

# **The New Buckinghamshire Secondary Transfer Test: Performance of the First Year**

**Paper for the meeting of the Education Select Committee of Buckinghamshire County Council to be held on 19 November 2014**

## **Executive summary**

- The Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools are now responsible for the secondary transfer test.
- A new test was introduced in 2013.
- The two years of the new test have yielded similar results.
- The new test has been broadly welcomed.

## **Introduction**

The Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools welcome the opportunity to discuss the performance of the new Secondary Transfer Test with the Education Select Committee of Buckinghamshire County Council and are grateful for the on-going support of the Council and its employees. This paper provides some background to and the rationale for the new testing arrangements, high level data on how the 'for entry in 2014' secondary transfer test performed and also discusses some of the issues and questions raised in the media and elsewhere. It also discusses some of the plans for the future.

## **Background**

After the last general election all but one of the Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools became academies. The remaining school has since converted. The result of this is that the thirteen Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools are all now their own admissions authorities.

The grammar schools have a tradition of working together, recognising each other's strengths and characteristics and following academy conversion wished to continue this. The Headteachers of the thirteen Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools were very keen to maintain a co-ordinated selection system to avoid an admissions and testing 'free for all' to the detriment of the pupils and families.

With the full co-operation of Buckinghamshire County Council it was decided to continue with centralised testing and also to take the opportunity to review the Secondary Transfer Test being used for selection as this had not been done for a considerable amount of time. It was agreed that, in line with more recent thinking in assessment, a broader-based selection test should be introduced as this would better assess children's all-round ability. Reviewing the test allowed us to make improvements based on the feedback from primary Headteachers and also gave us the opportunity to benchmark costs.

Having decided to introduce a new test the following took place:

- A specification for a more primary curriculum-based Secondary Transfer Test was created.
- Following a review of the market two companies were identified as potential suppliers and both were invited to submit a tender.

- The outcome of the formal competitive tender process was that the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) at Durham University was awarded the contract to be the new test provider.
- Additionally Buckinghamshire County Council was contracted to continue to administrate the testing and admissions process. Initially this was for each of the thirteen grammar schools individually but more recently on behalf of The Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools (TBGS), a not-for profit company established by the grammar schools specifically to manage the contracts for secondary transfer testing.
- Following a pilot with one thousand Year 6 children in Buckinghamshire in 2013, the new test was first introduced in September 2013 for children transferring to secondary school in September 2014. The first children to take the new test started secondary school in September this year. The 2015 test has also now been taken.

Throughout the process of changing to the new test The Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools worked closely with Buckinghamshire primary Headteachers in both maintained and partner schools. This continues via attendance at the termly Headteachers' Admissions Working Group meetings convened by Buckinghamshire County Council.

The new test incorporates verbal reasoning, non-verbal reasoning and mathematics. This is designed to test a range of competencies rather than the single verbal reasoning test of the previous test which was easier to coach for. Feedback from primary Headteachers is that the new test is broadly welcomed and is considered a more effective mechanism for selection to grammar school.

In contrast to the generally positive response from stakeholders, there have been some small-scale attempts to try to discredit the new Secondary Transfer Test. This has included some press statements, comments on social media and also publication of a pamphlet. Several claims have been made; however these are based entirely on interim data obtained via Freedom of Information requests and from a small and unrepresentative sample of schools, rather than on published, validated data. There have also been comments in social media, some of which show a misunderstanding of school admissions processes and the law.

### **The first rounds of testing**

In both 2013 and 2014 we were pleased with the testing process.

In both years, there were some administrative issues which the primary and secondary schools, Buckinghamshire County Council Admissions Team and CEM are working to improve. Examples include some CDs not working in 2013 (improved for 2014) and unclear instructions for labelling and returning completed test paper this year which will be improved ready for September 2015.

Primary schools have generally welcomed the revised test dates and the fact that the two papers are sat on the same day. They have also welcomed the nature of the tests including the revised content and that lost curriculum time is reduced.

