



Admissions Arrangements: Use of Faith-Based Oversubscription Criteria

Guidance for Governors /Trustees
Sept 2024



The Role of the Diocesan Board of Education (DBE)

- One function of the DBE is to offer guidance and support to its schools on admissions and appeals and assist governing boards in drawing up admission arrangements which meet local circumstances and are compliant with the School Admissions Code.
- We advise that schools use the [Church of England Admissions Builder Online Toolkit](#) in creating or reviewing their admissions arrangements.
- Governing Boards have a statutory duty to consult the DBE before consulting anyone else.
- Church schools are required to have regard to DBE guidance when formulating their admission criteria in relation to church commitment.
- School Adjudicators refer to Diocesan guidance when determining objections about church school admission arrangements. They will also take account of the governors' consultation with the DBE.

What is the Diocesan position on the use of faith-based criteria as oversubscription criteria?

- **It is the view of the DBE that our schools are schools for all; places for the whole community to be welcomed into without partiality. Therefore, DBE's view is that schools in the Diocese should not set faith-based or church attendance as a criterion. Admitting authorities should have regard to this advice when setting their arrangements.**
- The DBE invites all admission authorities to demonstrate 'true hospitality', as defined by Archbishop Welby, and offer 'warm fires and open doors', as described by the Bishop of Huntingdon:

'True hospitality....makes welcome and relationship possible across boundaries of faith or race or background....that welcome is the authentically Christian way of life and we see it in our schools every single day...It means engaging meaningfully and explicitly with difference....it needs to stem from a belief that God is at work in all people and a willingness to be surprised by the forms that work might take.'

'By Warm Fires, I mean a vibrant and attractive sense of our Christian Identity and by Open Doors I mean a real welcome to anyone and everyone to gather around the fire.'

*Extracts from 'The Fruit of the Spirit',
A Church of England Discussion Paper on Character Education*

- The DBE respects the right of our schools and academies to legitimately use faith-based criteria as one of their oversubscription criteria as permitted in Paragraph 1.36 Schools Admissions Code 2021.
- Governing boards who decide to include this as part of their admission arrangements should take note of the further guidance within this document.

Should we review the faith-based oversubscription criteria in our admissions arrangements?

- We advise all schools to review their admission arrangements on an annual basis, this includes an analysis of intake and when oversubscription criteria have had to be applied. A sample form for this is available on the Diocesan website, this will support governors in deciding on the inclusion of faith-based oversubscription criteria.
- If you are a school or academy with surplus places and have never had to apply oversubscription criteria, there is no benefit in having criteria which are over-prescriptive or could be seen as off-putting.
- We advise that consideration of the use of faith-based criteria should take place in a full meeting of the board. The rationale behind a decision to include or not include faith-based criteria should be made clear in the agreed minutes of the meeting.
- We advise that boards ensure that the local incumbent is involved in discussions where the incumbent is not already a governor.
- As part of these discussions, governors should consider the following statement: In 2016, at the Diocesan Directors of Education Conference, a debate was held on the use of church criteria in admissions arrangements. The concluding statement was this:

‘A child’s experience of being part of a faith ‘full’ school community is much more important than their parents’ attendance at church. If we believe in justice and equality we must not set exclusive criteria but build communities in the love of Christ.’

What if we want to offer an education to children of families who are committed Christians?

- Some popular church schools could be oversubscribed and could fill all their places with church members; this is particularly true of some secondary schools. In such situations, the DBE believes that church schools should consider both their role in nurturing children whose families are committed members of the Christian faith and also in serving members of the local community who may profess another faith or none.
- The DBE recognises the challenges faced by governing boards to decide how to balance its wish to serve the community with its wish to nurture children from Christian homes in their faith. The decision to turn away practising Anglicans, or other Christians, from a Church of England school to take in other children who may have no faith, or practice another faith, is a difficult one. Church schools in this position undoubtedly face a dilemma, but there is also the question of perception which plays a part in parents’ selection of their preferences. There are instances where non-church families are put off applying to their local church school because it is perceived that priority for admission is given to church attendees to the exclusion of all others, even if, in practice, this is not the case. Some families assume that they will not be given a place when in fact the school is not oversubscribed with church

families. In this case, a Foundation/Open Place Model serves a purpose in stating publicly that applications are welcome from non-church families as well as church families.

