

## **Fair school admissions: What is the contribution of the Choice Advice initiative**

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# **Fair school admissions: What is the contribution of the Choice Advice initiative**

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## **Abstract**

This paper assesses the contribution of Choice Advice to making admissions to English secondary schools fairer. The initiative characterises the unfairness of admissions as unequal opportunity for poorer parents to access good schools because they are less able to negotiate the admissions process. A major objective of Choice Advice is to enable more poor parents to gain access to popular and high performing secondary schools. The results of an evaluation in 15 Local Authorities are presented showing that Choice Advice provided a valuable service to some families but the proportion of poorer families helped was too small to make a significant impact on the numbers of poorer parents gaining access to popular schools. The characterisation of the problem is, we argue, flawed and, as a consequence, so is the way this policy was designed. Choice Advice is an example of a discursively complex initiative that is ambivalent in its effects. It provides a symbol of political will and is of real benefit to some parents, but it sustains a way of characterising the problem that plays a part in labelling poorer parents as deficient while making no significant impact on the unfairness of admissions.

## **Background and rationale for introduction of Choice Advice service**

Admission to secondary schools has posed increasing difficulties for policy makers. These problems centre on the aim, shared by successive UK governments, to maximise equality of educational opportunity for children of all backgrounds. However, children of different social backgrounds continue to be sorted into different schools. In broad terms, in England, as in a number of other developed countries (Jenkins et al. 2008), children from different social groups tend to be educated separately (Ball 2003; Coldron, Cripps and Shipton 2009). In addition to the separation of around 7 to 8% of children whose parents pay for private education, state maintained schools of all types differ markedly in terms of the social characteristics of their intake (Atkinson and Gregg 2004; Gibbons and Telhaj 2007; Pennell et al 2007, Sutton Trust 2006). There is evidence that segregation may contribute to the lower attainment, and consequent lack of social mobility, of children from poorer socio-

economic groups. There are two distinct but related arguments as to why this might be the case. One highlights the effects of different peer groups as an explanation and another locates the cause in the differential quality of schools - some are bad and others good. The evidence that those schools to which children from affluent and well educated families predominantly gain access tend to be those that do well on criteria of accountability (especially exam performance) and that those populated predominantly from poorer families (Robertson and Symons 2003; Sutton Trust 2009) tend to do less well is seen as evidence that poorer parents do not have equality of access to the good schools.

A variety of factors appear to explain this sorting of children by social background<sup>1</sup>. One is residential segregation. People in towns and cities tend to live with neighbours of similar social status. This, together with admission criteria such as catchment or proximity used by two thirds of all schools, privileges those who live near the school. Consequently schools serving areas with a population that is relatively affluent and well educated have a similar intake which contrasts with schools serving areas characterised by poorer and less well educated parents. Another is the behaviour of schools. There is evidence (West and Pennell 1997; Woods et al 1998; West and Hind, 2003; Coldron et al 2008) that the admission arrangements, particularly of Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools, offer the potential for selectively admitting children who are more able and present fewer educational challenges. Thirdly, parents from different social groups are variably engaged in the choice process. More affluent and more educated parents appear to engage more strongly and therefore more effectively with the process of choice than less privileged parents (Gewirtz et al 1995; Flatley et al 2001). Fourthly, parents appear to differ in their capacity to choose effectively. The complexity of the process and the need to access and absorb a great deal of information may put less educated parents, or those with English as a second language, at a disadvantage in successfully negotiating the process (Gewirtz et al 1995). It is the case that surveys of parents show that parents who are more affluent and with more educational

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<sup>1</sup> See Coldron, Cripps and Shipton 2009 for a full discussion

qualifications access more, and more kinds of, information (Flatley et al 2001; Coldron et al 2008). Fifthly, parents from different social backgrounds appear to choose differently and on different criteria (Gewirtz et al 1995; Ball 2003). Finally, financial difficulties play a part. The fear of having to pay for expensive uniforms, or 'voluntary' donations to school funds, or for travel to more distant schools may deter families with lower incomes.

Policy makers in England appear to have accepted this broad analysis of causes and interpreted them in terms of the market. Since the Education Reform Act of 1988, successive governments have adopted parental choice and the development of a 'quasi-market' in education (Le Grand 1991, Bartlett and Le Grand 1993; Adnett and Davies 2002) as the preferred means for the general improvement of schools and the most effective and equitable means of distributing and enhancing the supply of good education. Hence, it is a rational, justifiable and arguably progressive response to the problem of segregation to have a long term aim to improve schools so that they are all good while regulating the market to better ensure equal opportunity of access to those schools that are currently the best or most popular.

