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School admissions in England:

The rules schools choose
on which pupils to admit



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School admissions in England: The rules schools choose on which pupils to admit*

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Abstract

Most secondary schools in England are able to design the rules for which pupils have priority when the school is over-subscribed. This could be positive or negative for inclusivity, depending on schools' choices. In this context, we study the detailed rules for each secondary school in England. Our main findings are that, first, geography (still) determines admission to most over-subscribed schools. This matters for social mobility, as some households are priced out of high performing schools due to higher property prices around the school. Second, despite explicit financial incentives, only a small minority of schools give priority to pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium, and this priority is meaningful only in a few dozen schools. Third, the few schools with 'innovative' admissions arrangements could inspire other schools to implement feasible 'tried and tested' reforms. Free schools appear to be leading these 'innovative' admissions arrangements. Finally, in the complex system of multiple school types and diverse admissions arrangements, parents in some areas lack the required information to make informed school choices.

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1 Executive summary

Motivation:

- We study the diverse admissions arrangements across all secondary schools in England, for entry in September 2020. Our goal for this work, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, is to comprehensively describe how secondary schools prioritise pupils for admission if they are over-subscribed. In doing so, we provide evidence for the main barriers to accessing high performing schools for some groups of pupils, and examples of innovative admissions arrangements that might avoid these barriers.
- Schools differ in their effectiveness. That effectiveness helps shape students' qualifications and in turn their future life chances. So which students can access the most effective schools, and which end up in the least effective, matters for the distribution of life chances.
- As many secondary schools in England are over-subscribed, these admissions arrangements are crucial in influencing educational inequality, social mobility and the transmission of privilege. Intuitively, admissions arrangements matter more for schools with high performance, where the design of criteria might have the most influence on social mobility. Admissions arrangements also matter more in some, particularly urban and unequal, areas.
- This paper describes these admissions arrangements in unprecedented depth and breadth since the change in the educational landscape post academisation. Our dataset contains the full ordered list of criteria at almost every state secondary school in England. It also contains the rich details of each criterion. For example, most schools use some form of geography-based criterion, and in each case we have the full spatial coordinates for each zone. Where a linked feeder school is used, we have the school identifier of each school. We also have the details, sometimes quite arcane, of the many religion criteria used. The 18-month data collection exercise has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation and by the Keynes Fund at the University of Cambridge.
- This paper is the first part of a research programme. We are very interested in measuring the causal impact of different admissions arrangements. Our future work will study the effect of these admissions arrangements on pupils' school allocations, on the implications for the test score gap between poor and more affluent students, and on the important societal outcome of school segregation. Specifically, to evaluate the extent to which particular criteria may be socially discriminatory.

Summary of findings:

- First, Geography determines admission to over-subscribed schools for most secondary schools in England. This matters for social mobility, as some households are priced out of high performing schools due to higher property prices around the school. Second, despite explicit financial incentives, only a small minority of schools give priority to pupils eligible

for the Pupil Premium, and this priority is meaningful only in a few dozen schools. Third, the few schools with ‘innovative’ admissions arrangements could inspire other schools to implement feasible ‘tried and tested’ reforms. Free schools appear to be leading these ‘innovative’ admissions arrangements. Finally, in the complex system of multiple school types and diverse admissions arrangements, parents in some areas lack the required information to make informed school choices.

The school choice context:

- In England, the system for assigning students to schools is based on the preferences of families for which school their child goes to. For schools that are over-subscribed - more people want to attend than there are places - the schools rank pupils according to their admissions arrangements. Once parents have submitted their school preferences, the Local Authority allocates each pupil to their highest ranked school possible, given each schools’ capacity and admissions arrangements, and the choices of others.
- Admissions arrangements are published in advance by each school, and must adhere to the Government’s School Admissions Code. These admissions arrangements list the criteria through which pupils are given priority for access to the school.
- We find that around 90% of schools today have the power to set their own admissions arrangements. This is a dramatic change, as historically Local Authorities have been responsible for setting admissions arrangements (uniformly) for most schools in their area. This has been progressively changed by the introduction of schools that set their own admissions arrangements.

Findings about schools’ admissions arrangements:

- The decentralisation of the system naturally produces a great richness and diversity of admissions arrangements. This is detailed and illustrated throughout our report. Here, we summarise the main points. The first thing to note, that frames all our other findings, is the sheer diversity and complexity of the system. This to a degree honours the different missions that schools may follow, but it does create a complex puzzle for parents trying to navigate their way.
- Schools use a number of types of criteria in their admissions arrangements, the mean being 3.5. This does not count the two criteria that they are required by law to place at the top of the list: students with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and students in the care of the Local Authority (Looked After Children, LAC). Beyond those, some schools have only one more criterion, and others have another seven, with fine gradations between the criteria. Most schools choose to have a distance tie-breaking rule to break ties (decide) between pupils in the same priority group (with the same priority according to the criteria, given their characteristics). The ordering matters for the outcome: having a tie-breaking rule, typically distance from the school, very early means that distance is essentially all that matters, while allowing for other factors before the tie-breaking rule might allow for a more diverse intake.

- The most common criteria by far are siblings (96% of schools) and geography (88%). By geographical criteria, we mean criteria that specify in some way certain locations that are privileged in terms of admission to the school. This includes catchment areas and simple distance or travel time. Widely discussed criteria such as religious requirements and entry tests for selective schools are by comparison far less common - just 15% of schools use religious requirements and 11% use entry tests. There are other criteria used, perhaps explicitly aiming at achieving a more balanced intake. These include the use of random allocation or ‘lottery’ (3% of schools), Banding (3%), and explicitly prioritising disadvantaged students (5%).
- **Geography:** Geographical criteria are used by almost all schools, and are near the top of the ordering of criteria where they are used. This means that the scope for indirect selection is large. In a system mainly constrained by geography, higher demand in the catchment area or close to popular schools leads to higher property prices (see [Leech and Campos \(2003\)](#), [Cheshire and Sheppard \(2004\)](#), [Gibbons and Machin \(2008\)](#) and [Gibbons et al. \(2013\)](#) for evidence from England) which therefore reduces the chances of lower-income families to access the school. Whether school admissions arrangements should avoid this indirect form of discrimination is an interesting moral and political question. [Coldron et al. \(2008\)](#) state that “priority should also be given to mitigating the indirect causes of segregated intakes”, such as geographical criteria.
- **Siblings:** We consider the near-ubiquitous sibling criterion to be non-substantive. The effect of this criterion is to simply intensify the importance of getting the first child into the desired school on the basis of other criteria. It does not inherently favour any group, but it does act as a multiplier for the impact of other criteria on the overall allocation. We mean by this that if a student is admitted to a specific school through a particular criterion and a different student is excluded by the same criterion, then if they each had a sibling, this will double the effect of that initial criterion on the outcome.
- **Pupil Premium:** One very striking finding relates to the opportunity for schools to explicitly prioritise disadvantaged students for admission. This is almost completely absent: a criterion for students eligible for Pupil Premium is present in 5% of schools, and for reasons discussed below, is really only meaningful in a few dozen schools (out of about 3,250). Given the often progressive ethos of many schools, and the explicit aim that the introduction of the policy would facilitate access for poorer students ([Gorard \(2022\)](#)), this is fascinating and puzzling. Neither the additional funding allocated to schools for each eligible student nor any school’s social goal of improving diversity appears to be sufficient for schools to explicitly prioritise the admission of pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium.
- **Banding:** Banding is a “permitted form of selection” according to the School Admissions Code (2021), that is used by some admissions authorities to achieve a school intake that has a “proportionate spread of children of different abilities”. All pupils are assessed, and grouped into bands (for example, four or five groups) of ability. The school will then take a share of pupils from each ability band, using criteria to determine entry whenever a band is

over-subscribed. We find that banding is used in only a minority of Local Authorities, but in those areas that the practice is highly concentrated. Area-wide banding is used in four Local Authorities in London (Hackney, Lambeth, Tower Hamlets and Wandsworth) so that schools have an intake that is representative of the local area. Individual school-level banding is used elsewhere in England, by around 70 schools. These schools are likely to have intakes representative of all *applicants* rather than all pupils in the local area, which might be systematically higher ability depending on the school’s location and marketing strategies.

- **‘Aptitude’:** Schools with a specialism are permitted by the School Admissions Code to admit up to 10% of pupils according to aptitude in this specialism. After increasing in use between 2000 and 2006 (Allen et al. (2012), Coldron et al. (2008)), the use of aptitude tests/quotas appears to have stabilised in secondary schools in England. The effect of aptitude or specialism quotas on equality of access for lower social-economic groups is expected to be negative, as “high relative attainment in any of the subjects (even sport) will involve expense of resources of time and money for travelling, equipment and training” (Coldron et al. (2008)).
- **‘Innovative’ criteria:** We find that a minority of schools and/or areas are using more innovative admissions arrangements. These include random allocation of the available places to some applicants without reference to distance (104 schools), a test-based entry to assure a mixed-ability intake (‘Banding’, 103 schools), and a meaningful use of the Pupil Premium criterion (42 schools). Geographical criteria can also be modified to be more inclusive, for example reserving places for pupils out of the catchment (23 schools) or across catchment areas (35 schools). Even straight line distance tie-breaking rules can be modified, for example the distance measurement points can be spread across the city. These schools are showing that other approaches to admissions are possible and may offer exemplars for other schools to follow. Our future work will explore the effect of these choices on pupil, school, and area-level outcomes.
- **Free schools:** Many free schools have innovative admissions arrangements, such as the Pupil Premium criterion and banding, and less reliance on traditional admissions arrangements such as catchment areas. Early research suggested that the admissions arrangements of free schools were exclusive rather than inclusive (Morris (2014)). The opposite now seems to be true, as free schools are more likely to have admissions arrangements that are designed to *include* disadvantaged pupils than other school types. This could be due to the ‘blank slate’ for these new schools, the mission or ethos of the governing board, or guidance from the Department for Education that prominently mentions these innovative admissions arrangements (Department for Education, 2014).

Findings on lack of information:

- Our study highlights and illustrates the complex environment facing parents. In some areas of England, parents do not have good enough information about schools’ admissions arrangements. Information can be either incomplete, unclear or incorrect.

- Despite the weakening role of Local Authorities as admissions authorities, policymakers should consider whether the central provision of information to parents should be regulated. Mandating that own admission authority schools (such as academies) must provide full details of their admissions arrangements (including details of the catchment area, where applicable) to be compiled by the LA is likely to save parents valuable time and reduce uncertainty in the school choice process.
- Our findings are consistent with a survey of parents conducted for the Department for Education, that around one-fifth of parents said it was not easy to find information about the admissions criteria of schools, and almost a quarter of parents said it was not easy to understand the chance of admission to their preferred school ([Department for Education, 2022](#)).
- **Central provision of admissions arrangements:** 33% of Local Authorities do not publish school admissions guides that contain the admissions arrangements for all schools in their area. In these cases, parents would have to consult individual school websites. The collation of all schools' admissions arrangements by Local Authorities is not required by law, but should be encouraged to help parents make their school choices easily and with full information.
- **Provision of over-subscription information:** 12% of Local Authorities do not provide information about over-subscription status in the previous academic year. Where relevant, 37% of Local Authorities provide information about the distance cut-off for all over-subscribed schools (that use a distance tie-breaking rule) in the previous academic year. 44% provide partial information and 19% provide no information about the distance cut-offs for over-subscribed schools that use a distance tie-breaking rule.
- **Provision of catchment area information:** 59% of Local Authorities (with a non-faith school with a catchment area criterion) provide full catchment area information centrally, either in their LA admissions booklet or on their website. Another 29% provide catchment area information for some schools centrally. This leaves 12.5% of LAs that provide no information to parents about schools' catchment areas.
- LAs vary in the provision of catchment area information, from lists, to hand-drawn maps, to interactive maps. 38% of LAs with at least one non-faith school with a catchment area provide full information interactively online, through interactive maps or online look-ups between home address and school catchment area. Another 15% provide digital catchment area information for some schools. At the other extreme, almost 10% of LAs contain schools where catchment area information is not possible to find without contacting individual schools (and sometimes not possible even then) or is incorrect.

2 Introduction

Schools differ in their effectiveness. That effectiveness helps shape students' qualifications and in turn their future life chances. So which students can access the most effective schools, and

which end up in the least effective, matters for the distribution of life chances.

Today, we find that around 90% of schools have the power to set their own admissions arrangements.¹ This is a dramatic change, as historically Local Authorities have been responsible for setting admissions arrangements (uniformly) for most schools in their area. This has been progressively changed by the introduction of schools that set their own admissions arrangements.²

Why does this matter? Previous research has shown that schools that control their own admissions might be divisive. Writing with reference to grant-maintained schools in the early 1990s, [Reay and Ball \(1998\)](#) note that “As some “successful” schools are now choosing their intake, one way or another, some working-class families outside the immediate catchment area of such schools may be having their range of options reduced”. Previous quantitative research has found that Local Authorities with a larger share of schools that are their own admission authority have higher school segregation ([Allen \(2007\)](#), [Coldron et al. \(2008\)](#)).³

We study the diverse admissions arrangements across all secondary schools in England. Our goal for this work is to comprehensively describe how secondary schools prioritise pupils for admission if they are over-subscribed. In doing so, we provide evidence for the main barriers to accessing high performing schools for some groups of pupils, and examples of innovative admissions arrangements that might overcome these barriers.

Our main findings are that, first, geography (still) determines admission to over-subscribed schools for most secondary schools in England. This matters for social mobility, as some households are priced out of high performing schools due to higher property prices around the school. Second, despite explicit financial incentives, only a small minority of schools give priority to pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium, and this priority is meaningful only in a few dozen schools. Third, the few schools with ‘innovative’ admissions arrangements could inspire other schools to implement feasible ‘tried and tested’ reforms. Free schools appear to be leading these ‘innovative’ admissions arrangements. Finally, in the complex system of multiple school types and diverse admissions arrangements, parents in some areas lack the required information to make informed school choices.

This paper is the first part of a research programme. We are very interested in measuring the causal impact of different admissions arrangements. Our future work will study the effect of these admissions arrangements on pupils’ school allocations, on the implications for the test score gap between poor and more affluent students, and on the important societal outcome of school segregation. Specifically, to evaluate the extent to which particular criteria may be socially discriminatory.

The educational landscape in England has changed dramatically since 2010, with the introduction of academy schools and free schools. Academy schools, with freedom to design their own admissions arrangements, are now by far the most common secondary school type. Our

¹See also [Van den Brande et al. \(2019\)](#) for ‘top’ comprehensives in England.

²For context, [West and Hind \(2007\)](#) state that “Prior to the introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act, 15% of secondary schools had this responsibility, whereas in 2004, the figure was nearly one third (32%).”

³[Van den Brande et al. \(2019\)](#) show that schools that control their own admissions have a school population that is less representative of the local area than schools with Local Authority controlled admissions.

research is the first to study secondary school admissions nationwide since this dramatic change has been fully realised.⁴

Even before the introduction of academy schools, there was a diverse array of school admissions arrangements, both across Local Authorities and across other types that could set their own admissions arrangements (voluntary controlled schools and grant-maintained schools). Previous research in England has studied a sample of Local Authorities in the 1999/2000 academic year (Gorard et al. (2002)), all secondary schools in England in 2001 (West and Hind (2003)), 2006 (Coldron et al. (2008)), and 2012 (Noden et al. (2014)) and secondary schools in London (West and Hind (2016)). Morris (2014) studies the admissions arrangements of the early free schools in England.

In England, the system for assigning students to schools is based on the preferences of families for which school their child goes to. For schools that are over-subscribed - more people want to attend than there are places - the schools rank pupils according to their admissions arrangements. To describe these admissions arrangements and the system more generally, we need to be clear and consistent with terminology. Coldron et al. (2008) write that “The debate about admissions, while often appearing to be about arcane technicalities, does in fact go to the heart of current policies about how best to achieve social justice, an improved education system and a cohesive society.” Here are our important definitions and “arcane technicalities” that will be useful throughout the report.

The School Admissions Code: The School Admissions Code regulates school admissions, with the aim of ensuring that “all school places for [mainstream state schools] are allocated and offered in an open and fair way” (Department for Education, 2021). The School Admissions Code rules out the more obvious forms of overt social selection. For example, it rules out schools attempting to select high ability children from more affluent families through interviews or supplementary information forms that ask for information unrelated to the schools’ admissions arrangements.⁵

Admissions authority: The body responsible for setting the rules (admissions arrangements - see below) for the school in the eventuality that the school is over-subscribed. The admissions authority is either the governing board or Local Authority.

Admissions arrangements: Admissions arrangements are designed by the admissions authority, but must adhere to the School Admissions Code. These admissions arrangements (commonly referred to as ‘over-subscription criteria’) are published in advance by each school and/or admissions authority.

Criteria: Each published admissions arrangement contains a list of ordered criteria that are used to give pupils priority, depending on the pupil’s characteristics.

⁴See Noden et al. (2014) for the most recent nationwide evidence before our work, for admissions to secondary schools in September 2012, near the start of the academy expansion.

⁵The School Admissions Code has been strengthened over time to prevent overt and covert selection by schools. Now banned practices include interviews, supplementary information irrelevant to the school’s admissions arrangements (such as the parents’ occupation), priority to children of associated adults (e.g. governors), references from primary school and even ‘parental commitment’ (Coldron et al. (2008)).⁶ Allen et al. (2012) show that the strengthening of the School Admissions Code in 2003 and 2007 made the composition of schools that were forced to update their admissions arrangements more representative.

Tie-breaking rule: A tie-breaking rule is used when there are more pupils within a priority group (all have the same priority for the school based on their characteristics) than places available.

Allocation to school: Once parents have submitted their school preferences, the Local Authority allocates each pupil to their highest ranked school possible, given each schools’ capacity and admissions arrangements, and the choices of others.⁷

As many secondary schools in England are over-subscribed, these admissions arrangements are crucial in influencing educational inequality, social mobility and the transmission of privilege. Intuitively, admissions arrangements matter more for schools with high performance, where the design of criteria might have the most influence on social mobility. Admissions arrangements also matter more in some, particularly urban and unequal, areas.

This paper describes these admissions arrangements in unprecedented depth and breadth since the change in the educational landscape post academisation. Our dataset contains the full ordered list of criteria at almost every state secondary school in England.⁸ It also contains the rich details of each criterion. For example, most schools use some form of geography-based criterion, and in each case we have the full spatial coordinates for each zone.⁹ Where a linked feeder school is used, we have the school identifier of each school. We also have the details, sometimes quite arcane, of the many religion criteria used.

The decentralisation of the system naturally produces a great richness and diversity of admissions arrangements. This is detailed and illustrated throughout our report. Here, we summarise the main points. The first thing to note, that frames all our other findings, is the sheer diversity and complexity of the system. This to a degree honours the different missions that schools may follow, but it does create a complex puzzle for parents trying to navigate their way.

Schools use a number of types of criteria in their admissions arrangements, the mean being 3.5. This excludes two criteria that they are required by law to place at the top of the list: students with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and students in the care of the Local Authority (Looked After Children, LAC). Beyond those, some schools have only one more criterion, and others have another seven, with fine gradations between the criteria. Most schools choose to have a distance tie-breaking rule to break ties (decide) between pupils in the same priority group (with the same priority according to the criteria, given their characteristics). The ordering matters for the outcome: having a tie-breaking rule, typically distance from the school, very early means that distance is essentially all that matters, while allowing for other factors before the tie-breaking rule might allow for a more diverse intake.

⁷The school choice algorithm used by the Local Authority supports truth-telling in that parents cannot do better than stating their true preferences for schools, but the restricted list length - six preferences in some areas, but only three in others - means that the chance of being admitted is highly relevant to the problem parents face (Walker and Weldon (2020)). Parents have an incentive to name at least one ‘safe’ school and/or “skip the impossible” schools with no chance of admission (Fack et al. (2019)).

