

Coronavirus (COVID-19): assessment processes for selective school admissions

July 2020 – updated December 2020

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December 2020 update

The government published a <u>contingency framework for education and childcare</u> on 3 December 2020.

Selective schools will have completed the majority of their selection tests for entry in September 2021 by December but may still be testing:

- candidates who were unable to attend the test centre on the specified test day(s)
 for reasons such as religious observance, being clinically extremely vulnerable,
 illness, disability or bereavement, or who are having to self-isolate because of
 contact with a person suffering from coronavirus (COVID-19);
- late applicants; and
- in-year applicants.

Tests should continue to operate for admission to selective schools. We consider travel to such tests to be essential travel.

In arranging tests, admission authorities should follow the protective health measures set out within the Guidance for full opening: schools and within paragraphs 37-38 below.

In addition to the protective health measures taken within the venue, admission authorities should ensure that groups of parents and children are not allowed to congregate around the test site. Admission authorities should seek the advice of their local director of public health if necessary.

Other than this update, the following guidance still stands.

Summary

Schools remain open for all pupils.

Whilst selection testing for 2021 entry has mostly been completed, this guidance remains relevant for schools undertaking late and in-year testing.

Admission processes continue. It is therefore necessary to consider how assessment for admission to state-funded selective schools can be undertaken this year in the context of the nation's response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

The majority of selective state-funded schools operate written tests to assess ability or aptitude. Some will, however, operate other types of assessment, for example to determine sports or musical aptitude or, in some cases, for ability banding. We recommend that admission authorities which operate these other types of assessment operate according to the same principles set out in this guidance, although they may need to adapt certain elements according to their specific context.

The impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) protective measures mean that many admission authorities have had to change their selective processes this year. We recommend that written tests continue to be run under exam conditions whenever possible¹, albeit whilst operating stringent health protection measures.

Admission authorities should continue to ensure that they assess those who cannot attend on a specific day for reasons such as religious observance, disability, illness or bereavement. Such arrangements should cover instances where, for reasons relating to coronavirus (COVID-19) – such as self-isolation due to then being clinically extremely vulnerable, illness or exposure to someone who is ill, or <u>local restrictions</u> – some children may be unable to attend test centres on the specific day(s).

This guidance aims to support admission authorities in operating their tests effectively whilst admission authorities also:

- support children, particularly disadvantaged children, who have been out of school for a significant period, to prepare for the selection process;
- put in place health protection measures during the selection process; and
- ensure fair access for all children including those whose health status or that of their families means that they may be self-isolating or having to take additional precautions during the selection process.

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¹ Schools which select up to 10% of their pupils by aptitude in a prescribed subject may choose to apply to vary their arrangements to remove selection. Schools which band by ability may also remove selection but are reminded that, if they seek an in-year variation to remove banding, their intake must remain representative of the full ability range of applicants (or the full ability range of children in the local authority area or the full ability range of all children in England), even without a test. This may require wider variations of the admission arrangements. The forty maintained schools and academies which had partially selective arrangements prior to 1998 and continue with those arrangements would not be able to reinstate selection if they remove it.

Admission authorities are best placed to decide which approach works best for them. We will not, therefore, prescribe a single course of action. This guidance aims, rather, to assist admission authorities in planning effectively both for autumn assessments and ongoing assessments throughout the year.

Expiry or review date

This guidance applies to selective admissions for the 2021-22 school year.

Who is this publication for?

This guidance is non-statutory. It recommends approaches to selection for the following types of state-funded school:

- grammar schools;
- partially selective ('bilateral') schools;
- schools which band applicants by ability to achieve a comprehensive intake;
- schools which select up to 10% of their cohort by aptitude in a prescribed subject.

It is also relevant to local authorities as coordinating bodies for school admissions.

Whilst this guidance is targeted at state-funded schools which are governed by the statutory <u>School Admissions Code</u> ('the Code') and admissions legislation, independent schools which operate tests for entry and for scholarships may also find it useful.

