Malling, Torbay, Totnes, Tunbridge Wells, Walsall S., Wirral W., Wolverhampton S.W., Wycombe, Wythenshawe and Sale E., Wirral S.

Of course neighbouring ones will be affected too. But if you live in one of them will you ask your candidates for their views on selection? We would like to hear from you with any responses.

Winning the argument

In February our Chair Melissa Benn took part in two university debates, in Manchester and at the Cambridge Union. Both motions were supporting the reintroduction of grammar schools. Both were defeated. A report can be found on the Local Schools Network website www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2015/03/winning-the-argument-on-grammar-schools/

It is also on YouTube.

2015 Comprehensive Future Conference and AGM 10 am Saturday 21st November 2015

The Abbey Centre, 34 Great Smith Street, Westminster SW1P 3BU

Whichever party wins the election it is clear that there will be a great deal of campaigning needed to bring about fair admissions and an end to selection. What is also clear is that there are many on both sides of the left/right spectrum who support non-selective education. So we want to take the chance of an all-day conference to allow time to explore the way ahead. Please keep the date now. Details will follow.

Some recent publications

• **Melissa Benn and Margaret Tulloch**, Chair and Secretary of *Comprehensive Future* have contributed a chapter on admissions and ending selection in *What's next for education – advice to the next government from the New Visions Group*. The book is a compilation of a wide-ranging set of proposals from the New Visions Group, which includes academics, headteachers, writers, parents and governors. It is available, price £10, from Central Books Ltd, 99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN, 020 8525 8800, www.centralbooks.com

• **Professor John Coldron**, who has researched school admissions for some years, has written a very useful review of school admissions research for RISE (Research and Information on State Education). It can be downloaded from their website at www.risetrust.org.uk/node/60. The review was launched at a seminar in early March. RISE plans to have a report of the seminar on its website soon.

• A **Civitas** book published in March *The Ins and Outs of Selective Secondary Schools* includes a wide range of articles in favour of and against selection. There are some very useful contributions, including ones about the history of the partial move to comprehensive education, and it provides several excellent, detailed, evidence-based demolitions of selection at 11. It is available via www.civitas.org.uk/education/theselectiondebate, £18.

To coincide with the launch the author of one of the chapters, Henry Stewart co-founder of the Local Schools Network, produced a very useful short myth buster www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2015/03/eleven-grammar-school-myths-and-the-actual-facts/