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April 2026



Admissions Not Impossible

A framework for Fair School Admissions





About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is the UK's leading social mobility charity. Our programmes empower young people to access life-changing opportunities, and our research influences national change to deliver a fairer future.

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Thanks to Binda Patel and Carl Cullinane for their belief in my capacity to lead this project and their ongoing and steadfast support in bringing it into reality! Thank you to every school leader who has engaged with the Fair School Admissions Pledge and Fair School Admissions Award - you are the makers of change.

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Overview

- The Sutton Trust has been publishing research on school admissions for over 20 years. Most recently, this has highlighted that top-performing state secondary comprehensive schools admit fewer pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) than live in their local communities. They also admit fewer pupils receiving SEN (Special Educational Needs) Support than are present in their local area.
- The top 500 schools as measured by Progress 8 admit 20% fewer pupils eligible for FSM than live in their catchment areas, and 9% fewer pupils with SEND. The gap is even larger for those facing multiple disadvantages: these schools admit 26% fewer pupils who are both eligible for FSM and receiving SEN Support. In contrast, there is no gap for pupils with SEND who are not eligible for FSM, indicating that disparities in access for pupils with SEND are largely driven by socio-economic disadvantage.
- Two thirds of the gap in FSM levels between the highest attaining schools and the average school is attributable to social selectivity within catchment and just a third to the location of such schools in better-off areas. As such, a pupil not eligible for FSM living in the catchment area of a high attainment school is around 50% more likely to attend than a pupil eligible for FSM.
- At the highest attaining schools, 34% of pupils come from the most affluent neighbourhoods, and just 10% from the least. Again, this is not simply because these schools are located in better-off areas. A student from a most affluent neighbourhood is almost twice as likely (86%) to attend a high attaining school compared to those from a least affluent neighbourhood *within the same catchment area*.
- In the absence of national policy change, the Sutton Trust began working directly with schools to introduce fairer admissions practices in August 2023. Since then, 118 schools have joined the Fair School Admissions Pledge.
- We have supported 16 schools directly to introduce a Pupil Premium priority within their admissions policies and have been heavily cited in the rationale for a further six schools doing the same. This represents an increase of over 50% in the number of secondary schools nationally using a Pupil Premium priority.

- The Sutton Trust has given out 108 Fair School Admissions Awards recognising schools taking innovative approaches to ensuring all children in their community can access their schools.
- Building on our direct work with schools, alongside further research, the Sutton Trust has developed the Fair School Admissions Framework. This sets out our recommendations for how government and school leaders can work collaboratively to make admissions more inclusive.
- The framework is structured around three key themes. The first, 'Strategic Direction', reflects our learning that social segregation between schools is not yet widely understood, and that government has a key role in creating the conditions for schools to adopt fairer admissions policies.
- The second theme 'Key Admissions Policy Change' highlights our growing understanding that Pupil Premium priority has significant potential to reshape the admissions landscape.
- The third theme 'Taking a Wider View of Admissions' explores how factors such as the cost of attending school, access to clear information, and other innovative approaches to admissions can all contribute to improving access to high-performing schools.
- Taken together, the recommendations within the framework are designed to reinforce one another, creating the strongest possible conditions for fair admissions to have meaningful impact and ensuring that all children have equitable access to high-performing schools.

The Sutton Trust and Fair School Admissions

The Sutton Trust has been researching unequal access to high performing schools for [over 20 years](#), consistently showing that the schools with the best exam results have the lowest number of pupils from poorer backgrounds, even within the comprehensive system. What is more, those schools also take on fewer pupils from poorer backgrounds than live in their local area.

School admissions and who gets to attend good schools matters. Schools with fewer disadvantaged pupils and higher exam results get better Ofsted ratings and in turn attract more middle-class parents, and the best teachers. Improving the social mix across schools can break this vicious cycle. Your background shouldn't dictate your access to a high performing state comprehensive school. Fair admissions means that all children have equal access to the best education possible.

However, little progress has been made at the national level tackling this issue, and with increased academisation, more and more schools control their own admissions. Therefore, in August 2023 the Sutton Trust initiated a project looking at whether it was possible to engage directly with schools in adopting fair school admissions approaches, taking a 'ground up' approach. The first six months was dedicated to speaking with school and MAT (Multi-Academy Trust) leaders about the issue, exploring potential causes and what would be needed for change. We also spoke with other leading researchers and stakeholders such as local authorities.

From these discussions, we developed a theory of change for school-level admissions reform which identified that to make change, school and MAT leaders would need a package of assistance, delivered over a period of time, in order to adopt admissions changes. It also highlighted the importance of building a robust evidence base including further research, best practice and case studies to support national scaling and government engagement. Alongside this, there is a clear role for government in incentivising and rewarding schools that make progress towards fairer admissions. As a result, the Fair School Admissions Pledge and Awards were born.

The Fair School Admissions Pledge

The Fair School Admissions Pledge provided a package of support with an initial two months of direct training and input from the Sutton Trust accompanied by long-term support from a school expert. Delegates received a Fair Access Review Guide, which gave them all the resources they needed to

undertake a diagnostic review of admissions in their settings. We also launched the [School Admissions Dashboard](#) to help schools diagnose where their intakes were not reflecting their local community.

This was accompanied by a webinar and the chance to connect with the rest of their cohort, providing peer support and networking opportunities.

Approximately six weeks after that, a second set of action planning resources was provided alongside another webinar. This time, the school leaders focused on sharing their strengths and areas for development before collectively problem solving and ideating action plans. Finally, schools wrote their Fair School Admissions action plan.

Between March 2024 and July 2025, the Trust engaged with 118 schools through the Fair School Admissions Pledge. Evaluation data from these schools has deepened our understanding of how school leaders should be supported in introducing fair school admissions.

Accompanying the Fair School Admissions Pledge, we also hosted an annual Policy Change Workshop for schools, Trusts and local authorities looking to make change. This half-day event provided delegates with their options for policy change: pupil premium priority; fair banding; marginal ballots; simplified faith criteria and adjusting catchment areas. It also gave delegates information on how to run a consultation process. Long-term support was also offered, and we stayed in touch with those adopting policy changes throughout their implementation period.

Schools which had been through the Pledge process, as well as schools already taking innovative approaches to admissions, became eligible for the Fair School Admissions Award. This was set up to raise awareness throughout the school sector and recognise the schools implementing fair school admissions. Awardees can receive this at bronze, silver or gold standard, reflecting the level of action they have taken. To date, we have given 108 Fair School Admissions Awards, to schools, MATs, and local authorities.

Throughout this time, we have continued to talk with school and MAT leaders and other stakeholders to continue to develop our understanding of admissions. This has included sharing our research at national education conferences, panels, podcasts and through written articles. We have also used our experiences working with schools on the ground to inform our national policy advocacy on this issue.

“Between March 2024 and July 2025, the Trust engaged with 118 schools through the Fair School Admissions Pledge... To date, we have given 108 Fair School Admissions Awards, to schools, Multi Academy Trusts, and local authorities.”

Potential policy mechanisms for fair admissions

Random ballots: Ballots are where eligible applicants are selected for admission at random using a lottery, meaning everyone has an equal chance of getting in. This can be done in a number of ways, including 50-50 ballots, where half of places are reserved for those within a small catchment area, and the rest are open to a ballot within either a larger catchment area, or are unrestricted in terms of proximity. An alternative option is that of 'marginal lotteries', whereby most school places are allocated as normal, but a proportion of places, perhaps 10% or 20%, are reserved for applicants outside the catchment allocated by lottery.

Pupil premium priority: Prioritising applicants eligible for the pupil premium is currently allowed under the school admissions code, and some schools are operating such policies. Again, there are several ways of implementing this. The most far reaching would be to treat pupil premium applicants with strict priority, in the way looked after children are currently, meaning that all such applicants receive priority before other factors are taken into account. A less radical option would be to limit this strict priority by using a quota. Schools can set this quota at a number they feel appropriate - many schools use 30% or their local average.

Fair banding: Banding tests are currently used by a number of schools. Pupils sit an entrance test, but rather than allocating places based on ability, places are allocated equally across all ability 'bands'. This means a balance of abilities are admitted, which is likely to have a knock-on effect on socio-economic background.

Nodal points: Using geographic locations other than the school to determine distance from home for the purpose of prioritising admissions.

Social segregation in schools: The problem

In March 2026 the Sutton Trust published [Selective Inclusion](#). This report updates the most recent statistics on social segregation in English schools, as well as deepening the analysis to look at how disadvantage and special educational needs combine when it comes to admissions. The top performing 500 schools, whether measured on attainment or progress, continue to take, on average, fewer children eligible for free school meals than live in their local area. They also take fewer children receiving SEND support than live in their local area. These issues compound, resulting in children who experience the

double disadvantage of being both eligible for free school meals and receiving SEND support, facing the biggest barriers to accessing high performing schools.

In the comprehensives with the highest GCSE results, 15% of pupils are eligible for free school meals as shown in Figure 1. At schools with the lowest, it's 39%. And it's not just because high performing schools are located in more affluent areas. They also take 25% fewer FSM pupils than live in the neighbourhoods they draw their pupils from as shown in Figure 2. The lowest performing schools take 26% more. In fact, two thirds of the gap in FSM levels between the highest attaining schools and the average school is attributable to social selectivity within catchment, and just a third to the location of such schools in better-off areas.

Figure 1: Overall FSM rate compared to catchment, by quintile of school Attainment 8 scores

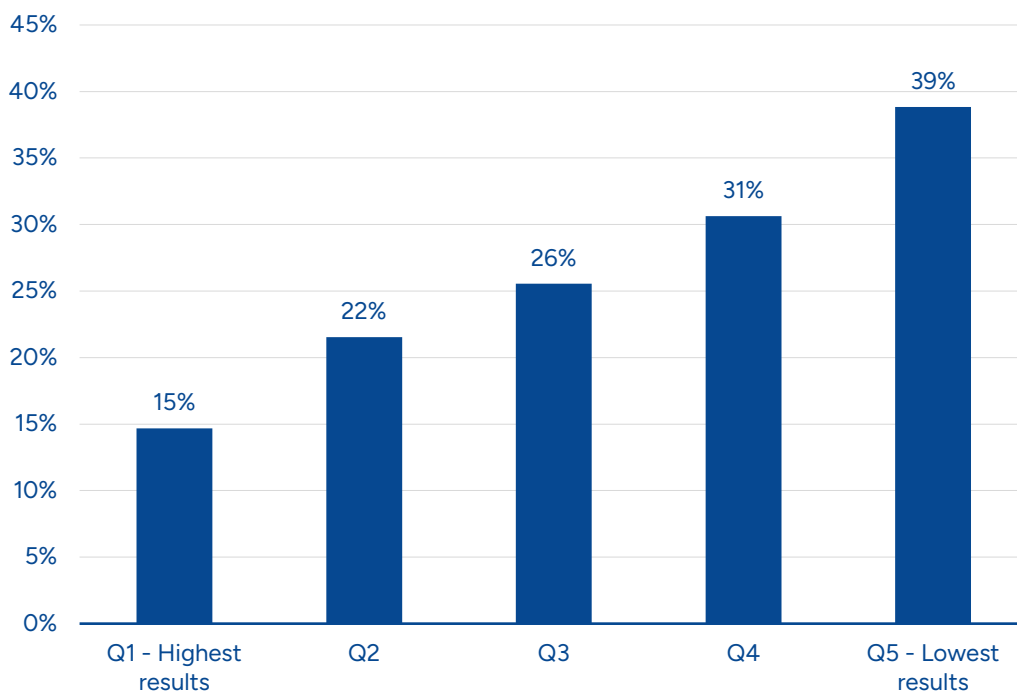
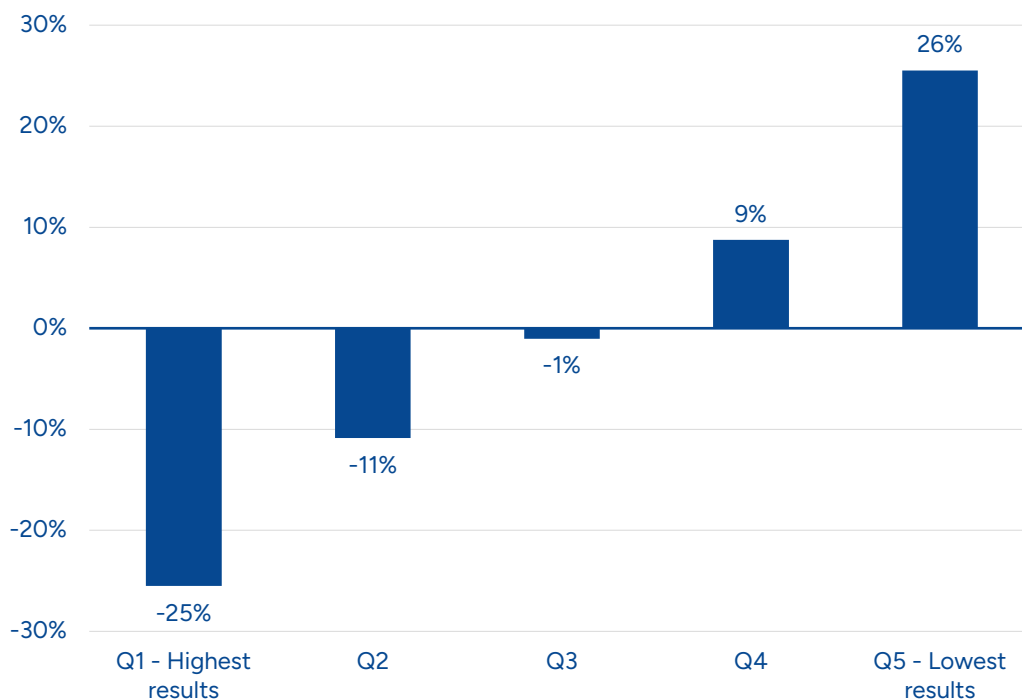


Figure 2: Overall FSM gap compared to catchment, by quintile of school Attainment 8 scores



Put another way, a pupil not eligible for FSM living in the catchment area of a high attainment school is around 50% more likely to attend than a pupil eligible for FSM.

If you look at pupils living in the most affluent and least affluent neighbourhoods, the picture is even starker. At the highest attaining schools, 34% of pupils come from the most affluent neighbourhoods, and just 10% from the least. Again, this is not simply because these schools are located in better-off areas. A student from a most affluent neighbourhood is almost twice as likely (86%) to attend a high attaining school compared to those from a least affluent neighbourhood *within the same catchment area*.

This illustrates both the scale of the problem, but also the clear potential for change, without the need for large scale shifts in where people live, or a huge transformation in school transport.

