

# Unlocking the gates:

Giving disadvantaged  
children a fairer deal  
in school admissions

**Believe in  
children**



**Barnardo's**

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By Barnardo's Policy and Research Unit



# Chief Executive's summary



For too long now, disadvantaged children have lagged behind their better-off peers in educational achievement. Those who are born poor are less likely to do

well in school, more likely to leave at 16 and become 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training), and less likely to go on to higher education.

There is compelling evidence that school admissions play a part in sustaining the achievement gap in education. Consider the lengths that parents will go to in order to get their child into the best local school, some even being prepared to move house. Yet we know from research that children can do better if schools are not socially segregated. Increasingly our schools are just that, with half of all pupils entitled to free school meals (a proxy for poverty) concentrated in a quarter of secondary schools<sup>1</sup>, while the top secondary schools take – on average – only five per cent of pupils entitled to free school meals, less than half the national average<sup>2</sup>.

*Unlocking the gates: Giving disadvantaged children a fairer deal in school admissions* draws together the research on secondary school admissions in England and explores the ways in which our education system fails to provide a 'level playing field' for children born into disadvantage. It also draws on the experience of Barnardo's Choice Advisers who help parents to navigate the labyrinthine complexities of secondary school admissions. Many of these parents find engaging with the application process so difficult that they do not apply

to any secondary school for their child, or they are blind to the difference the right school can make to their child's future. Either way, their son or daughter goes straight to the back of the queue when it comes to future educational success.

This short report aims to inform the debate on schooling, particularly as the new coalition Government begins to give more schools academy status, and the independence over their admissions which accompanies that. There is clear evidence that schools which control their own admissions are more socially selective. It is critical that the drive to raise standards by extending school 'freedoms' does not narrow opportunities for poorer children and widen the achievement gap even further. School freedoms must be balanced by clearer accountability for working with all children from the local community, including the most disadvantaged.

The report concludes with a number of recommendations which, if implemented, would give disadvantaged children a fairer deal in school admissions. These include:

- promoting 'banding' (admitting equal proportions of pupils in different ability bands) as a fairer basis for school admissions, particularly in urban areas
- requiring schools to report annually on their pupil intake in reports to parents and governors, and increasing scrutiny of admissions practice by the School Adjudicator and/or OFSTED
- separating responsibility for setting school admissions policies from administering them, as while policies often meet the letter of the law, practice can fall short.

**Martin Narey, Chief Executive**

1 Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) Deprivation and education – The evidence on pupils in England, Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4 available online at [www.education.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectid=15672&resultspage=1](http://www.education.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectid=15672&resultspage=1)  
2 Sutton Trust (2008) Low income pupils in high performing comprehensive schools available online at [www.suttontrust.com/reports/Ten-year-FSM-study.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/Ten-year-FSM-study.pdf)

# Policy context: child poverty in the UK, unequal life chances

1. Poverty blights children's lives. Currently one in four children in the UK is growing up in poverty<sup>3</sup> and Barnardo's experience of working with disadvantaged children and families means we know for many of them, life is tough. Barnardo's has campaigned on behalf of these children for a number of years, arguing for increased benefits, a better system of tax credits, and more help to get parents into work.  
in school, more likely to leave at 16 and become 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training) and less likely to go on to higher education. poor children start to fall behind their peers as early as 22 months<sup>4</sup> and the gap widens as they grow up. Children from disadvantaged homes are half as likely to get five good grades at GCSE as their classmates. In 2009, 27 per cent of children eligible for free school meals achieved five A\* to C grades (with maths and English) at GCSE, compared to 54 per cent of those not eligible<sup>5</sup>. And while pupils who do not receive free school meals stand a 32 per cent chance of going on to higher education, pupils in receipt of free school meals (a proxy for low income) stand only a 13 per cent chance – a gap of 19 percentage points<sup>6</sup>.
2. Much of the success of the last Government in reducing child poverty can be accredited to increases in child tax credits and other benefits. However, Barnardo's recognises that further increases in benefits are difficult in the current climate. Nevertheless, we are concerned that the new Government should not lose momentum when it comes to thinking about measures that will reduce child poverty. Not all measures aimed at helping poor families improve their life chances need to cost a great deal of money. In fact, changes aimed at ensuring our education system does not leave the poorest children behind, can cost relatively little.
3. Child poverty in the UK will only be eradicated if we tackle educational disadvantage passed down from one generation to the next. Children who are born poor are less likely to do well
4. There has been much interest across the political divide in tackling 'the opportunity gap' in education and good progress has been made in some areas. Some London boroughs have succeeded in narrowing the gap at GCSE to just five percentage points, but in other areas, it remains a shocking 44 percentage points<sup>7</sup>. Despite the political attention, the overall rate of progress has been disappointingly slow, with a reduction of just 0.6 percentage points in the last three years in England.<sup>8</sup>