⁸The data collection exercise underlying this work has taken more than 18 months, funded by Nuffield Foundation and previously by the Keynes Fund (University of Cambridge).

⁹This information is missing for 42 schools where the information was not available (25), depended on primary school catchment areas (7) or were found too late in the research process to code (10). Catchment area information is coded for 96.5% of secondary schools in England.

The main types of criteria by far are siblings (96% of schools) and geographical criteria (88%). By geographical criteria, we mean criteria that specify in some way certain locations that are privileged in terms of entry to the school; this includes catchment areas and simple distance or travel time.¹⁰ Widely discussed criteria such as religious requirements and entry tests for selective schools are by comparison far less common - just 15% of schools use religious requirements and 11% use entry tests. There are other criteria used, perhaps explicitly aiming at achieving a more balanced intake. These include the use of random allocation or ‘lottery’ (3% of schools), Banding (3%), and explicitly prioritising disadvantaged students (5%).

Geography: By far, the most common types of substantive criteria are based on geography - location relative to the school. These are used by almost all schools, and are near the top of the ordering of criteria where they are used. This means that the scope for indirect selection is large. In a survey of parents, [Coldron et al. \(2008\)](#) find that a fifth “had taken account of catchment areas the last time they moved home”. In a system mainly constrained by geography, higher demand in the catchment area or close to popular schools leads to higher property prices (see [Leech and Campos \(2003\)](#), [Cheshire and Sheppard \(2004\)](#), [Gibbons and Machin \(2008\)](#) and [Gibbons et al. \(2013\)](#) for evidence from England) which therefore excludes lower-income families from accessing the school. Whether school admissions arrangements should avoid this indirect form of discrimination is an interesting moral and political question. [Coldron et al. \(2008\)](#) state that “priority should also be given to mitigating the indirect causes of segregated intakes”, such as geographical criteria.

The School Admissions Code (2001) states that “Admission authorities **must** ensure that their arrangements will not disadvantage unfairly, either directly or indirectly, a child from a particular social or racial group, or a child with a disability or special educational needs, and that other policies around school uniform or school trips do not discourage parents from applying for a place for their child.” As discussed by [Eastwood and Turvey \(2008\)](#), whether socially imbalanced geographic criteria *indirectly* disadvantage a child from a particular social or racial group is an open question that should be clarified, especially given the widespread use of the geographic criteria.

Siblings: We consider the near-ubiquitous sibling criterion to be non-substantive. The effect of this criterion is to simply intensify the importance of getting the first child into the desired school on the basis of other criteria. It does not inherently favour any group, but it does act as a multiplier for the impact of other criteria on the overall allocation. We mean by this that if a student is admitted to a specific school through a particular criterion and a different student is excluded by the same criterion, then if they each had a sibling, this will double the effect of that initial criterion on the outcome. We are not suggesting that schools should drop the sibling criterion: this would cause severe disruption to family life. We are simply noting its effects. Studying the reasons and consequences of removing this criterion for the minority of schools that have decided to is of interest for future work, however.

Pupil Premium: One very striking finding relates to the opportunity for schools to explicitly prioritise disadvantaged students for admission. This is almost completely absent: a criterion

¹⁰Distance measures are formally tie-breaking rules rather than criteria, but we include them as criteria in this report as they are so commonly specified as such by admissions authorities.

for students eligible for Pupil Premium is present in 5% of schools, and for reasons discussed below, is really only meaningful in a few dozen schools (out of about 3,250). Given the often progressive ethos of many schools, and the explicit aim that the introduction of the policy would facilitate access for poorer students (Gorard (2022)), this is fascinating and puzzling. Neither the additional funding allocated to schools for each eligible student nor any school’s social goal of improving diversity appears to be sufficient for schools to explicitly prioritise the admission of pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium.

Banding: Banding is a “permitted form of selection” according to the School Admissions Code (2021), that is used by some admissions authorities to achieve a school intake that has a “proportionate spread of children of different abilities”. All pupils are assessed, and grouped into bands (for example, four or five groups) of ability. The school will then take a share of pupils from each ability band, using criteria to determine entry whenever a band is over-subscribed. Depending on the form of the initial assessment, banding can produce an intake that is representative of “the full range of ability of applicants for the school(s)” (where the assessment is taken by all applicants), “the range of ability of children in the local area” (where the assessment is taken by all pupils in the local area), or “the national ability range” (where the assessment is a nationally standardised test) (School Admissions Code, 2021).

Previous research is unanimous that area-wide banding is correlated with lower levels of segregation (Gorard et al. (2002), Coldron et al. (2008), Allen et al. (2012)). For example, Allen et al. (2012) conclude that “Area-wide banding and random allocation offer powerful tools to achieve a maximally functioning education market and to focus competition and popularity on the quality of provision rather than the social characteristics of the intake”.¹¹ We find that banding is used in only a minority of Local Authorities, but in those areas that the practice is highly concentrated. Banding used by individual schools outside these areas also has the potential to increase the diversity of the pupil intake.

We find that area-wide banding is used in four Local Authorities in London (Hackney, Lambeth, Tower Hamlets and Wandsworth) so that schools have an intake that is representative of the local area. Individual school-level banding is used elsewhere in England, by around 70 schools. These schools are likely to have intakes representative of all *applicants* rather than all pupils in the local area, which might be systematically higher ability depending on the school’s location and marketing strategies.¹²

‘Aptitude’: Schools with a specialism are permitted by the School Admissions Code to admit up to 10% of pupils according to aptitude in this specialism. After increasing in use between 2000 and 2006 (Allen et al. (2012), Coldron et al. (2008)), the use of aptitude tests/quotas appears to have stabilised in secondary schools in England. The effect of aptitude or specialism quotas on equality of access for lower social-economic groups is expected to be negative, as

¹¹See also Coldron et al. (2008) for similar policy suggestions: “Policy options available for redressing indirect selection that leads to socially segregated intakes include a body to set the admission criteria for all the schools in an area, fair banding, subsidised travel for lower income families, measures to ensure balanced intakes to grammar schools, random allocation and removing the ability to select a proportion by aptitude.”

¹²A minority of schools are permitted by the School Admissions Code to disproportionately favour higher ability pupils if that practice has been in place since the 1997/1998 school year. For this reason, we refer to banding rather than ‘fair banding’.

“high relative attainment in any of the subjects (even sport) will involve expense of resources of time and money for travelling, equipment and training” ([Coldron et al. \(2008\)](#)).

‘Innovative’ criteria: We find that a minority of schools and/or areas are showcasing more innovative admissions arrangements. These include random allocation of the available places to some applicants without reference to distance (104 schools), a test-based entry to assure a mixed-ability intake (‘Banding’, 103 schools), and a meaningful use of the Pupil Premium criterion (42 schools).¹³ Geographical criteria can also be modified to be more inclusive, for example reserving places for pupils out of the catchment (23 schools) or across catchment areas (35 schools). Even straight line distance tie-breaking rules can be modified, for example the distance measurement points can be spread across the city.¹⁴ These schools are showing that other approaches to admissions are possible and may offer exemplars for other schools to follow. Our future work will explore the effect of these choices on pupil, school, and area-level outcomes.

Free schools: Many free schools have innovative admissions arrangements, such as the Pupil Premium criterion and banding, and less reliance on traditional admissions arrangements such as catchment areas. Early research suggested that the admissions arrangements of free schools were exclusive rather than inclusive ([Morris \(2014\)](#)). The opposite now seems to be true, as free schools are more likely to have admissions arrangements that are designed to *include* disadvantaged pupils than other school types. This could be due to the ‘blank slate’ for these new schools, the mission or ethos of the governing board, or guidance from the Department for Education that prominently mentions these innovative admissions arrangements ([Department for Education, 2014](#)).¹⁵

Our study highlights and illustrates the complex environment facing parents. In some areas of England, parents do not have good enough information about schools’ admissions arrangements. Information can be either incomplete, unclear or incorrect. Despite the weakening role of Local Authorities as admissions authorities, policymakers should consider whether the central provision of information to parents should be regulated. Mandating that own admission authority schools (such as academies) must provide full details of their admissions arrangements (including details of the catchment area, where applicable) to be compiled by the LA is likely to save parents valuable time and reduce uncertainty in the school choice process. Our findings are consistent with a survey of parents conducted for the Department for Education, that around one-fifth of parents said it was not easy to find information about the admissions criteria of schools, and almost a quarter of parents said it was not easy to understand the chance of admission to their preferred school ([Department for Education, 2022](#)).

Central provision of admissions arrangements: 33% of Local Authorities do not publish school admissions guides that contain the admissions arrangements for all schools in their area.

¹³By ‘meaningful’, we mean used in non-selective schools, and therefore not conditional on high test scores.

¹⁴See [University of Birmingham School](#) for an example of this.

¹⁵Examples of the mission or ethos of these schools include: the school motto “Optimum Omnibus - the best for all” (Cobham Free School, Surrey, Pupil Premium criterion); mission that “MBS is a school where every boy is known personally and where every boy matters. The school has a Christian ethos but there are no faith entrance criteria; we welcome students of all faiths and none and we serve young people from every part of the diverse local community.” (Marylebone Boys’ School, Westminster, Banding); “All children are welcomed in our inclusive community, and all are challenged to be the best they can be.” (Trinity Academy, Lambeth, Pupil Premium criterion).

In these cases, parents would have to consult individual school websites. The collation of all schools' admissions arrangements by Local Authorities is not required by law, but should be encouraged to help parents make their school choices easily and with full information.

Provision of over-subscription information: 12% of Local Authorities do not provide information about over-subscription status in the previous academic year. Where relevant, 37% of Local Authorities provide information about the distance cut-off for all over-subscribed schools (that use a distance tie-breaking rule) in the previous academic year. 44% provide partial information and 19% provide no information about the distance cut-offs for over-subscribed schools that use a distance tie-breaking rule.

Provision of catchment area information: 59% of Local Authorities (with a non-faith school with a catchment area criterion) provide full catchment area information centrally, either in their LA admissions booklet or on their website. Another 29% provide catchment area information for some schools centrally. This leaves 12.5% of LAs that provide no information to parents about schools' catchment areas.

LAs vary in the provision of catchment area information, from lists, to hand-drawn maps, to interactive maps. 38% of LAs with at least one non-faith school with a catchment area provide full information interactively online, through interactive maps or online look-ups between home address and school catchment area. Another 15% provide digital catchment area information for some schools. At the other extreme, almost 10% of LAs contain schools where catchment area information is not possible to find without contacting individual schools (and sometimes not possible even then) or is incorrect.

The following section provides the necessary information about the education system in England, followed by further information about school admissions in England in section 4. Section 5 then describes secondary school admissions arrangements in great detail. Finally, section 6 discusses some trade-offs when considering the design of school admissions arrangements, before section 7 concludes.

3 Stylised facts about the educational landscape in England

The school system in England is organised around three stages: early years, primary education and secondary education. Secondary education, which is the focus of this report, covers ages 10/11, up to when the pupils are 16 years old.¹⁶

In this section, we highlight a number of facts about the educational landscape for secondary education. Like for other educational levels, the government sets the national curriculum and end of phase assessments. Local Authorities (LAs) are responsible for ensuring there are sufficient numbers of school places in their area, co-ordinating the school admissions process and providing home to school transport.

¹⁶The minority of schools that don't follow this timing are either 'middle' or 'all-through' schools. There are around 100 middle schools in England, concentrated in 6 Local Authorities, where pupils enter at around age 9 and leave at around age 13. There are also around 100 'all-through' schools that educate pupils from compulsory school starting to leaving age. Middle and all-through schools are included in our sample where the school or relevant admissions authority provides admissions arrangements for the secondary school phase.

There are several types of state-funded schools in England: Community schools, academies, free schools, foundation schools, voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools.

School types are important because they determine who the admission authority is (see Table 1). The LA acts as the admission authority for community schools and voluntary controlled schools. For the other school types, it is the governing body or the academy trust owning the school that acts as the admission authority.¹⁷

Figure 1 shows the total number of secondary schools by type, over time. There is a broad trend for more academies and fewer community schools in the state-funded sector. In the early 2000s, community schools were the most common school type, followed by voluntary aided/controlled (typically faith) schools and foundation schools.¹⁸ These school types are similar in that they have autonomy over how to spend their budget and staff hiring decisions, subject to regulations such as the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions document, although only community and voluntary controlled schools must follow the admissions arrangements of the LA.

Academy schools have become increasingly common over time, and are now the most prevalent secondary school type in England (Table 1 and Figure 1).¹⁹ As academy and free schools control their own admissions arrangements, this means that around 90% of schools are outside the LA admissions arrangements in the year of our data collection.

School types are not equally distributed around the country. As Figure 2 illustrates, academies are present everywhere, but especially prevalent in the corridor between Cornwall and Lincolnshire. Figure 3 shows that free schools are concentrated in a few distinct areas, including London, Plymouth, Blackburn with Darwen, and Bradford.

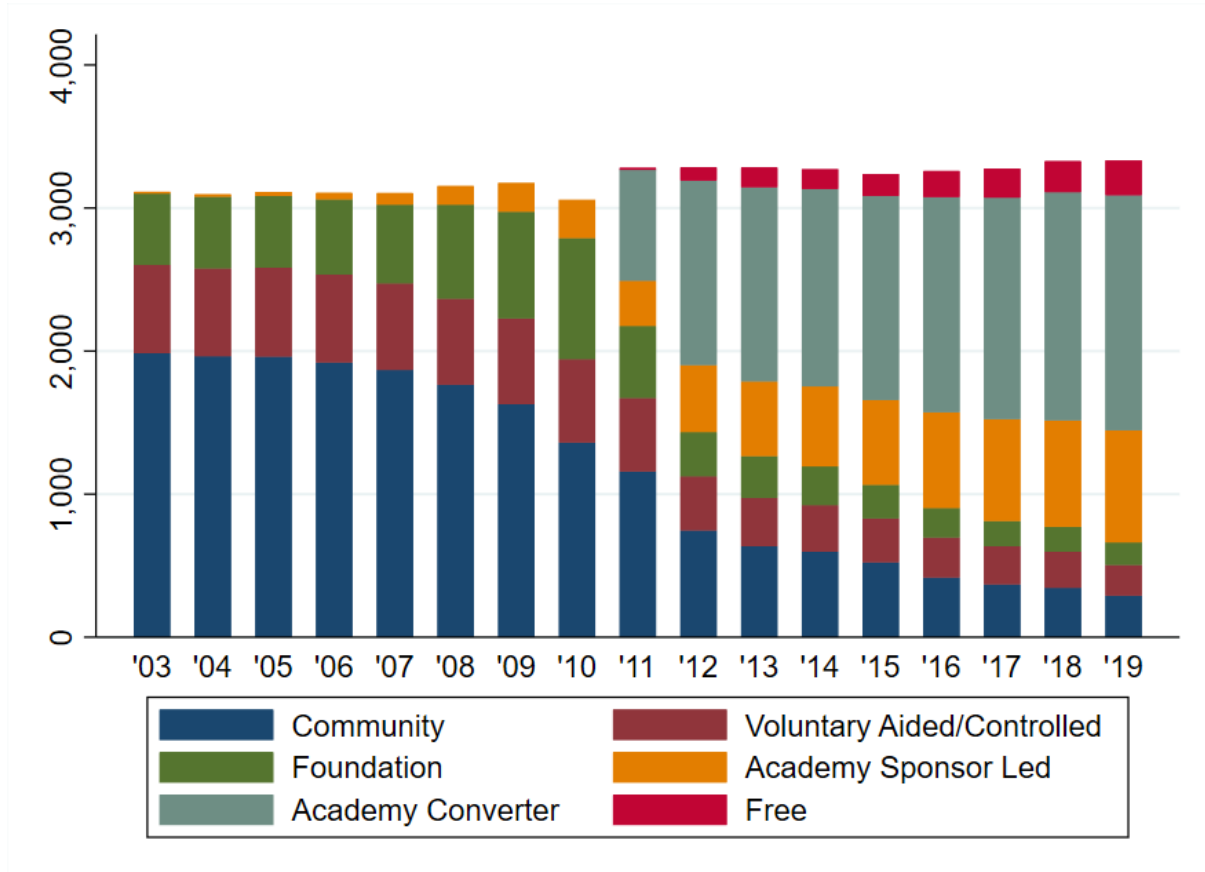
The exams at the end of secondary education (known as General Certificate of Secondary Education or GCSEs) are important for the child, as these results have a very strong influence on whether the child continues through to higher education, and also on job prospects. The transition from primary to secondary school is therefore a key point in a child's educational

¹⁷Other differences across school types include whether the per-pupil funding is received through the LA or directly from central government. All these types of schools are funded according to a National Funding Formula, which allocates per-pupil funding, with higher funding for certain groups of pupils, for example pupils with Special Educational Needs, English as an additional language, and eligible for free school meals. Community, foundation, and voluntary aided/controlled schools receive this funding through their LA, while academy and free schools receive this funding directly from the Department for Education. Free schools and academies receive an equivalent level of funding per pupil as a community school in the same area. In addition, they receive funding equivalent to services previously provided by the LA (West and Bailey (2013)).

¹⁸Foundation schools were established by the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, and typically replaced 'grant-maintained' schools. Voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools are publicly funded schools with different levels of control and involvement from the LA. Voluntary aided schools are owned by a religious or charitable organisation. Voluntary controlled are owned by the LA, but have a religious character.

¹⁹'City' or 'Sponsor Led' academies were introduced in 2000 with the goal to improve educational standards by giving more independence and flexibility to schools. Like their community counterparts, they are publicly funded but have more control over their budget, curriculum, and teacher pay and conditions. 'City' academies introduced by the Labour Government replaced 'failing' (and often inner-city) schools, sponsored by an external body that contributed around 20% to capital costs. 'Converter' academies, introduced by the coalition Conservative-Liberal Democrat government in 2010, are distinct in that schools could choose to 'convert' to academy status. Initially, only schools with an 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating could apply to become converter academies. Free schools were introduced at the same time as 'converter' academies. Free schools are new schools that are established in areas with high demand for school places, to foster greater choice and competition in the educational market. Free schools are outside LA control and can be set up by groups of parents, teachers, charities or any other organisation.