Improving admissions for all children

With more and more schools, trusts and local authorities making changes to their admissions, and the 2026 publication of the schools white paper sending a clear message from government that schools should become more inclusive, there is now real momentum for change.

All of the experiences over the past few years have shaped our knowledge and understanding of fair school admissions and informed our new Fair School Admissions Framework published here. This framework demonstrates how the government and schools can build on recent progress to work collaboratively to improve social diversity in our schools.

This report will begin by introducing the Fair School Admissions Framework in more detail. It then considers each element of the proposed framework, examining the associated evidence and explaining how we reached our conclusions. It examines our evidence base, blended with reflections on working with school and MAT leaders over the last two and a half years.

The Fair School Admissions Framework

The Fair School Admissions Framework, shown below, summarises the changes that are needed to improve social diversity in our schools. It is informed by Sutton Trust research, engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, and our experiences of working directly with schools since March 2024. It reflects our own opinions and those of school leaders themselves.

The framework identifies three key themes that are needed – Strategic Direction, Introducing a Pupil Premium priority and Considering Wider Approaches to Admissions. These themes reflect the strong change management theory already well-established in schools, starting with a focus on creating culture and then considering what is needed to embed that culture.

Within each theme the framework highlights our specific recommendations to government and schools and MATs. This reflects the multiple pathways to reform, through national policy change, and through practice change on the ground. But importantly it shows that real change is best achieved when the two work together and system-wide incentives and rules are coupled with buy-in from practitioners. Each recommendation is discussed in detail examining the evidence base that led to the recommendation.

Addressing the issue of Fair Admissions requires a coordinated and collaborative approach. While individual recommendations can drive meaningful progress, their impact is often strengthened when aligned with wider system changes. Different elements of the framework are designed to work together to reduce barriers and support more equitable access.

“Addressing the issue of Fair Admissions requires a coordinated and collaborative approach. While individual recommendations can drive meaningful progress, their impact is often strengthened when aligned with wider system changes.”

For example, introducing a mandatory Pupil Premium priority across all schools, is likely to have the greatest impact when combined with accompanying guidance on reducing the cost of school. Without this, financial barriers may continue to shape which families apply. This illustrates the importance of implementing the framework as a coherent package of measures, rather than as isolated interventions.

The framework below represents a summary of our recommendations and a full version is at the end of the report.

The rest of this report looks at each theme, explaining why the themes have been included in the framework before looking at the specific recommendations for both government and schools and MATs.

	Government	Schools and MATs
Strategic Direction	Embed a national cultural understanding that inclusion starts with admissions .	Embed fair admissions as part of school culture and moral purpose.
	Raise awareness of social segregation and fair admissions (e.g. through NPQs).	Establish a clear admissions policy let by SLT and governance .
	Align accountability with inclusion, including greater recognition of school context and admissions practices.	Conduct an annual review of admissions as part of inclusion strategy.
Key Admissions Policy Change	Consider requiring pupil premium priority in oversubscription criteria in the school admissions code.	Introduce a pupil premium priority in your school.
	Provide clear guidance, examples and case studies to support implementation.	
Take a wider view of admissions	Reduce financial barriers e.g. review free school transport.	Reduce the cost of attending school , e.g. promote free school meals and free transport, address uniform costs.
	Improve accessibility of information through guidance and model policies.	Ensure admissions information is clear, accessible and widely available .
	Support schools to implement innovative policies, for example Fair Banding and Marginal Ballots, through clearer expectations and case studies .	Consider innovative approaches to admissions if needed such as fair banding, marginal ballots, nodal points or reviewing catchment areas.

Theme one: Strategic direction

The recent [schools white paper](#) has set a clear direction of travel for schools. Inclusion is the name of the game. Over the next few years schools will be expected to increase their mainstream capacity to educate more children with SEND, embrace fair admissions policies and work with the government to halve the attainment gap. These aims are laudable and rightly ambitious.

Whilst the government is consulting on the detail of the plans outlined in the white paper, we must also start to consider the implementation of making schools more inclusive. School leaders are themselves encouraged to consider implementation as a process and one that takes time.¹ Effective implementation requires, amongst other things: a clearly communicated culture; leaders bringing people with them; creating the right conditions for change and ensuring those making the change have the resources they need.

The role of government in setting a strategic direction for fair admissions

Government has a critical role in shaping the conditions under which schools make decisions. Through explicit rules, accountability measures, guidance and incentives, it sets the norms that influence how schools interpret their responsibilities.

How government can develop the culture around admissions

To create a genuinely inclusive system, the government should establish a clear cultural expectation that **inclusion starts with admissions**. This means recognising that who schools admit is not incidental, but is instead fundamental to delivering fairer outcomes. Without this, efforts to improve inclusion risk being undermined by patterns of intakes that limit access to oversubscribed schools for the pupils who would benefit most. True inclusion cannot be achieved if a school's intake is not reflecting its local community in the first place.

Recently, the Department for Education has underlined their support for Fair Admissions. The Sutton Trust report [Selective Inclusion](#) highlighted that children eligible for FSM and those with SEND face barriers in accessing high performing schools and that this disadvantage compounds for children who are both eligible for FSM and have SEND. In response, a Department for Education spokesperson [said](#):

“To create a genuinely inclusive system, the government should establish a clear cultural expectation that inclusion starts with admissions. This means recognising that who schools admit is not incidental, but is instead fundamental to delivering fairer outcomes.”

“It is completely unacceptable that disadvantaged children or those with SEND are being shut out or discouraged from applying – and this government will put a stop to it.”

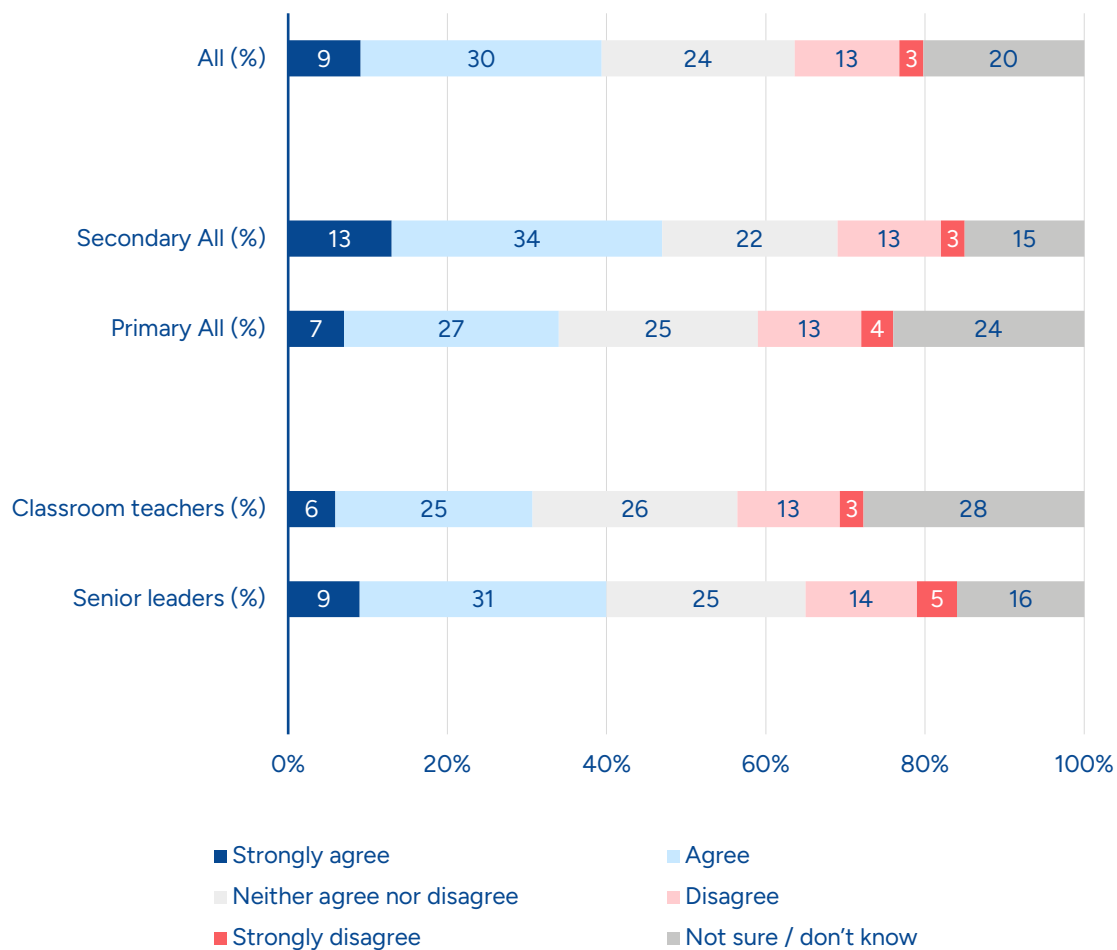
Statements such as this create a clear culture of the importance of admissions. However, the government now needs to consider its key levers for bringing their desired culture for admissions into reality. Largely, this has focused on providing resources to support schools becoming more inclusive of pupils with additional needs, for example [pledging £3.7 billion](#) to create more specialist places and inclusion bases. However, our research and experiences suggest this may not be enough, with our [annual polling](#) revealing that four in ten school leaders report cuts to support students with SEND in their schools. Further support is needed to help the school workforce understand the need for change in admissions. This includes understanding the role of socio-economic disadvantage in shaping inequalities, for example in securing adequate SEND provision, alongside stronger incentives to encourage change.

The government should raise awareness of fair school admissions in the education workforce

Over recent years we have identified challenges in three distinct strands relating to sector understanding of admissions that government should aim to address. Firstly, most school staff, including senior leaders, do not have a strong enough awareness of the issue of social segregation within high performing schools. Secondly, for those that are aware, or who are made aware, there is a disconnect between understanding the external factors at play and the potential actions that schools could take to mitigate these factors. Finally, and perhaps not unsurprisingly, there is a low awareness of the potential solutions that are currently available to school leaders.

Looking first at the challenge of social segregation itself, [Fairer School Admissions](#) from 2020 found that the teacher workforce had a mixed appreciation for the extent to which social segregation is a problem in schools. Figure 3 shows that only 39% of the workforce agreed or strongly agreed that socio-economic segregation is a problem in state schools.

Figure 3: To what extent do you agree that socio-economic segregation is a problem in non-selective state schools in England? (November 2019)



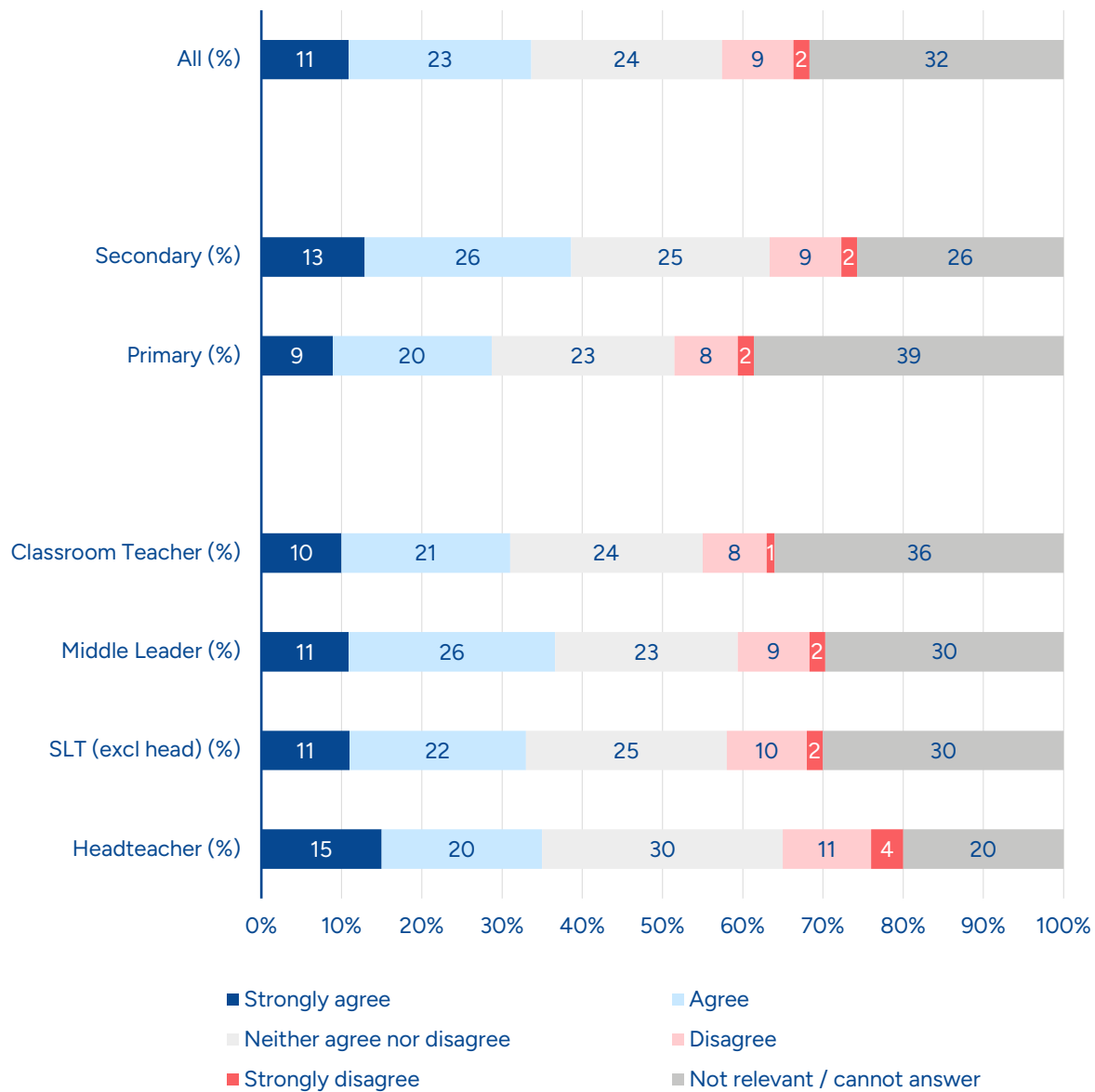
Source: [Fairer School Admissions](#)

[Fairer School Admissions](#) also found that agreement was highest in schools which were taking on more disadvantaged pupils than their local community and lowest in socially selective schools.

Notably a significant proportion, 20% of staff, felt unable to answer the question, demonstrating a lack of awareness of the concept itself.

We asked a similar question in polling undertaken by Teacher Tapp on the 24th and 25th June 2025.

