

FINAL DRAFT FOR PROOF READING

Primary Admission Rules

**Research Study Conducted for
Hertfordshire County Council Education Department**

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Introduction

Background and Objectives

Hertfordshire County Council Education Department approached MORI to undertake research looking at parents' views on aspects of primary admission rules for community and voluntary controlled schools. This research was to complement a much wider consultation exercise and debate about these rules which the County Council would be conducting early in 2001. MORI advised that since this research was to be part of a much wider consultation exercise, it would be best to undertake a piece of qualitative research involving a sufficient number of Hertfordshire residents in in-depth discussions of the issue. This is explained in more detail in the next section.

The overall aim of the research was to assess the views of parents towards the rules that HCC applies or might apply to the primary school admissions process. As such, parents were asked to consider and comment on the following aspects of primary admission.

- The sibling rule including all siblings being admitted and children nearest the school having preference over siblings further away.
- The distance rule which involves the measurement of the longest extra journey to the nearest alternative school.
- The nearest to the school rule.
- The rules for nursery and primary admissions being the same or different.
- The way of measuring home to school distances.
- The best way to introduce rule changes.
- A preference versus a ranking process.

The report is structured around these headings and, in addition, includes a final section which looks at other relevant issues.

Our Approach

A focus group approach was used to explore these issues in detail. Focus groups are the best way to research issues of this complexity when there is a need for detailed discussion and debate.

Five focus group discussions were conducted with parents between 6th November and 9th November 2000 and people were drawn from across the whole county to the discussion groups. If at the end of the last focus group any issues had been raised by the last group which had not been raised by others then further groups would have been held. In the event MORI felt that a good consideration of the issues had been raised and that further groups would not have added to the overall views that had emerged.

Participants were recruited using a detailed questionnaire to ensure a range of parents in terms of age, sex, social class and familiarity with the admissions process.

Methodology

Following a number of initial, exploratory questions, focus group participants were presented with a series of scenarios and asked to apply the primary admission rules to the situations described.

In each scenario, a number of children have applied for x available places at Primary School A. Using the information supplied about each child, parents were set the task of deciding which children should be given the places available. Parents were then asked to say whether or not they thought the decision reached was a fair one and to say what they did or did not like about the rule applied. At appropriate points in the discussions about the scenarios, additional questions were asked to probe further the views of parents.

During this exercise, it was assumed – and participants agreed – that Rule 1 (relating to children with Special Educational Needs) and Rule 2 (relating to children with a particular medical or social need) were ‘givens’, i.e., that certain children had identified needs that might be met only by certain schools and so their applications necessarily needed to take priority.

Summary

The key issues to emerge from the focus groups were as follows:

The sibling rule

- Participants felt strongly that siblings should be prioritised in admission decisions. Nevertheless, they were uncomfortable that this might disadvantage only children.
- Participants also expressed disquiet that only children might lose out to children with siblings although they lived closest to the school. Nevertheless, most participants believed that this was the lesser of two evils if the only alternative were to split siblings.

The longest extra journey and the nearest alternative school with available places rule

- Participants appreciate that the longest extra journey rule to the nearest alternative school with available places should be used to decide which children are offered places. However, they dislike HCC's method of designating the nearest alternative school with available places even though it is why the rule works.

The nearest to school rule

- Participants find the nearest to the school rule to be entirely sensible and fair.

The nursery and primary admission rules

- Participants did not agree with a rule that prioritised linked nursery children as they thought this would discriminate against the children of working parents or parents who did not want to send their children to nursery.
- Participants were not able to reach a consensus opinion about whether or not nursery and primary rules should be standardised or could differ. However, they were clear that any new rule should not take priority over the sibling rule.

Measuring home to school distances

- Participants are not completely happy with the way in which home to school distances are measured currently. However, they accept the principle of a standard means of measurement.

Introducing rule changes

- On the whole participants were indifferent but when pressed would prefer rule changes to be introduced in 'blanket fashion'.

Preference versus ranking

- Participants' responses suggest that, on balance, they find ranking a fairer and more instinctive way of making primary school application choices. However, a minority of participants would oppose a switch from the preference process currently employed by HCC.