In pursuing this aim a number of significant actions have been taken over recent years to deal with each of the causes of segregated intakes identified above. Stronger regulation of school admission authorities has been introduced including a requirement to consult on admission arrangements in each local area; the appointment of a schools adjudicator acting as an admissions watchdog; and the introduction of new rights and duties on a variety of stakeholders to object to the adjudicator about unfair arrangements of particular schools (DfEE 1999; DfES 2003; DCSF 2007; DCSF 2009b). There has been some attempt to redress the problem of differing financial resources by outlawing payments associated with admissions and restrictions on the costs of uniforms. The problem of mitigating residential segregation is fraught with both practical and conceptual difficulty (Lupton 2004; Goodchild

and Cole 2001; Robinson 2005) but even here there have been some attempts to achieve more mixed communities (Lupton 2004).

In 2006 the discomfort of a significant number of backbench Labour MPs with the welfare reform agenda of New Labour found in the Education and Inspections Bill a focus of discontent in the continuing inequality of educational outcomes. This was blamed partly on the continued segregation of schooling and the admission arrangements that allowed it. As a result, and despite having introduced very considerable improvements in the management and regulation of admissions, the Labour government came under pressure to introduce radical action to ensure not only fair procedures but more equitable actual outcomes. This pressure resulted in the much stronger Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the 2007 Admissions Code which in many cases made mandatory what had been only recommendations in previous guidance. It also introduced a duty to 'promote' equity<sup>2</sup>.

Choice Advice was one of the new measures introduced in the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to address the concerns by taking positive action to mitigate inequality of outcome. Read as a response to the political pressure it can be seen as a sign of the willingness to do something directly for poorer parents including making outcomes more equal. It implicitly addressed two of the perceived causes of segregated intakes identified above - poorer parents' difficulty in negotiating and, their relative disengagement with (self-exclusion from) the choice process. From its inception the initiative identified two groups to be helped by.

The first group was:

*around 6% of parents with children transferring to secondary school [who] are not interested in choosing a school. This often means that there is a small group of children who do not have a secondary school place when they leave primary school and some are allocated a place that is not suitable. These are the families that Choice Advisers will target and focus their advice on and they **should**, where*

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<sup>2</sup> See School Admissions Code 2007 para 1.72; para 1.101; para 1.102

*appropriate, offer one-to-one support. (Appendix 5: para 13 2007 School Admissions Code).*

The second group is 'disadvantaged families':

*The Choice Advice service **should** also support disadvantaged families in maximising the likelihood of their successfully securing a place in the school that will best meet their children's needs. (Appendix 5: para 14 2007 School Admissions Code).*

The stated purpose is made clear:

*Advisers do not take decisions for parents and cannot guarantee a place at a particular school, but the service will place these families on a level playing field with all other families when making the important decision of which secondary schools to apply for. (Appendix 5: para 6 2007 School Admissions Code)*

The focus on the first group provides further support for a small proportion of disengaged families and, while important, is clearly not intended to affect large numbers. The second group, while it includes those who are disadvantaged in the admissions process because they have English as a second or other language, or are recent arrivals, refers also to a much larger group of parents – those who are in less affluent occupations and who have acquired few educational qualifications and who are not well represented in the higher performing schools. The first guidance from central government to LAs on setting up the Choice Advice initiative made clear that the initiative was intended to help a significant proportion of parents:

*Nationally, the Government is clear that Choice Advice should be targeted at around 30% of families. (DfES 2006 para 16)*

Although the wording is non-committal it is reasonable to read this as an attempt to make a contribution to the fairness of admissions by increasing the chances of a significant proportion of poorer parents gaining access for their children to the 'better' schools where they would previously not have gained access<sup>3</sup>.

From these rationales we can infer three criteria of success of the initiative. Firstly, how far it helps the small group of families to engage in the process of choice. Secondly, how far it enables poorer parents more often than before to gain entry to high performing and popular schools. Thirdly, how far it helps parents who are new arrivals and/or have English as a second or other language.

In the following sections we consider the evidence from a recent evaluation of Choice Advice to see how far it was successful on the inferred criteria. In the final section we discuss the soundness of the underlying conception of the unfairness of admissions that provides the rationale for Choice Advice and recent admissions policy in general.

