

For more information contact Alison Laird, Policy Officer: 028 9076 5513, or [alison.laird@uup.org](mailto:alison.laird@uup.org).  
Ulster Unionist Party, Cunningham House, 429 Holywood Road, BELFAST, BT4 2LN

Every parent wants his or her child to receive the highest possible standard of education. That is why Ulster Unionists support all schools focusing on the essentials and making the most of each child's abilities and aptitudes — allowing every child to achieve their potential.

It is important that all post-primary schools are well-funded, with the resources necessary to deliver a first-class education for every child. Investing in primary schools will ensure that all children can make the most of their potential in post-primary education. We want an education system from 4 to 18 years old in which no child is left behind.

The Ulster Unionist Party is opposed to the imposition of admissions criteria that will effectively result in selection by postcode. We believe that matching aptitude and ability of pupils to schools is the fairest criteria for admissions.

We have been approached by a number of individuals, parents and representatives from schools who feel that there has been insufficient consultation time. We therefore formally request that the consultation period be extended so that all who are interested may have an opportunity to respond.

## **1. Principles and Objectives**

Ulster Unionists believe that the following should be included in the Principles:

1. All pupils must be given the opportunity to reach their full potential.
2. Each child should be able to secure a place in a school that best suits his or her educational needs, as per Paragraph 3.3.

We consider that the concept of the community school is overplayed in this document as not all schools serve particular local communities and that position should be allowed to continue.

We also consider the concept of parental choice to be overstated and unattainable. It should not be confused with parental preference which is a much more realistic concept.

## **2. Pupil Profiles**

We welcome the introduction of pupil profiles that include objective and carefully moderated information. However, we are not yet satisfied that Pupil Profiles have been fully developed and have undergone the extensive consultation necessary.

We are concerned that parents may choose whether or not to consult with primary and post primary schools as this runs contrary to the principle of informed parental preference.

There is a clear need for the post primary school not only to see the profiles but also to be able to make use of them if the school is over-subscribed in order to ensure the best match between what the school offers and the aptitude and ability of pupils who apply.

Pupil profiles must provide a record of a pupil's work and test performance (including results from standardised tests) during the later years of primary school – giving post-primary schools and parents an accurate reflection of a child's abilities.

## **3. Advice from Primary School**

Primary school will be one of the most important sources of advice for parents. It is therefore essential that all primary school principals have a very clear understanding of what is on offer at the range of post primary schools and should use the information in the Pupil Profile to offer realistic advice.

## **4. Advice from Post Primary Schools**

The post primary school will have a critical role in the process in terms of advising on the extent to which the aspirations, aptitude and ability of pupils is matched to what the school can offer. Indeed we would go further and assert that where a school is oversubscribed the school is in the best position to assess the best match between school and pupil.

## **5. Advice from DE/Education and Library Boards**

The role of the Department and the Education and Library Boards will be to set out clear procedures as to how the new arrangements will work and ensure that as much information as possible is available to all concerned.

## **6. Continuing Advice during Post-Primary Education**

Much more consideration of education pathways is required. There are a number of issues to be resolved — definition of course types, how co-operative arrangements will work in practice, timetabling, transport arrangements, problems in rural communities, how and if shared sectoral arrangements will work, financial arrangements between schools and responsibilities between schools. We doubt that

any arrangements will ever be simple and easily understood, as required by the guiding principles.

## **7. Timetable for the Admissions Process**

The procedural timetable is too tight and overly ambitious. The likely lack of agreement on the way forward, the complexities surrounding the detailed arrangements and the amount of work that remains to be done means that the timescale for introducing the arrangements looks unrealistic. Indeed the setting of unrealistic timescales throughout the whole process, which has now been running for some 5 years, is causing confusion throughout the system — not least to parents.

In addition, we are concerned that the decision over which school to transfer to will be made a lot earlier than at present, effectively at the end of the P6 year.

## **8. Pupils with Compelling Individual Circumstances**

Consideration of compelling individual circumstances is always difficult and potentially open to abuse. We agree that the very tight approach taken in the document is probably the correct one but more specific guidelines that take account of precedents established over time are required.