All the main testing is now held on the same day, with pupils in out-of-county schools which are not partners tested in grammar schools.

The new administration processes include the introduction of Selection Review Panels to enable parents of children who did not reach the qualifying score to ask for a review informed by improved evidence from their primary school. The review process is undertaken by experienced primary and secondary Headteachers.

## Results

The Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools work closely with the Buckinghamshire County Council Admissions Team. Data from the tests has been published incrementally across the year as the different stages of the admissions process are completed and is available on the County Council website [www.buckscc.gov.uk](http://www.buckscc.gov.uk). The first set of data for the 2015 test has also just been published including how many children took the test and how many have automatically qualified.

Key figures are:

	2015*	2014	2013
Number of children registered for the test	8553	8431	7438
Number of children automatically qualifying for a grammar school place	2783	2502	2406
Automatic qualification rate (121+)	33%	30%	32%
Total number of children qualifying	N/A	2846	2630
Total number of Bucks children qualifying	N/A	1538	1566
Total number of boys qualifying	N/A	1485	1369
Total number of girls qualifying	N/A	1361	1261

\*2015 figures are provisional

The number of pupils registering for the 2014 test was up on the previous year and again for 2015. Some of this increase is due to an increase in 'test tourism' see below.

The number of children automatically qualifying was similar to the previous year. The number of boys and girls qualifying was similar and also in line with 2013. In the light of the increased cohort, we sought to retain the percentage of that cohort which actually qualified.

In September 2014, 1484 children resident in Buckinghamshire took up places at Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools. This represents 72% of the total number of pupils taking up grammar school places in Year 7. All children in Buckinghamshire who qualified for grammar school were offered a place.

It should be borne in mind that there have been decreasing numbers of eleven year old children in Buckinghamshire. This declining trend is set to be reversed from 2015. This will have impacted on the numbers of Buckinghamshire children sitting and succeeding in the test. Therefore, the increasing numbers of children sitting and succeeding in the test is a trend that had existed prior to the test change.

Some points to bear in mind when reviewing the test data

1. Any suggestion of different performance by sub-groups has to be made with caution. For example, a suggestion has been made that racial group is a factor - this is dangerous because it is not the racial group itself that is the determining factor of performance; it's much more likely that it is a common characteristic that some of those in the racial group share that is important; for example, it could be the length of time that the child

or family has been in the country (which is recognised in the EAL3 factor in school funding). Equally, the interaction between different pupil characteristics is complex and it may be that those in this group also have a significant overlap with, for example, deprivation indices.

2. We have to be careful not to jump to wrong conclusions because of the subtleties of the data. Even asserting that girls and boys perform comparably (as it appears from the data) has to be treated with caution because it does not take into account any possible difference in parental aspirations which might affect their willingness to put their child forward for the test.
3. When looking at the performance of state-educated children in the different areas of Bucks, the figures are not easily comparable because:
  - a. Some children in Bucks primary schools live outside Bucks
  - b. Some children in schools outside Bucks live inside Bucks
  - c. The proportion in each area attending private schools may differ but is hard to measure
  - d. We don't know what type of school the out-of-county-educated children attend so it is an unknown mixture of state and private.
4. When comparing performance of 2014 with 2013, care must be taken to compare like with like as there were significant changes of schools included in the partner school group (ie the Slough primary schools left the partner school group).

### **Some frequently raised issues**

1. Is the test tutor proof?

The Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools were keen to use a test that assessed a broader range of skills. This means that the content of the test is partly aligned to the National Curriculum and based on the work which Year 5 children have undertaken at primary school.

The Grammar Schools are concerned about the amount of coaching taking place in preparation for secondary selection testing and in moving to a new test were keen to try and reduce the impact of this. There is no such thing as a 'tutor proof' test. However, the new tests are less susceptible to the impact of specific test tutoring because they are aligned to the National Curriculum which all children study. Additionally, the questions in the new test are less predictable than in the previous test because they cover a wider range of topics and there is a broader range of question types – points acknowledged and welcomed by primary Headteachers. It should also be noted that many primary schools use CATs test with children. Those tests follow a very similar approach to the new Secondary Transfer Tests so many children will already be familiar with formal test techniques from their experience of taking these tests at primary school.

