admissions/place planning probe

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admissions/place planning probe

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Contents

1 Introduction

The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to conduct a probe focusing on school admissions and place planning. This involved a short scoping study to identify the key issues affecting local authorities in this area. The aim of the study was to inform the development of key questions and priorities for future LGA research regarding admissions. This was a new approach, within the NFER educational research programme for the LGA, for identifying the key priorities for future research. It was designed to be undertaken within a short timescale and to make use of the range of sources of intelligence to which the NFER had immediate access. It is suggested that a similar approach might enhance the initial planning and design of future LGA research projects. This paper describes the methodology and associated issues, as well as highlighting the key findings from the admissions and place planning probe. The reports of the probes conducted for LGA were originally intended as working documents for internal use within the LGA only. Whilst acknowledging the purpose for which the probes were intended, and the limitations to the search methodology, it was subsequently decided that the reports should be made more generally available in the hope that they may be useful for a wider audience.

2   Aims and methodology

The admissions/place planning probe had three main aims:

- to identify existing and on-going work in the area so that any future research is original and/or builds on this

- to identify the issues that relevant practitioners consider need addressing

- to highlight areas where further research would be beneficial and viable.

The study was conducted during January and early February 2005 using a two-pronged approach:

- mapping recent literature and documentation (from 2003 onwards only) in the area of school admissions and place planning, covering 5–16 education in England only

- gathering the views of a sample of individuals with relevant experience in this area as to the current key issues.

It was envisaged that such an approach would identify both the issues occupying practitioners that existing work might not have addressed, and also identify the existing literature that practitioners may be unaware of but might find helpful. It is important to note that the methodology was *not* to review the literature and no systematic attempt was made to evaluate the documentation. The probe was designed to highlight the issues emerging from the data sources. It is recognised that there are other issues pertinent to admissions that may not have featured in this probe, due to the limited nature of the data collection. Further details of the methodology are provided in Appendix 1.

3 Key findings from the admissions/place planning probe

The first section lists chronologically, the main areas highlighted in the literature and documentation mapped as part of the probe work. The second section summarises the views of the local authority personnel who kindly contributed to this study.

3.1 Summary of findings in recent literature

Following changes introduced in the Education Act 2002 (England and Wales. Statutes, 2002), revised guidance for admissions was issued in the latest *Code of Practice* (DfES, 2003a). This applied to school intakes from September 2004, with further changes applying to intakes from September 2005. The *Code of Practice* (DfES, 2003a) provides **guidance** for both **primary school** and **secondary school admissions**. There is also a separate *Code* for **admissions appeals** (DfES, 2003b). As a result of the guidance and legislative changes, local authorities and schools have been required to make changes to their admission arrangements, for example, to ensure **fairer access** to schools for all pupils. Furthermore, in 2003 Ofsted and Audit Commission (2003a) published criteria relating to admissions under which local authorities would be **inspected**. It also included a description of local authorities' statutory duties and powers in this area.

The new admissions framework prompted a response by The Education Network (TEN) (2003a) who commented that 'for many groups of **vulnerable children**, the new framework brings the welcome prospect of **fairer access to popular schools** from which they have previously had it effectively denied' (p. 5).

Most of the research and opinion pieces within the last two years were dominated by **secondary school admissions**, rather than primary school admissions.

Admissions criteria, used by secondary schools, were the focus of research (West and Hind, 2003) which found that the majority of schools had clear, fair and objective criteria for admissions, but there was a **significant minority of schools** that used criteria that selected certain groups of pupils and, consequently,

excluded others. Interestingly, it was schools with responsibility for their own admissions – **voluntary-aided and foundation schools** – that were found to **lack equity** in admissions criteria.

The issue of **schools** as their **own admissions authority** was also highlighted, in relation to specialist schools, in the *Secondary Education: Diversity of Provision* report (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education and Skills Committee, 2003). It stated that evidence 'suggested that any rationale for schools operating as their own admissions authority may not be significantly outweighed by the wider benefits, not least to parents, associated with equity and clarity of process' (p. 35).