Figure 1: The number of schools, by school-type, in England over time

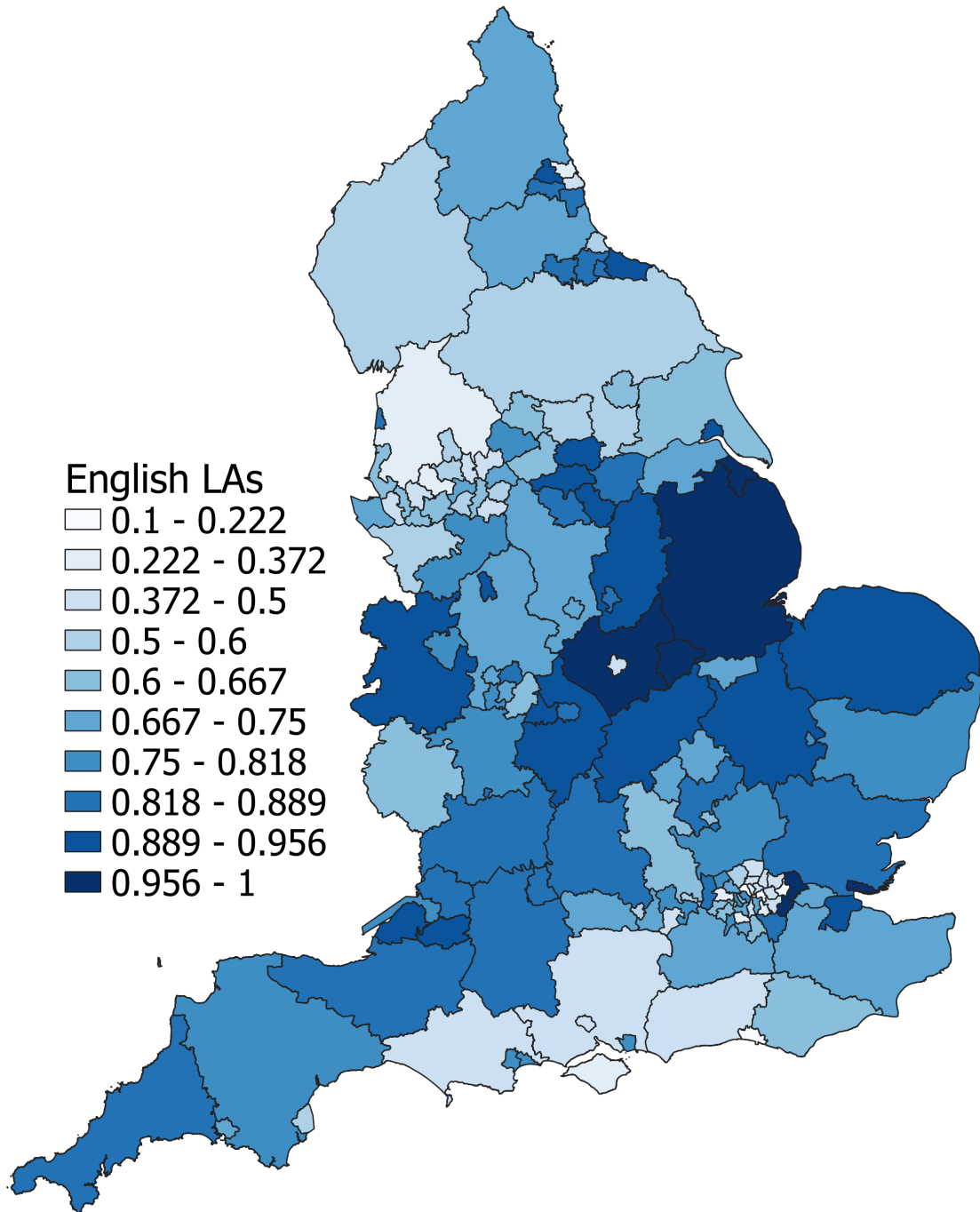


Source: Department for Education.

Note: '03' stands for the 2002/2003 academic year, '04' for 2003/2004 and so on. There is a break in the series between 2009/2010 and 2010/2011. Up to 2009/2010, KS4 performance tables are used. After 2010/2011, school spine is used. The school spine will include schools that open and cater only for younger pupils at first, and so are excluded from the KS4 performance tables. 'Foundation' schools are descendants of 'Grant-maintained' schools, but do not receive funding directly from central government. 'City Technology Colleges' are excluded from this figure.^a

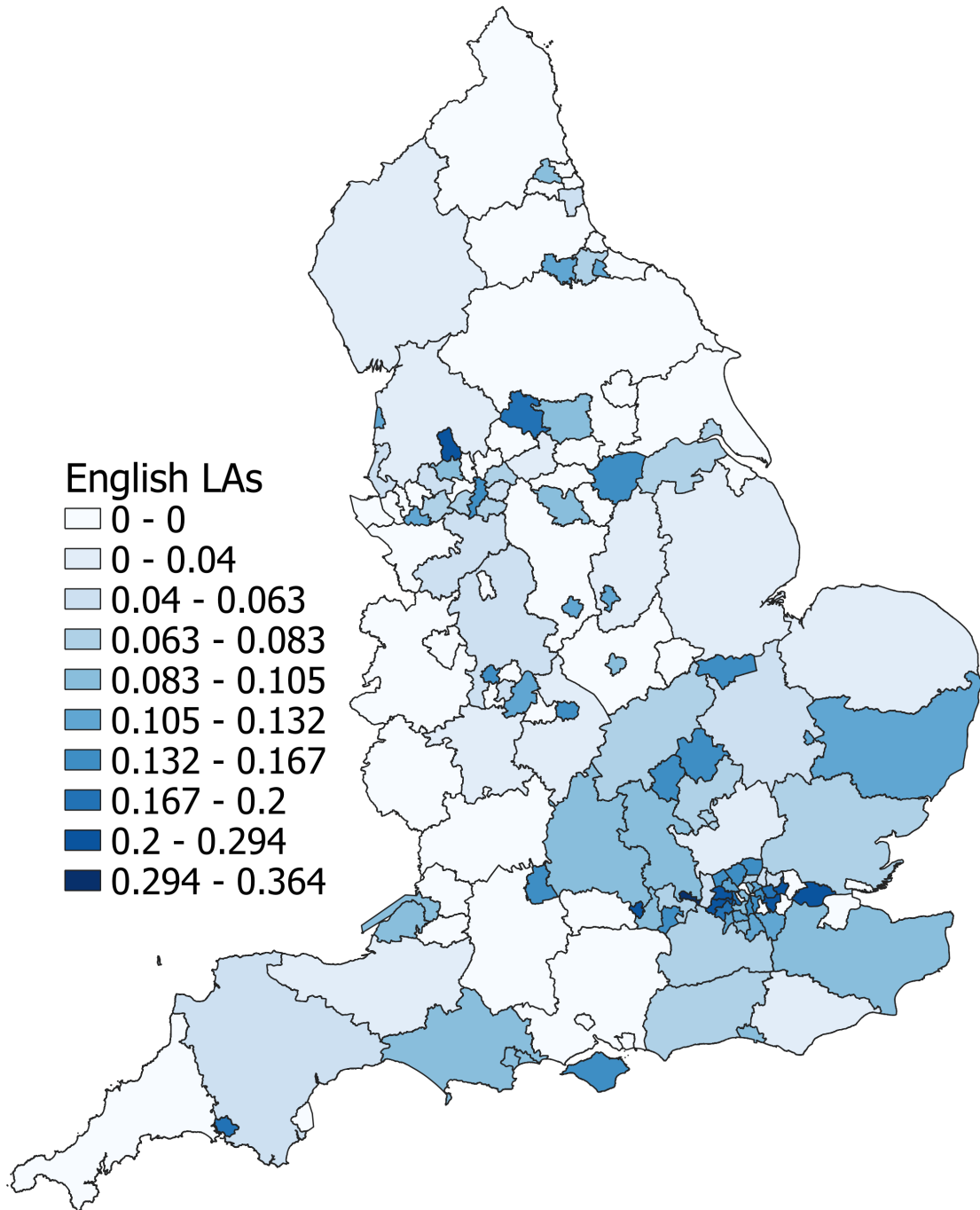
^aCity Technology Colleges (CTCs) were first announced in 1986, but there were only fifteen open by 1993, and the programme was effectively abandoned (West and Bailey (2013)). By 2010, all but three CTCs had converted to academies (West and Bailey (2013)). CTCs were the first example of a publicly funded school being funded directly by central government (West and Bailey (2013)).

Figure 2: The percentage of Academy schools across Local Authorities in England



Source: Department for Education.

Figure 3: The percentage of Free schools across Local Authorities in England



Source: Department for Education.

Table 1: Types of school and admissions authorities in England

School type	Admissions Authority	Percentage of secondary schools (2019)
Academy	Academy Trust	71.00
Free	Academy Trust or Governing Body	6.74
Foundation	Governing Body	5.14
Voluntary Aided	Governing Body	6.74
Voluntary Controlled	Local Authority	0.74
Community	Local Authority	9.64

Source: [Department for Education, 2021 \(p. 6.\)](#) and [Department for Education, 2014 \(p. 11.\)](#)

Note: Foundation schools are also state-funded schools with more autonomy. Voluntary Aided and Voluntary Controlled schools have degrees of more autonomy than community schools, and typically have a religious character. ‘Free’ includes studio schools (6) and university technical colleges (11). ‘Academy’ includes ‘converter’ and ‘sponsor-led’ academies. ‘Converter’ academies are schools that were previously community and that converted to academy status. ‘Sponsor-led’ academies were previously under-performing community schools that were required to convert to academy status, with sponsorship to contribute to new school buildings and/or capital investment. 67.09% of academy secondary schools (47.63% of all secondary schools in England) are ‘converter’ academies, and the remainder are ‘sponsor-led’ academies.

trajectory.

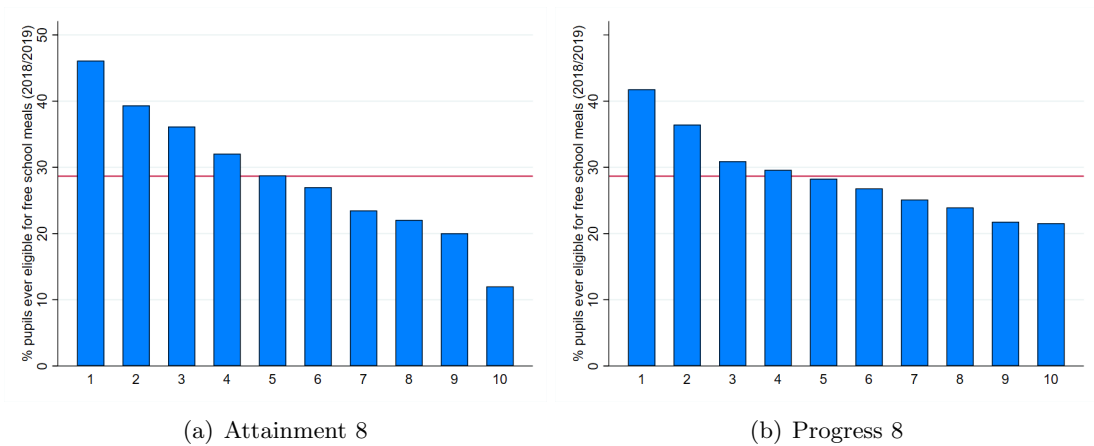
The importance of GCSE performance means that the educational effectiveness of the secondary school attended is important. While the *average* quality of English schools is considered high by international standards, challenges remain. In particular, numerous studies have documented an achievement gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

To what extent might this achievement gap be driven by access to schools? Around 24% of secondary school pupils in England (in our sample of schools, 2018/2019 school year) have ever been eligible for free school meals and free school meal eligibility is considered an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage. Figure 4 shows the percentage of pupils ever eligible for free school meals by school performance decile, according to data for two headline measures from the Department for Education. The fraction of ever free school eligible students is much higher in poorly performing schools, whether school performance is defined by attainment at the end of secondary school (Figure (a)) or the *progress* that pupils make during secondary school (Figure (b)).²⁰ The highest performing schools have the lowest fraction of enrolled students who have ever been eligible for the free school meals status.

While Figure 4 cannot be used to claim that lack of access is the driver of the unequal distribution of students from disadvantageous socio-economic background across schools (after all, Figure 4 might be the result of the choices that parents make, rather than their opportunities, or the positive correlation between pupil background and test scores), nor a driver of the observed performance gap, it does call for a careful examination of the role of admission arrangements in restricting access to high quality education. As [Coldron et al. \(2008\)](#) wrote in their landmark

²⁰The gradient is lower for the progress measure of school performance, which means that pupils are less sorted by income across schools for this measure. Attainment and progress are highly correlated, however (with a correlation coefficient of 0.7909 for all schools and 0.8314 for all non-selective schools). We will therefore use access to a ‘high performing’ school as shorthand for a school with high attainment, which is typically correlated with high progress.

Figure 4: The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (past six years) by school performance decile



Source: Authors’ calculation using school-level data from the Department for Education.

report on secondary school admissions: “A fairer and more effective admissions system will not solve the problems of lack of equal educational opportunity or social mobility but it can make a valuable contribution in combination with other policies.”

A rich academic literature has explored the different facets of school choice in England and how it may contribute to inequality of access.²¹ Our report is the first country-wide exploration of admissions arrangements for secondary schools in England since the widespread introduction of academies and free schools. The next section provides some institutional background on admission arrangements. The following sections document our findings.

4 School admissions in England: Institutional context

Since 1988, admission to state-funded secondary school in England uses a school choice procedure. Parents nominate their preferred schools in a rank-ordered list (ROL). They have access to widely-publicised formal quantitative data on school performance, and to their own informal networks of other parents’ information (see section C for more information). Given the parents’ and pupils’ preferences over school characteristics, they choose up to 6 schools on their ROL; in some areas of England, only 3 choices can be made.²²

These preferences are in many cases decisive. When possible, the child is assigned to their first choice. But if the school is over-subscribed (more students would like to attend it than the number of available seats) or if the school has the status of a selective school, this may not happen.

When a school is over-subscribed, criteria are used to determine in which order students are admitted, up to capacity. In other words, criteria can determine whether a student will be

²¹See e.g. Fitz et al. (2002), Allen and West (2009), Allen et al. (2012), Morris (2014).

²²Burgess et al. (2019) describe the nature of secondary school preferences submitted by all the parents in England in relation to school and family characteristics.

admitted to the school of their choice. The question of how school admissions arrangements are designed is therefore an important one.

In England, the School Admissions Code regulates admissions, with the aim of ensuring that “all school places for [mainstream state schools] are allocated and offered in an open and fair way” (Department for Education, 2021). The School Admissions Code has the force of law, and its provisions are mandatory requirements (paragraph 12).²³

The School Admissions Code establishes that all schools, except for voluntary and community schools, act as their own Admission Authority (Table 1). This means that they set their own admissions arrangements. The LA manages the whole process, i.e. assign students to schools based on their submitted ROL and schools’ admissions arrangements.

The School Admissions Code identifies two categories of students that must be given top priority in admissions: children with an Education Health Care Plan (referred to as ‘EHCP’ in the following) and ‘Looked After’ children. Beyond these, the School Admissions Code does not specify what criteria are allowed; it does not “give a definitive list of acceptable admissions arrangements. It is for admission authorities to decide which criteria would be most suitable to the school according to the local circumstances.” (p. 12). The School Admissions Code instead describes a long list of admission criteria that are *not* allowed. Schools are not allowed to select pupils based on their parents’ income or occupation (“they must not ... give priority to children according to the occupational, marital, financial, or educational status of parents applying.”), nor on the ability of the children (“take account of reports from previous schools about children’s past behaviour, attendance, attitude, or achievement” p. 12), except for the 163 explicitly selective grammar schools. The School Admissions Code also bans other criteria that might reasonably be interpreted as schools attempting to estimate the family circumstances or the child’s ability, such as listing the child or parents’ hobbies, conducting interviews, requesting photographs of the child, or requesting donations to the school.

4.1 Which schools are over-subscribed?

Apart from selective schools, the School Admissions Code requires all schools to admit all applicants if the school has enough places. Schools’ admissions arrangements are therefore only necessary when a school is over-subscribed.²⁴ In this subsection, we briefly describe some approximate and partial measures of over-subscription across England’s secondary schools. This allows us below to focus on schools in which the admissions arrangements are likely to be the most binding. Alternatively, there are areas of England where schools are not typically over-subscribed, so parents can choose the school they want, unconstrained by admissions arrangements.

²³The School Admissions Code was introduced following The School Standards and Framework Act 1998, and has been amended (typically strengthened) over time (in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2021). Studying changes across the 2003 and 2007 School Admissions Codes, Allen et al. (2012) show that regulating admissions arrangements in this way appears to affect the differentiation of school intakes. See Allen et al. (2012) for an excellent description of the introduction and revisions of the School Admissions Code until 2009.

²⁴Each school must publish its admissions arrangements in advance, however, for the eventuality that it is over-subscribed.

The proxy for over-subscription that we use is reported by LAs for schools. In turn, this appears to be largely based on a comparison of the number of students enrolled in a school with the school’s own assessment of its maximum intake. Clearly, the latter is manipulable by schools. Even this information about over-subscription was not available for all schools, and in some cases we had to infer over-subscription status rather than know with certainty. The problems that this lack of information present to parents is discussed in Appendix section C.

Bearing these caveats in mind, according to this measure 64% of schools in England were over-subscribed, leaving 36% under-subscribed (Appendix Table A1). Schools’ published admissions arrangements are therefore binding for most schools in England, although parents have unconstrained choice (not subject to admissions arrangements) for over one-third of schools. Figure 5 shows some key comparisons across school- and LA-types, while Appendix Table A1 shows more detailed statistics.

There is a general pattern that schools with higher performance are more likely to be over-subscribed. Appendix Table A1 shows that, for example, most of the schools that have an ‘Outstanding’ Ofsted rating are over-subscribed (95%). The same is true for only a limited number of those rated as ‘Inadequate’ (23%). Similarly, looking at KS4 quartile school performance, most of the schools with the highest attainment (94%) are over-subscribed, against only the 31% of those with the lowest attainment. Also, possibly related to performance, almost all the selective schools are over-subscribed (96%), compared to 63% of non-selective schools.

There is around a 15 percentage point difference in the percentage of faith and non-faith schools that are over-subscribed (76% compared to 60%) suggesting a stronger demand for education in faith schools. This could be due to religious education or associated characteristics of these schools.

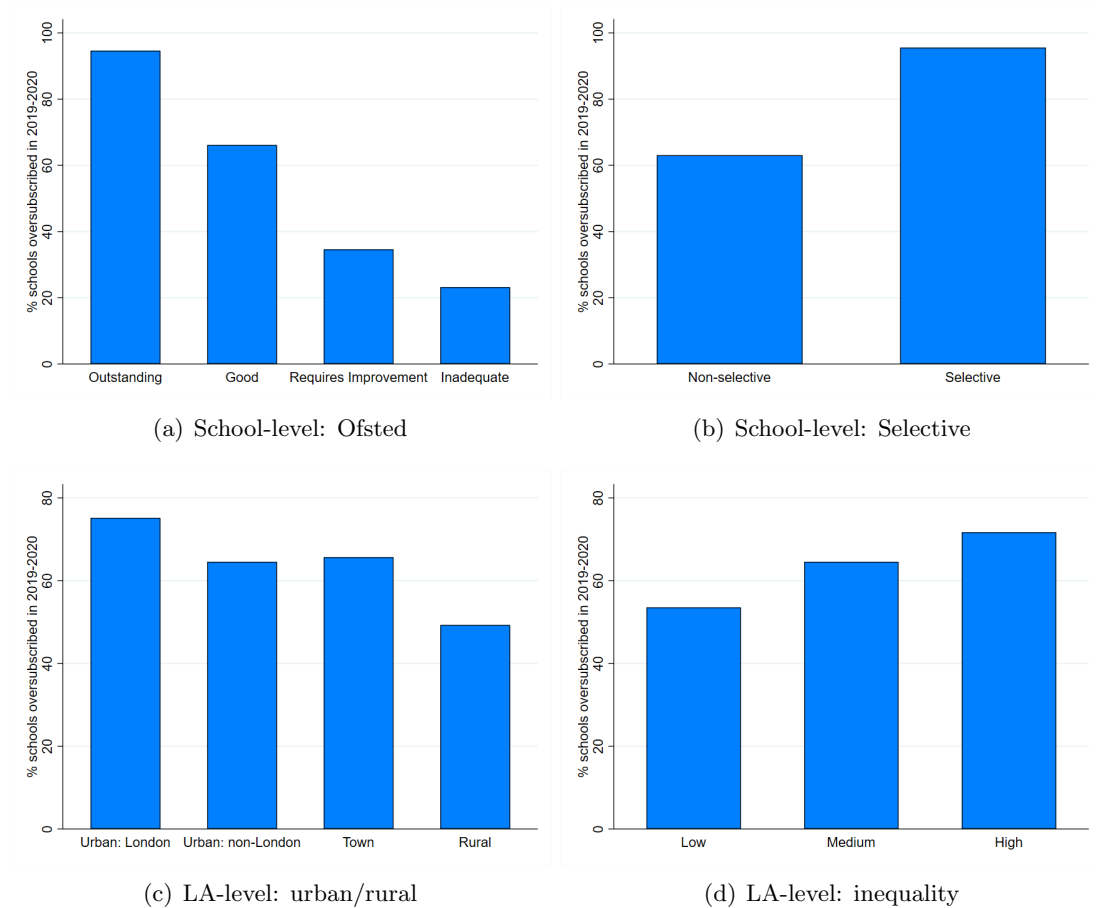
Parents across England have different experiences of over-subscription. Figure 6 shows that some LAs have less than 20% of schools over-subscribed, while in others almost all schools are over-subscribed. Schools’ admissions arrangements will shape school composition more dramatically in these LAs.

