
Consultation on New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools

RESPONSE BOOKLET

January 2005

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Organisation you are replying on behalf of (if any):

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Your position within that organisation (if appropriate):

Hon Secretary

CONSULTATION ON NEW ADMISSIONS ARRANGEMENTS FOR POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The Department of Education (DE) has published a Consultation Document entitled **New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools**. The document deals with a new admissions process in which the transfer of pupils will take place without a Transfer Test. Instead, parents will decide which post-primary school best meets their child's educational needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations.

The purpose of this Response Booklet is to provide you with an opportunity to comment on the range of issues covered in the Consultation Document. The questions therefore should be read in conjunction with the full document. Additional copies of both the Consultation Document and the Response Booklet can be obtained by contacting the Department of Education:

by phone: 028 9127 9638

by fax: 028 9127 9710

by e-mail: ppst@cDdeni.gov.uk or

by writing to: Post-Primary Support Team
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
Bangor
Co Down BT19 7PR

The documents can also be viewed on and downloaded from the Department's website (www.deni.gov.uk). Please contact the Department if you require the documents in other formats.

Please complete the Response Booklet and return it in the pre-paid envelope to the Department by **30 June 2005**. Responses can also be e-mailed to the Department at the e-mail address above. In view of the size and nature of the consultation, it will not be possible for the Department to reply individually to comments. Responses to this consultation will be subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 which gives the right of access to information held by all public authorities.

Please tick if you wish to receive confirmation of receipt of your response. **X**

The Department will consider all of the responses received before decisions are taken on new admissions arrangements.

CHAPTER 2

PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES

The Department has proposed a number of principles and objectives that could underpin new admissions arrangements, to create a process which is child-focused, fair, transparent and easily managed. Further details are provided at **paragraphs 2.11-2.3** of the Consultation Document.

Q1 The Department is seeking your views on whether the principles and objectives outlined provide a sound basis on which to develop new admissions arrangements.

The principles enunciated are laudable yet it is apparent that the delivery of some may militate against others.

We wholeheartedly agree that the interests of the children should be at the centre of the decision making process.

However it seems to be assumed that parents and pupils are best placed to make choices; mostly this is the case but sadly some parents have unrealistic academic expectations or see schools as places to control with whom their children might associate. Educational factors alone can not address these desires.

Many people continue to support the retention of academic selection, and have little confidence in the current proposals. One aspect of this is a fear that some parents will misuse choice, ignore the best interests of the child and choose a traditional grammar school for non-educational reasons. We wish to underline our support for the continuance of an academic pathway, for those whose abilities and aptitudes are best suited to such a direction. There must also be significant measures taken to raise the esteem of post-primary schools presently designated non-grammar. In order to build confidence in the approach of 'informed choice', we believe that parents must be made to realise the crucial importance of the advice of Primary principals and receiving post-primary school principals.

While acknowledging that schools normally serve local communities the proposals do not deal with the exceptions to this. With fragmentation of the post-primary schools into controlled, integrated, maintained and voluntary sectors there is not uniform provision of all types of schools in every community in Northern Ireland. Parents / pupils in rural areas and small provincial towns have no significant choice as to which post-primary school they might enrol in. Historically larger towns and cities attract pupils from far beyond the local area - especially where there is a good public transport network. It is paramount that all children have equality of opportunity in terms of availability of academic and vocational courses.

How schools are given sufficient flexibility is not addressed in these proposals; nor how admissions criteria in a local area will be made complementary.

The competitive nature of schools in an open enrolment situation where budgets are 'numbers driven' militates against imaginative collaboration in providing the 'Entitlement Framework'. These proposals do nothing to improve this situation where demographics show a dramatic decline in total pupil numbers.

CHAPTER 3

CHOOSING A POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL

The fundamental principle underlying the new admissions arrangements will be informed parental and pupil choice. This will involve parents deciding which schools best meet their child's educational needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations and listing those schools in order of preference on the Transfer Form. Questions 2-6 seek views on the different sources of information which could assist parents in the decision-making process.

Pupil Profile

A Pupil Profile for each child will be drawn up each year and will replace the current Annual Pupil Report. The Pupil Profile will be a fuller document, providing parents with clear and objective information about their child's progress and achievements and an assessment of their attitudes, aptitudes and interests. Further details are provided at **paragraphs 17-3.9** of the Consultation Document.