Figure 4: There is a problem with income-based segregation in the intake of non-selective state schools (June 2025)



Source: Teacher Tapp polling 24th and 25th June 2025 n = 6,916

Despite the polls being taken over five years apart, very little difference in awareness was found. Figure 4 shows that 34% of school staff felt that there was a problem with income-based segregation in the intake of non-selective state schools compared to 39% in 2019. Again, we see that those working in the secondary phase were more likely to agree than those working in the primary phase, although there was less difference between leaders and teachers on this occasion.

An increased number of staff chose not to answer the question in this polling, hinting at an increasing lack of awareness or understanding of the problem.

In both polls, there were slight differences based on the level of disadvantage in the school of the respondent. 38% of those working in the most disadvantaged schools agreed that there was a problem with income-based segregation in non-selective state schools, compared to 33% of those working in the most advantaged schools. This suggests that those who 'benefit' from social segregation within schools are least likely to be aware of it.

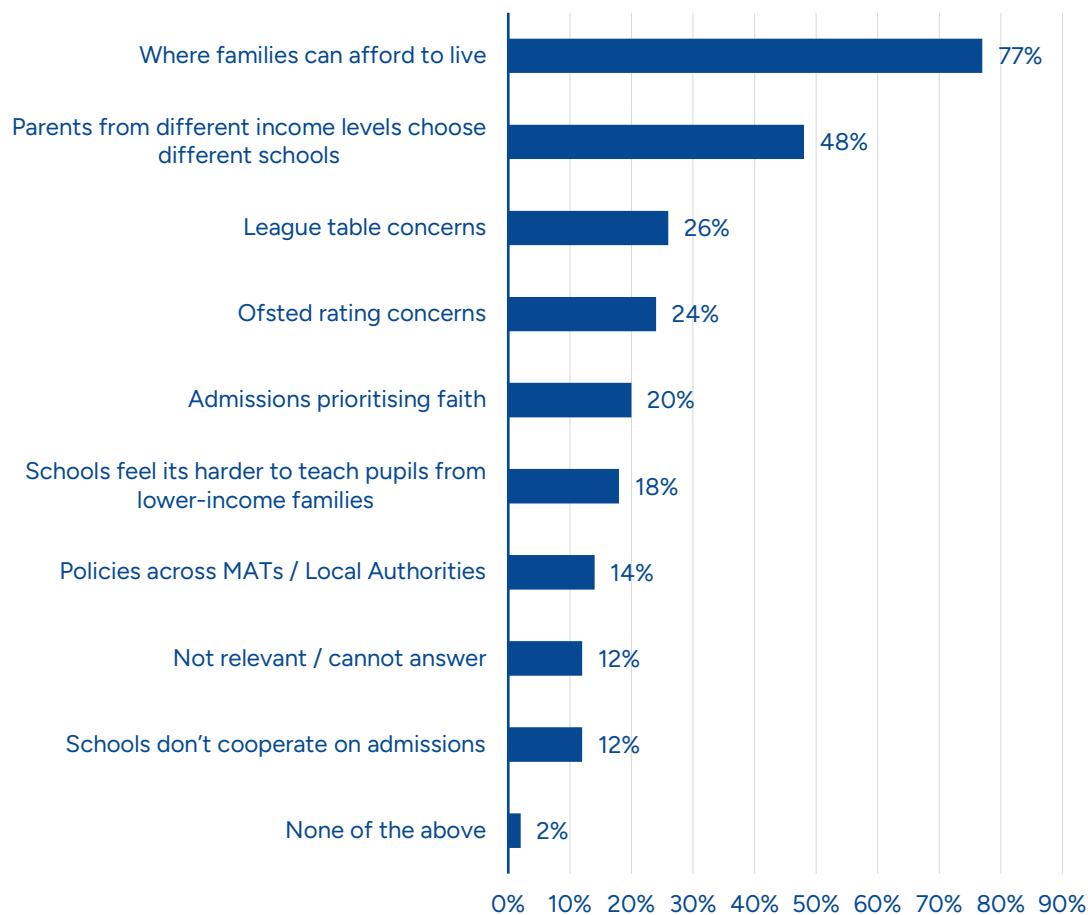
Moreover, the 2020 polling found that staff were less able to recognise social segregation as a problem within their own schools than they were with the system as a whole. 68% of all senior leaders said there was no problem with segregation at their school. Again, responses varied by level of disadvantage in the school, with teachers in the most socially selective schools being most likely to say there was no issue with socio-economic segregation at their own school. This could suggest that teachers are more likely to recognise the wider unfairness in the system but are hesitant to acknowledge this playing out in their own school.

Overall, the polling highlights a lack of consensus from school staff that there is a problem with socio-economic segregation in our schools, potentially driven by lack of awareness of the issue, or by a desire to maintain a system which may benefit those in more socially selective schools. It is therefore imperative that more is done to help school leaders understand the reality of social segregation in their schools. Without a firm grasp of why this is a problem, it will be far harder to create meaningful change.

Looking next to understanding of the reasons for social segregation, Figure 5 shows what teachers think contributes to the issue, with the top two highest reasons given being factors related to the home rather than schools. 77% say that where families can afford to live is the main contributing factor, whilst 48% report that families from different income levels make different school choices.

“It is therefore imperative that more is done to help school leaders understand the reality of social segregation in their schools. Without a firm grasp of why this is a problem, it will be far harder to create meaningful change.”

Figure 5: Teacher views on reasons for limited social mix at high-performing schools (June 2025)



Source: Teacher Tapp polling 24th and 25 June 2025 n = 6,788

There is some evidence to support the belief held by school staff that where families can afford to live impacts their school choices. [Selective Comprehensives 2017](#) found that houses close to a high performing school cost an additional premium of around 20%. [Parent Power 2018](#) highlighted that middle-class parents were more likely than working-class parents to move to an area which has good schools; move to a specific catchment area of a school; or buy or rent a second home to use the address for school applications.

However, [Sutton Trust](#) research has consistently found that social segregation in high performing schools happens locally as well as nationally and that disadvantaged children are less likely to access a top school, even if there is one nearby.

FSM gaps compare the FSM rate of a secondary school's incoming year 7 cohort across a three-year period to the FSM rate of the school's catchment

area. Negative FSM gaps mean the school recruits fewer children eligible for FSM than live in their catchment area. Meanwhile, positive gaps mean the school recruits more children eligible for FSM than live in their catchment area.

As shown in Table 1, for top achieving schools for pupil progress, their catchment areas only have 1 percentage point fewer FSM pupils than the average school, but they admit 6.1 percentage points fewer. For top schools in terms of absolute attainment, more of the gap is due to having less disadvantage in their catchment, but the majority of the gap is still attributable to selection within catchment. A non-FSM pupil in the catchment of a top school for Attainment 8 is 50% more likely to get in than an FSM pupil.

This doesn't mitigate the impact of the housing market entirely, particularly in terms of more granular differences in proximity to the school within the catchment area.

However, it does highlight that housing isn't the only reason for social segregation and shows what could be achieved by schools **within the areas they already draw from**.

Table 1: Contributions to lower levels of FSM at high performing schools compared to the average comprehensive (percentage point gaps)

	Top 500 – Progress 8	Top 500 – Attainment 8	Top 500 – English and maths
Total FSM gap compared to the average comprehensive	6.1	9.7	10.4
Gap due to catchment profile	1	3.3	4.2
Gap within catchment	5.1	6.4	6.2

Moreover, the emphasis on where parents can afford to live overlooks the fact that the overwhelming reliance on proximity within school admissions is a choice made by schools. 88% of schools rely heavily on proximity in their oversubscription criteria.² Yet this doesn't have to be the case, random ballots, Pupil Premium priority and fair banding are some of the ways schools can reduce their reliance on proximity.

Another common belief is that parents from different social classes make different choices. Whilst there is again some evidence to support that lower socio-economic groups are less likely to select high-performing schools,³ the reality is more nuanced. [Parent Power 2018](#) highlighted that working-class parents are more likely to consider the cost of attending school, or travel costs, than middle-class parents and may also be more likely to want their child to attend a school that their friends are also attending. Other research has shown that parents of all classes place similar value on school quality and make maximum use of the number of choices they are allowed to make.⁴ Therefore while parental choice may be having some impact on social segregation, they may not always reflect true preferences. Instead, low-income parents often make choices forced by circumstance, such as financial limitations, or driven by a belief that their child won't get into a certain preferred school. Low-income parents may also be less likely to want to send their children to schools with low numbers of similar children amid a fear they won't fit in. However, it should be up to schools to make themselves more welcoming to such families.

After these top two reasons, school staff then cite accountability as the main reasons for social segregation. This issue is discussed later in this report.

These findings highlight that there is good recognition of some of the key challenges in school admissions but that there is greater capacity for school leaders to recognise their own agency in responding to some of these factors. For example, it is true that where parents can afford to live does contribute to the challenge of social segregation but this in part due to the behaviour of schools choosing to use proximity in their admissions policy. Our polling highlights that leaders know this is an issue but very few schools have done anything about it. Without a strong understanding of why a problem is happening and how schools are contributing to the issue it is significantly more challenging to correctly identify the potential solutions that might work in their context.

Lastly, we consider the workforce awareness of solutions to social segregation. Here, our main focus will be on the implementation of a pupil premium priority in oversubscription criteria, something the Sutton Trust has been advocating for since 2020. Other options such the use of fair banding, marginal ballots and the use of nodal points are alternatives but have been less popular within our Pledge schools and in polling, which is discussed later in this report. Nodal points allow schools to use proximity to designated locations other than the school site. The aim of nodal points is that schools can set multiple points across their community, bypassing the traditional catchment zone that can influence the housing market.

Schools have been able to prioritise children eligible for the pupil premium since 2014. However, research from 2023 found that only 42 non-selective state comprehensives have chosen to implement this factor within their admissions policies.⁵ There are a range of reasons for this, including accountability disincentives, which are explored later in the report. But an additional key factor is school leaders' lack of awareness that schools are already allowed to implement a pupil premium priority within the confines of the school admissions code. The majority of school and MAT leaders that we have spoken with over the last two and a half years were simply unaware that they can choose to prioritise places for children eligible for the pupil premium. This is exemplified in one of our case study interviews with leaders:

*"I became aware of [Fair Admissions] on a [Sutton Trust] webinar... I didn't realise that pupil premium could be a criteria with[in] your admissions policy."
Matt Stevens – Saracens High school.*

Moreover, the leaders identified that they only learned this information, and that schools local to them had already implemented this approach via engagement with the Sutton Trust.

In another instance we were approached by a local authority who were co-ordinating a whole city effort to close the attainment gap. They had seen our Fair School Admissions Pledge and were seeking advice on their options, having not previously realised they could implement a pupil premium priority.

At a roundtable discussion with school leaders and experts in January 2023, we discussed why so many school leaders did not know the details of the school admissions code. Our reflection was that it is a piece of legislation that doesn't feature in any of the normal training or CPD options for school leaders. Many areas of school leadership have standardised training requirements. For example, Designated Safeguarding Leads must attend regular training sessions and SENDCos must complete a formal nationally recognised qualification.

There are areas of specific legislation that don't have associated training such as the law around suspension and exclusions. However, a key difference between this and admissions is the frequency in which they feature in the calendar of running a school. There is only a requirement for admissions to be consulted on once every seven years. It is, therefore, completely plausible that a headteacher may never need to do this, as they may move between schools within this time period. Conversely other highly legislated areas such as suspensions are referred to more often, forcing familiarity and understanding of the area. For a busy school leader it is understandable that the admissions policy may never reach the top of their 'to-do' list.

To conclude, there is mounting evidence that too many teachers are unaware of the problem of social segregation in schools, that they potentially lack a nuanced understanding of what is causing it and only a minority of school leaders are fully aware of their options for a solution.

Therefore, it is imperative that more is done to raise awareness of the challenge, as well as the possible solutions. The Sutton Trust welcomes the [schools white paper](#) reference to fair school admissions; this is certainly a step in the right direction. One possible solution would be to formalise the CPD opportunities for school leaders to understand the extent of social segregation in schools, in addition to the full range of options available to them in the school admissions code. Introducing this into the National Professional Qualification (NPQ) suite could be an excellent next step. This may be particularly useful within the NPQs for Headship and Executive Leadership.

Of the 118 schools we have worked with through the Fair School Admissions Pledge, 83 schools have joined as part of a multi-academy trust. MAT leaders often see themselves as having greater capacity to look at admissions more strategically, as they are less likely to be dealing with the day-to-day logistics of recruiting for their school. This is highlighted in this case study from The Mead Educational Trust:

“The benefit of [reviewing admissions] from a trust-wide perspective, [is that] we can see those inequalities of numbers across our secondary schools. If you're in an individual school, you're focusing on the community, rightfully, that you are serving, but you maybe don't understand the other communities within the city.” Gary Aldred – The Mead Education Trust

The government should reform accountability measures to support fair school admissions

Accountability is another important driver when encouraging schools to reflect on whether their admissions arrangements are genuinely fair, and when asking them to take deliberate steps to increase the intake of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with SEND.

At various points we have consulted with those working in schools to understand the barriers to introducing Fair Admissions. Teacher polling in 2019 for [Fairer School Admissions](#) found that 46% of school staff felt that ‘effect on league tables’ was one of the biggest barriers to greater socio-economic integration in high-performing schools. Teacher polling in 2025, as shown above in Figure 5, found that 26% of school staff felt ‘league table concerns’ and 24% felt ‘Ofsted rating concerns’ contributed to limited social mixing in high performing schools. When we looked at segregation for children with

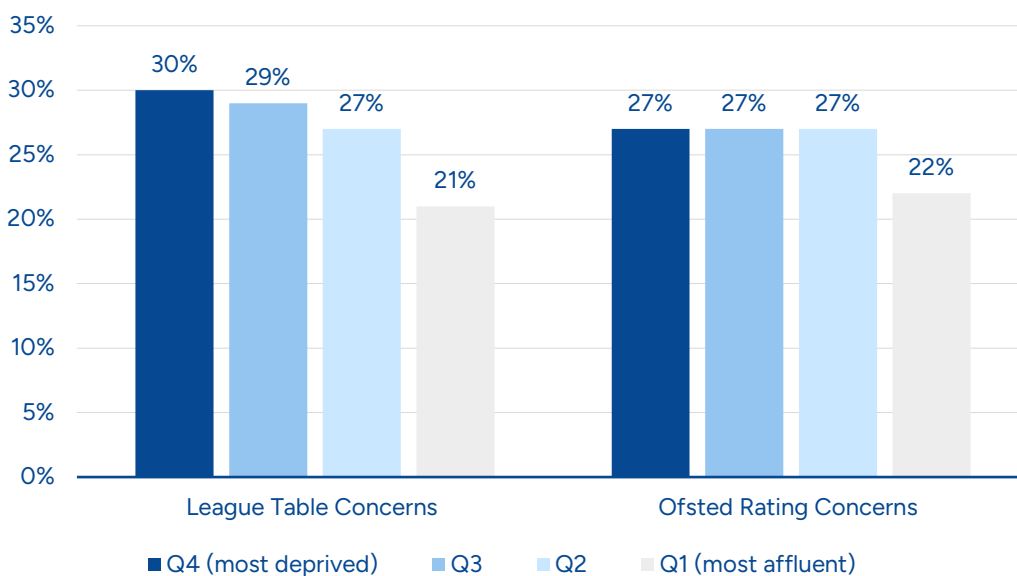
SEND in [Selective Inclusion](#) we found that 17% of school staff reported that 'greater recognition of inclusion in inspections or in league tables' would help schools to educate more children with SEND.

