PRIMARY SCHOOL ADMISSIONS CRITERIA A GUIDE

Revised October 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page Number

Preface 3
Role of the Board of Governors. 4
Introduction 4
The Legislation 4
Delegated Authority 5
Choosing Criteria 5
Terminology 6
Family Relationships 7
Distance from Home to School. 7
Catchment Areas 7
Order in Which Criteria Are Applied 8
Applying Admissions Criteria 8
Class Size Policy 9
Duty to Verify 9
Inappropriate Admissions Practices. 9
Role of the Education Authority 10
Parental Preference 10
Applications. 10
Publication of Information 11
Administration 11
Appeals. 12
Role of the Department 13
Admissions Number. 13
Enrolment Number. 13
Temporary Variation Policy 14
Accommodation 14
Area Planning 15
Role of the Parent. 15
Conclusion 15
Useful Contact Information 17

PREFACE

The purpose of this booklet is to guide Primary School Principals and Boards of Governors through the complex process that is the setting and application of Admissions Criteria.

The guide will cover a number of topics including the role and responsibilities of the Board of Governors of a school, the Department of Education (DE), the Education Authority (EA) and other stakeholders, Departmental policies such as the temporary variation (TV) policy, the area planning process, relevant legislation and choosing and applying criteria.

This booklet should be read in conjunction with the most recent Departmental circular entitled 'Open Enrolment in Primary Schools' and the accompanying guide entitled 'Guidance on a School's Duty to Verify Information Contained within Applications for Admission (Pre-School, Primary and Post-Primary)'. Both of these documents are available in the Circulars section of the Department of Education website at www.education-ni.gov.uk. Any other queries which you may have should be directed to the EA Primary Admissions Team or DE School Admissions Team who will be happy to assist you. Their contact details are listed on page17.

THE ROLE OF THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS

INTRODUCTION

The Board of Governors of a primary school plays a central role in the primary school admissions process. They are the admissions authority for that school and the decisions which they take regarding the setting and application of Admissions Criteria have the potential to significantly impact on the lives of the families who make application to their school. The role is a complex one, and it is essential that Boards of Governors use the advice provided by the EA Primary Admissions Team and DE School Admissions Team whilst fulfilling their duties.

It is also essential that Boards of Governors feel supported by these Bodies whilst they undertake their admissions responsibilities. In particular, the Education Authority Officers and School Admissions Team within DE hold a wealth of information regarding the primary school admissions process and can provide help and advice to any school which requires it. Schools must feel that they can avail themselves of this information resource if they are unclear on any point regarding the admissions process.

KEY POINT: IF IN DOUBT CONTACT THE EDUCATION AUTHORITY'S PRIMARY ADMISSIONS TEAM OR DE SCHOOL ADMISSIONS TEAM AND ASK FOR ADVICE

THE LEGISLATION

1. The legislation which governs the primary school admissions process is contained within Part III of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 as amended. A full account of these requirements is listed in the 'Open Enrolment in Primary Schools' circular. In brief the legislation requires primary schools to:-
   - admit up to their published admissions number;
   - comply with the preference expressed by a parent for admission to a child to years 2-7 if the school's enrolment number has not been reached, unless to do so would prejudice the efficient use of resources;
   - publish the criteria they will use to select pupils in the event of oversubscription. **These criteria must be capable of distinguishing between pupils down to the last available place.**

2. Further to these the Primary School (Admissions Criteria) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 require that the Admissions Criteria **shall** include:-

   - the order of priority in which pupils shall be admitted to the school where the school is over-subscribed;
   - provision to give priority to children who will have attained compulsory school age at the time of their proposed admissions, over those who will not have attained compulsory

school age at the time of their proposed admission; and

The Admissions Criteria **shall not** include:-

- provision for the selection of pupils by reference to ability or aptitude;
- the performance of any pupil in a test or examination held by, or on behalf of, the Board of Governors.

3. In addition to these legislative requirements, Admissions Criteria are not recommended to make reference to attendance at a specified nursery/preschool setting. As attendance at nursery/preschool settings is a non-compulsory phase of education, this practice is not considered to be appropriate.

