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# YOUR SCHOOL YOUR CHOICE



Securing your Child's  
Place at School -  
Admissions and  
Appeals Explained

John Chard

This is an excerpt from Lawpack's book *Your School Your Choice: School Appeals and School Admissions*.

To find out more about making a school appeal and the school admission process, [click here](#).

*Your School Your Choice*  
by John Chard

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For convenience (and for no other reason) 'him', 'he' and 'his' have been used throughout and should be read to include 'her', 'she' and 'hers'.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Applying for a place at a school of your choice

You, as a parent<sup>1</sup>, have the right to express a preference about where you would like your child to be educated. But can you guarantee that your child will go to the school of your choice? Unfortunately – and this may surprise you – you cannot. Furthermore, you do not have the right to send your child to the school of your choice. The theme running through all legislation concerning primary and secondary school education is, simply, that there are no guarantees that any child will be able to attend the school preferred by his parents. However, every child between the ages of five and 16 is guaranteed a school place.

The good news is that there are things you can do to substantially improve your chances of obtaining your preferred school. You are already taking one very important step: you are reading this book. By doing so, you are gaining information on the three fundamental stages in preparing a successful admission application. These stages are:

1. Understanding how the school admission process works;
2. Obtaining the right information to assist you to make a successful admission application; and
3. Showing precisely how you meet your preferred school's admission criteria.

Other specific steps you should take appear in the **quick list** below. More information about these, as well as details of how the information can be obtained, is contained in this chapter. The **quick reference** below explains some of the terms frequently mentioned in this chapter.

You should prepare yourself mentally and emotionally for a long period of uncertainty. The 'admissions round', as the process of submitting application forms to the admission authority and waiting for its decision is known, can normally be expected to take over half a year; it starts in September one year and finishes in March – or even later – the following

<sup>1</sup> The word 'parent' is used throughout this book to denote any person who has legitimate care of a child, and who may be the child's guardian, carer or parent.

year. Normally, the Local Education Authority (LEA) will send you its admissions booklet at the beginning of the admissions round if your child is already in school. However, if your child is about to start school and the LEA is not aware of your child, you may need to contact the LEA to obtain a booklet. The admissions round is a long and often nerve-wracking time for parents and children to wait. Should you need, or decide, to appeal against the decision made at the admission application stage, the period of uncertainty will be lengthened even further.

However, obtaining the relevant information and doing the necessary research to provide the admission authority with the necessary information – in other words, doing your ‘homework’ on the admission criteria – is critical. By getting this part of the admission process right, you maximise the likelihood of timely success and minimise the possibility of needing to appeal against the admission authority’s decision.

The issues covered in this chapter are as follows:

- The admission application deadline
- The LEA’s admissions booklet
- The school prospectus
- Schools with specialist status
- How to work with the published admission criteria
- Special or exceptional reasons to attend a school
- Voluntary aided and foundation schools’ and academies’ admission criteria
- Grammar school applications
- Open evenings
- The equal preference system
- Co-ordinated admission arrangements
- The application form
- Sit back and relax!

So, what do you need to do next? Start by consulting the quick reference and the quick list below.

## **Quick reference**

Understanding the meaning of these terms will help you to get the most from this chapter.

- **The admission authority**

The admission authority is the body responsible for setting and applying the admission arrangement for a school (or schools).

- **The Local Education Authority (LEA)**

The LEA is the local government body responsible for providing education for pupils of school age in a particular administrative area.

- **The admission authority for community schools**

The LEA is the admission authority for community schools (also called 'state' schools) in England, Scotland and Wales. Each LEA in England & Wales publishes a booklet, which gives details of the admission arrangements for all the schools in the LEA's administrative area. This booklet can be obtained from your local LEA.

England, Scotland and Wales each operate a separate system for school admissions. For details of how the admission process works in England, refer to this chapter; for Scotland, see Chapters 10 and 11; and for Wales, see Chapter 13. The details of all LEAs in England, Scotland and Wales appear in Appendix 8.

- **The admission authority for voluntary aided and foundation schools and academies**

Voluntary aided schools, foundation schools and academies (definitions of these types of school can be found in the Glossary at the back of the book) differ from community schools in that in these schools the governing body, not the LEA, acts as the admission authority. The schools' governors are also responsible for setting the admission criteria and for the arrangements for any subsequent appeals. Information about voluntary aided schools, foundation schools and academies will appear in the LEA's admissions booklet. Guidance about the admission arrangements and the admission criteria for these schools may appear in the admissions booklet, or, if the admission arrangements and criteria are especially complex, the LEA may provide a summary only. The prospectus for each voluntary aided or foundation school or academy should give parents information about the school's admission arrangements. However, if you are in any doubt, it is safest to contact your preferred school and ask it to provide the information directly to you.

- **Admission criteria**

When there are more applicants than there are school places available, the admission authority uses principles and rules known as admission criteria to determine which of its applicants can be offered a school

place. In simple terms, admission criteria are practical, objective measures, such as the distance between an applicant's home and the school, whether or not the applicant already has siblings at the school, or if the applicant can demonstrate the necessary religious affiliation in the case of a faith school. All admission authorities are required to ensure that their admission criteria are explained clearly.

- **Maintained schools**

Maintained schools include community, voluntary aided and foundation schools, because they are funded by the LEA. Academies are not maintained schools.

### QUICK LIST

- 1 Have you obtained a copy of the LEA's admissions booklet, which deals with school admissions? If more than one LEA is involved, you should obtain all of the admissions booklets. This is important because you will find the admission criteria for your preferred school (or schools) in the admissions booklet. You will need this information to complete your admission application, which will be enclosed with the admissions booklet.
- 2 Have you studied the admission criteria for your preferred school (or schools)?
- 3 Have you checked to see how well you meet the admission criteria?
- 4 Have you researched the school (or schools) you are considering?
- 5 Have you looked at the school's (or schools') prospectus (or prospectuses)?
- 6 Have you visited your preferred school (or schools) and taken a look around to see what you think?
- 7 Have you spoken to parents whose children already attend the school (or schools) of your choice?
- 8 Have you spoken to pupils already attending the school (or schools) of your choice?
- 9 Have you talked to the teachers at the school (or schools)?
- 10 Have you listened to your child, to see what he thinks about the school (or schools)?
- 11 Have you used this book to assess your chances of making a successful admission application or admission appeal?
- 12 **Have you made sure that you have sent your application in on time?**

## **The admission application deadline**

The admission authority will always publish the date and the time on that date by which it must receive applications. Case Study 4 (see page 15) shows how you could fall at the first hurdle, by failing to have your application considered because you did not meet the admission authority's published deadline. Remember, there is no appeal against the late submission of your application.

## **The LEA's admissions booklet**

This is essential reading for anyone preparing a school admission application. Each LEA, as the admission authority for community schools, publishes a booklet which gives details of the admission arrangements for schools in the LEA's administrative area. This booklet can be obtained from the LEA, or it may be available from your public library. Voluntary aided schools, foundation schools and academies will produce prospectuses like other maintained schools, but the responsibility for providing an admissions booklet for the administrative area rests with the LEA.

The admissions booklet provides important information which can help you to prepare a successful application for your child's admission to your preferred school. The admissions booklet is where you can find out about the admission arrangements (the date and time by which applications must be received by the LEA, for example) and the admission criteria (the fair principles and rules used by the LEA when it is allocating school places) for all the maintained schools in your area.

