



MAYOR OF LONDON

SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMISSIONS IN LONDON

by

Hazel Pennell, Anne West and Audrey Hind

February 2006

Centre for Educational Research

Department of Social Policy
London School of Economics and Political Science

Clare Market Papers No. 19

Funded by the Greater London Authority

© Centre for Educational Research 2006

CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Department of Social Policy

London School of Economics and Political Science

Houghton Street

LONDON

WC2A 2AE

Tel. No. +44 (0)171 955 6994

Fax. No. +44 (0)171 955 7415

ISBN No: 0 7530 1956 6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	I
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMISSIONS IN LONDON PROJECT	1
1.2 NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT	1
1.3 THE LONDON CONTEXT	4
2. ADMISSIONS CRITERIA AND INFORMATION.....	5
2.1 ADMISSIONS CRITERIA FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS	5
2.2 ADMISSIONS INFORMATION AND PARENTS/CARERS.....	13
3. CO-ORDINATED ADMISSIONS IN LONDON.....	15
3.1 INTRODUCTION	15
3.2 METHODS.....	17
3.3 KEY FINDINGS	17
4. DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS.....	22
4.1 ADMISSIONS CRITERIA AND PRACTICES	22
4.2 CHANGES SINCE 2001	23
4.3 CO-ORDINATED ADMISSIONS IN LONDON	23
4.4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS.....	24
REFERENCES.....	26
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	28
ANNEX A	29
ANNEX B.....	30
ANNEX C	31
ANNEX D	33

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Greater London Authority.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2005, the Greater London Authority provided a grant to the London School of Economics and Political Science to carry out a research project on secondary school admissions in London. The project had two objectives:

- to provide an up-to-date report on secondary schools' admissions criteria and practices in London for admissions in 2005/06, with a particular focus on disadvantaged pupils (and to compare these with the criteria used in 2001/02); and
- to examine, from the perspective of local authorities, how effectively the Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme functioned during its first year, including difficulties encountered by local authorities.

The research methods, key findings and implications for policy are summarised below.

Secondary school admissions criteria and practices in London

Parents obtain information about secondary schools and the criteria used to decide who should be offered a place at the school¹ from local authority brochures and, in some cases, from individual schools. For this study, secondary school brochures for pupils due to start secondary school in September 2005 were obtained from the 32 London local authorities with maintained secondary schools. The research reported here relates to the admissions criteria and practices of 374 secondary schools in London that are nominally 'comprehensive'.² Schools with responsibility for their own admissions (voluntary aided and foundation) may require supplementary application forms to be completed, so they were contacted and asked for the information they provided to parents together with any supplementary forms.³

- When there were more applicants than places available, the vast majority of secondary schools (96%) reported that priority in admissions was given to siblings of children already attending the school and to the distance from a child's home to the school. Over eight out of ten (85%) schools reported giving priority to children in care, whilst other commonly reported criteria were the medical/social needs of a child (70%) and a child's special educational needs (47%).
- A range of criteria were identified that could be described as promoting social justice by, in particular, giving priority to children in public care, criteria related to medical/social need and special educational needs. In each case, more community/voluntary controlled than voluntary aided or foundation schools reported the use of these criteria (in each case, the difference was statistically significant).
- For faith schools, the School Admissions Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003) states that a contribution can be made to community cohesion by having admissions arrangements that are inclusive of other faiths. Around half of voluntary aided schools⁴ (46%) made specific mention of 'other faiths', or another world faith, in their admissions criteria.

¹ These criteria are used in the event of there being more applicants than places available.

² The 19 grammar schools in London were excluded from the analysis; admissions criteria relating to the 14 academies which are classified as being 'independent' not 'maintained' are provided in **Annex A**.

³ Supplementary forms relating to 40 out of 173 schools with responsibility for their own admissions were received; supplementary forms for a further eight schools were provided with the local authority admissions brochure (see **Section 2.2**).

⁴ Faith schools in London are all voluntary aided.

- Secondary schools are permitted under legislation to select pupils in order to obtain a ‘balanced’ intake based on pupils’ abilities; this is usually referred to as ‘banding’. Just over one in ten schools (16%) used some form of banding; more of these were voluntary aided or community/voluntary controlled schools than foundation schools (24% and 13% compared with 9%). The only form of banding that can now be introduced is called ‘fair banding’; this involves children whose parents/carers have applied for a place at a school being tested and then placed in ability bands based on their results. The bands are required to be representative of all levels of ability with no level of ability ‘substantially’ over-represented. Examples of banding were identified, used by schools responsible for their own admissions, that would result in an intake skewed towards higher ability pupils.⁵
- Banding carried out for community schools and some voluntary aided schools in specific parts of London is different. It is carried out centrally by the local authority and involves all pupils transferring to secondary schools in the area rather than applicants to individual schools. It relates to the allocation of places to secondary schools rather than involving particular pupils. No new systems of this type can now be introduced, as they do not constitute ‘fair banding’ under current legislation. However, these systems have advantages over school-based systems: in particular, the banding is not carried out on the basis of applicants to a school, so will reflect the ability profile of the area rather than applicants to a school. As the local authority does not have a vested interest in the outcome, there can be more confidence that the system used is clear, fair and transparent.
- There are some admissions criteria that could be considered unfair on the grounds that they give priority to pupils who possess certain abilities/aptitudes. Although legislation has ruled out any new selection on the basis of academic ability, arrangements existing at the beginning of the 1997/98 academic year have been allowed to continue and new selection on the basis of aptitude in a subject is allowed in limited circumstances where the school has a specialism. There is a debate about whether aptitude can be distinguished from ability. Seven per cent of secondary schools in London used criteria based on ability/aptitude in a subject, more were voluntary aided and foundation schools than community/voluntary controlled (this difference was statistically significant).
- A small percentage of schools (6%) gave priority to the children of employees/governors and to children of former pupils (2%); these could contravene anti-discriminatory legislation such as the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Other criteria and practices could enable schools to ‘select in’ certain pupils and ‘select out’ others. These include the holding of interviews/meetings and seeking references from a child’s primary school. Other criteria are imprecise or unclear.
- Overall, around a quarter of secondary schools used at least one ‘potentially selective’ admissions criterion (e.g., aptitude/ability in a subject/general ability, child of an employee, child of a former pupil, pastoral factors, compassionate factors, interview/meeting). More of these were voluntary aided or foundation than community/voluntary controlled (46% and 35% versus 10%). This difference was statistically significant.

Information provided for parents/carers by local authorities and schools

- The quality of information provided to parents/carers by local authorities was variable. In a few cases the secondary school brochures did not contain details of the admissions criteria of all

⁵ This banding was in place at the beginning of the 1997/98 academic year and so may continue; legislation prevents further banding of this type being introduced.

schools in the area; in others, the information was incomplete or unclear. A minority of local authorities included the supplementary admissions forms, required by some schools, with the local authority brochure, so easing the secondary transfer process for parents/carers.

- In terms of the information provided by voluntary aided and foundation schools to parents/carers who had expressed an interest in applying for a place at the school, there were cases where the information differed in material respects from that given in the local authority brochures (e.g., the school held interviews, but these were not mentioned in the brochure, or admissions criteria were included that were not mentioned in the brochure).
- A number of issues arose concerning the use and content of supplementary admissions forms; there were examples where parents were asked to provide information that did not seem to be related to the school's admissions criteria (e.g., whether parents were living in bed and breakfast accommodation or parents' occupation); there were also concerns about the length of some forms and the requirement, in some cases, that parents and children write extensively about, for example, their reasons for wanting a place at the school. The use of these forms could deter parents/carers from applying to particular schools.

Functioning of the Pan London School Admissions Scheme

- For admission to secondary schools in year 7 (age 11), from September 2005, local authorities have been required to co-ordinate secondary school applications for their residents. All parents/carers apply to their local authority, on behalf of their child, for secondary schools; and local authorities exchange information with each other where residents apply to schools beyond their boundaries. In London, co-ordination for admissions in September 2005, involved all 32 London boroughs and the City of London (together with some local authorities on the periphery of London). The Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme was established. A questionnaire survey was conducted of admissions officers in the 40 local authorities (33 in London and seven in the surrounding area) participating in the Scheme in 2004/05. Completed questionnaires were received from 95% of the local authorities that were part of the Scheme. The response rate from London local authorities was 100%.
- Nearly eight out of ten London respondents were satisfied with the operation of the Scheme in its first year in terms of the allocation of places to pupils resident in their local authority: they tended to feel that the Scheme had eliminated – or partially eliminated – multiple offers and reduced the numbers of children without places. Over eight out of ten were satisfied with the Scheme more generally.
- Around nine out of ten London respondents considered that there were advantages of the Scheme compared with the method used the previous year. High percentages expressed satisfaction with the number of preferences allowed, liaison with local authorities, liaison with individual schools and the timetable adopted. However, half were not satisfied with the computer software and a third were not satisfied with the supplementary application forms used by schools.
- Two-thirds of London respondents considered that individual admission authorities had complied with the School Admissions Code of Practice compared with one-third who felt that they had not.
- Amongst suggestions for improvement, were the need for better and more reliable software; consistent and sustained co-ordination beyond the offer date of 1 March when the statutory scheme ended; and the need to resolve the incompatibility between the different systems used in

relation to the consideration of preferences used by the Pan London Scheme and a number of schools that were their own admission authority.

Discussion

- The majority of London secondary schools reported using criteria that can be considered to be fair in that they did not appear to be designed to select any particular categories of pupils at the expense of others. This was most notable in the case of community/voluntary controlled schools. A minority of schools, mainly those that were their own admission authority (voluntary aided and foundation), reported criteria that appeared to be designed to select certain groups of pupils but exclude others. Proportionately more voluntary aided and foundation schools reported the use of criteria that could be seen as being potentially selective. They were also less inclusive than community/voluntary controlled schools in that they did not prioritise certain groups of disadvantaged children (e.g., children in public care or those with special educational needs) to the same extent.
- Covert selection is almost certainly more extensive than suggested by the admissions criteria published in local authority brochures for a number of reasons: not all the admissions criteria and practices are mentioned in the local authority brochures; the supplementary forms used by some schools provide opportunities for schools to select more 'desirable' pupils; and the survey of admissions officers revealed some disquiet amongst a minority with the admissions arrangements of some schools.
- Analysis undertaken by the Greater London Authority, found that, in 2003, pupils resident in London, attending schools responsible for their own admissions (voluntary aided/foundation/city technology colleges/academies) were less likely to be eligible for free school meals and less likely to have special educational needs than those attending community or voluntary controlled schools. In addition, pupils in these schools had higher levels of achievement at the end of key stage 2 (age 11 years) prior to admission to secondary school.
- Research carried out at the London School of Economics and Political Science has also found similar differences when examining the composition of schools of different types: in 2004, the attainment band of pupils in community/voluntary controlled secondary schools in London who had entered the school in 2001, was lower (prior to admission to secondary school) than that of those in voluntary aided/foundation schools. Moreover, the percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and the percentage of pupils with special educational needs, both with and without statements, was found to be higher in community/voluntary controlled schools than in voluntary aided/foundation schools.
- The research findings were compared with an earlier survey conducted in 2001 (West et al., 2003). It was found that there had been an increase in the use of criteria that could be said to enhance social justice and inclusion. The most dramatic change was in the percentage of schools that prioritised children in public care; this increased from 4% in 2001 to 85% in 2005. In the case of religious schools, the inclusion of pupils from 'other faiths' was more frequently reported in admissions criteria in 2005 (35% in 2001 compared with 46% in 2005).
- There was an increase in the percentage of schools that selected a proportion of their intake on the basis of aptitude/ability in a subject (5% in 2001 and 7% in 2005). However, there was a decrease in the use of other potentially selective/discriminatory admissions criteria. Interviewing dropped to 2% (from 14% reporting parent interviews and 8% reporting pupil interviews in 2001). The proportion of schools giving priority to children of

employees/governors dropped from 13% to 6%. In short, the new Code of Practice, which came into force in September 2004, has had a positive effect.