DELEGATED AUTHORITY

4. The Department has no role in determining a school's Admissions Criteria, rather it is the sole responsibility of the Board of Governors to define and set the criteria they wish to prioritise in terms of admission to the school. Whilst the setting of the Admissions Criteria itself should be agreed and approved by the Board of Governors as a whole and cannot be delegated to a sub-committee; the application of the school's criteria can be delegated to a committee of the Board of Governors, under the scheme of management approved for controlled and maintained schools.

Schemes of management are approved by the Department and are drawn up by the Education Authority (EA) for controlled schools and by the Council of Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) for maintained schools. They are then issued directly to schools by the EA and/or CCMS.

CHOOSING CRITERIA

5. The purpose of admissions criteria is to determine which applicants will be admitted where a school is oversubscribed. The criteria should be clear, objective and capable of distinguishing between applicants down to the final available place. Boards of Governors must be able to demonstrate that their published criteria have been applied fairly, consistently and correctly, including in the event of an appeal to the Independent Admissions Appeals Tribunal. Well-designed admissions criteria promote transparency and contribute to a fair and effective admissions process for schools and families alike.

KEY POINT: IN ORDER TO BE FIT FOR PURPOSE CRITERIA MUST BE <u>SPECIFIC</u> AND <u>MEASURABLE</u>

6. The criteria must be able to distinguish between applicants down to the last available place.

As this is the case, the Admissions Criteria ***must include*** a tie-breaker which can be employed in the event of there being a tie between two or more children for one last remaining place. Further advice on the usage of tie-breakers can be found at Annex 2 of the 'Open Enrolment in Primary Schools' circular.

7. The criteria must reflect the Board of Governors' priorities for admission to the school in the event of oversubscription and the Department takes no role in suggesting what these should be.

8. The Board of Governors of the school should draft the criteria taking into consideration any representations made by the EA and/or in the case of a catholic maintained school, any representations made by CCMS.

9. The Board of Governors should ensure that the Admissions Criteria they intend to use for all year groups, not just year 1, are published in line with their responsibilities under the Education (School Information and Prospectus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003. For year 1 applications, this will be achieved by providing this information to the EA in line with their normal schedule for publication.

10. For post-year 1 applications, Form AP1 should be completed by the applicant and submitted directly to the school. Information on 'in-year transfer' for Years 2-7 is available on the EA Website at the link below.

In-Year Transfer Between Schools | Education Authority Northern Ireland

11. Since the application of the school's Admissions Criteria is the key factor in an Independent Admissions Appeal Tribunal's consideration of a parent's appeal it is **essential** that the criteria are: -

- listed in priority order;
- objective;
- not vague;
- capable of verification; and;
- capable of distinguishing between applicants down to the last available place.

TERMINOLOGY

12. Due to the need for unambiguous criteria that are straight-forward to apply, the terminology chosen within each criterion is of great importance. The three main areas where this can become an issue are in relation to the following: -

- family relationships;

- distance from home to school;
- catchment area which are not defined; and
- order in which criteria are to be applied.

Additionally, it is essential that criteria are not couched in vague or all-encompassing terms such as, for instance, '*supporting the ethos of the school'* as these criteria are ambiguous, open to appeal and not capable of distinguishing between applicants down to the last available place.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

13. If the criteria are to include such factors as *'eldest child'* or *'sibling'* is it clear as to what these phrases mean?

- Is the criterion **specific?** For instance in the case of the sibling relationship does the criteria list all the types of family relationship that the school will consider to be a sibling relationship such as half-sibling or step-sibling?
- Is the criterion **measurable?** For instance *'family connection with the school'* is not a suitable criterion as the degree of a family's connection with a school cannot be measured so this cannot be used to distinguish between applicants clearly and defensibly.