West *et al.* (2003) also looked specifically at secondary school admissions in London and concluded that there was more opportunity for **London schools** to use **overt and covert selection**, compared to schools in other areas of England. This was partly attributed to the fact that there were a greater proportion of **voluntary-aided schools** in London compared to England overall. Such schools, that are their own admissions authority, were found to have more opportunities to select particular types of pupils, than schools where the LEA was the admissions authority.

Admission to schools in London has been a focus for a number of researchers in recent years. For example, Johnson (2003) and Taylor and Gorard (2003) looked at the complexities of admissions in London schools. Johnson (2003) concluded that **collaboration** between London schools would be part of what was needed to help achieve a sustainable **social mix of pupils**. Taylor and Gorard (2003) suggested possible changes to the admissions system in London, but also recognised that these 'may only shift the failings of **wider social and geographical inequalities** to other LEAs, schools and parents' (p. 27). Since these papers were written, changes have begun to take place for London school admissions. For the **2005 school intake**, all 33 London boroughs (and eight neighbouring local authorities) have been involved in the **computer-generated coordinated admissions scheme** for secondary schools. Through this scheme

parents could list any six schools within the 41 participating local authorities, with the intention that each child **received one offer of a school place only** on 1 March 2005.

Other 2003 literature focused on **diversity of pupil intakes** in secondary schools (Newsam, 2003). He noted the effect that one school intake has on another and he divided secondary schools into eight categories, based on the proportion of each school's intake falling within the **ability range** of the **pupil population** in that local authority. The paper highlighted the relationship between secondary school **attainment results** and **pupil intakes**.

School place planning was the focus of a report by Ofsted and Audit Commission (2003b). This report considered school place planning in relation to **school standards and social inclusion**. It concluded that although authorities had been reasonably successful in predicting the required number of school places, they had not used this directly to promote high standards and social inclusion. TEN (2003b) valued the report for recognising some of the **challenges facing local authorities** in this area, particularly the point that multi-agency partnership working was considered necessary for addressing some of the issues, such as the issue of 'racial and religious polarisation in schools, usually reflecting segregation in housing in the areas served' (p. 5).

In 2004, TEN highlighted some of the changes to **admissions arrangements for 2005**, across **England** as a whole. The paper stated that local authorities needed to 'ensure that **oversubscription criteria** operated by all schools comply with the Admissions *Code of Practice*, and that **interviewing is ended** as part of the admissions process' (p. 1). TEN (2004a) argued that in the past, local authorities had not always objected to the **School's Adjudicator** when the *Code of Practice* was breached and thus, the *Code* was not benefiting all pupils as intended. Conversely, the number of cases referred to the School's Adjudicator for the 2004 intake did increase (BBC, 2004), suggesting that the **procedures and rights for admissions** were becoming more widely recognised.

Related to this, the report by the **Local Government Ombudsmen** (2004) stated that they received a total

of **1084 complaints** covering admissions during 2002–2003. The Special Report attempted to provide clear guidance on areas where there were problems or where advice was felt to be necessary. This included aspects of both the **admissions and appeals procedures**. However, the overall **number of appeals** was reported to have **decreased** (Shaw, 2004) for the first time in 2002–2003 academic year since the current government came into power.

The publication of the **Select Committee report** on secondary school admissions (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education and Skills Committee, 2004) generated a number of responses, including press articles and a response from the government. The report focused on the **process of secondary school admissions** – including how children are allocated a place, how parents express their preferences and how disputes are resolved. It also focused on the **impact** of the admissions and admission appeals **Codes of Practice** and recommended that there should be **revised regulations or legislation** to support the Codes. TEN (2004b) felt that such changes would be of benefit to many disadvantaged children and families. However, the government subsequently responded to the recommendations in the Select Committee report (TEN, 2004c) and noted that the admissions guidance, supported by the independent adjudicator system provided the necessary power and that **new legislation was not required**. But TEN (2004c) still queried whether the admissions framework was sufficient, such as to ensure that **children in care** are prioritised in **oversubscription criteria**, as the *Code of Practice* suggests.

