



Department  
for Education

# **COVID-19: assessment processes for selective school admissions**

**19 January 2022**

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## Overview

This guidance explains the actions schools and those organising and running ability and aptitude selection tests should take to reduce the risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in test venues.

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. 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.

This guidance includes public health advice, endorsed by the United Kingdom Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and aims to support admission authorities in operating their selection tests effectively whilst it also:

- advises on the specific health protection measures ([‘additional protective measures’](#)) which should be adopted for selection tests in the [circumstances set out below](#)
- advises on how to support children, particularly disadvantaged children, to prepare for the selection process
- aims to ensure fair access for all children including those who may be self-isolating or quarantining during the selection process

The government continues to manage the risk of serious illness from the spread of the virus. The Prime Minister announced on 27 November the temporary introduction of new measures as a result of the Omicron (B.1.1.529) variant and on 8 December that Plan B, set out in the autumn and winter plan 2021, was being enacted with immediate effect. As a result, these measures are reflected in this guidance for those testing children for ability and aptitude in test venues.

Control measures are set out in detail within the [Schools COVID-19 operational guidance](#) and these should be followed within test venues, whether or not the venue is a school.

COVID-19 continues to be a virus that we learn to live with and the imperative to reduce the disruption to children and young people’s education remains.

## Changes to the previous version

This guidance has been updated from the previous version published on 5 January to take account advice within the [Schools COVID-19 operational guidance](#) that face coverings are no longer recommended in schools.

## Summary

Admission authorities and local authorities must continue with their admission processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. This guidance provides advice on how assessment for admission to state-funded selective schools can be undertaken in the context of the nation's ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It includes recommendations specific to testing for 2022 entry for applications made in the normal admissions round as well as for late and in-year applications.

Admission authorities and those organising selection tests on their behalf should follow the advice on control measures set out within the [Schools COVID-19 operational guidance](#).

In addition, they should undertake a risk assessment and decide, on the basis of that risk assessment, whether it is necessary to adopt the [additional protective measures](#) in this guidance. They should, in any case, operate tests with the additional protective measures in place when advised to do so by local authorities, directors of public health and UKHSA health protection teams as part of their outbreak management responsibilities.

They should also follow the [advice in this guidance](#) on assessing the ability and aptitude of children who, for good reason are unable to attend a test on the normal date.

## 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 [School Admissions Code](#) and admissions legislation, independent schools which operate selection tests for entry and for scholarships may also find it useful.

## **Expiry or review date**

This guidance applies to selective entry procedures taking place for September 2022 admission and beyond and in-year applications for the 2021/22 academic year. It will be reviewed periodically in line with wider COVID-19 guidance for educational settings.

# Detailed guidance on approaches to selective admissions for 2022 admission and for in-year applications

## Assessment dates and deadlines for September 2022 entry

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’<sup>1</sup>.

Schools have been open for all children since 8 March 2021, we therefore advised admission authorities, in July 2021, to assess applicants’ ability or aptitude this year, wherever possible, by a date which enabled them to inform parents of the results of their children’s assessments in sufficient time to express their preferences for schools by 31 October<sup>2</sup>.

For applications made in the normal admissions round, where local authorities have permitted parents to change their preferences after 31 October, we strongly advised neighbouring local authorities to work together, insofar as possible, to agree dates by which they will permit parents to change preferences. We advised in July that, each local authority should make it clear to parents that, if they are applying for schools in neighbouring areas, admission authorities in those areas will be working to the dates (for example around changes of preference) which apply to the area within which the school is located rather than the dates within the child’s home area co-ordinated admissions scheme.

Whilst this was and is for the coordinating local authority to determine, allowing parents to change their preferences after 31 October was unlikely to be necessary where assessment results were provided to parents before 31 October or where the only local selection assessments are:

- for up to 10% of places allocated at a school based on aptitude
- for banding in a school or group of schools

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<sup>1</sup> Paragraph 1.32(c) of the School Admissions Code.

<sup>2</sup> This was a change from the guidance we published in July 2020 stating that it was reasonable, for one year only, to test in late October 2020 or, if the local co-ordinated scheme allowed, in November even if this meant that selection test results were not known before the closing date for applications (31 October 2020). This was to enable as many children as possible to get back into the routine of education before being tested and therefore minimise any disadvantage caused by the lengthy period many children had to spend away from school while schools remained closed.