It is very important that you study the admission criteria and provide the admission authority with as much information as you can, because this could help you to secure a place at your preferred school. It is, however, critical for you to be familiar with your preferred school's admission criteria if it is likely to be oversubscribed (i.e. there are fewer school places than there are applicants).

You can check to see if your preferred school is likely to be oversubscribed by consulting the LEA's admissions booklet. It gives each school's published admission number (also known as the published admission limit). The published admission number is the school's formal notification of the number of pupils it can admit. The admissions booklet also gives you the number of applications received by any school for the previous year. A comparison of these figures will allow you to assess whether or not your preferred school is likely to be oversubscribed.

You must refer to the current year's admission criteria when you are preparing your admission application. This is essential because what

happened in last year's admissions round cannot be taken as a guarantee of what will happen this year. The admissions booklets always make this clear. For example, the majority of schools will use the distance factor (the distance between the child's home and the school) to determine who will be allocated a place. One school may choose to measure straight line distance (often referred to as 'as the crow flies'), while another school will measure the shortest safe walking route. The actual distance measured, whichever method of measurement is used, will not be the same every year. This is because physical changes may have been made to roads and pathways, or new construction may have altered routes, and so on. In addition, parents will be applying from different addresses. For more information on the distance factor, see the section 'How to work with the published admission criteria' on page 7.

The LEA's admissions booklet also gives the last admission criteria for those that were successful last year. The last admission criteria are the 'cut-off' points at which the final applicant was admitted to the school during the last admissions round. For example, if a secondary school is using the straight line measurement and the cut-off distance last year was 2.5 kilometres and you live five kilometres away from the school, it is unlikely that you will be able to secure a place through the admission process. But if you live two kilometres away, it is much more likely that your application will be successful.

The admissions booklet contains many other relevant details about the school, such as the maximum number of pupils on roll (i.e. at the school); the number of preferences for the school last year; and how the places were allocated last year. All of this information can help you with the preparation of an admission application. Admissions booklets are available from the LEAs in England and Wales. Do note that the arrangements in Scotland are completely different and that there is no obligation on an LEA to produce a booklet. All of the LEAs' contact details appear in Appendix 8.

## **The school prospectus**

Every school produces a school prospectus. You may obtain a copy from the school's office. The school prospectus is the school's governors' opportunity to tell parents about the school.

The prospectus provides all of the key information about the educational activities of the school, such as the courses provided and the facilities available to the school's pupils. The school's governors may choose to give other information in the prospectus, including statements about the school's ethos and aspirations, perhaps, or a description of the various policies which the school is legally required to provide. It may also detail school policies, which range across all aspects of the school's operation, and

it may encompass statements about how homework should be completed, as well as the accepted dress code, and discipline and bullying. It may give an indication of a school's attitude and approach to the education of its pupils. The prospectus is where parents can find information about how the school has been performing against national educational targets, such as the 'end of key stage' tests. The information contained in the school prospectus should help you to decide if the school is likely to suit your child, or not.

## **Schools with specialist status**

Many secondary schools have obtained specialist status in a particular area of the National Curriculum. This means that they have been able to attract funding for specialised facilities, such as sports amenities. These special facilities can also be made available to the wider community in which the school is located. However, some schools may not explicitly draw attention to their specialist status in their prospectuses. A school's specialist status could be an important factor in your decision-making if you are looking for a school whose syllabus will suit your child's abilities; for example, should your child show a particular ability in sport, and you feel that he would benefit from attending the school with specialist status in this area of the curriculum, it would be wise to find out whether your preferred school has specialist status in sport. If it has, look closely at the school's admission criteria as the school may allocate some of its places to children with sporting ability.

Current legislation allows schools to allocate up to ten per cent of places to pupils with ability in the school's specialism. In practice, however, only about ten per cent of all schools do so. This means, of course, that only a very small proportion of children benefit from being allocated a school place on the basis of their particular ability in a specialised area of the school curriculum.

## **How to work with the published admission criteria**

The published admission criteria are the factors which the admission authority (the LEA for a community school and the governing body for a voluntary aided school, a foundation school and an academy) states that it will use to decide which children will be offered a place at its school. Some examples of admission criteria are given in the section entitled 'The LEA's admissions booklet' earlier in this chapter.

It is the responsibility of each admission authority to determine the admission criteria it will use, and thus the criteria will vary from school to school and area to area. It is essential that you are fully aware of the current admission criteria when you are applying to your preferred school (or

schools), and that you are able to show how well you satisfy these. Therefore, in order to make a successful admission application or appeal, it will be necessary for you to research the admission criteria in detail.

The ‘distance factor’ has been mentioned as one of the criteria relied upon by admission authorities when they allocate school places. Let us look at an example of why you need to fully understand how the published criterion, the straight line distance (or, ‘how the crow flies’) is applied. Unless you look very closely at the admission authority’s distance calculations, you may find that the information provided could mislead you when you are preparing an admission application. Case Study 1 (see page 9) shows you why. Usually, the distance factor, whether straight line or some other method, will be used as the last main criterion to determine places or as a tie break (this is used if there are more applications that meet the terms of the criteria than there are places available). This will be used after the other main criteria, which is why the number of applicants allocated places using the distance factor can vary substantially from one year to the next.

This is best illustrated by using the simple example of a one-form entry school. Say the school in question admitted 30 pupils last year and there had been ten siblings applying for places. The siblings have a higher priority and were offered places. This left 20 places to be allocated using the distance factor. In this example the distance measured for the last successful applicant was 1.5 kilometres. In the preceding year there were 11 siblings, which meant that 19 places were decided on distance and the last successful applicant lived 1.4 kilometres from the school. The number of siblings will vary from year to year and also parents will be applying from different addresses. You live 1.3 kilometres from the school and you may, therefore, assess that you have a good chance of your application being successful. However, before you become too confident, you should contact the admission authority and determine the straight line distance accepted each year for the last five years. What you discover may confirm that your assumptions have a basis in fact or, on the other hand, that last year was an ‘abnormal’ year and that the usual accepted straight line distance is less than one kilometre. What this example illustrates is that nothing is guaranteed and that you can only make a best guess, or a reasonable assumption, based on historical information.

What should you do if the admission authority decides to apply the criterion of the shortest safe walking route? The definition of the shortest walking route will vary from one admission authority to another. The more common components include that the route must be paved and lit, and also that it is a route which is open to the general public. It may well include public footpaths, as well as roads. The important issue is to find out precisely what this means. The definition of the shortest walking route

should be clear in the admission arrangements for the school. However, if you feel that it is unclear or you are not sure exactly how it applies, obtain a written explanation from the admission authority.

You may feel inclined to speak to someone in the school office to obtain a verbal definition of one or more of the admission criteria. However, I would urge caution here. You have every right to expect that the advice you are given by a representative of a school is accurate; regretfully, however, such responses have proved to be unreliable when they are later cited at an admission appeal. This may be because, for instance, the person to whom you spoke was trying to be helpful, but was not fully familiar with the full admission arrangements. When it comes to an admission appeal it will be 'your word against theirs' in the case of verbally issued advice, and who can reliably recall a conversation which took place some six to eight months earlier? A written explanation can, however, be produced at an admission appeal, and it will show whether or not you have been given reliable, accurate information in response to your enquiry.