These fears have been conveyed in other settings, in one-to-one conversations with school leaders and in the three roundtables held in early 2024 on the topic of Fair Admissions. At one roundtable in particular, participants were particularly disparaging, arguing that "people may claim to care [about children from low-income backgrounds], but they don't actually care, if it will affect their reputation." Others took a more understanding view acknowledging the immense pressures on school leaders.

Across our conversations and polling, we have seen an emerging pattern that concerns with impact on accountability measures seem to be more profound in schools with higher levels of disadvantage. This is discussed in [Fairer School Admissions](#) and [Selective Inclusion](#) and is highlighted in Figure 6 below.

30% of school staff in the most disadvantaged schools thought league table concerns contributed to social segregation, compared to only 21% in the least disadvantaged schools, with a similar pattern for Ofsted ratings. This suggests that the salience of these issues is lowest amongst the schools that are likely the biggest beneficiaries of the status quo.

Figure 6: Research has found that high-performing schools often have a limited social mix in their intake. What do you think contributes to this? By level of disadvantage within the school. (June 2025)



Source: Teacher Tapp polling 24th and 25 June 2025 n = 6,916

Schools serving more disadvantaged intakes may be right to be concerned. Under the previous Ofsted framework schools rated as 'Outstanding' had an average FSM gap of around -4% compared to those rated 'Inadequate' who had an average FSM gap of around +4%. This means that schools who were more socially selective were more likely to secure the top Ofsted grades. Teach First have also highlighted that under the previous Ofsted Framework, 20% of pupils in the most affluent areas attended an 'Outstanding' school compared to 12% of those in the most deprived areas.⁶ The long-awaited Ofsted reforms introduced in 2025, whilst in the early stages, do not appear to have made a significant impact on this problem. It has been [widely reported](#) that schools serving the most disadvantaged intakes have been less likely to receive 'Expected Standard' or above for achievement.

Moreover, it is well established that Key Stage 4 outcomes for children eligible for FSM are, on average, well below their more affluent peers. In 2024, schools with the highest 20% intake of children eligible for free school meals secured an average Attainment 8 score of 40.1, in comparison to 52.4 for schools with the lowest intake of children eligible for free school meals. This is also reflected in Progress 8 scores. In 2024, schools with the highest 20% for intake of children eligible for free school meal secured an average Progress 8 score -0.30 compared to +0.30 for schools with the lowest intakes.

Schools are, therefore, understandably concerned that having higher numbers of children eligible for free schools meals would have a knock-on effect on their outcomes.

It is important to note that on the whole, concerns around accountability are not limited to the academic outcomes but stretch into the long-term ability to run a school. For example, leaders raised concerns that poor Ofsted ratings can impact a school's ability to recruit staff, often sending a school into a doom spiral from which it is hard to recover. Schools with poor Ofsted ratings can also struggle to recruit pupils which limits their funding income, compounding the challenge of improving the school.

As has been noted by both Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson and Ofsted Chief Inspector Sir Martyn Oliver, there is a balance to be struck between recognising that some schools are operating in more challenging circumstances than others, whilst ensuring that we maintain high expectations for all our children. Therefore, in order to support leaders in making changes to their admissions processes, we might find ways in our accountability measures to celebrate schools who recruit more diverse cohorts, whilst still measuring the progress of those children. Without this, schools will be forever disincentivised from having fair admissions policies by accountability measures that punish them for doing so.

The introduction of 'Inclusion' as a specific measure within the new Ofsted framework is welcome. However, careful scrutiny of this category is essential to ensure that schools with lower levels of disadvantage or smaller SEND cohorts are not more likely to receive disproportionately higher Ofsted ratings than those serving communities with the highest levels of disadvantage or SEND. Inclusion within a curated intake is not true inclusion.

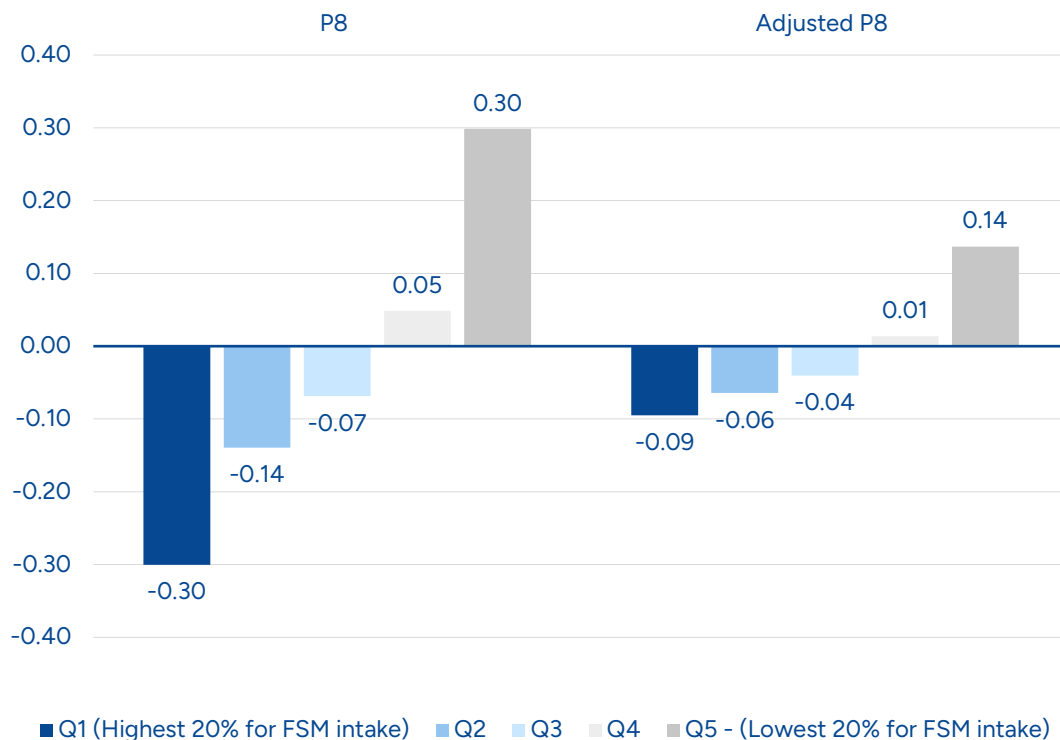
We also recommend that Ofsted be granted the powers to inspect admissions directly as part of their Inclusion category. Inclusion starts with admissions: schools should be celebrated for ensuring that all children in their community have equal access to their school. [The Equity Scorecard](#) provides one model on how this could work in practice, offering a transparent benchmark of whether schools are admitting their fair share of pupils eligible for free school meals relative to their local context, with comparisons against regional and national patterns.

Until this happens, schools may be under pressure to keep their SEND or disadvantaged cohorts small in order to give themselves the best chance of meeting their needs and securing a positive grade for this category. This was illustrated in [Selective Inclusion](#) where polling revealed that 41% of school leaders think that some schools proactively discourage pupils from applying to them.

Looking at Key Stage 4 outcome measures, one possible option for reform could be an additional measure which takes better account of the context in which a school is operating, like a 'contextual value added' score. One example is the [Fairer Schools Index](#) developed by Prof George Leckie at the University of Bristol and published by the Northern Powerhouse Partnership. This creates an 'Adjusted Progress 8' score, extending the usual Progress 8 methodology by accounting for, as well as prior attainment, pupil age, gender, ethnicity, EAL (English as an Additional Language), SEND status, FSM eligibility and residential deprivation. We applied this to our existing dataset on FSM rates and gaps for each state comprehensive school in England. Figure 7 compares how the FSM rate of schools impact their Progress 8 and Adjusted Progress 8 scores, showing that Adjusted Progress 8 is less impacted by the FSM intake of a school.

“Inclusion within a curated intake is not true inclusion.”

Figure 7: Progress 8 and Adjusted Progress 8 by FSM rate of school by level of disadvantage in school



Source: [The Sutton Trust School Admissions Dashboard](#)

Schools with the highest 20% for intake of children eligible for free school meals secured an Adjusted P8 score of -0.09 compared to a standard Progress 8 score of -0.30. This reduced range in adjusted Progress 8 score could encourage leaders to take on more diverse cohorts, and focus on doing well for those children.

Moreover, schools with the highest Adjusted Progress 8 scores also demonstrated lower levels of local social selection. The top 20% of schools by Progress 8 have an average FSM gap of -4.9% compared to the top 20% of schools by Attainment 8 which have a bigger FSM gap of -6.7%. However, top schools for Adjusted Progress 8 have an even smaller FSM gap of -3.9%. This shows that schools judged highly by Adjusted Progress 8 tend to be more socially diverse, as well as representative of their local community, than schools who score highly on Progress 8 or Attainment 8.

In conclusion, to support schools to make full use of their options within the school admissions code to improve the social diversity of schools we must first improve the measures we use to judge them. Current accountability measures disincentivise schools from taking on more complex cohorts and without change here it is unlikely we will see widespread uptake of fair admissions policies.

The role of schools and MATs in setting a strategic direction for Fair Admissions

While national policy plays an important role, many schools and especially those in MATs, already have the capacity and autonomy to set their own strategic direction to drive improved social diversity in their setting.

How schools and MATs can develop the culture around admissions

Schools are under increasing pressure to be inclusive. The recent [schools white paper](#) sets a vision of inclusion encompassing both children with SEND and for those who are disadvantaged. As such, many schools will be considering how they can develop a culture of inclusion.

Admissions policy plays a central role in this; it is not just to demonstrate compliance, it is a reflection of a school's values. It is tangible evidence of what a school stands for and who they want to serve. Inclusive and fair admissions can, therefore, be understood as both a driver and an expression of culture. A strong culture of inclusion creates the conditions for fairer admissions practices. Implementing those practices is a tangible demonstration of that culture in action.

The schools who took part in the Fair School Admissions Pledge were offered the chance to evaluate the experience. Of those who completed the evaluation 67% reported that one of the positive benefits they were hoping to see from the pledge was to give staff an increased sense of moral purpose.

The experience of schools with established inclusive admissions practices reinforces this point. At The Totteridge Academy, leaders described how reviewing their admissions arrangements prompted wider reflection on their values as educators:

"We met as a team and reflected on why we got into teaching. We all agreed that we wanted to help all children, but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds who would benefit most from great teachers in great schools... We made the decision to implement a new oversubscription criteria... which is applied before distance, for pupils eligible for the pupil premium... We have also noticed the positive impact this has had on our culture. It sets a clear moral purpose and joint vision so that everyone knows what we stand for."
Chris Fairbairn – Principal, Totteridge Academy

"Admissions policy plays a central role in this; it is not just to demonstrate compliance, it is a reflection of a school's values. It is tangible evidence of what a school stands for and who they want to serve."

Similarly, Education South West described how engaging with admissions reform shifted their perspective:

“You helped us... [to] reframe admissions from just compliance... to a real moral issue for us and actually [questioning] are we serving our communities in the way that we should? [It] fits into that wider picture around social mobility.”
Suzannah Wharf – Director of Education, Education South West

These examples demonstrate that the approach to admissions is not a neutral process. It is a key lever through which schools can articulate and embed a culture of inclusion. Therefore when considering how to improve social diversity at their setting school leaders should reflect on their school culture to understand whether there is adequate alignment between their culture and their aims for admissions.

Schools and MATs should have staff specifically responsible for Fair Admissions

Schools that took part in the Fair School Admissions Pledge were required to make two staffing commitments. Firstly, they needed to identify a member of the senior leadership team to lead on the project. This could be at a school or MAT level. Secondly, they needed to commit to involving their governors or trustees in the process.

Those who have completed the Pledge highlighted the usefulness of both these staffing commitments. Having a key person overseeing the admissions work ensured there were clear lines of accountability and this in turn empowered staff to make changes.

“I think it's starting with the why and being really clear about why this is an important process for you and what the impact is hopefully going to be. And then I think about it's about identifying those key people across each school that are going to help drive that forward.” Gary Aldred – The Mead Education Trust

For those leading the project across a MAT, a range of approaches were taken, but most MATs identified a single central leader collating work across a number of schools. This enabled MATs to minimise workload and maximise consistency.

“[I recommend having] a single trust lead, someone who's going to just keep an eye on things and be able to talk it through with school leaders. It's certainly making sure that whatever your governance structure, that you are talking to local governors... making sure that [headteachers] are briefing their

governors and explaining the work that's being done." Suzannah Wharf – Education South West

Here, Suzannah also highlights the value in keeping governors and trustees up to date. As the designated admissions authority this is vital for legal reasons, but many leaders also reflected on how gaining such support made the process easier in the long run.

MATs took a range of approaches in terms of balancing consistency with individual school autonomy. Many MATs described the importance of giving their headteachers a voice in the process so that decisions were made collaboratively.

Orion is a trust that participated in the pledge and successfully introduced pupil premium priority across all eight of their schools. Simon Garrill explains how he approached the process to ensure that all stakeholders had the chance to feed into an overall MAT approach.

"After discussing with trustees, we invited the Sutton Trust team to speak with our leaders...At Orion, our leaders are involved in major decisions, and this was no exception.

"The team quickly agreed that the Award matched our mission, so they led the effort to earn the Bronze award in 2024. This reflected our initial efforts to reduce the cost of attending our schools and improving how we communicate so that all parents can make informed school choices. Many had already considered how our admissions approach supports vulnerable students, while others needed to reflect further. We chose to review our admissions policies – not for the Award, but because it was the right thing to do." Simon Garrill – CEO Orion Education

Beyond staffing roles and structures, many leaders on the pledge highlighted the need to ensure support staff were included in the process. Some MATs brought administrative staff along to meetings and webinars so they could feed into the process. Others described the importance of explaining the moral purpose behind the change in order to secure buy-in from all staff.