- Governing boards should aim to ensure that children of other backgrounds and/or the local community whose parents, even if they are not practising Christians, have other valid reasons for choosing the school, should have some access to school places, even in those schools that are significantly over-subscribed. In such cases, it is advised that schools adopt a Foundation/Open Places Model.

Would removing our faith-based criteria have a negative impact on attendance at our local church(es)?

- It is the responsibility of church leaders to improve attendance at their church services, this is not the role of school admissions arrangements.
- Church schools stand at the centre of the Church of England's mission. Our schools enable more direct engagement with children and their families than any other contact, including regular Sunday worship. Inclusive schools with strong, positive links with their parish offer local churches a greater opportunity to link with the wider community.
- Schools can support their local church in numerous ways, please see our guidance document, *Working Together: Ideas for Parish and School Links*.

How should we word our faith-based oversubscription criteria?

- When setting faith-based oversubscription criteria, boards should ensure that they:
 - express them in a way which is easy for parents to understand.
 - relate them solely to regular attendance at public worship in church.
 - define the terms used, such as 'regular attendance' and 'church'.
 - include a SIF for parents to provide evidence that they meet the criteria and for church leaders to complete to verify the evidence.
- Compliant wording is built into the [Church of England Admissions Builder Online Toolkit](#)
- Governors must also refer to the Diocesan advice given in Appendix 1.

What priority should we give to faith-based criteria?

- It is advised that church attendance should not be placed higher than the following criteria (if being used):
 - Pupils who are either currently or have previously been 'looked after'
 - Children who have an exceptional medical or social need
 - Sibling
 - A child who resides within the catchment area of the school and is eligible for the pupil premium

Can we give greater priority to those who show the greatest commitment to their church, perhaps those who attend more regularly?

- Where demand for foundation places is very high, regulations allow for boards to give priority to fortnightly attendees above monthly attendees etc., providing this is made clear in the policy, but given the commitments of some families, as outlined below, it is advised that priority is given to those living nearest to the school so that the tie break for this criteria is in line with others.
- Governors should consider carefully the changing patterns of attendance at church on the part of families.
- It is important that an unconscious bias isn't built into oversubscription criteria and governors should be aware of differing family circumstances, for example, to ensure that single-parent families are not disadvantaged. Or sections of a catchment area are not disadvantaged because of accessibility to services.
- Consideration should also be given to factors such as a parent's ability to attend Sunday worship. For instance, some families may be caring for elderly relatives which requires them to be away regularly at weekends. Some parents may find it easier to be involved with mid-week services and some may have jobs which require them to work on Sundays, e.g., hospital staff, shop assistants, and police; others may have one parent working abroad for extended periods.
- There is no guarantee that a monthly attendee is any more committed than a fortnightly attendee and in that sense, attendance can be a crude measure of commitment.

What is a Foundation/Open Places Model?

- Boards may establish admission arrangements by offering a proportion of places to church applicants (foundation) and a proportion to those without church affiliation (open).
- The DBE is committed to ensuring that our schools have an inclusive intake. Where a school is heavily oversubscribed with committed church applicants, the only way that this can be delivered is through the open/foundation model. Boards may have different reasons for opting for this model, but it does emphasise to the community that the school welcomes applicants from outside the Church.
- A foundation/open place model will allow those not connected with the Church to be educated in a church school. **The DBE request that foundation places should be no more than 50% of the intake and that criterion which gives priority to the disadvantaged and vulnerable should be applied before quotas are assigned.**

How do we define Foundation and Open places?

- Governors will need to formulate admission arrangements specifically for their schools, and boards should seek advice in doing this from the Education Team.

Can we prioritise looked after children from committed Christian families?

- All schools **must** give first priority in their admission criteria to looked after children and previously looked after children. Regulations allow church schools to give priority to looked after children and previously looked after children who have a Christian commitment above those who are of another faith or none. However, the

Board considers that all looked after children should be given top priority regardless of faith.

What is a SIF?

- A Supplementary Information Form (SIF) may be used by governors in addition to the common application form / in-year common application form in order to collect additional information which is needed to apply their oversubscription criteria.
- A SIF cannot be a mandatory requirement, but parents may be made aware of the consequences of not completing a SIF.
- It is against the School Admissions Code to request any personal details about the parent's educational background, qualifications, income or first language as part of the admission process. Schools **must** not ask parents to agree to support the ethos of the school in a practical way (*School Admissions Code 2021, para 1.9e*), nor should the SIF by implication suggest covert requirements or discrimination, e.g. request for both the mother's name and father's name could be taken to disadvantage single parent families.
- Where a school uses a SIF, a copy of this should be appended to the Admissions Arrangements.
- Where a school uses a religious reference request to verify attendance at religious worship, this must also be attached to the arrangements.

