

School Admissions

Report by Maggie Waller July 2008

Commissioned by Slough Borough Council

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1.1 Introduction

This report is based on work carried out during June and July 2008, the aims of which were:

- To understand the current admissions arrangements and criteria for the grammar schools in Slough, in order to consider the implications of these in terms of the balance of in-borough and out-borough children who are successful in passing the 11+ test and in gaining places;
- To consider this in the light of the approach in other Local Authorities (LAs)
- To explore any other pertinent issues arising through discussions with Headteachers and Officers.

The work was carried out through:

Interviews (see **Appendix 1** for list of interviewees) as well as web-based research into practice in a number of other Local Authorities.

I would like to thank interviewees, in particular Headteachers, for the time they gave to this exercise, the information they provided and their openness throughout the process.

Recommendations are set out at the end of each section and summarised in Section 3 of this report.

1.2 Context

Slough has eleven secondary schools, four of which are grammar schools. Admissions arrangements are complex. There is a culture of collaboration across all schools, evidenced by the consortium arrangements in place, federations and sharing of good practice including joint teaching appointments. This level of collaboration is an important backdrop to any discussion of admissions and is perhaps unusual in an LA with such a wealth of mixed provision. It should also be noted that all young people attending Slough secondary schools receive a good education, with all secondary schools in Slough deemed by Ofsted to be 'outstanding' or 'good with outstanding features'.

2 Issues

2.1 The balance of in-borough and out-borough children who are successful in passing the 11+ test and in gaining places at grammar schools

This was the key issue for consideration.

It should be noted that the national admissions arrangements are complex. The Common Application Form, 'equal preference' model and common dates are imposed by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The aim of the arrangements in terms of seeking to ensure fairness and

consistency for parents is laudable, but does lead to restrictions for LAs and schools – LAs and schools cannot easily solve some of the complex problems that arise.

There are constraints imposed upon LAs and schools in terms of criteria. Slough Borough Council (SBC) has a statutory duty to provide sufficient secondary school places for Slough children i.e. those residing within the borough. This duty is carried out in a complex context of choice, diversity and access (LA duty to provide a choice and diversity of provision) and parental choice creates a tension. Local schools for local children is an ambition of many Local Authorities (LAs). However, added to this are restrictions which make it difficult for the LA to prioritise its own residents within admissions criteria:

‘each local authority **must** ensure that they...do not disadvantage applications to their schools from families resident in other local authorities (which would be contrary to the Greenwich Judgment¹¹). (R v Greenwich London Borough Council, ex parte John Ball Primary School (1989) 88 LGR 589 [1990] Fam Law 469) (School Admissions Code)

Distance or designated areas as criteria within admissions policies for grammar schools can be used to provide a greater chance of access to local children (though ‘local’ is not always synonymous with ‘in-borough’) and there are examples of such criteria in use in other LAs. Desk top research showed some LAs where distance and / or area are used within the criteria to admit eligible children (i.e those who have passed the required test). **Appendix 2** shows a variety of criteria within the admissions policies of grammar schools within 5 LAs - criteria used include:

- Proximity to school including a first area or radius followed by a wider one
- Feeder school arrangements
- Catchments / designated areas
- Top scorers followed by distance criteria e.g. a smaller area first then a wider one

It should be noted that within each LA there was variety and some traditional ranking arrangements but this was not the majority method.

The balance of in-borough / out- borough children in Slough grammar schools varies.

a) St Bernard’s School

In January 2007 there were 66.6% out borough pupils in the school. There are 30 in-borough children in Year 7. Numbers of in-borough children are not high as a proportion of the total intake (Published Admissions Number (PAN) is 120) but this is because the school, as a Roman Catholic school, provides for a potentially larger area than non-denominational schools. In the current admissions round all in-borough children who passed the 11+ test and had applied to St Bernard’s have a place, regardless of faith. It is rare that this is not the case and the Headteacher indicated that even when this had been an issue, numbers did not exceed 4 or 5.

Distance is used as tie-beak within criteria but not as a main criterion and whilst the number of children in-borough who are not successful is marginal it may be worth exploring this with governors should this situation change.

b) Herschel Grammar School

Herschel is seen by many as a ‘local’ school. In January 2007 there were 35.9% out-borough pupils in the school. The balance of in– borough and out-borough has not been an issue until this year with 7 in-borough children and 15 out-borough not placed as of May 08. The school’s PAN is 120 and this year

145 were admitted and if this had not been the case the situation would have been different, with 12 of those additional 25 children being in-borough.