### **The aims of the Choice Advice service**

Since the roll-out of the Choice Advice service in 2007/08, all Local Authorities (LAs) in England have a legal duty to provide independent advice and support to all local parents to choose a school (DCSF 2009b); the emphasis being initially on secondary school choice. LAs must provide a service offering information, advice and support the aim of which is to:

*...enable those parents who find it hardest to navigate the secondary school admissions system to make informed and realistic decisions about which schools to apply for in the best interests of their child.*

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<sup>3</sup> It is of note that the wording in the 2009 School Admissions Code substantially weakens this aim and focuses more on the smaller group of parents. This paper is however about the original aims of Choice Advice and the effect of its implementation in 2007-2008.



There is further guidance( 2006 para 16; DCSF 2009a paras. 30 and 31) as to who these families are who are in most need of help. It is those who have difficulties engaging with the admissions process; those with language or literacy problems; parents of children in care; new arrivals; frequent movers; and those living in deprived areas. The initial guidance to LAs (DfES 2006) highlighted the need for impartiality and independence from LAs as providers of schools, but also gave LAs the freedom to develop services to meet local needs and priorities – including the type of organisational model adopted and identification of target groups from those listed in the guidance. The Choice Advice service was intended as an additional service that built upon the continuing work of the Admissions Officers.

### **The evaluation**

Between September 2007 and July 2008 the Centre for Education and Inclusion Research was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families to conduct an evaluation of the Choice Advice initiative in 15 LAs (Stiell et al 2008). This built on an earlier pilot study (Shipton et al, 2008). The focus of the evaluation was on how the policy had been implemented, the nature of Choice Advice provision and the relative effectiveness of different models. We also identified good practice to inform development of the programme. We were not required to assess how far Choice Advice contributes to redressing the unfairness of admissions. In this paper therefore we focus on what the findings tell us about that contribution.

Almost half of all LAs in England (73 out of 150) were starting their second year of Choice Advice provision in August 2007, and we selected 15 as case study areas. The sample covered a range of models, geographical and socio-economic contexts and admissions arrangements. In each area, we carried out in depth interviews with Choice Advice staff,

Admissions Officers (AOs) and key school staff in the autumn and winter of 2007/08 (76 in total). In spring 2008, we interviewed 75 parents who had received Choice Advice in 2007/08, after their child had been allocated a secondary school place. The interview data were analysed together with information provided by each LA on the background characteristics of the parents they had advised (nearly 500 before the March allocation date, over 600 altogether) and with additional information provided by staff at the Choice Advisers Support and Quality Assurance Network.

### **Categories of help given**

Choice Advisers' and managers' perceptions of local needs influenced the focus and delivery of the services they developed. Needs were referred to, variously and with different emphases, in terms of the Admissions process (e.g. the return of completed applications); meeting parents' expressed demands (often from self-referring, information-seeking parents); and meeting more hidden needs for advice and support that required targeting. The advice given to parents fell broadly into five categories. They gave *reassurance* to anxious parents. They provided *information, explanations, and clarifications* such as 'objective' information on the admissions process and procedures, the equal preference system (EPS); oversubscription criteria; distance and transport; school performance (e.g. Ofsted report, league tables, Contextual Value Added data); the appeals process and they 'dispelled myths'. Much of this standard information is what Admissions Officers would have dispensed in the past and still do. They provided *advice and guidance* to help parents understand or interpret information; make realistic choices; consider other options; order their preferences; fill in the form; or consider making an appeal. This tended to be more time-consuming and in-depth and was additional support that many Admissions staff would not have been able to provide prior to the introduction of Choice Advice. Advisers also acted as an *advocate or champion* where a Choice Adviser would support or challenge schools or the LA directly on the parents' behalf, or accompany a parent on school visits to help facilitate their decision-

making. Some Choice Advisers provided extensive support throughout the appeals process but were not initially able to represent the parents at the appeals hearing but have subsequently been allowed to do so. Finally some took on an *influencing/advisory* role by feeding back information from schools and parents to effect change.

## **How Choice Advice was implemented**

In our sample of 15, five models of implementation were identified in terms of the organisational and management structures each Local Authority put in place to deliver their service. These were:

- **Admissions based** services which were based in or near to the existing LA Admissions team (in 4 LAs);
- **Parent Partnership-based** services delivered through the local Parent Partnership which is independent of the LA (in 7 LAs);
- **Independent Consultants** appointed by the LA to carry out the additional advisory work (2 LAs);
- **Voluntary organisation** commissioned by the LA (1 LA); and
- **Existing in-school support** commissioned to take on the additional role of Choice Adviser (1 LA).

Each model varied in the approach to the level of independence and the degree of access to admissions information and knowledge that Choice Advisers had, and also in the nature of provision and staffing. These two factors influenced the ways in which Choice Advice staff conceived of parents' needs and demands and the services' approach to targeting. In turn, this impacted on parents' experience of the service and ultimately, the effectiveness of the service at supporting disadvantaged parents.