The LEA is allowed to use whatever definition of the shortest walking route it wishes, but it must publish this definition and explain exactly how it will operate. Shortest walking routes may include any roads that are lit and paved, and are publicly accessible, but this must be checked with the relevant LEA. The case studies below show why this is necessary.

### **CASE STUDY 1**

Mr and Mrs X lived reasonably close to the secondary school that they wished their child to attend. There was a large public park between their home and the preferred school. Mr and Mrs X checked the distance between their home and the school using software available on the internet and they found that the distance fell well within the distances for the safe walking route described in the school's published admission criteria. On this basis, Mr and Mrs X submitted an admission application and had every expectation that it would be successful.

To Mr and Mrs X's great surprise, their application was turned down. The reason given by the LEA was that Mr and Mrs X's child lived further away than the last successful applicant. Mr and Mrs X challenged the decision and found that while the route they had calculated themselves included the walk across the public park, the LEA had discounted the element of the walk that related to the route across the park. The park route was public and paved, but it was not lit and it did not, therefore, comply with the LEA's definition of a safe walking route. The parents subsequently appealed, but their appeal was not successful.

The LEA is there to help you and most LEAs are very willing to assist. Therefore, do not hesitate to ask the LEA to clarify any matters which you find unclear, or to provide additional information which will help you with an admission application or to make a choice about schools. You may wish to ask the LEA to plot your safe walking route in advance and also confirm the route plotted, because the admission authority can, on occasion, make mistakes. See Case Study 2.

### **CASE STUDY 2**

Mr and Mrs Y applied to their preferred school, confident that their application on behalf of their child would be successful. Their application was rejected. The LEA stated that Mr and Mrs Y lived further from the school than the parents of the last successful applicant. The parents lodged an appeal and were able to illustrate that a new road that fulfilled the requirements for a safe walking route had not been included, which would have resulted in a place being offered. The appeal was not successful. For some reason, the appeal panel did not accept the integrity of the information supplied by the parents. In my view, if there was any doubt, the appeal should have been adjourned so that the information could be clarified. The investigation, which subsequently took place, should have been carried out before the panel reached their decision. This is why the original decision was flawed.

I discussed the LEA's decision, and the appeal decision, with Mr and Mrs Y and an investigation revealed that the LEA measuring software did not take into account a newly constructed road adopted by the local authority. Information demonstrating this omission was presented to the LEA, and it admitted that a mistake had been made in this regard. However, while it was not prepared to offer a school place to Mr and Mrs Y's child, the LEA did grant a further appeal. Mr and Mrs Y appealed again. After several months of uncertainty, they received notification that their second appeal had been successful.

### **CASE STUDY 3**

Mr Z's admission application to the LEA of his granddaughter's preferred school was not successful. When he enquired why, Mr Z was told that he lived further away than the last successful applicant. Mr Z challenged this decision on the basis that a right of way discounted by the LEA did, in fact, meet its definition of a safe walking route. Had this factor been properly taken into account, the result would have been that the measured distance would have shown that Mr Z's granddaughter lived closer to the school than the last successful applicant.

The LEA inspected the right of way and agreed with Mr Z that it did comply with its definition of a safe walking route. In the circumstances, the LEA re-measured all the applications and found that several applicants, including Mr Z's granddaughter, had been mistakenly denied places at the school. The LEA subsequently offered places to several children, even though it exceeded its own published admission number, without the need for the parents to go through the appeal process.

## **Special or exceptional reasons to attend a school**

Many community schools will feature an 'exceptional' or 'special reasons' criterion in their admission criteria. The exceptional reasons criterion has been designed to allow the admission authority to consider unusual or special circumstances which are not covered by other admission criteria. The admission authority must look at an application submitted under the exceptional reasons criterion from an objective point of view. The admission authority must also consider whether or not the exceptional circumstances cited by parents mean that their child can only attend the one school of their choice.

Should you wish to submit an admission application saying that exceptional circumstances dictate that your child must attend only the school of your choice, you will need to establish exactly what is required to satisfy this criterion. You may need to speak to the admission authority to see how it defines 'exceptional', or if it can give examples of what may be regarded as exceptional. However, such advice cannot be exhaustive, since by its very definition exceptional is, indeed, exceptional.

Many parents believe that their circumstances are exceptional, but this is rarely accepted by the admission authority. It should be noted that the LEA will look at exceptional reasons very carefully and apply its guidelines rigorously. Therefore, not many applicants meet this criterion.

## **Voluntary aided and foundation schools' and academies' admission criteria**

The admission criteria are the same for all community schools within the same LEA area. However, the admission criteria for voluntary aided and foundation schools and academies differ from school to school because each school's admission policy is determined by that school's governors. You will need to look at each school's prospectus to see if you meet the admission criteria for the individual school.

Many voluntary aided schools have a religious ethos. This will be reflected in the school's published admission criteria. The school's governors may require you to complete a supplementary application form, in addition to the one required by the LEA, in order to obtain further information about how the applicant meets the element of the school's admission criteria concerned with religion. The governors of a church school will usually expect to see that the applicant demonstrates regular religious commitment. The governors will determine what they consider to be 'regular commitment'. For instance, the applicant, and also the child's family, may be required to show that he regularly attends church services. Applicants may be asked to provide documentary evidence of their religious membership (such as a baptismal certificate), and also provide a letter of support from their parish priest or minister of religion.

Below is an example of the admission criteria for a Roman Catholic (RC) secondary school, showing the basis on which places are allocated to applicants, with the greatest preference being given to those in category 1:

- 1 Baptised Roman Catholic children attending Catholic schools. The governors would expect each candidate to have the application form accompanied by a baptismal certificate and a statement of support written and signed by the applicant's parish priest.
- 2 Baptised Roman Catholic children who are not attending a Catholic school, but who otherwise meet the requirements of category 1.
- 3 Other baptised Catholic children; a baptismal certificate is essential in such cases.
- 4 Siblings in the same family (including those who are adopted or fostered) of children who are at the school at the time of entry.
- 5 Children of other denominations attending a voluntary aided church school. The governors would expect such Christians to have evidence of baptism and have support of worship written and signed by their parish priest or minister of religion.
- 6 Children of other Christian denominations not attending a voluntary aided church school, providing that they can satisfy the requirements in category 5.
- 7 Any other children whose parents wish them to be educated at the school.

**Notes**

- 1 'Baptised Roman Catholics' is defined.
- 2 'Other Christian denominations' is defined.

- 3 A tie-break using distance is applied where appropriate. (This is used in any criteria when there are more applications than places available.)
- 4 'Looked after' children are given priority in each category (looked after children are cared for by the local authority and are given priority above all children in every school).

The example shows that you may, relatively simply, assess the category into which you fall with respect to this criterion. This will give you an indication of how successful your admission application is likely to be. You must, of course, take other factors into account, such as the number of available places (the published admission number) in your preferred school.

If you speak with the admission authority to obtain advice or information, remember that it is always worthwhile to ask for its response to be given in writing. A written document can always be produced at a later admission appeal, if necessary. It will also show the information you used when you made your decision to apply to a particular school (or schools).

## **Grammar school applications**

The admission arrangements for applying to a grammar school are exactly the same as those for applications to a non-grammar school. You will, however, need to contact the relevant school (or schools) in order to make arrangements for your child to sit the grammar school tests. The admission authority will make arrangements for the tests, which usually take place in October/November. Because of the timing of the tests, it is unlikely that you will know the outcome of your child's tests before the LEA's deadline for the submission of application forms or preference forms. The decisions will be sent to parents at different times depending on the timetable set by the school, but usually these will be in December or January.