This is because it is not possible to fail a banding assessment. For schools which allocate up to 10% of places based on aptitude, the majority of places are available to children irrespective of the assessment result.

In-year applicants must have their applications considered by the relevant admission authority but need only be assessed for eligibility for a grammar school place where a vacancy exists. Whether or not their children are assessed for ability, parents have a right of appeal to an independent appeals panel if a place is not offered, and their child must be offered a place on any waiting list for the school<sup>3</sup>.

Where vacancies exist, eligibility tests or assessments should take place to enable those vacancies to be filled as soon as possible.

## **The assessment process for September 2022 entry**

Admission authorities should follow the control measures set out in the [Schools COVID-19 operational guidance](#).

Whilst many grammar schools and partially selective schools use verbal, non-verbal and, in some cases, spatial reasoning tests to assess ability, some take account of what children have learnt in English and maths as part of their assessments of ability.

Admission authorities for schools which test ability in English and maths were asked in July 21 to consider if any changes to the test need to be made, in light of the fact that most children were out of school for a significant period during 2020 and early 2021. This continues to be our advice.

Admission authorities for selective schools are required to make alternative arrangements to assess children who are unable to take a selection test on the specified test day(s). Admission authorities should, therefore, ensure that their admission arrangements set out the steps they will take to assess the ability or aptitude of such children.

If, for reasons connected to COVID-19, the arrangements for tests need to be changed within a school's determined admission arrangements, the admission authority was asked in our May 2021 guidance to apply for a variation by the beginning of August 2021.

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<sup>3</sup> Where a child has not had their ability assessed, they must be placed on any waiting list, where one exists, for the school in accordance with the school's oversubscription criteria. If they are ranked sufficiently highly on the list when a vacancy arises, they must have their ability assessed at that point in time, so they can be allocated a place if eligible.

We do not anticipate, at this late stage, that schools will need to vary their testing arrangements, but it may be necessary, in rare circumstances, to vary some processes because of COVID-19. [Information on the variation process is set out below.](#)

## **Cooperation between admission authorities in operating selection tests**

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.

Admission authorities often co-operate so that children sit a single selection 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.

Admission authorities can also co-operate across local authority boundaries if that is helpful to make the process even simpler for parents.

Children both from within the home local authority area and from outside the area must be able to sit selection tests.

## **Children and adults who should not attend a selection test venue**

Children and adults should follow public health advice and the [Schools COVID-19 operational guidance](#) on [when to self-isolate and what to do](#). When children and adults are self-isolating and not able to attend school, they should also not attend a selection test.

In addition, admission authorities should not permit children and adults to attend a test venue who are displaying any COVID-19 symptoms, who have had a positive test result or have other reasons requiring them to stay at home due to the risk of them passing on COVID-19.

Further information is available in [NHS Test and Trace: what to do if you are contacted](#) and in the [stay at home: guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus \(COVID-19\) infection](#).

Children and adults who are required to quarantine in line with the [rules on international travel](#), having travelled abroad, should not be permitted to attend a test venue during their quarantine period. All arrivals from any countries listed on the government's travel [Red List](#) will enter quarantine.

In most cases, parents and carers will agree that a child with symptoms should not attend a test venue, given the potential risk to others. If a parent or carer insists on a child with symptoms attending the selection test, admission authorities or those running selection tests on their behalf should refuse to permit the child to sit the test on that day to protect other children and adults from possible infection with COVID-19.

## **Assessing the ability or aptitude of those children who cannot attend a test on the normal date.**

Admission authorities for selective schools are required to make alternative arrangements to assess children who are unable to take a selection test on the specified test day(s).

This group of children will include those who cannot attend on the date of the test (or any alternative dates) for reasons such as religious observance, illness, disability or bereavement. It will also include those who cannot attend for reasons related to COVID-19 – including those required to isolate or quarantine and those who, for good reason, are unable to return from overseas in time to sit the test.

Children previously considered clinically extremely vulnerable should attend school and should follow the same [COVID-19 guidance](#) as the rest of the population. This means that they could normally attend selection tests. However, in some circumstances, a child may have received personal advice from their specialist or clinician on additional precautions to take and they should follow that advice. This may mean that they cannot attend a selection test venue on the specific day(s). Children in these circumstances should also be considered as part of the group of children for whom alternative arrangements may need to be made.