"And it's kind of a subtle shift, but one that's important, making sure that everybody - and here I'm thinking your admissions officer, your admissions administrator - making sure that they know why it really matters to restructure your processes in that way... I know that what you've done for the last 10 years has been efficient, but has it necessarily been effective given our renewed vision?" Greg Fairchild – The Reading School

In conclusion, those who completed the pledge described the importance of having clearly defined roles and responsibilities, often with a specific person identified as the lead. They reflected on the importance of securing buy-in from staff through sharing the moral purpose of their renewed vision for admissions. Finally, they also recommended planning how to engage with all the staff stakeholders, from trustees through to administrative staff.

Schools and MATs should carry out annual Fair Access Reviews

As outlined earlier in this report, one of the challenges in making admissions fairer is that many school leaders still lack awareness of the problem of social segregation, what causes it and what the potential solutions are. [Fairer School Admissions](#) highlighted that in addition to lack of knowledge of the wider issue, school leaders were also especially prone to a lack of recognition that there may be an issue in their own school. There is thus a need to diagnose and recognise the problem where it arises, but also to regularly review emerging issues.

Through speaking with school leaders who had already implemented fair admissions policies we noticed that this was often in response to a change in cohort as the reputation of a school increased. One example of this is Reach Academy Feltham:

“Our original admissions policy didn’t have pupil premium priority within its oversubscription criteria. We introduced it after we received our Ofsted Outstanding rating in 2014. We became aware that this was having an impact on the housing market around the school and we wanted to ensure that we continued to serve the families that would benefit from our school the most.”

This highlighted the need for pre-emptive systems that would foresee the need for amending admissions policies. It also identified the need for reviews to be undertaken regularly. As a potential solution to this the Sutton Trust recommended that schools carry out annual ‘Fair Access Reviews’. Roundtables in early 2024 were supportive but also argued that school leaders’ workloads and stretched capacity may prevent them from embedding this concept.

As a result of this we developed a package of support and resources to support leaders in undertaking a Fair Access Review and Action Plan.

The Fair Access Review starts by guiding leaders through data analysis to determine whether there is an issue with equal opportunity of access to their schools. It then looks at what might be contributing to social segregation, exploring the cost of attending the school, how easy it is for parents to

understand the support that will be offered to them, how accessible the admissions policy is and whether the policy itself is providing barriers to access to the school. The pledge focuses on reflection and exploration, in order that leaders can gain a better understanding of their context in a judgement free space.

The resources of the Fair Access Review have been seen as very effective by participating school leaders. Evaluation of the pledge showed that 100% of respondents found the Fair Access Review resources to be 'very useful'. The evaluation also reflected that the resources supported leaders with their workload. The majority reported that the workload was manageable (61%) with the remaining saying that the workload was significant, but manageable. 67% also commented that the resources reduced the overall workload associated with this type of work and 75% reported that they provided structure which supported the aims of the work. It should be noted, however, that not all schools submitted an action plan following the Fair Access Review, so the workload implications may have been more challenging than our evaluation can evidence.

Crucially, leaders and experts reported that the Fair Access Review helped them to learn about their school and approach to admissions.

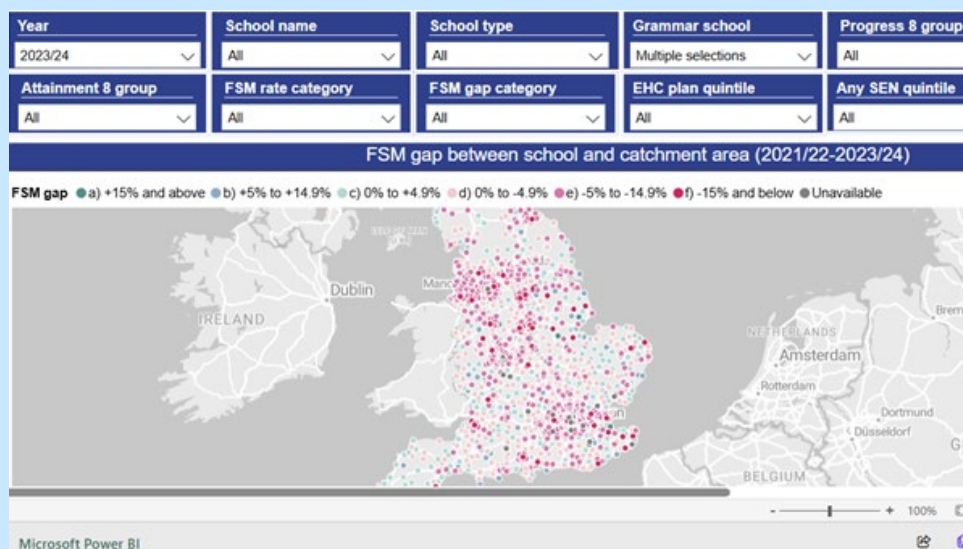
"It sounds fantastic because what you are saying is you're scaffolding the 'Explore' stage through the pledge... I'm thinking that actually there's probably a lot of things that schools will find out that they may not recognise, understand or know even though they've been focussed on these areas."
Margaret Mullholland - ASCL SEND Bites Podcast

School leaders involved in the pledge regularly reflected on their surprise at the overall cost of attending their school, or how difficult their admissions policies were to read. Some leaders reflected that the [Sutton Trust school admissions dashboard](#) was especially valuable, showing them that they weren't yet recruiting enough children eligible for FSM from their local communities. This illustrates the value in this process, despite the potential workload implications.

"Some leaders reflected that the Sutton Trust school admissions dashboard was especially valuable, showing them that they weren't yet recruiting enough children eligible for FSM from their local communities."

The Sutton Trust school admissions dashboard

The Sutton Trust school admissions dashboard is an interactive map designed to help users explore how fairly pupils are admitted to secondary schools in England based on their socio-economic background.



- The colour of the school's marker reflects their FSM gap with their catchment. Shades of teal represent 'positive gaps', i.e. they take more FSM pupils than live in their catchment area.
- Shades of red/pink represent 'negative gaps', i.e. they take fewer FSM pupils than live in their catchment area. The map contains contextual information on SEND intake and outcomes including Adjusted Progress 8.

By making these comparisons visible, the dashboard highlights patterns where some schools admit significantly fewer disadvantaged or SEND pupils than would be expected, helping school leaders, policymakers and researchers to better understand inequities in access and to inform more inclusive admissions practices.

Schools interested in undertaking a Fair Access Review can access the resources to do so on the [Fair School Admissions Hub](#).

Theme two: All schools should prioritise children eligible for the pupil premium

In previous reports focusing on school admissions the Sutton Trust has advocated for the uptake of a range of mechanisms to improve social diversity in schools. These include using pupil premium priority in oversubscription criteria, fair banding, marginal ballots, simplified faith criteria and removing aptitude places.

Our experiences of working with schools have solidified our stance that all of these options, when implemented correctly, can contribute to improved social diversity. The right option for each school may also depend on their individual context, the geography of their area and the profile of local schools. However, as our work in this area has developed, the arguments for particularly highlighting pupil premium priority as the one key policy change have become clearer. This has been informed by further research, feedback and reflections from our Fair School Admissions Pledge cohorts and insights from sector polling.

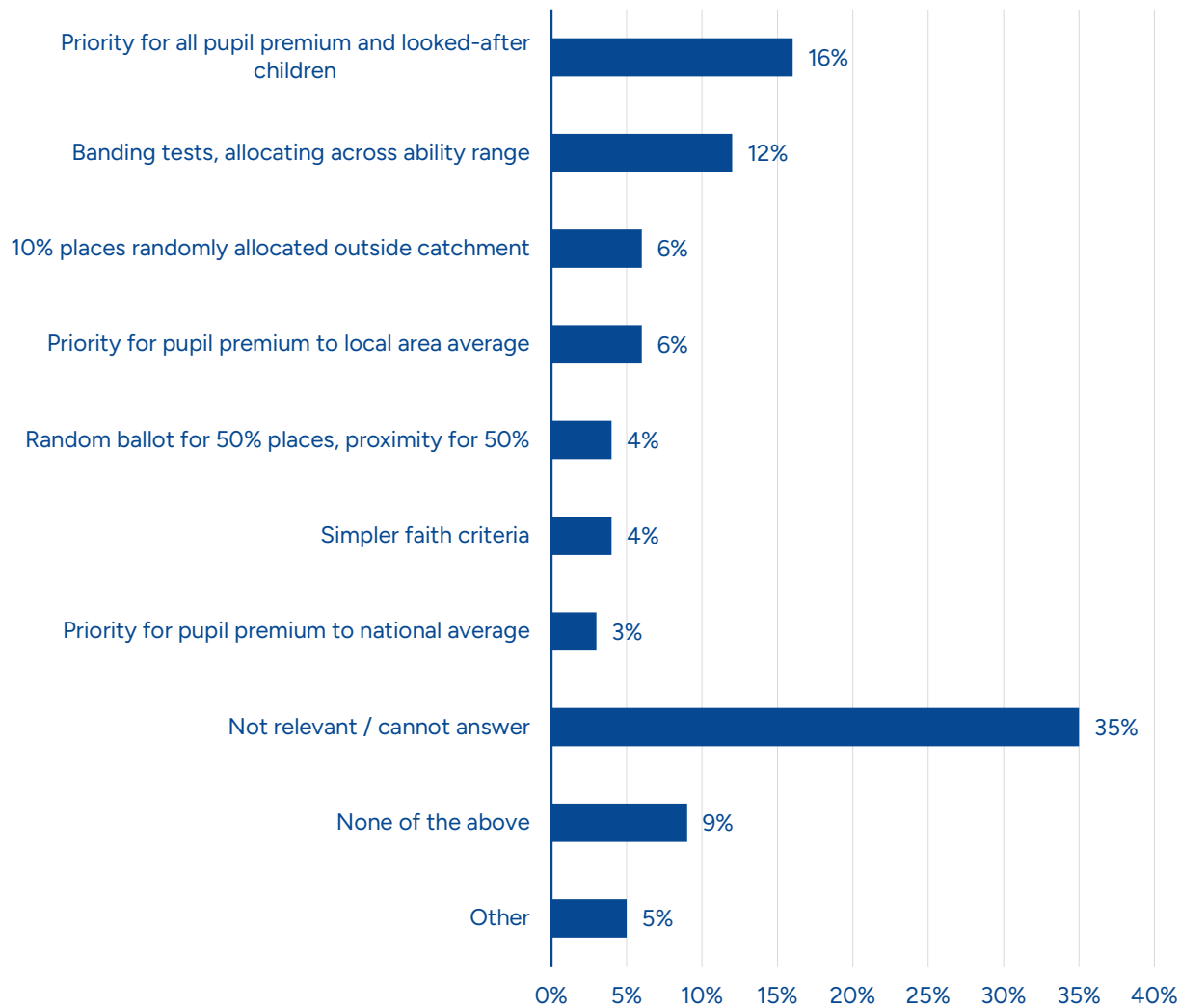
In part, our preference for pupil premium priority is informed by our experiences of working directly with schools looking to make changes to their admissions policy. Every school that has chosen to implement a policy change has chosen some form of a pupil premium priority, despite the pledge covering all the options identified above. In total so far we have supported 16 secondary schools to introduce a pupil premium priority. Whilst this number may seem small, it is important to note that prior to the pledge, only 42 non-selective schools were using this option nationally.⁷ Therefore this represents a 38% increase. Progress has been seen in other places too. Most prominently, Brighton and Hove have introduced a city-wide pupil premium priority in another six schools citing Sutton Trust work as a key factor in the change. One of the MATs we worked with introduced a pupil premium priority into their four primary schools. Some MATs in our pledge cohort have chosen to implement it in one school to begin with, so they can review before wider implementation.

It is also reflected in our polling of school staff. [Fairer School Admissions](#) identified that there was no overwhelming preference for a particular policy when considering what would be most likely to be adopted for oversubscribed schools. Three variations of pupil premium priority were also suggested, and when taken collectively these claimed 24% of senior leaders' votes. Two models for random ballots were suggested and collectively these also claimed

24% of senior leader votes. Pupil premium priority and random ballots were therefore broadly the most popular options.

Similar results were found in our June 2025 Teacher Tapp polling.

Figure 8: Which policies teachers think over-subscribed schools are most likely to use.



Source: Teacher Tapp polling 24th and 25th June 2025 n = 6,696

Figure 8 shows that the three proposed models for pupil premium priority claimed 25% of votes. Fair banding claimed 12% and the two models for random ballots claimed 10%. Taken with the previous polling we can tentatively argue that pupil premium is increasing in relative popularity and perhaps the most popular option amongst those who work in schools. Both sets of polling highlight that one of the challenges of a pupil premium priority is that there are multiple ways to implement it.

Conversations with school leaders have helped us to understand the relative popularity of different options for change. Pupil premium priority is often seen as the approach which speaks best to the moral purpose of educators, enabling them to directly help those that need it most. It is also viewed as one of the simpler policies, not requiring additional testing or the involvement of an independent adjudicator.

Further evidence to support the potential of a pupil premium priority comes from data-led modelling and research conducted by a team led by Simon Burgess and Ellen Greaves at the University of Bristol.⁸ This research used unique data on applications and admissions to model the potential impact of different fair admissions mechanisms including fair banding, marginal ballots and several variants of pupil premium priority. It identified that a **15% pupil premium quota, applied last**, yielded the biggest impact for children eligible for the pupil premium with the minimum negative impact on other children. In other words, it created the best ratio of ‘winners to losers.’

This evidence collectively has informed our stance that pupil premium priority has the biggest potential for improving social diversity in schools. Data informed modelling shows its positive impact and it is popular with school leaders. Next, we consider how this can best be introduced across all secondary schools in England.

“This evidence collectively has informed our stance that pupil premium priority has the biggest potential for improving social diversity in schools. Data informed modelling shows its positive impact and it is popular with school leaders.”

The role of government in introducing pupil premium priority across all schools

Mandating pupil premium priority

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the current focus on inclusion, there has been mounting pressure on the government to consider mandating that all schools prioritise places for children eligible for the pupil premium. The [schools white paper](#) announced that government will be consulting on the school admissions code. This is therefore an excellent opportunity to drive behavioural change in schools.

It has been argued that schools have been able to do this since 2014 and that there is no need to make this compulsory. However, with only 42 schools choosing to do this in a meaningful way,⁹ it is clear that the current approach is not working. We also know from [Fairer Schools Admissions](#) that the schools with the lowest levels of disadvantage and therefore, the ones most in need of adopting such policies, are the ones least likely to be aware of the challenge. Schools are also faced with a potential ‘first mover disadvantage’ where they

may feel pushing ahead on their own may disadvantage them in relation to other schools.

The need to mandate a policy change is reinforced by research showing that there is little evidence of the access gap closing, despite schools being able to use a range of fair admissions approaches for several years already. Table 2 examines the FSM cohort of top 500 performing schools compared to the national average rate for FSM for the relevant years.