## **Other relevant information**

### **Open evenings**

All schools will arrange open evenings for parents. Open evenings are your opportunity to look around the school and see the facilities for yourself. You will be able to speak with the head teacher and the staff, and to ask them any questions you may have about the school. The school naturally wishes to attract pupils, so bear in mind that the head teacher and staff may give a positive slant to the school's achievements. Many students will also be on hand and you should speak to them, as well as to the staff. This will

enable you to get an idea of the students' views of the school and the opinions of the school given by the staff.

It is important that you attend the open evening. You can assess first hand whether or not the school is suitable for your child, and if it has an atmosphere which will promote your child's educational development. Your child should also see the school because his views will be important when you decide which school (or schools) you would prefer him to attend.

## The equal preference system

From the September 2008 intake, LEAs must operate what is referred to as an equal preference system. What will happen is this: You will rank the schools to which you are applying in order of preference, with your first choice at number 1. The LEA will simply receive a list of all applicants who have included the school as one of their preferences. The LEA will then allocate places to applicants in accordance with the LEA's published admission criteria, regardless of the order of preference indicated on the application form. At the same time the LEA will send lists of pupils to the governors of voluntary aided and foundation schools, and academies, where those schools have been listed as a preference. The governors will then advise the LEA which pupils the school is proposing to offer places to, based on the application of the school's own admission criteria.

Under the equal preference system, some applicants may be eligible to receive more than one offer of a school place. Should this happen, the LEA will offer your child a place in the school that has an available place and that has also been ranked highest (although not necessarily first) on your list of preferred schools. The school places which you do not need to accept will be allocated to other pupils.

## Co-ordinated admission arrangements

All LEAs operate what is known as co-ordinated admission arrangements. What this means is that you must complete and return the application form for any school (or schools) to your own LEA. Under current legislation, you are entitled to express up to three preferences for schools. In some areas you can express more preferences. In London, for example, you can express up to six preferences.

What happens, therefore, if you live in the London Borough of Lewisham and you want to apply for two Lewisham community schools, two voluntary aided schools in Lewisham, and two community schools in Greenwich? The simple answer is that you apply on the Lewisham co-ordinated preference form – that is, the application form (which is included in the admissions

booklet) – giving details of all six schools ranked in order of preference. You must ensure that you provide any supporting documentation required by any of the schools. Finally, you must make sure that the application form is received by the LEA by the closing time on the closing date. Case Study 4 shows why it is important to meet the LEA's deadline.

If it is at all possible, take the application form in to the LEA personally, and ask for a receipt. If you are unable to do this, make sure that your application form is posted well before the closing date. Telephone the LEA to check that it has been received. This is very important, because LEAs may claim that proof of posting is not proof of receipt. Thus, even if you can demonstrate that you posted your application form, there is no guarantee that it was received by the LEA.

## The application form

An application form, also called the preference form, will normally be included in the LEA's admissions booklet. Many LEAs now enable you to apply online. Applications made online are usually acknowledged by an automatic message. The acknowledgement message should be printed and kept, so that it may be produced if necessary. If you do not receive acknowledgement of an online application, you should check with the LEA that the application has been received.

If you are applying for a place at a secondary school, some LEAs make provision for application forms to be handed in to the primary school currently attended by your child. If this is the case, ask the primary school for a receipt. If you are applying for a primary school place, some LEAs allow you to return the application form to the first preference primary school, as well as directly to the LEA.

But, whatever you do, do not leave returning your application form to the LEA until the last minute! If you do, something unexpected may happen. This could mean that your application form is not received until after the LEA's deadline. Case Study 4 shows that, in a 'worst case scenario', your child may be denied a place at your preferred school, simply because you missed the deadline.

### **CASE STUDY 4**

Mrs N, who happened to be a teacher at a secondary school, gave the preference form to her son and asked him to hand it in at his primary school. The school noticed that it had not received a form from Mrs N and it left an urgent message on her mobile phone to let her know that the closing time for receipt of the forms was 3pm that day. Mrs N

retrieved the message at approximately 1pm. In haste, Mrs N went to the primary school attended by her son and found the form in his locker. However, the primary school had already returned the forms to the LEA, as it was required to do. Mrs N then rushed the form straight to the LEA's offices. Unfortunately, by the time the LEA received the form it was 3.15pm and the form was, correctly, deemed to be late.

The preferred school was oversubscribed and was not in a position to offer Mrs N's son a place. Mrs N lodged an appeal, but it was not successful. If the application form had been received on time, her son would have secured a place at his preferred school.

The LEA will start to process the application forms as soon as it receives them. If any preferences have been received for schools other than the community schools in its administrative area, such as voluntary aided schools, it will advise the relevant admission authorities to see if they are able to offer places to the applicants; these lists will not be sent to those authorities until after the closing date.

Please bear in mind that if you are seeking a place at a voluntary aided school, foundation school or academy, you may also need to complete a governors' form (which can be obtained from the school concerned), in addition to the usual LEA application form. It is important that you provide whatever information is required, in order to avoid any delay to the LEA's decision-making process and thus to your being informed where your child will be offered a school place.

## **Sit back and relax!**

Having done all your homework and submitted your application (or preference) form, there is nothing more that you can do. Except to wait! Decisions relating to secondary school applications are published on 1 March every year. Decisions regarding primary school applications will usually be published later in the year, although some primary schools do issue their decisions before 1 March.

Remember that approximately 90 per cent of all parents secure a place at one of their preferred schools. The children of the remaining ten per cent of parents will be offered places at alternative schools. If your child is offered a place at a school which you feel is unacceptable, you will be offered the opportunity to appeal against the LEA's decision. If you did not get offered a place at any of your preferred schools, or if you were offered a place at a school but not at your highest preference, you have a right to a statutory appeal in front of an independent appeal panel.

## CHECKLIST 1

- 1 Have you obtained a copy of the LEA's admissions booklet?
- 2 Have you obtained the prospectus (or prospectuses) for the school (or schools) which interest(s) you?
- 3 Do you understand how places will be allocated if there are more applications than available school places?
- 4 After studying the published admission criteria for last year's admission, is it your opinion that your child will be allocated a place in your preferred school?
- 5 Have you attended your preferred school's (or schools') open evening(s), and spoken to the staff and the students?
- 6 After consulting the current year's admission criteria, is your choice of school realistic and reasonable?
- 7 Do you understand how the equal preference system will operate?
- 8 Have you obtained details of successful admissions for the last five years?
- 9 Have the admission criteria been amended recently? You can find this out by asking the admission authority.
- 10 Have you obtained any advice from the LEA or from the school in writing, and if so, have you kept this information to hand?
- 11 If you are applying to a grammar school, have you arranged for your child to sit the entrance tests?
- 12 If you are applying to a faith school, are you certain that you can demonstrate your religious affiliation?
- 13 If you are applying to a faith school, have you asked your parish priest or minister of religion for a letter of support?
- 14 Have you obtained all the documentation to support your admission application?
- 15 Have you checked to make sure that you have enclosed **all** of the necessary information with the application form?
- 16 Have you ensured that your application was submitted on time?
- 17 Have you checked to ensure that your application was received by the admission authority?