3 Department for Work and Pensions (2009) Households Below Average Income: An analysis of the income distribution 1994/95-2007/08 available online at [http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/hbai/hbai2008/pdf\\_files/full\\_hbai09.pdf](http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/hbai/hbai2008/pdf_files/full_hbai09.pdf)  
4 Feinstein L (2003) Inequality in the early cognitive development of children in the 1970 cohort *Economica* Vol 70, no 277.  
5 Department for Children, Families and Schools (2009) DCSF: GCSE Attainment by Pupil Characteristics, in England available online at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000900/index.shtml](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000900/index.shtml)  
6 The Sutton Trust (2008) Wasted Talent: Attrition rates of high achieving pupils between school and university available online at [www.suttontrust.com/reports/wastedTalent.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/wastedTalent.pdf)  
7 Department for Children, Families and Schools (2009) GCSE Attainment by Pupil Characteristics, in England available online at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000900/index.shtml](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000900/index.shtml)  
8 ibid

### **Barnardo's Closing the Opportunity Gap policy briefings**

5. This paper is the second in a short series published by Barnardo's that focuses on the opportunity gap in education and possible policy solutions. The first paper *Lost in Transition – the urgent need to help young school leavers into education or training*<sup>9</sup> looked at how we can help the significant number of disadvantaged young people who leave school at 16 with few qualifications and become long-term unemployed.
6. This paper tackles the issue of fair admissions to secondary schools in England. It explores how well the current system is serving children from poorer households, and offers policy solutions to ensure fairer chances for all.
7. Early in 2011 we will produce a third paper, exploring the link between poverty and school exclusions.

### **Why look at secondary school admissions?**

8. Secondary school admissions may not seem the obvious place to start in a debate on why poorer children are not achieving as well as they should be in education. The new Government has already signalled that they intend to direct more funding to poorer pupils, whichever school they attend, through a new Pupil Premium. This is of course welcome, but widening access to good neighbourhood schools has a critical role to play in narrowing the opportunity gap in education. There is significant

evidence that secondary schools in England are socially segregated and that social segregation harms pupil performance.

### **Social segregation in secondary schools in England – the evidence**

- Half of all pupils entitled to free school meals, are concentrated in a quarter of secondary schools.
- The top secondary schools (on a measure of getting five GCSEs at A\* to C including English and maths) take on average only five per cent of pupils entitled to free school meals, less than half the national average.
- The social make-up of schools in England is often not reflective of the neighbourhoods in which they are based. The difference between the number of free school meal pupils on their roll and the number of free school meal pupils in the local electoral ward is as much as 30 per cent in some schools.

Sources: Department for Children, Families and Schools (2009) Deprivation and education – The evidence on pupils in England, Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4; Sutton Trust (2008) Low income pupils in high performing comprehensive schools Sutton Trust (2008) Social selectivity of state schools and the impact of grammars

9. Social segregation within the school system is partly responsible for entrenching educational disadvantage. Researchers have identified a positive peer effect – a term used to describe what

many parents have long suspected – that if you put children into a class of academically high-performing pupils, then their results are likely to improve. One of the biggest studies of this effect was undertaken by Zimmer and Toma<sup>10</sup>, who studied pupils in five different countries. They found that increases in the average ability of other pupils in the class consistently raised individual student achievement, across all of the countries studied and regardless of the make-up of the education system.

