

CHAPTER 7: TRANSFER ARRANGEMENTS

Transfer at age 11

- 7.1 We have outlined earlier our view that the first major decision point about learning pathways in a pupil's education should normally be at age 14, when pupils are beginning to choose the courses to be taken for external examinations. From that point, provision should increasingly reflect the pupil's personal choice of learning pathway and his/her needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations. It nevertheless remains the position that the physical transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary education will normally take place at age 11. This is the most common age of transfer in other European regions. Responses to the Burns proposals confirmed that this is an appropriate arrangement. The Working Group shares this view, though alternative arrangements could be developed as long as they meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework and criteria and are agreed at local level.
- 7.2 Under our proposals, the schools to which pupils will be transferring at age 11 will offer a broad, general education in Key Stage 3, based on the CCEA proposals for the Key Stage 3 statutory core curriculum, together with extension courses and enrichment opportunities to widen and develop interests and which reflect a school's ethos and emphasis. At Key Stage 4 and beyond, they will offer a wider variety of learning pathways, whether in-house or via collaboration with other schools, the FE sector or other providers. There will also be increased scope for pupils to change school at the end of either Key Stage 3 or Key Stage 4, where pupils and their parents so choose in order to better meet pupils' needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations. These decisions would be informed by the Pupil Profile and with advice from the school.

The Transfer Test

- 7.3 At present, the Northern Ireland transfer arrangements revolve around the selection of pupils for certain types of post-primary education based on their academic ability as assessed in the two 1 hour Transfer Tests taken in the first term of their P7 year – the so-called 11+ exam. This arrangement is the single most sensitive issue the Group has had to consider. This is illustrated by the responses to the Burns proposals, which strongly

favoured the removal of the existing Transfer Test, while there were divergent views about the continuation of academic selection.

7.4 To achieve these seemingly contradictory outcomes would appear to require:

- devising an alternative form of Transfer Test that would be less stressful for pupils; and/or
- an alternative approach to academic selection, for example relying on primary teachers' professional assessment of pupils' relative abilities, expressed in the form of a recommendation as to which type of post-primary education would be most suitable.

7.5 The Transfer Tests have been in existence for some 50 years, originally in the form of the 'qualifying' exam. During that time, various models of tests have been used, plus hybrid arrangements involving a combination of tests and teacher assessment. All of these have attracted criticism for various reasons, as have the present curriculum-based tests in English, Maths and Science and Technology. To overcome the problem of reliance on performance in just two 1-hour tests, it would in theory be possible to aggregate results from tests or other assessment tools over a longer period, such as the last two or three years of primary education. However, that would be likely to extend the period of stress on pupils and add to the pressure on teachers to 'teach to the test' to the detriment of a balanced and enjoyable curriculum for their pupils. In short, we do not believe that there is an alternative testing regime which would overcome the concerns expressed.

7.6 In some other European countries, teachers' assessment of pupils' aptitudes and abilities play a major part in decisions about which post-primary school they attend. However, to work effectively, such arrangements require a context where there is greater parity of esteem between different school types and a process of transfer much less highly charged than it is currently in Northern Ireland. Based on previous experience where teachers' professional judgement was a main element of the process, it would not be appropriate or fair to place a similar responsibility on teachers here. There is also the potential for dispute. We believe nevertheless that parents should have more consistent and comprehensive information on how their children are progressing. For that reason, we endorse strongly the current work by CCEA on the

development of the Pupil Profile. The Pupil Profile should be an integral element of the information available to parents – alongside school prospectuses and admissions criteria - when they are taking decisions about post-primary education for their children.