This is an excerpt from Lawpack's book *Your School Your Choice: School Appeals and School Admissions*.

To find out more about making a school appeal and the school admission process, [click here](#).

*Your School Your Choice*  
by John Chard

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For convenience (and for no other reason) 'him', 'he' and 'his' have been used throughout and should be read to include 'her', 'she' and 'hers'.

## CHAPTER 1

# Applying for a place at a school of your choice

You, as a parent<sup>1</sup>, have the right to express a preference about where you would like your child to be educated. But can you guarantee that your child will go to the school of your choice? Unfortunately – and this may surprise you – you cannot. Furthermore, you do not have the right to send your child to the school of your choice. The theme running through all legislation concerning primary and secondary school education is, simply, that there are no guarantees that any child will be able to attend the school preferred by his parents. However, every child between the ages of five and 16 is guaranteed a school place.

The good news is that there are things you can do to substantially improve your chances of obtaining your preferred school. You are already taking one very important step: you are reading this book. By doing so, you are gaining information on the three fundamental stages in preparing a successful admission application. These stages are:

1. Understanding how the school admission process works;
2. Obtaining the right information to assist you to make a successful admission application; and
3. Showing precisely how you meet your preferred school's admission criteria.

Other specific steps you should take appear in the **quick list** below. More information about these, as well as details of how the information can be obtained, is contained in this chapter. The **quick reference** below explains some of the terms frequently mentioned in this chapter.

You should prepare yourself mentally and emotionally for a long period of uncertainty. The 'admissions round', as the process of submitting application forms to the admission authority and waiting for its decision is known, can normally be expected to take over half a year; it starts in September one year and finishes in March – or even later – the following

<sup>1</sup> The word 'parent' is used throughout this book to denote any person who has legitimate care of a child, and who may be the child's guardian, carer or parent.

year. Normally, the Local Education Authority (LEA) will send you its admissions booklet at the beginning of the admissions round if your child is already in school. However, if your child is about to start school and the LEA is not aware of your child, you may need to contact the LEA to obtain a booklet. The admissions round is a long and often nerve-wracking time for parents and children to wait. Should you need, or decide, to appeal against the decision made at the admission application stage, the period of uncertainty will be lengthened even further.

However, obtaining the relevant information and doing the necessary research to provide the admission authority with the necessary information – in other words, doing your ‘homework’ on the admission criteria – is critical. By getting this part of the admission process right, you maximise the likelihood of timely success and minimise the possibility of needing to appeal against the admission authority’s decision.

The issues covered in this chapter are as follows:

- The admission application deadline
- The LEA’s admissions booklet
- The school prospectus
- Schools with specialist status
- How to work with the published admission criteria
- Special or exceptional reasons to attend a school
- Voluntary aided and foundation schools’ and academies’ admission criteria
- Grammar school applications
- Open evenings
- The equal preference system
- Co-ordinated admission arrangements
- The application form
- Sit back and relax!

So, what do you need to do next? Start by consulting the quick reference and the quick list below.

## **Quick reference**

Understanding the meaning of these terms will help you to get the most from this chapter.

- **The admission authority**

The admission authority is the body responsible for setting and applying the admission arrangement for a school (or schools).

- **The Local Education Authority (LEA)**

The LEA is the local government body responsible for providing education for pupils of school age in a particular administrative area.

- **The admission authority for community schools**

The LEA is the admission authority for community schools (also called 'state' schools) in England, Scotland and Wales. Each LEA in England & Wales publishes a booklet, which gives details of the admission arrangements for all the schools in the LEA's administrative area. This booklet can be obtained from your local LEA.

England, Scotland and Wales each operate a separate system for school admissions. For details of how the admission process works in England, refer to this chapter; for Scotland, see Chapters 10 and 11; and for Wales, see Chapter 13. The details of all LEAs in England, Scotland and Wales appear in Appendix 8.

- **The admission authority for voluntary aided and foundation schools and academies**

Voluntary aided schools, foundation schools and academies (definitions of these types of school can be found in the Glossary at the back of the book) differ from community schools in that in these schools the governing body, not the LEA, acts as the admission authority. The schools' governors are also responsible for setting the admission criteria and for the arrangements for any subsequent appeals. Information about voluntary aided schools, foundation schools and academies will appear in the LEA's admissions booklet. Guidance about the admission arrangements and the admission criteria for these schools may appear in the admissions booklet, or, if the admission arrangements and criteria are especially complex, the LEA may provide a summary only. The prospectus for each voluntary aided or foundation school or academy should give parents information about the school's admission arrangements. However, if you are in any doubt, it is safest to contact your preferred school and ask it to provide the information directly to you.

- **Admission criteria**

When there are more applicants than there are school places available, the admission authority uses principles and rules known as admission criteria to determine which of its applicants can be offered a school

place. In simple terms, admission criteria are practical, objective measures, such as the distance between an applicant's home and the school, whether or not the applicant already has siblings at the school, or if the applicant can demonstrate the necessary religious affiliation in the case of a faith school. All admission authorities are required to ensure that their admission criteria are explained clearly.

- **Maintained schools**

Maintained schools include community, voluntary aided and foundation schools, because they are funded by the LEA. Academies are not maintained schools.

### QUICK LIST

- 1 Have you obtained a copy of the LEA's admissions booklet, which deals with school admissions? If more than one LEA is involved, you should obtain all of the admissions booklets. This is important because you will find the admission criteria for your preferred school (or schools) in the admissions booklet. You will need this information to complete your admission application, which will be enclosed with the admissions booklet.
- 2 Have you studied the admission criteria for your preferred school (or schools)?
- 3 Have you checked to see how well you meet the admission criteria?
- 4 Have you researched the school (or schools) you are considering?
- 5 Have you looked at the school's (or schools') prospectus (or prospectuses)?
- 6 Have you visited your preferred school (or schools) and taken a look around to see what you think?
- 7 Have you spoken to parents whose children already attend the school (or schools) of your choice?
- 8 Have you spoken to pupils already attending the school (or schools) of your choice?
- 9 Have you talked to the teachers at the school (or schools)?
- 10 Have you listened to your child, to see what he thinks about the school (or schools)?
- 11 Have you used this book to assess your chances of making a successful admission application or admission appeal?
- 12 **Have you made sure that you have sent your application in on time?**

## **The admission application deadline**

The admission authority will always publish the date and the time on that date by which it must receive applications. Case Study 4 (see page 15) shows how you could fall at the first hurdle, by failing to have your application considered because you did not meet the admission authority's published deadline. Remember, there is no appeal against the late submission of your application.

## **The LEA's admissions booklet**

This is essential reading for anyone preparing a school admission application. Each LEA, as the admission authority for community schools, publishes a booklet which gives details of the admission arrangements for schools in the LEA's administrative area. This booklet can be obtained from the LEA, or it may be available from your public library. Voluntary aided schools, foundation schools and academies will produce prospectuses like other maintained schools, but the responsibility for providing an admissions booklet for the administrative area rests with the LEA.

The admissions booklet provides important information which can help you to prepare a successful application for your child's admission to your preferred school. The admissions booklet is where you can find out about the admission arrangements (the date and time by which applications must be received by the LEA, for example) and the admission criteria (the fair principles and rules used by the LEA when it is allocating school places) for all the maintained schools in your area.