- The survey of admissions officers involved in the Pan-London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme indicated that the Scheme was largely successful in meeting its main aim of eliminating or greatly reducing multiple offers of places. There were high satisfaction rates for various aspects of the Scheme. The main areas of concern were in respect of the computer software used; there was also concern about the use of supplementary forms by schools that were responsible for their own admissions. There was a general view that the increased links between local authorities that had been engendered by the Scheme were beneficial.

Summary and policy implications

The research findings suggest that a number of changes to current policy are needed to ensure that schools with autonomy over admissions do not ‘cream’ the most desirable pupils. Given the recent Government White Paper, ‘Higher Standards, Better Schools for All’ (HM Government, 2005) this is even more important as included within it are proposals for all new schools to become responsible for their own admissions as foundation, voluntary aided, trust schools or academies. Moreover, existing schools would also be encouraged to become trust schools with similar powers over admissions. As these changes would increase the number of schools with responsibility for their own admissions, and hence the potential for more selective admissions criteria/practices, the following proposals should be considered by policy makers.

- At present, the School Admissions Code of Practice provides guidance, to which bodies responsible for school admissions should ‘have regard’. If they have a good reason not to follow the guidance having first considered it, they may do so. As a result of this lack of regulation, schools may continue to use criteria that are not clear, fair or objective to decide who should be admitted to the school. To address this issue, the School Admissions Code of Practice should be strengthened and underpinned by regulation (as already happens in relation to the co-ordination of school admissions and is to happen in relation to children in public care).
- A ‘menu’ of acceptable types of criteria should be provided in regulations.⁶
- The use of supplementary admissions forms by schools that are their own admission authority should be curtailed.
- Some of the most problematic admissions criteria and practices, identified in the research, pre-date the election of the Labour Government (e.g., partial selection by general ability and banding that results in an intake skewed towards higher achieving pupils). Regulations could be introduced to end their use.
- The use of selection by ability/aptitude privileges some pupils over others. Testing cannot clearly distinguish between current levels of achievement, ability and aptitude. Given the well-established links between achievement and socio-economic background, selection by aptitude/ability in a subject is likely to have a detrimental impact on disadvantaged children. The use of banding on an area-wide basis, on the other hand, could help reduce the current ability (and hence socio-economic) imbalance in the intake between schools (see also Gorard et al., 2003); legislation could be introduced to give powers to local authorities to introduce new area-wide banding systems.

⁶ This currently happens in relation to the types of factors that can be used by local authorities to allocate funds to schools in their fair funding formulae.

- There is a good case for stating in admissions criteria that priority is given to children with a statement of special educational needs. Where it is not a criterion it may signal to parents/carers that such children do not have the same rights as those without such needs. Moreover, in the case of an individual school, it may give out the message to parents/carers that such a school does not welcome children with special educational needs to the same extent as other schools that do give such priority.
- Local authorities should be given a statutory role to oversee admission arrangements of all publicly funded schools in their area and ensure that admissions criteria are in accord with the ‘menu’ of acceptable criteria.
- There is a strong case for the allocation of school places to be carried out by a body other than a school. Where individual schools are responsible for their own admissions there will be continuing concern that pupils may be either consciously or unconsciously ‘selected in’ or ‘selected out’ in the admissions process in the interests of schools rather than pupils. The pressures caused by league tables and competition, undoubtedly present incentives for schools which are oversubscribed, to obtain pupils who are both highly motivated and able. We consider that an alternative body should be responsible. Local authorities are best placed to undertake admissions (as happens in Finland and Sweden) although separate arrangements could be made for faith schools, whereby appropriate bodies, such as Diocesan Boards in the case of Church of England schools, could undertake the role.
- Local authority brochures should contain admissions criteria on all publicly funded schools in their administrative area. Further, local authorities should have a statutory duty to ensure that the information included in brochures is complete and accurate.
- Given that differences have been identified in the characteristics of pupils who enter different types of schools (Ewens, 2005; West and Hind, 2006), the monitoring of applicants to different types of schools needs to be undertaken by local authorities or the Department for Education and Skills or an independent body such as the GLA.⁷ The aim would be to determine which categories of pupils (e.g., children with special educational needs, children from different ethnic groups, children in public care, children known to be eligible for free school meals) are offered places and which are subsequently admitted to different types of schools.

⁷ With permitted access to DfES pupil level annual school census (PLASC) data.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Secondary School Admissions in London Project

In March 2005, the Greater London Authority provided a grant to the London School of Economics and Political Science to carry out a research project on secondary school admissions in London. The project had two objectives:

- to provide an up-to-date report on secondary schools' admissions criteria and practices in London for admissions in 2005/06, with a particular focus on disadvantaged pupils (and to compare these with the criteria used for 2001/02); and
- to examine, from the perspective of local authorities, how effectively the Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme functioned during its first year, including difficulties encountered by local authorities.

This report presents the findings. Before doing so, the policy context at a national and local level is outlined and relevant literature reviewed. Section 2 focuses on the admissions criteria and practices used for admission to secondary schools for pupils starting secondary school in year 7 (aged 11 to 12 years) in September 2005. It also considers the extent to which the admissions criteria appear to comply with the School Admissions Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003) and provides an overview of the admissions information provided to parents/carers via brochures, and pre-admission information sought by some schools. Section 3 presents the views of local authority admissions officers on the functioning of the Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme during its first year. The final section discusses the research findings and puts forward a number of implications for policy.

1.2 National policy context

The education reforms first introduced by the Conservative Government in the 1980s, and specifically the Education Reform Act 1998, resulted in a 'quasi-market' in school-based education (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). Following these reforms, many more schools in England became responsible for admissions to their schools as a result of opting out of local authority control and becoming grant-maintained: whilst in January 1988, 15% of schools in England were responsible for their own admissions, by January 1999, 30% were their own admission authority (West and Pennell, 2003).⁸

Admission authorities (i.e., local authorities, voluntary aided and foundation schools) are required to admit children, on demand, up to the physical capacity of the school (except in the case of selective schools); in the event of the school being oversubscribed, with more applicants than places, the school's admissions criteria are used to decide who should be offered a place.

Concerns were raised in the 1990s on the effect that the autonomy of certain schools over admissions was having on the administration of school admissions in various parts of the country. In particular, it was argued that the overall co-ordination of admissions by local authorities was

⁸ The local authority is responsible for admissions to community and voluntary controlled schools. Voluntary aided schools, foundation schools, academies and city technology colleges are responsible for their own admissions (academies and city technology colleges are classified as 'independent' schools).

being impeded and that there were implications for equity in circumstances where certain schools⁹ were in a position effectively to ‘choose’ their pupils (see Gerwirtz et al., 1995; Audit Commission, 1996; Walford, 1993; West & Pennell, 1997; West et al., 1998).

The Labour Party before it was elected in 1997, committed itself to reform of the admissions system. Subsequently, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 put into place a new legal framework for school admissions. New statutory requirements were laid upon local authorities by the Act, as amended by the Education Act 2002, and subsequent regulations (Office of Public Sector Information (OPSI), 2002a; 2002b) to formulate an admissions scheme covering every maintained school in their area in order to co-ordinate the admissions process; under the regulations local authorities were also required to co-ordinate arrangements for residents applying to these schools or to any outside the area from September 2005.

The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (section 25) empowered the Secretary of State to appoint School Adjudicators. Adjudicators have a variety of functions with regard to school organisation and a specific role in seeking to settle local disputes concerning admissions where it has not been possible to reach local agreement; they are independent of the Secretary of State and ‘consider each objection on its individual merits, taking account of the reasons for disagreement at local level, in the light of the legislation and the guidance in this Code’ (DfES, 2003, p. 19). Adjudicators are able to consider objections from admission authorities, by community and voluntary controlled schools and from parents in the case of certain pre-existing partially selective admissions criteria. Decisions taken by adjudicators are binding on all the parties involved. They can only be challenged through judicial review (DfES, 2003). The Act also required the Secretary of State for Education to issue a Code of Practice on School Admissions (section 84). Together the legislation, the accompanying regulations and the Code of Practice can be seen as an attempt to deal with the difficulties that had arisen from the establishment of a predominantly unregulated market in relation to school admissions.

The first Code of Practice came into force on 1 April 1999 (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1999) and applied to those transferring to secondary school from September 2000. A second came into force on 31 January 2003 (DfES, 2003) and applies to those transferring from September 2004. Key aspects of the Code of Practice concern information provided for parents, guidance on the admissions process, oversubscription criteria,¹⁰ the Schools Adjudicator and the co-ordination of admissions arrangements. In terms of the criteria that admission authorities use in cases where more parents have expressed a preference for a particular school than there are places available (known as oversubscription criteria) the Code allows ‘a fairly wide discretion’ provided that:

- the criteria are not unlawful;
- the admission authority has properly considered the factors which it believes to be most important in ensuring that children receive an efficient and suitable education, and has had regard to the guidance in this Code;
- the criteria are clear, fair and objective and are published (DfES, 2003, p. 55).

⁹ At the time these were grant-maintained (now mostly foundation) and voluntary aided (mostly church) schools.

¹⁰ These apply to local authorities, which are responsible for admissions to community and voluntary controlled schools, to voluntary aided schools, foundation schools and academies. Although academies are technically ‘independent’ they are subject to the School Admissions Code of Practice; city technology colleges are also ‘independent’ but are not subject to the Code; the Education Act 2002 enables city technology colleges to become academies.

The Code also makes reference to circumstances where partial selection is permitted and where it is not. New selection on the basis of ability is not allowed other than by 'fair banding' which is designed to obtain an entry 'fully representative of the range of ability amongst children applying to the school for that year of entry' (DfES, 2003, p. 58), although a school that admitted a proportion of its pupils by ability or aptitude at the beginning of the 1997/98 academic year is allowed to continue to operate the same selection arrangements on the same basis. However, in some circumstances new partial selection on the basis of aptitude in a particular subject is allowed: schools with a specialism are permitted to select up to 10% of their intake on the basis of aptitude in a relevant subject.