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1. Rule 3 – The Sibling Rule

1.1 Should children with siblings be prioritised over only children?

Key finding:

Parents felt strongly that siblings should be prioritised in admission decisions. Nevertheless, they were uncomfortable that this might disadvantage only children.

Scenario 1

Sam has an older brother already at School A.

Billy has an older sister already at School A.

Andy is an only child.

Under Rule 3 (relating to siblings), Sam and Billy would be offered the places

Focus group participants experienced no difficulty in applying Rule 3 correctly to this scenario and, in the circumstances, most felt that the fairest decision would be to offer the places to Sam and Billy. Here, parents' main concern was with minimising the logistical problems that parents would face if they needed to get their children to two (or more) locations in time for the start of the school day. Some recognised, however, that their decision was an unfortunate one for Andy:

It is unfair for the only child

Or even if he is the first of siblings, it's unfortunate for him

[But] if you have got one there, you can't be at two places at the same time so even though it is unfair for him ...

YOU ARE HAPPY RATHER THAN UNHAPPY WITH THAT DECISION?

I wouldn't be if Andy was mine but you just have to take it

There is no other choice

ABC1 mothers

There has got to be a rule somewhere.

It is the fairest of what you can do with it.

ABC1 parents

Well, if I was the one with the only child, I would probably be peeved but there's nothing I can do about it

C2DE father

Most areas ... there is more than one choice [of school] ... So I think under those circumstances that at least [Andy] would still get an option to go to another school that is equal education. But with [Sam and Billy], if they are split up, it is more work on the parent in general

C2DE parents

1.2 Should children with siblings be prioritised over local children?

Key finding:

Parents' disquiet about Andy's situation increased with the realisation that he would not get a place even though he lived closest to the school. Nevertheless, most participants believed that this was the lesser of two evils if the only alternative were to split siblings.

Scenario 2

Sam has an older brother already at School A; she lives 200 metres from the school.

Billy has an older sister already at School A; he lives 1600 metres from the school.

Andy is an only child; he lives 150 metres from the school.

Under Rule 3 (relating to siblings), Sam and Billy would be offered the places

As with Scenario 1, focus group participants experienced no difficulty in applying Rule 3 correctly to the situation described. However, despite their preference for prioritising the applications of children with siblings, parents were less certain about the rule's fairness in this situation, particularly if it were essential that Andy could walk to school:

I do think it is very unfair ... I sympathise with people who have got siblings there. I just think, I know people who have to be dropped off, get in the car and drive, and I can just walk there

ABC1 mother

I would be furious if I was Andy's mum, even more furious because it would annoy me that someone from the other side of town, who have got plenty of schools at their end of town, could have taken what I would see as my place ... I feel that if they could go to a school that was that far, then they could travel elsewhere

BC1C2 mother

On balance, however, participants felt that to split siblings would be more unacceptable:

If they are going to start saying not siblings, then they are going to have to appreciate that the youngest child is going to always be late and always have to be collected half an hour earlier from school

ABC1 mother

You've got to look at it from the siblings point of view and also from the fact that the kids have got to be collected from school – you can't be at two schools at the same time, so you are either leaving a kid hanging around, which is dangerous, or you've got to send two people to two separate schools to collect them

C2DE father

A potential solution suggested by one participant was to allow siblings to take priority over local children only within a certain radius of a school:

I think a way they could help is if after a certain distance, if you wanted your child to go to X School and it was further than a certain distance from your house, you should be made aware that the rule is "Anyone within that distance will get preference but there will be no guarantee that any other children can go to that school."

NO OTHER SIBLINGS, YOU MEAN?

Yes, if it was outside a certain radius of where you live. So at least, then, if someone was travelling five miles to school, and then their brother also wanted to go to that school, and someone is living half a mile up the road, that is not right – they might not get in

C2DE father

2. Rule 4: – The Longest Extra Journey and the Nearest Alternative School Rule

Key finding:

Parents appreciate that the longest extra journey rule should be used to decide which children are offered places in their first-choice school. However, they dislike HCC's method of designating the nearest alternative school even though it is part of how the rule works.

Scenario 3

Sam has an older brother already at School A; she lives 200 metres from School A and 500 metres away from the nearest alternative school.