It is very important that you study the admission criteria and provide the admission authority with as much information as you can, because this could help you to secure a place at your preferred school. It is, however, critical for you to be familiar with your preferred school's admission criteria if it is likely to be oversubscribed (i.e. there are fewer school places than there are applicants).

You can check to see if your preferred school is likely to be oversubscribed by consulting the LEA's admissions booklet. It gives each school's published admission number (also known as the published admission limit). The published admission number is the school's formal notification of the number of pupils it can admit. The admissions booklet also gives you the number of applications received by any school for the previous year. A comparison of these figures will allow you to assess whether or not your preferred school is likely to be oversubscribed.

You must refer to the current year's admission criteria when you are preparing your admission application. This is essential because what

happened in last year's admissions round cannot be taken as a guarantee of what will happen this year. The admissions booklets always make this clear. For example, the majority of schools will use the distance factor (the distance between the child's home and the school) to determine who will be allocated a place. One school may choose to measure straight line distance (often referred to as 'as the crow flies'), while another school will measure the shortest safe walking route. The actual distance measured, whichever method of measurement is used, will not be the same every year. This is because physical changes may have been made to roads and pathways, or new construction may have altered routes, and so on. In addition, parents will be applying from different addresses. For more information on the distance factor, see the section 'How to work with the published admission criteria' on page 7.

The LEA's admissions booklet also gives the last admission criteria for those that were successful last year. The last admission criteria are the 'cut-off' points at which the final applicant was admitted to the school during the last admissions round. For example, if a secondary school is using the straight line measurement and the cut-off distance last year was 2.5 kilometres and you live five kilometres away from the school, it is unlikely that you will be able to secure a place through the admission process. But if you live two kilometres away, it is much more likely that your application will be successful.

The admissions booklet contains many other relevant details about the school, such as the maximum number of pupils on roll (i.e. at the school); the number of preferences for the school last year; and how the places were allocated last year. All of this information can help you with the preparation of an admission application. Admissions booklets are available from the LEAs in England and Wales. Do note that the arrangements in Scotland are completely different and that there is no obligation on an LEA to produce a booklet. All of the LEAs' contact details appear in Appendix 8.

## **The school prospectus**

Every school produces a school prospectus. You may obtain a copy from the school's office. The school prospectus is the school's governors' opportunity to tell parents about the school.

The prospectus provides all of the key information about the educational activities of the school, such as the courses provided and the facilities available to the school's pupils. The school's governors may choose to give other information in the prospectus, including statements about the school's ethos and aspirations, perhaps, or a description of the various policies which the school is legally required to provide. It may also detail school policies, which range across all aspects of the school's operation, and

it may encompass statements about how homework should be completed, as well as the accepted dress code, and discipline and bullying. It may give an indication of a school's attitude and approach to the education of its pupils. The prospectus is where parents can find information about how the school has been performing against national educational targets, such as the 'end of key stage' tests. The information contained in the school prospectus should help you to decide if the school is likely to suit your child, or not.

## **Schools with specialist status**

Many secondary schools have obtained specialist status in a particular area of the National Curriculum. This means that they have been able to attract funding for specialised facilities, such as sports amenities. These special facilities can also be made available to the wider community in which the school is located. However, some schools may not explicitly draw attention to their specialist status in their prospectuses. A school's specialist status could be an important factor in your decision-making if you are looking for a school whose syllabus will suit your child's abilities; for example, should your child show a particular ability in sport, and you feel that he would benefit from attending the school with specialist status in this area of the curriculum, it would be wise to find out whether your preferred school has specialist status in sport. If it has, look closely at the school's admission criteria as the school may allocate some of its places to children with sporting ability.

Current legislation allows schools to allocate up to ten per cent of places to pupils with ability in the school's specialism. In practice, however, only about ten per cent of all schools do so. This means, of course, that only a very small proportion of children benefit from being allocated a school place on the basis of their particular ability in a specialised area of the school curriculum.

## **How to work with the published admission criteria**

The published admission criteria are the factors which the admission authority (the LEA for a community school and the governing body for a voluntary aided school, a foundation school and an academy) states that it will use to decide which children will be offered a place at its school. Some examples of admission criteria are given in the section entitled 'The LEA's admissions booklet' earlier in this chapter.

It is the responsibility of each admission authority to determine the admission criteria it will use, and thus the criteria will vary from school to school and area to area. It is essential that you are fully aware of the current admission criteria when you are applying to your preferred school (or

schools), and that you are able to show how well you satisfy these. Therefore, in order to make a successful admission application or appeal, it will be necessary for you to research the admission criteria in detail.

The ‘distance factor’ has been mentioned as one of the criteria relied upon by admission authorities when they allocate school places. Let us look at an example of why you need to fully understand how the published criterion, the straight line distance (or, ‘how the crow flies’) is applied. Unless you look very closely at the admission authority’s distance calculations, you may find that the information provided could mislead you when you are preparing an admission application. Case Study 1 (see page 9) shows you why. Usually, the distance factor, whether straight line or some other method, will be used as the last main criterion to determine places or as a tie break (this is used if there are more applications that meet the terms of the criteria than there are places available). This will be used after the other main criteria, which is why the number of applicants allocated places using the distance factor can vary substantially from one year to the next.

This is best illustrated by using the simple example of a one-form entry school. Say the school in question admitted 30 pupils last year and there had been ten siblings applying for places. The siblings have a higher priority and were offered places. This left 20 places to be allocated using the distance factor. In this example the distance measured for the last successful applicant was 1.5 kilometres. In the preceding year there were 11 siblings, which meant that 19 places were decided on distance and the last successful applicant lived 1.4 kilometres from the school. The number of siblings will vary from year to year and also parents will be applying from different addresses. You live 1.3 kilometres from the school and you may, therefore, assess that you have a good chance of your application being successful. However, before you become too confident, you should contact the admission authority and determine the straight line distance accepted each year for the last five years. What you discover may confirm that your assumptions have a basis in fact or, on the other hand, that last year was an ‘abnormal’ year and that the usual accepted straight line distance is less than one kilometre. What this example illustrates is that nothing is guaranteed and that you can only make a best guess, or a reasonable assumption, based on historical information.

What should you do if the admission authority decides to apply the criterion of the shortest safe walking route? The definition of the shortest walking route will vary from one admission authority to another. The more common components include that the route must be paved and lit, and also that it is a route which is open to the general public. It may well include public footpaths, as well as roads. The important issue is to find out precisely what this means. The definition of the shortest walking route

should be clear in the admission arrangements for the school. However, if you feel that it is unclear or you are not sure exactly how it applies, obtain a written explanation from the admission authority.

You may feel inclined to speak to someone in the school office to obtain a verbal definition of one or more of the admission criteria. However, I would urge caution here. You have every right to expect that the advice you are given by a representative of a school is accurate; regretfully, however, such responses have proved to be unreliable when they are later cited at an admission appeal. This may be because, for instance, the person to whom you spoke was trying to be helpful, but was not fully familiar with the full admission arrangements. When it comes to an admission appeal it will be 'your word against theirs' in the case of verbally issued advice, and who can reliably recall a conversation which took place some six to eight months earlier? A written explanation can, however, be produced at an admission appeal, and it will show whether or not you have been given reliable, accurate information in response to your enquiry.