What if a parent does not send in their SIF?

- Applications made on the relevant Local Authority common application form are valid applications even if not accompanied by a SIF. However, if a SIF is not completed, governors will only be able to use the information provided on the common application form.
- Governors may consider contacting parents where a SIF has not been received, they should also do so if the school has received a SIF but there is no record of a common application form, as the SIF is not a valid application on its own. The relevant information should be notified to parents, including the reasonable expectation that it is the parent's responsibility to provide all information that they would wish governors to consider in support of their application and the timescale in which this information should be received by the school.

Should we offer priority to non-Christian faiths?

- We would recommend that schools welcome those of other faiths to their school through their other (non-faith based) oversubscription criteria. The admissions authority will need to be satisfied that the criteria is objective and fair (including when read alongside Christian faith based criteria) and provides for the fact that different faiths practice in different ways. To our knowledge, no satisfactory method of inclusion of faith based oversubscription criteria for those of other faiths has been identified to date, and we would encourage Church schools to review their policies where priority for other faiths is currently included and proceed with caution in this regard.

Appendix 1: Guidance on wording faith-based oversubscription criteria

We advise all schools to use the Church of England Admissions Builder tool to ensure compliant wording.

Those schools that do not use the Admissions Builder Tool should adhere to the following guidance on wording when creating or reviewing their faith-based oversubscription criteria:

- Ensure all wording adheres to the requirements of the School Admissions Code 21. In particular ensuring that that wording is clear, objective and reasonable.
- Attendance at public worship should be the sole measure of religious activity used and this should be sufficiently defined. Avoid using other religious activities that are social, complex or non-permissible such as leading a music group or being a PCC member.
- Both the duration and frequency of attendance at public worship must be clearly defined, and provide an obvious threshold. They should also be reasonable and proportionate. For example, *'At least once a month for not less than 12 months before the closing date specified on the form which the application is submitted'*
- Avoid using layers of priority based on the level of church attendance for the reasons set out in our guidance document.
- Do not use subjective and undefined terms such as *'usually attend'*; *'regular attendance'*; *'occasional worshipper'*
- Do not use terms previously found in admissions guidance, such as *'at the heart of the church / attached to / known to the church'*, as they do not meet the objectivity and transparency requirements of the Code.
- Wherever possible, avoid restricting church attendance to only one or a small number of named churches.
- Use the nationally recognised definition of church, see below:
'Christian church means any church which is designated under the Ecumenical Relations Measure nationally by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York or locally by the diocesan bishop, or is a member of Churches Together in England, or the Evangelical Alliance, or a partner church of Affinity'
- Check that the wording of faith-based oversubscription criteria of the admissions policy, the SIF and any clergy reference form is identical. No additional information or reference to it can be sought through the SIF.

Appendix 2: An example Supplementary Information Form (SIF)

This Supplementary Information Form should be completed by the parent/guardian of the child who is seeking admission to the school. This form needs only be completed to confirm and verify that you meet the requirements of the oversubscription criteria related to church attendance. No additional information will be considered unless a family has attended more than one place of worship for that period, in which case more than one form may be submitted to cover the 12 month period. It is the responsibility of the parent to get both sections completed and returned to school.

This form should be returned to the school office by no later than midnight on 15th January/31st October.

Section A: Application			
Please consider the following information as part of the admissions process for the following child:			
Child's Surname:		First name:	
Name of parent/Guardian			
Address			
Postcode		Contact no:	

Place of worship:			
Name of vicar/priest/faith leader			
Address:			
Postcode		Contact no:	

I can confirm that applicant has attended public worship at the above place of worship for at least once a month for not less than 12 months prior to the submission date above.			
Signed:		Date:	

Section B: Verification			
This section is to be completed by the above-mentioned church leader.			
I confirm that the child/parent/guardian named above has attended public worship at church at least once a month for not less than 12 months prior to the submission date above.			
Name:			
Signed:		Date:	

Schools may wish to gather the verification on a separate form for confidentiality reasons.