10. Social segregation can also lead to a negative peer effect – concentrating a disproportionate number of pupils from low income backgrounds, who are statistically less likely to be performing well academically, in a few schools. For example an OECD study in 2004 found that: 'Regardless of their own socio-economic background, students attending schools in which the average socio-economic background is high, tend to perform better than when they are enrolled in a school with a below-average socio-economic intake.'<sup>11</sup>
11. Moreover, everyone seems to benefit from more social integration, not just poorer children: 'Countries with greater socio-economic inclusion [schools less segregated by socio-economic background] tend to have higher overall performance.'<sup>12</sup>

### **The Barnardo's experience**

12. While we are all familiar with stories of ambitious middle class parents moving house or attending church regularly in order to get their children into the 'best' local schools, we hear little about those families who find the secondary school admissions process so daunting and complicated that they simply don't make an application at all.
13. Barnardo's has experience of working with such families to help them through the admissions process. We run two services – in Bradford and Luton – which employ Choice Advisers to offer targeted advice and support to disadvantaged and vulnerable families applying to secondary schools. The services vary in the light of local needs, but both provide a range of support such as:
  - open evenings at primary schools to provide general information to parents about the secondary school admissions process and the services the Choice Adviser can offer families
  - telephone advice to families
  - outreach work with particularly vulnerable families to assist them in making an application, including help understanding information and filling in forms
  - help for families seeking to appeal a decision, including assistance in putting together a case for appeal
  - help for families seeking to make applications part way through the school year, for admission to secondary schools (and in some particularly vulnerable cases, primary schools)

<sup>9</sup> Barnardo's (2010) *Lost in Transition: The urgent need to help young schools leavers into education or training* available online at [www.barnardos.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/our\\_projects/education.htm](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/what_we_do/our_projects/education.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Toma E and Zimmer RW (2000) Peer effects in private and public schools across countries, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 19, 75-92

<sup>11</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2004) *Learning from Tomorrow's World – First Results from PISA 2003*, Paris: OECD

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

- making contact with families who did not state a back-up preference on admission forms and ensuring they understand how declaring preferences influences the admissions process.

### Helping families with the admissions process

Diane contacted a Barnardo's Choice Adviser to help with making her granddaughter's application to secondary school. Stephanie had lived with her grandparents since her mother died when she was seven years old. She attended the primary school that had been her catchment area school when she lived with her mother. This now meant that if Stephanie was to continue with her peers and cousins she would need to get into an oversubscribed high school out of catchment.

At about the same time, Stephanie's grandfather passed away which left her feeling sad and anxious and sapped her self confidence. Her primary school noticed that Stephanie had become increasingly anxious and the head teacher wrote a supporting letter along with the child psychologist supporting the family's case. The Barnardo's Choice Adviser met with Diane to discuss the application process and, when her application was unsuccessful, supported the family during the appeals process. Support via home visits was given to ensure that the application for appeal was completed with Diane and preparation for what to expect at the appeal and emotional support was given prior to, and on the day of the appeal. Stephanie's appeal was a success and she gained a place at the chosen school.