“Top performing schools continue to take fewer children eligible for free school meals than the national average.”

Table 2: FSM rates of top performing schools as a proportion of the national average

Report	Top 500 5 A* – C GCSE grade	Top 500 Attainment 8	Top 500 Progress 8	Top 500 % of pupils securing 4+ in GCSE English and Maths
Selective Comprehensives 2017	55%	NA	88%	NA
Selective Comprehensives 2024	NA	60%	77%	59%
Selective Inclusion (2026)	NA	63%	77%	60%

This shows that the top performing schools continue to take fewer children eligible for free school meals than the national average. Progress 8 is the best measure to reflect on as it has been consistently measured across this time period. The top 500 schools as judged by Progress 8 have actually become less representative of the national FSM rate over time. In 2017 the top 500 schools FSM intake represented 88% of the national FSM rate, however by 2024 this had dropped to 77%. This could indicate that a more forceful approach is needed to ensure that high performing schools are socially selective.

On the other hand, national policy change raises the prospect of pushback from middle-class parents, who may fear the loss of the advantages they have been able to secure in gaining access to the best schools. Arguably this is evidence for why a mandated approach is best. Nationally we can engage the parent body rather than leave individual schools to address this on their own

and without support. Parallels could be drawn to the debate around mobile phones in schools where individual schools have found it extremely challenging to manage parental pushback alone.

There are also some concerns that jumping into a mandated approach might be something the system as a whole isn't ready for. Schools may experience sudden changes in cohort and not have the knowledge or experience to support all children. Moreover, if schools are required to prioritise pupil premium children before they have made the cultural shifts in their ethos they may find ways to discourage children eligible for the pupil premium from applying. We have already seen evidence of leaders discouraging children with SEND from applying to their schools in [Selective Inclusion](#). This reinforces the Fair School Admissions Framework approach. A mandated approach to introducing pupil premium priority would need to be supported through a clear strategic direction and a wider approach to admissions to ensure all schools engage in the spirit with which it was intended.

It should also be acknowledged that admissions is a long game. Any changes made now will take at least two years to work through the consultation process and then it will be another five years until those year 7 children enter Key Stage 4 exams. Only at that point will we be able to evaluate the impact of fair admissions. We must also remember however, that our best efforts over the last 12 years have failed to substantially close the attainment gap. The evidence that the status quo isn't working should also be considered.

Ultimately, while tangible progress is being made, it is unlikely that wide uptake of pupil premium priority will be seen without government requiring schools to do so. The reference to fair school admissions in the [schools white paper](#) is an indication that we are moving in the right direction. The government is also right to provide opportunity to consult on the school admissions code. We recommend that mandating pupil premium priority is an element of this consultation so that further evidence can be considered.

Government should provide resources and training for school leaders to support them in introducing a pupil premium priority

Any change to the school admissions code will take time, but while this is happening there are other ways the government could encourage uptake of schools' existing rights to implement a pupil premium priority.

The first of these is addressing school leaders' fears of 'getting it wrong'. This was initially raised in the roundtables we held in early 2024. Here we discussed that school leaders would be hesitant to amend their admissions policies as it is

one of the areas that they most feared legal action from parents. This became a lived reality for one MAT in our Fair School Admissions Pledge. Having decided to run a consultation to introduce a pupil premium priority across their schools, they received firm advice from their own lawyer not to go ahead, as it may lead to complaints from parents. They ultimately postponed their consultation to give themselves more time to prepare for the change. This is a source of frustration, given the explicit approval of the school admissions code on the matter, judgments from the Office for the Schools Adjudicator, and the fact that many schools have introduced a pupil premium priority without parental opposition. This illustrates how important it is for government to support schools in making policy change and ensure the admissions code backs up schools making those changes with greater clarity.

Nonetheless, school leaders on the pledge took particular reassurance from looking at the policies of other schools that had already introduced a pupil premium priority. Evaluation of the pledge also highlighted that leaders benefitted from access to speaking to a perceived expert in admissions, as well as consulting with peers looking to achieve the same aims. We therefore strongly recommend that the government produce a range of exemplar admissions policies, as well as gathering existing case studies, highlighting different ways that pupil premium priority can be introduced. The Trust's new [School Admissions Hub](#) uses existing case studies and research to illustrate different models and provides advice for school leaders on implementing a pupil premium priority.

Another area of concern from school leaders is how they confirm individual pupils' eligibility for the pupil premium. Whilst the current school admissions code highlights the need for a Supplementary Information Form to identify that pupils are applying under this criteria, leaders still feel that guidance on proving eligibility is vague. Again, leaders look to what other schools are doing. Most leaders on the pledge have opted to contact primary schools for confirmation. In some instances, the local authority has taken the lead in determining pupil premium eligibility to reduce workload for individual schools. This is a powerful way for local authorities to support schools to implement Fair Admissions. We therefore recommend that the government produce clear guidance on this, perhaps as part of the above exemplars and case studies.

Finally, the government must urgently address the potential confusion around whether school places can be prioritised for children eligible for the pupil premium or those eligible for free school meals. This is especially vital due to the upcoming changes to eligibility criteria decoupling the two.

The role of schools and MATs in introducing pupil premium priority

Regardless of the potential for national policy change, school and MAT leaders are already able to introduce a pupil premium priority into their oversubscription criteria. The Sutton Trust encourages all schools to do this, especially those who have completed a Fair Access Review and finds that their school does not yet serve the full socio-economic range of their community.

There are a wide range of ways that pupil premium priority can be applied. Detailed information and support is available on the [School Admissions Hub](#). You can also test the impact of different priority approaches on a simulated intake with the [Pupil Premium Admissions Simulator](#).

In particular, leaders will need to make the following decisions when applying a pupil premium priority:

1. Will you use an unlimited or limited pupil premium priority? If you use a quota, will it be linked to the national average, the local average or something else?
2. Will you apply your priority early as part of your oversubscription criteria or will you section off some of the places to be designated after the main places (we refer to this as a pupil premium quota).
3. Will you link your pupil premium priority places to proximity? Do pupils have to live within a certain distance to qualify? How will they interact with existing catchment areas?

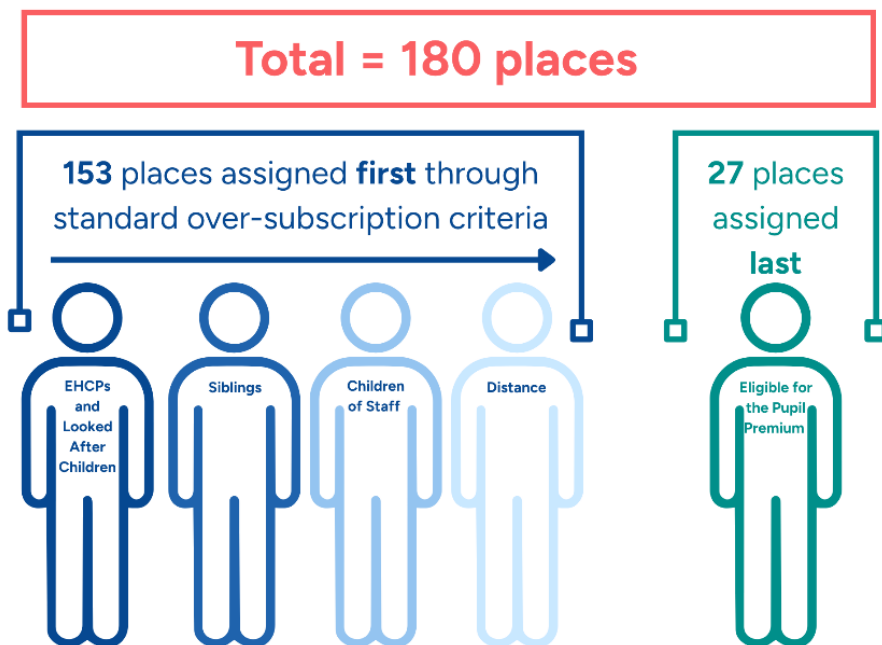
The answer to each of these will impact the scope of the change being made and should be considered carefully in light of the school's local context. All of these choices are explored in detail in the School Admissions Hub resource, but two models are considered here for illustrative purposes.

Model #1. Reserved Quota.

Firstly, as described above, the work by Simon Burgess's team identified a specific model of applying pupil premium priority. They recommend that 15% of places are prioritised for children eligible for the pupil premium, but that this is applied last. In essence, splitting your PAN into two smaller groups, a larger group which is determined by your standard oversubscription criteria and a smaller group dedicated to pupils eligible for the pupil premium not admitted in the first group. In their modelling they applied the same tie-breaker to the pupil

premium group as the school used throughout their admissions policy. This is illustrated in Figure 9 which uses example oversubscription criteria.

Figure 9: One model for applying a Pupil Premium priority – 15% quota, applied last

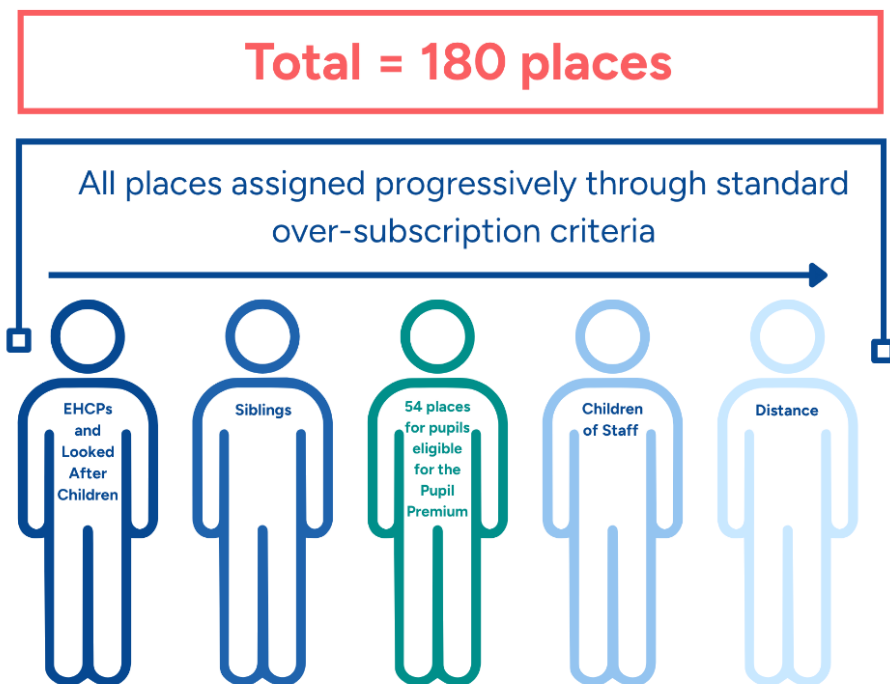


The aim of this model is to maximise the opportunities for children eligible for the pupil premium who wouldn't otherwise access the school. Some children eligible for the pupil premium will incidentally gain access through typical oversubscription criteria. By reserving the places until last priority spaces are not 'used up' by children who would have gained access to the school otherwise.

Model #2. Priority within criteria

A second model to consider is one used most commonly by schools who have already chosen to implement a pupil premium model. Here schools set a pupil premium quota and place it high on their oversubscription criteria. Figure 10 illustrates this, again using example oversubscription criteria and numbers.

Figure 10: One model for pupil premium priority – quota placed early on in the oversubscription criteria.



In the example shown in Figure 10, a pupil premium quota of 30% (54 out of 180 places) has been chosen, but schools have autonomy to choose any quota. An alternative would be to set the quota across the first three criteria, so the 54 places include pupil premium pupils admitted in the EHCP, looked after children and siblings categories. Guidance on how to select a quota is given in the [Fair School Admissions Hub](#).

There are schools all over the country that have chosen to apply a pupil premium priority. Case studies are available on the Fair School Admissions Hub. Two examples are also shown below:

Case study one: Orion Education

Admissions criteria

Where applications are oversubscribed, after the admission of children with statements of special educational needs/Education Health Care Plan (EHCP), places will be offered in line with the admission criteria outline below:

1. Children Looked After (CLA)
2. Students entitled to the pupil premium grant (up to 20% of the total places on offer)
3. Sibling (sibling on roll at the proposed time of entry)
4. Children of staff at the school
5. Medical or Social Needs
6. Proximity

This is a simplified list of their oversubscription criteria and the full policy can be found [here](#).

Case study two: The Mead Education Trust

This policy is taken from one of the schools in The Mead Education Trust, Kibworth Academy based in Leicester.

The admission number for Kibworth Mead Academy into year 7 is 180.

1. Children in the care of a local authority within England or who were previously in the care of a local authority within and outside of England.
2. Pupils who have a serious medical condition or exceptional social or domestic needs that make it essential that they attend the school requested. (Professional documentation confirming the situation must be submitted with the application).
3. Pupils who will have an older sibling attending the same school at the same time.
4. 32 children who are eligible for the pupil premium.
5. Children of members of staff (teaching and support staff) on a permanent contract.
6. Pupils living nearest to the school measured in a straight-line distance (home to school front gate).

This is a simplified list of their oversubscription criteria and the full policy can be found [here](#).

Theme three: Take a wider view of admissions

Often the discussion around admissions leaps straight to changing admissions policies. This is understandable, as policy changes are likely to have the biggest impact and are best placed to tackle some of the most significant factors contributing to social segregation.

However, it became clear to us through our initial research and roundtables that there was a lot of ground to be won in examining a school's wider approach to admissions. Additionally, leaders reflected that even if a pupil premium priority was introduced that wouldn't mean that it would be effective without a wider strategy in place to ensure that children from low-income families were aware of the policy and felt the school was one which they could attend. One school we spoke with who has introduced a pupil premium priority was dealing with just this issue:

“The cost of attending school is a significant barrier for working class families when making their school choices.”

