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Access to Grammar schools for disadvantaged pupils

**A report of interviews with Grammar
and Primary Head teachers**

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

This research looks at why children from disadvantaged backgrounds go or don't go to grammar schools. Previous reports commissioned by the Sutton Trust have shown just how successful grammar schools are in getting students into the country's leading research universities¹. This success makes it all the more important to ensure that grammar schools – regardless of ideological debates over their future– do their utmost to enrol academically gifted children from all social backgrounds

This report describes the factors that help and hinder children from disadvantaged backgrounds getting into grammar schools. The information is based on in depth interviews with Head teachers from primary and selective grammar schools.

Between 1973 and 2012 grammar schools fell in number from 809 to 164 (DfE, 2012) and by 2012 around 4% of school aged children attended grammar schools (Cribb et al, 2013).

About 15 of the 152 English local authorities have fully selective secondary systems - another 21 have some fully selective secondary schools.

Opponents say grammar schools are socially divisive - sifting children in to "sheep and goats" at 11 years of age, and that other schools around grammars suffer. They say money plays an important part in getting a place at grammar school because of the cost of private tutors coaching children to pass the entrance tests. Recent figures from the Department for Education show that the proportion of children in grammar schools eligible for free school meals is low - 1.9% - compared with a national average of about 16% in 2012 (Bolton:2013).

Supporters of grammar schools say they are 'beacons of excellence' that help children achieve their potential and that academically bright pupils are best taught together. They say they are vehicles for social mobility and that more children should have the chance to go to them so there should be more of them.

¹ <http://www.suttontrust.com/public/documents/1UniversityAdmissions.pdf>

With the current academies' programme which removes schools from local authorities' responsibility and allows changes to a school's admission code, the way is becoming easier for the number of selective grammar schools to expand. Many grammars have converted to academy status in England -71% of grammar schools compared with 36% of all secondary schools were academies in 2012.(Bolton: 2013)

1.2 Methodology

To understand why pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds do or do not go to grammar schools we spoke to staff from a range of primary and grammar schools. Using an analysis produced by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) we interviewed senior members of staff in five grammar schools.

These schools were identified as having higher than average numbers of disadvantaged children. This allowed us to explore what they had in place to produce this, what they believed the key barriers were and what can be done to promote disadvantaged pupils' access to grammar schools.

Three more interviews were carried out with Head teachers of grammar schools put forward by the Grammar School Heads Association (GSHA). These were identified as having particularly supportive practices and a strong reputation for actively encouraging pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

To understand the issues from the perspective of primary schools, interviews were also carried out with three primary school Head teachers.

In this report we set out the key issues as identified by these Head teachers and discuss examples of good practice.

1.3 Defining 'disadvantage'

We used Free School Meal eligibility as the proxy for disadvantage. There were concerns that this measure failed to consider those children who just miss out on qualifying for FSM and also children moving in and out of poverty as family circumstances begin to change more quickly but in most research Free School Meal eligibility is the standard benchmark for disadvantage (this is based on the family being in receipt of a number of welfare benefits and/or a family income of less than £16,190).

2. Key themes

2.1 Educational aspiration

Many Heads felt that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds had lower educational aspirations compared with those from more affluent backgrounds. They felt that more middle class affluent families placed greater importance on education and were more likely to see grammar schools as providing a high quality education leading to greater advantages in later life. Parents in disadvantaged families, who themselves may have lower education levels, sometimes were thought to know less about the grammar and education system and as a result put less value on what grammar schools could offer their children:

“I think families find it very hard to look outside their immediate neighbourhood when they’re looking for schools, and the tendency is that they stay in their neighbourhood and they go to the same school as everybody else goes to in the area. Even if they are bright enough to take advantage of the depths and pace of a selective school curriculum.. their eyes aren’t lifted to that horizon. We need to do more work with primary schools to raise aspiration.” (Head teacher, Grammar school)

Where grammar schools had a higher than average number of disadvantaged children in their intake, strong educational aspirations (for example, amongst some Asian cultures), were felt to play an important role in increasing the number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds in these schools.

2.2 Parental perceptions of grammar schools

Head teachers felt that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds often associated grammar schools with tradition, middle class values and elitism. These perceptions created a *social* rather than educational barrier. As a result, grammar school Head teachers said that parents from deprived areas were reluctant to send their child to the local grammar – they felt that their children could be out of their depth socially and financially and might struggle interacting with children from more affluent backgrounds. Instead, parents felt more comfortable sending their child to the local school, where they would mix with their friends and children from the same neighbourhood and similar backgrounds.