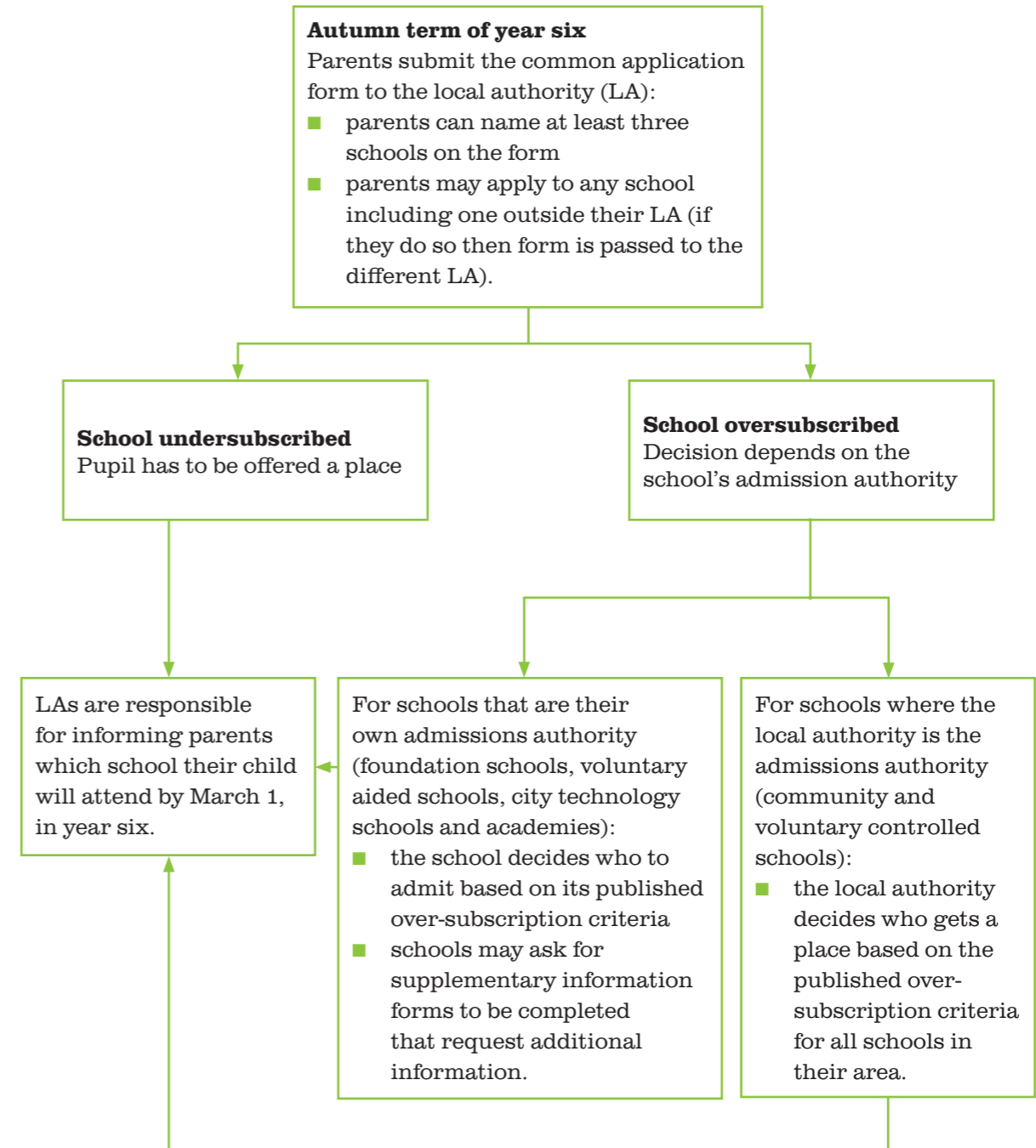
14. Barnardo's project workers often find themselves working with families with complex needs, who are leading chaotic lives. The extent of the day-to-day challenges they are dealing with means that they struggle to engage with a complicated process such as the secondary school admissions system. Issues that our project workers report as common with the families they work with, and which undermine their ability to get their children into their preferred (or simply a nearby) school include:

- frequent house moves – across local authority boundaries and school catchment areas, meaning they miss key dates in the admissions process, so find themselves 'at the back of the queue'
- recent immigration to the UK
- lack of spoken or written English
- disability and learning difficulty (parent or child) including having a child with a statement of special educational needs
- domestic violence
- poverty and debt
- having a parent in prison.



### How do secondary school admissions work?

15. Since the Education Reform Act 1988, parents have had a degree of choice over which school their child attends, also known as 'parental preference'. However, the system for determining school admissions is complex, particularly when schools are oversubscribed. The admissions system is illustrated in the box below.



