

DFES Consultation On School Admissions

The Government's consultation paper is about improvements to the school admissions framework introduced in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. The proposals Government are consulting on take account of research into parents' experiences and expectations of school secondary admissions, conducted by Sheffield Hallam University and the Office for National Statistics. They also take account of views expressed to the Department by a number of Local Education Authorities; others including Schools Adjudicators, the churches, the Local Government Association, the Local Government Ombudsman and governors' associations; and the many members of the public who write to their MPs or the Department about school admissions.

The Government's objectives are about ensuring that admission arrangements meet parents' preferences for the school of their choice to the maximum extent possible (while some schools are over-subscribed it is, sadly, never going to be possible for every parent to get the outcome they want) and work to the benefit of local parents and children. The main proposals in the consultation paper require primary legislation. The Government will make changes in the Education Bill already announced. Other more minor or technical proposals can be done through secondary legislation or by amendment of the School Admissions Code of Practice.

The main changes proposed are:

- requiring co-ordination of admissions systems and school place allocation by LEAs, on a locally agreed basis which allows schools which are their own admission authority (foundation and voluntary aided schools) to apply their own admission criteria and feed the results into the LEA for allocation purposes;
- clarifying the law on parental preference, to resolve any doubts LEAs may have about whether their present or proposed systems comply;
- making the current voluntary Admissions Forums mandatory, with a role to advise all admission authorities in their area on admissions issues, including the sharing of pupils with challenging behaviour and from other vulnerable groups;
- ceasing to use standard numbers to establish how many pupils a school can take, relying instead on admission numbers set as part of admission arrangements based on the new capacity assessment;
- amending legislation so that objections to the Adjudicator can be made by all those who ought to have been consulted on intended admission arrangements, rather than just those who actually were; and so that community and voluntary controlled schools can object to the arrangements of local foundation and voluntary aided schools which affect them;
- relaxing consultation requirements on admission authority schools, so that, after an initial year in which all will have to publish intended admission arrangements, they need only publish them every other year if nothing has changed and there were no objections previously. Alternatively, providing for LEAs to carry out consultation on behalf of these schools.

There are many positive developments proposed in the consultation document which should lead to a more consistent and co-ordinated system and enable an improved service to be provided to a greater majority of pupils and parents.

Particular issues which we may need to be aware of and which may require further consideration include:

- the perception that there may be a reduction in the autonomy of Foundation and Aided schools in the control and management of their admissions
- possible difficulties in synchronisation of key dates with neighbouring Authorities given the complexity of the Buckinghamshire system as a result of operating a selection process at 11+
- the definition of “preference” and the implications that the various definitions may have on the admissions system within Buckinghamshire