



CONSULTATION ON SCHOOLS ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS

**SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL
LOCAL COMMITTEE (GUILDFORD)
9 FEBRUARY 2006**

KEY ISSUE

To respond to the County Council's consultation on proposed changes to the admissions criteria for Community and Voluntary Controlled schools.

SUMMARY

At its meeting on 17 January 2006 the County Council's Executive considered a report containing the results of a wide consultation on admission arrangements in Surrey and recommending that further consultation be carried out on proposed changes to admissions criteria and the adoption of an Equal Preference System. The Executive report is reproduced here and the Local Committee is invited to comment on the proposals in time for the final consideration of the arrangements by the Executive on 28 March 2006.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Local Committee (Guildford) should submit its comments on the proposed changes to admission arrangements.

KEY ISSUE/DECISION:

Following an extensive Admissions Survey Members are asked to consider the responses and to recommend a change in Surrey's admissions criteria for community and voluntary controlled schools for September 2007.

BUSINESS CASE:

1. The strength of feeling both for and against change has been considerable since proposals for change were first initiated in September 2003. Since that time the option of maintaining the status quo is no longer a viable option since the Council will inevitably be open to legal challenge if it maintains its current system.
2. Members will be aware that the County Council's admissions policies only apply to its 209 community and 27 voluntary controlled schools. Any admissions criteria are only applied to those schools who are oversubscribed at the time of application. The 100 voluntary aided and 35 foundation schools decide on their own admissions policy although some may take the County Council's policy into account when setting their criteria. In order to present an objective as possible view of Surrey's main stakeholders in the school admissions process, consultants at MVA were commissioned to undertake the survey / consultation on behalf of Surrey County Council.
3. The postal Admissions Survey was circulated to all relevant stakeholders in the admissions process in October 2005 with a closing date for response by 16 December 2005.

Stakeholders included:

- i) parents of pupils aged 2-3 years (Early Years), in year 1 and year 5,
 - ii) all headteachers and chairs of governors in all Surrey's maintained schools
 - iii) 6 diocesan boards
 - iv) 14 neighbouring LAs
 - v) Surrey County Councillors, borough / district councillors
 - vi) Parish councils
 - vii) Surrey's Admissions Forum
 - viii) Local Transportation Directors
 - ix) Colleagues in Sustainable Development.
4. In addition to the Admissions Survey 11 parent focus groups were convened, one in each of the County's boroughs / districts. The groups aimed to be partly educative so that participants were able to gain a good understanding of the issues and options being consulted upon, and partly exploratory so that the Council was able to better understand which issues are of most importance at a local level.
 5. The focus groups consisted of a discussion with up to 12 parents in each area who had school aged children. The groups were recruited to include parents of both primary and secondary age children and to have not more than 3 parents of children at any one school.
 6. After discussion the groups were asked to vote on 2 issues:

Section (1) Support for, or opposition to, a system of admission based on the 4 criteria (siblings, nearest school, feeder schools and get to school easily); these criteria were identified as being important in determining school admissions as a result of a pre-consultation

exercise carried out in September 2004.

Section (2) Support for the Equal Preference or Preference Weighted systems of school admissions.

7. 500 face to face interviews were also conducted with parents/carers of pre-school and school aged children in Surrey. These interviews were carried out with a representative sample of respondents in randomly selected areas of the County.

8. ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES TO THE POSTAL ADMISSIONS SURVEY

Of the 38,511 forms sent to all relevant stakeholders only 7215 (19%) responded. This was disappointing given that pre-paid envelopes were supplied with the forms and the facility to reply on line and a helpline were also provided.

9. The total responses to the 4 proposed admissions criteria by respondent groups are summarised in the table below:

SECTION 1

Criteria that should be taken into account by respondent type

	Overall	Parent of school age children in Surrey	School Gov	Head teacher	Surrey County Cllr	Borough Cllr	Diocesan Board	Neighbouring LEA	Any other
Respondents	7215	6495	389	90	26	120	4	14	333
Siblings at school	87%	87%	87%	91%	81%	80%	100%	86%	84%
Nearest school	72%	72%	71%	81%	73%	77%	75%	33%	74%
Feeder schools	59%	59%	53%	54%	50%	59%	50%	71%	62%
Get to school easily	70%	70%	70%	78%	85%	83%	75%	43%	70%

NB. Throughout this report where percentages do not total 100% this will usually be because the respondent was able to give more than one answer. In the case of questions on the 4 criteria they were asked as separate questions but have been combined into one table. Small differences from 100% may be because of rounding.