16. Criteria that can be used in a school's over-subscription criteria are governed by the statutory School Admissions Code<sup>13</sup>. This specifically forbids the use of criteria that could disadvantage certain pupils, as well as advising on which criteria are considered fair (see text box below).

**The code forbids over-subscription criteria that give priority according to:**

- the occupational, financial or marital status of parents
- the educational achievement or background of the parents
- reports from previous schools about a child's past behaviour, attendance, attitude or achievement
- having relatives who previously attended the school, but have now left
- having relatives who are either governors of the school or members of staff
- the behaviour of other members of a child's family, whether good or bad
- child or parents' interests, specialist knowledge or hobbies.

**Commonly-used criteria that are considered fair and acceptable include:**

- priority to those with siblings already at the school
- priority to those with specific social or medical need. This should not be used to move pupils down the priority list of admission, only up;
- random allocation – particularly appropriate for urban areas;
- distance between home and school and ease of access by public transport
- catchment areas – these should reflect the diversity of the

- community, and must not exclude particular housing estates
- partial selection by aptitude for schools with a specialism (up to 10 per cent of pupils only)
- banding (selecting pupils to get a cross section).

17. While the current system aims to promote parental choice, it has become very complicated and therefore off-putting to some parents. There are concerns that while middle class parents tend to be strongly engaged to get the best result from the admissions process – even to the extent of moving house – disadvantaged parents are less likely to exercise their right to choose and more likely to simply opt for their local school, or not apply at all.

18. To address such concerns, in 2005, the then Government announced plans to develop a national network of Choice Advisers. These provide an independent service to families whose children are making the transition from primary to secondary school. Local authorities are required to provide parents with access to independent advice, support and guidance on the admissions process. How this service is provided varies greatly between different local authorities, with some offering advice and support through their own admissions team, while others use their parent-partnership officers, independent consultants or voluntary sector providers such as Barnardo's. A recent evaluation of the initiative<sup>14</sup> found great variation in the provision of Choice Advice: some services did

little more than answer the queries of self-referring families about how the admissions system worked, whereas others specifically targeted disadvantaged parents, providing them with intensive support.

19. Given the current pressure on local authority budgets there is also concern as to the extent local authorities will be able to maintain high quality Choice Adviser services at all. Choice Advice is often funded from area-based grants given to local authorities by the Department for Education. These grants have already been cut as part of the initial £6bn worth of savings announced by the Government in May 2010, and further reductions may yet follow. We therefore risk a position where current Government reforms to the education system - including the introduction of more academies and new 'free schools' may mean disadvantaged families face an even more complicated admissions system, at a time when advice to help them navigate that system is being cut.

**Why does the current system fail to ensure fair admissions?**

20. The admissions system is based on the idea of parental choice or more precisely, the right to express preferences between local schools. Who goes where, particularly in relation to popular schools that are over-subscribed, is decided by admissions authorities.

21. There have been many changes to school structures in recent decades, including to admission

arrangements. Local authorities act as the admissions authority for the majority of schools, but certain types of school act as their own admissions authority. The recent growth in foundation schools and academies means that there are increasing numbers of schools which act as their own admissions authority. In January 1988, 15 per cent of schools were their own admission authority<sup>15</sup>, by January 2009, that figure had almost tripled to 42 per cent. The number of academies is also expected to rise significantly in the near future – an estimated increase from before the election suggested that the number of academies was likely to rise from 133 in January 2009 to 314 by September 2010<sup>16</sup>. This estimate does not take into account current government policy which will fast-track high performing schools to academies. David Cameron has expressed a wish to grant academy status to a further 2000 schools, and 1560 schools have already expressed an interest. Along with the government's plans to introduce 'free schools' this means that the percentage of schools acting as their own admission's authorities is likely to grow significantly in the near future.