Johnson (2004) criticised the Select Committee report for failing to address one key question concerning admissions – that is, whether '**parental preference** alone should be the key criterion in admissions' (p. 13). He argued that 'parents should have rights, but they are not the only ones' (p. 13). The article suggested a new approach, whereby schools could be pre-grouped and parents then have the choice of a particular group of schools, so that factors other than parental preference could also be taken into account.

Parental choice,[1] particularly in the case of **oversubscribed schools**, was the focus of a report by the Social Market Foundation (SMF) (Haddad, 2004). It

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1   Since this probe was undertaken, the issue of parental choice has received further attention, after being highlighted as an area of focus for the forthcoming Education Bill (BBC, 2005).

stated that parental choice should be the first principle in school admissions and where parental choice could not be met because of a lack of capacity, then a **national ballot** should be used to ensure parents from poorer backgrounds were not disadvantaged. Slater (2004) described the proposals suggested by the SMF and stated that 'many of the 1060 **foundation and voluntary-aided** (faith) secondaries who are their own admission authorities use their freedom to cherry-pick **middle-class pupils**'. Furthermore, Sinnott (2004), in response to the Prime Minister's speech on the Government's five year plan stated that 'only some **parents** can fight their way through an **admissions system** that allows individual schools to set their **own criteria**. That is **not choice**: that is a test of parents' ability to fight their way through a morass of admissions schemes and is a recipe for selection by schools' (p. 1).

Recent admissions-related documents have also included debates about the effects of **grammar schools** on **achievements** (e.g. Schagen and Schagen, 2003). Atkinson and Gregg (2004) looked at the **impact of selection** by ability on children from **disadvantaged backgrounds**. They concluded 'selection does work in favour of bright pupils from poor backgrounds – but only a small minority actually make it to grammar schools' (p. 3). In local authority areas where **grammar schools** still exist there has been a debate (e.g. Managing Schools Today, 2004) over whether the children who **apply unsuccessfully** to grammar schools then 'miss out' on their **first choice** of comprehensive school. This was an issue in authorities that use the '**ranked preference system**' for allocating places (where the schools are informed of the ranking on the admissions applications), as opposed to the '**equal preference system**' (where schools are not provided with the ranking information).

3.2 Local authorities' views on the areas causing concern

Issues associated with **school place planning** were most frequently a concern to local authority respondents. This included the difficulties associated with accurately **forecasting school places**, particularly in areas where there was a growth in **housing developments**, or an expected growth in housing developments and populations. Generally, the **changing demand for school places**, or places in particular year groups was an issue causing concern to some local authorities. One authority mentioned the

key stage 1 class size limit as contributing to the difficulty to accommodate demands for school places. Another explained that families with more than one child in the same school phase were **unable to secure places** for their children in the **same school**. One of the London boroughs mentioned the difficulty in planning school places particularly when the **population trends** did not correspond with the take-up of school places, because of **cross-borough admissions**.

Securing school places for '**hard-to-place**' pupils, such as those with **challenging behaviour**, was another concern to some authorities. This seemed to be an area that local authorities were beginning to address; by **developing protocols** with schools for sharing the admission of such pupils. Sometimes the issue was exacerbated in authorities where a number of schools were their **own admission authority** and hence, the pupils perceived as particularly challenging were being shared by only a small number of schools (in those where the local authority was the admissions authority). Other circumstances which caused particular concern in this area were when schools were required to go over their **published admission number** to accept pupils with challenging behaviour or when there was a shortage of alternative educational provision for these pupils.

For 2005 admissions, it was the first year that authorities were required to **coordinate admission arrangements** between schools. This, unsurprisingly, was considered a concern to some local authority respondents, although equally, was an area perceived to be working well in some cases (see below). Particular issues were difficulties with the **software**; the lack of a **common closing date** for coordinated admissions; ways to manage **differing transfer ages** from neighbouring authorities; and the impact that coordinated admission arrangements may have on **school/community segregation** in the future.