5 Insights from the analysis of admissions arrangements

This section describes the design of secondary school admissions arrangements in England. It shows that admissions authorities in England make varied choices, resulting in diverse admissions arrangements across the country and across types of school.

The main goal of admissions arrangements is to offer clear guidance about which applicants to admit when more students want to enrol than available seats. Admissions arrangements consist of criteria and tie-breaking rules. Criteria are characteristics that applicants need to have to benefit from a priority. For example, a ‘sibling’ criterion means that all applicants with a sibling in the school have priority over (will be admitted before) applicants with no sibling in the school. A priority can be absolute, meaning applicants that meet the criteria benefit from it with no restriction, or it can be conditional. Ways to implement a conditional priority

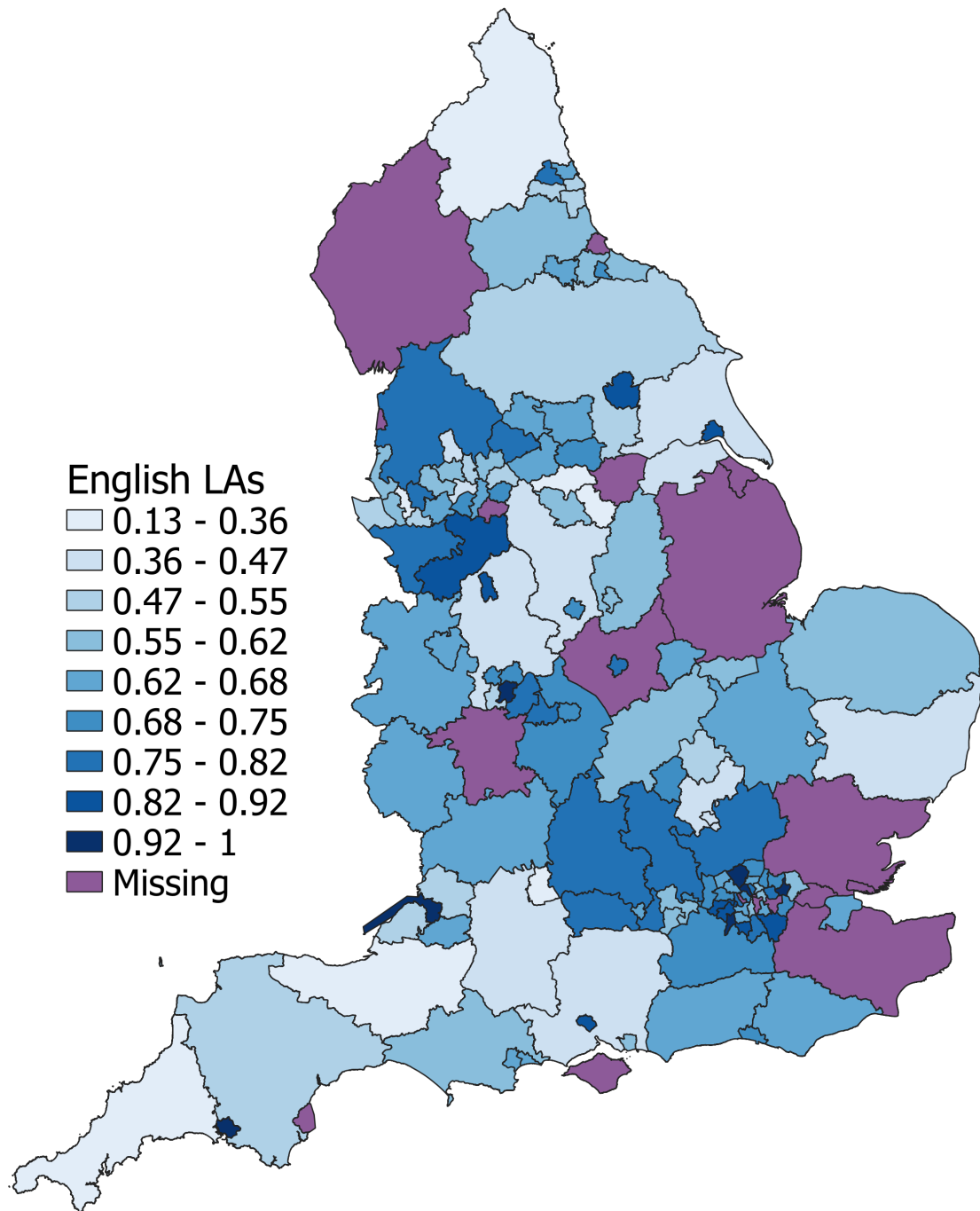
Figure 5: The percentage of over-subscribed schools by school and Local Authority type



Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). The sample for this figure is 2,567 schools where over-subscription in the previous academic year (entry in September 2019) was reported. Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Over-subscription information collected from Local Authority for the 2019-2020 school year.

Note: "Ofsted" refers to the most recent full Ofsted inspection before the relevant school choice date (31st October 2019) including inspections made before academy conversion (missing for 82 schools). "Inequality" refers to the variation in secondary school performance (attainment) within the LA in the 2018/2019 school year. LAs are divided into three equally sized groups, with the "low" inequality group having the lowest variation in secondary school performance (attainment).

Figure 6: The percentage of schools that are over-subscribed across Local Authorities in England



Note: The figure shows the distribution of the ratio of the number of over-subscribed schools by LAs divided by the total number of schools within the corresponding Local Authority. Blank Local Authorities are due to missing data.

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). The sample for this figure is 2,567 schools where over-subscription in the previous academic year (entry in September 2019) was reported. Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Over-subscription information collected from Local Authority for the 2019-2020 school year.

include quotas (applicants meeting a specific criterion have priority, up to, say, 10% of the seats) and banding (where applicants are drawn from across ability bands in certain proportions so that their chances of being admitted depends on how many other students of 'their type' have already been admitted).

Figure 7: Example admissions arrangements

Making an application for a school place

Oversubscription Criteria (for Sheffield community schools and Academies)

Special educational needs

Any child that has an Education Health Care Plan or a statement for SEN that names a specific school must be offered a place there.

The following oversubscription criteria outline the priorities for admission to Sheffield Community Foundation Secondary Schools and Academies, (for details of the oversubscription criteria for All Saints and Notre Dame, please see pages 41 to 52). These criteria have been consulted upon and approved by the Elected Members of the City Council.

1. Children in Care (previously In Care)

Pupils who are in care or previously in care (Children who were in care but ceased to be so because they were adopted or became subject to a child arrangement order or special guardianship order immediately following being In Care). Children in this category will be prioritised at their preferred school.

2. Catchment Area with Sibling

Children who live in the catchment area at the latest date for receiving applications and who will have a sibling attending the preferred school in September 2020 will be prioritised above other catchment applicants.

If the older sibling will be attending the Sixth Form they will only meet the Sibling criteria if they have previously attended the school, e.g. in any year between Years 7 and 11.

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3. Catchment Area
Children living in the catchment area for the preferred school that will not have a sibling attending, will be considered next.

The Authority does prioritise catchment area residents, however places are not guaranteed.

4. Brothers or sisters (siblings) of children refused a place at their Sheffield catchment school

In circumstances where parents have applied on time for but been refused a place at their catchment school for older siblings and allocated a place at a non-catchment school, any younger sibling will be afforded priority sibling status. This will only apply where allocated a preference ranked lower than the catchment school or allocated the nearest available school.

5. Brothers or sisters (siblings)

Children who will have an older brother or sister (sibling) at the preferred school on the date of admission, will be offered a place if any places remain after all above categories have been allocated.

A pupil is not afforded sibling status if the older sibling transfers to a school sixth form having not previously attended there. A sibling is defined as a child who permanently or usually lives at the same address as:-

- a brother and/or sister
- a stepbrother and/or stepsister (including half brothers/sisters)

and in both cases will attend the preferred school at the time of entry.

Where places are obtained under this category, parents and carers must note that, places cannot be guaranteed

in future years for younger children.

6. Designated feeder school

If your child attends a primary school which is officially designated as a feeder to a secondary school, but you live outside the catchment area, you will be offered a place after all above categories have been allocated.

Parents whose child falls under this category should note that if they attend a non-catchment primary school they have less chance of being allocated a place at the linked secondary school than those who live in the catchment area or have a brother or sister at the school.

For information about designated feeder schools please see pages 34 to 37 or contact Secondary Admissions on 273 5790.

7. Other applications

Any child who does not fit into one of the above categories will be considered next. Places will be allocated up to the published indicated admission number.

Tie breakers

For any admission category that is oversubscribed there are two stages of further consideration:

- Where exceptional medical, social or special educational needs are demonstrated/supported by professional evidence, an application **may** be prioritised by the Admissions Committee (AC) but only within the admission category. Please note this list of circumstances is not exhaustive and is provided simply as an example of reasons for which the AC **may** prioritise a case. It is your responsibility to provide supporting evidence to demonstrate your exceptional reasons. For example, if you or your child has medical reasons for applying for a school, you must provide evidence from a relevant medical professional with your application. If you apply on line or

over the telephone you can send any additional evidence by post

- if there are no exceptional circumstances, all applications will be prioritised first by the admission category and then by distance from the home address to a designated point at the school building. This is a straight-line measurement.

Twins and Multiple Births

In circumstances where there is one place remaining and the next eligible children are twins or multiple birth, the Local Authority may make an exception and allocate above the admission number.

The Authority cannot guarantee that other siblings of multiple birth families will automatically follow if one is offered a place through normal arrangements.

Children living equal distances from the School

In circumstances where two or more children live at addresses that are equidistant from the school the place will be allocated through the process of Random Allocation.

Please contact the Admission Team (Tel: 273 5790) if you have any queries about how you fit into the above categories.

Admissions Committee (AC)

Applications for oversubscribed schools will be considered against the oversubscription criteria described above.

Where parents provide additional evidence from a professional to support their application, it will be submitted to the Admissions Committee which may consider giving priority if it is satisfied that circumstances are exceptional. It should be noted that where medical needs are given as a reason for applying for a particular school, the medical

APPLY ONLINE - www.sheffield.gov.uk/pupliladmissions

Source: Booklet “A guide for parents. Transfer to Secondary School 2020/2021”, Sheffield, p8-9.

Throughout this section, ‘admissions arrangements’ refers to the criteria and tie-breaking rules that admission authorities apply if their school is over-subscribed. Figure 7 shows an example of a complete admissions arrangement, taken from the admissions booklet for the schools for which Sheffield LA is the admissions authority. ‘Criterion’ refers to an individual criterion within the admissions arrangements, for example ‘Special educational needs’, ‘Children in Care’, ‘Catchment Area with Sibling’, and so on in Figure 7. Each ‘criterion’ can include multiple elements, for example ‘Catchment Area with Sibling’ shown in Figure 7. ‘Tie-breaking rule’ refers to characteristics that are used to break ties within priority groups.²⁵ For example, if there were more siblings than places, the tie-breaking rule would be applied to all siblings to determine admission. Distance or random numbers are common tie-breaking rules, as described in section 5.1.2.

Considering Figure 7 in more detail, beyond the legally required categories of ‘EHCP’ and children in care, Sheffield essentially uses four criteria: whether the applicant lives in the catchment of the school, whether they have a sibling at that school, whether they are currently attending a primary feeder school, and whether fall within the category of ‘special needs’. Residence in the catchment area is the *main* criterion. Applicants living in the catchment area have priority above applicants not living in the catchment area. Among applicants from the catchment area, siblings have priority above applicants without siblings, and within each of these groups, ‘special needs’ applicants are prioritised. Among applicants from outside the catchment area, siblings have priority, next come applicants with no sibling currently attending a feeder school, and then all other applicants. Again, inside each admission category, ‘special needs’ are prioritised. For the tie-breaking rule within admission categories, Sheffield uses distance to school.²⁶

The ‘design’ of admissions arrangements includes the type of criteria that are applied, the order in which they are applied, and the tie-breaking rule applied, if any. We start by presenting the types of criteria used by schools in England. This includes a special focus on the role of geography in section 5.1.2, that we show is the dominant deciding factor in access to schools. We then show the number and combinations of criteria types, then focus on the ordering of criteria types. In the following sections, we will typically exclude the criteria required by the School Admissions Code (‘EHCP’ and ‘Looked After’) to focus on the discretionary choices that admissions authorities make when designing their admissions arrangements.

5.1 Criteria used by schools

Despite freedom to set admissions arrangements (within the School Admissions Code), most schools apply standard admissions criteria. ‘Traditional’ criteria used in England, such as giving priority to siblings and by some form of geography, are almost ubiquitous. There are examples of ‘innovative’ criteria being applied, however, such as priority to pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium and by random allocation. This section describes the overall patterns and variation in the selection of admissions criteria for secondary schools in England.

²⁵A priority group is the group of pupils that have the same priority according to the admissions arrangements, given their characteristics.

²⁶The booklet describes ‘special needs’ status as a tie-breaking rule, but because it does not allow to distinguish among applicants with ‘special needs’, it is rather a criterion.

Table 2: The classification of criteria-types

Criterion type	Description
Required	Criteria that are required by the School Admissions Code to be the first two criteria. These are ‘EHCP’ and ‘Looked After’ ¹
Sibling	Priority to the sibling of a current pupil, or in some cases the sibling of a pupil at a linked school.
Geographical	Priority to pupils living in a pre-defined catchment area, the school is the nearest school. ²
Special need	Priority to those with ‘special circumstances’, medical or social need, multiple births, firstborn children, and in one case ‘International’ pupils.
Child of Staff	Priority for children of staff, sometimes with a condition of length of employment at the school.
Feeder	Priority for those at a linked feeder school (or in year six of an all-through school). In some cases the definition of feeder school is broad, for example “General Religious Primary”.
Religious	Priority for pupils of a particular (specified) religion.
Test	Priority for pupils that pass a general ability or aptitude test.
Pupil Premium	Priority for pupils that are eligible and registered for the Pupil Premium.
Child of Armed Forces/ former student	Priority to pupils according to parents’ status. Only one school gives priority to children of alumni.

Notes: ¹ An Education, Health and Care Plan is a plan made by the Local Authority under Section 37 of the Children and Families Act 2014 specifying the special education, health and social care provision required for that child (see School Admissions Code, Footnote 14). A ‘looked after child’ is a child who is (a) in the care of a Local Authority, or (b) being provided with accommodation by a Local Authority in the exercise of their social services functions (see the definition in Section 22(1) of the Children Act 1989) at the time of making an application to a school.(see Admissions Code, Footnote 14).

² Distance (usually between home and school) is often included by schools as a criterion, despite acting as a tie-breaking rule in practice. In these cases, we treat count distance as a ‘Geographical’ criterion.

Appendix Table [A15](#) shows the full set of admissions criteria that are used by any secondary school in England. We have grouped these criteria into ‘types’ to make the description more manageable and digestible in this report. These types are summarised in Table 2.

Appendix Table [A2](#) shows the frequency of these criteria types in school admissions arrangements. In this table, a criteria type is recorded as present if it appears in any position in the admissions arrangements, independently or in combination with any other criteria type. For example, if the criterion ‘Sibling & Catchment Area’ was applied, then the priority types ‘Sibling’ and ‘Geography’ would be coded as present. Appendix Tables [A3](#) and [A4](#) show the variation in the presence of priority types across school-types, and Appendix Table [A5](#) shows the variation across LA-types. This section will focus on the overall use of criteria types in England, drawing out interesting differences across school- and LA-types where relevant.

5.1.1 ‘Sibling’ criterion type

Almost all schools apply a sibling criterion. Fewer than 5% of secondary schools have no priority for siblings. This might reflect the practicality of siblings attending the same school. The

decision for schools to omit this criterion is therefore interesting. [Fitz et al. \(2002\)](#) summarise the potential trade-off: “Although this rates highly as a family-friendly policy because only one set of travel arrangements has to be made, it can also serve to lock families in to particular schools, in some cases to their advantage and in others not.”

The sibling criterion is commonly used across all school-types, except for selective schools (used by around 50%) and to a lesser extent free schools (used by around 91%). Schools that choose to exclude the sibling criterion are more likely to be in London (where only 93% of schools use this criterion), in LAs that permit more than three school choices²⁷, and in LAs with high inequality in school outcomes (which is driven by selective LAs).²⁸

5.1.2 ‘Geography’ criterion type

The widespread use of geographical criteria is a notable feature of the English school choice system. Most (88%) of secondary schools use some form of geographical criteria, such as a catchment area or priority by straight-line or travel distance. In addition, ‘Geography’ usually features prominently in schools’ admissions arrangements. There is variation across school-types, with free schools and faith schools less likely to use geographical criteria. There is also some gradient across school ‘quality’, with schools in the highest Ofsted and attainment categories relatively less likely to use geographical criteria than schools in the lowest categories. There is also variation across LA-types, with rural LAs more likely to use geography than urban LAs, particularly those in London. This section explores the different types of geographical criteria used by schools, with and without the combination of geographical and/or random tie-breaking rules.

The most common forms of geographical criteria is a ‘catchment area’, where pupils living within a defined area have priority above pupils living outside that area. Admissions authorities also commonly include ‘distance’ (usually between home and school) as a criterion, although it is in practice a tie-breaking rule.²⁹ There are variants of these two main geographical factors. For example, some schools have two or more catchment areas, with either priority rankings across catchment areas, or quotas of pupils from each catchment area applied. Distance between home and school is most commonly measured as a straight line distance, but can be travel distance, and can also be measured from home to ‘nodal’ point(s) rather than the school.³⁰

The choice of catchment area versus distance may reflect historical choices made by LAs. For example, in Essex, the decision was taken to replace catchment with distance: “[Using distance is] easier to administer, easier to justify, more objective ... It’s also a recognition of the way

²⁷This difference is not driven by London.

²⁸In LAs with high inequality but no selective schools, the percentage of schools with a sibling criterion is 98%.

²⁹Distance tie-breaking rules are distinct from distance criteria, as they break ties within priority groups. For example, if a school had more siblings than places, then the distance tie-breaking rule would be used to decide which siblings were admitted.

³⁰These nodal points are normally around the school, but not universally. The choice of nodal point(s) could improve or worsen equality of access. For example, for the latter case: “the Bristol Free School then use another point, close to the centre of the NPA, from which to designate the other 80% of places at the school. This measurement point, where an Admissions Office has been located, is situated in an affluent area of the city, nearly two miles away from the school. This is where the majority of students will reside, an area socio-economically very different to that in which the school is found.” ([Morris \(2014\)](#)).

in which time has moved on, is a sense in which catchment areas were initially about the LEA allocating children to schools, and that's not the business we're in any more.” (Gorard et al. (2001))

Appendix Table A6 shows that ‘catchment areas’ are used as a criterion by more than half of schools (56%), and it is given high priority. 90% of these schools (where ‘catchment’ is present anywhere in the admissions arrangements) have ‘catchment area’ in the first three criteria. 90% of schools use either distance as a criterion and/or as a tie-breaking rule, confirming that access to over-subscribed schools in England is rationed by residence.³¹ This is the case for the sub-sample of over-subscribed schools in addition to the full sample of schools.

Appendix Tables A7 and A8 show the variation in the use of geographical criteria by school type. Free schools are the least likely to use catchment areas (around 36% overall, and around 58% in the first three positions conditional on including the catchment area criteria anywhere), followed by faith schools (around 46% overall) and selective schools (around 58%). The use of distance criteria and/or tie-breaking rule is more uniform across schools, but is slightly lower for selective, free and faith schools compared to other school types.