7.7 The preceding paragraphs deal with some of the practical dimensions of the transfer arrangements. There are, however, more fundamental issues:

- There is a widely held view that the age of 11 is too early for significant decisions to be taken which commit pupils to particular learning pathways for at least 5 years. Children mature at different rates and their career interests and aspirations will not emerge until much later. It is for this reason that we see age 14 as the earliest point at which major decisions about learning pathways should begin to be taken.
- There is a deep concern expressed by many about the stress caused to pupils and the damaging sense of 'failure' for those who do not do sufficiently well to gain their preferred school place. The pressures on pupils, parents and teachers appear to increase year by year, and may be further intensified where parents resort to private tutoring.
- It is intrinsically unsound to believe that pupils deemed to be more able should automatically be routed along an 'academic' pathway as distinct from those with a more vocational bias. Our economy and society need able young people in business and other spheres. This 'academic' and 'vocational' dichotomy is in any case artificial and unhelpful (see page 21). To avoid these spurious distinctions, the Entitlement Framework described earlier seeks to ensure a wider and more varied range of course choices, to meet individual pupil learning needs.
- It is sometimes argued that the present selective arrangements provide opportunities to pupils from less advantaged backgrounds that would not otherwise be available to them. Whilst that may have been true historically, the current picture is very different. As noted earlier (see page 9) there is a wide disparity between the proportion of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in grammar schools and in non-grammar schools. This suggests that the present arrangements tend to perpetuate social disadvantage rather than overcome it.

- The options for school provision in individual localities described in the previous chapter are based on the principle that provision should be varied but should be seen as of equal value. Pupils should have a clear sense that they have chosen whatever school they are attending (accepting that first preference may not be attainable in every case) and not that they have been assigned there by default, by dint of being considered ineligible or unsuitable for some other type of school.

7.8 With all these considerations in mind, the Group has concluded that a Transfer Test or any other means of academic selection should have no place in the transfer arrangements to post-primary education described in this advice. The Transfer Test should be removed as soon as possible and be replaced by arrangements based on parental and pupil choice.

7.9 The Group would recommend the immediate removal of the Transfer Test but for the realisation that this would lead, in the short term, to very substantial over-subscription in a number of post-primary schools and considerable upheaval in the system generally. The key underlying problem is that, where attractive alternative provision is not available, many parents seek a grammar school place regardless of their child's individual interests or aptitudes. The Group's recommendations aim to address that imbalance by ensuring that all post-primary schools, whilst offering provision that may differ in ethos and emphasis, are regarded as of equal value. In addition, the present arrangements tend to accentuate the decision at age 11. Rather, the emphasis should be on the decisions at age 14 and on the important role of the Pupil Profile in helping pupils and parents make informed choices. Age 14 is the stage at which most pupils will be making their first significant decisions about the courses to be taken for external examinations.

These changes will not happen overnight but the Group believes that it is vital to ensure sufficient momentum in the implementation of these proposals and in particular towards the final removal of the Transfer Test. The Group does not wish to preserve the status quo for a further period but recognises that time is needed for concerted action to prepare for the non-test environment. It may be possible to proceed more quickly in some areas than in others, depending on the present configuration of provision in individual localities.

The Interim Period

7.10 Specifically in relation to the Transfer Test in the interim period, immediate action should be taken on a number of fronts including the following:

Choosing to do the Transfer Test

7.10.1 Already about 30% of pupils do not sit the Transfer Test. These include pupils in the 'Dickson Plan' schools in Craigavon, and some other areas where non-selective arrangements exist, together with other pupils whose parents opt them out of the Transfer Test. There are, however, a great many pupils who are entered for the Transfer Test simply because parents are seeking a grammar school place without being aware of the opportunities available in other schools or that they can choose not to have their children entered for the Transfer Test.

7.10.2 Before making the decision about whether a child should be entered for the Transfer Test, parents should be given an opportunity to come to a better understanding of the type of provision best suited to their child's needs, aptitudes, interests, and aspirations and the type and range of provision offered by the post-primary schools in their area. This could be achieved through a number of steps including:

- discussions with the P6 teacher about the child's needs, aptitudes, interests, and aspirations, taking account of the information available within the school. The Pupil Profile will be an integral part of this information sharing in the future;
- information should also be provided, whether by the Department or school managing authorities, explaining to parents the increased choice and flexibility envisaged in all schools as a result of our recommendations, and the fact that there will be opportunity to make choices about learning pathways when their children reach age 14; and
- post-primary schools should hold 'open nights' for parents and pupils during the P6 year to enable them to see the provision on offer and help them decide whether or not a child should be entered for the Transfer Test.