Casual admissions, that is, mid-year admissions, were considered a concern to some local authorities. This related to an **increasing number** of casual admissions and a lack of school places in the year groups/schools where places were sought. In one case, this was reported to have led to an increase in the number of **admission appeals**. The **volume of admission appeals** was also a concern to another authority.

The **length of time** a pupil could be **without a school place** whilst the admissions process and appeals procedure was underway, was a concern in one responding local authority.

Some authorities mentioned issues specifically relating to schools that are their **own admissions authority**. It was mentioned that such schools had complicated admission arrangements, and it was difficult for the local authority to enforce the guidance from the *Code of Practice* on such schools.

3.3   Local authorities' views on the areas working well

The local authority respondents were also given the opportunity to describe an area that they felt was working well for school admissions or place planning in their authority. On the whole, the areas were very specific to the local authorities, often where a new process had been developed. The responses are summarised below.

- **Coordinated admission arrangements**, despite being a concern to some authorities, were also felt to be working well in some cases. For example, one authority mentioned **good cooperation** over coordinated admissions **between local authorities** within the region, with regular meetings to share issues and expertise.

- **Place planning** was an area where two authorities felt their systems had improved. One explained that this was because the **place planning team and the admissions team** were positioned under the same assistant director, which enabled better **information exchange**, which led to a better match between parental preferences and places. Another authority felt that they were moving towards a more **informed process of population projection**, which would improve medium- to long-term school place planning. This again, was also an area that some authorities considered to be a concern (as noted above). Related, one authority felt that they had recently been successful at **school reorganisations** involving major changes.

- Other systems which responding local authorities felt were working well included an **admissions panel** to allocate places to secondary age pupils transferring **mid-year**, a **collaborative system**

with schools (including voluntary-aided schools) for **placing challenging pupils** in particular, and **joint administration of admissions** to an **academy**, between the admissions authority and the local authority.

3.4   Areas susceptible to further research

3.4.1 Experts' views

Areas highlighted by experts in the field of admissions and place planning as being important for future research to address are summarised below:

- the impact of recent policy on the **pattern of preferences** for schools, particularly the impact that **academies** and **specialist schools** may have on admissions to other schools within the area. Academies currently have additional autonomy compared to other schools and the effect this has on admissions is an issue

- the issues related to **schools** acting as their **own admissions authority**

- **local authorities** are **responsible** for ensuring that their **schools** adhere to the **Code of Practice**. Whether and how local authorities are managing this is an issue

- **local authorities** are **responsible** for involving the **School's Adjudicator** in cases where schools are not adhering to the **Code of Practice**. At present, there seems to be varying practice amongst local authorities for doing so.

3.4.2 Literature and documentation

The following issues were highlighted in the recent literature and documentation as potential areas for future research:

- the impact that an increasing number of **academies** may have on other schools within the area (West *et al.*, 2004)

- the impact of **specialist schools** on other schools within the area (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education and Skills Committee, 2003)

- the extent to which different **types of schools** (e.g. those that are their own admissions authority and those that are not) **adhere to the Code of Practice** guidelines for admissions criteria and their stated admissions policies (West, 2003)

- the **characteristics** of **successful and unsuccessful applicants** to differing **types of schools** (e.g. community schools versus voluntary-controlled schools) (West, 2003)

- the **interaction of policies** for **school place planning** with policies for **housing and planning**; and with policies for the **inclusion** of pupils with special educational needs (Ofsted and Audit Commission, 2003b)

- the effectiveness of individual school approaches to tackling **racial and religious polarisation** (Ofsted and Audit Commission, 2003b)

- the effectiveness of involving a **higher authority** than councils in **school place planning** in large urban areas (Ofsted and Audit Commission, 2003b)

- evaluating the effectiveness of **school admissions policies** (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education and Skills Committee, 2004)

- investigating **alternatives to overcrowding** in schools following large numbers of **successful appeals** (GB. Parliament. HoC. Education and Skills Committee, 2004).