Q2 **The Department is seeking your views on:**

- (a) **whether the Pupil Profile should be used in the way described in the Consultation Document; and**
- (b) **whether there are alternative or additional ways in which the Pupil Profile should be used to help parents decide on future post-primary provision for their child.**

The Pupil Profile is a very useful and important document in describing any child's educational attainment and potential. However the ongoing assessment needed to provide an informative document must not be allowed to distort the delivery of curriculum as has happened with previous transfer tests. Teaching and providing opportunities for learning only/mostly in areas which can be measured will not provide the holistic education necessary for our children. It is appropriate that these documents provided by the primary schools should be available to post-primary schools as part of the 'choosing a school' process. Similarly if Pupil Profiles play any part in the selection of post-primary schools then rigorous standardisation and moderation will be essential.

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Advice from the Primary School

Towards the end of P6, as part of the current annual parent-teacher meetings, parents will have the opportunity to discuss with the primary school Principal and/or P6 teacher, their child's progress, achievements and future educational needs. The Pupil Profile will play an important role in this discussion. Further details are provided at **paragraph 3.10** of the Consultation Document.

Q3 The Department is seeking your views on the information/advice which should be available from the primary school to help parents make informed decisions.

We reiterate that in rural areas where school choice is so restricted should a primary principal recommend a type of school s/he is in reality recommending a specific school.

There is also concern that discussion with pupils too far in advance of the actual transfer may unsettle children; parents need to be reminded of the stress they may inadvertently cause their children by insensitively dealing with these issues.

Some secondary schools have developed good links with contributory primary schools, helping to enrich the primary school curriculum - especially for very small rural schools and providing for a smooth transition from primary to second level schools. This should be encouraged by appropriate financial support.

The parental discussions regarding the pupil profile begin quite early and as a result little information is gleaned during the P7 year of development of the child, which can be very significant for many children.

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Advice from the Post-Primary School

Parents and pupils will need clear information about the range of post-primary schools available to them and the educational provision they offer. This information could be available in the following ways:

- * Attending open days/evenings
- * Post-primary school prospectuses
- * Web-based information
- * Discussions with parents

Further details are provided at **paragraph 3.11** of the Consultation Document.

Q4 The Department is seeking your views on:

- (a) the range of information outlined in the Consultation Document to help parents make informed decisions;
- (b) the role of the post-primary school in advising parents; and
- (c) whether any other information/support should be provided to parents to assist the decision-making- process.

Information to parents and pupils by means of open days / evenings, school prospectuses, web-based information and discussion with parents are all very appropriate and acceptable.

However it is important that school prospectuses and the web-based information become part of a monitoring and evaluation process (e.g. by the Inspectorate or ELB transfer personnel) as the 'marketing strategies' have been known to greatly distort the reality.

Concern must also be expressed that the parental discussions do not become protracted negotiations. It would be important to emphasise to parents and Post Primary schools that the aim of sharing the pupil profile is to increase the information available to help parents make a decision about the most appropriate pathway for the child. These discussions could be misused.

The time and staffing implications for senior management in post-primary schools will be very significant requiring additional resources. Where special educational needs have been identified safeguards for all parties - parents, pupils and schools - need to be devised; because of resource and financial implications of enrolment in a school. Where above average costs in educating a child are identified schools may be tempted to dissuade an application for admission. Adequate central funding and appropriate 'statementing' of children with special educational needs must be maintained.

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Advice from DE/Education and Library Boards

The Department of Education and the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) will also have a key role in providing parents with access to information about the key stages of the admissions process. In September of the P7 year, parents could receive an information pack which would include a guidance leaflet explaining the key stages of the process and a copy of the relevant ELB Transfer Booklet(s). Parents would also have access to factual, procedural advice via the ELB Transfer Officers, a help-line and web-based information. Further details are provided at **paragraphs 3.12-3.13** of the Consultation Document.

Q5 The Department is seeking your views on the information/advice which should be available from DE/Education and Library Boards to help parents choose the most suitable post-primary school.

The proposals seem adequate and appropriate and similar to what happens at present.

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Continuing Advice during Post-Primary Education

There should be ongoing dialogue between the post-primary school, the parent and pupil to ensure that the child's educational needs are continuing to be met. This will be particularly important at the end of Key Stage 3 (age 14).

If a pupil's needs are not being met, consideration could and should be given to a change of educational pathway and, where appropriate, a change of educational setting. Further details are provided at **paragraphs 3.14-3.17** of the Consultation Document.

Q6 The Department is seeking your views on what information/ advice should be available to assist with choices of educational pathway, during post-primary education.

Flexibility and the child centred approach needs to be maintained throughout a pupil's school career. Motivation will be greatest, and disenchantment with schooling reduced, where pupils 'design' their own school experience within a broader 'Entitlement Framework'.

It is also important that independent advice should be available if parent(s) / pupil is dissatisfied with advice and recommendations coming from a school.

Sometimes disenchantment with one school situation or disagreement with parental desires/expectations may cause strife and anxiety. Pupils should have ready access to counselling or other support to give direction and independent help.

