

## **Council Admissions Consultation Response**

### **Introduction**

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) believes that the arrangements for moving from primary to post primary school have an important contribution to make to the implementation of New Post Primary Arrangements. Therefore it welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation since there are clear implications for primary and post primary schools at a time of educational change.

Indeed it is important to emphasise that the pressures on changing school at eleven could be greatly reduced under new arrangements. Given a common curriculum at key stage 3 important career path decisions are deferred until 14. For most children their aspirations and interests will emerge after sampling the diversity of the key stage 3 curriculum. It is for this reason that we see age 14 as the earliest point at which major course/subject decisions should be taken.

It is regrettable that this consultation is taking place before parents and others have any appreciation of the new kinds of post-primary arrangements which might emerge in the course of the next few years. School admission arrangements should, however, work for the benefit of all parents and children in an area. The arrangements should be as simple as possible for the parents to use, and help them to make the appropriate decision about the preferred school for their children. Even in a non-selective system with greater flexibility at 14-19, parents will need support in determining their preferences for post primary school. Parents must have a clear explanation of what a school will do if oversubscribed and how likely they are to be successful in an application. The degree to which parents will accept the admissions process depends on the transparency of the process its timeliness and its final outcome, including any appeals process.

This response is written to reflect each of the eighteen questions posed in the Consultation Response Booklet.

### **1 Principles and objectives**

The principles and objectives set out in the consultation provide a sound basis on which to develop new admissions arrangements. Council would be concerned at what might appear to be a contradiction regarding the use of the Pupil Profile. Some further additions might help clarify some of the out workings:

The arrangements should:

- Ensure that parents have easy access to helpful admissions information
- Admissions criteria should be clear and objective for the benefit of all children including those with special educational needs, disabilities or in public care.

### **2 Pupil Profile**

The pupil profile has been developed for the specific purpose of monitoring and guiding the child's education and personal development. Council believes that in time it can be a valuable formative tool used by pupils, parents and teachers to guide the individual child through their school career. A trust needs to be built between all parties to ensure honest and clear communication. This would be threatened if the profile were to be used for any other purpose that could influence critical decisions about a child's life path. It may inform but it cannot determine the appropriate post primary school for a child of nine or ten (i.e. at the end of P6). The profile is not intended as a tool for selection and it cannot be used for such a purpose. Based on previous experience where teachers' professional judgment was a main element of the

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process, it would not be appropriate or fair to place a similar responsibility on teachers here. Its value at the age of 11+ will only be known when the range of schools and any specific characteristics are known.

### **3 Advice from the primary school**

Primary schools have built up key relationships with parents and children generally over seven or more years. Council anticipates that the use of the pupil profile will improve communication between parent and primary school throughout the time in primary education. Primary schools are best placed to offer guidance on the child rather than possible receiving schools. Principals will have access to information on all of a pupil's needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations for discussion with parents. Authorities should facilitate principals by keeping them informed of developments in post primary arrangements locally and any significant changes educational provision, admissions arrangements or criteria. However the primary school is but one source of information on these and the main responsibility for making decisions will continue to rest with the parent.

### **4 Advice from post primary school**

The post-primary school is best able to explain the ethos and educational pathways available through their school. Schools can communicate this by open days/evenings, facilitating school visits and publishing helpful school prospectuses. There are already considerable requirements of school prospectuses and greater clarity is required to identify what might be added to this list of requirements. This would include how the entitlement curriculum is to be delivered, with what partners, if any, the school will work in the delivery of the Entitlement Framework at 14+. This may require modification of how information is provided on, for example, extra curricular activities.

### **5 Advice from the Department/Education Support Body**

A single authority responsible for admissions and exclusions could offer consistent coherent advice to parents and schools and adjudicate on contentious issues. The support body would have a single set of documentation and produce appropriate guidance materials. A step-by step guide should be made available to parents, which should include details of how and when admission criteria would be applied by schools and how parents can access the in-built appeals procedures. Council would recommend that the criteria published by the central support body should be the legally binding admissions criteria. Further it would suggest that the body should scrutinise and approve the criteria and in consultation with the Department and governors only publish criteria that it deems to be consistent with regulations.

### **6 Advice for parents and pupils at 14**

Children mature at different rates and their career interests and aspirations will often not emerge until much later. It is for this reason that Council would see age 14 as the earliest point at which major decisions about learning pathways should begin to be taken. This will become the critical age at which students begin to make career choices rather than at 11. At the critical juncture of 14 parents and students need impartial advice and guidance on the systems of education 14-19 available in the locality (including further education and training). Schools will need support in providing more differentiated provision from 14-19 to cater for the aspirations of young people. The Entitlement Framework will offer a minimum range of choice at Key Stage 4 over at least 24 subjects/courses of which at least one third will be academic and at least one third vocational. This range will be extended to a minimum of 27 subjects/courses at Post-16, again with the minimum of one third academic and one third vocational.