The LEA is allowed to use whatever definition of the shortest walking route it wishes, but it must publish this definition and explain exactly how it will operate. Shortest walking routes may include any roads that are lit and paved, and are publicly accessible, but this must be checked with the relevant LEA. The case studies below show why this is necessary.

### **CASE STUDY 1**

Mr and Mrs X lived reasonably close to the secondary school that they wished their child to attend. There was a large public park between their home and the preferred school. Mr and Mrs X checked the distance between their home and the school using software available on the internet and they found that the distance fell well within the distances for the safe walking route described in the school's published admission criteria. On this basis, Mr and Mrs X submitted an admission application and had every expectation that it would be successful.

To Mr and Mrs X's great surprise, their application was turned down. The reason given by the LEA was that Mr and Mrs X's child lived further away than the last successful applicant. Mr and Mrs X challenged the decision and found that while the route they had calculated themselves included the walk across the public park, the LEA had discounted the element of the walk that related to the route across the park. The park route was public and paved, but it was not lit and it did not, therefore, comply with the LEA's definition of a safe walking route. The parents subsequently appealed, but their appeal was not successful.

The LEA is there to help you and most LEAs are very willing to assist. Therefore, do not hesitate to ask the LEA to clarify any matters which you find unclear, or to provide additional information which will help you with an admission application or to make a choice about schools. You may wish to ask the LEA to plot your safe walking route in advance and also confirm the route plotted, because the admission authority can, on occasion, make mistakes. See Case Study 2.

### **CASE STUDY 2**

Mr and Mrs Y applied to their preferred school, confident that their application on behalf of their child would be successful. Their application was rejected. The LEA stated that Mr and Mrs Y lived further from the school than the parents of the last successful applicant. The parents lodged an appeal and were able to illustrate that a new road that fulfilled the requirements for a safe walking route had not been included, which would have resulted in a place being offered. The appeal was not successful. For some reason, the appeal panel did not accept the integrity of the information supplied by the parents. In my view, if there was any doubt, the appeal should have been adjourned so that the information could be clarified. The investigation, which subsequently took place, should have been carried out before the panel reached their decision. This is why the original decision was flawed.

I discussed the LEA's decision, and the appeal decision, with Mr and Mrs Y and an investigation revealed that the LEA measuring software did not take into account a newly constructed road adopted by the local authority. Information demonstrating this omission was presented to the LEA, and it admitted that a mistake had been made in this regard. However, while it was not prepared to offer a school place to Mr and Mrs Y's child, the LEA did grant a further appeal. Mr and Mrs Y appealed again. After several months of uncertainty, they received notification that their second appeal had been successful.

### **CASE STUDY 3**

Mr Z's admission application to the LEA of his granddaughter's preferred school was not successful. When he enquired why, Mr Z was told that he lived further away than the last successful applicant. Mr Z challenged this decision on the basis that a right of way discounted by the LEA did, in fact, meet its definition of a safe walking route. Had this factor been properly taken into account, the result would have been that the measured distance would have shown that Mr Z's granddaughter lived closer to the school than the last successful applicant.

The LEA inspected the right of way and agreed with Mr Z that it did comply with its definition of a safe walking route. In the circumstances, the LEA re-measured all the applications and found that several applicants, including Mr Z's granddaughter, had been mistakenly denied places at the school. The LEA subsequently offered places to several children, even though it exceeded its own published admission number, without the need for the parents to go through the appeal process.

## **Special or exceptional reasons to attend a school**

Many community schools will feature an 'exceptional' or 'special reasons' criterion in their admission criteria. The exceptional reasons criterion has been designed to allow the admission authority to consider unusual or special circumstances which are not covered by other admission criteria. The admission authority must look at an application submitted under the exceptional reasons criterion from an objective point of view. The admission authority must also consider whether or not the exceptional circumstances cited by parents mean that their child can only attend the one school of their choice.

Should you wish to submit an admission application saying that exceptional circumstances dictate that your child must attend only the school of your choice, you will need to establish exactly what is required to satisfy this criterion. You may need to speak to the admission authority to see how it defines 'exceptional', or if it can give examples of what may be regarded as exceptional. However, such advice cannot be exhaustive, since by its very definition exceptional is, indeed, exceptional.

Many parents believe that their circumstances are exceptional, but this is rarely accepted by the admission authority. It should be noted that the LEA will look at exceptional reasons very carefully and apply its guidelines rigorously. Therefore, not many applicants meet this criterion.

## **Voluntary aided and foundation schools' and academies' admission criteria**

The admission criteria are the same for all community schools within the same LEA area. However, the admission criteria for voluntary aided and foundation schools and academies differ from school to school because each school's admission policy is determined by that school's governors. You will need to look at each school's prospectus to see if you meet the admission criteria for the individual school.

Many voluntary aided schools have a religious ethos. This will be reflected in the school's published admission criteria. The school's governors may require you to complete a supplementary application form, in addition to the one required by the LEA, in order to obtain further information about how the applicant meets the element of the school's admission criteria concerned with religion. The governors of a church school will usually expect to see that the applicant demonstrates regular religious commitment. The governors will determine what they consider to be 'regular commitment'. For instance, the applicant, and also the child's family, may be required to show that he regularly attends church services. Applicants may be asked to provide documentary evidence of their religious membership (such as a baptismal certificate), and also provide a letter of support from their parish priest or minister of religion.

Below is an example of the admission criteria for a Roman Catholic (RC) secondary school, showing the basis on which places are allocated to applicants, with the greatest preference being given to those in category 1:

- 1 Baptised Roman Catholic children attending Catholic schools. The governors would expect each candidate to have the application form accompanied by a baptismal certificate and a statement of support written and signed by the applicant's parish priest.
- 2 Baptised Roman Catholic children who are not attending a Catholic school, but who otherwise meet the requirements of category 1.
- 3 Other baptised Catholic children; a baptismal certificate is essential in such cases.
- 4 Siblings in the same family (including those who are adopted or fostered) of children who are at the school at the time of entry.
- 5 Children of other denominations attending a voluntary aided church school. The governors would expect such Christians to have evidence of baptism and have support of worship written and signed by their parish priest or minister of religion.
- 6 Children of other Christian denominations not attending a voluntary aided church school, providing that they can satisfy the requirements in category 5.
- 7 Any other children whose parents wish them to be educated at the school.

**Notes**

- 1 'Baptised Roman Catholics' is defined.
- 2 'Other Christian denominations' is defined.

- 3 A tie-break using distance is applied where appropriate. (This is used in any criteria when there are more applications than places available.)
- 4 'Looked after' children are given priority in each category (looked after children are cared for by the local authority and are given priority above all children in every school).

The example shows that you may, relatively simply, assess the category into which you fall with respect to this criterion. This will give you an indication of how successful your admission application is likely to be. You must, of course, take other factors into account, such as the number of available places (the published admission number) in your preferred school.

If you speak with the admission authority to obtain advice or information, remember that it is always worthwhile to ask for its response to be given in writing. A written document can always be produced at a later admission appeal, if necessary. It will also show the information you used when you made your decision to apply to a particular school (or schools).

## **Grammar school applications**

The admission arrangements for applying to a grammar school are exactly the same as those for applications to a non-grammar school. You will, however, need to contact the relevant school (or schools) in order to make arrangements for your child to sit the grammar school tests. The admission authority will make arrangements for the tests, which usually take place in October/November. Because of the timing of the tests, it is unlikely that you will know the outcome of your child's tests before the LEA's deadline for the submission of application forms or preference forms. The decisions will be sent to parents at different times depending on the timetable set by the school, but usually these will be in December or January.