7.10.3 These steps should ensure that, by the end of P6, a parent would have a clearer view of the school best suited to their child's needs and whether they should be entered for the Transfer Test. As new arrangements begin to take shape, we envisage that the proportion of pupils being entered for the Transfer Test would reduce year on year.

Using the Transfer Test

7.10.4 The present legislation permits grammar schools to use the results of the Transfer Tests as part of their admissions criteria, but they are not obliged to do so. A number of grammar schools already admit pupils with the full range of Transfer Test scores, including Grade D (see Appendix 2). There is nothing to hinder these schools – and indeed any other grammar schools which so choose – deciding that they could contribute to the educational provision in their area just as effectively without the need to include Transfer Test results among their admissions criteria. In so doing, they could still retain their essentially academic character if they so wish, or they could adopt another curricular emphasis that reflects their particular strengths or the needs of the area they serve. The LPDP could play an important part in encouraging and assisting such changes in individual areas where that is seen to be appropriate.

Reducing the Use of the Transfer Test

7.10.5 An additional option which should be made available to selective schools is to begin to reduce progressively the proportion of their intake admitted on the basis of the Transfer Test grades. For example, a grammar school could decide to admit 25% of its intake in the first year without reference to Transfer Test grades, and move to higher percentages in subsequent years. Again, the LPDP could assist such moves in the context of the consideration of the needs of the area more generally. Care would, however, need to be taken to ensure that the reduction in places accessible via the Transfer Test did not inadvertently increase pressure on pupils to attain still higher grades.

Reviewing Current Admissions Criteria

7.10.6 The interim period should also be used by school managing authorities to review existing admissions criteria, taking account of the recommendations in the next section. The aim of this and the foregoing proposals is to enable a smooth transition to the arrangements that will apply when the Transfer Test is no longer available.

Protecting the Primary Curriculum

7.10.7 The Department should issue advice to primary schools that they should ensure that the focus of work in P6 and P7 is on the full curriculum. Continuing to prepare pupils for the Transfer Test will detract from the successful delivery of the new Key Stage 2 curriculum.

Transfer Test – Final Date

7.11 We recognise the extent of the culture change inherent in a move away from the selective system which has so long been a feature of post-primary education in Northern Ireland. We have concluded, however, that the longer-term continuation of the present arrangements is untenable both educationally and socially. The Group's recommendations provide an agenda for the development and enhancement of provision over the next few years, which will be reinforced by the parallel developments on the implementation of the revised curriculum and the introduction of the Pupil Profile. The Group has considered carefully the timetable for these various developments and has concluded that Autumn 2008 should be the final date for the use of the Transfer Test. The use of ability-based admission criteria should not be available to any school for subsequent admissions rounds.

7.12 This timescale takes account of the expected developments in:

- creating a range of schools which are different but equally valued, including the extension of vocational provision as part of the general enhancement of curricular choices resulting from implementation of the Entitlement Framework;

- the associated development of joint working between schools, with FE institutions and other providers which will result in a wider range of course options and learning pathways, especially from age 14 onwards;
- the implementation of the Pupil Profile, where pupils transferring to post-primary education in September 2009 will be the first cohort to be able to make an informed choice of learning pathways for Key Stage 4 based on 3 years of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum and 3 years of the Pupil Profile; and
- the review of admissions criteria to reflect the removal of ability-based criteria.

New Transfer and Admissions Arrangements

7.13 The fundamental principle underlying the new arrangements should be informed choice by parents and pupils. In addition to good quality advice from schools (both primary and post-primary), parents should have access to external support to assist them through the admissions process. The role of the Education and Library Board Transfer Officers could be extended to include this, along with well publicised parent-friendly access to advice. The transfer process should be set out clearly for parents, pupils and schools to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clearly understood and that all concerned are engaged in the process. 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.

7.14 Measures should also be taken to simplify the present rather complex and time-consuming process. For the future, the Department should explore the possibility of a more efficient computer-based system under which parents could make choices on a form to be submitted to a central body that could apply the criteria of their preferred schools and notify parents of the outcome.

7.15 In a non-test environment, parents and pupils will decide which school best meets the pupil's needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations. Making this informed decision will involve a number of steps, including:

- Discussion between parents and pupils and the primary school about the pupil's needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations, taking account

of the information available within the school. The Pupil Profile will be an integral part of this process.