It is for admission authorities to decide how to assess the ability or aptitude of applicants, whether that is by a test under exam conditions, an online test (where available), teacher assessment or other means, providing assessments comply with the provisions of the Code.

## **Minimising disadvantage for protected groups and socially and economically disadvantaged children.**

Prior to selection testing taking place, admission authorities are strongly advised to make provision for parents to alert the admission authority if their children are disabled and require special assessment processes or if their child has been advised to isolate or reduce their social contact by their specialist, due to the nature of their medical condition or treatment.

It would be a breach of paragraph 2.9 of the Code (which says that admission must not be refused solely because a child has missed an entrance test for selective places) to

refuse to admit a child to a selective school simply because it is not possible for the child to attend the selection test venue on any set date or dates. It will normally be possible to offer alternative dates for a test so that they can be allocated a place - if they reach the necessary ability standard in a grammar or partially selective school test - but it may be necessary to assess them in their homes, via an online selection test (where available) or at another venue.

In addition, 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, negative impacts.

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 have underlying health conditions. Admission authorities should provide reassurance about the measures they are putting in place to reduce any risks during selection tests.

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 COVID-19 pandemic, and to take action to mitigate such impacts wherever possible.

The [memorandum of understanding](#) 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.

We advised in July 2020 that admission authorities could consider lowering the selection test pass mark for children eligible for the Pupil Premium by varying their admission arrangements. This was and continues to remain our advice but it is a decision for the individual school's admission authority. A number of grammar schools already set a lower pass mark for disadvantaged children.

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 for a grammar school place. Schools should consider how they can engage with disadvantaged families and children to provide support.

An example of this activity might be for grammar schools to support families with targeted selection 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.

Selective schools should use recovery and tutoring funding, alongside their existing Catch-up Premium, and their Pupil Premium, to prioritise support for particular pupils according to their need, including for potential applicants who come from disadvantaged households.

## **Selection test security and integrity**

Whilst arrangements need to be made to accommodate children who are unable to attend a selection 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. This does not mean that children cannot be tested from home or outside a test venue. Some providers may be able to arrange an online selection test.

It is important that admission authorities ensure all selection test papers are secure and all question papers are locked up at night or collected daily by the test provider. Children should not be permitted to take question papers home after they have sat a test.

If sufficient care is taken, it should be possible for the intellectual property of test agencies to be protected even where children are allowed to sit late and in-year paper selection tests at home, or overseas where they are out of the country and unable to return, for good reason, in time to sit the test. Admission authorities should talk to their test providers about such tests when a selection test in a test venue, an online test or teacher assessment of a candidate's ability is not an option. Again, question papers should be collected after the test.

## **Protective measures in selection test venues**

Admission authorities, and those arranging selection tests on their behalf, should comply with the revised control measures set out within the [Schools COVID-19 operational guidance](#).

Candidates and invigilators, although not required to wear face coverings during selection tests, may wear them if they wish, and test venues should keep a small supply of face coverings and be sensitive to the needs of individuals.

From 27 January, mandatory certification is no longer in place and so venues and events are not required by law to use the NHS COVID Pass as a condition of entry, but some may do so voluntarily. Further information on this is available: [Using your NHS COVID Pass for travel abroad and at venues and settings in England](#). You should not use the NHS COVID Pass as a condition of entry for education or related activities such as selection tests.

In July 2021, we advised that the additional protective measures set out in this section would be necessary for selection tests where local authorities, directors of public health and UKHSA health protection teams recommend they are adopted as part of their outbreak management responsibilities, or where those responsible for operating the tests deem them necessary after conducting a risk assessment. This continues to be our advice.

- selection tests should take place in well-ventilated rooms. Guidance on ventilation within schools is set out in more detail within the [Schools COVID-19 operational guidance](#)
- desks in the venue should be placed 2 metres apart
- candidates or staff who have one or more COVID-19 symptoms, no matter how mild, or who are unwell, self-isolating because they have tested positive or who are quarantining, must not be permitted to attend. Separate arrangements should be made for assessing children when they are unwell, self-isolating, quarantining, who are abroad and, for good reasons, are unable to return to the country to sit the test on the normal date or where they have been advised to isolate or reduce their social contact by their specialist
- hand washing facilities should be made available to all candidates and invigilators etc in the test venue. There needs to be good access to hand washing and toilet facilities to avoid queuing
- any selection test rooms and toilet areas should be kept clean. Frequently touched surfaces (door handles/desks) should be regularly cleaned with the usual cleaning products
- hand sanitiser should be placed around the selection test room(s) 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), 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
- the '[catch it, bin it, kill it](#)' approach continues to be very important. Make sure sufficient tissues and bins are available to support pupils and staff to follow this routine

The [e-Bug COVID-19 website](#) contains free resources for schools, including materials to encourage good hand and respiratory hygiene.