Distance is used as a criterion within criteria (after rank) and is used for entry beyond Yr 7 and this could be extended to initial application. However, the school emphasises that the strength of Herschel as a school has never been at the expense of the non-selective schools and whilst the Governing Body may be open to looking at distance as a criterion, this would only be if this was with the support of the non-selective schools. The concern is that if more Slough residents were successful in gaining places at the grammar schools this would mean these higher ability children were not taking up places at neighbouring non-selective schools and this could have a negative impact in terms of the cohort and its results.

c) Langley Grammar School

The right of parents to express a preference, to choose a 'local school' regardless of which LA it is in, parents' willingness and ability to travel as well as parents' own travel to work patterns all create difficulties for the LA in supplying places for Slough children. These factors affect Langley Grammar School, given its proximity to the Slough border and the M4.

The school selects on ability and is not a local school but can be seen as the school of choice for many 'local' people, despite overall high out-borough figures (in January 2007 there were 64% out-borough pupils in the school). The highest number of applicants for entry by postcode area is from SL3 although part of this falls outside Slough borough boundaries. The numbers of applicants from SL3 have risen from 2007 to 2008 by over 80%, way in excess of the rise from anywhere else.

The picture as of June 2008 is that 38 pupils with SL postcodes who were eligible have not received offers: this number may change as further places become available. Of these 20 are Slough residents.

Interestingly, there were some offers made to pupils with SL postcodes who rejected those offers and some families who were unsuccessful in gaining a place, despite scoring over 111 in the 11+ test, but opted not to appeal.

The number of pupils taking the 11+ test is rising.

Distance is used as a tie break within criteria.

Other influences on the intake of Langley Grammar include Churchmead School in Datchet not being a first choice of many parents it would otherwise serve and Langley Academy which serves this end of the borough.

d) Langley Academy

The Langley Academy allocates places according to distance within nine ability bands.

e) Slough Grammar School

Out-borough children in the school represented 54.7% (January 2007). The Headteacher's view is that more in-borough children in the grammar schools would have a negative impact on the non-selective schools. There are no plans to change current admissions criteria.

f) Wexham School

The Headteacher was clear that if grammar schools take more of the Slough children than now there will be an impact on non-selective schools and this could create 'sink' schools in the non-selective sector. He believes that the number of grammar schools means there will always be one non-selective school at

risk in Slough and even an over-subscribed school like Wexham is fragile. The Headteacher believes that in some schools the impact of 1 child on GCSE results can be as high as 1%. It was suggested that if the 11+ pass mark was higher this would demonstrate the true difference between the grammar schools and other schools – greater pace and rigour. When some non-selective schools were under-subscribed this provided a safety net and school improvement has accelerated without all the additional places to absorb its impact.

Overall

The balance of in-borough to out-borough children in Slough grammar schools is a concern. Many factors contribute to this increasing trend but it must be considered with regard to both the selective and non-selective schools.

Distance and / or catchment areas are used in a number of LAs (see **Appendix 2**). Further research needs to be carried out to engage with these LAs to find out the impact of these arrangements and to consider which model/s could be appropriate in Slough's geographical circumstances if this were under consideration. The LA should extend this debate with the grammar schools (and non-selective schools) and if there was a willingness to consider such an approach, a detailed piece of work needs to be done to identify which young people would have been offered places under any such criterion and the impact this would have had on the cohort of adjacent non-selective schools. It is essential to consider any increased number of in-borough children gaining grammar school places against any impact on the non-selective sector.

Recommendations 2.1

LA to explore further the arrangements in other LAs where such criteria exist to find out impact and equity of such arrangements.

The LA to discuss with all secondary schools further; the LA to discuss with any grammar school which might consider using some method of distance as a main criterion and, if in agreement, to explore further the range of models that might be used: proximity, area, top scores followed by proximity etc.; carry out a detailed mapping to identify what the change in intake would have been for that grammar school and its surrounding non-selective schools and share the data to inform debate.

2.2 Compliance

DCSF is carrying out a review of all admissions policies nationally in order to audit compliance with the School Admissions Code.

There have been changes to the admissions process in Slough grammar schools for the coming round of admissions and these are welcomed as being in line with the Coordinated Admissions Arrangements, for example, the grammar school of choice now being placed as first choice on the Common Application Form (CAF).