- Dissemination of information to parents:
 - by Department of Education, or managing authorities explaining to parents the choice and flexibility available in all schools and the opportunity to make choices about learning pathways when their children reach age 14;
 - by schools through School Prospectuses and other sources, outlining the school's education provision and ethos; and
 - by school managing authorities, outlining the admissions criteria for each school in the local area.
- School Visits. Parents' and pupils' in P7, or P6 if desired, attendance at 'open nights' at the post-primary schools that they feel will meet the needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations of their child.

7.16 In the non-test environment, decisions about post-primary schools can be made sooner than at present with the following advantages:

- parents will not have to wait for the Transfer Test results before listing their preferences for schools;
- post-primary schools will be able to begin the admissions process much sooner; and
- decisions could be made by Easter, to the benefit of parents, pupils and post-primary schools.

This valuable extra time in the final term of primary education would facilitate an appropriate induction phase to enable a smooth transition from primary to post-primary education.

7.17 Parents' and pupils' choices about schools may mean that some are oversubscribed. As the fundamental developments required to give effect to the Entitlement Framework begin to be implemented and individual schools enjoy a more equal status and reputation, the degree of over-subscription should diminish. Effective planning of provision at local level should also seek to match demand and places as far as possible, so that

oversubscription would be minimised. When the Transfer Test is removed, schools will no longer be able to select on the basis of academic ability if they are oversubscribed. In that situation, admissions criteria should be rigorous enough to enable admissions to be determined in an orderly and well-managed fashion and must comply with human rights and equality legislation.

7.18 The Burns Report proposed five statutory admissions criteria to be used in a specified order by all schools. The Group noted the mixed views expressed during the consultation on the concept of universal and statutory criteria and on the criteria proposed by Burns. Our proposals envisage the development of local arrangements that meet local needs, wishes, and circumstances. It would be inconsistent with this approach for the Group to prescribe a universal set of admission criteria that would be applicable in every locality, if indeed that were possible. It is, however, necessary to have a degree of consistency in the criteria used and to ensure that no child within any locality is disadvantaged. The Group believes that in the future, schools should select from a limited menu the admission criteria that they will use and decide the order in which they will be applied. This approach will enable schools to reflect their own ethos and take account of local circumstances. To ensure coherence and consistency, criteria should be subject to discussion and agreement within the Local Planning and Development Partnership (LPDP - see Chapter 8). This would ensure that admission criteria are complementary and that each pupil is given priority under at least one set of admission criteria.

7.19 The admission criteria listed below are considered suitable for inclusion in the menu from which schools would choose. They are based on the principle that they should be transparent and fair and not just lawful, and free from any inadvertent bias or indirect discrimination against particular groups or individuals. The Group believes that they should give precedence to the interests of the pupil and the area the school serves.

7.20 Schools could select from the following:

- **Family Connections**

- **Siblings:**

- This is based on the principle that we should not break up families. The term “sibling” needs to be clearly defined and the position of half and step-relations made clear.

- **Children of employees in the school:**
This should apply to all employees and not just teachers. The Group noted the responses to the consultation on this criterion but considered that it could be a demonstration of commitment to the school, as well as an element of a school's 'family friendly' policy for its employees. It would have relatively little impact on admissions given the number of pupils involved.

- **Eldest Child.**

- **Geographical factors**

These could be reflected in a number of ways, for example by one or more of catchment area, nearest suitable school, contributory primary schools, local area and adjacent areas. These need to be clearly defined and balance enrolment traditions with fairness. The Group recommends that the Department should commission demographic and geographic research in order to inform how the geographic factors should be expressed in the menu of criteria from which schools may draw. The term "nearest suitable school" will also need to be defined.

- **Final Criterion**

Criteria must be capable of admitting pupils down to the last available place. This could be achieved by using either:

- **Proximity to school** - with specification of how the 'measured distance' is to be determined; or
- **Random computerised selection:** this process should be explained clearly and administered fairly.