Key actions for admission authorities and local authorities in respect of ability and aptitude selection for 2021 admissions

It is for admission authorities to determine whether to amend their processes for selection. In July, we strongly advised them to review their processes and think carefully about whether changes were needed to deal with the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Admission authorities were asked to consider whether they needed to vary their determined admission arrangements to allow for any necessary changes to selection processes. Most variations for the 2021/22 school year have already been decided either by the schools adjudicator (maintained schools) or the regional schools commissioners on behalf of the Secretary of State (academy schools). However, some schools may still need to seek variations. More information on the variation process is included within this guidance.

No child was likely to perform to their utmost ability in a test at the beginning of September and were likely to benefit from as much time back in education as possible before being assessed. The attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers is likely to be magnified by their absence, for several months, from school when they were closed because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. We therefore:

 strongly advised that tests for grammar and partially selective schools were moved back into late October (which meant that many parents had to express preferences for school places before results were known) or to November if local admission co-ordination processes allowed. Many selective schools have responded to this advice by varying their admission arrangements;

- strongly advised that local authorities issued communications clearly explaining to parents the consequences of choosing only selective schools in their preferences in case their child did not attain a sufficiently high score to qualify for a grammar school. This was to help address the fact that parents would have had to express their preferences without knowing whether their child would qualify for a place in a selective school. We also recommended that local authorities strongly advised parents to use their final preference(s) for a local non-selective school(s) if test results were not known before 31 October in order to increase their opportunities of obtaining one of their preferences; and
- advised that local authorities with grammar schools to offer all parents applying for a secondary place at least one additional preference, if this was possible², to help address the same issue. Local authorities in which a large number of parents choose selective schools in neighbouring authorities were also asked to consider whether a similar approach would be feasible or appropriate in their area, particularly where they currently offer parents the minimum number of preferences.

We continue to advice admission authorities to follow the system of controls set out in the schools guidance for full opening when testing children for aptitude or ability. They should not permit those who are displaying coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms to attend a test centre with other children and adults. We have provided greater detail on protective health measures below.

Whether or not they change their admission arrangements, admission authorities must ensure that their selection arrangements continue to comply with equalities legislation. This means they must consider the impact of their selection process in the context of how it might combine with the effect of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak and public health measures on children and families with <u>protected characteristics</u> under the Equality Act 2010³, including religion, race and disability. Admission authorities should mitigate, wherever possible, any negative impacts, and make reasonable adjustments where necessary.

Admission authorities for selective schools are required to make alternative arrangements to assess children who are unable to attend the test centre on the specified test day, for reasons such as religious observance, illness, disability or

² We recognise that some contracts with companies providing co-ordination software may not permit such changes to be made at reasonable cost but that other contracts will.

³ The Public Sector Equality Duty (contained in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) requires the proprietors of maintained schools and academies (as public bodies) to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited under the Act; advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; and foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

bereavement. Admission authorities should, therefore, also set out within their admission arrangements the steps they will take to assess the ability or aptitude of children who cannot attend the scheduled test (including on any alternative dates) for reasons related to coronavirus (COVID-19), if they do not consider this is already sufficiently covered by their existing arrangements.

For children who cannot attend the test on the specified day(s), it is important that the result of an alternative assessment is known in time for their results to be included in the ranking of applications so that they can be offered a place at the school on National Offer Day, if they meet the oversubscription criteria and, in the case of grammar schools, reach the necessary ability standard. For late and in-year applications, any necessary assessments of ability or aptitude should be carried out, where there are vacancies, and an offer of a place made as soon as possible.

Paragraph 1.17 of the Code requires selective arrangements to be included within a school's admission arrangements⁴. In July we therefore asked admission authorities to consider whether changes to their testing arrangements (e.g., around test dates, pass marks or assessment of those who cannot attend tests on the specified day(s)) required the school's admission arrangements to be varied. If any schools still need to vary their admission arrangements for 2021 and subsequent years, advice on how to do so is set out below.