“Last year our pupil premium criteria wasn't fully utilised and we are keen to improve this each year. We are looking to work with primary schools to ensure that all pupils who are eligible for FSM complete the necessary paperwork in year 6 so they can claim their place at our school.” Eden Park High School

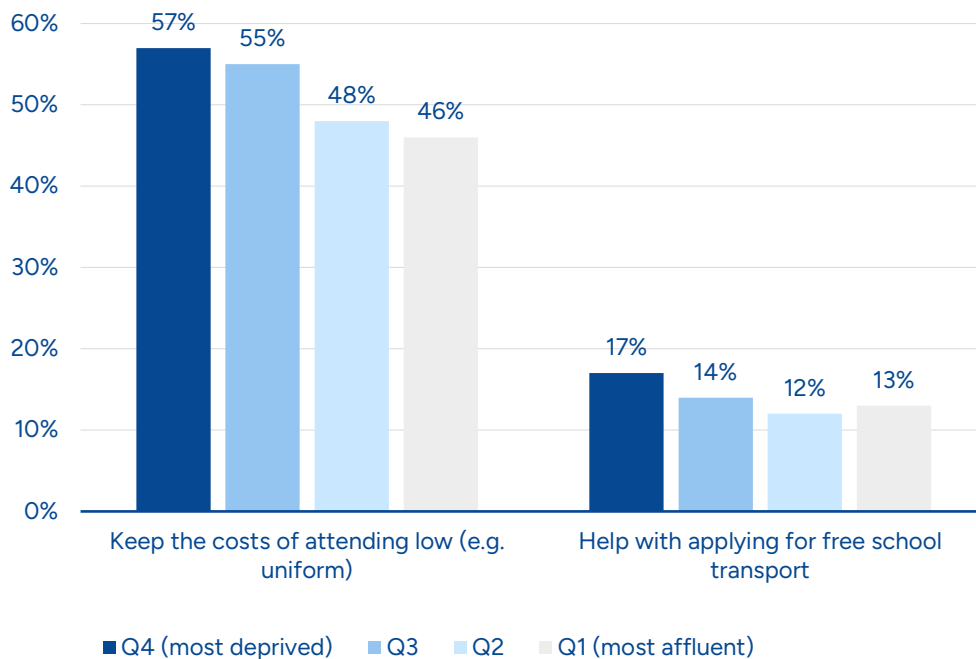
Cost of attending school

The cost of attending school was one area we felt we could improve access to schools without the need for complex policy consultation.

The cost of attending school is a significant barrier for working-class families when making their school choices. Previous Sutton Trust research revealed that 56% of working-class families say that 'hidden costs' impact on their school choices. The [Child Poverty Action Group](#) found that the average cost of attending secondary school for one year is £2,274.77. It is no wonder then that parents on low incomes or universal credit must consider this when making school choices, sometimes pro-actively seeking out the cheapest option.

The cost of attending school can be driven by costly uniform, transport, equipment lists as well as extra-curricular and enrichment expectations. Polling highlighted that a significant number of schools do not yet proactively consider this as part of their approach to admissions:

Figure 11: Percentage of schools utilising financial strategies to support fair access to their schools by socio-economic status of school, as reported by senior leaders



Source: Teacher Tapp Polling 24th and 25th June 2025 n = 1,737

Figure 11 shows that keeping costs of attending low is a more popular tactic than helping families apply for free school transport. This may in part be because of the current [government’s progress](#) in reducing the cost of school uniforms which has required schools to recently consider this specific issue. Whilst this has not yet been implemented, it is likely that schools will have started preparing anyway.

It might also be because school leaders do not fully understand who is eligible for the free school transport support, something that was admitted by MAT CEOs and headteachers on more than one occasion. This is especially frustrating given the pivotal role of school transport in accessing a wider range of schools. This has been highlighted by campaigners in Brighton and Hove in recent years as the city has moved to introducing a city-wide pupil premium priority. They argue that effective and affordable school transport can play a significant role in supporting the uptake of school places made available by fair admissions policies by low-income families.

While contexts differ between urban and rural environments, it is important to note that significant gains to equity in access can be achieved without large scale ‘bussing’ over long distances. In fact, the gap in school effectiveness (access to schools of varying quality) between those from high and low socio-

economic backgrounds could be eliminated with pupils travelling a maximum of just 3 kilometres.¹⁰

Figure 11 also shows how schools with more affluent cohorts are less likely to enact strategies which may increase social diversity. 57% of the most deprived schools keep the costs of attending school low compared to only 46% of the least deprived schools. 17% of schools with most deprived intakes support pupils applying for free school transport compared to 13% of schools with the least deprived intakes.

Access to information to make school choices

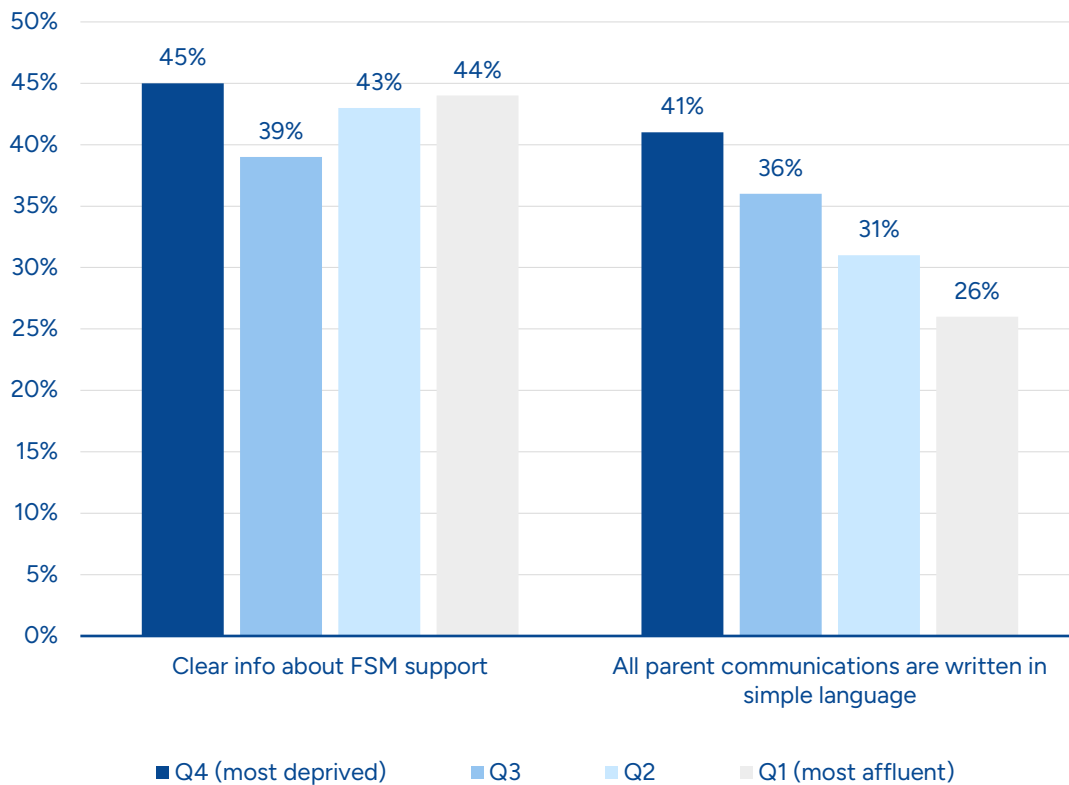
We also found in [Parent Power 2018](#) that not all families make equally well-informed choices with more affluent families using a wider range of evidence to make their school choices.

The [National Literacy Trust](#) has identified that 18% of adults in England are functionally illiterate. This means they can understand short straightforward texts on familiar topics accurately and independently and obtain information from everyday sources but reading information from unfamiliar sources or on unfamiliar topics could cause problems.

In addition, schools on the pledge often highlighted the challenges of living in ethnically diverse communities, where multiple languages were spoken in their communities. This adds to the challenge of schools communicating with parents.

There is some evidence that schools are making some efforts to address these issues, as shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Percentage of schools utilising clear communication to support fair access to their schools by socio-economic status of school



Source: Teacher Tapp Polling 24th and 25th June 2025 n = 1,737

Overall, 38% of those polled reported providing clear information about support available to children eligible for FSM. There were no significant differences across schools. A slightly less common strategy was ensuring that all communications were written in simple language, with 31% of those polled reporting that their schools did this, and substantial differences by level of disadvantage in the school. 41% of the most deprived schools took this approach, compared to 26% of the most affluent schools. This suggests that those already serving more disadvantaged contexts recognise the value of communicating clearly, reinforcing the need for more advantaged schools to address the issue.

Admissions policies are typically very complex, legal documents. This creates a barrier to families with lower literacy levels who may be more likely to also be from low-income homes or have English as an additional language. They may struggle to understand these texts and whether they are likely to gain a place at this school. This means that even if fair admissions policies are put into place, some families may not understand them to benefit from them.

Similar challenges arise in other areas of school life that families may want to understand before making school choices. Factors such as how a school can support their child who is eligible for free school meals, the school's approach to behaviour and their SEND strategy can all be hidden in long and technically complex documents.

Ultimately, this meant that working-class parents didn't always make school choices that reflected their 'true preference' and were more likely than their more affluent counterparts to make choices constrained by circumstance, whether real or perceived.

Addressing wider approaches in the Fair School Admissions Pledge

Addressing these areas as part of a wider approach to admissions has the potential to improve social diversity in schools. Not only do these approaches avoid lengthy processes, we also found that school leaders were much more willing to engage in these changes. In part this was because leaders told us that they felt less 'political', less risky and more within their control to manage.

We saw this play out in the action plans generated by leaders, which embraced these wider approaches more often than making a formal policy change.

In total 28 schools originally planned to undertake a policy change, of which 16 schools were successful. In contrast:

- 54 schools committed to rewriting their admissions policy to make it easier to understand.
- 45 schools planned ways to support more parents to apply for free school meals, for example having staff available at open evenings to show families how to apply.
- 41 schools planned to produce documents for parents that explained their pupil premium strategy and the support their child might be entitled to.
- 38 schools planned to update their open evening presentation to highlight how they can support children from low-income backgrounds.
- 32 schools planned to update their website to feature clear information on how they can support children eligible for the pupil premium.

- Uniform was tackled in a range of ways. 24 schools planned to open pre-loved or swap shops, 22 schools planned to offer subsidised uniform and 22 schools planned a range of other uniform options such as changing providers to reduce the overall cost.

Alongside this, the Sutton Trust has highlighted how other policy options beyond pupil premium priority have the potential to improve social diversity. These are discussed below.

The role of government in taking a wider approach to admissions

Much of the work in this theme must be undertaken by schools themselves. However, school leaders have a high workload and this can influence the pace at which they can make change. Government can support school leaders to make changes more quickly by providing guidance, resources and training as outlined below.

How government can reduce the cost of school

It is vital that the government continues the good progress that has been started in reducing the cost of attending school. They may wish to also consider the wider costs of attending school beyond uniform, for example extensive equipment lists or extra-curricular expectations and how these can be managed by schools. Careful monitoring of the uptake of the new uniform policy as it becomes embedded within schools will also be needed to ensure that it sufficiently reduces the cost of school.

As discussed above in Figure 12, free school transport is a key way we can further reduce the cost of school. The government should review current eligibility for free school transport, so that it does not become a hidden barrier to parental choice. This could include extending eligibility to all pupils eligible for pupil premium (and, therefore, those eligible for FSM in the last six years), so that families have greater certainty about the support that will be available over a longer period. Current support also limits parents to support in a relatively small geographical area, which is likely to be particularly limiting for families in lower density or more rural areas, who could have few schools within the current maximum distance of six miles. The government should look at greater flexibility or extending the maximum distance within which this support is available.

“It is vital that the government continues the good progress that has been started in reducing the cost of attending school.”

How government can support schools to communicate accessibly

Our work with schools in the Fair School Admissions pledge illustrates that schools are keen to support parents in making informed school choices. However leaders on the pledge often voiced concerns over the need to meet the legal requirements of key documents whilst also making them easy to understand. Therefore, we recommend that the government produce further guidance on how schools can communicate key information in a way that is accessible to all families. This is especially important for admissions policies, pupil premium strategies and SEND strategies. The [NHS](#) already has similar documents for their workforce. Leaders may also benefit from specific templates and pro-formas.

Many schools also discussed how they were exploring the use of AI tools to help them translate documents. The government may also wish to investigate the appropriateness of these tools in order to recommend specific tools to schools.

How government can support schools to adopt alternative admissions policy options

[Selective Comprehensives 2024](#) highlighted that implementing a pupil premium priority is not the only policy option to increase social diversity.

The alternative options fall broadly into two categories – removing or adjusting policies that contribute to social segregation and introducing policies that have the potential to increase social diversity. Aptitude places are one potential cause for concern. These offer priority places to children showing ability in certain subjects. Leaders reflect that these places are often taken by middle-class families who have the means to support their child in developing an aptitude e.g. sports or music lessons. The government may wish to consider adapting the school admissions code here, requiring schools to find ways of assessing potential rather than aptitude.

Faith schools have, on average, higher FSM gaps than non-faith schools. The reasons for this are complex but some of this is due to the complexity of proving one's religious eligibility, something which may be particularly challenging for children from low-income homes. Therefore, Sutton Trust recommends that the government support schools to simplify their criteria by providing exemplars and case studies of faith schools who have done this.

Conversely fair banding and balloting are two policy options that could potentially contribute to social diversity. The school admissions code also

allows for more innovative approaches such as the use of proximity against nodal points or reserving places for children out of catchment. However, take up of these options has also been low. Only 103 schools currently use banding, 23 schools reserve places for children outside of catchment and just one comprehensive school has been found to use a nodal point proximity measure.¹¹

Some of this reservation may relate to school leaders' overall lack of awareness of social segregation and the solutions available as identified earlier in the report. Leaders on the pledge also reflected their concerns about doing 'something different' from other schools and were nervous about interpreting the school admissions code incorrectly. The government could support this by producing exemplar policies showcasing the application of more innovative arrangements.

Fair banding has come under scrutiny recently, with opponents arguing that it can be used to curate a cohort rather than as an inclusive measure. [FFT Education Datalab](#) have highlighted the potential unintended consequences on neighbouring schools leading to neighbouring schools with higher levels of low ability pupils. The Sutton Trust feels that fair banding, when applied with the intention of serving the full range of its community, can contribute to social diversity, but if used wrongly can have the opposite effect. In most cases this will involve mapping the ability bands against the national ability range but in some cases where the community has a lower ability range than the national average, it may be worth mapping against the applicant range. We also recognise that neighbouring schools may feel it impacts their cohort, but this should be considered in context that fair banding is only used when a school is oversubscribed. Fair banding may be mitigating more extreme social segregation across schools.

Fair banding works best when schools make a concerted effort to reduce barriers to engagement. Examples of this could include running the tests in primary schools and on open days as well as providing clear information on the test and how to apply.

The government has already identified that they intend to look specifically at the rules around fair banding. This is a sensible step. Currently schools are able to gauge ability across either the national ability range, the local ability range or the applicant ability range. We have seen schools use different versions to have a positive impact and therefore recommend that the government specifically consider the intention of schools who chose to use it rather than the mechanism itself. This could be done as part of Ofsted inspections, with school leaders being invited to explain the rationale for their admissions policies. Government should also provide guidance on the wider support the school should provide to ensure all families are able to engage with the assessment.