The Entitlement Framework is clearly a key aspect of the review of post-primary schooling. It is important that additional guidance and counselling specialist teachers are available in all schools to assist pupils, with parents, to make the appropriate choices for them; especially coming to the end of each of the Key Stages.

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Timetable for Admissions Process

It is important that time is built into the admissions process to enable parents to consider the full range of information available to them, to visit schools and to seek advice. The removal of the Transfer Tests may also provide an opportunity for decisions to be made sooner and this could allow more time for post-primary schools to have an appropriate induction for Year 8 pupils. Further details of a possible broad timetable for new admissions arrangements are provided at **paragraphs 3.18-3.20** of the Consultation Document.

Q7 The Department is seeking your views on the broad timetable for the new admissions process.

The time-table needs to be of the duration envisaged because of the large amount of consultation and information retrieval necessary - nevertheless the long time span could unsettle P6/7 pupils much too soon; the P.7 year to all intents and purposes not influencing the Pupil Profile used in directing parents and schools about choices. At age 11 the rate of learning and development can accelerate greatly for some children and a P.6 Profile may not truly represent a child by June of their P.7 year.

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CHAPTER 4

PUPILS WITH COMPELLING INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES OR A STATEMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEED

Some children will have specific needs that can only be provided for at a particular named school i.e. pupils with compelling individual circumstances and children with statements of special educational needs. These pupils are considered outside of the normal admissions process. Questions 8-11 cover

Compelling Individual Circumstances

For some children, their individual circumstances will be so compelling that they necessitate the child's attendance at a particular named school, rather than any other school. Further details are provided at **paragraphs 4.24.7** of the Consultation Document.

Q8 The Department is seeking your views on the types of cases which should be considered as compelling individual circumstances (see paragraphs 4.34.5).

The compelling individual circumstances of some should not be met at the detriment of the majority.

Schools must be given the resources necessary to meet the identified needs of individuals; mainstreaming special educational needs while desirable for social education can bring unacceptable pressures on schools where inadequate resources are allocated.

We remain gravely concerned that the requirements of SENDO and meeting the resource demands of mainstreaming children with Special needs have not been adequately provided for in funding from the Department of Education.

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Q9 The Department is seeking your views on whether pupils admitted under compelling individual circumstances should be supernumerary to schools' admissions and enrolment numbers (see paragraph 4.6).

The alternative proposal that 'statemented' children in a school prior to transfer should be included in the school's admission number is an appropriate safeguard, with those pupils transferring with statements being considered supernumerary for one year only.

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Q10 The Department is seeking your views on whether individual Boards of Governors or a Central Panel should consider cases of compelling individual circumstances. If a Central Panel, your views are sought on its size and composition (see paragraph 4.7).

Special cases must always be monitored and determined by authorities other than the school - the Special Central Panel would be appropriate, provided budgetary concerns are not allowed to be the predominant factor in making decisions.

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Pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Need

Some pupils with special educational needs will have a statement which sets out what those needs are and specifies the type of school, and any particular school, which the Education and Library Board considers appropriate to meet those needs. Pupils with a statement of special educational need are currently admitted to the school as supernumerary i.e. over and above the school's approved admissions and enrolment number. Further details are provided at **paragraphs 4.84.10** of the Consultation Document.

Q11 The Department is seeking your views on whether pupils with statements of special educational need should continue to be admitted as supernumerary.

Where maximum class size is exceeded difficulties arise for schools in providing appropriate teaching especially in practical classes for pupils. Statemented pupils should only be supernumerary for a maximum of one year. This should not limit the availability of Classroom assistants and other support as need is established.

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CHAPTER 5

ADMISSIONS CRITERIA FOR OVERSUBSCRIBED SCHOOLS

Under new admissions arrangements, some schools will continue to be oversubscribed i.e. have more applications than places available. If this happens, post-primary schools have to apply admissions criteria to decide which pupils to admit. The Department has accepted the recommendation that a menu of admissions criteria should be drawn up and schools should select from this menu the criteria they would use when oversubscribed. Questions 12-17 seek views on a range of admissions criteria that could be included in a menu and the different options for the format of the menu.

Family-Focused Criteria

The two criteria listed for consideration under this category are siblings currently at the school and eldest/only child. Further details are provided at **paragraph 5.8** of the Consultation Document.

Q12 **The Department is seeking your views on the family-focused criteria listed and their inclusion within a menu.**

The two family focused criteria are essential if schools are to be family focused.

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Community-Based Criteria

The two criteria listed for consideration under this category are feeder primary schools and parish. Further details are provided at paragraphs 5.9-5.10 of the Consultation Document.

Q13 The Department is seeking your views on the community-based criteria listed, their inclusion within a menu and how they should be defined.