Billy is an only child; he lives 1600 metres from School A and 300 metres away from the nearest alternative school.

Andy is an only child; he lives 150 metres from School A and 450 metres away from the nearest alternative school.

Under Rule 3 (relating to siblings), Sam would be offered a place and under Rule 4 (the nearest alternative school rule + longest extra journey rule), Andy would be offered a place

2.1 The longest extra journey

Participants experienced little difficulty in applying Rules 3 and 4 to the situation described. There was no feeling amongst the groups that it would be unfair to offer a place to Andy rather than Billy when the alternative, effectively, would mean Andy travelling past one school to get to another:

I wouldn't feel sorry for him anyway because he lives 1600 meters away and he is only 300 metres away from his nearest school

ABC1 mother

It is logic, really

ABC1 mother

That seems fair

BC1C2 mother

2.2 The alternative school

Focus group participants were unhappy about HCC's method for designating the 'alternative school' when that school was a child's nearest *under-subscribed* school.

Under-subscription was widely equated with the school concerned being a poor one:

The thing is, you are going to know automatically that it is the school that nobody wants. If it is under-subscribed, then there is a reason for it

ABC1 mother

That's the shittiest school in the area! ... Unfortunately, if you live next to the school that is the scum of the earth and there's no way in hell you are going to send your kid there, you are going to be measured against that school because it is obviously going to be under-subscribed

C2DE father

As such, parents felt it was unlikely to be a school they would select themselves, but was the school in which their children 'inevitably' would 'end up' because their second- and third-choice schools would also be fully subscribed. Although it was emphasised during the discussions that the 'alternative school' was used purely for measurement purposes, parents remained alarmed by this designation because they were convinced it meant their choices being over-ridden:

It is not fair, because the alternative school, when you first go through all these forms and everything, you assume it means your next, your alternative, to your first choice, but it is not

ABC1 mother

If you put a decent second, then the chances are, other people – that would be their first, so it gets a bit scary

ABC1 mother

Why isn't it the parent's second option? Why are you given three choices if they aren't going to give a stuff about them in the first place?

C2DE father

If you are applying to a popular school and you put them down and I don't get in, then you know you are sort of at the bottom of the queue all the time and you will end up with the school that you really don't want

BC1C2 mother

Parents tended to agree that HCC needed to employ, and be seen to employ, a consistent and transparent method of designating the alternative school. Suggestions made by focus group participants for alternative ways of designating the alternative school were:

- Distance from second- and third-choice schools:

They can look at their second choice schools. If [one's] was available and [one's] wasn't, perhaps they ought to look at that ... I mean obviously you want your first choice school, but it would be better than one you didn't want

ABC1 mother

An alternative suggested by one group was to allow parents who had been unsuccessful in a first round of applications to reapply to an under-subscribed school of choice:

It should be to give you some choices to then go and see and maybe reapply for something because this [the nearest alternative school] is not necessarily the right school for your child ... maybe they should write to you and say "I am very sorry, but you haven't got any of your three choices" and give a list of schools that are available

BC1C2 mothers

3. Rule 5 – The Nearest to the School Rule

Key finding:

Parents find this rule to be entirely sensible and fair and a way of picking-up after rule 4 any children who live near to the school.

Scenario 4

Sam has an older brother already at School A; she lives 200 metres from School A and 500 metres away from the nearest alternative school.

Billy is an only child; he lives 1600 metres from School A and 300 metres away from the nearest alternative school.

Andy is an only child; he lives 150 metres from School A and 100 metres away from the nearest alternative school.

Under Rule 3 (relating to siblings), Sam would be offered a place and under Rule 5 (being nearest to school), Andy would be offered a place

Participants experienced little difficulty in applying Rules 3 and 5 to the situation described, and there was no feeling amongst the groups that this was an unfair decision (“quite logical”).

4. Standardising the Nursery and Primary Admission Rules

Key finding:

Parents did not agree with a rule that prioritised linked nursery children as they thought this would discriminate against the children of working parents or parents who did not want to send their children to nursery.

Parents were not able to reach a consensus opinion about whether or not nursery primary admission rules should be standardised or could be allowed to differ. However, they were clear that any new rule should not take priority over the sibling rule.