## **Other relevant information**

### **Open evenings**

All schools will arrange open evenings for parents. Open evenings are your opportunity to look around the school and see the facilities for yourself. You will be able to speak with the head teacher and the staff, and to ask them any questions you may have about the school. The school naturally wishes to attract pupils, so bear in mind that the head teacher and staff may give a positive slant to the school's achievements. Many students will also be on hand and you should speak to them, as well as to the staff. This will

enable you to get an idea of the students' views of the school and the opinions of the school given by the staff.

It is important that you attend the open evening. You can assess first hand whether or not the school is suitable for your child, and if it has an atmosphere which will promote your child's educational development. Your child should also see the school because his views will be important when you decide which school (or schools) you would prefer him to attend.

## The equal preference system

From the September 2008 intake, LEAs must operate what is referred to as an equal preference system. What will happen is this: You will rank the schools to which you are applying in order of preference, with your first choice at number 1. The LEA will simply receive a list of all applicants who have included the school as one of their preferences. The LEA will then allocate places to applicants in accordance with the LEA's published admission criteria, regardless of the order of preference indicated on the application form. At the same time the LEA will send lists of pupils to the governors of voluntary aided and foundation schools, and academies, where those schools have been listed as a preference. The governors will then advise the LEA which pupils the school is proposing to offer places to, based on the application of the school's own admission criteria.

Under the equal preference system, some applicants may be eligible to receive more than one offer of a school place. Should this happen, the LEA will offer your child a place in the school that has an available place and that has also been ranked highest (although not necessarily first) on your list of preferred schools. The school places which you do not need to accept will be allocated to other pupils.

## Co-ordinated admission arrangements

All LEAs operate what is known as co-ordinated admission arrangements. What this means is that you must complete and return the application form for any school (or schools) to your own LEA. Under current legislation, you are entitled to express up to three preferences for schools. In some areas you can express more preferences. In London, for example, you can express up to six preferences.

What happens, therefore, if you live in the London Borough of Lewisham and you want to apply for two Lewisham community schools, two voluntary aided schools in Lewisham, and two community schools in Greenwich? The simple answer is that you apply on the Lewisham co-ordinated preference form – that is, the application form (which is included in the admissions

booklet) – giving details of all six schools ranked in order of preference. You must ensure that you provide any supporting documentation required by any of the schools. Finally, you must make sure that the application form is received by the LEA by the closing time on the closing date. Case Study 4 shows why it is important to meet the LEA's deadline.

If it is at all possible, take the application form in to the LEA personally, and ask for a receipt. If you are unable to do this, make sure that your application form is posted well before the closing date. Telephone the LEA to check that it has been received. This is very important, because LEAs may claim that proof of posting is not proof of receipt. Thus, even if you can demonstrate that you posted your application form, there is no guarantee that it was received by the LEA.

## The application form

An application form, also called the preference form, will normally be included in the LEA's admissions booklet. Many LEAs now enable you to apply online. Applications made online are usually acknowledged by an automatic message. The acknowledgement message should be printed and kept, so that it may be produced if necessary. If you do not receive acknowledgement of an online application, you should check with the LEA that the application has been received.

If you are applying for a place at a secondary school, some LEAs make provision for application forms to be handed in to the primary school currently attended by your child. If this is the case, ask the primary school for a receipt. If you are applying for a primary school place, some LEAs allow you to return the application form to the first preference primary school, as well as directly to the LEA.

But, whatever you do, do not leave returning your application form to the LEA until the last minute! If you do, something unexpected may happen. This could mean that your application form is not received until after the LEA's deadline. Case Study 4 shows that, in a 'worst case scenario', your child may be denied a place at your preferred school, simply because you missed the deadline.

### **CASE STUDY 4**

Mrs N, who happened to be a teacher at a secondary school, gave the preference form to her son and asked him to hand it in at his primary school. The school noticed that it had not received a form from Mrs N and it left an urgent message on her mobile phone to let her know that the closing time for receipt of the forms was 3pm that day. Mrs N

retrieved the message at approximately 1pm. In haste, Mrs N went to the primary school attended by her son and found the form in his locker. However, the primary school had already returned the forms to the LEA, as it was required to do. Mrs N then rushed the form straight to the LEA's offices. Unfortunately, by the time the LEA received the form it was 3.15pm and the form was, correctly, deemed to be late.

The preferred school was oversubscribed and was not in a position to offer Mrs N's son a place. Mrs N lodged an appeal, but it was not successful. If the application form had been received on time, her son would have secured a place at his preferred school.

The LEA will start to process the application forms as soon as it receives them. If any preferences have been received for schools other than the community schools in its administrative area, such as voluntary aided schools, it will advise the relevant admission authorities to see if they are able to offer places to the applicants; these lists will not be sent to those authorities until after the closing date.

Please bear in mind that if you are seeking a place at a voluntary aided school, foundation school or academy, you may also need to complete a governors' form (which can be obtained from the school concerned), in addition to the usual LEA application form. It is important that you provide whatever information is required, in order to avoid any delay to the LEA's decision-making process and thus to your being informed where your child will be offered a school place.

## **Sit back and relax!**

Having done all your homework and submitted your application (or preference) form, there is nothing more that you can do. Except to wait! Decisions relating to secondary school applications are published on 1 March every year. Decisions regarding primary school applications will usually be published later in the year, although some primary schools do issue their decisions before 1 March.

Remember that approximately 90 per cent of all parents secure a place at one of their preferred schools. The children of the remaining ten per cent of parents will be offered places at alternative schools. If your child is offered a place at a school which you feel is unacceptable, you will be offered the opportunity to appeal against the LEA's decision. If you did not get offered a place at any of your preferred schools, or if you were offered a place at a school but not at your highest preference, you have a right to a statutory appeal in front of an independent appeal panel.

## CHECKLIST 1

- 1 Have you obtained a copy of the LEA's admissions booklet?
- 2 Have you obtained the prospectus (or prospectuses) for the school (or schools) which interest(s) you?
- 3 Do you understand how places will be allocated if there are more applications than available school places?
- 4 After studying the published admission criteria for last year's admission, is it your opinion that your child will be allocated a place in your preferred school?
- 5 Have you attended your preferred school's (or schools') open evening(s), and spoken to the staff and the students?
- 6 After consulting the current year's admission criteria, is your choice of school realistic and reasonable?
- 7 Do you understand how the equal preference system will operate?
- 8 Have you obtained details of successful admissions for the last five years?
- 9 Have the admission criteria been amended recently? You can find this out by asking the admission authority.
- 10 Have you obtained any advice from the LEA or from the school in writing, and if so, have you kept this information to hand?
- 11 If you are applying to a grammar school, have you arranged for your child to sit the entrance tests?
- 12 If you are applying to a faith school, are you certain that you can demonstrate your religious affiliation?
- 13 If you are applying to a faith school, have you asked your parish priest or minister of religion for a letter of support?
- 14 Have you obtained all the documentation to support your admission application?
- 15 Have you checked to make sure that you have enclosed **all** of the necessary information with the application form?
- 16 Have you ensured that your application was submitted on time?
- 17 Have you checked to ensure that your application was received by the admission authority?