The first Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999) allowed parents to be interviewed but only to establish religious or denominational commitment for admission to a church school. Parents were not, according to the Code, to be interviewed for any other purpose at any point of the application or admissions process (except in the case of boarding schools). The second Code of Practice (DfES, 2003) restricts interviews further and states: 'no parents or children should be interviewed at any part of the application or admission process, in any school except a boarding school' (p. 13).

Notwithstanding the actions taken by the Labour Government to improve school admissions, concerns still remain. First, there are concerns over the status of the Code of Practice. Whilst admission authorities must comply with the law, legislation and statutory instruments, they are only required to 'have regard to' the guidance given in the Code. Having done so, they can set admissions criteria that do not comply with the Code, as long as they have good reasons for their actions (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills, 2004).¹¹

Second, there are concerns regarding the role of local authorities. Local authorities are 'required by legislation to be both co-ordinator and enforcer of good practice' (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills, 2004, p. 20). Where they identify admission arrangements that are contrary to the Code of Practice they have a duty to try to resolve matters or if that is not possible to make an objection to the adjudicator. However, by making an objection they are placing themselves in an adversarial role with schools. This does not sit easily with their other duties that involve promoting co-operation and maintaining good relationships with schools (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills, 2004).

Third, there are concerns about the role of the Schools Adjudicator; the power of adjudicators is limited to investigating the matter that is the subject of the objection and not to any others (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills, 2004). Adjudicators must confine their judgements to the circumstances that obtain locally and if no objection is made then no action can be taken, irrespective of the extent that the practices may contravene the Code of Practice.

Researchers and commentators have continued to highlight problems associated with school admissions and more specifically those involving schools that are responsible for their own admissions (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills, 2004; West et al., 2003; Gorard, 2003; Gorard et al., 2003). As noted by West et al. (2004): 'a significant minority of schools, notably those that are their own admission authorities, use a variety of criteria that appear to be designed to select certain groups of pupils but exclude others – there are thus clear opportunities for schools to 'select in' and 'select out' pupils' (p. 360).

¹¹ This was the position adopted by one voluntary aided school that has continued to interview notwithstanding the Code of Practice and an objection that was upheld by the Schools Adjudicator. The school took this to judicial review and won the case on the grounds that having 'had regard' to the guidance contained in the Code it had made the decision not to act in accordance with the guidance.

In this context it should be noted that the White Paper ‘Higher Standards, Better Schools for All - More Choice for Parents and Pupils’ (HM Government, 2005), proposes a radical reform of education in England. If implemented, this could fundamentally change the landscape of education in England, as every school would be able to acquire a self-governing trust similar to that supporting academies. Moreover, all new schools would be self-governing foundation, voluntary aided, trust schools or academies and all would have responsibility over admissions.

1.3 The London context

The focus of this report is on secondary school admissions in London. There are features of London that mark it out as distinct from other parts of England – these are well known and involve not only the sheer scale of London but also its diversity. It has become a truism that a major feature of London is that extremes of wealth and deprivation exist side by side. As one measure of this, in January 2005, 39% of pupils in inner London secondary schools were known to be eligible for free school meals and 18% in outer London; this compares with 14% across the whole of England (DfES, 2005a). In contrast, whilst an average of 7% of pupils in England attend independent schools, in inner London the figure (for all pupils) rises to 14% (DfES, 2005b). London is also the most ethnically diverse part of the country. Two-fifths (41%) of children in London belong to a black, Asian or minority ethnic group compared with 13% of children in England and Wales (Mayor of London, 2004). A recent report noted that at school level there is ‘tremendous variation between the prior attainment of the pupils they take in. This variation is associated with levels of deprivation and produces a steep hierarchy of schools’ (DfES, 2005c, p. 9).

London has been the focus of a number of initiatives by the Labour Government to improve the overall ‘quality’ of education provided in the capital: Excellence in Cities for example, aimed to address educational disadvantage and underperformance in schools located within the most deprived urban areas in England including London. Another initiative, The London Challenge, sets out a three tier strategy to achieve a world-class education system in London by: ‘transforming the educational landscape in parts of London with historic patterns of low aspiration and low achievement; supporting schools facing the greatest challenges to establish a strong culture of achievement; and putting in place changes across London that will strengthen the system throughout the capital’ (DfES, 2005c, p. 12). Increasing the diversity of schools in the capital, including the opening of new academies across London, is a central part of the initiative.

Turning more specifically to admissions to secondary schools in London, the experience of parents in choosing a school in London is also distinctly different from elsewhere in the country (Flatley et al., 2001). In particular, the education market is more developed in London and competition for places is more intense than elsewhere. Flatley et al. found that London parents were the least likely to be offered places at their favourite school – 68% compared with 85% nationally. The researchers concluded that parents in London were three times less likely to be offered a school place at the school they most wanted than parents living elsewhere, having controlled for the possible effect of other variables. Indeed the researchers found that there were only four variables that had an independent significant association with whether or not parents were offered a place at their favourite school; the strongest association was being a London parent (an odds ratio of 0.3: 1.0) (Flatley et al., 2001). They also found that parents in London were more likely than those elsewhere *not* to have applied to their nearest school and to have applied to more than one admission authority; they were also more likely to have made an appeal (Flatley et al., 2001).

Research carried out by London South Bank University suggests that children from minority ethnic groups are disadvantaged in the secondary transfer process (see The Guardian, 2005; Bruegel and Weller, 2006). The research found that although these children tended to be clustered in primary schools with poorer overall test results at age 11 (key stage 2) than white children, they fared even

worse after secondary transfer in terms of the key stage 3 results of their secondary schools. The social class background of children was also found to impact on their success in the competition for places in a similar way.

Research by West and Hind (2005) found more ‘selectivity’ amongst London comprehensive schools with autonomy over admissions, compared with schools outside London (having taken account of the fact that there are more schools responsible for admissions in London than in the rest of England). They found that higher proportions used potentially selective admissions criteria than in the rest of England. Moreover, it was found that schools with responsibility for their own admissions had lower proportions of pupils with special educational needs than schools whose admissions were controlled by the local authority.

2. ADMISSIONS CRITERIA AND INFORMATION

The first part of this section examines criteria for admission to secondary schools in London. The second part provides an overview of the admissions information provided to parents/carers at the secondary transfer stage via brochures, and pre-admission information sought by some schools with responsibility for admissions.

2.1 Admissions criteria for secondary schools

Methods

The analysis of admissions criteria and practices was carried out by collecting secondary school admission brochures for each of the 32 London local authorities with maintained secondary schools. In the case of 12 schools information in the local authority brochures was either missing or largely incomplete and so in these cases information was collected from the schools in question; all were their own admission authority – and all voluntary aided except for one foundation school. A database was established of the admissions criteria and practices used by schools for pupils entering in year 7, in September 2005.

Information was obtained on the criteria used by state-maintained secondary schools in London that were not fully academically selective (i.e., excluding the 19 grammar schools in London) (N=374). Over half (53%) were community schools, 29% voluntary aided, 17% foundation and 1% voluntary controlled. Given the small number of voluntary controlled schools, and the fact that their admissions are the responsibility of the local authority, they have been combined with community schools in the analyses that follow. (**Annex A** lists admissions criteria for the 14 ‘independent’ academies for September 2005.)

Overall findings

A wide range of admissions criteria and practices were used for admission to ‘comprehensive’ secondary schools in London; those used by at least 5% of schools are shown in Table 1 (for a fuller listing see **Annex B**).

Table 1. Admissions criteria and practices used by London ‘comprehensive’ schools

Criterion/practice	Percentage of schools N= 374
Siblings	96%
Distance	96%
Child in public care	85%
Medical/social need	70%
Special educational needs	47%
Religion	25%
Child attends feeder school	19%
Banding	16%
Child from ‘other faith’	13%
School is ‘first preference’	10%
Catchment area	8%
Child has ability/aptitude in subject	7%
Child of employee/governor	6%

As shown in Table 1, the vast majority of secondary schools reported that siblings and distance were admissions criteria in the event of their being more applicants than places. Over eight out of ten schools reported giving priority to children in care. Other commonly reported criteria were medical/social needs and special educational needs. As might be expected, given the high proportion of voluntary aided schools, a significant minority of schools – almost all those that were voluntary aided – had an admissions criterion relating to religion.

Amongst the criteria reported by admission authorities were a number that could provide opportunities for pupils to be ‘selected in’ or ‘selected out’ during the admissions process. These opportunities include using criteria that give priority to certain categories of pupils who might enhance a school’s league table performance, for example, those with a particular ability/aptitude in a subject. On the other hand, there are other categories of children, such as those in public care or those with special educational needs, who may be less likely to excel but whose presence might indicate that the admission authority had considered issues related to what could be construed broadly as ‘social justice’.

Admissions criteria and ‘social justice’

A range of criteria may be used by admission authorities that could variously be described as ‘inclusive’ or as promoting social justice. Here we examine differences between schools responsible for their own admissions and those whose admissions are controlled by the local authority (see also **Annex B**).

Children in public care

The School Admissions Code of Practice (DfES, 2003) notes that children in public care are a disadvantaged group who have very low average levels of attainment. It is recommended that all admission authorities give these children ‘top priority’ in their admissions criteria. In our analysis we found that more than eight out of ten schools had a criterion prioritising this group. However, more community/voluntary controlled schools than voluntary aided or foundation schools reported this as a criterion (95% versus 74% and 72%). This difference was statistically significant.¹²

¹² All differences reported as being statistically significant, are significant at the 0.05 level or beyond.

Criteria relating to medical/social need

Seven out of ten schools reported having an admissions criterion related to the medical or social needs of the child. Community/voluntary controlled schools were significantly more likely to include such a criterion than were voluntary aided and foundation schools (81% versus 56% and 59%). This difference was statistically significant.

Special educational needs

Nearly half the secondary schools in London reported having an admissions criterion that made reference to pupils with special educational needs. More of these schools were community/voluntary controlled than voluntary aided or foundation (64% versus 25% and 28%). This difference was statistically significant.

Some caution needs to be exercised on this point as some local authority brochures and individual schools treat the admission of pupils with special educational needs as a separate matter and do not have special educational needs as a specific admissions criterion.

Religious schools and 'other faiths'

The Code of Practice states that faith schools can make a contribution 'to community cohesion by having admission arrangements that are inclusive of other faiths and of all elements of population of their local area' (DfES, 2003, p. 12). A quarter of all London secondary schools made reference to religious criteria: all were voluntary aided.

Around half of these (46%) made specific mention of 'other faiths' or another 'World Faith' in their admissions criteria although all 'Christian'¹³ schools mentioned other Christian denominations in their criteria. Two examples of criteria mentioning 'other faiths' are given in Figure 1.