In **Admissions-based services** admissions knowledge tended to be emphasised as more important than independence from the LA, and services were often more reactive and demand driven, particularly where the service was promoted universally. Proactive targeting mainly took the form of chasing late or incorrect applications. Their links with primary schools (where these existed) were their main source of referrals. Advisers using this model mainly provided information and reassurance to self-referring worried but well-informed parents, particularly in areas with more complex admissions arrangements e.g. wholly selective areas. Some Admissions-based services recruited additional staff with outreach skills who were based close to the Admissions team. They had a more targeted approach to reaching vulnerable parents, but were aware of the challenges inherent in helping the hardest to reach, and that self-referring parents often took time away from their targeting activities. The fact that these Choice Advisers were line managed directly or indirectly by Admissions managers sometimes compromised their ability to be truly autonomous and independent from Admissions and the LA. The potential conflict of interests emerged as an issue for a small number of parents who were seeking support around their appeals..

Admission based services reached fewer *targeted* parents than those based with **Parent Partnerships**. Parent Partnership (PP) teams are existing arms-length providers of independent advice and guidance to parents on Special Educational Needs (SEN) related issues. Choice Advisers based here were often experienced advisers and advocates for parents. They were able to develop good links with Admissions staff to gain access to the necessary admissions information/knowledge. They strategically focused their targeting efforts by avoiding universal promotion of the service sometimes steering self-referring parents to other sources of information. Some advisers were described as regularly working intensively with families who required more support, often beyond the call of duty in areas of high demand or need. They delivered more intensive and personal levels of support, including home visits and accompanying parents on school visits. Parents in receipt of Parent Partnership based services tended to be more satisfied and felt that the support had

a direct impact on their final allocation outcome. These services were able to strike an effective balance between close contact with the LA admissions team and independence from the LA as provider of community schools. This was particularly evident in relation to their significant support of parents with children with more complex needs and helping parents win appeals. Compared with the other models, PP based services advised the highest volume of parents and reached more target group parents.

Two LAs that appointed **independent consultants** considered that there was likely to be low demand for Choice Advice in their areas because there were few faith or selective schools, or choice was effectively limited (e.g. in rural areas), or parents were happy with their undersubscribed local comprehensives, or because primary school staff already provided additional support needed by parents. Consequently needs were harder to identify. In one large and mainly rural LA, just one small urban area was identified as needing significant Choice Advice input. Although they did not consider there to be a high demand for personalised support to parents in their areas, interviews with primary school staff suggested there may have been some pockets of unmet need. Choice Advisers in these two LAs were employed as consultants, but usually had previous or existing senior roles in education and some knowledge of admissions processes. Targeting mainly involved following up admission officer leads on late applicants, or giving a small number of Choice Advice presentations to parents that focused on the admissions system and procedures. Some consultants had other roles within the LA that opportunistically brought them into contact with disadvantaged Year 6 parents who sometimes needed support with their applications.

Two LAs appointed **Voluntary and other in-school professional support** who already had good working relationships within schools as advisers. They were completely independent from the LA admissions team but this meant they had little prior knowledge of the admissions process. There was limited promotion of their services, and links beyond their existing client group were poorly developed. Their approaches to targeting were either ill-