It is essential that where there is a single process for selecting by aptitude or ability in an area, that admission authorities co-operate wherever possible to ensure that they maintain a consistent approach if they vary their admission arrangements. Not doing so will unnecessarily complicate the admission process for parents.

Detailed guidance on approaches to selection for 2021 admissions

Delaying testing for 2021 admissions

1. Paragraph 1.32 of the Code is clear that admission authorities must take 'all reasonable steps to inform parents of the outcome of selection tests before the closing date for secondary applications on 31 October' so as to allow parents time to make an informed choice of school.

2.	Given the extraordinary circumstances due to the coronavirus (COVID-19)
outbre	ak, it was unlikely that children would be ready to perform at their best in a test

⁴ Footnote 4 of the Code says, 'Admission arrangements means the overall procedure, practices, criteria and supplementary information to be used in deciding on the allocation of school places and refers to any device or means used to determine whether a school place is to be offered.' Selection is part of the 'procedure..... to be used in deciding on the allocation of school places' and assessment is a 'means used to determine whether a school place is to be offered.'

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which took place at the normal time in September. Additionally, in some cases, it will not have been feasible for schools to provide results before 31 October due to coronavirus (COVID-19) -related disruption (for example if additional test sessions were needed to accommodate protective measures).

- 3. Our advice to the sector, therefore, is that it was reasonable, for this year only, to test in late October or, if the local co-ordinated scheme allowed for this, in November even if this meant that test results were not known before the closing date for applications (31 October). This action by admission authorities will have enabled as many children as possible to get back into the routine of education before being tested and therefore minimised the disadvantage caused by the lengthy period many children had to spend away from school while schools remained closed. This disadvantage is likely to be especially acute for children eligible for the pupil premium, and for children who face particular barriers to their education.
- 4. We acknowledge that late testing meant that parents applying in the normal admissions round needed to make choices about secondary schools for their children without knowing whether their children necessarily met the academic standards required for selective schools.
- 5. We recommended, therefore, that admission authorities and local authorities were clear in their communications with parents about the consequences of late testing, so that parents could consider how many selective schools to choose within their preferences.
- 6. Where the outcome of tests was not known before 31 October, we strongly recommended that local authorities considered offering all applicants for a secondary school at least one additional preference, under the admission co-ordination process for 2021 admissions, where this was possible.
- 7. Whilst this was for the coordinating local authority to determine, offering an additional preference was unlikely to be appropriate where the only local testing is:
 - for up to 10% of places allocated at a school based on aptitude; or
 - for banding in a school or group of schools.
- 8. This is because it is not possible to fail a banding test. For schools which allocate up to 10% of places based on aptitude, the majority of places are available to children irrespective of the test result.
- 9. For partially selective ('bilateral') schools, the question of whether to offer an additional preference depended on the overall number of schools with partial selection in an area and the overall proportion of selective places. It was and is, however, for local authorities to decide their course of action.

Delaying testing: choice advice

- 10. Local authorities have a duty under section 86(1A) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 to 'provide advice and assistance to parents of children in the area of the authority in connection with [their] preferences'.
- 11. Where grammar school assessment results were not provided until after 31 October, we therefore recommended that local authorities advised parents to use their final preference(s) for a local non-selective school(s). This will improve the chances of a child being allocated a preferred school on national offer date (1 March 2021) if he or she did not demonstrate sufficiently high academic ability in the assessment process for a grammar school.
- 12. Although we strongly advised local authorities both to offer an additional preference (where possible) and to advise parents to use any additional preference for a local non-selective school, parents were free to use an extra preference in any way they saw fit. Local authorities were reminded to explain the consequences to parents of choosing only selective schools, in case their child did not attain a sufficiently high score to qualify for a grammar school.

Testing over a longer period of time than normal

- 13. We continue to strongly advise admission authorities and those testing on behalf of admission authorities to follow the system of controls set out in the <u>schools guidance</u> for full opening and the specific advice on health protection measures in tests set out below, in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) when carrying out testing. As a result of taking these measures, it is unlikely to be possible to test as many children in a single hall in one sitting as is normal practice.
- 14. Autumn, late and in-year tests, may either need to be run over a longer period of time or the admission authority may need to allocate more space for testing in order to follow health protection measures.