4   Conclusions

With the many changes influencing the admissions system over the last few years, there has been much research literature and other documentation discussing the issues and effects of school admissions and place planning. This paper has summarised the main areas focused on in the recent documentation. It has also highlighted the areas currently concerning local authorities and other experts in the field. This final section of the paper discusses the overall issues emerging in the literature and through local authority responses that future research may be able to help in addressing. Lastly, it also outlines areas that have *not* arisen in any significant form through this probe, but where there could, potentially, be issues associated with admissions that a further probe could address.

4.1   Issues that future research could address

The effects of some schools – those that are voluntary-aided or foundation status – acting as their own admissions authority was an ongoing issue in the 2003 and 2004 literature and it was also mentioned as an issue by local authority respondents and other experts. It was suggested that such schools had more opportunity to select particular pupils and sometimes used overly complex admissions criteria. If there are some schools within an authority that are able to operate in this way, this will also impact on the pupil intakes in the remaining schools – community and voluntary-controlled schools. To date, little is known about the different characteristics of pupils who apply to different types of schools. For example, whether certain groups of pupils are successful or unsuccessful in obtaining a place at a particular type of school. With the new coordinated admissions system, it would be possible to investigate this issue with the cooperation of local authorities, to provide evidence to show whether the current admission arrangements ensure all pupils have fairer access to all secondary schools. Related to the above issue, there are also an increasing number of specialist schools and academies that have a greater degree of autonomy in their admissions. The impact of these schools on other local schools could also be investigated.

Further research could address the following questions:

- What effect, within a local authority area, do different types of schools have on their neighbouring schools? For example, are pupil intakes (in terms of pupil characteristics and numbers of applications) in existing comprehensive or voluntary-controlled schools significantly affected by new academies or specialist schools within the locality?

- Are there significant differences in the characteristics of pupils (e.g. gender, ethnicity, prior attainment, special educational needs, socio-economic background) who *apply* to different types of schools? To what extent is the pupil intake representative of the cohort of pupils applying to a particular school?

Some local authority respondents highlighted the difficulty of securing school places for pupils with challenging behaviour. However, the *Code of Practice* states that 'it is normally unacceptable for a school to refuse to admit a child on the basis of their behaviour elsewhere' (p. 32). But this is followed by a list of exceptions to the rule. Where schools are not adhering to the *Code of Practice*, it is the responsibility of the local authority to inform the School's Adjudicator. If they do not, they could be subject to a Local Government Ombudsmen investigation. The literature suggests that practice across local authorities is not consistent in this area and therefore further research could help to clarify the situation for local authorities. It could also provide good practice examples of how local authorities ensure that schools are adhering to the *Code of Practice* guidance.

Further research could address the following questions:

- How do local authorities monitor schools' adherence to the admissions *Code of Practice*? Is there a process for supporting schools to amend their admissions practice when it does not comply with the guidance?

4.2 Issues that further probes could address

It should be noted that this probe has focused on research and documentation from the last two years in England only. Whilst this was appropriate for identifying existing and on-going work in the area of admissions so that future research could build on this, the NFER team recognises that there are issues that have arisen through other NFER projects, that could potentially impact on admissions but were outside the remit of this present probe, and so have not featured in this paper. It would be possible for further probes to be conducted in similar ways. For example, areas of focus could be:

- on the types of issues concerning primary school admissions compared to secondary school admissions

- on the types of admissions issues concerning rural areas compared to urban areas

- on the impact of school achievement and attainment tables on parental choice of school

- on the impact of admissions policies on specific vulnerable groups

- on international comparisons of the admissions system in England.

The areas discussed in this section have highlighted where further research would be beneficial to address some of the issues regarding school admissions and place planning. It has also suggested areas where further probes addressing specific admissions issues could be beneficial. It is intended to inform the LGA in their decision-making process for commissioning further research to support local authorities in this complex area.

Appendix 1 Methodology

Mapping the literature: database searches

A range of different educational databases were searched. Search strategies for all databases were developed by using terms from the relevant thesauri (where these were available), in combination with free text searching. The same search strategies were adhered to as far as possible for all the databases. The NFER Library's own internal databases were also searched, as well as CERUK.[2]

The database searches were supplemented by scanning the reference lists of relevant articles, thus identifying further studies. The team also searched relevant websites and downloaded documents and publications lists.