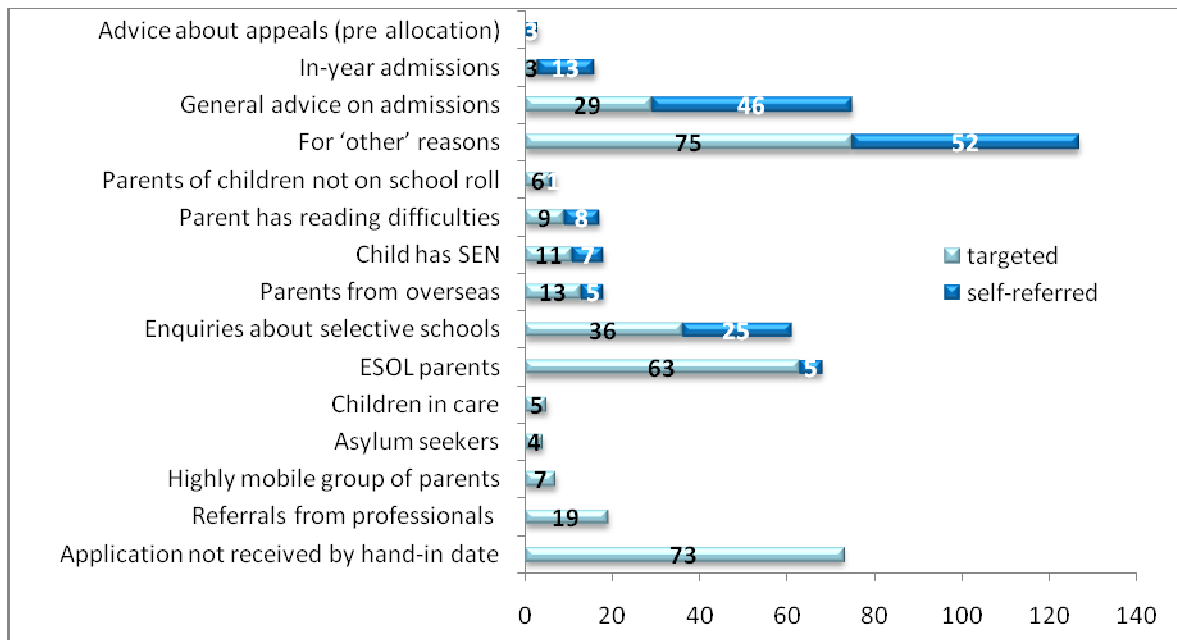
conceived or not effectively executed, often because other school staff were already supporting parents well.

**How effective was the targeting?** Choice Advisers in the 15 LAs recorded contact with a total of 602 parents. On the data available we estimated that at least 57% of all parents who had contact with the service in the sample LAs were targeted<sup>4</sup>. Parents were targeted for a variety of reasons in different LAs and different provider models. Each Choice Adviser or service defined its own criteria for targeting, and this depended to some extent on the model of provision and also on the nature of the locality. For example an Adviser in a multi-cultural inner city borough, who herself spoke several minority languages, targeted speakers of these languages with posters in local shops and community centres while others (more often the Admissions-based advisers) targeted primary schools that traditionally returned few application forms before the deadline. Figure 1 shows the numbers of those targeted and self-referred for the different reasons for contact or the subject of the enquiry.

**Figure 1: Numbers of those targeted and self-referred and frequency of the reasons for contact/the subject of the enquiry**

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<sup>4</sup> We obtained data for 76% (459 parents out of the 602) **as to whether or not** they had been targeted. Of these 459, 75% (345 parents) were targeted,



As the Choice Advice services did not have a uniform definition of targeted parents, we have examined targeting in relation to three groups of parents who may be considered to be potential recipients of admissions advice and guidance. The first and second are those of Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) origin and those speaking English as a second or other language (ESOL). For these groups, we acquired data for at least 60% of these contacts. The third category is parents of children entitled to free school meals (FSM), for which we only have data for 42% of contacts. We have selected these groups for the following reasons. Families entitled to FSM are financially disadvantaged and financial disadvantage is strongly associated with social and educational disadvantage including apparent exclusion from high performing schools. Speaking English as a second or other language (ESOL) will in many cases be associated with difficulty in speaking and reading English and therefore may also disadvantage parents as they seek information about schools and the admissions process and complete the relevant forms. Being of minority ethnic origin (BME) does not itself imply a need for admissions advice and guidance but there is considerable overlap with the two previous categories, for example in the cases of recent immigrants. Members of some ethnic groups are statistically more likely to achieve lower educational qualifications in Britain, but this does not apply to all ethnic minorities. Ideally therefore we should distinguish groups of different ethnic origin. But the numbers in each group for which we have data are small and

do not enable us to analyse them separately, for example, only two Chinese families had any contact with Choice Advisers. As we shall see, although there is little evidence that "BME parents" was a target category for Choice Advisers, it is notable that higher proportions of BME parents did have contact with the service than their proportions within the sample LAs would lead us to expect. Recent arrivals and ESOL families, who were more specifically targeted, by definition include higher proportions of BME families.

Data for three potential target groups can be found in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 shows parents in receipt of advice by ethnicity. Table 2 adds data of those speaking English as a second or other language (ESOL) and those entitled to free school meals (FSM).

Table 1: Parents in receipt of advice by ethnicity

<b>Parent's Ethnic group</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Pakistani Bangladeshi Indian	122	20.3
Black or Black British	55	9.1
White or White British	179	29.7
Chinese or Chinese British	2	0.3
Mixed heritage	10	1.7
Other Group	17	2.8
Prefer not to say	91	15.1
Total	476	79.1
Not recorded	126	20.9
Total	602	100.0

Table 2 also provides data on how far the families in these target groups who received advice were representative of the proportion of those groups in the case study LAs. In general higher proportions of our three categories had contact with the Choice Advisers than



are present in the population of the case study areas showing that for all groups, some level of targeting occurred.