¹³ Church of England, Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist and those describing themselves as Christian.

Figure 1. Examples of criteria mentioning ‘other faiths’

Example 1

The Governors of the school will designate 75% of the annual intake and of each band of ability as foundation places. For the Foundation Places the Governors will give priority to pupils whose families are active members of the:

1. Church of England and then
2. Other Christian denominations

Any Foundation Places not allocated under the above will be given to children whose parents wish them to be educated in the school's Christian tradition and who the Governors feel would benefit from the general aims of the school. The Governors welcome applications from parents practising other world faiths.

In all cases the governors will give consideration to:

- a) Children with brothers or sisters already in the school
- b) Children who in the opinion of the Governors have special medical or social needs.

Example 2

Children will be admitted to the school in the following order of priority. The governors reserve the right to give over-riding priority to children in public care and to any child on the ground of documented social or medical need, and where the school is clearly capable of accommodating those needs. The admissions criteria are in order of precedence:

1. Students who attend a Church of England church or whose parents/carers do so.
2. Students who are, or whose parents/carers are, regular worshippers at other churches, or chapels, or other Christian denominations as defined by ‘Churches together in Britain and Ireland’; or members of the Evangelical Alliance.
3. Students who are, or whose parents/carers are, practising members of another world faith. Please note a letter, relating to the above must be signed by a vicar, minister or religious leader and must be submitted to the school at the time of application.

Admissions criteria and the opportunity to select

A range of criteria that could be considered ‘unfair’ are examined in the following section. These could be considered to be unfair on two possible grounds: either they give priority to certain categories of pupils who possess certain abilities/aptitudes or it appears that the criteria could contravene current legislation.

Criteria related to ability/aptitude

Although the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 ruled out the introduction of any new selection on the basis of academic ability,¹⁴ existing selection by ability or aptitude was allowed to continue. New selection on the basis of aptitude in a subject was also allowed in limited circumstances where the school has a specialism (e.g., a specialist school) and where the proportion selected is no more than 10% of the school's intake.¹⁵

In the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 ‘ability’ is defined as ‘either general ability or ability in any particular subject or subjects’ (section 99). Aptitude is not defined in the legislation, although the Code of Practice states that ‘a pupil with aptitude is one who is identified as being able to benefit from teaching in a specific subject or who demonstrates a particular capacity to succeed in that subject’ (DfES, 2003, p. 33). However, it is not clear how demonstrating a ‘capacity to

¹⁴ Academic selection is allowed in sixth forms and fair banding is also allowed.

¹⁵ Priority on the basis of aptitude is allowed for physical education/sport/one or more sports; the performing arts/one or more of the performing arts; the visual arts/one or more of the visual arts; modern foreign language or any such language; design and technology and information technology (OPSI, 1999). New regulations are to come into force in 2006 and selection on the basis of design and technology and information technology will no longer be permitted.

succeed' differs from 'ability'. As a result we focus on either ability or aptitude in a particular subject area in relation to partial selection. We found that more voluntary aided and foundation schools than community/voluntary controlled schools reported selecting a proportion of pupils on the basis of ability or aptitude in a subject area (13% and 12% versus 3%). This difference was statistically significant.

It is notable that the lack of clarity between aptitude and ability is reflected in the admissions criteria used by schools. For example, one school that selected up to 10% of pupils able to demonstrate a specific aptitude in and commitment to one of the performing arts required those wishing to qualify for an audition for a music place to have attained Associated Board Grade 3 or equivalent standard. The criterion could be measuring ability or aptitude or both – it is not possible to say which. What is clear however, is that it is measuring achievement.

In addition to selection by ability or aptitude in a subject area, 3% of schools selected a proportion of pupils on the basis of general ability. More of these schools were foundation than voluntary aided or community/voluntary controlled (9% versus 3% and 2%).

Other selective criteria

Even where a school did not select a proportion of its pupils by aptitude/ability in a subject, there were other ways that it could partially select its intake. One school, for example, had as one of its criteria 'Children who demonstrate significant involvement in activities relevant to the ethos of the school'. This was defined as:

- Membership of and progression within the brownies/cubs, girls/boys brigade or equivalent... for a minimum of two years;
- Playing of musical instrument for a minimum of 1 year and attainment of Grade 2;
- Membership of and progression within a Drama/Theatre/Dance group for a minimum of two years;
- Membership of and regular active participation within a competitive sports team for a minimum of two years or, in individual competitive sport, to have achieved an award at regional level.

Banding

Under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, secondary schools are permitted to select pupils in order to obtain a 'balanced' intake based on their ability; this is usually referred to as 'banding'. Overall, our analysis showed that 16% of London schools used some form of banding. More voluntary aided and community/voluntary controlled schools than foundation schools used banding (24% and 13% versus 9%). This difference was statistically significant.

The only form of banding that can now be introduced is called 'fair banding' which involves an admission authority testing all children applying for a place at a particular school and then placing the children into ability bands on the basis of their test results. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (section 101) allows banding to take place only if the bands are representative of all levels of ability among applicants to a particular school and that no level of ability is 'substantially' over-represented. Our research identified examples of banding where the process would result in an intake skewed towards those of higher ability; however, as this was banding that was in place at the beginning of the academic year 1997/98, it is allowed to continue:

To secure an effective balance of ability across each intake and throughout the school as a whole, all applicants will be required to take a series of standard tests...On the results of these tests, applicants will be placed in one of the following bands: above average, average,

below average. In September 2005 places will be offered, as far as applications allow, in the proportions 40:40:20 for the three bands.

The girls chosen for admission will be drawn from across the whole ability range i.e. above average, average and below average, this is in order to achieve a genuinely comprehensive intake within the school. The governors' expectation is that the 90 entrants will be approximately made up of 24 girls of above average ability, 50 of average ability and 16 of below average.

There is a different form of banding that is undertaken in respect of community schools and some voluntary aided schools (see West, 2005) in certain parts of London. It is carried out centrally by a local authority and involves all pupils in the final year of primary school within its area rather than applicants to individual schools. Essentially it consists of allocating places to secondary schools rather than involving particular pupils:

A quarter of the total places available at each of these schools are allocated to each of the four reading bands [25% in each].

The main purpose of the tests is to make sure that each secondary school has, as far as possible, an even balance of pupils of different abilities and is therefore a truly comprehensive school...[Children] will be placed in one of five bands [20% in each]... Those with the highest scores will be in band 1a and those with the lowest in band 3.

As this method does not constitute 'fair banding' as defined in legislation, such local authority systems cannot now be introduced. However, area-based systems have advantages over school-based systems. First, they involve all pupils in primary schools within the defined area who are due to transfer to secondary school (and those applying from outside) whilst school-based systems are restricted to pupils who apply to a particular school; this is an important difference as there may be particular reasons why parents/carers may decide not to apply for a particular school – for example, they may perceive that they have little chance of success. Second, if the local authority administers the process there is an increased likelihood that it will be clear and transparent given that the local authority is less likely than an individual school to have a vested interest in the outcome; if banding is undertaken by a school, there is an incentive to admit higher performing pupils, moreover, it would be possible to admit the highest scoring pupils in any particular band whilst still adhering to the legal requirements.

Finally, research evidence indicates that banding by local authorities is associated with lower levels of school segregation (Gorard et al., 2003). Perhaps this is not an unexpected finding given that the introduction of banding was an attempt to obtain a fully comprehensive intake to schools in an area (see West, 2005).

Criteria giving priority to children of employees, former pupils, family connection

The School Admissions Code of Practice (DfES, 2003) reminds admission authorities that they should bear in mind the possible impact, direct or indirect, on equal opportunities of their admissions criteria. For example, it states that giving priority to certain categories of pupils such as children of former pupils or employees/governors could contravene the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, and should not be used unless objectively justified.

A small proportion of secondary schools (6%) reported giving priority to children of employees/governors (9% of foundation schools, 5% of voluntary aided and 5% of community/voluntary controlled schools). A small percentage of schools reported giving priority to the children of former pupils (2%): more of these were foundation or voluntary aided than

community/voluntary controlled schools (5% and 4% versus 0%) (this difference was statistically significant). One per cent of schools gave priority to children with a strong family connection to the schools: all were voluntary aided schools (see also **Annex B**).

Other practices that enable schools to ‘select in’ and ‘select out’ pupils

There are a number of other criteria and practices that could be considered potentially unfair. These include, for example, holding interviews, seeking references from a child’s primary school or requirements that involve the performance of a child’s sibling. In other cases criteria may be considered unfair on the grounds that they are either imprecise or unclear (see also **Annex C**).

Interviews

According to the School Admissions Code of Practice (DfES, 2003) interviews should not take place for admission to day schools at the secondary transfer stage. We found, nevertheless, that a small minority of schools (2%) carried out interviews or held pre-admission meetings with pupils, parents or both; all were voluntary aided schools.

In most cases the admissions information did not refer to interviews but to ‘meetings’, presumably because interviews are no longer sanctioned by the Code of Practice. In substance, what was described did not appear to differ significantly from interviews, for example:

Where the school is first choice, the school will contact the parent/carers to offer the opportunity for a meeting (which will not involve the child) to enable the parent/carers to demonstrate further the degree of religious commitment and practice.

Another school put the onus on parents to instigate the interview procedure:

Under our Admissions Policy, you will be sent a supplementary information form, in the academic year preceding the proposed year of entry, which you must complete. This form will include a ‘tick box’ to enable you to request a meeting in order to demonstrate the degree of your religious commitment and practice.

It appears, however, that the practice might be somewhat more widespread. One school did not refer to either interviews or meetings – and therefore it is not recorded as such – but stated that:

Parents will be asked to complete a written statement of support and applicants will be invited to the school to complete the second part of the application form.

In the case of another school, it was not clear if the purpose of the interview, which was ostensibly related to partial selection by aptitude and aimed at determining language aptitude, had a wider purpose:

A limited number of places may be offered (up to 10%) to girls of all Christian denominations who have a proven aptitude for foreign languages. Evidence of this aptitude will be required at interview. Also required will be a reference from a priest.

In addition to the schools that explicitly held interviews/pre-admission meetings, two others asked pupils to complete religious questionnaires to test religious knowledge and observance.

Criteria that are not clear or objective

Some criteria were not in line with the guidance provided in the School Admissions Code of Practice, because they were vague and allowed for administrative discretion (see also **Annex B**). One criterion was ‘pastoral factors’ (used by 14% of voluntary aided schools), where in one case the criterion referred to ‘any pastoral, social or educational benefit to be gained’. A similar criterion was ‘compassionate factors’ (used by 11% of voluntary aided schools). Such factors were treated variously by different admission authorities. Some required professional evidence, one said that it ‘may’ require professional evidence and in one case no evidence other than a supporting letter appeared to be required. In the same vein, another criterion, used by one school, was ‘exceptional family circumstances’; again this was undefined. Some schools had criteria that were subjective; one voluntary aided school reported as a criterion: ‘The ability to make full use of the opportunities available at [the school]’.