DISTANCE FROM HOME TO SCHOOL

14. If a distance criterion or a tie-breaker is to be used is it clear how this criterion will be applied?

- Is the criterion **specific?** The criterion must make clear what distance will be measured – for instance from the pupil's home address to the school – perhaps a particular entrance of the school should be specified for this purpose if the school has more than one?
- Is the criterion **measurable?** Which method will be used (for instance a digital mapping tool or similar or an ordnance survey map) to measure the distance?
- Further to this will the distance be measured by driving distance by road/shortest walking distance or shortest possible distance point-to-point?

CATCHMENT AREAS

15. If a catchment area is to be used is the area clearly defined?

- Is the criterion **specific?** The criterion must make clear exactly to which area it is referring.

- Is the criterion measurable? Is the catchment area clearly defined? Does the criterion state that a map has been drawn up, agreed by the Board of Governors and made available to parents who are applying to the school?

ORDER IN WHICH CRITERIA ARE TO BE APPLIED

16. In the event of oversubscription at the first criterion:-

- will the second criterion be applied, followed by the third and so on (i.e. in the order set down') until the criteria are exhausted?

For instance, *'in the event that there are more applicants than places available, the Board of Governors has determined that the following criteria shall be applied by an Admissions Committee of the Board of Governors in the order set down'* - in this scenario the tie-breaker would only be employed to distinguish between applicants for the final few places, if necessary.

For instance *'in the event of over-subscription in the last criterion which can be applied then selection for all places remaining in this category will be on the basis of ...*';

OR

- Will the tie-breaker be used to rank order all applicants where oversubscription occurs in any one criterion (i.e. even at the first criterion)?

For instance *'In the event of oversubscription within any of the above criteria the tie-breaker will be applied.'*

APPLYING ADMISSIONS CRITERIA

17. Schools should:-

- consider all applications for admissions in accordance with the timetable set out by the EA;
- allow **only those with delegated authority** as agreed, and recorded, by the Board of Governors i.e. the admissions committee, **to apply the Admissions Criteria** of the school. It is essential that neither administrative staff nor any other person who has not been granted this delegated authority should apply the Admissions Criteria;
- not advise parents of the outcome of the application process until the allocation of places has been completed and the EA have issued unplaced/placed notifications to all applicants;

- not admit children below compulsory school age where such provision i.e. in the form of a reception class, did not exist in the 1998/99 school year. Schools which do already have a policy of admitting reception age children should ensure that compulsory school age children are admitted first;
- ensure that if the school wishes to operate a waiting list, that it has a policy in place which governs the management of such a list and that this has been clearly communicated to parents. Further advice on waiting lists can be found in DE Circular 2012/10 entitled 'Guidance for Schools on the Operation of Admission Waiting Lists' which is available on the Department of Education website; and
- keep good records which clearly show how the criteria were applied and by whom in the event of an admissions appeal.

CLASS SIZES POLICY

18. Schools should bear in mind that it is the Government's policy that all classes in Key Stage 1 (years 1-4) are limited to a maximum of 30 pupils. If a school wishes to exceed this number, they must seek a Class Size Exception from the EA. If they also require a TV (i.e. if such an admission will exceed the admissions/enrolment numbers of the school) they should seek this variation from DE. If the Department decides to grant the TV, it will also seek a class size exception, on behalf of the school, from the EA.

DUTY TO VERIFY

19. It is important to note that schools may have a duty to verify information contained within admissions applications if they are to ensure the correct application of their Admissions Criteria. Boards of Governors have a duty to verify qualifying information contained within applications to their school if, at the point of applying their Admissions Criteria, they have general knowledge or belief of a problem with false information within applications. If at this point, and in possession of such a knowledge or belief, Boards of Governors do not verify qualifying information then they present all rejected applicants with substantial grounds for appeal and face the effective negation of their ability to act as an Admissions Authority for their school. For further advice and information on the 'Duty to Verify', schools should read DE Circular 2013/24.

INAPPROPRIATE ADMISSIONS PRACTICES

20. Failure to complete its admissions duties appropriately has serious consequences for a Board of Governors. At the very least such practices can destroy local trust in the school or cause the Department and/or the EA and/or CCMS to question the ability of the Board of Governors to carry out its functions. Inappropriate practices can lead to disappointed children and negative press for the school, EA, CCMS and DE. It can also lead to successful admissions appeals or even Judicial Review of the school's actions. Any school which admits pupils over and above the admissions and enrolment numbers approved by DE is acting unlawfully and the Department will take action accordingly. Such action could include,

but is not limited to, zero-rating of excess pupils or a reduction in the school's approved admissions number.