SECTION 2

10. The responses to Section 2 on the fairness of a preference weighted system which Surrey currently uses or an equal preference system is summarised in the table below:

The majority of respondents felt that both systems were fair but a higher proportion favoured the Preference Weighted System with nearly two thirds (63%) saying this was very fair or fair. Just over half (54%) considered the Equal Preference System to be very fair/fair.

How fair do you think Equal Preference and Preference Weighted Systems are?

	Fairness of System A (Equal Preference)	Fairness of System B (Preference Weighted)
N=	7183	7198
Very fair	18%	24%
Fair	36%	39%
Neither fair nor unfair	21%	14%
Unfair	17%	16%
Very unfair	5%	4%
Don't know	3%	3%
Total	100%	100%
Mean	3.5	3.7

11. ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES TO THE FOCUS GROUPS

The focus groups were moderated by a trained interviewer from MVA. Discussions took place with the groups around local case studies to illustrate the potential impact of the 4 proposed criteria as outlined in paragraph 6, Section 1 of the report compared with the current system based on siblings and flexible Admission Priority Areas.

12. Equal Preference and Preference Weighted systems

The focus groups also incorporated material to assist participants in understanding 2 alternative systems for determining admissions – Equal Preference and Preference Weighted.

13. The focus groups are summarised in tables 1-3 overleaf:

Table 1**FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES TO THE 4 CRITERIA**

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Siblings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for younger sibling • Less travel and traffic problems • Practical for drop off/pick up • Build relationship with school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority can be given to siblings resident outside of area above local child • Difficult for younger siblings to go to different school that they may be better suited to • Priority given to siblings in selective schools rather than on their own abilities in competition with that years intake
Nearest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easier for children to build friendships and to develop community ties, particularly for primary schools • Less travel and traffic problems • Contributes to mixed intake and less difference in standards between schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undesirable if nearest school is under-performing • Undesirable if school is not suited to child's needs (including specialist schools) • Causes difficulties if nearest school has different admissions criteria • Perception that system is open to abuse
Feeder Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows children continuity and to maintain friendships • Lessens parental anxiety about school admissions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tied into school path and school may change • Tied into school path and child's needs may change • Perception that would be given lower priority if chose an alternative school
Get to School Easily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less travel and traffic problems • Encourages independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too vague a definition • Unfairly discriminates against those who do not live on public transport routes • Only relevant to secondary children as parents of primary children would not let children travel independently

Table 2**FOCUS RESPONSES TO CURRENT SYSTEM v CRITERIA BASED SYSTEM**

Borough	Case Study Schools	Favoured Current APA System or Criteria based System	Notes
Elmbridge	Oatlands Infant Esher High	Criteria Based	Reservations about feeder school and nearest criterion
Epsom & Ewell	Wallace Fields Junior	Criteria Based	Criteria for primary only. No overall preference for secondary – emphasised parental choice and needs of child
Guildford	Tillingbourne Junior Howard of Effingham George Abbott	Criteria Based	Siblings criterion considered important but should be combined with maximum distance
Mole Valley	Ashcombe Eastwick Junior	No overall preference	
Reigate Banstead	& Reigate Priory Junior Reigate School	No clear preference	Support for different systems at primary and secondary
Runnymede	Magna Carta Manorcroft	Criteria Based	
Spelthorne	Sunbury Manor	Criteria Based	priority order:- primary (1) siblings (2) nearest secondary(1)nearest (2) siblings
Surrey Heath	Valley End Infant Crawley Ridge Junior	Criteria Based	Siblings and nearest to be main criterion
Tandridge	Oxted Audley	Mixed views	Favoured siblings and nearest criteria only
Waverley	William Cobbett Rodborough	Criteria Based	priority order:- primary(1) siblings (2) = nearest/feeder secondary (1) siblings (2) nearest
Woking	Goldsworth Primary	Criteria based	

Table 3

FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES TO EQUAL PREFERENCE OR PREFERENCE WEIGHTED

Borough	Equal Preference or Preference Weighted Fairer?	Notes
Elmbridge	Equal Preference	
Epsom & Ewell	Equal Preference	
Guildford	Equal Preference	
Mole Valley	Mixed Views	Vote 5 Preference weighted 4 Equal Preference
Reigate & Banstead	Mixed views – no overall preference	
Runnymede	Equal Preference	
Spelthorne	Mixed views – no overall preference	Group found it hard to understand the difference between the systems
Surrey Heath	Equal Preference	
Tandridge	Equal Preference	
Waverley	Equal Preference	
Woking	Equal Preference	

14. In addition to the 11 focus groups Members of the Schools & Community Select Committee were given the opportunity of attending a 12th focus group. Overall the points raised by Members coincide with some of the views expressed by the parent focus groups but agreed on the siblings criterion then the nearest school but were less sure about feeder schools and ease of transport. However, they could see the latter 2 criteria playing a part in an overall admissions policy.

15. ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES TO THE FACE TO FACE (1:1) INTERVIEWS

Interviewers from MVA held 500 face to face (1:1) interviews with a representative sample of the public. Like the focus groups this gave the opportunity for a full discussion about the proposed changes and the likely impact of such. This led to a better understanding of the full implications of any change.

16. The responses of those interviewed is summarised as follows:

SECTION 1

Schools Admissions Criteria

The criterion considered important by the highest proportion in determining whether a child should go to a particular school was being able to get to the school easily on foot, bicycle or public transport. More than four out of ten felt that this was very important (45%) and 79% overall regarded it as very important/important.

Almost three quarters of parents interviewed in the face-to face surveys felt that having a sibling at the school was very important or important (73%). More than two thirds regarded going to the nearest school as very important or important (68%) and nearly two thirds (65%) regarded feeder schools as very important/important.

Overall the majority considered each of these criterion to be very important or important. However, a sizeable minority of parents did not rate feeder schools or going to the nearest school as important. 19% rated feeder schools as unimportant or very unimportant and 16% assessed the nearest school criterion in this way.

17. Furthermore from the following table one can see the importance the respondents attached to each criterion.

	Brother/ sister at school	Going to the nearest school	Feeder schools	Get to school easily
N=	498	498	498	498
Very important	40%	34%	20%	45%
Important	33%	36%	34%	34%
Neither	12%	14%	21%	11%
Unimportant	10%	15%	16%	9%
Very unimportant	2%	1%	3%	1%
Don't know	2%	0%	5%	0%
Mean	4.0	3.9	3.6	4.1
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

18. Overall this makes a strong case for including all 4 criteria. In addition the following table indicated that the majority of respondents in this group (66%) thought that a criteria based system of admissions was very fair/fair compared with 55% who felt that Surrey's current system was very fair/fair.

Fairness of APA and Criteria

	Fairness of the current system	Fairness of alternative criteria based system
N=	498	498
Very fair	14%	21%
Fair	41%	45%
Neither fair nor unfair	17%	14%
Unfair	12%	6%
Very unfair	3%	2%
Don't know	14%	12%
Total	100%	100%
Mean	3.6	3.9

19. SECTION 2

Equal Preference and Preference Weighted Systems

Respondents interviewed in this group were asked to consider 2 alternative systems for parents to identify their choices of schools and the way that these choices are taken into account. The question incorporated a description of the two systems – Equal Preference and Preference Weighted.

More than two thirds of parents considered the Equal Preference system to be fair or very fair (67%). Indeed more than a quarter (27%) rated this as very fair. In comparison just under half of all parents surveyed felt that the Preference Weighted system was fair/very fair. Nearly a quarter of parents (23%) regard the Preference Weighted system as unfair or very unfair.

20. A breakdown of the responses can be seen below:

Fairness of Equal Preference and Preference Weighted Systems

	Fairness of System A (Equal Preference)	Fairness of System B (Preference Weighted)
	498	498
Very fair	27%	11%
Fair	40%	37%
Neither fair nor unfair	12%	18%
Unfair	11%	19%
Very unfair	2%	4%
Don't know	8%	10%
Total	100%	100%
Mean	3.8	3.4

When asked to say which of these systems they felt was better overall, exactly half said Equal Preference. This was almost twice as many as favoured the Preference Weighted System (28%).

This response is consistent with that of the focus groups when 72% preferred an Equal Preference system.

21. When asked which system was better overall 50% responded that System A – Equal Preference was better while only 28% preferred System B – Preference Weighted.

22. A detailed breakdown to the total responses of the face to face (1:1) interviews is available on file.

23. KEY FINDINGS

It is difficult to compare like with like particularly because of the differences in the numbers of responses from each of the participative groups and the different forms the survey took. Also one can argue that both the focus groups and the face to face interviews had a more in depth understanding of the implications of any change because of having the opportunity to challenge, discuss and explore the subject matter with an interviewer.

Therefore where percentages are available a comparison is enabled but for the focus groups one can only use a general comment of yes / no in response to the questions.