Recommendation 2.2

All admissions authorities within Slough should comply with DCSF recommendations.

2.3 Information

2.3.1 Clarity of Information

Admissions in Slough is very complex given the diversity of the provision and there is a high degree of misinformation and misunderstanding by parents, elected members and even, according to Headteachers, amongst themselves. Phrases like 'equal preference' are difficult for parents to understand.

There are a number of things that could be done and there is a need for all involved in guiding parents and providing information to do so in a clear and consistent manner.

Elected members and local MPs may, on occasion, have admissions issues brought to their attention by constituents and whilst they should not be involved in cases personally nor seek to influence outcomes, it is essential that they be provided with up to date and accurate data and information so that they can refer constituents to the correct process, information and guidance.

Recommendations 2.3.1

Information in all admissions policies should be reviewed for consistency and clarity.

Slough Borough Council should continue to review its admissions brochure on an annual basis.

Briefings should be held for both Primary and Secondary Headteachers and others involved in admissions to ensure equal understanding of LA and schools' processes and the CAF process.

A briefing should be held for elected members and MPs in the autumn term to provide information about the CAF / admissions process, criteria and data such as in-borough and out-borough.

2.3.2 Data and Information Sharing

One way of reducing the misunderstandings that exist for schools, parents and between admissions authorities would be by increasing the degree of sharing of data across all admissions authorities and taking every opportunity to provide consistent advice to parents.

The School Admissions Code states that:

*'Schemes **must** continue after 1 March to ensure that places which become available are reallocated effectively'* and this supports the recommendation to continue to coordinate the process beyond March .

Recommendations 2.3.2

The LA and schools should continue to take every opportunity to work closely together throughout the admissions process, to minimise administration and streamline the process, keeping one another informed about progress and sharing data, in order to inform robust discussion about issues based upon accurate and shared information.

Since only the Local Authority should offer school places, coordination should extend beyond March to ensure clarity for parents and a smoother process.

Whilst the LA is present at primary school meetings about admissions this could be expanded to include more secondary school open evenings.

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The details of enhancing coordination could be one of the issues which an Admissions Task and Finish group might address (see section 3 below).

2.4 Children in Public Care

During discussions and consideration of criteria for admissions the priority given to children in public care was discussed. It is a statutory requirement that children in public care (like children with a statement of SEN) are given high priority. It appears that grammar schools are applying this criterion but there is mixed practice regarding its inclusion in admissions policies.

One school had been given legal advice that, as this is a statutory requirement, it was not necessary to state it within the admissions policy and this advice has been followed.

This appears to be in breach of the Admissions Code of Practice which states:

'Children who are in public care (looked after children) must now be given top priority in the oversubscription criteria for all schools.'

Admission authorities are required to give highest priority to children in care in their oversubscription criteria.'

There is inconsistency within the grammar schools' admissions information and the Slough Admissions Booklet for these schools; this inconsistency could lead to misunderstanding on the part of carers.

The criterion is clearly stated in the Slough Booklet (p7) for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools.

Recommendations 2.4

The LA issue clarification to all schools, having sought further legal advice, to confirm the position regarding children in public care and the explicit inclusion of the relevant priority in written admission policies.

All published information to be consistent in all publications.

2.5 Earlier testing

Currently the 11+ test is taken in the autumn term (November) and there has been some debate about earlier testing.

The School Admissions Code now states that:

*Grammar schools and other schools, or their admission authorities, which are permitted to use selection by ability or aptitude, **should** ensure that parents are informed of the outcome of entry tests before they make their applications for other schools.(2.92)*

Currently there are no grammar schools in Slough operating earlier testing but Slough Grammar School is considering introducing this for 2010 entry and plans to include this in the annual consultation on

admissions in the autumn of 2009. The school already holds open evenings for year 5 children and their families in July each year.

Discussions with Headteachers showed a variety of views:

Some Headteachers could see the merits of an earlier test, with parents knowing the results prior to application but perceptions varied as to whether this would be welcomed by primary colleagues as it would allow more time to focus on Year 6 or whether it would be unpopular and also might put pressure on children too early (Heads assumed that testing may be necessary in the summer term but it is interesting to note that some other LAs – see below – run tests in September.) It would be crucial to seek parents' views early. One Headteacher was of the view that parents may be able to challenge the LA and schools as currently they do not have all information available at the point of application as they have not got 11+ results. With results known prior to application parents would be in a better position to be making an informed choice.