21. On this basis it is essential that the Board of Governors fulfil their responsibilities accurately, transparently, with attention to detail and within the boundaries of all the guidance provided by the managing authorities and DE on the subject. Good practice includes but is not limited to:-

- clear criteria which are unambiguous and capable of distinguishing down to the last available place;
- proper record keeping;
- appropriate delegation of duties;
- appropriate communication with prospective parents; and
- avoidance at all costs of unlawful admissions (those in excess of the approved admissions and enrolment numbers of the school without the prior approval of the Department) even where placed under pressure by parents or their representatives.

THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATION AUTHORITY

PARENTAL PREFERENCE

22. Article 9 of the Education (NI) Order 1997 requires the EA to make arrangements for enabling the parent/guardian of a child to express a preference as to the primary school at which they wish education to be provided for their child and to give reasons for preference. The EA administers and co-ordinates these arrangements. Information regarding the arrangements for admissions is available on the EA Website at the link below:-

Admissions | Education Authority Northern Ireland

The EA Website is updated frequently throughout each stage of the open enrolment procedure to ensure schools/parents/guardians are kept informed.

APPLICATIONS

23. The EA Connect Portal is used to make application for admission to Primary 1. The EA Connect portal opens in early January each year, with a link to the portal available on the EA Website. The dates for open and close of EA Connect are contained in the annual published DE Timetable.

For application to year groups 2-7 Form AP1 is to be used and these application forms are available on the EA Website.

PUBLICATION OF INFORMATION

24. Article 17 (2) of the Education (NI) Order 1997 requires the EA to publish particulars of the arrangements including:-

- the school's enrolment number;
- the school's admissions number;
- the respective functions of the Board of Governors and the Principal in relation to admissions to the school; and
- the criteria for admission to the school.

25. The Education (School Information and Prospectus) Regulations (NI) 2003 also requires the EA to publish the number of applications received and the number of places approved in respect of;

- the school year in which the criteria is published;
- each of the previous 2 school years; and
- the *number of pupils admitted to the school in each of those three school years.

from 2025/26 this number should also include any child admitted to the school with a Statement of SEN and/or who may be attending SPiMs.

26. Draft Admissions Criteria is uploaded by the EA Primary Admissions Team via AnyComms+ to schools in October of each year for amendment and should be returned to EA Primary Admissions via AnyComms+ by the closing date as outlined in the DE published Timetable.

27. The Education Authority publishes the primary school Admissions Criteria on the Education Authority website in December each year (date of publication as per DE published timetable).

ADMINISTRATION

28. Where a school is over-subscribed and an application is 'not selected', EA Connect portal will automatically move any 'not selected' applications including any attachments on to the next named preference. This process continues until the application has been 'selected' for admission or all preferences are exhausted.

Where an application has been selected at second or subsequent preference or where an application has not been selected for admission to any school, the notification email issued by EA at the close of the open enrolment procedure also includes information on how to submit an appeal.

The EA Connect portal opens again at the close of the open enrolment procedure for new late applications, additional preferences for those applicants yet to secure a school placement and for acceptance/refusal of the school offered.

APPEALS

29. Article 15 of the Education (NI) Order 1997 requires the EA to make arrangements enabling parents/guardians to appeal if they are dissatisfied with an admissions decision. The appeal will be to the Independent Admissions Appeal Tribunal constituted in accordance with the School Admissions (Appeal Tribunals) Regulations (NI) 1998.

Information on arrangements for appeals against admissions decisions made by schools is published on the Education Authority website at the close of the open enrolment procedure with a link to the EA Connect portal available on the EA Website.

The date of the opening and closure of the EA Connect portal to submit an Appeal is contained in the published DE Timetable. Parents/Guardians have 10 days to lodge an appeal against any school that has refused admission to their child once the EA Connect appeal portal opens.

