



Department
for Education

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

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Summary

As part of national measures to limit the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), we had to limit the numbers of children and young people attending schools. That is why, since 23 March, schools were open only for priority groups (children of critical workers and vulnerable children). From the week commencing 1 June, we have been able to welcome more children back to their schools. Schools will [reopen for all pupils from September](#).

Admission processes continue and so it is 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 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. It is recommended 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 protective measures mean that admission authorities are likely to need to change their selective processes this year. It is recommended 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 – such as self-isolation due to illness or exposure to someone who is ill, or local protective measures – 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 they 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.

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 for the autumn.

¹ Schools which band by ability or which select up to 10% of their pupils by aptitude in a prescribed subject may choose to apply to vary their arrangements to suspend selection for 2021

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 [School Admissions Code](#) ('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; although we strongly advise them to review their processes and think carefully about whether changes are needed to deal with the impact of the coronavirus outbreak. Admission authorities will also need to consider whether they need to vary their determined admission arrangements to allow for any necessary changes to selection processes. More information on the variation process is included within this guidance.

No child is likely to perform to their utmost ability in a test at the beginning of September and all are 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 from school during the coronavirus outbreak. We therefore:

- strongly advise that tests for grammar and partially selective schools are moved back into late October (which is likely to mean parents will need to express preferences for school places before results are known) or to November if local admission co-ordination processes allow;
- strongly advise that local authorities issue communications clearly explaining to parents the consequences of choosing only selective schools in their preferences in case their child does not attain a sufficiently high score to qualify for a grammar school. This is to help address the fact that parents may need to express their preferences without knowing whether their child would qualify for a place in a selective school. We recommend that local authorities strongly advise parents to use their final preference(s) for a local non-selective school(s) – if test results will

not be known before 31 October – in order to increase their opportunities of obtaining one of their preferences; and

- advise that local authorities with grammar schools offer all parents applying for a secondary place at least one additional preference, if this is possible², to help address the same issue. Local authorities in which a large number of parents choose selective schools in neighbouring authorities may also wish 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.

Admission authorities are advised 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 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 outbreak and public health measures on children and families with [protected characteristics](#) 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 already 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 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, 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.

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.

Paragraph 1.17 of the Code requires selective arrangements to be included within a school's admission arrangements⁴. It is strongly recommended therefore that admission authorities 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)) require the school's admission arrangements to be varied. For advice on how to do so, see the section on admission variations below.

It is essential 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 outbreak, it is unlikely that children will be ready to perform at their best in a test which takes place at the normal time in September. Additionally, in some cases, it may not be feasible for schools to provide results before 31 October due to coronavirus-related disruption (for example if additional test sessions are needed to accommodate protective measures).

3. Our advice to the sector, therefore, is that it is reasonable, for this year only, to test in late October or, if the local co-ordinated scheme allows for this, in November even if this means that test results are not known before the closing date for applications (31 October). This will enable as many children as possible to get back into the routine of education before being tested and therefore minimise the disadvantage caused by the lengthy period many children have had to spend away from school. 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 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.'

4. We acknowledge that late testing will mean that parents may need to make choices about secondary schools for their children without knowing whether their children will necessarily meet the academic standards required for selective schools.

5. We recommend, therefore, that admission authorities and local authorities are clear in their communications with parents about the consequences of late testing, so parents can consider how many selective schools to choose within their preferences.

6. Where the outcome of tests will not be known before 31 October, it is strongly recommended that a local authority considers offering all applicants for a secondary school at least one additional preference, under the admission co-ordination process, where this is possible.

7. Whilst this is for the coordinating local authority to determine, offering an additional preference is 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 may depend on the overall number of schools with partial selection in an area and the overall proportion of selective places. It 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 will not be provided until after 31 October, we recommend that local authorities advise 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 if he or she does not demonstrate sufficiently high academic ability in the assessment process for a grammar school.

12. Although we would strongly advise 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 are free to use an extra preference in any way they see fit. Local authorities are reminded to explain the consequences to parents of

choosing only selective schools in their preferences in case their child does not attain a sufficiently high score to qualify for a grammar school.

Testing over a longer period of time than normal

13. Admission authorities and those testing on behalf of admission authorities are strongly advised to follow the system of controls set out in the [schools guidance for full opening](#) and the specific advice on health protection measures in tests set out below, in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus when carrying out testing. As a result, it is unlikely to be possible to test as many children in a single hall in one sitting as is normal practice.

14. 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 autumn 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 work together to ensure, insofar as possible, that such approaches can continue so that any complexities for parents are minimised. This will help 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 are likely to be more difficult and 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. We now know much more about coronavirus and so in future there will be far fewer children and young people advised to shield. Nevertheless, a small number of children may still be unable to attend tests because of public health advice to self-isolate. This might be because they have had symptoms or a positive test result themselves, because they are a close contact of someone who has coronavirus or because they (or

their family members) have been advised to shield for a temporary period when local transmission rates are high. Prior to testing taking place, admission authorities are strongly advised to make provision for parents to alert the admission authority if their children fall within the above categories or if their children are disabled and require special assessment processes.

20. 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.

21. 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.

22. 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 themselves been shielding previously but have been advised that this is no longer necessary, those living in households where someone is clinically vulnerable, or those concerned about the comparatively increased risk from coronavirus, 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.

23. 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.

24. 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.

25. 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.

26. 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.

27. Schools are advised to review how any outreach activity focused on disadvantaged children has been affected by the coronavirus outbreak and associated social distancing measures. We would encourage schools to consider how they can engage with target families and children to provide support over the summer and autumn. 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 over the summer or early autumn.

28. 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.

29. On 10 June, the Prime Minister announced plans for a £1 billion Covid catch-up programme. The additional [£650m we are providing schools](#) and the [£350m National Tutoring Programme](#) will support children who have lost time in education as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. Selective schools are therefore advised to give consideration to how they might use this funding to support learning, including for potential applicants who come from disadvantaged households.

Test security and integrity

30. 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.

31. 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

32. 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.

33. 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;
 - 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

34. 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’
35. 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.

36. 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.

37. Maintained school admission authorities would need to seek an in-year variation from the Schools Adjudicator via [this website](#).

38. 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. We recommend that admission authorities for academy schools also use this form, but that they submit it to the Academy Questions mailbox.

39. 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 and when they want changes to come into effect.

40. 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 outbreak).

41. 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 outbreak is a major event. It is likely that the Schools Adjudicator or RSC will consider that this justifies necessary changes to arrangements.

42. 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 outbreak.

43. Requests will need to be submitted as soon as possible. Each local authority must publish its composite admissions prospectus by 12 September, and it will be helpful to parents if varied arrangements are in place by the deadline for publication, so that parents can begin to consider their options on the basis of up to date information. Because of the coronavirus outbreak, the volume of variations the RSC/Adjudicator will be considering is likely to be large, and so submitting a request early would be helpful to enable these to be processed in a timely manner.

44. 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.

45. 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 parents of changes.

46. 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.

47. 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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for Education

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