## Admission arrangements variations

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’. The selection process will therefore be written into schools’ published admission arrangements<sup>4</sup>.

The impact of COVID-19 meant that many admission authorities had to change their selection processes for entry in September 2021. In May 2021, we asked admission authorities to consider whether any major changes in circumstances required further changes to be made to selection procedures for entry in September 2022 and, therefore, to their admission arrangements<sup>5</sup>.

Admission authorities must continue to ensure that their selection arrangements 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 COVID-19 pandemic and public health measures on children and families with [protected characteristics](#) under the Equality Act 2010<sup>6</sup>, including religion, race and disability. Admission authorities should mitigate, wherever possible, any negative impacts, and make reasonable adjustments where necessary.

A number of selective schools varied their 2021 admission arrangements because of necessary changes to their selection processes. Most schools’ assessment processes have been completed for applications in the 2022 normal admissions round and we do not therefore anticipate many changes to now need to be made at this late stage.

In the rare situation where a variation is still necessary, academy school admission authorities would need to seek an in-year variation from their relevant Regional Schools

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<sup>4</sup> Footnote 4 of the Code states, ‘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.’

<sup>5</sup> 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 if necessary. Schools which band by ability may also remove selection if necessary 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. Grammar Schools and the forty maintained schools and academies which had partially selective (‘bilateral’) arrangements prior to 1998 and continue with those arrangements would not be able to reinstate selection if they removed it.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

Commissioner (RSC) who takes this decision on behalf of the Secretary of State. The admission authority should send its request to [Academy.QUESTIONS@education.gov.uk](mailto:Academy.QUESTIONS@education.gov.uk). Maintained school admission authorities would need to seek an in-year variation from the [Schools Adjudicator](#).

There is an [online form on the adjudicator's website](#) for requesting an admissions variation. Admission authorities for maintained schools should complete this form and submit it to the adjudicator. Admission authorities for academy schools should also use this form, but they submit it to the Academy Questions mailbox.

When requesting variations, admission authorities should provide information on what the major change is that necessitates the variation, which 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.

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 2022 would have been determined by 28 February 2021.

The Schools Adjudicator or RSC - on behalf of the Secretary of State - will consider each application for an admissions variation on its merits. They will need to be satisfied that there has been a major change in circumstances since the arrangements were determined in February 2021, that the change requested is necessary and the changes are the minimum necessary.

Schools which band by ability should note the requirements of section 103(3) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, set out in footnote 2, which may require wider changes to their admission arrangements if they wish to abandon banding.

So that parents could begin to consider their options on the basis of up to date information we reminded admission authorities in May to submit any variation requests which might affect the allocation of places in the normal admission round by the beginning of August 2021 at the latest. However, if variations are necessary for late and in-year processes – they can still be considered.

To vary their admission arrangements, admission authorities must follow the process set out in paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7 of the Code:

- we recommend, as part of this process, that admission authorities ensure bodies which will need to play a part in varied arrangements are content with the

approach proposed. In addition, where the local authority is the admission authority it must consult the school's governing body<sup>7</sup>

- the admission authority should inform the appropriate bodies/persons listed in footnote 44 and paragraph 1.47 (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.

If the RSC or Schools Adjudicator approves the variation, the changes must be published as revisions to the admission arrangements and the amended arrangements must be displayed prominently on the school's website<sup>8</sup>. 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.

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.

Admission authorities wishing to make changes to their selective processes for 2022 admission should be clear that the process set out in paragraphs 1.45 to 1.48 of the Code would not permit them to revert to their previous arrangements for 2023 unless they had already begun their consultation by 21 December 2021.

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<sup>7</sup> Paragraph 3.6 of the Code

<sup>8</sup> Paragraph 3.7 of the Code



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