Criteria that are unfair

Criteria could be considered unfair if they relate to the behaviour of others, either siblings or, indeed, parents (see **Annex B**). Examples included:

Where the student has a brother or sister currently attending the school with an attendance record over 92% (foundation school).

Siblings who, with their families continue to maintain as active an involvement in the life of their church as when the previous child was admitted (voluntary aided school).

Consideration is given to sisters of siblings who already attend [the school] where there is evidence that the family is willing to support the ethos, aims and procedures of the school (voluntary aided school).

Some schools (3% of voluntary aided schools) took up references from a child’s primary school or required his or her primary school reports to be provided. In one voluntary aided school, in order to be considered for an audition for a music place ‘only candidates who can demonstrate commitment by an excellent school attendance and punctuality record will be invited’. In a second case, a voluntary aided school required parents to provide their child’s primary school reports for the previous three years as one of the ways of judging his or her attitudes to religion; this information could, however, be used more generally to determine the child’s suitability for the school. In addition, some parents/carers may be deterred from making an application if their child does not have exemplary school reports. In a third case, a headteacher’s reference was required from the child’s primary school; this sought information on attendance and punctuality, friendship patterns, relationships with staff, attitudes to school, special contribution to the school and special educational needs.

Overall selectivity of secondary schools

Further analyses were carried out to examine the overall extent of selectivity in London's 'comprehensive' secondary schools. It was found that around a quarter of schools used at least one 'potentially selective' admissions criterion.¹⁶ More of these were voluntary aided or foundation than community/voluntary controlled (46% and 35% versus 10%). This difference was statistically significant.

2.2 Admissions information and parents/carers

Information provided by local authorities

The main sources of information on admissions for parents/carers are the brochures published by local authorities. Our examination of the brochures revealed that the coverage was not comprehensive in all cases. There was no information or very little information on the admissions criteria of 12 schools that were their own admission authority.¹⁷ In these cases the onus would be on parents/carers to obtain the information directly from the schools concerned, which may deter some parents/carers.

More generally, the quality of information in the brochures was found to vary considerably. In many cases the information was detailed, in others adequate, while in some it was cursory. In one brochure, for example, the following information was provided on the criteria of a foundation school: 'siblings, medical/social, geographical'; and for a voluntary aided school: 'primary school attended, medical reasons, entry test (up to 15% of intake), distance from/ease of travel'. In these two examples, although the criteria were listed there were no accompanying explanations or details, meaning that parents/carers would need to contact the individual schools if they wanted to obtain fuller information, which again may deter some from considering or applying to these schools.

Information provided and requested by autonomous schools

Given the lack of detail in some local authority brochures, we wrote to all voluntary aided and foundation secondary schools in London asking for the information they provided to parents/carers interested in applying for a place at the school (for admission in September 2005), and where applicable, supplementary admissions forms that were used.¹⁸ Information from 59 schools was provided, representing about a third of the relevant schools (N=173); this included the supplementary admissions forms for 40 schools.¹⁹ The analysis that follows is based on the information provided.

¹⁶ Potentially 'selective' criteria included: selecting a proportion of pupils on the basis of ability/aptitude in a subject area/general ability; interviews/pre-admission meetings with pupils/parents; priority to the child of an employee/governor/former pupil; pupil with a family connection to the school; pastoral benefit to the pupil of attending the school; the pupil's primary school report/recommendation of the primary school headteacher; the academic record of the pupil's sibling(s); compassionate/exceptional factors relating to the pupil; the pupil's participation in organisations associated with school; community involvement by parents/children.

¹⁷ Criteria were either lacking or the information was restricted to just one or two criteria for 11 voluntary aided and one foundation school.

¹⁸ Under the co-ordinated admissions system in London supplementary forms were used in cases where the Common Application Form (see **Section 3.1**) was insufficient to allow an admission authority to consider the application against its published admissions criteria.

¹⁹ In addition supplementary forms for a further eight schools were included in the local authority brochures for parents.

It is important to note that there were examples where the information provided to parents/carers by schools differed in material respects from that contained in the respective brochures. These included two cases where it was clear that interviews/meetings would take place, prior to the admission decision being taken, although this was not mentioned in the local authority brochures. In one of these cases, the notes accompanying the admissions criteria stated: 'The school anticipates that parents and children will wish to meet with the Headteacher or a governor of the school prior to the admission decision'. In the other case, an 'interview form' was included in the information to parents.

In several cases, there were admissions criteria that were not included in the local authority brochures. However, more problematic were the supplementary admissions forms. There were examples of schools using such forms without an apparent need to do so, and examples where parents were asked to provide information that did not seem to be related to the admissions criteria used by the school in question. The kinds of information required by schools on their supplementary forms are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Examples of information collected from parents/carers on supplementary forms

Previous School(s)

- Full address, telephone number, name of headteacher, class teacher
- All schools attended including reason for leaving
- Whether this is a [named religion] school
- If child is not attending [named religion] school give an explanation for this. If an unsuccessful application was made to a religious school attach relevant evidence

Choice of school

- Parents' first preference school (used by schools that operated 'first preference first' and those that did not)
- Schools applying to, including independent schools
- Reasons parents wish son/daughter to attend [name of school]
- Reason parent wants child to attend [named religion] school

Personal information

- Occupation of parent
- Names of brothers and sisters in family, age, school attending or occupation
- Whether parents are married (photocopy of marriage certificate to be provided)
- Whether family lives in a hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation
- Whether child is eligible for free school meals
- Whether parents have refugee status
- Languages spoken
- Religion
- Ethnicity
- Whether child has learning/behavioural problems
- Whether child receives any special help at school
- Whether child has special educational needs and stage or statement [not one of the admissions criteria for the school in question]

Community/religion

- Involvement in life of parish or church by child [in some cases types of involvement were listed e.g. altar server, member of choir]
- Involvement in the parish or church by parents/carers [in some cases offices held or posts of responsibility were listed e.g. catechist, special minister, reader, choir]
- Comment on any other matters relating to circumstances or religious practice e.g., where a child received Sacraments at other than usual time, or where parents are unmarried or the marriage was civil

Aptitude in specific subject

- Reflect achievement not aptitude (e.g., instrument/voice grade, date, mark)

Extra-curricular

- Child asked to write a description of self, family etc. including hobbies

Employment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whether parent works at the school applying to [used by school that did not give priority to staff as an admissions criterion]
Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any other information that might be helpful in considering the application Any special reasons why parent would like child to attend [the school] Why parent wishes child to attend [the school]. Note to say 'use an additional sheet to expand as necessary'.

Some of this information would appear to be unnecessary and in some cases can be considered to be intrusive. It is also unclear why schools require information on say, whether a child is eligible for free meals, at the application stage. Some of the information could have been used to help determine who should be admitted. Nevertheless, for whatever reasons the information was collected, it is hard to justify why schools should seek details of the occupation of parents or older siblings, or whether the family lives in a hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation.

There is also an issue over the length of the forms, up to eight pages in several instances, and the requirement for parents and children to write extensively, for example, on their reasons for wanting a place or to provide details of their involvement in the church. One school, for example allowed a whole page for this and asked parents to write as fully as possible as the school 'is no longer permitted to interview'. This may deter certain parents/carers from applying and, should they do so, to disadvantage them against others who are better able to express themselves in writing.

3. CO-ORDINATED ADMISSIONS IN LONDON

3.1 Introduction

This section focuses on the co-ordination of secondary school admissions across London that was established following the Education Act 2002. It describes the background to the scheme and its main elements. This is followed by an outline of the methods used and the findings from the survey of local authority admissions officers that was carried out.

In January 2003, the Government published regulations on secondary school admissions to accompany the Education Act 2002.²⁰ The regulations required local authorities to co-ordinate secondary school applications for their residents commencing with school intakes from September 2005.²¹ Under these arrangements applicants would apply to their local authority irrespective of whether they wished to apply to schools in that area or not, whilst local authorities were required to exchange information with each other where residents had applied to schools beyond their boundaries. The regulations also specified that all parents would, as far as reasonably practicable, receive an offer of a place on 1 March in the calendar year following their application.

The main aim of co-ordination was to ensure that, as far as possible, every child within a local authority area would receive one offer of a school place on the same day. This would eliminate or largely eliminate multiple offers and free up places for parents who would not otherwise be offered a place at one of their preferred schools. The School Admissions Code of Practice (DfES, 2003) provided guidance to local authorities in establishing a co-ordinated admissions scheme, the elements of such a scheme, the transfer and sharing of information and a suggested timetable for the co-ordination process.

²⁰ The Education (Co-ordination of Admission Arrangements) (Secondary Schools) England Regulations.

²¹ All maintained schools were to be involved as well as academies; city technology colleges were not required to take part but were encouraged to do so.

London local authorities considered that in order to meet the aims of the regulations for the capital, co-ordination would need to include all 32 London boroughs and the City of London and some local authorities on the periphery (Association of London Government (ALG), 2005).²² In order to achieve the full benefits of co-ordination, it was further considered necessary to develop a system which enabled a far greater number of exchanges of information between local authorities, than is envisaged in the DfES Code of Practice. The Pan London Admissions Executive Board was established in January 2003 and charged with taking forward the drafting, dissemination and planning of the Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme. These were then debated and agreed by the Pan London Board and the London Inter-Authority Admissions group (LIAAG).²³ The operation of the Scheme was led and managed by Wandsworth Council, led by Sutton Council's Chief Education Officer, and funded by a £1.5m grant from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The Scheme was designed to:

- make the admissions system fairer;
- result in more parents getting an offer of a place for their child at one of their preferred schools earlier and fewer getting no offer at all;
- create a simpler system for parents (ALG, 2005).

The main elements of the Scheme are summarised in Figure 3 (Pan London Co-ordinated Secondary Admissions, 2003).

Figure 3. Main elements of the Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme

- Parents use one form, the Common Application Form (CAF), and return it to their local authority by 22 October 2004.
- Supplementary application forms should not be used by admission authorities within the local authority unless the information available through the Common Application Form is insufficient to enable application to be considered against the published admissions criteria.
- Parents make six preferences for schools on the CAF.
- An 'equal preferences system' is used. Under this system local authorities consider all preferences without reference to the rank order made by parents, except where a school has 'first preference first' as one of its admissions criteria. However, if there is more than one potential offer available to an applicant the highest ranked preference is used.
- The order of the preferences should not be revealed to other admission authorities except where needed by admission authorities to apply their own admissions criteria, for example, if a school's admissions criteria give highest priority to those who have made that school their first preference. However, where a parent has applied for a place at a number of schools in another local authority the order of preference should be revealed to the local authority so that the highest ranked preference can be determined if a child is eligible for more than one place.
- Application data to schools in other participating local authorities should be uploaded to the Pan London Register²⁴ on 15 November 2004.
- The last date for uploading late applications is 7 January 2005.
- The highest potential offer is to be uploaded on 9 February 2005.
- All parents are to receive their offer on 1 March 2005.