Cooperation between admission authorities in operating tests

- 15. It is important that the process of applying for a selective school is not made unnecessarily complex for parents by any changes to the selection process.
- 16. Admission authorities often co-operate so that children sit a single test for a number of schools, whether for banding or for admission to grammar or partially selective schools. Where there is currently a unified approach to assessment, admission authorities should continue to work together to ensure, insofar as possible, that such approaches can continue, so that any complexities for parents are minimised. This helps ensure that children can be assessed once for eligibility for a number of schools.

- 17. Admission authorities can also co-operate across local authority boundaries if that is helpful to make the process even simpler for parents.
- 18. The logistics for organising tests this year were more difficult and it was and is possible, therefore, that more venues might be needed. Children both from within the local authority area and from outside the area must be able to sit the test.

Minimising disadvantage for protected groups, socially and economically disadvantaged children and children who are unable to attend the test centre

- 19. A small number of children may still be unable to attend a selection test, in line with public health advice to self-isolate because:
 - they have had symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) or a positive test result themselves
 - they live with someone that has symptoms or has tested positive and are a household contact
 - they are a close contact of someone who has coronavirus (COVID-19)
- 20. More evidence has emerged that shows there is a very low risk of children becoming very unwell from coronavirus (COVID-19), even for children with existing health conditions. Far fewer children should remain in the clinically extremely vulnerable group in the future following their routine discussions with their clinician.
- 21. The advice for pupils who remain in the clinically extremely vulnerable group is that they should return to school from 2 December (and could therefore sit selection tests), at all local restriction tiers, unless they are one of the very small number of pupils or students under paediatric or NHS care (such as recent transplant or very immunosuppressed children) and have been advised specifically by their GP or clinician not to attend an education setting.
- 22. The government has issued <u>more restrictive formal shielding measures</u> for the clinically extremely vulnerable in the worst affected areas, based on advice from the Chief Medical Officer. Clinically vulnerable people are those who have received a letter from the NHS or from their GP telling them they are in this category. Clinically extremely vulnerable people in Tier 4 (stay at home) areas are advised to follow shielding advice. All children still deemed clinically extremely vulnerable are advised not to attend school in Tier 4 areas and so admission authorities should put alternative selection assessment arrangements in place for them.
- 23. Children who live with someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable, but who are not clinically extremely vulnerable themselves, should still attend school (and therefore will be able to sit selection tests).

- 24. Prior to selection testing taking place, admission authorities are strongly advised to make provision for parents to alert the admission authority if their children fall within the categories within paragraph 19 or if their children are disabled and require special assessment processes.
- 25. It would be a breach of paragraph 2.9(e) of the Code (which says that admission must not be refused solely because a child has missed entrance tests for selective places) to refuse to admit a child to a selective school place simply because it is not possible for the child to attend the test centre on any set date or dates. For some children it may, therefore, be necessary to make arrangements for them to be assessed in their homes or at another safe venue either at the same time, or later.
- 26. Further to the above, admission authorities are required to comply with the Equality Act 2010. This means that they must consider the impact of their selection process on children with protected characteristics, including religion, race and disability. Admission authorities should mitigate, wherever possible, any negative impacts.
- 27. Admission authorities are also advised to consider any concerns from parents about the greater risk their child may face, or feel they face, due to their own personal circumstances. This may include pupils who are clinically extremely vulnerable, those living in households where someone is clinically extremely vulnerable, or those concerned about the comparatively increased risk from coronavirus (COVID-19), including those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds or who have certain conditions such as obesity and diabetes. They should provide reassurance of the measures they are putting in place to reduce the risk during tests.
- 28. To the extent it is not covered in considering duties under equalities legislation, in the interests of fairness, we also prompt admission authorities to identify any impact of the selection process which might prove a barrier to children from lower income backgrounds in light of the public health situation and take action to mitigate such impacts wherever possible.
- 29. The <u>memorandum of understanding</u> between the Department for Education and the Grammar School Heads Association sets out our shared ambition for more pupils from lower income backgrounds to apply to, pass the test for, and be admitted to selective schools.
- 30. Admission authorities can consider lowering the selection test pass mark for children eligible for the pupil premium. This is a decision for the individual school's admission authority. A number of grammar schools already set a lower pass mark for disadvantaged children. Any authorities who take this approach should ensure this still provides sufficient rigour to ensure those children can thrive within the highly academic environment of a grammar school.