24. The following table summarises the overall views of each participative group:

Survey / consultation group	Criteria that should be taken into account				Consider APA and Criteria Based Systems very fair/fair		Equal Preference/Preference Weighted What System is Better Overall		
	Sibs	Nearest School	Feeder School	Easy Access	Current System	Proposed System	Equal Preference	Preference Weighted	No preference
1. Postal Surveys	87%	72%	59%	70%	62%	76%	39%	52%	10%
2. Focus Groups	Y	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N			73%		27%
3. Face to Face Interviews	68%	69%	40%	69%	55%	66%	67%	48%	18%

25. MVA's summary of findings is also attached in Annexe 1.

26. IN SUMMARY

The majority of those consulted / interviewed indicated:

- i) Strong support for 3 of the proposed criteria of siblings, nearest school and ease of access. There was less strong support for the criterion of feeder schools but nevertheless 59% of postal survey respondents and 40% of the sample survey respondents agreed that this criterion should be included in admissions criteria. That the current system of admissions was fair but a higher proportion considered the proposed system to be fair thus suggesting a preference for changing to a criteria-based admissions procedure.
- ii) A difference in views relating to Equal Preference v. Preference Weighted system.
- iii) The responses to the postal survey indicated support for maintaining Surrey's Preference Weighted system but this may have been due to a lack of understanding about the 2 systems, something which both the focus groups and the face to face interviewees could have discussed with their interviewer and therefore reached a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of both systems.
- iv) Responses of the focus groups and face to face interviews indicated strong support of an Equal Preference system. These responses can be considered more reliable and therefore more representative than the postal responses as they were carried out with a randomly selected rather than a self-selecting sample.

27. OPTIONS:

Legal advice relating to the 4 admissions criteria, given since the start of the consultation, has been that the criterion "Being able to get to school easily on foot, bicycle or public transport", although one of the most popular criterion, would be open to legal challenge and be extremely difficult to administer. This view is also supported by a recent Ombudsman report. Bearing this in mind and also the current challenges in relation to Surrey's flexible Admission Priority Area system, one cannot recommend a further change to a criterion which would be equally open to challenge.

28. It is therefore recommended that this criterion be deleted from the list of criteria. In support of this is the fact that many children who have ease of access to school would be living near to the school or could be a sibling and / or could be attending a feeder school so therefore this criterion would be subsumed within the other 3 criteria. This view is supported by comments from the parents' focus groups as follows:

"A further disadvantage of the ease of transport criterion was that it was felt to be too vague and open to interpretation. This was mentioned by parents in Mole Valley, Runnymede and Surrey Heath.

*'It seems quite a weak criterion on which to base somebody getting into school.
Parent, Runnymede'*

Some parents in Waverley found it difficult to distinguish between the nearest school and ease of getting to school criteria and suggested that they should be merged in some way."

29. Having regard to current legislation and the Admissions Code of Practice realistically there are 4 options as follows:

30. OPTION 1

To use the following criteria in this order:

- i) Looked After Children
- ii) Exceptional Circumstances
- iii) siblings
- iv) nearest school
- v) any other

31. BENEFITS

- i) Giving priority to those for whom it is the nearest school supports Surrey County Council's 'green' policy.
- ii) It minimises disruption for parents and pupils since many already attend their nearest school if it is perceived as a successful / popular school.
- iii) Would support the views of the respondents to the Admissions Survey in expressing a lower priority for feeder schools.
- iv) It is simple to administer and understand

32. RISKS

- i) Some pupils in particular communities who have always expected to attend a particular school will not be able to do so.
- ii) Some schools may decide to apply for foundation status to maintain their existing admission patterns by naming feeder schools.
- iii) Nearest school will include where appropriate giving some preferences to out-county pupils whose nearest school is a Surrey school

33. OPTION 2

This option includes feeder schools after nearest school as follows:

- i) Looked After Children
- ii) Exceptional Circumstances
- iii) siblings
- iv) nearest school
- v) feeder school*
- vi) any other

* NB a feeder school criterion cannot be used for the admissions of children into the Reception year group.

34. BENEFITS

- i) Same as in paragraphs 31 i) ii) and iii) but slightly less disruption in rural areas where a feeder school criterion might enable some pupils living further away from the school to be admitted.