22. Schools that are their own admissions authority are subject to the School Admissions Code, designed to ensure they allow fair access for all. Despite this, there is evidence that they tend to be more socially selective. A report by the Sutton Trust in October 2008 found that 74 out of the 100 most socially selective schools in

<sup>13</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010) School Admissions Code, available on line at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/sacode/downloads/3986-admissions-code-feb10.doc](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/sacode/downloads/3986-admissions-code-feb10.doc)

<sup>14</sup> Stiell, B, Shipton L Coldron J and Coldwell M (2008) Choice, Advice and Evaluation, available online at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RW072.pdf](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RW072.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Department of Education and Science (1988) Statistics of Education School Leavers GCSE and GCE 1988, London: DES.  
<sup>16</sup> Data available from the Department for Children, Schools and Families online at 31 March 2010 at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000843/SFR08\\_2009\\_LATablesFinalUnrestrictedOctober2009.xls#Table 10e!A1](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000843/SFR08_2009_LATablesFinalUnrestrictedOctober2009.xls#Table 10e!A1)

England were their own admission authority<sup>17</sup>. In particular, voluntary-aided schools (typically those with a religious focus) seemed to take disproportionately fewer pupils entitled to free school meals, compared to their local population.

23. The reasons behind these differences in intake are complex: it is not simply the case that poorer parents are being refused admission by certain schools, as they may not even apply. Recent research<sup>18</sup> showed for example that poorer parents were making different choices because they were more likely to prioritise their child's own preferences – relating to factors such as friendship groups – rather than academic results. Key reasons – from academic research and Barnardo's experience – why certain families are disadvantaged by the school admissions process are explored below.

**The new School Admissions Code still allows some practices which may discriminate against disadvantaged children**

24. The new School Admissions Code which came into force in 2008 aimed to put an end to admissions practices that would favour children from better-off backgrounds. It has only been in operation a year and the most recent study by West et al<sup>19</sup> suggests that there is still not 100 per cent compliance, particularly amongst schools which are their own admissions authority. Their research

identified a number of ways in which schools were acting in accordance with the letter, but not the spirit, of the new code – operating admissions systems that are so complex and difficult to understand that they may deter less well-educated and confident parents from applying. Examples cited in the study include:

■ **Complex criteria relating to religious observance**

Many voluntary-aided schools were found to have supplementary information forms which asked a large number of questions about religion. Over a fifth of voluntary-aided schools surveyed had at least four admissions criteria relating to religion and some had as many as 11. They often involved open questions, requiring detailed replies. This may be enough to put off parents who lack confidence in writing, particularly the 16 per cent of adults in the UK who are estimated to lack functional literacy<sup>20</sup>. In addition, the criteria used to assess religious observance can put certain families at a disadvantage for reasons not related



<sup>17</sup> Based on the school's free school meal intake compared to the free school meal levels in the catchment area. Sutton Trust (2008) Social selectivity of state schools and the impact of grammars available online at [www.suttontrust.com/reports/GrammarsReviewSummary.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/GrammarsReviewSummary.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Coldron, J, Cripps, and Shipton L (2009) Why are secondary schools socially segregated?, Centre for Education and inclusion research, Sheffield Hallam University

<sup>19</sup> West A, Barham E, and Hind A (2009) Secondary school admissions in England: Policy and practice available online at [www.risetrust.org.uk/Secondary.pdf](http://www.risetrust.org.uk/Secondary.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Information from the National Literacy Trust accessed online at March 31 2010 [www.literacytrust.org.uk/socialinclusion/adults/survey.html](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/socialinclusion/adults/survey.html)

to their religion, for example, if they have only recently arrived in the area.

**Barnardo's experience**

Barnardo's services in Bradford and Luton have found themselves advising increasing numbers of newly arrived eastern European families in recent years. While these families are often devout Catholics, so wish their children to attend a faith school, they can struggle to meet the priority admissions criteria for local Catholic secondary schools. In Luton for example, some have only recently arrived or have moved around the city and therefore have not had consistent enough attendance at a particular church to be able to gain the required reference from a priest; others are denied admission because they failed to gain entry (particularly if they arrived mid-year) into a Catholic primary school which operates as a 'feeder' to the secondary school.