**Table 2: Parents contacted in each LA in relation to known proportions in the sample LAs**

	Proportions in case study LAs <sup>5</sup>	Proportion of parents contacted <sup>6</sup>	National average
%BME*	25.3%	51.1%	11.0%
% White*	74.7%	48.9%	89.0%
%FSM**	17.8%	35.4%	15.9%
% Non-FSM**	82.2%	64.6%	84.1%
% ESOL*	n/a	33.6%	n/a
% English speakers*	n/a	66.4%	n/a

n/a = data not available

\*Source: Government statistics: at <http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/datasetList.do>

\*\*Source: Table20, Meal arrangements in Maintained Secondary SchoolUPDATEDSFR30\_2007\_LAtables\_1.xls”

One quarter of all contacts resulting from targeting by Choice Advisers were from either minority ethnic groups or parents who did not speak English as their first language. As regards social disadvantage, advisers described their targeting in general terms as focusing for example on *'socially disadvantaged families', 'the more deprived areas', 'social deprivation, FSM and touching on the ethnic groups as well'*. In other words, they were targeting poverty and social disadvantage but not specifically seeking out children on FSM. We can conclude that, although there was wide variation between models and areas, the Choice Advice advisers did, as intended, achieve targeting in practice. We shall also see in

<sup>5</sup> Weighted according to number of responses from each LA and calculated as follows. Total of % of that group in each LA multiplied by the number who provided information in relation to that question in each LA, divided by the number who provided information in relation to that question.

<sup>6</sup> The proportion of parents contacted is calculated as the % of all who provided information in relation to that question that fitted the definitions of BME/FSM/ESOL.

the next section that the help given was of considerable benefit to those parents in receipt of advice and support. However it is important to bear in mind the scale on which Choice Advice is operating. Most LAs only had between one and two Choice Advisers in place, often in part-time roles. In the fifteen LAs in the study, approximately 73,000 children transfer to secondary school per year. Of these 602 (0.8%) were recorded as having contact with a Choice Adviser and of these about half were in a target group.

## **The Experience of Parents**

Interviews with parents provided evidence of a variety of ways in which the initiative had led to a positive impact for parents from target groups. Some gained access to popular high-achieving schools that were not their local catchment school because the Choice Adviser had encouraged the parents to apply to particular schools when they would otherwise not have done so:

*It wouldn't be the same outcome if it had not been for the Choice Adviser. I hadn't even thought about that school, it was from talking to him that we actually came to that conclusion. I hadn't realised my daughter would be eligible as we're not in catchment*  
(Parent 32, Area 4)

Sometimes Choice Advisers were instrumental in facilitating access to the more popular non-catchment schools by helping parents appeal rather than accept their allocated school:

*I happen to live right next to [the allocated school]...[but applied for non-local over-subscribed school] a very, very demanding school and honestly I never thought I was going to get anywhere with it, but she's really, really helped me...Not just in helping with the case, but even for moral support she really was there for me...the appeal was a success as my daughter has actually got a place* (Parent 24, Area 14)

*...it was the best thing I ever done really, [the Choice Adviser] helped me so much...But it's down to her, telling me what to write and what to put, obviously it's my life and it's true what she's writing, but the way she puts it and stuff, I think it was down to her the reason why I won this second appeal (Parent 45,14)*

It was not necessarily the case however that less advantaged parents aspired to gain entry to higher achieving schools. A range of alternatives were often considered, with more emphasis placed on schools being local and whether their child might be happy, rather than conclusions of Ofsted reports or school performance. Some target group parents positively opted for local low achieving undersubscribed schools:

*Some people say [the local school] is not so good a school...I just [put it on the application] because it's nearby the house (Parent 75, Area 4)*

Referred and targeted parents necessarily tended to be from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Some of these parents were not anxious about the decision-making process itself but had difficulties understanding and/or navigating the system or completing the forms. These parents were more likely to be satisfied with their local schools, unless there was a specific reason why they did not want their child to attend them such as concerns about bullying or their child's SEN or medical condition:

*...she'd been bullied quite badly at her junior school...it was [the Choice Adviser] who said to just put that, you know put that she'd been bullied...and that's why she wanted this other school as her first choice... I just really wanted his reassurance about it and how to fill in like the last box, you know, which is reasons why you want to choose this*

*school...She got her first choice... I can only think that [the help of the Choice Adviser] helped really (Parent 25, Area 12)*