2.3 The role of primary schools

Grammar school Head teachers highlighted the important role primary schools play in encouraging parents from disadvantaged families to consider sending their children to grammar. Sometimes this was difficult when primary schools disagreed with assessment based entry processes and selective education in general. Sometimes primary schools don't have a longstanding relationship with their local grammar schools and weren't in a position to give parents accurate information about the ethos of the grammar school and its admission procedure.

Some Head teachers said that some primary school teachers believe that grammar schools are not suitable for children from poorer families. Reasons included that they wouldn't fit in at the school, or that they would no longer fit in at home (or in their local community) and so it would be better to go to the local non selective secondary school - even if they were academically bright enough to go to grammar school. This view was not expressed in our interviews with primary school staff although some said that parents might prefer a more 'rounded' education for their child, or that some pupils would not want to attend grammar schools.

There were mixed views on the extent to which local primary schools should be actively engaging their pupils with the grammar school. Although grammar schools hold ultimate responsibility for tackling any pre conceived ideas about the school and only they can change these preconceptions, this could not happen without primary schools providing a gateway to grammar schools for more able pupils.

"It's the primary heads who are the gatekeepers really, they're actually saying to the parents, 'Look, go and have a look at the grammar; you might not think it's for you, but go and have a look'" (Head Teacher, Grammar school)

Primary school Heads in areas where taking the 11+ examination is not compulsory, thought families of disadvantaged children were less likely to put their child in for the exam - they thought that it was the role of the primary school teachers to encourage them. Their perception of grammar school education and its benefits for all pupils as well as for who these schools are 'suitable' was therefore seen as playing an important role.

"I mean I'm quite keen, personally, to have children taking the test that only have a chance of passing it..."

(Head Teacher, Primary school)

Recommendation: Primary schools put in all pupils they think are bright enough to sit the entrance exam, rather than selecting just those they think will fit in (which is often those from more affluent

families). Leaving it to parent choice was seen to strongly influence which pupils sit the entrance exam and the chance of getting a place. Middle class parents were seen as more likely to put their child in for the exam and to take steps to get them to 'pass' (for example, tutoring).

2.4 Community engagement and outreach

There was a feeling that steps need to be taken to change the image of grammar schools and show they are open to everyone. Outreach to the community includes engaging with local parents, local primary schools and in particular, those primary schools with disadvantaged pupils who may be missing out on the chance to attend Grammar schools. It was also felt to be increasingly important for them to show everything they can offer children, especially for those who have interests beyond straight academic subjects.

“What tends to happen with the grammar schools is they don't have to prove themselves, so they don't really make an awful lot of effort in my opinion when it comes to the open evenings because it's, well, ‘if you pass the test, you'll come here’ whereas with the other schools that are competing, they have to be all-singing, all-dancing to get the best children into their school”.

(Head Teacher, Primary School)

A number of activities have been introduced by grammar schools in this study to increase local community engagement and attract children from all walks of life.

- **Commitment to engagement activities.** For example, having dedicated members of staff targetting particular areas of the community and local schools to engage disadvantaged young people. A one to one approach with specific families and primary school Heads has helped them to engage with grammar schools.
- **Dispelling the myth.** This is where grammar school staff go into local primary schools to form links, show the pupils they are not 'scary' and talk about their school and in some cases take groups of children for lessons. Primary schools have also provided regular school time slots to visit the school and present sessions to children. These include details on the entrance exam, how the school system works and the support available when they get there. This particular strategy helped children to get to know faces from the school and understand the entrance system.
- **Bridging the gap between the grammar school and the whole community.** Grammar schools organising 'mini festivals' designed to bring together the local community, not just prospective pupils and parents. As a result, one grammar school has noted an increase in interest from primary schools previously uninterested in the school. Other encourage their

pupils to take part in community volunteering - sending a message to the community that they want to contribute positively to the local area.

- **Recruitment drives** in primary schools. These showcase the school and encourage children from disadvantaged backgrounds a desire to attend and the best chance to secure a place in a grammar school. This may also include sessions in the grammar school (during the school day and with transport provided) where pupils are tutored.
- **Taster days** specifically targeted at parents from catchment areas. These were designed to tackle pre conceived ideas around the formality and ‘stuffiness’ of grammar schools. The day included a walk round of the school and opportunities for informal discussions with staff.
- **Identifying gifted students.** Grammars have also worked closely with primaries in identifying gifted pupils in Year 3 and targeting the parents with the view to building a long term relationship. It is hoped this will help to alleviate concerns about applying for a place at Year 6.
- **Changing the image.** Many said that there is a need for good PR to change the image of grammars so they are not seen as being ‘posh’ and elitist. This needs to happen if grammar schools are to attract pupils from different backgrounds and thrive.