²² Eight were invited to participate: Kent, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Surrey, Slough, Thurrock and Windsor and Maidenhead. All but Windsor and Maidenhead took part in 2005.

²³ Membership of the Board consisted of Chief Education Officers, Admission Officers, Information Technology specialists, the London Grid for Learning and the ALG; the LIAAG is a forum for Admissions Officers from all the London boroughs, as well as a group of Admissions Officers from the participating bordering boroughs.

²⁴ This is the software used to transmit data between each local authorities Local Admission System.

3.2 Methods

A survey of admissions officers was undertaken in September 2005 in order to obtain their views on the functioning of the Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme at the end of its first year of operation (2004/05). A questionnaire was developed and sent electronically to the main Pan London admissions contact in each of the 40 local authorities participating in the Pan London Scheme. Respondents were offered the opportunity of completing the questionnaire either electronically or manually. In a number of cases, at the request of respondents, the questionnaire was completed via a telephone interview.

Responses were received from all 40 of the local authorities taking part in the Scheme but in two cases the responses were in the form of comments rather than completed questionnaires. Completed questionnaires were received from 38 local authorities (a 95% response rate).

For London local authorities, there was a 100% response rate and in the following section we report on the key findings from all 33 London local authorities. **Annex D** presents summary findings for the five local authorities outside London that participated in the Scheme in 2004/05 and also returned questionnaires.

3.3 Key findings

Satisfaction with the Pan London Scheme

Respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the operation of the Pan London Scheme in relation to the allocation of places to pupils resident in their local authority. Nearly eight out of ten respondents (79%) reported that they were satisfied whilst 18% were not satisfied (one respondent (3%) felt unable to comment).

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to explain the reasons for their answers and provided a wide range of comments. Those who were satisfied tended to feel that the Scheme had eliminated – or partially eliminated – multiple offers, had reduced the numbers of children without places or had provided other benefits. Comments included the following:

We were able to eliminate multiple offers. We have a lot of cross-borough movement with [neighbouring borough] and parents could not obtain a place at [a popular school] unless they put it down as their first preference. This year because multiple offers were freed-up, parents were able to obtain a place even if they put it down as their second, third or fourth preference.

Far [fewer] pupils without school places – approximately 40 in comparison with 100+ the previous year and all 40 were due to parental preferences being unrealistic.

The number unplaced at initial offer stage was 100 less than the previous year...Also the [local authority] benefited because it is an inner London borough with much cross-borough movement.

It gave the [local authority] information not previously available about applications for out-borough schools.

Those who were ‘not satisfied’ tended to have experienced extensive problems with computer software or their neighbours had experienced such difficulties. Comments included the following:

The software was unreliable at each stage of the system' and 'We managed to upload but not exchange information. There was an issue over the software provided.

However, one respondent had more fundamental concerns:

[The local authority] has always taken the view that the Pan London Scheme is an expensive and bureaucratic response to the real-life problem of a shortage of high quality (or even acceptable) secondary school places in this part of London. The system achieved nothing for [named borough] parents.

Respondents were then asked how satisfied they were with the Pan London Scheme more generally. Over eight out of ten respondents (85%) said they were satisfied (12% were not and one respondent (3%) was unable to comment). Again, a wide range of comments were made. A number of respondents drew attention to the scale of the task and the effort put in by staff to make the system work:

We expected there to be problems in something so big that had never been fully tested before for real. These were overcome by dedicated people working very long hours.

Despite the adverse publicity it was the willingness of all London admissions officers of all grades...that ensured that the Scheme succeeded.

Others, although registering various levels of satisfaction, detailed the kinds of problems that had arisen:

It worked well overall but it would have been most effective if all participating local authorities had been able to exchange files during the offer process.

'First preference first' and...[in]adequate software undermined the Scheme to a degree, but it could have been a lot worse. The fact that regulations said that co-ordination should cease at 1st March was not helpful, as [local authorities] were not able to agree and implement uniform post-offer procedures either among themselves or with admission authority schools. Many admission authority schools continued to employ bad practices – such as interviewing, 'conditionality', asking parents to declare their other preferences on supplementary forms etc. – which were extremely unhelpful for parents.

It would have been beneficial if all [local authorities] had been required to use the same Local Admission System (i.e. software).

The Pan London Register was not prepared for the volume [of data] and there were issues of corrupt data transfer. We still had to check with neighbouring [local authorities] to ensure that the correct data and complete information had been transferred – just one incorrect record could impact on the whole process of who should receive which offer.

Advantages and disadvantages of the Scheme

Around nine out of ten respondents (91%) considered that there were particular advantages of the Pan London Co-ordinated Secondary Admissions Scheme compared with the system used the previous year, 6% felt there were no advantages and one respondent (3%) was unable to comment. The main advantages mentioned, in an open-ended question, were: earlier offers of places; fewer multiple offers; fewer applicants without any offers; fewer appeals; and more applicants receiving their first preference or a higher preference than previously. Other benefits were also mentioned:

for parents, in that there was a simplified admissions' system; and for local authorities, in that it allowed better tracking of offers, and provided information on out-borough applications that was not previously available.

Notwithstanding these positive views, 55% of respondents considered that there were particular disadvantages associated with the Scheme compared with the method used the previous year, 42% felt that there were no disadvantages; one respondent (3%) was unable to comment. The disadvantage most frequently mentioned by respondents was the heavy workload and consequently additional pressure on admissions staff. This was associated with the tight timetable, deadlines and technical and IT difficulties.

Respondents were then asked for their views on specific aspects of the Scheme. These are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Views on various aspects of the Scheme

	Satisfied (%)	Not satisfied (%)	Don't Know (%)	N
Number of preferences allowed	97	0	3	33
Liaison with local authorities	87	10	3	31
Liaison with individual schools	87	3	10	31
Timetable adopted	85	9	6	33
Use of 'equal preference' system	82	15	3	33
Computer hardware	76	12	12	33
Supplementary application forms used by schools	63	34	3	32
Transfer of information between admissions system and Pan London Register	55	36	9	33
Computer software	45	49	6	33

As can be seen from Table 2, there were high levels of satisfaction with various aspects of the Scheme. Nearly all respondents were satisfied with the number of preferences allowed, and over eight out of ten were satisfied with liaison with local authorities and with schools, the timetable adopted and the use of the 'equal preference' system. They were also largely satisfied with the computer hardware used. In contrast, there were three areas where there was less satisfaction: the computer software; the transfer of information between the local admission system and the Pan London Register; and the use of supplementary application forms by schools responsible for their own admissions.

Respondents who were not satisfied were asked to explain reasons for their dissatisfaction. A range of software problems were described that, in many cases, also impeded transfer of information between the Local Admissions System and the Pan London Register (PLR). A range of comments are given below:

The software did not deal easily with the borough-wide banding system.

The computer software barely held together in the main stages...There were, in particular, endless problems with the transfer of information.

The failure of various bits of software meant we missed some vital information and deadlines. Sometimes this was the local systems (ours and other local authorities) and sometimes it was the PLR. Patches were last minute and did not always solve the problems. The inability to send changed data via the PLR was a great handicap.

Computer software let us down and we were not able to exchange offers with other [local authorities]. However, we have since determined that the software used by other [local authorities], resulted in some cases, to a lack of integrity in the data.

The other main area of concern was in the use of supplementary application forms by schools; comments included the following:

Some schools in some [local authorities] are using supplementary forms unnecessarily or inappropriately causing confusion for parents and friction with other schools.

Many supplementary forms are asking questions not relevant to the schools admissions criteria...There is apparently no legislation to stop schools from doing this. Schools that do not need supplementary form information to apply their admissions criteria are still using them and stating that a parent's [Common Application Form] will not be processed until supplementary forms are completed.

School supplementary forms skew the admissions process and introduce elements of selection on matters not mentioned openly.

Adherence to the Code of Practice

Admissions officers were asked, whether to the best of their knowledge, individual admission authorities had adhered to the School Admissions Code of Practice in terms of the admissions practices they had adopted. Around two-thirds (67%) considered that admission authorities had complied with the Code whilst 33% felt they had not. However, in addition, to the 33% who felt that schools were not adhering to the Code, four more respondents (12%) felt that minor infringements had taken place or that schools in their borough were complying but some others outside were not. A selection of comments is given below:

No, I believe some schools carried out interviews; I have no evidence for this besides what some parents said verbally; other schools had supplementary forms and should not have. It is difficult to police schools.

No, we referred four schools to the Adjudicator.

No, there were inappropriate requests for information on their supplementary forms. 'First preference first' schools were wanting to offer places to applicants who had ranked their school as a second or lower preference, over those who had ranked it as a first preference.

No, many admission authority schools continued to employ bad practices – such as interviewing, 'conditionality', asking parents to declare their other preferences on supplementary forms etc. – which were extremely unhelpful for parents.

Yes in this [local authority]. We are aware of cases in other local authorities where schools have used supplementary forms inappropriately or have not fully cooperated with the process.

Improvements to the Pan London Secondary Admissions Scheme

Respondents were asked an open-ended question to find out if there were any ways, in their opinion, that the Scheme could be improved. Of those who responded (N=30), 90% considered that

there were such areas, 7% did not feel that there were any and 3% did not know. Several themes emerged in their responses.

The need for better and more reliable software was mentioned by a number of respondents. Several also felt that the DfES needed to be more pro-active in this area, for example:

The DfES needs to take more ownership of the national requirements for data transfer and supplier interpretation and testing.

The DfES should also monitor software service providers regularly to ensure that they meet the statutory delivery times around upgrades etc.

Many felt that there was a need for consistent co-ordination after the offer date of 1 March when the statutory scheme ended:

There needs to be co-ordination to deal with late offers and this needs to be consistent across [local authorities]. With [one neighbour] we were able to co-ordinate up until September but this was not the case with [another].

Local authorities need to co-ordinate the process until pupils start in September. This will ensure we are able to give the figures requested by the DfES and that schools do not offer places to parents who have ranked them lower than a previous offer.

More co-ordination is needed after 1 March and this needs to be in the Code of Practice to make sure voluntary aided and foundation schools comply.

A number of respondents noted incompatibility between the 'equal preference' system used by the Pan London Scheme and 'first preference first' used by a minority of schools with responsibility for admissions, and were concerned that all schools should abide by the former. As one respondent noted: 'The 'first preference first' issue greatly compromises what we are trying to achieve and we should all work hard to see that it is removed.'

Other comments

About half of the respondents made other comments. A number stressed the benefits of the Scheme, for example:

A positive up-side to the Scheme is that local authorities have a much closer working relationship and are really working hard to make the Scheme a success.