The keywords used in the database searches, together with a brief description of each of the databases searched, are outlined in appendix 2. All searches date from 2003 onward.

In addition to the database searches, the research team mapped information and documents relating to admissions and place planning held by EMIE at NFER. This resource included:

- relevant enquiries from local authorities that EMIE had received within the last two years

- relevant messages posted on the 'eddie forum'[4] within the last two years

- other documentation with reference to admissions or place planning held by EMIE.

This provided a useful means of accessing additional data relating to admissions and place planning already held within EMIE at NFER, highlighting some of the issues concerning local authorities over recent months.

A total of 40 literature sources were mapped. This material included policy reports, research papers and press articles. Short articles were read, but only the summary and conclusions of longer reports were read. The main issues from each document were summarised and the admissions area that each document focused on was coded into broad subject groups (e.g. secondary admissions; coordinated admissions schemes). Also noted were any possibilities for further research that were highlighted in the documents.

Contacting experts

The research team also worked closely with staff in EMIE to ensure that local authority officers were given the opportunity to contribute to this brief study. A message was developed by the research team and EMIE's information officers and posted on the 'eddie forum'. The message explained the purpose of the study and invited local authorities to respond to the following:

- 'Please describe up to three main issues regarding school admissions or place planning that are causing the most concern in your authority at the moment (please explain particular problems in approximately three lines)

- Please describe one area of school admissions or place planning that you feel is working well which you would be prepared to share with colleagues.'

The message also included the email address and telephone number of a member of the research team for replies, so that local authority officers were able to respond confidentially, rather than to all users of the 'eddie forum'.

Within three weeks of the message being posted on the eddie forum, a total of 11 local authorities responded to the invitation to share their concerns and

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2   Current Educational Research in the United Kingdom
3   An email discussion forum, managed by EMIE, only accessible to staff working in local education authorities

to highlight an area working well in admissions or place planning. The message was open for any local authority member to respond but, as expected, most respondents held school admissions officer posts or equivalent.

In addition to the local authority personnel, two other experts in the field of admissions were also invited to contribute to this work via email and telephone. A summary of their responses is included in the section highlighting areas susceptible to further research.

Appendix 2 Description of databases searched

British Education Index (BEI)

BEI provides bibliographic references to 350 British and selected European English-language periodicals in the field of education and training, plus developing coverage of national report and conference literature.

#1	Admission Criteria
#2	Grammar Schools
#3	Selective Admission
#4	#1 or #2 or #3
#5	School Place Planning (ft)
#6	School Places

ft   Denotes free-text searching

British Education Internet Resource Catalogue

The Catalogue provides descriptions and hyperlinks for evaluated internet resources within an indexed database. The collection aims to list and describe significant information resources and services specifically relevant to the study, practice and administration of education at a professional level.

#1	Admission Criteria
#2	Grammar Schools
#3	Selective Admission

#4	#1 or #2 or #3
#5	School Place Planning (ft)
#6	School Places

ft   Denotes free-text searching

ChildData

ChildData is the National Children's Bureau database containing details of around 35,000 books, reports and journal articles about children and young people.

#1	Admissions Policies
#2	Grammar Schools
#3	Selective Education
#4	School Places (ft)

ft   Denotes free-text searching

Websites

Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL)
National Association of School Masters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)
National Union of Teachers (NUT)
Specialist Schools Trust
Sutton Trust
The Education Network (TEN)

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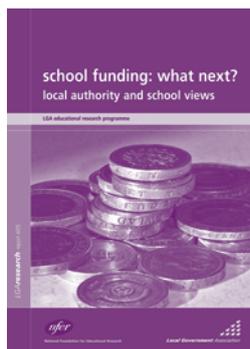
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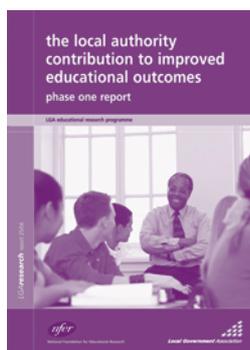Published in 2004
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