2.5 Catchment area

Issues around catchment areas underpin much of the discussion about engaging the local community.

Grammar schools without a catchment area have seen a steady increase in the number of children coming from further away. These pupils are said to often come from more affluent areas – their parents can afford transport costs and can capitalise on the grammar school offer. Head teachers from grammar schools also said that over recent years there had been a notable increase in the number of children from private or independent primary schools applying.

Concerns were voiced around the affect this may have on the chances of poorer children coming to grammar schools. Increasing numbers of pupils from outside the immediate area was thought to further embed the ‘distance’ from the local community, making Grammar schools look like they weren’t for their children, and deterring the very children they are trying to reach out to.

“You see all these families arriving in their big Land Rovers, what’s that trying to say to the local community?”

(Head teacher, Grammar school)

Several grammar school Heads believed the reason they had higher intakes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds was primarily because of the geographical area they were in – when

the school is in a more socially mixed area with high levels of social deprivation then there is a higher chance of having a mix of pupils in the intake.

Some respondents said that reducing the catchment area of the grammar school would give more local disadvantaged pupils a greater chance of getting in by reducing competition from affluent families from further afield.

2.6 Coaching and Admissions

Coaching or tutoring commonly used to get into selective schools. Students are either coached in the type of skills that are tested in entrance exams or do lots of practice papers. All of this can give these pupils an advantage when it comes to taking the test. Tutoring is often private and costly and therefore more likely to be used by affluent parents. It was widely acknowledged that children from more affluent, middle class families were coached to pass the entrance exam. Head teachers were concerned about this:

“Our perception is that [coaching] does to some extent work, that these particular test students can be coached for, and then they perhaps get precedence over children that haven't had that level of coaching”

(Head teacher, Grammar school)

“If you can afford to do it, it costs a lot of money, and therefore those who can't afford to do it will just kind of shrug their shoulders and can't do anything about it. So it is, it is divisive in that way.”

(Head teacher, Grammar school)

An increase in private tutoring results in children from families that can afford it dominating grammar school places. Anecdotally it seems to have got worse with the recession: when parents cannot afford a private secondary education for their child but want them to have high quality teaching, they pay for extra tuition or even private primary education to try and secure a grammar school place.

Views were divided on the tutoring debate; some grammars did not inherently disagree with tutoring as it was good examination preparation, others saw it as a barrier that further reduces opportunities for more disadvantaged young people.

While efforts have been made to design exams that are resistant to tutoring, concerns remain about how ‘tutor-able’ some of the entrance exams are. These concerns were:

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- Practicing past papers means children are likely to see questions that come up in their entrance exam (as they don't change enormously).
 - They test specific skills rather than global ability – learning what certain types of questions are asking you to do and how to respond appropriately is an advantage.
 - Maths ability appears to carry more weight and is more teachable than other skills or tasks that require a wider knowledge-base or aptitude to thinking creatively.

Entrance exams with these features lend themselves more to tutoring and so are favourable to pupils whose parents can afford it. For pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, sitting the exam could in itself disadvantage them as they may not have been tested in that way before or seen the type of questions the exams contain – particularly where grammar school sets its own entrance exams.

Other factors reducing access for disadvantaged pupils was the time and cost involved in travelling to different test venues over what could be a period of weeks. For this reason, some grammar schools a joint test shared by a number of grammar schools so pupils only had to pass one exam to be eligible for a number of grammar schools in the area.

Admission appeals was another issue identified by Head Teachers. Using lawyers to lodge admissions appeals favours more affluent families. Middle class parents are more likely to be aware of the appeals procedure and have the confidence to pursue it. Supporting disadvantaged families to pursue an appeal was identified as an important factor that could increase the number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds going to grammar school. Examples were given of both primary school teachers and heads of Grammar schools providing information and support to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to successfully appeal.

A number of activities were being undertaken or considered to challenge these issues;

- **A review of the current testing system.** Some schools are in favour of producing an 'uncoachable' method of assessment. They saw this as a more long term objective to help level out opportunities. However, there remained some support for the current 11+ examination process, deeming this as a good indication of academic ability.
- **Overhauling the school admissions policy.** This was popular with some respondents. Positively discriminating in favour of children from families in receipt of state benefits over other children passing the entrance exam was suggested as one way of challenging the advantages gained by coaching.