It was also stated that there could be a down side if the test was earlier and there were insufficient grammar school places for all Slough residents at grammar schools.

Headteachers were concerned about the appropriateness of holding open evenings in the summer term and the logistical difficulties this might cause.

This is clearly an issue for the grammar schools themselves who carry out all the administration and organisation of these tests.

Other LAs:

Kent holds the test in September; results in October and CAF closing date in November.

Sutton tests in September; results are early October and CAF later in October.

Recommendations 2.5

Whilst this is an issue for the grammar schools themselves, given the School Admissions Code recommendation, discussion could take place about earlier testing. The debate could be had amongst Primary and Secondary Headteachers and the LA; the educational and other implications for children and their families could be explored further.

Should any change to testing arrangements be introduced at any time this should be done with a long lead in time to enable full consultation with parents.

Further research could be carried out to find out more about the impact where this has been introduced in other LAs.

3. Summary of Recommendations

Overall

In order to take forward a number of the issues raised in this report a Task and Finish Group might be established with Headteachers and the LA. Such a group could explore issues further and commission further research work and analysis by the LA with a view to making any initial

recommendations early in the autumn, to feed into the annual consultation in the autumn of 2009 for the 2010 round of admissions and in respect of any ongoing good practice.

Recommendations 2.1

In borough / Out borough / Distance as a Criterion

LA to explore further the arrangements in other LAs where such criteria exist to find out impact and equity of such arrangements.

The LA to discuss with all secondary schools further; the LA to discuss with any grammar school which might consider using some method of distance as a main criterion and, if in agreement, to explore further the range of models that might be used: proximity, area, top scores followed by proximity etc.; carry out a detailed mapping to identify what the change in intake would have been for that grammar school and its surrounding non-selective schools and share the data to inform debate.

Recommendation 2.2

Compliance of local arrangements with Coordinated Admissions Arrangements:

All admissions authorities within Slough should comply with DCSF recommendations.

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The LA and schools should continue to take every opportunity to work closely together throughout the admissions process, to minimise administration and streamline the process, keeping one another informed about progress and sharing data, in order to inform robust discussion about issues based upon accurate and shared information.

Since only the Local Authority should offer school places, coordination should extend beyond March to ensure clarity for parents and a smoother process.

Whilst the LA is present at primary school meetings about admissions this could be expanded to include more secondary school open evenings.

The details of enhancing coordination could be one of the issues which an Admissions Task and Finish group might address.

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Should any change to testing arrangements be introduced at any time this should be done with a long lead in time to enable full consultation with parents.

Further research could be carried out to find out more about the impact where this has been introduced in other LAs.

Interviewees:

Hilda Clarke: Headteacher Langley Grammar School

Julian King- Harris: Headteacher Herschel Grammar School

Margaret Lenton: Headteacher Slough Grammar School

John McAteer: Headteacher St Bernard's Grammar School

Jeff Richardson: Headteacher Wexham School

Bill Alexander; Assistant Director Raising Achievement SBC

Tony Browne: Head of School Services SBC

Local Authority	Distance Criteria
Kent	Variety of approaches across schools: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity of child's home to school measured in a number of ways • Children living in, or attending primary schools in, xxxxx and surrounding villages (xxxxxx postcode) ; • Named feeder schools; • Towns / areas prioritised according to access to a grammar school
Bucks	Variety: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catchment area • First by rank within reserved area then beyond area
Bromley	One girl's school: Top 130 scorers in selection tests and applications accepted from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those within 7.5 mile radius of school • Within a 7.5 to 9 mile radius with sibling
Lincolnshire	Variety: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Including: pupils living within the traditional catchment area (from x feeder primary schools) • Proximity to the child's home • Children who reside within 6.5 miles as the crow flies are defined as "in catchment" candidates. Should there be need to establish priority within category, it will go to the applicants with the higher V.R. scores • Eligible children whose permanent residence is within the school's designated area for free transport (traditional catchment area) with priority being given to the order of their aggregate scores in the entrance tests.
Sutton	30 highest ranking score then ranked within 10k radius of school then beyond 50 highest then 80% of places to given radius then beyond to wider radius Also schools with pure ranking – mixed NB