4.1 Should the rules applying to nursery and primary admissions be the same?

Parents were asked to comment on their reaction to the possibility of there being two separate sets of admission rules (one for nursery and one for primary). However, they found this difficult to decide without knowing first in which respects the rules would differ: would there simply be an additional rule added to the primary set, and, if so, where would it appear in the order; would the primary rules contain additional rules and their order be totally jumbled up; or, would the two sets of admissions criteria each contain totally different rules? To this extent, no consensus of opinion emerged in groups' consideration of this issue: while some parents felt it would be problematic to have different sets of the rules, others accepted it almost without demur.

This issue was explored further with the introduction of a new rule:

Scenario 5

What would happen in the following situation if a new admission rule were introduced – a new Rule 3 – which was concerned with children who attend a designated linked nursery at the time of application?

Primary School A has three applications for two available places. The school has a linked nursery.

Sam has an older brother already at School A; she attends a private nursery; she lives 200 metres from School A and 500 metres away from the nearest alternative school.

Billy is an only child; he attends School A's linked nursery; he lives 1600 metres from School A and 300 metres away from the nearest alternative school.

Andy is an only child; he attends School A's linked nursery; he lives 150 metres from School A and 100 metres away from the nearest alternative school.

Under the new Rule 3, Billy and Andy would be offered places

Of all the rules discussed by the focus groups, this rule was the most contentious. Parents were unhappy for three reasons:

- That this rule, in the posed order, prioritised linked nursery children over siblings:

Then you have got to be at two places at once because how could she be if [Sam] went to a private nursery and her brother was at school and she got a different school, how would parents get them to schools at the same time?

ABC1 mother

- That this rule, as posed, might discriminate against the children of working parents, or parents who did not wish to send their child to nursery school:

Sam could go to a private nursery because her Mum works all day and Dad works every day and they can't get her to the linked nursery

ABC1 mother

There might be a reason they have sent their child to a private nursery – because of the hours; someone might need childcare after that

C2DE father

Linked nurseries cause problems for working mums because the nurseries only offer two and a half hours' care. A mum that is at work needs a lot more care than that. She has done right by her child, sent them to a private nursery that covered her working hours

C2DE mother

I didn't want my children to go to school until they were five. I felt pressurised that I had to use the blasted nursery just to get them into reception

C2DE mother

You feel you would have to put your child in a nursery

BC1C2 mother

and

- That this rule, as posed, restricted parental choice:

I don't think you should have to take the nursery place that is linked to a school. I think you should have a choice

ABC1 mother

*You have got to make choices. If your choice is taken away
... you might have a nursery that you would like to place
your child in, for whatever reason it might be, but that
choice is taken away because you are now under pressure –
it has got to go there, even if the child isn't happy there*

C2DE father

5. Measuring home to school distances

Key finding:

Parents are not completely happy with the way in which home to school distances are measured currently. However, they accept the principle of a standard means of measurement.

Scenario

Participants were asked to comment on HCC's method for measuring the distance lived by a child from a school (the 'shortest designated route'). Parents' own emphasis was on safety, so, while they appreciated the need to measure distances using a consistent and transparent method, they were unhappy that the shortest designated route might include roads that could not be walked along at all (for example, the M25) and/or in safety. This, they felt, favoured drivers:

There are people who don't have cars ... the Council's measured route is not going anywhere near their route, but they are being penalised for not driving around the road

ABC1 mother

If I am walking on a road that hasn't got a separate path, to me that's not safe

C2DE father

Everyone can walk, not everyone can drive, can they?

C2DE mother

To this extent, the general consensus of opinion amongst parents was that HCC should use the 'shortest, **safest**, designated route' to measure home to school distances, namely a route that actually could be walked, had a separate pavement (as far as possible – it was realised that this might not apply to country lanes) and was lit.

Some parents understood that there would be a problem with this measure of distance.

Most parents were satisfied that it was sensible to measure home to school distances from the child's home address since the alternative – to allow parents to nominate some other address – was open to manipulation (*"Then they are going to have people saying any old thing, aren't they?"*).

It should also be noted that several parents found it difficult to understand metric measurements used in the scenario and HCC's information/application pack and would prefer HCC to use imperial measurements instead of, or as well as, metres.