Schools are vital aspects of a community's infrastructure. In a divided society with a fragmented system it is extremely important that all sections of a community have a school within a reasonable travelling distance with an ethos they can support, identify with and embrace.

It is important that additional funding be made available to support small Post-primary schools for the social reason of avoiding further polarisation of society, caused by population shift fuelled by a desire to be closer to a preferred type of post-primary school. It is in this respect the Entitlement Framework is an important concept. Imaginative ways of encouraging schools of different management types to collaborate must be developed.

The need for effective, fair and transparent criteria in relation to feeder schools is crucial.

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Geographical Criteria

The two criteria listed for consideration under this category are School-Centred Catchment and Child-Centred Catchment. Further details are provided at paragraphs 5.11-5.13 of the Consultation Document.

Q14 The Department is seeking your views on:

- (a) the geographical criteria listed, their inclusion within a menu and the most appropriate means of operating them; and
- (b) what percentage limit, if any, should be set for places allocated by geographical criteria.

A child-centred geographical criteria would seem best provided parents select the 'management type' (i.e. controlled, integrated, Irish medium, maintained or voluntary) of school, prior to expressing a choice for a particular named school. Schools should be able to give preference to children transferring from primary schools in their particular sector e.g. an Integrated Post-primary should be able to give preference in an over-subscribed situation to children coming from an integrated primary school.

A post-primary's previous transfer history must also be accommodated.

There may be situations where schools may be grouped for a common catchment area.

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Tiebreakers

Admissions criteria must be capable of admitting pupils down to the last available place. The two tiebreakers listed for consideration are random selection and proximity from home to school. Further details are provided at **paragraph 5.14** of the Consultation Document.

Q15 The Department is seeking your views on:

- (a) the tiebreakers, random selection and proximity from home to school, as a means of admitting pupils down to the last available place;
- (b) the most appropriate method of operating random selection and/or measuring proximity; and
- (c) whether schools should be free to use different methods of operating random selection or proximity.

Random selection based on initial of surname on the birth certificate, published in advance and changed annually would seem appropriate, most fair and transparent enabling parents to plan in advance.

All schools should have the same procedures as tie breakers to ensure transparency and consistency.

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Other Criteria

Q16 The Department is seeking your views on any other criteria that you believe should be included in the menu, bearing in mind the principles and objectives outlined in Chapter 2.

No other criterion is necessary for traditional schools. However should specialist schools be developed then criteria relevant to the specialism would be appropriate.

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Format of Menu

The aim of a menu approach is to provide some consistency in the criteria which schools use whilst allowing some flexibility to enable schools to take account of local circumstances. Several options for the menu are considered. Further details are provided at **paragraphs 5.15-5.17** of the Consultation Document.

Q17 The Department is seeking your views on the possible options for the menu.

Option 4 is preferred - compulsory categories and compulsory order - otherwise litigation and judicial reviews could become a feature of the new transfer process.

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CHAPTER 6

ADMISSIONS APPEALS

Parents will continue to have a statutory right of appeal if they are not content with the decision of the Board of Governors not to admit their child. Further details of the appeal arrangements are provided at **paragraphs** 6.1-6.8 of the

Q18 The Department is seeking your views on whether the process for appealing the decisions of Boards of Governors not to admit a child to the school should be altered in any way.

The Appeals process as outlined is adequate and the proposed time-scale more practical. Any admissions criteria should be robust enough to withstand extraordinary numbers of appeals.

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Other Issues

Are there any other issues you would like to comment on in relation to new admissions arrangements for post-primary schools? If so, please use the box below.

We support the broad emphasis of these post-primary proposals namely: the strong focus upon the pupil's abilities and needs, the development of the pupil profile, informed parental choice and co-operation between schools and colleges.

However, we are very concerned by the distinct lack of development of confidence building measures. There is little conviction among parents and many teachers that the proposals will actually work. There is therefore a pressing need for the Department to provide examples of how the proposed solutions might work in practice. Without such illustration, doubts and uncertainty could easily engender outright opposition.

Transport is a key factor in making all schools accessible and having a 'level playing field' for all schools. Free public transport should be available to all young people in full time education to the nearest school type of their choice.

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NEW POST-PRIMARY ADMISSIONS ARRANGEMENTS – EQUALITY CONSIDERATIONS

Section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between certain individuals and groups, namely:

- * between persons of different religious belief;
- * between persons of different political opinion;
- * between persons of different racial group;
- * between persons of different age;
- * between persons of different marital status;
- * between persons of different sexual orientation;
- * between men and women generally;
- * between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- * between persons with dependents and persons without.

Do you think any of the issues contained in the Consultation Document would have any adverse implications for any of the section 75 categories?

Yes No X

If yes, what are they?

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