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Stronger role for local authorities emerges

As well as an end to selection on aptitude and ability *Comprehensive Future* wants to see a stronger coherent role for local determination of admissions, ie:

- Academies and CTCs brought in line with other schools in the area so all local publicly funded schools operate under the same arrangements.
- All publicly funded local schools, including those that are currently their own admission authority, to have the administration of admissions (ie determining whether an applicant meets these admission criteria) to be carried out by the local authority even if the criteria are set by the school.
- All admission criteria for all local publicly funded schools should be agreed by the admission forum. If there is to be banding it should be across the ability range for the local authority intake, not apply only to applicants to an individual school, and all publicly funded schools in the area should have the same system of banding agreed by the admission forum.

Clearly a stronger role for local authorities is emerging. It remains to be seen what effect changes in the new School Admissions Code will have on admission forums. There is new guidance on membership and responsibilities, which includes details about the membership of forums, their role, the forum report and a list of frequently asked questions. Entitled *Information Note on the New Role and Responsibilities of Admission Forums* it is available from the school admissions section of the DCSF website at www.dcsf.gov.uk/sacode/guidanceandreports.shtml

All local authorities are required to establish forums. Forums are to be smaller with no more than 20 members. The guidance says: 'it should not be dominated by one group, ie the Local Authority'. It is not clear how members are to be appointed. Membership must 'reflect the types of schools in the area'. Local employers can be included. Each faith group must be represented.

Forums are not expected to duplicate the report brought in by the Education and Skills Act 2008, which gave a duty to local authorities to report each year on the 'legality, fairness and effectiveness of all school admission arrangements in their area' to the Adjudicator. Instead their voluntary report should say how 'they feel the arrangements contribute to fair access'. The report of the admission forum should accompany the LA report, which should be submitted to the Adjudicator by 30 June each year.

Originally when the Schools Commissioner was appointed he was expected to carry out and publish a 'national review of fair access' based on admission forum reports. The DCSF website still says that the first of these reports, which will look at how fair access is being achieved across the country, will be presented to Parliament in April 2009.

Sir Bruce Liddington was announced as the first Schools Commissioner in 2006. He resigned last year. It seems more likely that this report will be replaced by a report in November 2009 from the Schools Adjudicator on how fair access is being achieved locally; this will draw on reports now required from the local authorities.

Following media reports about lotteries, the Secretary of State has also asked the Schools Adjudicator to report on random allocations and admissions of twins and multiple births by September 2009.

Admissions procedures still too complex for parents

RISE (Research and Information on State Education) published a report in March on the criteria which have been used to make decisions by admissions authorities for admissions to 3,134 English secondary schools this September. The research (*Secondary Schools in England: Policy and Practice*) was carried out by Professor Anne West and colleagues at the London School of Economics. It can be found on www.risetrust.org.uk

Some of the recommendations are:

- Admissions to all schools should be as simple and straightforward as at the community schools (and some academies) identified in the report.
- There should be a simplified procedure for determining religion and religious practice.
- Further guidance to schools as to what is and what is not appropriate to ask in Supplementary Information Forms (SIFs) would help admission authorities to have a clearer understanding of how they should use these forms (this has also been recommended by the Office of Schools Adjudicator).
- To ensure procedural fairness either the local authority or possibly a religious body with no vested interest in the outcome should take responsibility for the allocation process for all schools.
- Data should be made available enabling the patterns of applications to be related to patterns of offers to establish if school autonomy in relation to school admissions is a factor in determining which pupils apply to which schools and which are offered places.

No selection support from think tank

Policy Exchange, a think tank said to influence Conservative policy, has published a study comparing academies, US charter schools and the Swedish free schools. It acknowledges that allowing a first come first served admissions policy in Sweden has led to concerns about social segregation but unsurprisingly advocates choice and private providers.

However it recommends that the 'market' should be designed so that it does not increase segregation in the schools system and 'admissions policies have to be set carefully'. (*A guide to school choice reforms*, Policy Exchange. March 2009).

Motion calls for an end to selection

David Chaytor MP, a founder of *Comprehensive Future*, has promoted Early Day Motion 867 which calls for an end to selection and KS2 tests so that 'no child starts their secondary school career publicly labelled as a failure'.

The EDM notes the evidence linking selective school admission policies with social segregation and says that public tests designed to fail the majority of children are 'incompatible with the spirit and purpose of the Every Child Matters agenda'. An EDM is an effective way of raising an issue and identifying supportive MPs. So far 41 Liberal Democrat and Labour MPs have signed. You can check who they are by going to the EDM page on the parliamentary website www.parliament.uk/about/how/business/edms.cfm

If your MP has not signed please encourage him/her to do so.

Over to you

- Please send us a donation – we rely on donations
- *Encourage a friend to join by going to our website www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk*
- Let us know about the effect of selection in your area
- *Respond to the question about the AGM*

Training courses on admissions

The Advisory Centre for Education is putting on day training courses in Manchester and London for everyone involved in admissions and appeals. The courses are during May and June.

Training will cover all aspects of admissions and the effect of the new School Admissions Code, including admission forums, the impact of equality law, case law and adjudicator decisions.

ACE is uniquely placed to offer training; its helplines deal daily with admissions as well as special needs and exclusions.

For more information see www.ace-ed.org.uk/training or phone 020 7704 3370.

When and where for our AGM?

Up until now our AGMs have been on Saturdays in October or November in London or Birmingham.

We know many supporters cannot find the time to come to an all day event so we would like to gauge support for an alternative.

Would you be more likely to come to an evening event on a weekday or do you prefer a Saturday? Would you be more likely to come to the AGM in London, Manchester or Birmingham? Please can you let us know?

You can email info@comprehensivefuture.org.uk phone Margaret Tulloch on 020 8947 5758 or write to the *Comprehensive Future* address. Do get in touch!

Spectator debate

Andrew Neil will chair a debate on 23 June at 6.45pm at the Royal Geographical Society, 1 Kensington Gore, London SW7.

The motion *Grammar schools are best* will be supported by David Davis MP, Stephen Pollard and Graham Brady MP and opposed by Charles Clarke MP, Simon Jenkins and Polly Toynbee.

Tickets are £25 excluding VAT. Email debate@pressholdings.com or phone 020 7941 0044 ref debate 2.

Labour conference

Fringe meetings are expensive to run. After our fringe at last year's Conservative conference and the previous year at the Liberal Democrat conference we hope to have a fringe on Tuesday evening at the Labour conference.

Plans are at an early stage. If you are going please keep the date free!