6. Introducing Rule Changes

Key finding:

On the whole participants were indifferent but when pressed would prefer rule changes to be introduced in 'blanket fashion'.

Participants were asked to say whether any future changes to the rules should be phased in gradually or adopted 'blanket fashion'. On the whole, participants were largely indifferent either way, but where an opinion was expressed, they tended to agree that (with sufficient notice) changes applied to all families as of a particular date was the preferential option:

They should say "Right! It changes now"

Because if it is piecemeal, it is changing all the time

ABC1 mothers

As of that date

Yes – otherwise it is confusion

ABC1 parents

Blanket change, and certainly not change back again!

C2DE mother

7. Preference versus Ranking Process

Key finding:

Participants' responses suggest that, on balance, they find ranking a fairer and more instinctive way of making primary school application choices. However, a minority of participants would oppose a switch from the preference process currently employed by HCC.

Scenario:

Parents were asked to weigh up the pros and cons of two different approaches to the application process (*preference*, as in the primary application process in Hertfordshire versus *ranking*, as in the secondary application process in Hertfordshire), and to say which they preferred.

Interestingly, participants in some of the groups had spontaneously expressed a preference for a *ranking* process even before this question was posed, with several questioning why they were required to place their schools in a choice order. For example:

I don't think they should be asking you to categorise your schools in priority. Say I put three schools down. I don't necessarily think they were all good, but say I have got two in-between. I really wouldn't want to prioritise

One or the other you are not bothered

I don't think it should be considered first, second and third choice. It is a case of this and this school. There is no actual priority

If you are applying to a popular school and you put them down and you don't get in, then you know you are sort of at the bottom of the queue all the time and you will end up with a school that you really don't want

BC1C2 mothers

Prompted, participants tended also to favour a *ranking* process over a *preference* process:

I would have felt better doing ranking, even though I did get my first choice school ... because you are more likely to get into one [school of choice] if you do it that way

ABC1 mother

I wouldn't trust the authority to administer [ranking because it is more complex] so on that alone I would go for the preference ... but I would go personally for the ranking

C2DE mother

It feels more natural.

I think because of this con on the preference process that you don't get your second or third choice

BC1C2 mothers

Nevertheless, some parents remained in favour of the *preference* process:

I would go with preference still ... it is not a perfect system, I don't think you are going to be happy with anything, there is always going to be someone, someone is going to find something wrong with it. But I think better the devil you know than the devil you don't know

ABC1 father

8. Other Issues

A number of additional issues emerged from the debate within and between groups:

8.1 Parents' application priorities

There is a strong link between the factors which influence parents' choice of school and the rules they feel should be applied to the primary admissions process. Parents wanted to exercise a right to choose which school their children attend ("the best school for the child") and for children to be able to attend the same school as their siblings.

8.2 Communicating with parents

Parents thought that HCC Education Department could improve the way it communicated with them about the primary admissions process. Currently, they do not feel they receive the information that would be most useful to them, nor do they receive it early enough. In the view of some parents, there is also scope for improvement in HCC's face-to-face (including telephone) communication with parents.

8.3 What parents perceive the rules to be

Unprompted, parents were unable to detail the primary application rules with any certainty or accuracy. Moreover, the fine, or technical, detail of individual rules, or the admissions process as a whole, was clearly lost on many participants and there is scope to express or explain the rules in a simpler, less ambiguous fashion. The "Chinese Whispers" effect of the school gate 'grapevine' impacts on parents' perceptions of the rules and efforts need to be made to firmly establish the real rules in parents' minds.

8.4 "Black and white rules applied to grey situations"

Throughout the discussions about the scenarios, participants wanted to know more about individual children's personal situations before they decided whether or not admission rules had been applied fairly. For example:

I think it all depends on how close the other schools are as well, doesn't it? I mean, if it is a village, then it is unfair

C2DE mother on Andy not getting a place in Scenario 2

As long as Billy would get his second place

ABC1 mother on fairness of Andy getting a place over Billy in Scenario 3

When my wife and I chose to take our eldest daughter to nursery ... if our daughter wasn't happy with nursery, my wife had said she wasn't going ... She would have been pulled out so then she wouldn't have had her link, she wouldn't have automatically got a place ... A faceless bureaucrat wouldn't agree with that argument ... A faceless bureaucrat who doesn't know you from Adam would say 'you aren't going to that school, so tough shit – he goes to whatever school I send him to'