7.21 The Group recognises the different circumstances of children with statements of special educational needs, where parents can express a preference as part of the statementing process. Given the increased incidence of statementing and the greater integration of statemented pupils in mainstream schools, the present practice of regarding such pupils as additional to the school's admissions number should be reviewed.

7.22 Particular considerations also apply to Integrated and Irish-medium schools, which draw their intakes from a wider area. In addition to the

criteria outlined above, Integrated schools should be able to make reference to religious affiliation during the admissions process in order to ensure an appropriate religious mix.

Compelling Individual Circumstances

7.23 No admissions criteria can deal with every eventuality and it will be important to have arrangements that are able to take account of 'compelling individual circumstances'. We believe that such arrangements should be restricted to the most exceptional circumstances and that these will require careful definition. To ensure consistency of approach, a central independent body with the necessary expertise (i.e. educational, medical, social) should consider these cases. 'Compelling individual circumstances' should not be included in schools' admission criteria.

Unsuitable Criteria

7.24 The following oversubscription criteria are not considered suitable for use under the new arrangements:

- Selection by ability or aptitude, including any use of the contents of the Pupil Profile;
- Attendance or behavioural records;
- Date of application;
- Interviews: these could be used as a proxy for selection by ability and have the potential to unfairly disadvantage some pupils.

This does not preclude consultation interviews intended to offer advice and to inform pupil and parental choice. Material from such consultations should not, however, be used by schools when determining admissions where a school is oversubscribed.

Variations in Admissions Numbers

7.25 Under the new arrangements, schools will no longer be operating in isolation but in cooperation with others in their areas. Where a school is only marginally over-subscribed, it should be possible for it to seek a temporary variation in the admissions number where this would not be detrimental to neighbouring schools and is supported by the LPDP.

Exercising Choice at Age 14 and 16

7.26 The choice and flexibility inherent in the Entitlement Framework will facilitate those pupils who change institution at age 14 and 16 to reflect decisions about learning pathways. There should be no undue impediment to pupils moving between institutions to access courses at these stages and any transfer should be based on informed pupil and parental choice. In consultation within their Local Planning and Development Partnership, schools should have in place arrangements to deal with any oversubscription, in line with the previous guidelines, though it should also be possible to seek a temporary variation in schools' enrolment numbers where this is consistent with the overall provision in the area. The cooperative arrangements in the locality should be capable of ensuring that each pupil can be offered provision suited to their needs. At post-16, given the qualifications-driven nature of education at this level, it is accepted that schools may need to set minimum requirements based on prior study or attainment for entry into specific courses (not the institution). In so doing, schools should provide access to alternative courses.

Moving Forward

7.27 It is not feasible to outline interim admission criteria for the period prior to cessation of the Transfer Test, because schools are starting from different positions and practices, and the pace at which new arrangements based on the Entitlement Framework can be put in place may differ from one area to another. Schools should, however, begin to adapt their admission criteria as soon as possible, in consultation within the LPDP, in a way which reduces the present complexity and which moves in the direction of the anticipated future menu of admission criteria outlined above.

7.28 The Group recommends that the Department should commission immediately the necessary demographic and geographic research to inform the development of future admission criteria, so that schools have early access to these as they move away from the use of traditional, including test-based, admission criteria. The new admission criteria should be developed in conjunction with the Strategic Planning and Implementation Group (see Chapter 8) and should aim to strike a balance between the need to keep the list of criteria short, so that the admissions arrangements are straightforward and easily understood by parents, and the need to give schools sufficient flexibility in setting their admission criteria.

Key Recommendations

- The Transfer Test should end. No other means of academic selection should replace the test.
- Transfer decisions at age 11 should be based on informed parental and pupil choice.
- Immediate steps should be taken to reduce the impact of the current Transfer Test; the final date on which the Transfer Test should be held is Autumn 2008, and sooner where possible.
- Schools should draw from a limited menu of admission criteria to deal with any oversubscription situations.
- The Department should commission immediately the necessary work to establish the menu of admission criteria so that schools can migrate to these as soon as possible.
- Decisions about learning pathways at age 14 and 16 should be based on informed pupil and parental choice.
- At age 16, there may be minimum requirements for entry into specific courses.