## 2. Can the test contribute to narrowing the gap?

Narrowing the gap in pupil attainment is a complex issue. In developing the test, the Grammar Schools worked with CEM to ensure that the test was deemed appropriate for Buckinghamshire cohorts and was fair for children whatever their gender, ethnicity or social background. The results from the pilot showed the test was fair but this will continue to be monitored closely.

Nationally and locally, grammar schools recognise that they have a responsibility to promote social mobility and to ensure that they give opportunities to students from all backgrounds. There have been a number of discussions between the Grammar School Headteachers' Association and Government ministers about children entitled to free school meals (FSM). At a local level, many grammar schools are providing aspirational opportunities to primary-aged children; there is also a commitment to include FSM entitlement as a high ranking admissions criterion for when schools are over-subscribed. National data suggests 'narrowing the gap' is much broader issue in Buckinghamshire than the secondary transfer test. This can only be realistically achieved with improvements in KS1 and KS2 outcomes to ensure that all children can enter secondary school with a clear view towards success and GCSE and A Level. For this to happen there needs to be clear collaboration between all sectors of education, in partnership with parents.

One local group has claimed that children from poorer backgrounds and BME have 'done worse' in the new Secondary Transfer Test. It is not specified what 'worse' means; however it is not reliable to make statements about trends and patterns for specific groups from a single year's data and as stated above the data that has been used to make such claims is a small subset of the total and unrepresentative. To substantiate such claims a detailed analysis of additional information such as the current attainment of the children concerned would be needed. We are currently considering how a longitudinal study might be achieved.

## 3. The county/out of county debate

The Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools (and Buckinghamshire County Council before them) have no control over which children sit the test. Irrespective of residence, families cannot be barred from entering their child into the test and no charge can be made to take part.

In Buckinghamshire primary schools it is usual for most children to sit the test i.e. all children take the test unless their parents have specifically chosen to opt out. The majority of children take the test irrespective of whether they are likely to qualify. This way, we ensure that all children, whatever the parental understanding of their abilities may be, have an opportunity to enter the test and to attend a grammar school, subject to qualification. By contrast, children taking the test from outside Buckinghamshire 'opt in' to do the test.

In order to automatically qualify for a place at a grammar school, children must obtain a standardised score of 121 or above. Where the children live is irrelevant unless the school they wish to attend has more qualified applicants than places. If that happens, then the particular school's admissions criteria come in to play. Most schools include catchment and

distance from the school as one of these. Details of these are published on each school's website. The proportion of children qualifying in and out of county for a particular school will therefore depend on how many pupils have applied to the school and also the school's location. For example, Chesham Grammar School is very close to the Buckinghamshire/Hertfordshire border with Berkhamsted as close as Amersham. Similarly, Sir William Borlase is in Marlow in Buckinghamshire, but half of its catchment area is in the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. Burnham Grammar School serves part of Slough close to the school.

The Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools are aware of 'test tourism' (which is not unique to Buckinghamshire). The publicity surrounding the new test and the fact that CEM has recently been chosen to provide tests for grammar schools in many areas has led to an increase of interest in the test. A further, significant factor was also the decision to pull forward the timing of the test and subsequent announcement of results to comply with the requirement, in the Admissions Code, to publish the results in advance of the preference deadline.

This means that some parents are entering their children for tests in different parts of the country (anecdotally there has been evidence to suggest that some parents are entering their children for tests in as many as five different locations). This is undesirable but there are no legal grounds which can be used to refuse to test children if they apply. This means that the number of out-of-county children being tested is higher than it could reasonably be expected to be (and is increasing). This in turn means that the initial qualification rate for out of county children can look disproportionately high. The additional candidates do increase the cost of testing to the grammar schools.