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- **Free or subsidised coaching sessions** for academically able primary school children from poorer backgrounds provided opportunity for children whose parents might not be able to afford it. Online and face to face tutoring the sessions can prepare children less familiar with examinations for the test content.
 - **Better primary school teacher awareness.** Primary school teachers need to be aware of pupils scores from the entrance exam and support or make appeals for disadvantaged pupils who were close to securing a place or who they believe (regardless of their test score on the day) should go to grammar school. Grammar schools need to be open to these approaches, value others' professional judgements and consider offering places to disadvantaged pupils whose primary schools have recommended them.

2.7 Financial barriers

It was widely acknowledged that financial barriers had to be considered more systematically in both day to day school and extra curricular planning. Whilst grammars were confident that disadvantaged pupils integrated well both academically and socially, they were mindful to provide further support to these pupils in a way that did not ostracise them from their counterparts. They had several schemes to support children from less wealthy families once they were their pupils. This helps overcome some of the concerns that parents might have had about their children attending so to stop prospective parents not applying in the first place, the schools have to ensure parents are aware of what support they can offer.

A number of ongoing support activities were being used by grammar schools:

- Ensuring grants and other financial provisions are available for poorer children and their families for school uniforms and trips away
- Second hand uniform shops to provide an affordable alternative to buying new uniforms
- Providing heavily subsidised or entirely funded places for overseas school trips to ensure that all pupils had an equal opportunity to experience extra curricular activities

3. Improvements and recommendations

The evidence above outlines efforts being made to tackle issues of access to grammar schools, there remain a number of challenges both at a strategic and school level that need to be overcome to provide the best chance of equality of access.

3.1 Strategic level

At a strategic level the research suggests

- **Securing more funding to help with myth busting, engagement and recruitment activities.** Grammar schools that had been successful in engaging disadvantaged young people had predominantly done so by securing some extra funding. Further financial support can help to embed successful activities and plan effectively for future work in this area.
- **Tackling oversubscription.** Oversubscription continues to exacerbate issues around diversity in grammar schools. Some Heads expressed the view that an increase in the number of grammar schools may help to ease the pressure on already strained and complicated entrance systems that currently favour those from more affluent backgrounds.
- **Sharing lessons.** Grammar school Heads who felt they had implemented a number of effective activities wanted to share their learning with other schools. At this point they felt that there was no obvious platform available to do this and this was a missed opportunity to learn from others' experience.
- **Centralised commitment to equality of access.** Local authorities and government must share a commitment to equality of access to grammar schools for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to tackle the issue as well as understand the barriers and what needs to be done to overcome these. The message, if it is to be spread, needs to come from the top.

3.2 School level

The research indicated that at a school level, for improved equality of access there needs to be

- **A burning commitment to having pupils from a range of backgrounds at the heart of the school ethos.** A genuine passion and desire to improve access for all children must be at the

heart of the school and a live issue for the management team, governors and teaching staff. Realistic objectives must include how individual staff members will play an active role in achieving these goals.

- **Coaching gifted but disadvantaged pupils.** Providing free face to face and/or online coaching was particularly effective in bridging the gap between those who can and cannot afford private coaching. With challenges around private coaching, further funding can help to increase the number of coaching places offered to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

“Grammar schools were and, and should still be for everyone. They should be people rubbing shoulders with each other for their own merits not because their parents had enough money to give them coaching”

(Head Teacher, Grammar School)

- **Review of the entrance tests.** Schools need to review their current admission assessments to make sure that they are testing the whole child rather than the results of private coaching and issues around the current 11+ favouring more mathematically able students.
- **Review of admission policies.** Grammar schools need to review their admissions policies and appeal processes continually to make sure they are not disadvantaging children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Review of catchment areas.** A detailed review of catchment areas and their effect on children from disadvantaged areas needs to be carried out by all grammar schools. Without this knowledge it is impossible for schools to tackle oversubscription issues, particularly from more affluent areas. This issue appears more immediate in grammars where applications are rising year on year.

4. Case studies – best practice grammar schools

The following case studies show how some Grammar schools we spoke to are supporting the access of disadvantaged pupils in practice

4.1 Bishop Wordsworth Boys Grammar School

Bishop Wordsworth has around 900 pupils from the ages of 11-18. Based in Salisbury. It is the only grammar school in the local authority. They have recently increased the size of their catchment area.

Bishop's has a long term commitment to improving access opportunities for children from poorer backgrounds. Although engaging with the local community has been challenging, a number of activities have been effective in bridging this gap. They are making efforts to try and diversify the kinds of primary schools they engage with, focussing on schools from a more diverse area that are unlikely to have sent children to the school before. In recent years, the Head has been active in attending primary schools in disadvantaged areas. Sessions around myth busting and further information on the school has helped pupils to consider the grammar as an option open to them, much of which is cascaded down to parents with similar views.