C2DE father on fairness of the linked nursery rule in Scenario 5

I would like to know why Sam had gone to the private nursery

BC1C2 mother on fairness of the linked nursery rule in Scenario 5

You can't just write it down on paper. You need to take everything into account and it needs to be almost personal. You know, why has this occurred for each individual? It should be dealt with on an individual basis, I think is what we're saying

What we are talking about – it is not black or white

BC1C2 mothers, general observations on the scenarios

It seemed, therefore, that while there was widespread appreciation of the need to have a process that was applied consistently and equitably, parents were anxious, too, that the process should have some in-built flexibility.

8.5 Impressions of the primary admissions process as a consequence of focus group participation

By the end of each focus group, participants tended to express a greater appreciation of the issues and difficulties involved in determining and applying primary admission rules. In large part, this was because an explanation of each rule, combined with the opportunity to see the rule 'in action' (when applied to a variety of scenarios), provided a context for the rules and a chance to see the 'bigger picture' more objectively. There was a feeling that efforts by the Education Department to communicate with more parents at this level would be beneficial in getting parents 'on side':

It seems fairer when you see it on paper and they need to show this

Hertfordshire have never given me a scenario of how they choose it and it has now shown me the reasons why, and how they choose it, and I can understand it now

ABC1 mothers

I'd hate to have this job, I really would!

C2DE mother

There's a lot to take into consideration. I have been through the appeal process and I felt how hard I was being done by. Now I can see you've got to look at it from both sides of the fence

C2DE father

[This] has informed us more than anything.

I think it is complicated from your [sic] point of view, but I think it is fair

This is the best information that we have had

BC1C2 mothers

Parents felt there were a number of ways in which HCC could 'help its cause'. For example, some felt it could provide more personalised and detailed feedback to families whose first choice applications had been rejected:

And maybe if you are being refused, maybe instead of saying "You have not got your choice", they should explain, not name the child, but say "this child – blab, blab, blab" and they should explain why and you would be more sympathetic, wouldn't you?

ABC1 mother

Others felt that public meetings, or some other means of verbal communication, would also be useful:

If they could actually get the people and start it earlier on in the year and actually have someone go to, maybe have a speaker go to, each junior mixed infant school ... and have a meeting thing like this [group], I think it would be a lot easier

ABC1 mother

It was also felt that information about the rules contained in the application pack sent to parents could be clearer – many participants, for example, did not realise that the A4 handout listing the primary admission rules, given to them before they started discussing the admission scenarios, already appeared in *Starting School: Admission to Hertfordshire Primary Schools 20001-2002*. It could also be less intimidating in appearance:

The size of them booklets, you have got to read them from cover to cover to actually try and get the gist of it. And then by the time you have actually got to the end of it, you have got to read it again to make sure you actually absorb it

C2DE mother

Appendices

Methodology

In total, 40 Hertfordshire parents participated in the research. These were recruited face-to-face to reflect a variety of demographic factors, as follows:

- Sex
- Social class
- Household composition
- Range of familiarity with primary admissions process
- Child attending (or likely to attend) community or voluntary controlled school within Hertfordshire

Thus, across the five groups, the following types of parent attended:

	Type	Total
Sex	Male	9
	Female	31
Social class	A	0
	B	9
	C1	16
	C2	9
	D	2
Household composition	E	4
	One parent family	7
	Two parent family	33
Familiarity with primary admissions process	Primary age child (none pre-primary age)	14
	Primary age child (one pre-primary age)	20
	Pre-primary age child (none primary age)	6
Child at Herts. community or voluntary controlled school		40

Participants were paid an incentive of £20 in appreciation of their time.

Interpretation of the Data

Qualitative research is an interactive process between researcher and participants that allows insights into attitudes, and reasons for these attitudes. It should be remembered that results are not based on quantitative statistical evidence but on a small sample of a cross-section of (in this case) Hertfordshire residents. Findings, therefore, are illustrative and not statistically representative. This research, however, is appropriate for the purpose to which the County Council will put it.