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### **7 Admissions timetable**

One of the benefits of the non-test environment is the proposed new timetable. In the non-test environment, decisions about post-primary schools can be made sooner than at present. Council welcomes the fact that transferring pupils are informed of their new school earlier both to facilitate any challenges to a decision and more importantly to allow an induction process for pupils prior to their starting the new school. This valuable extra time in the final stage of primary education will facilitate a smoother transition from primary to post-primary education.

### **8 Compelling Individual Circumstances**

Any consideration of admissions arrangements must address the identification of children with specific circumstances requiring attendance at a particular school. The arrangements must specify how these children are to be identified, what circumstances might require specific provision, the process for adjudicating on these cases and how they compliment the ordinary admissions process. All schools have encountered pupils and families with difficult circumstances. This poses a particular difficulty for Boards of Governors who often do not have either the information or expertise to assess such cases. Many such cases involve medical or social circumstances. It is impossible to list every possible scenario. Therefore Council would suggest that the appropriate central panel should adjudicate according to agreed criteria but have discretion in responding to cases.

### **9 Places for compelling circumstances**

Admissions and enrolment figures reflect the physical capacity of schools. It is therefore important that as far as possible the numbers actually enrolled reflect that capacity. Council would propose that applications based on compelling circumstances should be heard early and pupils placed in advance of the main cohort and that any admitted subsequently should be regarded as supernumerary.

### **10 Central Panel**

Compelling circumstance applications poses a particular difficulty for Boards of Governors who often do not have either the information or expertise to assess such cases. This results in an inconsistency between schools and even between different applications. Council welcomes a central panel to review these cases which would include particular medical conditions or social circumstances.

The panel should incorporate the expertise (medical, social, educational etc) to adjudicate on such matters as well as local knowledge of what is available in the area. Any panel considering applications should have a member with local knowledge of the schools in the area and the communities they serve. The panel should consist of either three or five members..

### **11 Places for Stated pupils**

Council would anticipate that, depending on local arrangements, stated pupils making the general criteria should apply through normal procedures. Where this is not the case the Council would recommend that, as with exceptional circumstances cases, stated pupils should be supernumerary. However the enrolment number should include them in the school year after they have entered.

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### **ADMISSIONS CRITERIA**

Council wishes to see every child (and their parents) feeling welcomed and appreciated. Further more it is important that not only individuals but different groups feel included in the school community. The language in which criteria is expressed sends important messages to the wider community. Admissions criteria should be expressed positively so that individual pupils and groups are encouraged to have a feeling of belonging. Criteria should be transparent and fair and not just lawful, and free from any inadvertent bias or indirect discrimination against particular groups or individuals. They should give precedence to the interests of the pupil as a member of primary family and the area the school serves.

For this reason Council agrees with the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee that acceptable admissions criteria should be identified and clearly defined in regulation or primary legislation. It would also suggest that unacceptable criteria be identified and banned.

#### **12 Family focused**

The core relationship in education of any child is within their family. It is vital that schools and parents work together to support the child at all stages of their formal educational career. Admissions criteria should not break up families. Therefore Council would give highest priority to siblings (suitably defined) of children attending the school. Thereafter it would have sympathy with children who have siblings who have attended the school but sees no merit in any other family relationship as a principle criterion.

For the same practical reasons children of employees of the school could be included in criteria. However this should be all employees and not just teachers. It would have relatively little impact on admissions given the number of pupils involved but it would be a 'family friendly' policy and would also convey a confidence about the school to the community.

There are some issues to do with definition of the term sibling. In increasingly complicated domestic arrangements (for example half and step relations) schools and parents need this clearly defined and enshrined in regulations. Any particular domestic circumstances arising from a more extended family arrangement could be considered by applying under compelling individual circumstances. Similarly guidance would be required on what is meant by employee.

#### **13 Community based**

Council strongly identifies with the concept of parish. Catholic maintained schools have a history and tradition of identification with their parish community. In practice most schools were funded initially by their local parishes. Many schools indeed reflect this in their current admissions criteria.

It should be made clear, however, that this use of parish defines a locality. All children in the parish regardless of perceived religion are welcome in catholic maintained schools. In addition it seems invidious that applicants from outside the parish or refined local community would displace a child from the local community. CCMS would prefer the use of the home as a community identifier rather than the use of feeder primary schools.