- 31. Many grammar schools are also carrying out a programme of outreach activity to engage lower income families and to support their children, including preparing high ability disadvantaged children to be ready to benefit from a grammar school place.
- 32. Schools are advised to review how any outreach activity focused on disadvantaged children has been affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak and associated social distancing measures. We would encourage schools to consider how they can engage with target families and children to provide support.
- 33. An example of this activity might be for grammar schools to support families with targeted test familiarisation work and/or support in English and maths. Schools which select by ability will know their traditional feeder schools, and selective schools and feeder primaries are asked to work together to identify which disadvantaged children might be supported in this way.
- 34. On 10 June, the Prime Minister announced plans for a £1 billion Coronavirus (COVID-19) catch-up programme. The additional £650m we are providing schools and the £350m National Tutoring Programme supports children who have lost time in education as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Selective schools are therefore advised to continue to consider how they might use this funding to support learning, including for potential applicants who come from disadvantaged households.

Test security and integrity

- 35. Whilst arrangements need to be made to accommodate children who are unable to attend the test on the normal dates, admission authorities are advised to give careful thought to how various circumstances might threaten the security of test questions (which are often the intellectual property of test agencies), and the integrity of the test. It is recommended admission authorities consider how these risks can be mitigated insofar as possible.
- 36. If children are to be tested over a period of a week, for instance, it will be important for admission authorities to ensure that all test papers are secure, that question papers do not leave the test centre and are locked up at night or collected daily by the test provider.

Protective measures in test centres

37. Admission authorities for schools are strongly advised to ensure the protective measures set out here are in place within the test centre. Admission authorities are reminded that this advice is reviewed regularly to reflect the latest scientific advice. We strongly recommend therefore that procedures are kept under review in line with the latest advice.

- 38. Specifically, protective measures should include the following actions:
 - those children taking tests in a school whilst other children are being educated in that school should be kept separate from them to minimise any risk of transmitting coronavirus (COVID-19);
 - candidates or staff who are unwell/self-isolating should not be permitted to attend.
 Separate arrangements for assessing children who are unwell/self-isolating should be made:
 - tests should be managed to avoid a mass drop-off or pick-up of candidates at the same time. Parents should not be permitted to park or congregate at or outside the centre and the admission authority will need to police safe distancing inside and outside the venue. Likewise, children should not be permitted to congregate in groups whilst entering or leaving the test centre;
 - limit escorts for candidates to one parent/adult and discourage group travel to test centres;
 - tests should take place in well-ventilated rooms with desks set at a safe distance apart in all directions;
 - hand washing facilities should be available. There should be good access to hand washing and toilet facilities to avoid queuing;
 - any test rooms and toilet areas should be sanitised and kept scrupulously clean.
 Frequently touched surfaces (door handles/desks etc.) should be regularly cleaned with the usual cleaning products;
 - hand sanitiser should be placed around the test rooms and general area to help candidates and staff keep their hands clean. It may be necessary to provide sanitiser on every desk;
 - candidates should bring their own equipment (pencils/pens/calculators etc.), tissues and water bottles to avoid sharing. It is recommended that a supply of unused equipment should be available for those candidates who do not bring their own.