In any Admission Appeal, a school acts as the Data Controller and therefore bears full responsibility for the documentation submitted. This includes ensuring that all information provided to the appeals process is:-

- complete and accurate in every respect;
- submitted within the specified deadline for submitting appeal documents;
- compliant with data protection legislation; and
- appropriately redacted where sensitive or third-party data is present e.g. redacting other pupil names when submitting the individual response documents that will solely be for the attention of the appellant.

Minutes of the Board of Governors/Admissions Committee should be included where decisions on admissions have been made. Appeal hearings will be set up remotely (MS Teams) and a representative of the School/Board of Governors is encouraged to attend. There is no mechanism for filtering out cases which appear to have little prospect of success.

The Appeal Clerk is part of the EA and therefore not a member of the Independent Appeal Tribunal panel. The Clerk is not involved in the making of the decision regarding the appeal outcome but has an important role in ensuring that relevant facts are established and that

the appeal hearing is fair. Duties include:-

- order the business of the day;
- ensure all links etc are working prior to hearing commencement;
- ensure all parties have had access to all the submitted documentation;
- ensure the panel is not left alone with any of the parties;
- keeps an accurate and full record of the hearings; and
- deals with any post-decision complaints and challenges e.g. Judicial Review

30. The EA Primary Admissions team carry out the following functions with regard to appeals:-

- relevant administrative duties including arranging an agreed date/time for appeal hearing suitable to all parties;
- sets up MS Teams Channel and arranges test calls with all parties;
- provides assistance and information to all the parties to the appeal prior to the hearing.

THE ROLE OF THE DEPARTMENT

31. In line with Articles 10, 11 and 12 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the Department of Education sets a school's admissions and enrolment number for each academic year. A full explanation of how these are calculated in contained in the 'Open Enrolment in Primary Schools' circular.

32. Once these numbers have been set, the Board of Governors of a school must not admit a pupil or pupils which cause them to exceed either number. To do so, without the prior approval of the Department, is to act unlawfully.

ADMISSIONS NUMBER

33. Where a school has places within its approved admissions number it must admit all applicants (of compulsory school age only, or giving priority for applicants of compulsory school age where the school has an existing policy of admitting pupils below compulsory school age). The school must only employ the Admissions Criteria which have been set to distinguish between applicants where it has received more applications than places available. Parents who wish to appeal admissions decisions where the school's Admissions Criteria have been applied can submit an appeal to the Independent Admissions Appeals Tribunal constituted by the EA.

ENROLMENT NUMBER

34. If a school has more applicants than places available for admission to years 2-7 it should

employ the criteria set for this purpose. Again, in this instance parents who wish to appeal admissions decisions where the school's Admissions Criteria have been applied can appeal to the Independent Admissions Appeal Tribunal.

35. If a school refuses to admit a pupil to years 2-7 at a primary school, where there are places available within the enrolment number, on the basis that such an admission would prejudice the efficient use of the school's resources; this family also has a right of appeal, known as a 'Complaint'. School Admissions Team within DE considers these Complaints.

The Team gathers evidence from the family, the school and the EA and will make a decision as to whether the case should be dismissed, or upheld, in which case the school will be asked to admit the pupil. A school refusing admission to a child on the basis that it is prejudicial to the efficient use of resources, therefore, must ensure that the family is informed of their right of appeal in the letter issued in response to an AP1 application.

TEMPORARY VARIATION POLICY

36. If a school wishes to admit a pupil or pupils in excess of their approved admissions and/or enrolment number, they must seek prior permission to do so from the Department of Education by way of a Temporary Variation (TV) request.

37. A TV allows the Department to vary a school's approved admissions number and/or enrolment number for a specified period. Any request for a TV must be made to the Department by the school and will be considered in accordance with the prevailing policy and guidance.

38. In deciding whether to submit a TV request, schools should satisfy themselves that any additional pupils can be accommodated safely and within an appropriate learning environment using existing accommodation.