The role of schools and MATs in taking a wider approach to admissions

Most of the actions within this theme are quick wins for schools, enabling meaningful progress to be made rapidly and independently, without needing to wait for government direction or support.

How schools and MATs can reduce the cost of school

Throughout the pledge, the cost of attending school was frequently raised as an area that schools had been shocked to discover. Most school leaders felt they were doing their best to reduce cost, but in calculating the cost of attending their school over a year (through the Fair Access Review) they discovered costs that far exceeded their expectations.

"We did some quite a lot of in-depth work around costings for our families. And I think ... goodness, that's a lot of money... By the time you've taken in... the uniform, the PE kit, specialist stationery, extracurricular, the miscellaneous items... It's really good that actually nationally this is becoming more near the top of the agenda to really help support families, because as school leaders, you know people want the children in their schools to look smart, but actually you don't want it to be something whereby that sheer cost you are going to exclude young people. So that was quite eye opening for our headteachers."
Suzannah Wharf – Education South West

Schools reduced costs to families in a number of ways. Reducing the number of branded uniform items or offering pre-loved uniforms, providing equipment packs to pupils and offering discrete financial support. Where schools couldn't reduce costs further they also considered notice periods to families:

"It's when that information is shared as well, if you've got uniform costs, which are quite a financial burden, dropping that in the June for the September with no lead in time, that's really hard for families and really stressful. So [have the conversations] early and say, but don't worry, because we have our swap shops, we have opportunities for families to be able to use uniform that's been pre-loved, it's available and it's accessible and actually we have a sustainability mission as well to try and ensure that we're not being wasteful as consumers." Suzannah Wharf – Education South West

Notice periods are especially important to families who are budgeting month to month and may need more than four weeks' notice to cover unexpected costs.

Another way schools tackled financial barriers was in better promoting the option for free school transport. Most schools who looked at this did so by

deploying staff at key events such as open evenings who could help parents apply for their free transport. One school with particularly complex transport options in their local area decided to produce a map showing exactly which streets would qualify for free transport.

Most schools were able to identify at least one way they could reduce the financial burden of attending their schools, for example by providing equipment or reducing uniform expectations.

How schools and MATs can ensure they are communicating accessibly

After completing a Fair Access Review, school leaders often reflected that there was a lot they could do to improve how they communicate with families. In the Fair Access Review leaders looked at three main areas. They used [reading difficulty calculators](#) to determine how complex key documents were to read and, they considered how easy it was to find information on their website and they also considered how proactive they were in promoting information as part of their recruitment strategy. We recommend that all schools should do the same as part of their wider approach to admissions.

Many schools used a combination of built-in Microsoft Word and Google editor tools as well as manual checking to review the accessibility of their communications. One MAT took a more innovative approach to reduce the workload element:

“To keep workload manageable, we found some really intuitive ways to work. We used AI tools to order our school websites and we did that to both check that the policies were there, but also that information was accessible... We [also] looked at the minimum reading age... [and] found that some of our websites, [were not] accessible to some of our parents and that included both the reading age, but also the ability to translate that into different languages for our communities.” Gary Aldred – The Mead Education Trust

AI was also used as part of the solution with leaders using it to translate documents into multiple languages, reduce the complexity of the documents and to also convert written documents into podcasts or videos.

Another common approach with school leaders was to create ‘easy to read documents’ which accompanied their standard policies. A snippet of one example is shown below with a fuller explanation available on the [Fair School Admissions Hub](#).

Figure 13: Example 'easy to read' admissions policy from the Fair School Admissions Pledge

2. Number of Learners

The school can have 600 students in total. Each year, 80 new learners can join Year 9 (age 13) and 180 new learners can join Year 12 (age 16).

For more details, visit the college website: www.ldeutc.co.uk

3. How to Apply

The college wants to have learners of all abilities and an equal number of boys and girls.

- **Year 9 Applications for 2026:** Apply by December 12, 2025, using the form on the college website.
- **Special Needs:** Learners with an Educational Health and Care Plan (EHCP) will be admitted if the college can meet their needs.
- **Too Many Applications:** If more learners apply than there are places, the college will use these rules to decide who gets in:

1. **Looked After Children:** Children in care or who were in care.

2. **Girls:** Up to half of the places will go to girls. Priority is given to:

- Children with special social or medical reasons.
- Brothers and sisters of current learners.
- Children of staff who have worked at the college for at least two years.
- Random selection based on how close they live to the college.


4. Distance Bands

- **Band A:** Less than 4.5 miles from the school.
- **Band B:** Less than 10.5 miles from the school.

Other organisations picked out key information to highlight on their website, allowing parents to access the information most useful to them without having to navigate long documents. Some made video content to support parent understanding. [One Degree Academy](#) is an excellent example of this, shown in Figure 14.


Figure 14: Screenshot of how one school makes admissions information clear for parents and carers

We're so glad you're here



A World's Best School 2025 finalist & rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted in 2019 and 2025, One Degree Academy is a dynamic, top rated primary school in Enfield, UK. We are dedicated to empowering students with the knowledge, skills and confidence to achieve their full potential. Through high-quality teaching, personalised support and a strong focus on character development, we inspire young minds to excel academically and beyond. Our mission is to create a nurturing learning environment where every student can thrive and succeed.

We welcome applications from all families in our community and encourage anyone interested in sending their child to One Degree Academy to apply. As a free state school, we're open to everyone —no matter where you live.



The Heart of One Degree: How We Live Our 4 Cs
One Degree Academy

Watch on YouTube

Want to Jump to the Top of the Waiting List?

For most year groups, we operate a waiting list that's updated with every new application. Families eligible for Pupil Premium (low-income households) are automatically placed at the top of this list, regardless of where they live. If you think you may qualify and would like assistance, please email admissions@onedegreeacademy.org or call us at 020 3150 1144. We'll be happy to help you secure a place at One Degree Academy. You will need to **complete the Pupil Premium application form** [here](#).

You can learn more about Pupil Premium [here](#).

No Catchment Area for Lower Income Families

There is no catchment area for families eligible for Pupil Premium (low-income households). These families are given priority admission or go to the top of our waiting list, regardless of their address. Please **complete the Pupil Premium application form** [here](#). Then call us on 020 3150 1144 and we can help you see if you qualify as Pupil Premium.

“Our primary recommendation for improving social diversity in schools is to introduce a pupil premium priority which is well supported by abundant promotion of the policy and simply written documents.”

Ultimately, schools took a range of approaches to making their information more accessible, but the majority of schools did consider this as part of their approach to improving admissions.

When and how schools should consider adopting alternative admissions policy options

Our primary recommendation for improving social diversity in schools is to introduce a pupil premium priority which is well supported by abundant promotion of the policy and simply written documents.

However, there may be specific circumstances where schools feel that a pupil premium priority isn't the right fit for their context, or they have already introduced a pupil premium priority and not seen their desired impact.

Therefore, another potential starting point for some schools is actively removing or tweaking policies that contribute to social segregation.

One school we worked with decided to remove their aptitude places after analysis of the children awarded those places revealed that none of the children were eligible for the pupil premium. Other schools tweaked their catchment areas to include postcodes from wards with higher levels of deprivation (using the IDACI).

Feeder schools were another criteria that some school leaders reviewed to ensure their current feeders reflected the social mix and level of diversity they were aiming to curate in their schools. Caution should be exercised when introducing new feeder schools, as this can shift competition for places into the primary phase as well as at secondary level. Where new feeders are identified, this should be done strategically, with careful consideration given to pupil demographics and the likely impact on the school's intake.

We therefore encourage leaders to look forensically at which criteria their cohort gained entry through to understand the potential existing barriers. Leaders also reflected that removing policy barriers was an easier ask than introducing potentially controversial ones.

However, some schools may find that they have already removed policy barriers and introduced a well-supported pupil premium policy and they have still not generated the desired level of social diversity in their schools.

In this instance we encourage schools to think more creatively about how they might amend their admissions policy. The school admissions code is inherently permissive and designed to specify what schools can't do rather than describe the things they can do.

"This is something I'd definitely recommend to all school leaders. It sounds like a really dull job, but... I swotted up on lots of Office of the School Adjudicator's rulings because there isn't a body that you can go to ask for advice. And so the only way really to get an insight into what you can do with the admissions code, what works, what flies, what doesn't fly, is having a read back through some of the rulings that have been made by the OSA... And all school leaders are definitely encouraged to think, OK, what's said in the school admissions code and what's not said? And actually, those things that are not said, they're not said for a reason." Greg Fairchild – Reading School

Fair banding is a well-established alternative arrangement which may boost the social diversity of your school. But this must be done carefully. Depending on the starting point of the school, and other schools in the area, if a limited

cohort of children take the test (often a more advantaged and motivated group) and the ability range of the applicant pool is used as a benchmark, this could result in a less diverse intake. Typically, we suggest that schools using fair banding map their pupils against the national ability range, but some contexts may require an alternative approach, especially for schools serving communities with an ability range lower than the national average. Encouraging and enabling families from across the socio-economic spectrum to take the test is also key.

Marginal ballots, where schools use a lottery for a small proportion of their school places, is another system which has potential for reducing social segregation. It is often seen as a 'fair' approach by parents but can simultaneously cause some anxiety. Again, the impact of this approach will depend on local context, and the demographic profile of those closer and further away from the school, as well as being dependant on outreach to parents and primary schools in deprived areas who might be slightly further away, to promote applications.

Finally, school leaders should also review the role of admissions appeals in shaping who ultimately secures a place at their school and consider whether this process is influencing overall social diversity. Comparing offers with actual attendance can provide useful insight here. For example, among pupils eligible for FSM, 84% receive an offer from their first-choice school but only 81% go on to attend, whereas the pattern is reversed for non-FSM pupils, with a higher proportion attending their first-choice school than initially received an offer.¹² This may indicate that appeals processes are more frequently or more successfully used by more advantaged families. Schools should therefore analyse appeal outcomes alongside their admissions data to ensure the process is not unintentionally reinforcing existing inequalities in access.

There is more detail on policy options on our Fair School Admissions Hub which we encourage leaders to engage with.

Discussion

Sutton Trust research over two decades has shown the perennial nature of social segregation in England's schools, and the impact this has on inequalities within the school system. But there is now mounting appetite for change. The clear indications of direction of travel in the 2026 schools white paper are welcome, but our experiences over the last two and a half years have shown that a complex range of factors need to be addressed to make significant progress.

We have demonstrated throughout the pledge that there is appetite from school leaders for change in admissions. Since our work began, we note an increase of over 50% in the number of schools choosing to use a pupil premium priority, and there is room for much greater growth. It is also vital that changes to admissions policy are accompanied by a wider shift to a culture of inclusion and accessibility. Our conversations with school leaders highlight that there is a willingness to review and implement a wide range of changes to enable equal access.

As such, we have developed and launched the Fair School Admissions Hub to broaden access to the support school leaders need to make changes to admissions. Time constraints weigh heavily on school leaders and our hope is that an online portal of resources will both reduce their overall workload and increase the flexibility of engaging with these resources.

However, there are two significant barriers to change.

Firstly, school leaders are already overstretched and overworked. This limits their ability to prioritise school admissions. If we want to see more schools pick up the mantle of school admissions we must make it as easy for them as possible. Schools need resources and systems to help them review their approach to admissions and they need clear and detailed guidance on how they can make changes. They are thirsty for knowledge from other school leaders who have 'been there and done that' and actively seek out case studies. This desire for support is the reason why the Fair School Admissions Hub exists, and the government can do their part by developing their own body of resources to give concrete support and guidance to schools considering change.

Secondly, uncertainty in different areas of admissions creates too much fear for school leaders to fully embrace fair school admissions. Leaders are fearful of pushback from middle-class parents, of mis-interpreting the school admissions code and of the potential impacts of a more socially diverse cohort on their

“The Fair School Admissions Pledge has shown that when the right support is available, meaningful change can happen. Now the Government needs to consider what lessons they can learn from this to move admissions forward throughout England.”

school outcomes and accountability measures. Here the government will need to be brave and act to reassure schools so they can make the changes needed. This could involve reviewing current approaches to accountability measures, providing case studies of schools that are doing admissions well and potentially even mandating that all schools introduce a pupil premium priority, taking pressure off schools themselves to lead the change.

Moving forward without these steps will likely mean that any changes made to admissions will fall short of our desired aims of improving social diversity. The Fair School Admissions Pledge has shown that when the right support is available, meaningful change can happen. Now the government needs to consider what lessons they can learn from this to move admissions forward throughout England.

Appendix – The Fair School Admissions Framework (full version)

	Government	Schools and MATs
Strategic Direction	Embed a cultural understanding that inclusion begins with admissions.	Develop a culture for admissions that goes beyond legal compliance and towards moral purpose.
	Raise awareness of social segregation and fair admissions so that it is high on school leaders' agendas. This could include embedding fair admissions into the NPQ curriculum.	Develop an admissions strategy that is overseen by a member of SLT and a governor. Consider how all staff can be engaged in the process of fair admissions.
	Adapt accountability measures to support schools to become more inclusive. This could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ofsted taking greater account of school intake in inspections- Ofsted inspecting admissions as part of the inclusion judgement- An updated measure of school performance alongside Progress 8 that takes school context into account.	Complete an annual 'Fair Access Review' to ensure that admissions plays an active role in a schools inclusion strategy. Resources to support with this are available on the Fair Admissions Hub.

Key Admissions Policy Change

Consider **updating the school admissions code** so that all oversubscribed schools are **required to implement a pupil premium priority**.

Provide stronger guidance and resources to support schools in introducing pupil premium priority under the existing code, including concrete policy examples and case studies.

Introduce a pupil premium priority in your school, across your MAT or local authority. Schools have considerable autonomy in how this is implemented, with a range of viable models.

For example, a capped quota (e.g. 30%) can be applied within oversubscription criteria, typically after sibling priority and before distance. One potential model for this is introduce a 15% quota applied after the standard oversubscription criteria has been applied to the first 85%.

Take a wider view of admissions

Support schools to reduce financial burdens, including reviewing the current provision of free school transport. Government may wish to particularly consider extending the maximum distance within which this support is available.

Support schools to **improve the accessibility of their communication** with parents by providing guidance documents and model admissions policies.

Support schools to implement innovative approaches to admissions by **providing a bank of case studies and further clarifying some elements of the school admissions code**. This should include the expectations around fair banding.

Reduce the financial burdens of attending your school including supporting parents to apply for free school meals and free school transport.

Ensure all **communications to parents are accessible** to all and that support is widely promoted.

Consider other options for **innovative policy change** such as removing policies that act as barriers or introducing further mechanisms such as:

- Banding
- Ballots
- Nodal points which promote social diversity
- Reviewing whether catchment areas reflect the diversity of the local community.

References

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