



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR1723

Admission authority: Plymouth Council for Plymouth High School for Girls

Date of decision: 26 August 2020

Determination

In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Plymouth Council for Plymouth High School for Girls for September 2021.

I determine that for admissions in September 2021 the grammar school testing arrangements will be as described in this determination.

The referral

1. Plymouth Council (the local authority) has referred a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for September 2021 for Plymouth High School for Girls (the school), to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator. The school is a community school for girls aged 11 to 18 in Plymouth and the local authority is its admission authority. It is designated as a grammar school in accordance with section 104 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (the Act).
2. The proposed variation makes changes to the grammar school testing arrangements and is made in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the interests of dealing speedily with this and the many other requests for variations along the same or similar lines as a result of Covid-19 I have not considered other aspects of the admission arrangements in this variation request. Therefore, nothing in this determination should be taken as indicating that other aspects of the arrangements do or do not conform with the requirements relating to admissions.

Jurisdiction

3. The referral was made to me in accordance with section 88E of the Act which states that: “where an admission authority (a) have in accordance with section 88C determined the admission arrangements which are to apply for a particular school year, but (b) at any time before the end of that year consider that the arrangements should be varied in view of a major change in circumstances occurring since they were so determined, the authority must [except in a case where the authority’s proposed variations fall within any description of variations prescribed for the purposes of this section] (a) refer their proposed variations to the adjudicator, and (b) notify the appropriate bodies of the proposed variations”.
4. I have been informed that the required notification has taken place and I am satisfied that the proposed variation is within my jurisdiction.

The proposed variation and consideration of the proposed variation

5. As a grammar school, the school admits only pupils who are of high academic ability. It is permitted, where there are not enough such applicants, to keep places empty. The school must, it follows, be able to assess the academic ability of applicants. It usually does so by means of a test taken early in the autumn term when potential applicants are in Year 6 of primary school. The tests are shared with the two other Plymouth grammar schools which are Devonport High School for Boys and Devonport High School for Girls. The tests for admission in September 2021 were originally set to take place on Saturday 12 and Saturday 19 September. I understand that all applicants take tests on both days.
6. In the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department for Education has issued guidance to the admission authorities of selective schools, advising that “The impact of coronavirus protective measures mean that admission authorities are likely to need to change their selective processes this year. It is recommended that written tests continue to be run under exam conditions whenever possible, albeit whilst operating stringent health protection measures.” More detailed sections of the guidance strongly recommend that tests are moved back into late October or November and cover matters such as public health measures including social distancing and how to make provision for testing for children from families that may be shielding or particularly vulnerable. It is against that background that the local authority has applied for a variation in following terms: “Amendment of the 11 plus examination and result dates to be moved for the 2021/2022 academic year. To enable parents to nominate four preferences on the common application form rather than three for the 2021/2022 academic year only.”
7. The arrangements for the school as they were originally determined provide:
- “Admission to the school is on the basis of selection by reference to ability. Only candidates who attain the required standard in the prescribed arrangements for selection are eligible to be considered for admission to the school. The prescribed

arrangements involve candidates' participation in the 11-plus examination. The 11-plus examination will take place before the closing date for submission of the application form for a school place and parents/carers are required to register their child to take the examination."

8. It can be seen from the extract above that the arrangements themselves do not specify the date of the tests. Rather, these are set out in the co-ordinated admission scheme. I make no formal finding on this point, but I observe that it would be clearer for parents and helpful to them if the dates were included in the determined arrangements themselves. I note that the co-ordinated scheme for 2021 is dated 29 November 2019 and that the dates (both those originally set and the proposed new dates) are prominently displayed on the local authority's website in the section about admissions. The new dates proposed for the test are Saturday 7 and Saturday 14 November 2020. As the arrangements do not contain any test date it is at the least arguable that no variation is required to change that date.

9. The arrangements do provide that the date of the tests will be before the closing date for applications (31 October 2020). The new dates are after that so a variation is required on that point and indeed the variation request asks for the arrangements to be changed so that the words "The 11-plus examination will take place before the closing date for submission of the application form for a school place and" be removed and the following word "parents" be capitalised to read "Parents". I note that by specifying particular new dates for the test, the local authority could be leaving itself with little room for manoeuvre should there be a further local or national lockdown in place come November. However, as the test dates are not in fact included in the school's admission arrangements in this case, it would be open to the local authority to move the dates again if necessary and further lockdowns are by their nature unpredictable. The arrangements also do not address how the local authority will cater for children who may themselves be or who may have family members who are shielding, or who may be ill (whether because of Covid-19 or otherwise) and so are unable to attend on any given test date for those or similar reasons. I have been assured by an officer of the local authority that appropriate measures will be put in place to ensure such children can take the test. I note that this matter is also addressed in the DfE guidance and emphasise the importance of the local authority's taking appropriate measures.

10. The variation also refers to the local authority's wish to give parents the opportunity to express four preferences rather than three on its Common Application Form. This again follows the DfE guidance, but the guidance here is concerned with the co-ordinated scheme rather than the admission arrangements of a particular school. It is not therefore a matter which requires my approval.

11. Finally, the requested variation refers to the amendment of the test dates for 2021/22. Admission arrangements are determined only for one year. If the local authority wishes (as it no doubt will if circumstances allow) to revert to holding tests and providing

results before the closing date for secondary school applications for the 2022 admission round it will need to consult on and determine arrangements that provide for this as it will represent a change from the arrangements which applied for 2021.

12. It is beyond question that the Covid-19 pandemic represents a major change of circumstances. The local authority as the admission authority for the school has considered how it can amend its arrangements in order to deal with the challenges it faces. It has also clearly had regard to the Department for Education's guidance. I am satisfied that the proposed variation is a pragmatic and appropriate response. I approve the variation.

Dated: 26 August 2020

Signed: 

Schools Adjudicator: Shan Scott