■ **Policies that make it hard to understand who gets priority if a school is over-subscribed**

Under the code, admissions criteria need to be 'clear in the sense of being free from doubt and easily understood'. However, some admissions authorities have long and complex policies which may be off-putting to parents who struggle with written English. Barnardo's advisers have found that lengthy information booklets with dense text to explain local admission arrangements and complicated maps and descriptions explaining local catchment areas can make the process seem very daunting to parents.

**Complicated over-subscription criteria related to catchment area**

From West et al (real example from a foundation school admissions policy).

'Within the [local area] Consortium Boundary, after the allocation of places under criteria 1, 2 and 3, half of the remaining places will be allocated to boys living to the north and half to boys living south of the [named river]. If there is an uneven number of places available, the additional place will be allocated to the side of the river having most applicants. Any places not filled by those living on one side of the river will be transferred to the other. In both cases those living closer to the school, as measured in a direct line on a map from the home address to the School, will be accorded higher priority.'

■ **Difficult to navigate admission processes which can differ from school to school**

The very process of making an application can be confusing for parents. Despite the introduction of a common application form and the move towards a nationwide deadline, Barnardo's Choice Advisers report that small differences in process in different schools and authorities continue to confuse parents. For example, a lack of co-ordination between local schools can make it difficult for parents to attend open evenings at all of the schools they may be interested in applying to. This is particularly problematic if the open evening is the main vehicle for providing supplementary information forms that parents need in order to make a successful

application. Further complications are caused by different deadlines – for example schools using banding systems may require an earlier application (to allow time to sit a test), before the main application deadline; and missing the earlier deadline can mean missing out altogether. Even the proposed national deadline for applications (30 October) may cause problems for parents who leave things until the last minute, as it is likely to fall within the half-term break in many schools, a time when parents may not be able to access in-school support.

#### **League tables: a disincentive effect?**

25. Many commentators point to the annual publication of school league tables, which focus on GCSE scores, as a key factor exacerbating social segregation in the school system. Put simply, league tables create incentives for schools to select pupils who are more likely to achieve good grades, since this will give them the best chance of maintaining an impressive ranking in the league tables. While there have been some attempts to improve this situation through the introduction of contextual value added indicators, published alongside traditional raw data, concerns remain that the simple overall score given to schools does not reflect many of the complexities of educating children facing a wide range of barriers to achievement. League tables have received criticism from across the political divide and there are signs of change. Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education,

has previously stated that the current system of league tables is ‘flawed’ and that it harms both ‘truly brighter students [who] aren’t being stretched because there’s no emphasis on getting people from a B to an A’ and ‘weaker students, who could really benefit from extra care and attention [and who] aren’t focused on either’.<sup>21</sup>

#### **Greater freedoms for schools, not matched by clearer accountability**

26. In the past, local authorities controlled most school admissions, so it was logical that schools should not be held to account on this front. However there has been significant growth in the number of schools responsible for their own admissions in recent years, which is likely to accelerate. Greater school autonomy must be balanced with clearer accountability. Although a significant proportion of schools now act as their own admissions authority, they are not held to account for taking their fair share of pupils from all backgrounds in the local community:
- The Ofsted inspection regime does not look at school admissions policies or practice.
  - The School Adjudicator has a narrowly defined legal role to decide whether individual schools are complying with the letter of the School Admissions Code, but not whether their admissions policy is resulting in a balanced intake, reflective of the local area.
27. The previous Government piloted a system of school report cards which would have provided a fuller overview

of how schools are performing, but legislation to introduce this was not passed before the end of the last Parliament. Barnardo’s is encouraged that the new Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition agreement<sup>22</sup> contains a commitment to ensuring that all schools are held properly accountable which we hope will include holding schools to account for fair admissions. Any reform to the system of school accountability must ensure that the achievements of schools that are working well to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds are duly recognised.