## **9. Effect on School Admissions and Enrolment Numbers**

We do not agree that pupils with compelling circumstances should be considered supernumerary.

## **10. Central Panel**

Given the complexities and the need to establish standard criteria across all schools we see advantages in establishing a central panel to consider such cases. This would ensure tighter control of the procedures.

## **11. Pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Need**

We do not agree that pupils with statements should be considered supernumerary.

## **12. Admissions Criteria for Oversubscribed Schools — Family Focus**

It is sensible that schools be permitted to use family focused criteria within their menu of criteria. It should be a matter for each school to decide the exact nature of such criteria. If they so wish schools should be permitted to extend family links to include past pupils at the school.

However, we do not believe that this criterion should override the matching of pupil to school on the basis of ability and aptitude.

### **13. Community-Based Criteria**

### **14. Geographical Criteria**

We can see no clear distinction between these two criteria — they both relate to distance from the school. We accept that distance can be a useful tiebreaker in oversubscribed schools. However one of our main concerns about the proposals is that distance from the school could become the main factor in determining which pupils would be admitted to a heavily oversubscribed school.

The consultation paper implies that very few schools will in practice be oversubscribed and that distance from the school will not therefore play heavily in the arrangements. We do not accept that argument. The reason why relatively few schools are presently oversubscribed is that the grade achieved in the transfer test puts a natural break on applications — pupils tend not to apply to schools if historically the grade they receive would not have gained them admission to a particular school.

If this restriction is removed many schools — particularly grammar schools — will be heavily oversubscribed and under the proposed arrangements will have no option but to use the distance criteria to select a significant number of pupils. In other words selection by postcode will inevitably replace academic selection and we consider this to be unsatisfactory and not in the best interests of any pupils. **This issue is at the core of our concerns about the proposals.**

### **15. Tiebreakers**

We are very concerned that admission to any school could become a lottery and are not prepared to countenance any form of random selection.

### **16. Other Criteria**

We consider it absolutely vital that further consideration is given to a criterion that allows preference to be given to those pupils whose aspirations, aptitude and ability best match what any school has to offer. We are not suggesting a return to the current approach to academic selection. We suggest that pupil profiles, that include results from standardised tests, are used to match pupils with the most suitable school. It is not in the best interest of a pupil to be admitted to a school to which he or she is not best suited, or rejected from a school to which he or she is best suited.

### **17. Format of the Menu**

The outcomes of the menus are unacceptable as they will inevitably result in significant numbers being selected by postcode or by random selection. The problems would be overcome by the inclusion of the type of criteria outlined in our response to question 16.

## **18. Admissions Appeals**

There appear to be some inconsistencies in the present appeal mechanisms and we would like a more professional and less ad hoc approach be taken.

## **19. Other Issues**

We do not have any further comments to make.

## **20. Equality Considerations**

We are strongly opposed to the proposals and our reasons for this and suggested alternatives are fully spelt out in our responses to previous questions.

We believe that the proposed admissions criteria will seriously disadvantage large sections of the population living in outlying and rural areas who will find it virtually impossible to have their children admitted to their preferred schools.

These proposals take no account of the Department's own household survey which showed that 64% of parents wanted to retain some form of academic selection. That view was confirmed in a BBC survey.

It is very unlikely that these proposals would find the necessary support in any devolved NI administration. Pushing the proposals through and ignoring the opinions of the public and the locally elected representatives is unacceptable and undemocratic.

We believe that a large number of pupils are likely to end up in a school that does not match their ability and aptitude.

It is our view that because of the somewhat tighter management arrangements in maintained sector schools the principles underlying the Costello and admissions criteria proposals could be applied more easily in the maintained sector than in the controlled sector. That being the case, and without departing from our own concerns about the proposals, we would not object to maintained schools moving in this direction. However on human rights ground we see no reason why those in the controlled and non-denominational grammar schools sectors should be forced against their will to follow suit. Similarly we see no reason why the schools in the Craigavon area should be forced to change their arrangements that are particularly suited to the needs and background of that area. Our position is that schools in particular sectors and in particular geographical areas should have the flexibility to apply the arrangements which best suit their circumstances.