35. RISKS

- i) More pupils who live further away from the school who traditionally would have admitted them in the past may not be able to get the school of their preference (para 32 i).
- ii) In support of the Greenwich Judgement a feeder school criterion will include where appropriate named out-county schools

36. OPTION 3

This option includes giving priority to feeder schools before the nearest school as follows:

- i) Looked After Children
- ii) Exceptional Circumstances
- iii) Siblings
- iv) feeder school
- v) nearest school
- vi) any other

37. BENEFITS

- i) Would enable some pupils, who live further away from a school but who traditionally live within the current Admission Priority Area or beyond to be admitted over local children.

38. RISKS

- i) Putting feeder schools before nearest school does not support the views expressed by those responding to the Admissions Survey where less importance was given to the feeder school criterion and more emphasis was placed on the nearest school criterion.
- ii) Encourages pupils / parents travelling longer distances to school and therefore does not support Surrey County Council's 'green' policy.
- iii) More priority would be given to pupils attending out-county feeder schools due to the Greenwich Judgement and this would displace local pupils living nearer to the school.
- iv) Pupils living nearer to the school could be displaced as priority is given to pupils living further away and attending feeder schools disadvantaging local pupils.

39. OPTION 4

Change to an Equal Preference System

The Preference Weighted System was supported by 13% more of those responding to the postal survey whereas the majority of parents in the focus groups and 67% in the face to face interviews thought Equal Preference was a better system.

40. BENEFITS

- i) Supported by the representative and participative responses to the Admissions Survey.
- ii) The majority of Local Authorities already have this system in place.
- iii) Of Surrey's neighbouring Local Authorities only 2 (Hampshire and East Sussex) have a Preference Weighted system (as does Surrey) and one of these (Hampshire) is considering changing to an Equal Preference system in 2008.
- iv) It maximises the chance of parents getting at least one of their preferences.
- v) As the tie-breaker within each criterion is home to school distance by walking route local parents have the advantage and are likely to have shorter home to school journeys.

41. RISKS

- i) Slightly more costly to administer than a Preference Weighted system and although not an actual increase in costs over the current system we may not make the level of savings already identified in admissions that keeping a Preference Weighted system would deliver.
- ii) More people are considered for each school so a first preference or first ranked school carries no advantage.

42. RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is recommended that Surrey County Council consult from mid January to the end of February on:

- i) changing our admissions criteria for community and voluntary controlled schools to those outlined in Option 2 (para 33).
 - i. Looked After Children
 - ii. Exceptional Circumstances
 - iii. siblings
 - iv. nearest school
 - v. feeder school
 - vi. any other
- ii) Changing to an Equal Preference system, Option 4 (paras 39-41).
- iii) To agree criteria for identifying feeder schools taking into account the locality of schools and the numbers of pupils in the year group applying for transfer from one school to another.

43. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

The above are recommended for the following reasons:

- i) Maintaining the current admission system is not a viable option since the use of flexible APAs does not comply with the Admissions Code of Practice and will inevitably be open to legal challenge.
- ii) The introduction of objective-based criteria will comply with the Admissions Code of Practice and be fairer for parents, and will help them to understand the process more readily. Parents will also be more able to assess their chances of gaining entry to their preferred schools.
- iii) The proposed criteria are commonly used throughout the Country and by our neighbouring LAs.

- iv) The proposed criteria will encourage attendance at local schools with the welcome impact of reducing traffic congestion.
- v) The introduction of a feeder school criterion will support the notion of linked school working in confederations and develop a community-based approach to local issues.
- vi) An equal preference system is operated by the majority of LAs throughout the country and indeed by the majority of our neighbouring LAs. It will also maximise the chances of the majority of parents getting one of their preferences.

44. WHAT HAPPENS NEXT:

The Local Authority will:

- i) Undertake a final consultation from mid January to 28th February 2006 on firm admission proposals.
- ii) Report to Schools & Communities Select Committee on 09 March 2006.
- iii) Report back to the Executive on 28 March 2006.
- iv) The recommendations from the Executive of 28 March will be considered by the full County Council on 18 April 2006 and the Admissions Arrangements adopted.

45. RESPONSE OF LOCAL COMMITTEE (GUILDFORD) TO THE NEXT CONSULTATION

45. The Local Committee (Guildford) may wish to make its views on proposed admission arrangements for September 2007 known to the Executive when it meets on 28 March 2006.

Responsible: Anne Macavoy, Head of Admissions & Transport (Strategy), 01483 517689

Accountable: Anna Wright, Director for Schools

Sources/background papers: Reports to Executive on 30 September 2003, 02 March 2004, 28 September 2004, 04 July 2005. Report & minutes to the Schools & Communities Select Committee 14 June 2005