39. Where a TV request is approved, the Department will notify the school in writing. Only those pupils covered by the Department's approval may be admitted in excess of the school's approved numbers.

40. Schools must not admit pupils in excess of their approved admissions number or enrolment number without prior approval from the Department.

41. Further information on Temporary Variations is available in the Department's current guidance and circulars relating to school admissions.

ACCOMMODATION

42. A school's intake is restricted by its physical capacity. This is a finite number. The school's Admissions Criteria help it to ensure that its intake matches the accommodation available

to it. Unplanned growth outside these restrictions can lead to unsafe conditions within a school and can make it difficult for the managing authorities and the Department to plan and build appropriate accommodation.

43. It is also essential that schools are absolutely clear that a TV to a school's admissions and enrolment numbers is granted on the condition that **no additional accommodation is required to accommodate the additional pupils**. A school will not be granted additional accommodation on the basis of gaining an additional place or places by TV and indeed if a school requires additional accommodation, they should not seek a temporary variation in the first instance.

AREA PLANNING

44. It is essential; therefore, that school growth happens within the context of the Area Plan held by the managing authorities. Where area plans identify a need for an increased number of places in a particular sector, they will also specify how these places should be provided. This may be through a new school or through increasing the capacity of existing schools. These proposals will then progress through the normal capital investment process within available funding. This managed approach is the only way a school can grow to meet demand.

THE ROLE OF THE PARENT

45. In line with Article 9 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the EA makes arrangements for every parent to express a preference or preferences for particular primary schools and to give reasons for these preferences. All parents, therefore, have the responsibility to consider the options available to them, consider how their child might meet the Admissions Criteria for the school or schools of their choice and then having considered all the guidance provided to them by schools and the EA, complete the primary school admission application and submit it in accordance with the published deadlines.

46. Parents should also consider transport availability when making their application to schools.

CONCLUSION

47. The factors involved in primary school admissions make it a challenging and complex role. The Department and the EA recognise the responsibilities it places on Boards of Governors, most of which are acting in a voluntary capacity.

    Their role is valued and vital within the Open Enrolment process. This guide is not intended to be, and indeed cannot be, an exhaustive one. There is, however, a wealth of information available to support schools as they make difficult choices which are a necessary part of the process. If in doubt a school should contact the Primary Admissions Helpdesk or the Primary Admissions Manager in EA or the Department's School Admissions Team who will make every effort to assist.

48. The Department and EA welcome feedback on both the Open Enrolment process and the guidance that is provided on it. If you have any comments on this guide or any other aspect of Open Enrolment policy or practice, please address these to the Primary Admissions Manager in EA or the School Admissions Team in the Department of Education as this feedback can ultimately help to improve the service provided to families seeking a primary place of their child.

Department of Education (in collaboration with Education Authority)

(revised) October 2026

USEFUL CONTACT INFORMATION

School Admissions Team

Department of Education

Rathgael House

43 Balloo Road Bangor

Co. Down BT19 7PR

Tel: 028 9127 9564

Email: SchoolAdmissionsTeam@education-ni.gov.uk

Primary Admissions Office

Primary Admissions Manager: Adele Patterson

3 Charlemont Place

The Mall

Armagh

BT61 9AX

Email: primaryadmissions@eani.org.uk Tel: 028 9047 0177

Pre-School Admissions Office

Pre School Admissions Manager: Mairead Kerr

1 Hospital Road,

Omagh,

BT79 0AW

Email: preschooladmissions@eani.org.uk Tel: 028 9047 0177

Post Primary Admissions Office

Primary Admissions Manager: Darren Gallagher

82 Galgorm Road

Ballymena

Co. Antrim

BT42 1HN

Email: postprimaryadmissions@eani.org.uk Tel: 028 9047 0177

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

23 Linenhall Street

Lisburn

BT28 1FJ

Tel: (028) 9201 3014

Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

James House

2-4 Cromac Street

Belfast

BT7 2JB

Email: admin@nicie.org.uk Tel: 028 9694 4200

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

200–202 Falls Road

Belfast

BT12 6AF

Tel: 028 9032 1475