Figure 8 shows the variation in the adoption of catchment areas across England. One obvious geographical pattern is the lack of catchment areas in London. This is confirmed in Appendix Table A9, where only 16% of schools in London have a ‘catchment area’ criterion. Catchment areas are also infrequently used in England’s second-largest city (Birmingham) and the surrounding LAs (Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, and Wolverhampton) and the Greater Manchester area. There are rural LAs with few schools with catchment area criterion (for example Lincolnshire and County Durham) but these are rare. Appendix Table A9 confirms that schools in rural LAs are much more likely to use catchment areas.

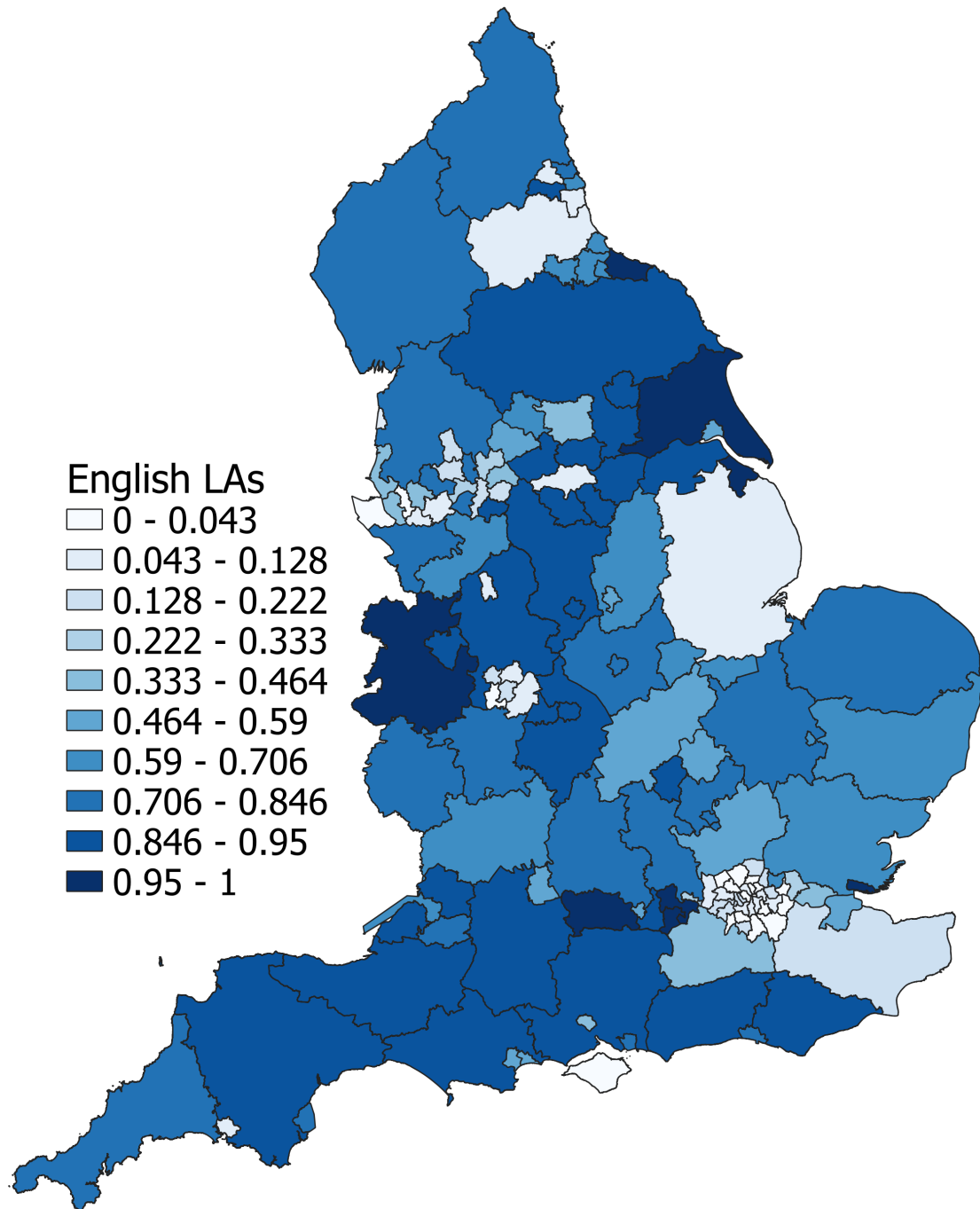
Although there are fewer formal, pre-defined, catchment areas in urban areas, geography still matters. Recall that in Appendix Table A6, 90% of schools used a distance criterion, tie-breaking rule or both. In these cases, catchment areas become ‘de facto’ as a radius around the school, shrinking as demand for the school (and therefore demand for properties around the school) grows. The percentage of schools that have a distance tie-breaking rule and/or criterion is similar across urban and rural areas (Appendix Table A9).

The final rows of Appendix Tables A6 to A9 show the median area per catchment area (in km squared) and the median distance cut-off (in km). We have chosen to present the median rather than the mean, as there are some very large catchment areas and cut-offs that would skew the mean. These simple aggregate summary statistics do not account for population density, school size, and other factors that might influence the size of the catchment area. There are some interesting comparisons, however.

First, the catchment area for selective schools is much larger than the catchment area for non-selective schools. This is because selective schools typically draw the highest ability pupils from a wide area, for example a whole city. Faith schools have slightly larger catchment areas than non-faith schools, while free schools have the smallest catchment area size across school types.

³¹Of course, some schools with use both the ‘catchment area’ criterion and distance as a tie-breaker.

Figure 8: The percentage of schools with a catchment area criterion across Local Authorities in England



Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.
Note: The percentage of schools is calculated excluding 163 selective schools.

Table 3: Local Authorities with the highest concentration of lottery as tie-breaking rule in admissions arrangements

Local Authority	Percentage of secondary schools
Trafford	15.79
Hammersmith and Fulham	18.18
Derby	18.75
Doncaster	20.00
Gateshead	25.00
Bristol, City of	27.27
Kensington and Chelsea	33.33
Brighton and Hove	80.00

Source: Authors’ dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

Second, higher performing schools (Outstanding and highest quartile of attainment) have larger median catchment areas than lower performing schools. Higher performing schools have smaller distance cut-offs than lower performing schools, however. This requires further investigation, but it could be that distance cut-offs are more relevant than pre-defined catchment areas for popular schools, as these schools might have to ration places *within* the catchment area. Third, pre-defined and de-facto catchment areas are both larger in more rural areas than more urban areas. This is intuitive, as population density is higher in urban areas, while school size does not increase proportionally in urban areas.

Over half of schools choose to specify a random tie-breaking rule following the distance tie-breaking rule, in case two pupils have exactly the same distance between home and school. Just over 3% of schools choose to have only a random tie-breaking rule. These schools are more likely to be free schools (11% of free schools have a lottery tie-breaking rule and no distance tie-breaking rule). These are concentrated in certain LAs (Table 3). Brighton and Hove is the high-profile case of a ‘lottery’ in school assignment, where only one religious school does not use a random tie-breaking rule. In other areas, a minority of schools (typically academies and free schools) have adopted the random tie-breaking rule as opposed to the distance tie-breaking rule.

As described in section 5.1, very few schools have a quota for pupils living outside the catchment area(s). There are only 23 schools that reserve places for pupils living outside the catchment area, conditional on having a catchment area criterion. These schools are mainly free schools and selective schools. The minority of schools with a catchment area criterion in London are relatively more likely to reserve places for pupils outside the catchment (around 8% of these schools, compared to around 1% of schools outside London). These few schools might provide useful examples for the balance between a ‘local’ and ‘open’ school. For example:

To provide fair and open access to the wider community, after places have been filled under the first five criteria, any remaining places will be offered to children living within the East Sussex County Council Electoral Divisions of Eastbourne, Polegate,

Willingdon and East Dean. Where the number of applicants in this category exceeds the number of places, offers will be determined by random allocation.” [Gilredge House \(free school\)](#)

Some schools reserve a high proportion of places for those outside the catchment area:

Up to 50% (rounded up to the nearest whole number) of remaining places will be allocated in this category to children whose home address (as defined by this policy) is situated in the Academy’s defined catchment area in accordance with the HGABR Catchment Area Map which is published alongside this policy on the Academy’s website, or available in hard copy format from the Academy’s main office.

All remaining places will be allocated in this category to children living outside the Academy’s defined catchment area as described above, together with any children who did not achieve a place in the category immediately above.” [Harris Girls’ Academy Bromley](#)

40% of the PAN will be allocated to applications within the THS catchment area, 60% of the PAN will be allocated to applications from the County of Dorset.” [Dorset Studio School](#)

A distance-based system can also be modified to admit pupils more representative of a wider area, for example:

Our Nodal System: University of Birmingham School, we aim to create a diverse learning community that helps to address the needs of a rapidly growing city by admitting people from across Birmingham. We don’t have a specific ‘catchment area’ as we operate a nodal system, taking pupils from four different locations across Birmingham.

A node is a central point, determined by co-ordinates on a map, and not a post-code area, from which measurements will begin. Our nodes are the main reception entrance to the School, and the entrance to the railway stations in Hall Green, the Jewellery Quarter and Small Heath.” [The University of Birmingham School \(free school\)](#)

Catchment areas and geographical criteria more generally have the potential to shape neighbourhoods and restrict access to popular schools for lower income households. Reflecting on the finding that catchment areas were commonly used by LAs in the early 2000s, [Fitz et al. \(2002\)](#) write that “Our findings point to some interesting paradoxes, most notably the fact that the most commonly used criterion in the allocation of students to places, catchment areas, is likely to create and sustain socio-economically segregated patterns of secondary schooling because these are linked in complex ways to residential segregation.” Our findings suggest that the link between residential location and school access has not diminished, but a few pioneering schools might provide some ways for geographical admissions arrangements to evolve.

5.1.3 ‘Feeder’ schools criterion type

Feeder schools also have a geographical element, as feeder schools are typically neighbouring primary schools, but may have a distinct purpose in facilitating links between schools for the primary to secondary transition. The use of feeder schools as an over-subscription criterion is quite common in England: 38% of schools use this as a criterion (Appendix Table A2). However, it is typically not at the top of the list, with only 25% of schools including it in the top 3 criteria (Appendix Table A10). In fact, overall, the modal position among the discretionary set of criteria is 3rd.³² There is variation across school-types, with feeder schools most common for faith schools and least common for selective schools, followed by community and free schools. LAs in London are less likely than LAs elsewhere to use the feeder school criterion.

Figure 9 shows some interesting differences in the use of the feeder criterion across school- and LA-types, while Appendix Table A11 brings together more detailed statistics.

Feeder school system is somewhat more frequently used by faith schools, 57% compared to 36% of non-faith schools. It seems very likely that the feeder primary schools share the same faith orientation, and the priority given to those pupils emphasises the value placed on continuing that distinctive education. Feeder schools are typically higher up the list of criteria for faith schools (excluding EHCP and Looked After, the mean position for feeder schools is 2.4 for faith schools and 3.3 for non-faith schools).

Unsurprisingly, very few selective schools use feeder schools as a criterion, 7% rather than 40% of non-selective schools. Free schools make less use of feeder schools as a criterion than do academies. This could be due to new schools being more likely to make a ‘fresh start’, or that academy schools in multi-academy trusts are likely to have feeder school arrangements.

The use of feeder schools as a criterion is strongly clustered in certain types of LA, particularly common in rural areas (50% of schools use it) and uncommon in London (only 17%). Figure 10 shows this variation in more detail. For example, the use of feeder schools is particularly high in Cornwall, Devon, Hampshire, and Northumberland. There is also a correlation of the use of the feeder criterion with educational inequality, being less frequent in high educational inequality areas. This might derive from their very low use by selective schools, which are obviously associated with high educational inequality.

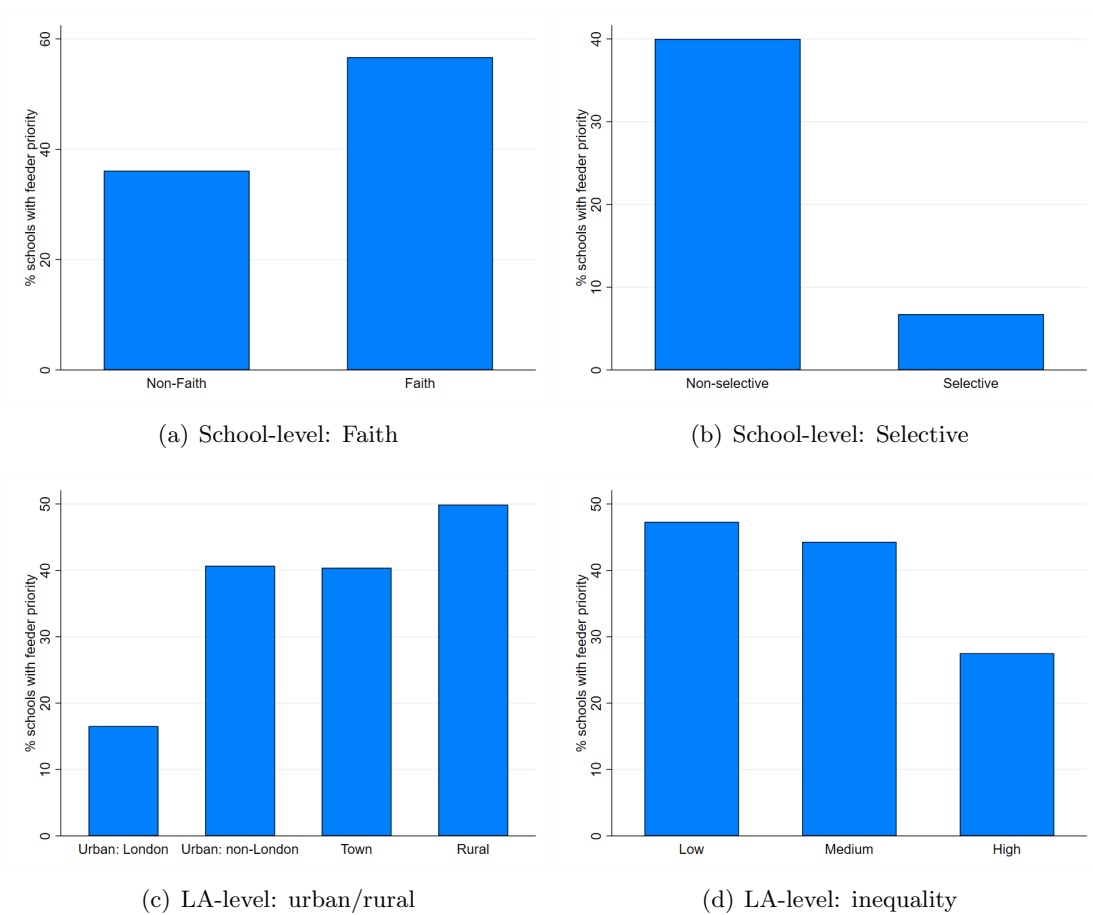
To a degree, using a feeder school system acts like a geographic criterion, encouraging a focus of the intake of pupils from specific areas near the school. Feeder schools and catchment areas are more commonly used together, however, suggesting that feeder schools have a distinct purpose aside from selecting geographically close pupils. These could be historic links between schools, or new links forged by multi-academy trusts.

For parents with a clear view of their desired secondary school, the use by that school of feeder schools as a high-level criterion incentivises earlier moves, favouring future-oriented parents.

Of course, secondary schools with an eye on their future exam performance could choose feeder schools strategically. For example, they could nominate only high performing schools as feeder

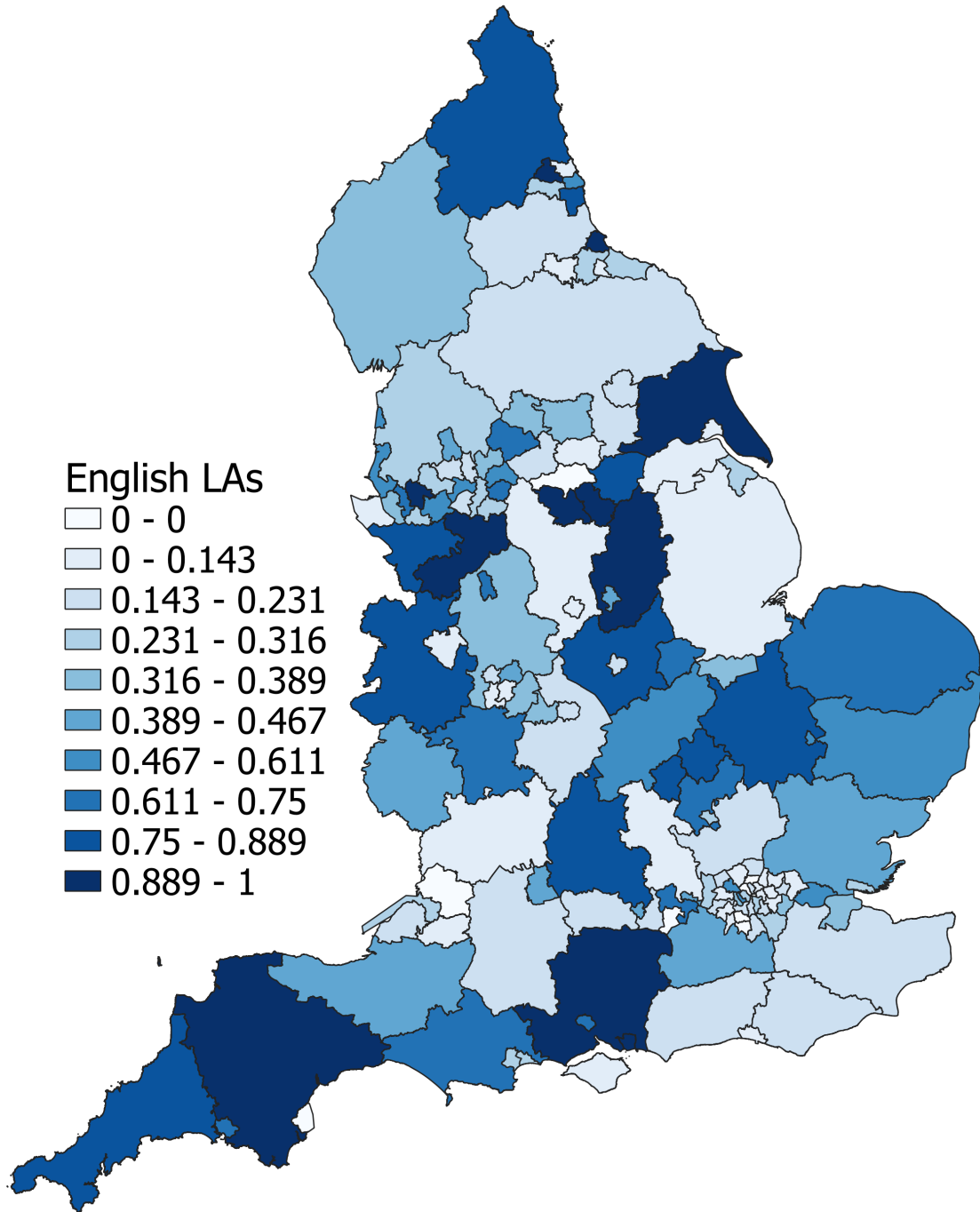
³²‘Discretionary’ means that ‘EHCP’ and ‘Looked After’ are excluded from this count.

Figure 9: The percentage of schools with Feeder school criterion, by school and Local Authority type



Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Note: "Inequality" refers to the variation in secondary school performance (attainment) within the LA in the 2018/2019 school year. LAs are divided into three equally sized groups, with the "low" inequality group having the lowest variation in secondary school performance (attainment).

Figure 10: The percentage of schools with a feeder school criterion across Local Authorities in England



Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.
Note: The percentage of schools is calculated excluding 163 selective schools.

schools to generate a high ability intake, or choose feeder schools from more affluent neighbourhoods again to encourage a favourable intake for the school. The School Admissions Code includes the statement that “the selection of a feeder school or schools as an over-subscription criterion must be transparent and made on reasonable grounds”, so this strategic cherry-picking is not allowed, although in practice it must be hard to check.