#### **Fairer school admissions: ideas for change**

28. There are a number of options which Barnardo’s believes would give disadvantaged children a fairer deal in school admissions – improving their chances of being admitted to a good local school and so improving their chances of academic success. These principally involve raising expectations for schools that control their own admissions to ensure they are fair and do not disadvantage pupils from poorer backgrounds. Given that most of these involve minor changes to existing requirements or simple changes of responsibilities for existing tasks, none of them are likely to have significant cost implications; however, we believe all of them could make a significant difference to the opportunities poorer children are given within our education system.

<sup>21</sup> BBC news online (August 2009) Tories Plan League Table Review available online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8203673.stm>

<sup>22</sup> Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition negotiation agreements reached 11 May 2010



### **Promote 'banding' as a fairer basis for school admissions**

29. One system that has been shown to offer more of a 'level playing field' in school admissions is banding, which involves schools admitting equal proportions of pupils in different ability bands, based on an assessment. We would like to see the Government actively promote banding<sup>23</sup>, particularly in urban areas which have high levels of social segregation within their school systems. This system is already used in some academies. It was also introduced in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets to good effect – increasing the number of children eligible for free school meals at the two voluntary-aided schools participating in the scheme<sup>24</sup>.

### **Require schools to report on their pupil intake in reports to parents, governors etc**

30. Schools have been given more control over their admissions policies, so should also be held more accountable for how they work in practice. Schools should report annually on the profile of their pupil intake, including the proportion of children on free school meals<sup>25</sup>. This information should be published as part of any successor to league tables as well as other reports produced by the school, such as school profiles and reports to governors. This information should also be benchmarked against the school

age population for the catchment area. This could counter-balance the disincentive effect of league tables, giving schools that are their own admissions authority a greater incentive to be inclusive of all children in the local community.

### **Independent scrutiny of school admissions practice**

31. Local authorities are under a duty to report to the School Adjudicator on admissions practices in schools, and parents may object if their complaint relates to certain breaches of the School Admissions Code. However, schools operating particularly good practice in relation to admissions receive no official recognition for doing so – unlike good teaching practice, admissions fall outside the remit of OFSTED inspections. We recommend that there be a duty to review school admissions policies on a regular basis, looking not only at whether they comply with the letter of the law, but also whether policies represent good practice and are resulting in a mixed intake broadly representative of the local community. This could be achieved by extending the role of Ofsted inspections and/or the School Adjudicator (who already has to produce an annual report to the Secretary of State on fair access, currently focused more on legal compliance than good practice) and enforced by requiring them to follow up on poor practice with schools and church authorities.



### **Separate responsibility for setting school admissions policies from administering them**

32. Many schools set their own over-subscription criteria, which under the School Admissions Code, must be clear and easy to understand. Although school admissions policies may adhere to the code, as we have seen, they often fall short in how they are implemented.

33. Administering school admissions puts a great burden on schools who have to read applications and supplementary information forms and judge these against published criteria. Some schools which are their own admissions authorities, notably trust schools and some academies, therefore choose to use the local authority to administer their admissions. Local authorities must in any case co-ordinate admissions for all schools in their

area and administer admissions for community-based schools.

34. Barnardo's recommends that while schools should be allowed to continue to set their own admissions policies in accordance with the School Admissions Code, the administration of school admissions should be done by a body independent of the school – possibly the local authority or local admissions forum. This would lighten the administrative burden on schools and provide confidence to parents that only relevant information would be taken into account in deciding admissions. It would also help to ensure that schools admissions criteria were clear and easy to understand, since an independent body would need to implement them. We believe this would help to eliminate unfair admissions practice, where decision-making falls short of both schools' published admissions policies and the law.

<sup>23</sup> The Admissions Code makes reference to it, but there has been no active encouragement to introduce such systems  
<sup>24</sup> West A School Choice, Equality and Social Justice: The Case For More Control British Journal of Educational Studies, vol. 54, no. 1, March 2006, pp15-33  
<sup>25</sup> This information should be readily available from the Annual Schools Survey collected by the Department for Children, Schools and Families

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Giving disadvantaged children a  
fairer deal in school admissions*

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Some images posed by models  
Names have been changed to  
protect identities



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