The school has also changed its admissions policy to reflect more favourably those from disadvantaged backgrounds by prioritising children who pass the 11+ and whose family are in receipt of state benefit.

Key Stage 2 booster lessons, designed to familiarise children with the 11+ examination, also form a key part of the school's commitment to diversity. Children eligible for free school meals or whose family are in receipt of benefits are offered free weekly booster lessons and their place is prioritised over other children's. These classes have not only been helping children build confidence around the examination, but also help to build parental aspiration as they see their child progress through the course.

The school still faces challenges around awareness in some sections of the local community, they hope to build on some of these recent changes and secure further funding dedicated to enabling access for all.

“Grammar schools should be a kind of a, it's the classic idea of a ladder. And a route to accelerate you towards the very highest levels in education that you can get to. It's that. And it's not; it shouldn't be dominated by one social class or the other. It should provide a meritocracy.”

4.2 Pates Grammar School

Pates has around 1000 pupils, with an intake of around 120 Year 7s each academic year. The school is located in a deprived area with seven other grammar schools relatively close by.

Outreach activities with the local community have been the focal point for raising awareness and opportunities for engagement with the school. Regular community events such as mini festivals held at the school for local people is an opportunity for gifted children and their parents to see what the school has to offer, and also goes some way in tackling pre conceived ideas about the school. Sixth form students are also encouraged to volunteer in the local community, with a particular focus on working with children and young families, facilitating the schools presence in the local community further.

The Head tries to visit all the 70 local primary schools in the area to help with myth busting and encouraging pupils who may not otherwise consider the Grammar to look at what the school can offer them. These activities are viewed as a catalyst for engaging bright children and their parents.

The school's commitment to access for all has also seen the development of free online coaching sessions offered to gifted children from state primary schools in more deprived areas. The sessions are designed to build confidence and improve academic ability – and at no cost to the child's family. The school has seen remarkable results from this relatively small trial and intend to expand the initiative in future years.

The school is considering more 'coach proof' entrance assessments in an attempt to tackle the increase in private tutoring. In recent years, they have amended their admissions policy to prioritise intake children from more disadvantaged backgrounds to go some way in tackling this.

The school is committed to a long term plan of activities focused on engaging parents and raising the aspirations of young people in the local community.

“You need to actively want to do it (improve diversity) and when you do that then people will buy into it 'cause they believe what you're saying. So it, it needs to be part and very, and a very obvious part of the vision for the school to want to do that.”

4.3 Judd School

The Judd School is a voluntary aided grammar school in Tonbridge, Kent. The area it is based in is described as affluent with only pockets of deprivation. There are around 960 students aged 11-18, and nearly all go on to University.

Improving access for poorer children has been done by establishing good relationships with primary schools from different areas. Bright pupils are selected by their primary school and invited to the school to attend weekly project sessions. This gets the children used to the grammar environment, helps to myth bust, and inspires them to enjoy learning. The school tries to make these sessions accessible for all by providing free travel to the school and sessions take place during normal school hours.

Grammar school staff are also encouraged to attend primary schools on a regular basis in an attempt to open up the school to more pupils and improve their profile in the local community. *Ad hoc* visits to the school are arranged on a regular basis for families to come and tour the school and chat with staff.

Coaching is a big problem for the school. They want to move away from the more coachable 11+ exam to get round the problem of disadvantage for less affluent families and rebalance skills in English and Maths.

The school's long term plan is to design their own method of assessment to get a more rounded intake, both academically and socially, that will give a truer reflection of academic ability.

“If we were inventing our own we'd do a test that simply says you don't need to practice. We're testing you on what you do normally. No special preparation required, level playing field and all that. Not doing these strange non-verbal gymnastics.”

5. Recommendations for future research

These interviews have allowed some in depth of exploration of the findings from the data analysis carried out by IFS. We have explored various factors which may affect the number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds going to grammar school.

What isn't covered by this report is what other secondary schools, other education providers and policy-makers think about grammar schools. What is striking is how much schools attributed the role that parents play in choosing a grammar school for their child and how attitudes to education varies between different socio-economic groups of parents. There is much academic literature about the role of the home learning environment on attainment for children – it is disappointing that Heads see bright children from disadvantaged backgrounds not being encouraged to go to grammar school.

Views of parents, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, towards grammar school education is another missing piece of the jigsaw – in this research we have not spoken to parents. Finding out if parents genuinely see their child's educational options in this way, or whether this is a stereotypical misrepresentation on the part of schools, needs to be explored further to see what can be done to overcome this barrier to give disadvantaged children equal access to grammar school places.

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