Not all occurrences where Choice Advice was felt by parents to make a difference were about an altered outcome. Choice Advisers reassured parents who were constrained by the fact that they did not and could not meet the criteria for entry to popular schools as effectively as other parents. Choice Advisers could do little for these parents other than make them feel better about the options they had available. The dispelling of myths around schools perceived to be 'good' or 'bad' through value added data and other factual information was appreciated by parents, as was being reassured that they had taken all the appropriate steps and done the best they could:

*I did go and see [the local school for my dyslexic son]...although that would be great for us as it's just down the road, it's actually on the same road that we live on...Then we went to [a school across town], which we were actually dreading going to because of the reputation...really, really bad reputation...The head showed us around and also took us to the SENCO...we came out of there going 'god we're really surprised'... all of our decision-making was really made through [the Choice Adviser], he was the biggest help (Parent 26, Area 4)*

*... [without the advice the outcome] probably would have been the same. I think it was more for my reassurance. I certainly felt better and more confident about the process (Parent 35, Area 15)*

A strong theme that arose in our research was that some parents did not want to make a choice. This was not a disengaged or apathetic response but a conscientious objection to

the competitive model sometimes accompanied by explicit resistance to the discourse of 'good' and 'bad' schools:

*I'm a bit of the opinion that in the end if you're going to go to a comprehensive, it doesn't really matter which one you go to. There's a whole lot of things out about league tables and achievement and SATS and all that sort of thing, but I've always been pretty much of the opinion that if you want to get a good education, then you can and it doesn't really matter which one you go to (Parent 27, Area 4)*

Some parents felt uncomfortable with choosing away from the local school. They saw it as something forced on them by the segregation of local schools which in turn was a result of enhanced parental choice. They thought it would be better if people didn't have that choice but simply went to their local school:

*...when we went to school you were expected to go to at least a school within some kind of radius – at the bottom of your road – which meant that the schools had, you know, bad kids and good kids, but it was a school and it was a mix of children that was going there (Parent 41, Area 14)*

These parents were not accepting of a consumerist role within a market paradigm of 'good' and 'bad' schools, and were sometimes making a conscious decision to *not* choose the high achieving popular schools.

A less strong but nevertheless evident theme was a meritocratic discourse that justified privileged access and provision. Some parents of higher attaining children felt that brighter, hardworking and ambitious children like theirs deserved more choice and a better chance of getting into their preferred school than their less motivated or deserving peers:

*I think they could do something else [in terms of how they allocate places]...if their ability is good why are they not getting places, I don't want to create discrimination but not everyone can be the Prime Minister, not everyone can be a teacher or doctor...but if the child has level 4 or level 5 and their punctuality is good [then why can't they go to the best schools?]* (Parent 46, Area 14).

The independence and impartiality of the service was generally highly valued by parents, as was the quality of the service most parents received. Parents' satisfaction with the advice they received seemed to relate to the degree of personalisation they experienced.

### **Geographical variation**

In some, areas Choice Advice was a solution in search of a problem in that Choice Advisers found most parents were relatively satisfied with their local secondary school and additional support was already provided by staff in primary schools. In more rural areas choice was restricted as a result of a more dispersed population. Consequently there was limited demand or need for their services and little room to mitigate any existing segregation. In some urban areas with high population density, residential segregation, greater residential mobility, close proximity both of affluent and deprived areas and popular and 'failing' schools, plus ease of travel there was a clear hierarchy of schools, polarised parental perception and competition between parents for places in a few popular schools (Coldron, Cripps and Shipton 2009) and Choice Advisers were more active here meeting an evident demand for their services. But it was not true of all urban areas with some lacking intense competition or polarised perceptions of schools and consequently there was little demand for the Choice Advice service.

### **The impact on the fairness of admissions**

There is no doubt that Choice Advice was successful in helping hundreds of parents (and, extrapolating, this means thousands nationally) to better navigate the secondary schools

admission process. Many families were given independent information about the application process, and myths about 'good' and 'bad' schools were dispelled, including reassurance about the costs involved in attending. As a result, Choice Advice enabled some families to gain places at oversubscribed, popular and high performing schools that they might not have considered if they hadn't received advice, and others gained a place at their preferred school because they received help with the appeals process, and others felt reassured about the school they had little choice but to accept.