5.1.4 ‘Special need’ and ‘Pupil Premium’ criteria types

Almost half of schools give priority to pupils with some ‘special need’ (either social or medical) in addition to the two required admissions criteria (‘EHCP’ and ‘Looked After’). The inclusion of Pupil Premium is much less common, however, with only around 5% of schools including it anywhere in their admissions arrangements, despite incentives to do so from the national school funding system. The use of ‘special need’ is highest for community schools (over 70%) and lowest for selective schools (around 21%) and also relatively low for faith schools (35%) and free schools (40%). There is no noticeable gradient across Ofsted inspection. Free schools are more likely to use ‘Pupil Premium’ as a criterion type, however. Free schools therefore choose different criteria to give access to less advantaged pupils, with a higher use of ‘Pupil Premium’ but lower use of ‘special need’ than academy schools, for example.

The Pupil Premium was introduced in England in 2011 as additional funding to support education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils ([House of Commons Library, 2022](#)), a per pupil addition to school funds for each pupil from a poorer household. The amount was significant, starting at £600 per pupil in 2012, rising to £1300 per pupil in primary schools and £935 in secondary schools in 2014, and £1385 and £985 in 2022/23.

The revision of the 2010 Admissions Code in 2014 gave “all admission authorities in England the option to give priority to disadvantaged children in their admission arrangements” ([Department for Education, 2014](#)). This was the first time that schools were explicitly allowed to include eligibility for the Pupil Premium in their admissions arrangements. This remains the case, with the same options included in the 2021 Admissions Code ([Department for Education, 2021](#)).

This was potentially game-changing: a channel through which schools could offer places that would otherwise be completely unavailable to poorer pupils outside the favoured catchment areas. The reality has been very different. In our data for entry to the 2020-2021 school year, only 170 schools (5% of the total) use the Pupil Premium in any criteria ([Appendix Table A2](#)), although where present, the Pupil Premium criterion typically has high priority (89% have it in the top 3 criteria, [Appendix Table A10](#)). The nature of those few schools is fascinating. Three-quarters of these schools are selective. Among selective schools, 79% of them use the Pupil Premium criterion in their admissions arrangements. Among the non-selective schools, this equivalent percentage is only 1.4% (42 schools) ([Appendix Table A12](#)).

Both parts of this split seem remarkable. Taking the non-selective schools first, this shows that there has been essentially no interest from most admissions authorities in using Pupil Premium in their admissions arrangements.

There are a few possible reasons for this. First, it may be a collective action problem. Perhaps

an individual school introducing this criterion might have feared it would attract mostly Pupil Premium students, dramatically altering the pupil composition (and therefore, indirectly, league table position). If all schools introduced the Pupil Premium criterion together, there would be less dramatic changes in pupil composition. This reason is perhaps unlikely, however, as schools could have chosen to introduce the Pupil Premium criterion with a quota, for example up to 20 places reserved for pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium.

Second, by reserving places for pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium, the school may deter other applicants, which might negatively affect the school budget overall.³³ In addition, the real terms level of funding for the Pupil Premium has been declining in recent years, due to the cash freeze (Farquharson et al. (2022)). It is therefore likely that many schools believed that the additional Pupil Premium funding was not enough to outweigh other considerations. Alternatively, there could be some inertia for existing schools, or local opposition to innovative changes to admissions arrangements. Either way, the lack of interest in using Pupil Premium as a criterion is very striking.

Turning to the selective schools that do use Pupil Premium eligibility as a criterion, it is clear that this is used in conjunction with the entrance exam that is the basis of the selectivity. Pupil premium pupils that pass the test (normally up to a quota) would therefore have priority over other applicants that pass the test. Of these 128 schools, the ordering of the discretionary criteria is:

³³Parents could be deterred either directly if parents choose schools in part because of the peer group, or indirectly through the effect on headline performance measures in the league tables.

Table 4: The use of Pupil Premium in the admissions arrangements for selective schools

Frequency	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
20	PP & T	T						
10	PP & CA & T	T & CA	T					
8	T	PP & CA						
7	T	PP						
6	PP & CA & T	PP & T	T & CA & S	T & CA	T & S	T		
6	PP & CA & T	T & CA	PP & T	T				
5	PP & T	T & CA	T					
3	PP & T	T & SN	T & S					
20	PP & T	All other criteria						
13	PP & CA & T	All other criteria						
8	T	PP & T	All other criteria					
3	T	PP & CA	All other criteria					
3	T & S	PP & CA & T	All other criteria					
3	T & S		PP & T	All other criteria				
2	T & CA	T & S	T & COS	PP & CA & T	All other criteria			
2	R & PP & T & CA	All other criteria						
2	R & PP & T	All other criteria						
2	T			PP	All other criteria			
1	T		PP	All other criteria				
1	T				PP & Ca	All other criteria		
1	T				PP	All other criteria		
1	T & S	T & COS	T & Ca	PP & T	All other criteria			
1	R & T & S	R & T & CA & F	R & PP & T	All other criteria				

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. The sample of schools is 128 selective schools that use 'Pupil Premium' at any point in their admissions arrangements.

Note: 1st to 8th denote the position of the criteria in the schools' admissions arrangements, excluded the first two required criteria of 'EHCP' and 'Looked After'. 'PP' denotes 'Pupil Premium', 'CA' denotes 'Catchment Area', 'T' denotes 'Test', 'R' denotes religious, 'S' denotes sibling, 'COS' denotes Child of Staff and 'F' denotes Feeder. Blank cells denote any other criteria applied, or no criteria (if the list of criteria is less than 8). Where the frequency is of the admissions arrangements is two or less, the criteria have been grouped after the first occurrence of the Pupil Premium criterion.

Table 5: The use of Pupil Premium in the admissions arrangements for free schools

Frequency	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
6	PP							
5		PP						
2	PP & CA							
1	PP & CA	PP						
1	PP & CA			PP				
1		PP & CA						
1		R & PP				PP		
1				PP				
1				PP & CA				

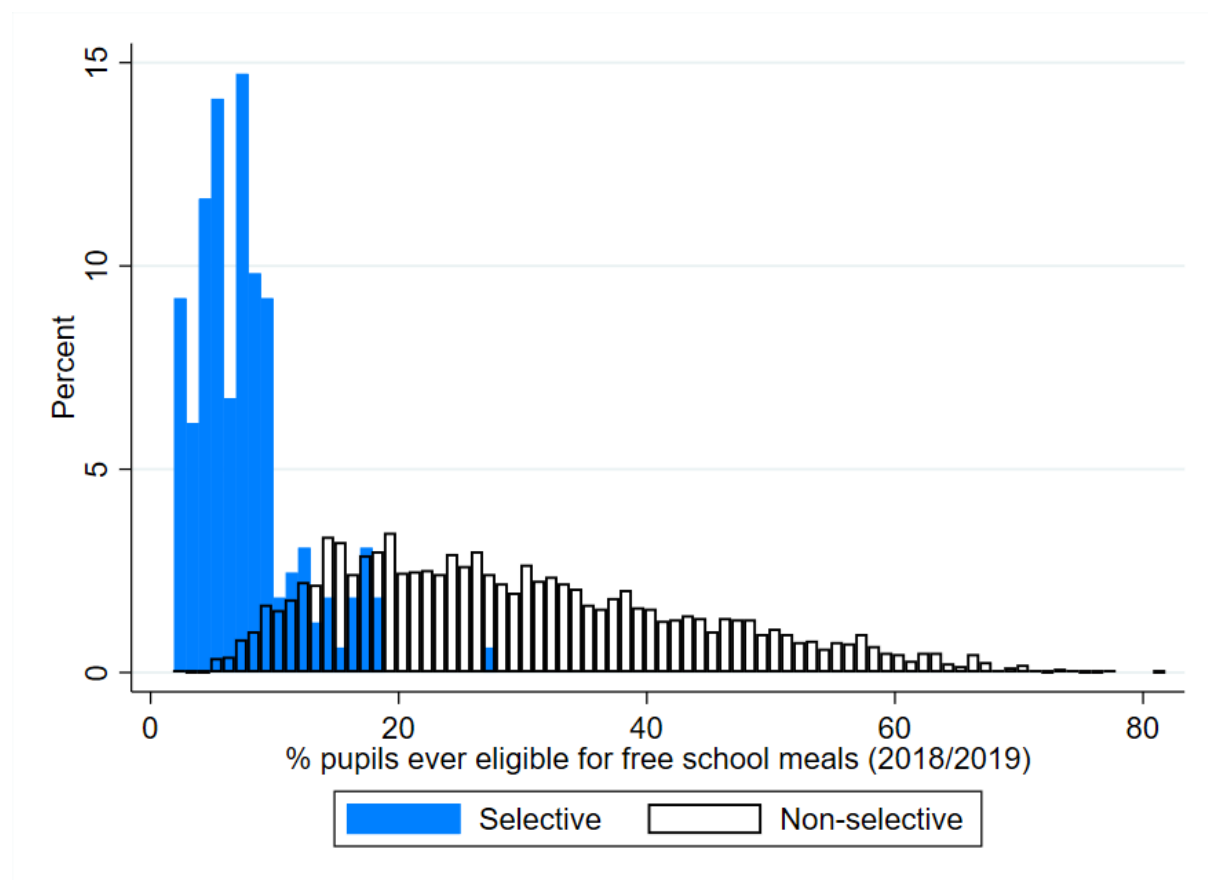
Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. The sample of schools is 19 free schools that use 'Pupil Premium' at any point in their admissions arrangements. Note: 1st to 8th denote the position of the criterion in the schools' admissions arrangements, excluded the first two required criteria of 'EHCP' and 'Looked After'. 'PP' denotes 'Pupil Premium', 'CA' denotes 'Catchment Area' and 'R' denotes religious. Blank cells denote any other criterion applied, or no criteria (if the list of criteria is less than 8).

In all cases, the Pupil Premium criterion follows the test score criterion or is combined with passing the test score threshold. It is very unlikely therefore that the Pupil Premium criterion in these schools has much 'bite'. Indeed, Figure 11 shows that the distribution of pupil composition for selective is strikingly different to the distribution for non-selective schools. Despite using the Pupil Premium criterion, selective schools have much fewer pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium. Figure 12 focuses on the school composition of selective schools, comparing selective schools with and without the Pupil Premium criterion. This figure shows that the distribution of pupil composition is very similar between these two groups of selective schools. Again, the Pupil Premium criterion has not noticeably increased the percentage of pupils with the Pupil Premium. In fact, the average percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is slightly *lower* in selective schools with the Pupil Premium criterion than without.³⁴

Appendix Table A12 shows that free schools are the other school-type with noticeably higher use of the Pupil Premium criterion. In contrast to selective schools, the use of Pupil Premium by free schools is more likely to meaningfully affect pupil access. For free schools, Pupil Premium is less likely to follow another criterion, and is less likely to be combined with another criterion. The most common combinations of criteria for free schools are shown in Table 5. Although the percentage of free schools with the Pupil Premium criterion is lower than the percentage of selective schools, the overall design of the admissions arrangements is more likely to prioritise access for these pupils.

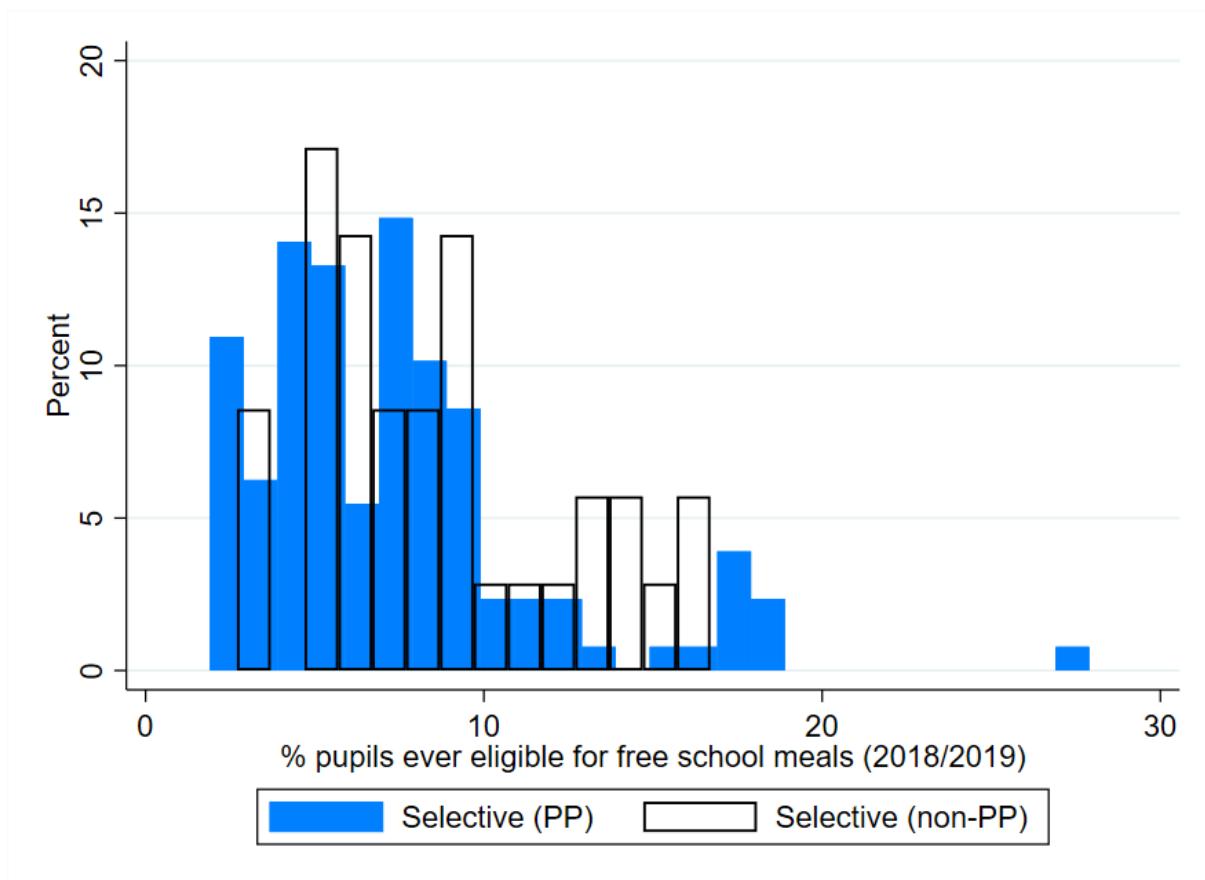
³⁴This analysis does not take account of differences in the local composition of the area surrounding the schools, however.

Figure 11: The distribution of the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (past six years) by selective and non-selective schools



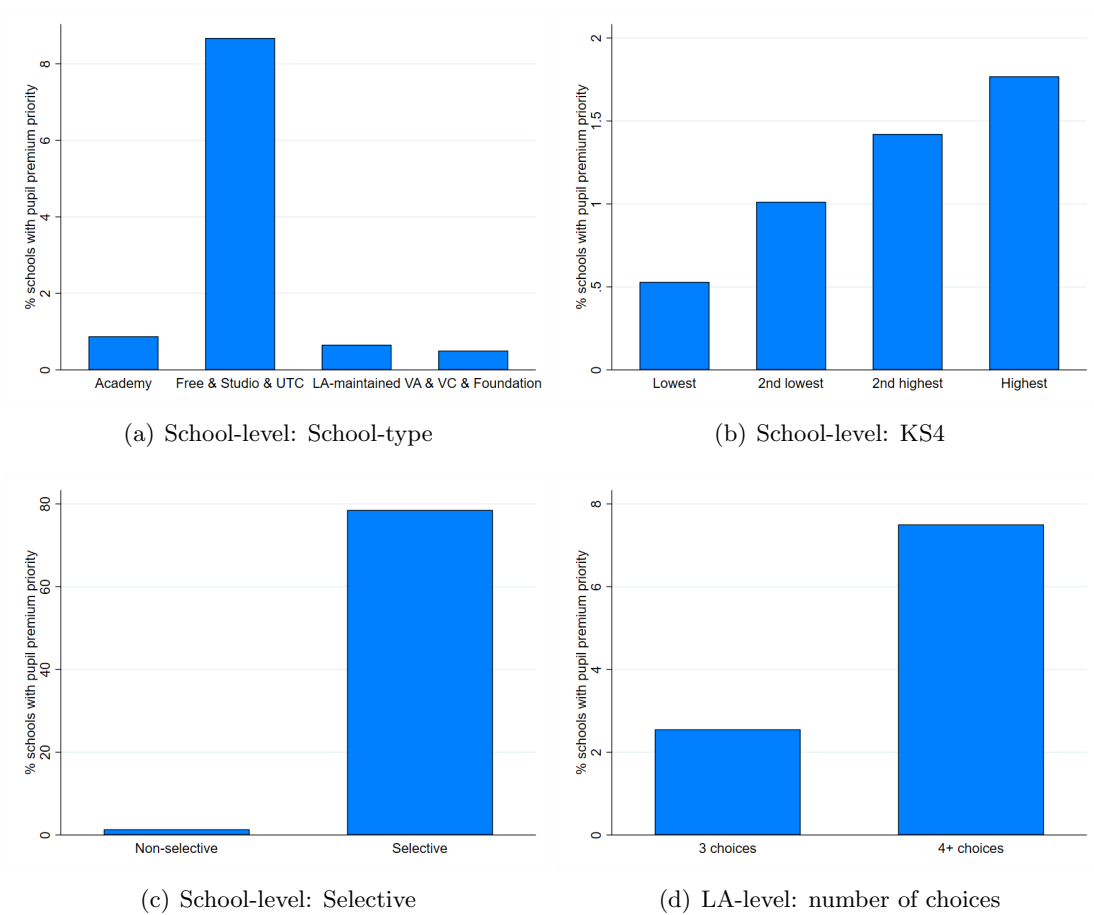
Source: Authors' calculation using school-level data from the Department for Education.

