



## Evaluation of the Department for Education and Grammar School Heads Association memorandum of understanding, 2018 to 2022

At the time of undertaking the evaluation, the Grammar School Heads' Association (GSHA) represented 152 of the 163 grammar schools in England.

In 2018, the GSHA and Department for Education signed a Memorandum of Understanding ('MOU'). It was renewed in 2020.

The MoU set out a shared ambition to see:

- more pupils from lower income backgrounds applying to, passing the test for, and being admitted to selective schools; and
- increased partnerships between selective schools and non-selective secondary schools and/or primary schools locally, with a view to collaborating to improve outcomes for children across their area.

The MoU ran up until the end of 2022.

### DfE engagement with GSHA and its members

Throughout the period of the MoU, the department regularly engaged with GSHA to:

- provide updates on changes to policy (alongside other stakeholder groups such as local authorities, academy trusts and faith school providers);
- understand the views of the grammar school sector on departmental policies; and
- understand the progress in delivering the aims of the MoU.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, DfE and GSHA held termly meetings. DfE also held regional meetings with grammar school heads in several regions to discuss the barriers in the way of disadvantaged children obtaining a grammar school place and to discuss outreach and partnership working.

Brexit and then the Covid-19 pandemic required the department to reprioritise resources, resulting in the regional meetings being discontinued and meetings with the GSHA becoming more ad hoc although still frequent.

GSHA continues to regularly attend DfE's admissions group – a termly meeting between the department, local authorities and admissions authorities to discuss school admission issues and policy development.

DfE attends the GSHA annual conference. This provides the opportunity to deliver messages to schools, including on the need to increase numbers of disadvantaged children on roll as well as more general updates, and for the department to hear from schools.

## **Grammar school involvement in departmental partnership programmes**

In 2020, the DfE invited high performing schools to apply to become Teaching School Hubs. Schools were chosen that demonstrated high-quality teaching and continuous improvement – not just for their own school, or within their own Multi Academy Trust, but also in other schools.

In February 2021, DfE announced the 81 successful winners to join the existing 6 test & learn hubs to create a network of 87 in total. 8 grammar schools were successful in bids to run nine of the hubs.

**Subject hubs** are designed to develop expertise in teaching a specific subject or discipline. This expertise is shared with other schools in terms of teaching professional development and pedagogy:

- 4 grammar schools are maths hubs (40 maths hubs in total);
- 2 grammar schools were lead hub schools as part of the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) Pedagogy Pilot (9 MFL hubs in total);
- 4 science learning partnerships are led by grammar schools (29 in total);
- 4 computing hubs are led by grammar schools (34 hubs in total).

## **Grammar school outreach and test familiarisation**

There has been much good work by grammar schools to work with local primary schools to undertake outreach work. However, efforts by schools during 2019/20 to 2021/22 were severely hampered by lockdown and the closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many schools are engaged in a range of different outreach activities including test familiarisation, maths and English support for disadvantaged children, grammar schools hosting events involving other schools, changes to admission arrangements and the lowering of test pass marks for disadvantaged children.

The **Frog test familiarisation portal** – developed and promoted by GSHA members - targets support towards disadvantaged children who will be sitting a selection test. GSHA have reported that 58 grammar schools now subscribe to the portal. From a GSHA survey of the first 19 schools to start using Frog, 21% of schools reported a significant increase in disadvantaged children applying for their school and 63% reported an increase.

## Prioritising the admission of disadvantaged children

In 2017, of the 163 grammar schools, 63 offered a level of priority to disadvantaged children within their admission arrangements<sup>1</sup>. Significant progress has been made since then. In 2022 this had risen to 136, 130 of which are GSHA members (86% of GSHA members)<sup>2</sup>.

Of the 152 GSHA member schools:

- 104 prioritise children eligible for free school meals or the pupil premium for admission, immediately after the mandatory admissions priority given to looked after and previously looked after children
- 42 of those 104 schools cap the numbers of disadvantaged children to be admitted under this priority criterion
- 26 include FSM or PP in their admission arrangements but give them a lower level of priority than other criteria (for example, catchment, siblings etc)
- 25 schools lower the test pass mark for disadvantaged children. 24 of these schools also include a specific priority oversubscription criterion for disadvantaged children within their admission arrangements.

## Data on admissions

5% of all secondary age children attend a state-funded grammar school. Between 2017/18 and 2021/22 there has been a slight increase overall in the percentage of disadvantaged pupils on roll in grammar schools; rising from 7.2% to 7.9% across years 7 to 11. Over this period, the number of children attending grammar schools increased by 10,000; 1,600 of those pupils were pupil premium children. Over this same period, the percentage of PP pupils in year 7 to 11 in non-selective schools has declined from 28.4% (756k of 2.66m) to 27.4% (797k of 2.91m). However, only high-ability pupils who meet the required standard in a selection test are eligible for admission to grammar schools and, like their non-pupil premium peers, not all pupil premium children will meet the required standard.

While there has been a small increase overall, there is lots of variation between schools. Some have seen very significant increases, others have seen a decline and some have seen no substantial change.

## Conclusions and next steps

Through the work it has taken forward with its schools, GSHA has demonstrated its commitment to encouraging selective schools to challenge themselves to do more to admit greater numbers of disadvantaged pupils.

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<sup>1</sup> 8 based on a combination of free school meal and pupil premium eligibility, 20 on the basis of free school meal eligibility and 35 on the basis of pupil premium eligibility.

<sup>2</sup> 15 on the basis of free school meal eligibility and 115 based on pupil premium eligibility.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, understandably, been a challenge for schools in undertaking outreach activity to encourage more disadvantaged families to apply. Nonetheless there are many good examples of schools prioritising the admission of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, carrying out outreach activities with local primary schools and rolling out test familiarisation.

There has been a slight rise in the percentage of disadvantaged children attending grammar schools, at a time when the percentage fell across all secondary schools. The number of disadvantaged children in grammar schools generally remains low.

The fact that the number of disadvantaged children at grammar schools remains low in the face of interventions to increase their numbers shows what a complex issue this is to resolve. Many grammar schools are committed to admitting children from all backgrounds, but to achieve this is likely to require multiple interventions. All schools, especially those which have made no progress or very little progress in admitting greater numbers of disadvantaged children, need to challenge themselves to do more.

The department continues to encourage grammar schools to work with their local communities to breakdown barriers to entry for disadvantaged pupils, so that these schools can act as drivers of social mobility. The department remains committed to engaging regularly with the GSHA executive and its members to monitor progress and encourage schools to share learning and best practice.

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