But, the proportion of poorer parents gaining such access was extremely small. As already noted, only 0.8% of the families with children transferring to secondary school in the 15 case study LAs had any contact with a Choice Adviser and only about half of these were in a target group. But even the 0.4% of targeted parents were not all helped to gain access to high performing popular schools. Of those parents from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who wanted to gain a place at a popular school, some did not fit the over subscription criteria and the role of the Choice Adviser was to reassure them about the less popular schools to which they could gain access. The small proportion of parents gaining access to high performing schools could only have a negligible impact on the nature of any single school's intake or on the level of segregation in an area. Given the scale of the problem it seeks to address, and accepting for the moment the official characterisation of the source of unfairness, the level of resourcing was never going to have a significant impact.

However, a critical assessment of the thinking behind the policy would suggest that (even if it were economically possible) a significant increase in the number of advisers would not of itself have the desired effect on unfairness. This is because there is reason to doubt the soundness of the analysis of the problem and therefore the rationale of Choice Advice. As we have noted the analysis identifies the problem as one of unequal access and that a measure of success in mitigating the unfairness of admissions would be how far poorer parents were enabled more often than before to gain entry to high performing and popular

schools. What we have seen as the rationale of the policy implies that conscientious parents want, or should want, to get their children into the most popular and high achieving schools. The characterisation of the problem assumes that the majority of poorer parents are not gaining access to the schools they most prefer, or should most prefer. But the evidence suggests that there is not a significant level of dissatisfaction amongst poorer parents. Two nationally representative surveys of parents (Flatley et al 2001; Coldron et al 2008) found that there was no association between parental background and success in gaining their most preferred school<sup>7</sup> and that great majority of parents parents of all backgrounds are satisfied with their child's secondary school. Our findings from the interviews with Choice Advice parents reinforce those of previous qualitative studies showing that parents in all social groups make conscientious and informed choices of school but that the underpinning values of socially distant groups are different. To label the preferences of poorer parents as not only different but also deficient is to invoke and impose the values of a market model of education, a model whose moral justification and practical efficacy are strongly disputed.

The evidence from our parent interviews showed that there was a great variety of reasons for parents wanting or needing advice about admissions and only some of these were to do with gaining access to popular schools. We found that some parents (especially those that were poorer) were happy to choose their local schools and did not want access to those that were more popular or higher attaining.

This body of evidence suggests that socially distant parents make equally conscientious but different choices and that decisions are fundamentally influenced by material resources, perceived risk, social solidarity and a realistic assessment of the chances of admission. An active assessment of the costs and benefits in different circumstances combines with

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<sup>7</sup> This research takes account of the possibility that expressed first choices are not necessarily for the most preferred school and shows that most gain access to the school that they most wanted. However it does not deal with what Bourdieu has highlighted as the possibility that, for reasons of habitus and material constraints, they positively choose what they have to choose.



different values and dispositions to generate different responses. But the larger policy of which Choice Advice is a part arises from a market paradigm which casts education as a commodity produced by schools and consumed by parents. According to this, 'good' parents engage with the choice process. If they do not it is either that they won't or can't because of lack of skills or education. Either way, poorer parents are characterised as deficient choosers.

Explanations of segregation in terms of some deficit on the part of some parents are a misreading of the causes of segregated school intakes. Rather, the reasons lie deep in the social practice of members of different communities (Coldron et al 2009).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have attempted to gauge the contribution of Choice Advice to making admissions fairer. In the absence of official success criteria we inferred them from the provenance of the policy and the official guidance. On this basis Choice Advice will have been successful:

- if it helps those parents who do not currently express a preference to do so and enables them to become more engaged with their children's schooling
- if it helps significantly to rebalance the current level of social segregation of school intakes by enabling poorer parents more often to gain access to high performing popular schools predominantly populated by children from more affluent families
- if it helps parents who are new arrivals, or have English as their second or other language.

On the first criteria Choice Advice was successful in targeting a good proportion of these disengaged families and offered valuable support for parents and children. We do not know how far this led to greater engagement by parents in the longer term. On the second criterion

it was unsuccessful. While it helped a small proportion of poorer families to access a popular school the scale was so small that it could not make a significant impact on the larger process of segregation of schools and therefore had a minimal impact on the fairness of admissions. On the third criterion it was successful in targeting those potentially needy families.

We have further argued that the Choice Advice policy conceives the problem of segregation as primarily a dysfunction of the market through the restrictive behaviour of providers and the inadequate engagement of poorer parents as consumers. Consequently the problem is partly located with, and Choice Advice designed to deal with, poorer parents cast as inadequately informed or incompetent or otherwise deficient consumers. This is not supported by the evidence, is a tendentious characterisation of a good parent as a conscientious consumer, and is based on a mistaken analysis of the complex social practices and structures that lead to segregated schooling.

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