The Pan London process, when it works properly, seems to make choosing schools much easier for parents. Although there is a tighter timescale the administrative side seems better too.

Others commented on the scale of the undertaking and the commitment of staff. 'This has been a major undertaking and it is a great achievement to have achieved London-wide cooperation on it'; 'a significant achievement by admissions staff in London local authorities'; and 'it was very well co-ordinated by Wandsworth. The several meetings attended were useful and the Wandsworth team were very approachable and helpful'.

4. DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Admissions criteria and practices

Our analysis of the admissions criteria used by London secondary schools for admission in September 2005, revealed that the majority of schools reported using criteria that can be considered to be fair in that they did not appear to be designed to select any particular categories of pupils at the expense of others. This was most notable in the case of community schools. Admissions criteria of community schools closely followed the Code of Practice insofar as they were generally 'clear, fair and objective, for the benefit of all children, including those with special educational needs, disabilities or in public care' (DfES, 2003, p. 8).

A minority of schools, on the other hand, mainly those that were their own admission authority, reported criteria that appear to be designed to select certain groups of pupils but exclude others. Proportionately more schools with responsibility for their own admissions reported the use of criteria that could be seen as being potentially selective. They were also less inclusive in that they did not prioritise to the same extent as community/voluntary controlled schools, vulnerable children.

The amount of covert selection that occurs is almost certainly higher than suggested by the admissions criteria set down in local authority brochures for a number of reasons. First, not all admissions criteria and admissions practices are mentioned in the local authority brochures. We found several examples of schools that appeared to interview, for example, although interviews were not mentioned in the brochures. Second, the supplementary forms used by some schools provide opportunities for schools to select more desirable pupils (i.e., those who might enhance their league table position or be easier to teach). We found examples of schools that asked parents to provide information that was not directly related to their application (e.g., their occupation). In other cases, parents were asked to write extensively on their reasons for applying to the school or on other matters, thus offering the possibility of schools selecting applicants on the basis of literary prowess. Third, the survey of admissions officers revealed some disquiet amongst a minority: a third felt that some schools were not complying with the School Admissions Code of Practice and a similar percentage were not satisfied with schools' use of supplementary forms.

Moreover, analysis undertaken by the Greater London Authority, found that, in 2003, pupils resident in London, attending schools responsible for their own admissions (voluntary aided/foundation/city technology colleges/academies) were less likely to be eligible for free school meals and less likely to have special educational needs than those attending community or voluntary controlled schools. In addition, they had higher levels of achievement at the end of key stage 2 (age 11 years) prior to admission to secondary school (Ewens, 2005).

West and Hind (2006) have also found similar differences when examining the composition of schools of different types: in 2004, the attainment band of pupils in community/voluntary controlled secondary schools in London who had entered the school in 2001, was lower (prior to admission to secondary school) than that of those in voluntary aided/foundation schools. Moreover, the percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and the percentage of pupils with special educational needs, both with and without statements, was found to be higher in community/voluntary controlled schools than in voluntary aided/foundation schools.

Under the current arrangements local authorities could be considered as more objective players in the admissions process in that they are less likely than individual schools to have a vested interest in admissions to any particular community school. A school with responsibility for admissions, on the

other hand, given the circumstances of the quasi-market in school-based education, has a direct interest in obtaining an intake that is more likely to enhance its league table position.

4.2 Changes since 2001

This is the second analysis of admissions criteria used by London schools that has been undertaken; the first related to admissions in September 2001 (West et al., 2003). Given that a new Code of Practice came into force for pupils admitted to secondary schools in September 2004 it is possible to consider what effect, if any, the Code has had on admissions criteria.

In both 2001 and 2005, similar proportions of schools overall reported the use of siblings, medical/social need, religious factors and feeder schools as admissions criteria in the event of oversubscription. However, there was a marked increase in the use of certain criteria that could be said to enhance social justice and inclusion. The most dramatic change was in the percentage of schools that prioritised children in public care; this increased from 4% in 2001 to 85% in 2005. Prioritising those with special educational needs increased from 44% to 47%. On the other hand, there was also an increase in the percentage of schools that selected a proportion of their intake on the basis of aptitude/ability in a subject (from 5% to 7%).

For religious schools the inclusion of pupils from 'other faiths' was more frequently reported (an increase from 35% to 46%). Compared with 2001, the overall percentage of schools interviewing pupils dropped to 2% (in 2001 14% reported parent interviews and 8% reported pupil interviews). The proportion of schools giving priority to children of employees/governors dropped from 13% to 6%. Overall, the mechanisms put in place by the Government can be seen to have had a positive effect on the use of these potentially selective/discriminatory admissions criteria.

4.3 Co-ordinated admissions in London

The survey of admissions officers in the 40 local authorities involved in the Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme was carried out to obtain the views of respondents on the Scheme from the perspective of the respective local authority. Respondents indicated that the Scheme, undertaken for the first time in 2004/05, was largely successful in meeting its main aim of eliminating or greatly reducing multiple offers of places. Over three-quarters of admissions officers were generally satisfied with the Pan London Scheme.

There were high satisfaction rates for various aspects of the Scheme including the number of preferences allowed, the timetable adopted, liaison with schools and local authorities and the use of the 'equal preference' system. The main areas of concern were to do with the computer software used; there was also concern with the use of supplementary forms by schools that were their own admission authority.

There were specific areas where it was felt improvements should be made, particularly with regard to computer software. Admissions officers also considered that co-ordination on admissions should be extended beyond 1 March when the statutory scheme ended and that incompatibility between 'first preference first' and 'equal preference', should be resolved. It was suggested that schools using 'first preference first' should have to comply with the 'equal preference' system used by the Pan London Scheme. Finally, there was a general view that the increased links between local authorities that had been engendered by the Scheme were beneficial although the work load had proved to be daunting.

4.4 Policy implications

The research findings suggest that a number of changes to current policy are needed to ensure that schools with autonomy over admissions do not ‘cream’ the most desirable pupils. Given the recent Government White Paper, ‘Higher Standards, Better Schools for All’ (HM Government, 2005) this is even more important as included within it are proposals for all new schools to become responsible for their own admissions as foundation, voluntary aided, trust schools or academies. Moreover, existing schools would also be encouraged to become trust schools with similar powers over admissions. As these changes would increase the number of schools with responsibility for their own admissions, and hence the potential for more selective admissions criteria/practices, the following proposals should be considered by policy makers.

- At present, the School Admissions Code of Practice provides guidance, to which bodies responsible for school admissions should ‘have regard’. If they have a good reason not to follow the guidance having first considered it, they may do so. As a result of this lack of regulation, schools may continue to use criteria that are not clear, fair or objective to decide who should be admitted to the school. To address this issue, the School Admissions Code of Practice should be strengthened and underpinned by regulation (as already happens in relation to the co-ordination of school admissions and is to happen in relation to children in public care).
- A ‘menu’ of acceptable types of criteria should be provided in regulations.²⁵
- The use of supplementary admissions forms by schools that are their own admission authority should be curtailed.
- Some of the most problematic admissions criteria and practices, identified in the research, pre-date the election of the Labour Government (e.g., partial selection by general ability and banding that results in an intake skewed towards higher achieving pupils). Regulations could be introduced to end their use.
- The use of selection by ability/aptitude privileges some pupils over others. Testing cannot clearly distinguish between current levels of achievement, ability and aptitude. Given the well-established links between achievement and socio-economic background, selection by aptitude/ability in a subject is likely to have a detrimental impact on disadvantaged children. The use of banding on an area-wide basis, on the other hand, could help reduce the current ability (and hence socio-economic) imbalance in the intake between schools (see also Gorard et al., 2003); legislation could be introduced to give powers to local authorities to introduce new area-wide banding systems.
- There is a good case for stating in admissions criteria that priority is given to children with a statement of special educational needs. Where it is not a criterion it may signal to parents/carers that such children do not have the same rights as those without such needs. Moreover, in the case of an individual school, it may give out the message to parents/carers that such a school does not welcome children with special educational needs to the same extent as other schools that do give such priority.

²⁵ This currently happens in relation to the types of factors that can be used by local authorities to allocate funds to schools in their fair funding formulae.

- Local authorities should be given a statutory role to oversee admission arrangements of all publicly funded schools in their area and ensure that admissions criteria are in accord with the ‘menu’ of acceptable criteria.
- There is a strong case for the allocation of school places to be carried out by a body other than a school. Where individual schools are responsible for their own admissions there will be continuing concern that pupils may be either consciously or unconsciously ‘selected in’ or ‘selected out’ in the admissions process in the interests of schools rather than pupils. The pressures caused by league tables and competition undoubtedly present incentives for schools, which are oversubscribed, to obtain pupils who are both highly motivated and able. We consider that an alternative body should be responsible. Local authorities are best placed to undertake admissions (as happens in Finland²⁶ and Sweden) although separate arrangements could be made for faith schools, whereby appropriate bodies, such as Diocesan Boards in the case of Church of England schools, could undertake the role.
- Local authority brochures should contain admissions criteria on all publicly funded schools in their administrative area. Further, local authorities should have a statutory duty to ensure that the information included in brochures is complete and accurate.
- Local authorities need to use the opportunities provided by the new co-ordination of admissions to exchange information on the admission practices of individual schools.
- Given that differences have been identified in the characteristics of pupils who enter different types of schools (Ewens, 2005; West and Hind, 2006), the monitoring of applicants to different types of schools needs to be undertaken by local authorities or the Department for Education and Skills or an independent body such as the GLA.²⁷ The aim would be to determine which categories of pupils (e.g., children with special educational needs, children from different ethnic groups, children in public care, children known to be eligible for free school meals) are offered places and which are subsequently admitted to different types of schools.

²⁶ In Finland, which has a high quality education system with school diversity, local authorities have a key role in determining to which school pupils are allocated. Priority is given to ensuring that every child has a place at a local school if that is what parents want, with priority being given to ensuring travel to school is as safe and as short as possible. Although parents can make a request for another school, this can only be granted if there are places available, having placed pupils who live near the school (West and Ylönen, 2005). In Sweden, the local authority allocates children to different schools. In the event of parents wishing their child to attend a municipality school, but not one to which their child would normally be allocated, the local authority will consider the parent’s request although the authority will make the final decision (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2005). Admission to a privately run school differs between municipalities: parents either apply directly to the school, or admission is organised by the municipality.

²⁷ With permitted access to DfES pupil level annual school census (PLASC) data.

REFERENCES

Association of London Government (2005) Report to the Leader's Committee on London Co-ordinated Admissions (Item 9) 10 May 2005.

Audit Commission (1996) Trading Places: The supply and allocation of school places. London: The Audit Commission.

Bruegel, I. and Weller, S. (2006) Minority ethnic children are disadvantaged in the transition from primary to secondary school. Paper presented at a seminar at the Runnymede Trust, 18 January.

Department for Education and Employment (1999) Code of Practice on School Admissions. London: DfEE.

