

Secondary school admissions – Q & A

What's the new system?

It means communities are given priority of access to their local school/s, by a simple system based on their home postal area. It is proposed that:

- Portslade Community College would have its own catchment area – postcode **BN41 2**
- Hove Park and Blatchington Mill would share a joint catchment area - postcodes **BN1 5** (excepting Tongdean Lane), **BN3**, **BN41 1**
- Varndean and Dorothy Stringer would share a joint catchment area – postcodes **BN1 1- 4**, **BN1 6- 7**, **BN2 0- 3**, **half of BN2 5**, **BN2 9**
- Falmer High and Patcham High would share a joint catchment area – postcodes **BN1 8- 9**, **BN2 4** and Tongdean Lane of **BN1 5**
- Longhill School would have its own catchment area – postcodes **BN2 6- 8**, **half of BN2 5**

A map detailing the catchment area boundaries and postcodes is available on our website. The BN2 5 postcode has been split between two catchment areas to take into account overall pupil numbers, established community areas and the balance of needs indicators such as free meals.

The proposed new system would not affect Cardinal Newman school. As a church-aided school, it's their governing body that is responsible for deciding admission policy, not the council.

When does this start?

This would apply for secondary places in September 2008.

Why can't we introduce it straight away?

The government's rules on changing school admission policies state that changes have to be notified 18 months in advance. We have no powers to override this. If agreed by the Children, Families and Schools committee on 6 November, a period of statutory consultation with schools then has to take place before final approval. This would not be until the new year.

Why change the current system?

The current system, where places are allocated on the basis of home to school distance after exceptional needs and sibling links have been taken into account, is clear and easy to understand.

However, the result has been that it's only children who live relatively near to many of our schools that get places at them. This has been called the 'golden halo' effect.

Large areas of the city that are further away from schools – including many deprived areas – effectively have no access to schools near them.

We wanted to see if we could find a system that would offer local schools to local people, and also give schools a more balanced intake from a variety of backgrounds. We believe the proposed system achieves this.

How do equal preference systems and ballots work?

In the new system everyone within a catchment area would have an equal chance of getting a place at a school in their area- no matter which part of the area you live in.

We think this would be a fairer way of allocating places than the current system.

And after exceptional needs and sibling links have been taken into account, you are given priority for schools in your catchment area over people from outside your area.

You still put your three preferred schools in order of preference on your form. Our admissions team then works through all the preferences for all schools. If we can offer more than one of your preferences, we offer you the higher ranked one.

If schools are oversubscribed, we run a ballot. People who do not get places through the ballot still have an equal chance of getting a place at one of their other preferred schools.

If both schools in a catchment area are oversubscribed we run the ballot at the more oversubscribed one first.

Again, we think this is fairer than the current system because it treats everyone in the catchment area equally.

What makes us so sure that this is the best way forward?

A working group comprising councillors of all political parties, local parents and a parent governor representative has been working through a wide range of possible solutions for more than a year. They have been helped by a 20- strong group of parents from across the city.

They identified six key factors in formulating their recommendations. They were:

- increased opportunity for children to transfer to a secondary school with their peers
- enabling a better balance in the spread of children from deprived wards attending secondary schools
- access to preferred schools
- travelling distance
- links between schools and communities; and
- the importance of meeting parental preference.

They have looked at different models based on: feeder primary schools; nodes and dual nodes; single catchment areas and double catchment areas.

They had to factor in the different capacities of schools, as well as predicted future intakes. And they also had an obligation to come up with a system that is both fair and easy to understand.

They came to the conclusion that the proposed system is fair, easy to understand, and offers the most benefits to most people.

The working group's recommendations are being presented to committee in their entirety.