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### **14 Geography**

Given the child centred nature of catholic education Council is attracted to the use of child centred catchments as opposed to school centred. The Department has identified benefits in terms of practicality and costs to which Council would add the potential benefits in pupils' health for those walking or cycling to their school. Given the historical links with parishes, Council feels that geographic criteria expressed in terms of identified parishes if necessary in priority order should continue to be used. In the light of the removal of selection, the Department needs to define the term 'nearest suitable school'. Geography and distance to school is an important aspect of social justice. As the Commons committee identified:

'Unless school transport can be publicly financed, the impact of failing to get a place at the nearest school will disproportionately burden poorer families.'

In addition such provision will aid the cohesion of local communities and the education of children who, for the most part will have a clearer curricular coherence if fewer feeder school contribute to a post-primary school. Council has long advocated the philosophy of the extended school which would reflect a true partnership of school, family and the wider community.

### **15 Tiebreakers**

The bulk of children will be admitted to school under the criteria already considered. In the event of oversubscription under any of these individual criteria, governors will need a tie breaker criterion to determine to the last individual applicant. Council would support three possible methods which schools could use. The choice of method should be left to the governors to meet their individual circumstances.

Proximity to school - with specification of how the 'measured distance' is to be determined. This has the advantage of minimizing the travel distance for those entering the school. However the Department should indicate which methods of measuring distance are acceptable. Thus as the crow flies may meet the needs of some schools but be inappropriate for others. Schools need to be satisfied they can apply the criterion uniformly and verifiably.

Date of birth - This has the benefit of being easily obtained from the application form. There is no compelling reason for its use other than the ease of convenience.

Surnames - Equally arbitrary is the use of surnames based on a randomly generated list of letters. This is valid but can encounter difficulties with common surnames.

### **16 Other criteria**

All the major criteria have been identified. However it would be helpful not only to identify valid criteria but also specifically to exclude particular ones. Thus the use of random lottery is unfair and unworkable. Similarly the use of interviews should be banned. These cannot effectively be standardised over the time period of the admissions process and are open to claims that they assess aptitude or ability or social circumstances. Council agrees with the House of Commons that the rationale for ending the use of interviews is that, intentionally or otherwise, they enable judgments to be made about the child's prior attainment as well as the family's social class, educational and professional background and level of support for their child's schooling.

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Particular difficulties that arise for an individual child should be dealt with by the admissions support body who in consultation with the Department could allow variations in admissions or enrolment numbers. The discretion should allow governors to accept additional children outside of the normal criteria if they are allowed to do so by the education support body.

### **17 Menu Options**

Council would feel that in keeping with the catholic ethos the highest priority should be given to the family and family connections. The next criterion should reflect the local community within the catchment and in the case of catholic schools would normally be expressed in terms of parishes or any 'partnership area' designated under new post-primary arrangements.

The Council would recommend that these two criteria should be specified in order on all admissions criteria. Thereafter Council consider that schools can apply any order from a list of approved criteria. These and any 'new' criteria should be approved by the Central Panel referred to at Point 10. In regards to the use of a tie breaker the Department should leave the selection of a particular tie breaker from a list of approved criteria to the discretion of the governors.

### **18 Appeals**

There should be a single set of regulations governing the membership and payment of admission appeals and expulsion appeals tribunals. Each tribunal should have at least one member with knowledge of the locality and the circumstances that prevail. Tribunals should be held as local to the parents as practical and in a neutral environment.

### **Other Issues**

In introducing the new required legislation the Department should use the opportunity to build on existing strengths and eradicate some weaknesses. The existing parental preference administrative system should be maintained.

The same admissions criteria should apply for entry to the school prior during and subsequent to entry in year 8 of post primary education.

The Department should make regulations to require proof of address in any application for school admission.

### **Conclusion**

The Council recognises the need to revise Admissions Arrangements to facilitate the implementation of New Post-Primary Arrangements. It is essential that any decision on Admissions Arrangements support the Government Policy on Post-Primary Arrangements and do not undermine them. In the light of curricular and technological change, it is appropriate to examine arrangements for moving schools throughout the education of the child.

School admission arrangements should be as simple as possible for the parents to use and work for the benefit of all parents and children. In a non-selective system and with greater flexibility at 14-19, parents

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will need support in determining their preferences for the future. The suggestions made by Council are intended to support parents and children. In particular Council would wish to see the opportunities that this review offers utilised. Changes in arrangements should enhance the transparency; and the timeliness of the process and its final outcome, including any appeals process.