Figure 12: The distribution of the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (past six years) by selective and non-selective schools



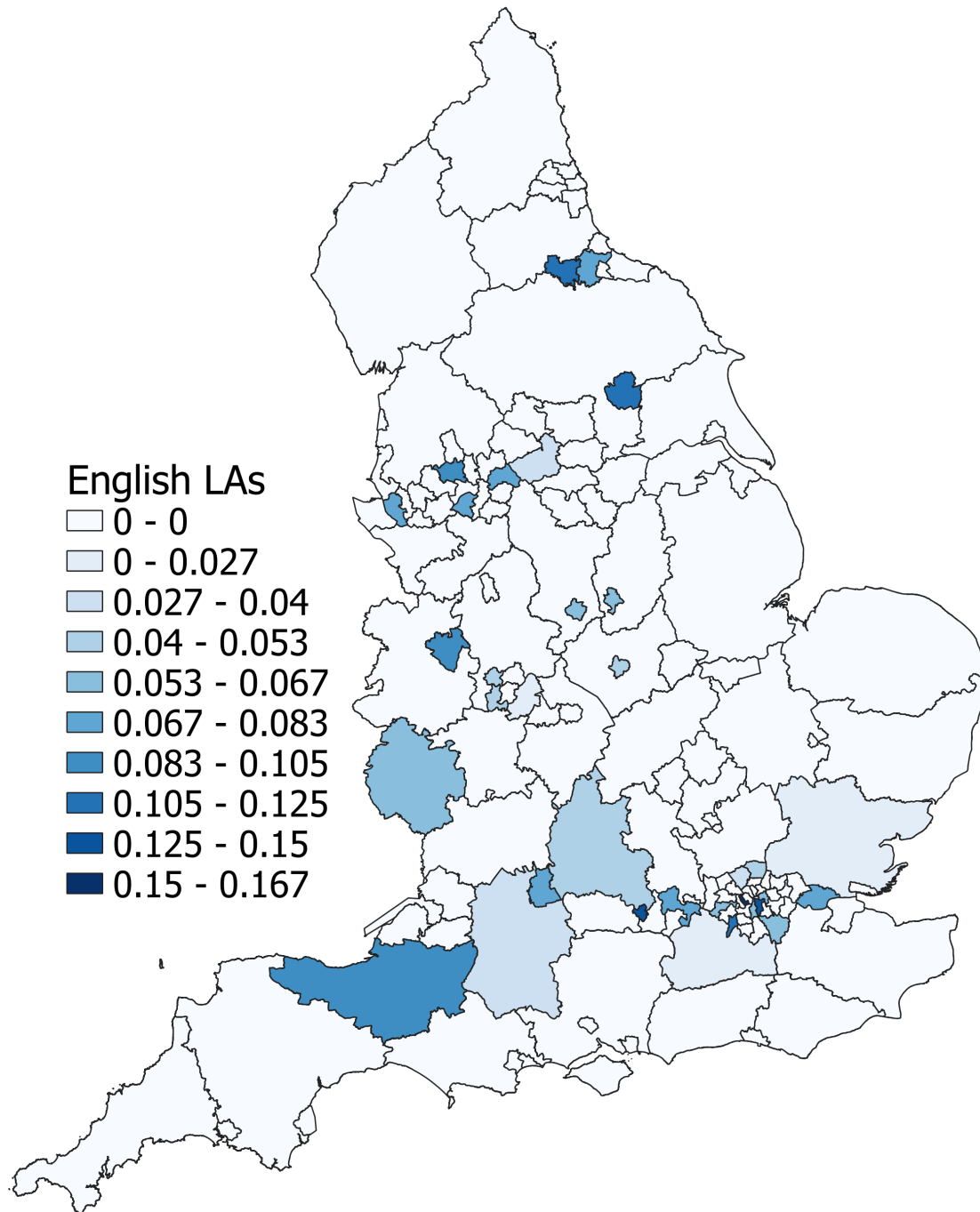
Source: Authors' calculation using school-level data from the Department for Education. Pupil Premium priority derived from Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

Figure 13: The percentage of schools with Pupil Premium criterion, by school and Local Authority type



Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

Figure 14: The percentage of schools with a Pupil Premium criterion across Local Authorities in England



Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.
Note: The percentage of schools is calculated excluding 163 selective schools.

5.1.5 ‘Child of Staff’ criterion type

More than 40% of schools prioritise children of staff. Only a minority (15 schools) have a quota for the number of children of staff members that are prioritised. This criterion is more common in London, where around 58% of schools use it. ‘Desirable’ schools (over-subscribed, higher attainment, and higher Ofsted schools) are relatively more likely to have the ‘Child of Staff’ criterion. With this in mind, this criterion could have multiple purposes. First, it could be a useful staff recruitment and/or retention strategy device.³⁵ Particularly for over-subscribed and high performing schools, this could be a valuable non-pecuniary benefit to staff working at the school. If so, this would be most likely to widen inequalities in staff retention across schools. Second, children of staff members are likely to value education and therefore be an ‘asset’ to the school’s league table position (see the commentary in [Allen and Burgess, 2011](#)).

5.1.6 ‘Religious’ criterion type

Before the 1870 Education Act, all schools in England were entirely provided and maintained by religious organisations ([Walford \(2008\)](#)). After 1870, government schools were established to ensure all to school for all pupils (up to the age of 12). Since the 1944 Education Act, there has been a system of dual provision by LA ‘community’ schools and faith ‘voluntary’ schools, largely arranged into primary and secondary phases. Some of these faith schools are ‘voluntary controlled’ (controlled by the LA similarly to ‘community’ schools) but the majority are ‘voluntary aided’, that have lower state support and more independence, for example over admissions arrangements ([Allen and West \(2009\)](#)). Today, around 15% of state secondary schools have some ‘religious’ criterion (Appendix Table [A2](#)).

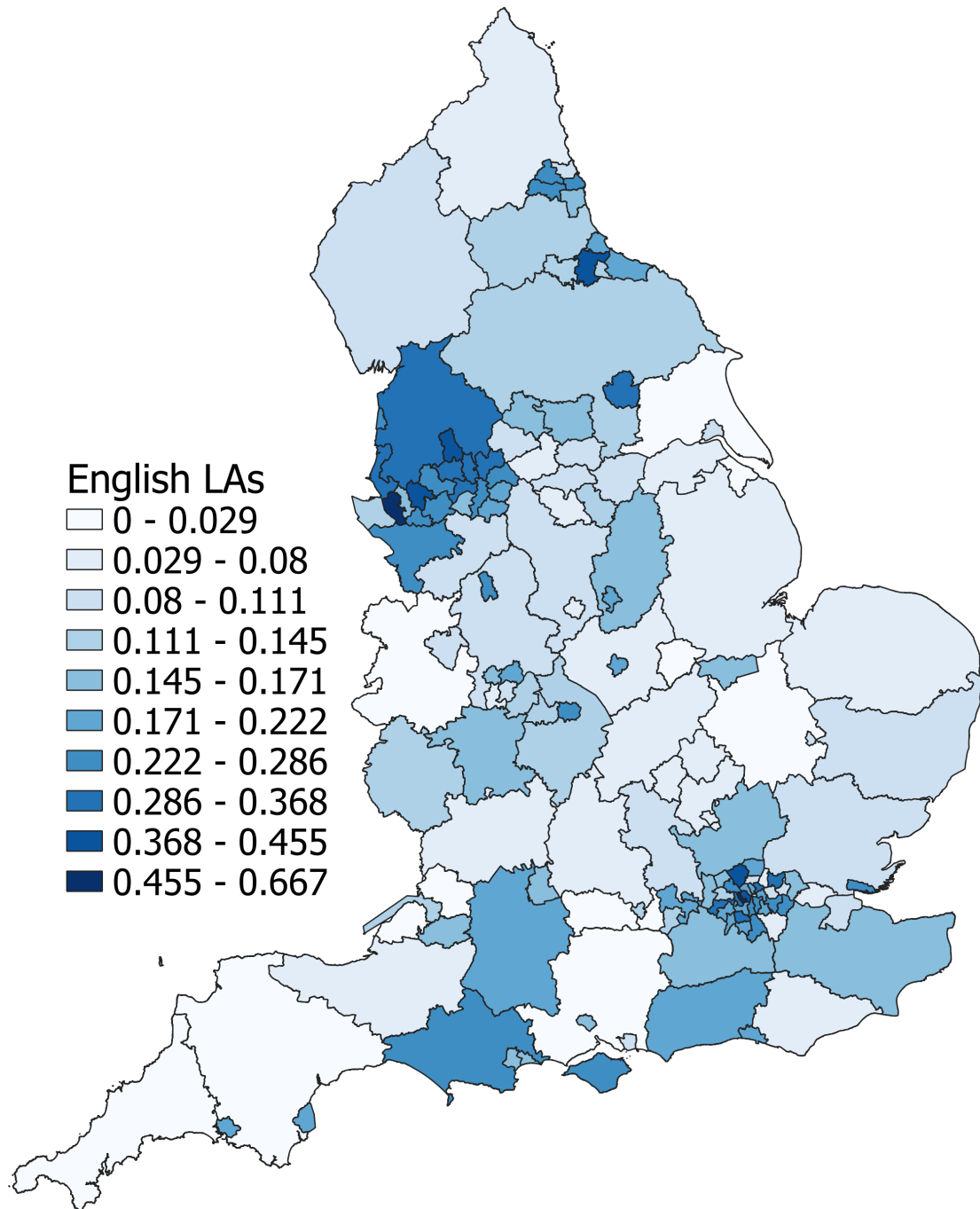
The use of religious criteria is geographically concentrated, with higher prevalence in London and the North-West of England (Figure [15](#)) predominantly in urban areas (Appendix Table [A5](#)). The location of faith schools is related to their origin, and uncorrelated to religious observance across areas today, as the “physical location of these schools was essentially fixed by the 1960s” ([Allen and Vignoles \(2016\)](#)). For example, the “internal mission of the Catholic schooling in England was primarily to the industrial working class who were located in Inner London ([Grace \(2002\)](#))” ([Allen and West \(2009\)](#)).

Unsurprisingly, the use of religious criteria is concentrated in faith schools (Appendix Table [A3](#)). These schools are disproportionately in the best Ofsted and attainment category (Appendix Table [A4](#)). These means that, largely due to historical factors, parents in some areas of England have a potential ‘outside option’ of a (typically high performing) faith school, where access is less constrained by geography but more by religious observance.

Previous research studying the admissions arrangements of religious schools has noted the potential for covert selection of pupils, such as interviews (notionally to assess religious commitment, but broadened in scope) ([West et al. \(2004\)](#)), school-administered banding, aptitude tests and primary school references ([Allen and West \(2009\)](#)). These practices are now banned by the

³⁵Discussing the ‘Child of Staff’ criterion, [Allen et al. \(2012\)](#) note that in some versions of the School Admissions Code, this criterion was only allowed when there was a skills shortage.

Figure 15: The percentage of schools with a Religious criterion across Local Authorities in England



Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.
Note: The percentage of schools is calculated excluding 163 selective schools.

School Admissions Code, although banding that draws disproportionately from higher ability bands is permitted if the practice was in place in the 1997/1998 school year.

5.1.7 ‘Test’ criterion type

All selective schools use ‘Test’ as a criterion, but selective schools are just under half (46%) of the 351 schools that have some form of ‘Test’ criterion. What explains these apparently selective ‘non-selective’ schools? For over three-quarters of these ‘non-selective’ schools, the ‘Test’ is a form of specific aptitude test, for example to demonstrate an aptitude in music, languages, performing arts or sport. This is permitted by the School Admissions Code, for up to 10% of the pupil intake (across all specialisms).³⁶ A school’s choice of specialism may be strategic to affect the pupil composition of the school, as ‘aptitude’ in music or languages is likely to be more socially graded than ‘aptitude’ in football (or sports more generally). [Coldron et al. \(2008\)](#) state that these aptitude criteria might be universally socially graded, however: “Nevertheless there are strong arguments to suggest that selection by aptitude is likely to be socially selective by default. A high relative attainment in any of the subjects (even sport) will involve expense of resources of time and money for travelling, equipment and training.”

Schools with aptitude quotas almost all have a sibling criterion (97%). Priority to siblings is not conditional on the criterion through which the older sibling gained a place, for example through the aptitude quota vs geographical criterion. This therefore gives parents an incentive to divert effort to encouraging ‘aptitude’ in the relevant subject to their oldest child, as this will effectively gain admission for all their children.

The remaining quarter of selective ‘non-selective’ schools (43 schools) appear to have an aptitude test for general academic ability, that is not permitted by the School Admissions Code unless the school is designated as ‘partially selective’, and the quota for academic selection does ‘not exceed the lowest proportion of selection that has been used since the 1997/98 school year’ (School Admissions Code, 2021).

There is a strong gradient in the use of ‘Test’ across school-types. Higher performing schools (both in attainment and Ofsted rating) are more likely to use some form of ‘Test’ criterion. This again leads to whether higher performing schools choose this criterion, or whether this criterion contributes to creating higher performing schools.

‘Test’ is also less common in rural areas and areas limited to three choices. Unsurprisingly, ‘Test’ is correlated with high inequality in school-level attainment. This is mostly driven by LAs containing fully selective schools.³⁷

³⁶These specialisms are a legacy of the ‘specialist schools’ programme. From a low-level in 1997, encouraged by additional funding under a Labour government, by 2010, “nearly 90% of secondary schools had achieved specialist status” ([West and Bailey \(2013\)](#)). In 2010, under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, specific funding for the specialist schools programme ended ([Gove, 2010](#)). Since then, schools have had the freedom to designate or re-designate as specialist schools. See [A history of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, 2007](#) for more information on the development and progression of this programme.

³⁷The percentage excluding LAs with at least one fully selective school is 8.4%.

5.1.8 Quotas

Quotas are a way to give priority to some student groups up to a point (conditional priority). This could enable schools to foster a balance between student groups.

Quotas based on aptitude and ability are used by more than 12% of schools (Appendix Table A2). The most common use of quotas is selecting up to 10% of pupils according to an ‘aptitude’. Quotas for pupil aptitude and ability are present in 4.7% and 6.7% of all schools, respectively. Excluding selective schools and focusing only on the aptitude quota, the percentage is 4.8%. Compared to previous research, the use of aptitude quotas in England is therefore stabilising after a period of steady growth, from an estimated 1.3% in 2000, 3% in 2001 to 4% in 2006 to 5% in 2008 (West et al. (2004), Coldron et al. (2008), West et al. (2011), cited in Allen et al. (2012)).

Quotas for other criteria are used less commonly. Around 1% of all schools have a quota for pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium (combined with some factor such as test score or geography), geography, and religion. In addition, around 1% of all schools have religious and geographical quotas that are designed to widen admissions, such as reserving places for pupils outside the catchment area, or for non-religious pupils in faith schools.³⁸

Quotas are more common in over-subscribed schools (16% of over-subscribed schools compared 5% of under-subscribed schools). Some types of quota are particularly over-represented in over-subscribed schools. An ‘aptitude’ quota is used 4.5 times more frequently for over-subscribed relative to under-subscribed schools, for example.³⁹ Quotas according to general ability tests are also around 4.5 times more common in over-subscribed relative to under-subscribed schools.

Section 5.2 showed that over-subscribed schools have slightly more criteria types in their admissions arrangements, on average, than under-subscribed schools. We now also know that over-subscribed schools are more likely to use academic and/or aptitude quotas to admit pupils. This raises whether popular schools introduce quotas, or schools become popular through the use of quotas. Parents might be directly attracted by a special status associated with the quota, or indirectly by the favourable pupil composition or league table position that the quota brings.⁴⁰

Aptitude quotas are associated with specialist schools. Earlier research found that where specialist schools are their own admissions authority, these schools “had the lowest proportions of children eligible for FSM compared with other schools in their respective LEAs” (Fitz et al. (2002)).

³⁸There is variation in the type of quota applied across schools. Intuitively, faith schools are more likely to have religious quota (6% for own and/or other faiths, 8.6% reserving some ‘open’ or ‘community’ places). 24% of selective schools have a quota for FSM, combined with other factors (such as test score). Free schools have variable use of quotas - 6% for aptitude, 3.2% for FSM, unconditional, and 14% for any geographical quota. Quotas are most common in London, where 25% of schools have any type of quota, and 9% of schools have an aptitude quota, for example.

³⁹6.5% of over-subscribed non-selective schools have an ‘aptitude’ quota, compared to 1.4% of under-subscribed non-selective schools.

⁴⁰Unfortunately, our cross-sectional data for school admissions arrangements does not allow for a dynamic consideration of school popularity and the use of quotas.

5.1.9 Banding

Banding is another way to foster a balance between student (ability) groups. Usually, schools have an equal number of places for pupils in each ability group, or band. Each's pupil's ability group can be determined by a test run by a school or LA. Where there are more pupils that would like to attend the school within a band, over-subscription criteria are applied within the band.

The use of banding is limited across England as a whole, but geographically concentrated, used by 14% of schools in London (Figure 16 and Table A5). The presence of banding in London has historical roots, described in West (2005), starting from the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). The ILEA was responsible for education in Inner London from 1965 to 1990 (abolished as part of the 1988 Education Reform Act) and introduced banding in 1972. The precise method of banding was reformed over time, from head teacher recommendation to a verbal reasoning test, but the aim of the ILEA remained the same: "Banding was used to try to ensure that comprehensive schools had an intake that was academically balanced" (West (2005)). This area-wide system appears to have been unique in England (West and Nuttall (1992) cited in West (2005)).

After the abolition of the ILEA, only three of twelve Inner London LAs retained banding until 2004 (Camden, Lewisham and Tower Hamlets). Most other LAs in Inner London removed banding between 1990 and 1994, but Hackney retained it until 2004 (West (2005)). Gorard et al. (2002) state that this system of banding at the LA-level reduces segregation across schools, "running at half what would be expected *ceteris paribus*".⁴¹ In 2001, banding was used by about 3% of schools across England (West and Hind (2006)). Virtually all of these schools were in Inner London, however, accounting for around 60% of schools in the area (West and Hind (2006)). Most of these schools used bands at the school-level rather than LA-level, and some implemented bands that were skewed towards higher ability pupils. Both of these practices result in intakes that are less representative of the local area.

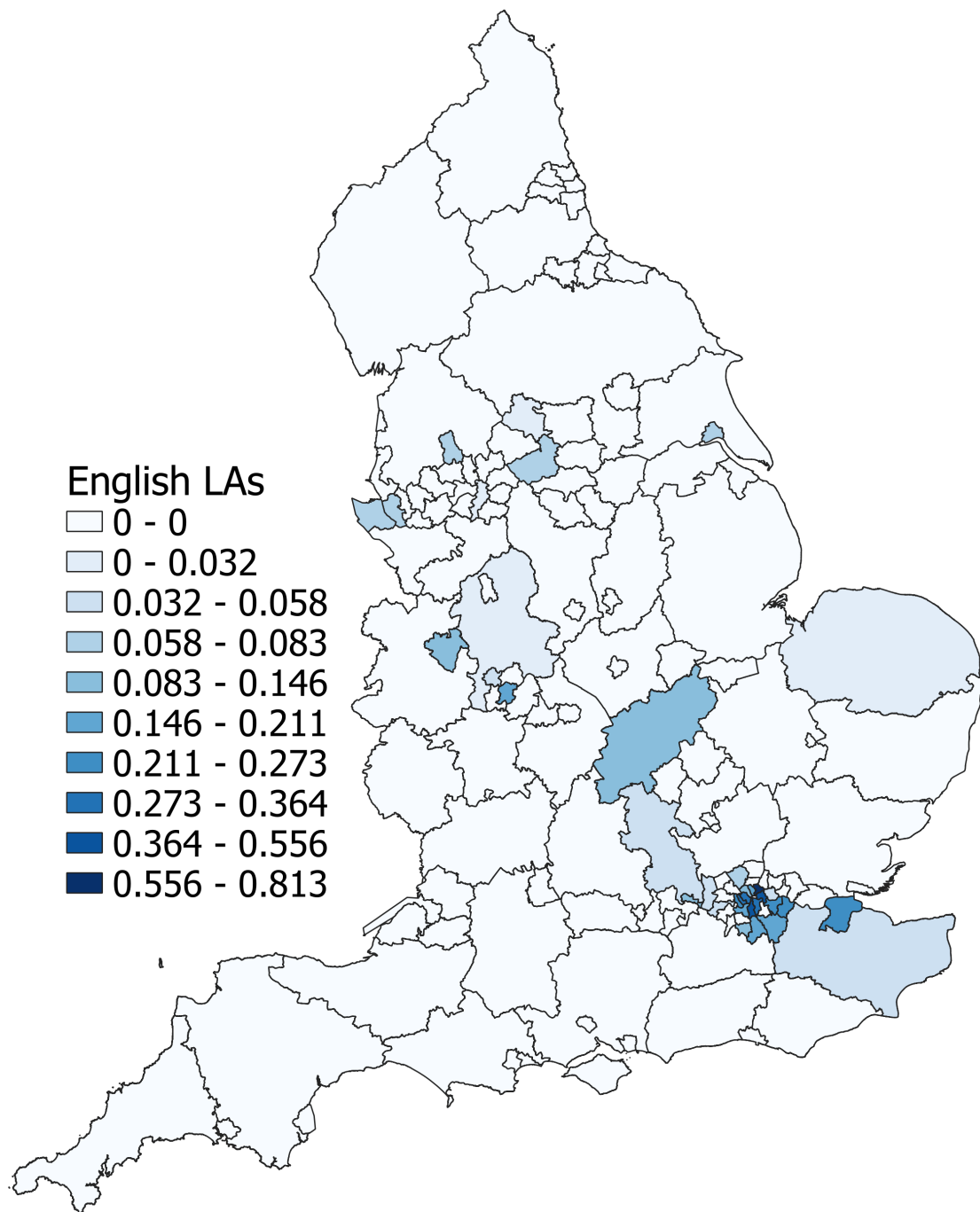
For admission to the 2020/2021 school year, we find that banding is still prevalent in Tower Hamlets but has been removed from schools' admissions arrangements in (most of) Camden and Lewisham. Banding seems to be restored in Hackney, however, where it is used by all non-faith non-selective schools in the LA. In London, banding is now also common among non-faith, non-selective schools in Westminster (20% of schools), Wandsworth (22%), Croydon (24%), Greenwich (31%), Bexley (33%), Southwark (38%), Lambeth (42%) and Kensington and Chelsea (50%). Outside London, in Sandwell (27%) and Medway (30%).