Department for Education and Skills (2003) Code of Practice on School Admissions. London, DFES.

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/sacode>

Department for Education and Skills (2005a) Schools and pupils in England, January 2005 (final), London: DfES.

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000606/index.shtml>

Department for Education and Skills (2005b) Facts and Figures, London Challenge website.

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/londonchallenge/facts.shtml>

Department for Education and Skills (2005c) London Schools: Rising to the challenge, London: DfES.

Ewens, D. (2005) Moving home changing school, DMAG Education Research Group Seminar, 20 September. London: GLA.

Flatley, J., Williams, J., Coldron, J., Connolly, H., Higgins, V., Logie, A., Smith, N. & Stephenson, K. (2001) Parents' Experience of the Process of Choosing a Secondary School, Research Report RR278. London: DfES.

Gewirtz, S., Ball, S.J. and Bowe, R. (1995) Markets, Choice and Equity in Education, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Gorard, S. (2003) School Choice Policies And Social Integration: The experience of England and Wales. Memorandum Submitted to Education and Employment in Committee (SA 12). London: Stationery Office.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmeduski/58/58we08.htm>

Gorard, S., Taylor, C. and Fitz, J. (2003) Schools, Markets and Choice Policies. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

The Guardian (2005) Ethnic background linked to school success, 10 March.

HM Government (2005) Higher Standards, Better Schools for All - More Choice for Parents and Pupils, Cm 6677, London: DfES.

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/schoolswhitepaper/>

House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills (2004) Fourth Report of the Education and Skills Committee 2003/04 Secondary Education: School Admissions HC 58-1. London: Stationery Office.

Le Grand, J. and Bartlett, W. (1993) (eds.) Quasi-Markets and Social Policy, London: Macmillan.

Mayor of London (2004) The State of London's Children Report. London: Greater London Authority.

Office for Standards in Education (2003) School Place Planning, London: Ofsted and Audit Commission.

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/index.cfm?fuseaction=pubs.displayfile&id=3416&type=pdf>

Office of Public Sector Information (1999) The Education (Aptitude for Prescribed Subjects) Regulations 1999, London: OPSI.

Office of Public Sector Information (2002a) The Education (Co-ordination of Admissions Arrangements) (Secondary Schools) (England) Regulations 2002 SI 2002 No. 2903. London: OPSI.

<http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2002/20022903.htm>

Office of Public Sector Information (2002b) The Education (School Information) (England) Regulations 2002 SI 2002 No. 2897. London: OPSI.

<http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2002/20022897.htm>

Pan London Co-ordinated Secondary Admissions (2003) Template LEA Scheme.

<http://www.wandsworth.gov.uk>

Swedish National Agency for Education (2005) Email correspondence with Anne West.

Walford, G. (1993) Selection for Secondary Schooling, in Briefings for the Paul Hamlyn Foundation National Commission on Education, London: Heinemann.

West, A. (2005) 'Banding' and secondary school admissions: 1972-2004. British Journal of Education Studies, 53 (1) 12-33.

West, A. and Hind, A. (2005) Selectivity, admissions and intakes to 'comprehensive' schools in London, England (submitted).

West, A. and Hind, A. (2006) School choice in London, England: Characteristics of students in different types of schools (in preparation).

West, A., Hind, A. and Pennell, H. (2003) Secondary Schools in London: Admission Criteria. London: Research and Information on State Education Trust.

<http://www.risetrust.org.uk>

West, A., Hind, A. and Pennell, H. (2004) School admissions and 'selection' in comprehensive schools: policy and practice. Oxford Review of Education, 30 (3), 347-69.

West, A. and Pennell, H. (1997) Education reform and school choice in England and Wales, Education Economics, 5 (3), 285-306.

West, A. and Pennell, H. (2003) *Underachievement in Schools*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

West, A., Pennell, H. & Noden, P. (1998) School admissions: increasing equity, accountability and transparency, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 46, 2, 188-200.

West, A. and Ylönen, A. P. (2005) Market-oriented reforms and the welfare state in England and Finland: The case of compulsory education (submitted).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the local authorities and schools that provided the information on which this research is based and, in particular, the local authority staff who responded to the survey on the Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme. We would also like to thank Pauline Shelley and Graham Carter for their invaluable help with the survey of local authorities. Finally, we would like to thank Caroline Boswell and David Ewens of the Greater London Authority for their advice and support throughout the project.

ANNEX A

Table A1. Admissions criteria for academies

Criterion	Academies N=14
Distance	14
Child in public care	14
Siblings	13
Special educational needs	13
Medical/social need	10
Catchment area	7
Child has ability/aptitude in subject	6
Banding	6
Child attends feeder school	4
Religion	2
Child from 'other faith'	2
Random selection	2

ANNEX B

Table B1. London ‘comprehensive’ secondary school admissions criteria (September 2005) by type of school

Criterion	London secondary schools N=374	Community & voluntary controlled N=201 (a)	Voluntary aided N=108	Foundation N=65
Siblings	96%	100%	85%	100%
Distance	96%	100%	86%	99%
Child in public care	85%	95%	74%	72%
Medical/social need	70%	81%	56%	59%
Special educational needs	47%	64%	25%	28%
Religion	25%	0%	88%	0%
Child attends feeder school	19%	15%	25%	20%
Banding	16%	13%	24%	9%
Child from ‘other faith’	13%	0%	46%	0%
School is ‘first preference’	10%	1%	28%	9%
Catchment area	8%	8%	9%	5%
Child has ability/aptitude in subject	7%	3%	13%	12%
Child of employee/governor	6%	5%	5%	9%
Pastoral factors	4%	0%	14%	0%
General ability	3%	2%	3%	9%
Compassionate factors	3%	0%	11%	0%
Difficult journey to another school	3%	4%	2%	0%
Interview/pre-admission meeting (b)	2%	0%	8%	0%
Child of former pupil	2%	0%	4%	5%
Child has strong family connection to school	1%	0%	3%	0%
Pupil’s primary school report	1%	0%	3%	0%
Other discretionary criteria (c)	1%	0%	3%	3%

Notes

(a) There were only four voluntary controlled schools and admissions to these are the responsibility of the local authority; for this reason they have been grouped with community schools.

(b) With pupils and/or parents.

(c) Sibling’s record; the pupil’s participation in organisations associated with school; community involvement by parents/children.

Statistically significant differences (0.05 level or beyond) between different school types are emboldened.

ANNEX C

Examples of admissions criteria used by schools responsible for their own admissions

Voluntary aided secondary school

If there are more applications than places, then places will be allocated in accordance with the following criteria, which are stated in order of priority:

1. Children of parents and guardian who will actively support the aims of the School.
2. Children from families who are members of a Christian denomination or other world faith and who support the Christian ethos of the School.
3. Children who demonstrate significant involvement in activities relevant to the ethos of the School.
4. Children and grandchildren of Liverymen...
5. Children who have either a medical condition, social or special need which is relevant to the application (written evidence must be provided at the time of application).
6. Children whose parents or guardians were and/or whose siblings were or are pupils at the School.
7. Children living nearest to the School measured from the middle of the head teacher's office.

Parents will be asked to complete a written statement of support and applicants will be invited to the school to complete the second part of the application form.

Voluntary aided secondary school

When the number of eligible applicants exceeds the number of places available, priority will be given according to the following criteria and in the order listed to:

- A. Roman Catholic girls who have had a sister, mother, aunt or grandmother at the school;
Roman Catholic girls who would derive particular religious benefit from the school;
Roman Catholic girls who would derive exceptional medical or pastoral benefit from the school;
The remaining places will be allocated according to the principle 'ease of access from home to school.'
- B. After places are allocated, parents and pupils are invited to the school for interviews. Any vacancies which remain after all Catholic applications have been dealt with will be offered to baptised, practising members of other Christian denominations Priorities listed in A1-A4 will apply.

Voluntary aided secondary school

Criterion 7. The Child's religious values and approach correspond with aspects of the School's Mission Statement

Parents/guardians will be asked to send copies of the last three primary school annual reports (Years 3, 4, 5) with the application. On the basis of the information contained in the reports... Governors will award points as follows:

Reports indicate a very positive approach to Religious Education (3 points)
Reports indicate a positive approach to Religious Education (2 points)
Reports indicate a generally positive approach to Religious Education (1 point)
Reports indicate a need for an improved approach to Religious Education (0 points).

Foundation secondary school

1. Children who have a brother or sister at the School.
2. Children who have a doctor's certificate to prove to the governors' satisfaction that there are medical grounds sufficient to necessitate their attendance at the School.
3. Children living nearest the School, measured in a straight line from the School to the parents' permanent home.
4. Children of both teaching and non-teaching staff employed at the school, who wish to send their children to the school but who do not qualify under the other criteria.

Foundation secondary school

1. Where the LEA has assessed the student as having Specific Learning Difficulties ... which necessitate his/her attendance [at the school].
2. If a student holds a Statement of Special Educational Needs which names [the school].
3. Where the student has a brother or sister currently attending the school with an attendance record above 92%.
4. The proximity of the student's home to the school (measured by a straight line), with those living nearer being accorded the higher priority.

Performing arts place in specialist voluntary aided secondary school

Performing arts places are offered to applicants whose daughters can demonstrate a specific aptitude in and commitment to one of the performing arts...To assess this aptitude, applicants for consideration for performing arts places will be invited for audition by reviewing: the standard of experience and qualifications in their chosen performing art; the personal statement completed by the candidate on the supplementary form.

Only candidates who can demonstrate commitment by an excellent school attendance and punctuality record will be invited for audition.

ANNEX D

All seven local authorities on the periphery of London that participated in the Pan London Co-ordinated Secondary Admissions Scheme responded to the Pan London Survey but in two cases this was in the form of comments only. There were, therefore, usable questionnaires from five local authorities.

Key findings are given below:

- Two of the respondents were satisfied with the Pan London Scheme in relation to the allocation of places to pupils resident in their local authority, whilst two were not satisfied and one was unable to comment.
- In terms of the Pan London Scheme more generally, two were satisfied and three were not satisfied.
- Four respondents reported that there were advantages of the Scheme compared with the method used the previous year; one reported that there were not any advantages.
- Four respondents reported disadvantages of the Scheme compared with the method used the previous year; whilst one reported no disadvantages.
- Four respondents reported that schools adhered to the Code of Practice on school admissions; one reported that they did not.

Table D1 gives respondents' views on various aspects of the Scheme.

Table D1. Views on various aspects of the Scheme

	Satisfied	Not satisfied	Don't Know
Liaison with local authorities	5	0	0
Liaison with individual schools	4	0	1
Number of preferences allowed	4	1	0
Use of 'equal preference' system	4	1	0
Computer hardware	4	0	1
Computer software	3	1	1
Use of supplementary application forms by schools	3	1	1
Timetable adopted	3	2	0
Transfer of information between admissions system and Pan London Register	2	3	0
N=5			