Admission Arrangements Variations

- 39. The Code sets out at paragraph 1.17 that: 'all selective schools must publish the entry requirements for a selective place and the process for such selection'.
- 40. The selection process will therefore be written into admission arrangements and it may be necessary to change ('vary') them in respect of the following:
 - test dates;
 - test pass marks;
 - other changes to the test process;

- arrangements for those unable to attend on test dates because of religious observance because they are ill or bereaved, have a disability or unable to attend because of public health measures, for instance.
- 41. Many schools have already varied their arrangements. Any that are yet to vary their arrangements, but need to do so, should follow the advice below.
- 42. Academy school admission authorities would need to seek an in-year variation from their relevant Regional Schools Commissioner (who makes this decision on behalf of the Secretary of State). The admission authority should send its request to Academy.QUESTIONS@education.gov.uk.
- 43. Maintained school admission authorities would need to seek an in-year variation from the Schools Adjudicator via <u>this website</u>.
- 44. There is an <u>online form on the adjudicator's website</u> for requesting an admissions variation. Admission authorities for maintained schools should complete this form and submit it to the adjudicator. We recommend that admission authorities for academy schools also use this form, but that they submit it to the Academy Questions mailbox.
- 45. When requesting variations, admission authorities should provide information on what the major change is that necessitates the change, what changes they want to make to their admission arrangements, when they want changes to come into effect and that they have informed the relevant persons/bodies that they have applied for a variation.
- 46. In line with paragraph 3.6 of the Code, admission arrangements can only be varied if such changes are necessary in view of a major change in circumstances since they were determined. Admission arrangements for 2021 would have been determined by 28 February 2020 (i.e. before measures were implemented by the government in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak).
- 47. The Schools Adjudicator or RSC (on behalf of the Secretary of State) will consider each application for an admissions variation on its merits. Clearly, the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak is a major event. It is likely that the Schools Adjudicator or RSC will consider that this justifies necessary changes to arrangements.
- 48. The changes should be the minimum necessary, but admission authorities may also want to consider whether it is necessary to change any other aspect of their determined admission arrangements, beyond selective arrangements, which may be undeliverable due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.
- 49. Requests will need to be submitted as soon as possible. Each local authority was required to publish its composite admissions prospectus by 12 September. We therefore advised in July that it would be helpful to parents if varied arrangements are in place by the deadline for publication, so that parents could begin to consider their options on the basis of up to date information. We also advised that because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, the volume of variations the RSC/Adjudicator would be

considering was likely to be large, and so submitting a request early would be helpful to enable these to be processed in a timely manner. Nevertheless, some requests continue to be submitted, and these will be considered on their merits.

- 50. To undertake the variation, admission authorities must follow the process set out in paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7 of the Code:
 - we recommend that, as part of this process, admission authorities ensure that bodies which will need to play a part in varied arrangements are content with the approach proposed. For example, where the intention is to hold tests over more days and for these tests to take place in local primary schools, admission authorities need to be confident the primary schools can accommodate this. In addition, where the local authority is the admission authority it must consult the school's governing body⁵;
 - the admission authority should inform the appropriate bodies/persons listed in footnote 61 and paragraph 1.44 (c), (d) and (f) of the Code as to which changes are being requested and how these will change the admission arrangements. It should provide evidence these groups have been informed with its application.
- 51. If the RSC/Adjudicator approves the variation, the changes must be published as revisions to the admission arrangements and the amended arrangements must⁶ be displayed prominently on the school's website. The admission authority should inform its local authority of any changes and use any other methods it normally uses to inform local parents of changes.
- 52. The local authority should amend its online admissions prospectus to include the varied admission arrangements. The admission authority and the local authority should ensure that what is published on the school's website and the local authority's website is consistent.
- 53. Admission authorities are asked to note that, if they vary their admission policy for 2021 entry but then wish to revert to their previous policy for 2022, they must consult on it for any 6 weeks between 1 October 2020 and 31 January 2021, in accordance with the provisions set out in paragraphs 1.42-1.49 of the Code.

⁵ Paragraph 3.6 of the Code

⁶ Paragraph 3.7 of the Code



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