Figure 17 provides an example of banding in Tower Hamlets, where all pupils sit the same banding test. This area-wide banding is also used in Hackney, Lambeth, and Wandsworth. For example, in Hackney, the admissions guide states that:

Most Hackney secondary schools use a process of banding to ensure they admit a wide range of children of different abilities. Every child who applies must sit

⁴¹For a slightly later period, Coldron et al. (2008) find a consistent finding that "segregation was much less in the three banded authorities than in comparable areas".

Figure 16: The percentage of schools with banding across Local Authorities in England



Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.
Note: The percentage of schools is calculated excluding 163 selective schools.

Figure 17: Description of banding for community schools in Tower Hamlets

4 Banding

- 4.1 Tower Hamlets has a policy of banding to try to ensure that its schools take in an even balance of pupils in different ability ranges. All Tower Hamlets community schools as well as Central Foundation, George Green's, Mulberry Academy Shoreditch, London Enterprise Academy, Mulberry School for Girls, Sir John Cass Foundation & Red Coat, St Paul's Way Trust and Stepney Green Maths Computing and Science College use banding.
- 4.2 The band for a pupil attending a Tower Hamlets primary school is determined from the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) Test for reading and mathematics taken in the summer term of year 5. The results of the tests are used to place a child in one of four bands Band A,B, C and D. D is the highest scoring band
- 4.3 For pupils applying from primary schools outside of Tower Hamlets we determine the band by asking the primary school for a teacher assessment.

Source: Ready for Secondary School in Tower Hamlets 2020.

a cognitive ability test (CAT) and the results are used to group applications into different ability bands.” ... “Each band has equal priority and the same number of places are offered to applicants in each band where possible. This means that your child has an equal chance of being offered a place regardless of the band they are assigned to. If there are more applications than places available within each band, the school will apply their admission criteria to offer places. (Hackney's Secondary Schools 2019 Admission Guide)

Outside these four London LAs, the banding assessment is at the school rather than LA-level, by around 70 schools. For example, for a single school in Wolverhampton:

If there are more than 150 applicants into Year 7 they will be tested using a NFER (National Foundation of Education Research) Non-Verbal Reasoning Test and placed into five ability bands with the same number of places in each band. Bands will be ordered 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest. All children will be placed in one of the bands and an equal number of children will be taken from each. No child can fail this test and therefore any requests to re-sit the assessment will be refused. [Thomas Telford University Technical College](#)

And Blackburn and Darwen:

All pupils must sit the Fair Banding Assessment. This is to ensure there is an even spread of entrants across the ability range.

The results of the Fair Banding Assessment will be used to place each applicant into an ability band. Each band will be divided into in-Borough and out-of-Borough pupils. The number of QEGS Year 6 pupils and the geographical area in which they live will determine the number of places in each band available to external pupils. [Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School \(free school\)](#)

The use of banding could suggest that these schools have made a conscious choice to diversify. Banding is more common for free schools, ‘Outstanding’ schools, and schools in the highest attainment quartile (Appendix Tables A3 and A4). These schools could therefore be interesting examples where the admissions arrangements are designed to equalise pupil composition and access to high performing schools. Previous research suggests questions the use of school-level banding, however. First, a minority of schools are still permitted to take proportionately more pupils from the highest ability band (West (2005), School Admissions Code, 2021). Second, even when the ability bands are equally weighted, Allen and West (2009) summarise that “a school-level system of banding amongst all applicants meeting the required criteria gives schools very strong incentives to ensure that the pool of applicants from which they administer the banding is of a high ability on average”.

5.2 The number of discretionary criteria types used by schools

The number of criteria types used in an admissions arrangements will affect the allocation of pupils to schools. At one extreme, including only one discretionary criterion type will differentiate between pupils along only one dimension (for example, only by whether they have a sibling, only by whether they live in the catchment area, or only by the distance between their home and the school). At the other, a long-list of criteria types will differentiate between pupils along multiple dimensions. We find that schools range between including one and seven discretionary criteria types in their admissions arrangements. There is limited variation across school-types. There is geographical variation, with the modal number of criteria types applied across LAs varying between one and six.

Appendix Table A13 shows the average number of criteria types per admissions arrangements, by school- and LA-type. The first row shows that the average across all secondary schools in England is 3.5.⁴² This varies only a little across types of schools, with even less variation across types of LAs.

Figure 18 illustrates some interesting (small) differences across school-types in the number of criteria types per admissions arrangements. The bars show the distribution of the number of criteria types, where the highest bar is equivalent to the mode for that school-type.

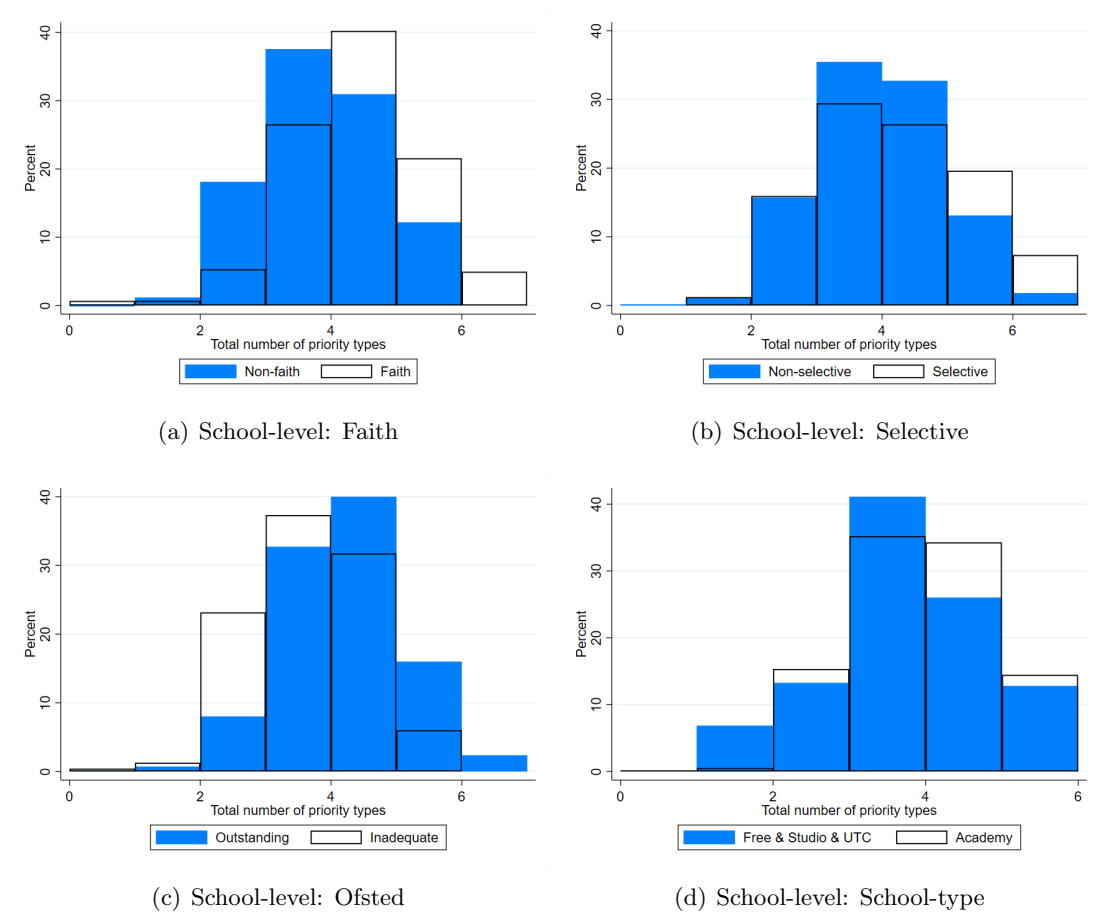
The most noticeable difference is between non-faith and faith schools, where faith schools are much more likely to have longer lists of criteria types. Figure 18 shows that the modal number of criteria types is higher for faith schools (four, compared to three for non-faith schools). Appendix Table A13 shows that the average number of criteria types is 3.4 for non-faith and 3.9 for faith schools.⁴³ This is because faith schools typically use the ‘Religious’ criterion type in addition to other criteria types.

Other differences are less stark. Selective schools have more criteria types, on average, than

⁴²A school at the 25th percentile and median would have three criteria types. This would be four criteria types for a school at the 75th percentile.

⁴³A school at the median and 75th percentile of the distribution for faith schools would have one more criterion type than the equivalent for non-faith schools.

Figure 18: The number of school admissions criteria types given, by school-type



Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

non-selective schools (3.7 compared to 3.5, Appendix Table A13).⁴⁴ Although selective schools are less likely to use certain criteria types (for example ‘Sibling’ as seen in the previous section) all selective schools use ‘Test’ and the majority use ‘Pupil Premium’.

Within non-selective schools, schools with an ‘Outstanding’ Ofsted rating use slightly more criteria types, on average, than schools with an ‘Inadequate’ rating (3.7 compared to 3.2, Appendix Table A13). The same pattern holds between schools with the highest and lowest pupil attainment (3.7 compared to 3.2, Appendix Table A13). There are two potential explanations for this. First, ‘Outstanding’ schools are more likely to be over-subscribed (96% compared to 23%, Appendix Table A1) so may have to design their admissions arrangements to be more differentiated. Second, schools are more likely to become ‘Outstanding’ with a favourable pupil mix, which can be influenced by the design of the admissions arrangements. At this stage in our research project, we cannot disentangle which of these two mechanisms drives this effect.

Within non-selective schools, free schools have slightly fewer criteria types than academy schools, on average (3.3 compared to 3.5, Appendix Table A13). This is interesting because both types of schools are their own admissions authority, but, as shown in the previous section, are using their freedom to set admissions arrangements differently.

Figure 19 shows the variation in the most common (modal) length of admissions arrangements across LAs in England. Slightly longer criteria are more common in the South-West of England, but there is variation across the country. The most common (modal) number of discretionary criteria types used in schools’ admissions arrangements across LAs is three. Around 95% of LAs have a mode of either two, three, or four discretionary criteria types per admissions arrangements. There are exceptions at the extremes, however, where most schools have either low (one) or high numbers (five to six) of criteria types in their admissions arrangements.

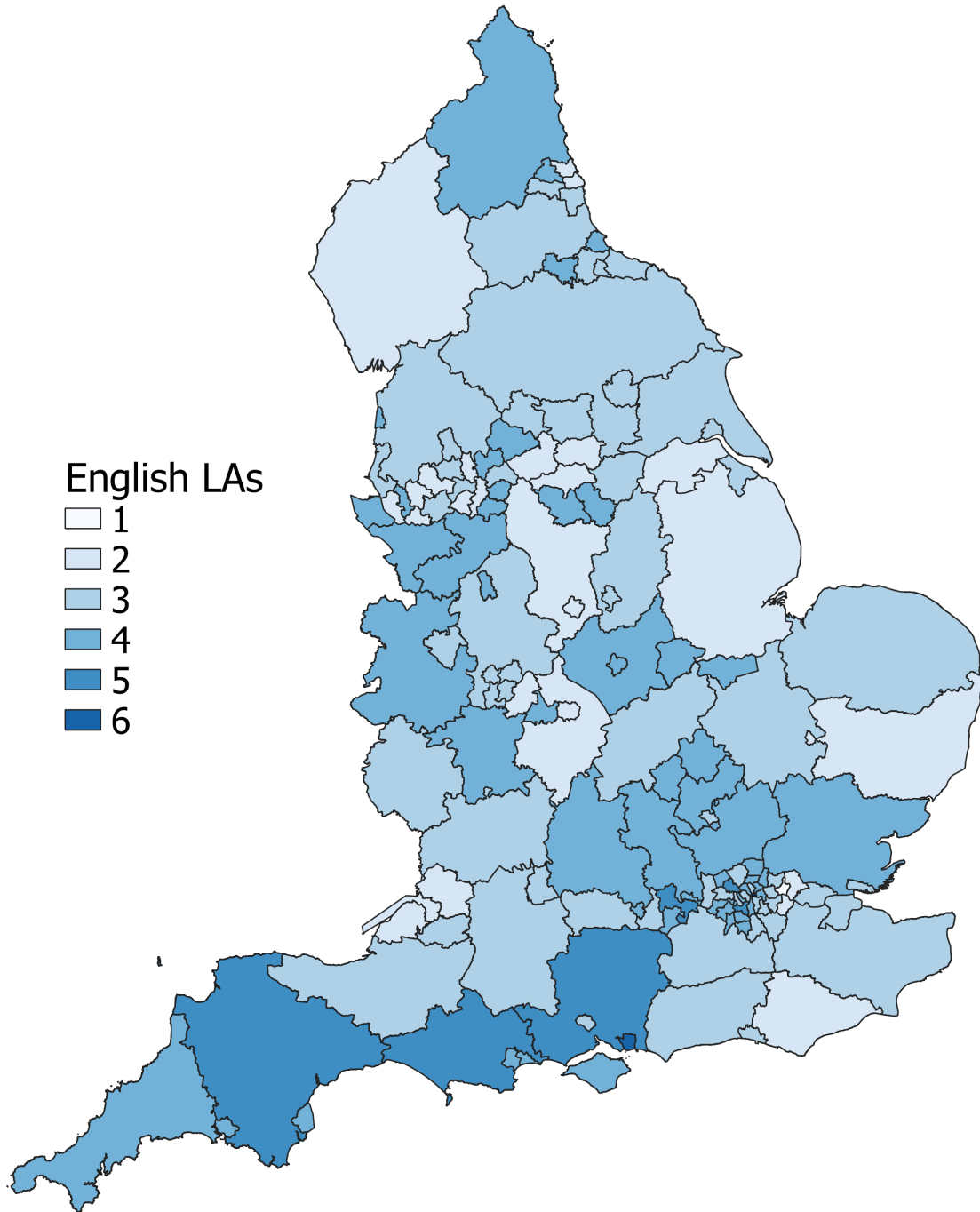
The LA with the lowest modal number of criteria types is Barking and Dagenham, where most schools’ admissions arrangements have one discretionary criteria type: ‘Geography’ (in this case Geography refers to straight line distance). This means that most pupils are differentiated and admitted only on the basis of distance between home and school.

The LA with the highest modal number of criteria types is Portsmouth (six criteria types). In Portsmouth, schools vary in the order and application of criteria types, but the most common admissions arrangements have: ‘Special Need’, ‘Geography’, ‘Sibling’, ‘Feeder’, ‘Child of Staff’ and ‘Child of Armed Forces’.

Other LAs where most schools have many criteria types are more consistent across schools than in Portsmouth. For example, most (31 out of 40) schools in Devon have the same criteria types in the same order: ‘Special need’, ‘Catchment Area’, ‘Sibling’, ‘Feeder’, ‘Child of Staff’. These longer lists of criteria types means that pupils are differentiated and ranked according to multiple characteristics. The following subsection explores how these criteria types are also combined, for example ‘Sibling & Catchment Area’ to further differentiate between pupils.

⁴⁴A school at the median and 75th percentile of the distribution for selective schools would have one more criterion type than the equivalent for non-selective schools.

Figure 19: The modal number of criteria types included in admissions arrangements across Local Authorities in England



Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Note: The modal number of criteria types included in admissions arrangements is derived excluding selective schools and religious schools, to focus on the choice of criteria for schools that would traditionally have followed the Local Authority admissions arrangements.

5.3 Combinations of criteria types

The previous sections have described the prevalence and use of each criterion type, for example ‘Sibling’, anywhere and in any combination with other criteria types within the admissions arrangements. This section describes how criteria types are combined to produce priority groups, for example ‘Sibling & Geography’. These combinations range from two criteria types (most commonly ‘Sibling & Geography’) to four criteria types (most commonly ‘Religious’ & ‘Feeder’ & ‘Sibling’ & ‘Geography’). Figure 20 shows all combinations of criteria types, with two combinations in Figure (a), three combinations in Figure (b) and four combinations in Figure (c).

Figure 20 shows that the religious criterion type is often combined with other criteria types. Indeed, the religious criterion type features in all combinations with four criteria types, and almost three-quarters of all combinations with three criteria types. This means that faith schools differentiate between pupils more finely, within religious children applying many criteria typically used by non-faith schools, such as catchment areas or feeder schools. Most commonly, ‘Religious’ criterion type is combined with ‘Sibling’, ‘Feeder’ and ‘Geography’, but also with ‘Special Need’, ‘Child of Staff’, ‘Pupil Premium’, ‘Child of Armed Forces’ and ‘Test’.

5.4 The ordering of criteria used by schools

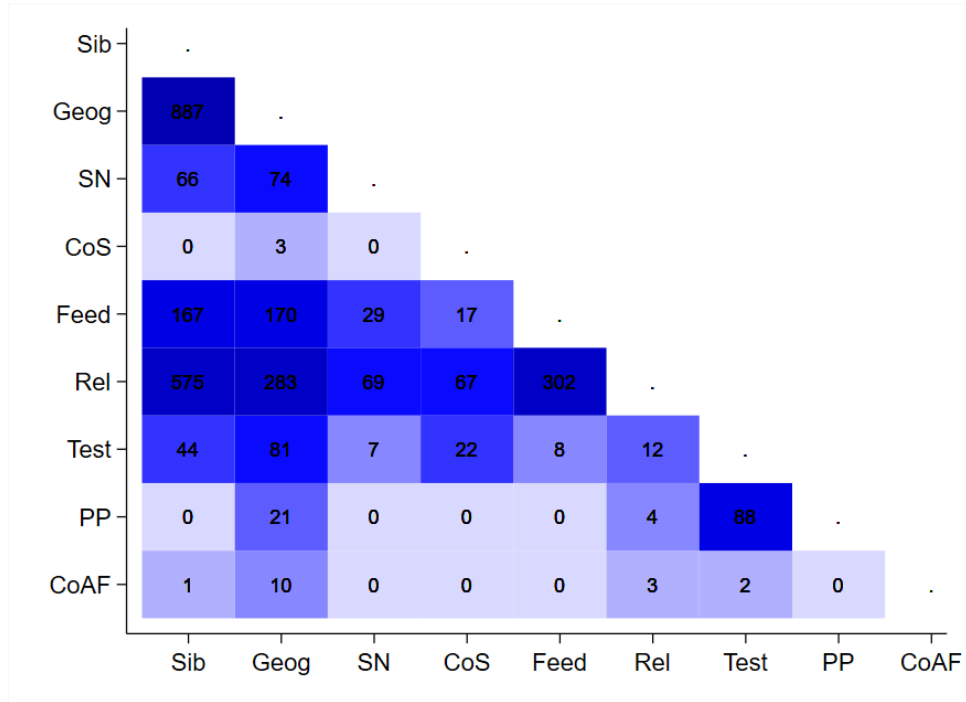
The ordering of criteria matters, as criteria placed earlier in the admissions arrangements are more likely to ‘bite’ (affect pupil allocation to schools). A popular school might be at full capacity after considering only the first few criteria, leaving the remaining criteria irrelevant.

Appendix Table A10 shows the frequency of each criteria type in the first three and five criteria per admissions arrangement, excluding ‘EHCP’ and ‘Looked After’ from the list. The first two columns show this for the whole sample of schools, unconditional on having that criteria type anywhere in the admissions arrangements. The next two columns show the percentage of schools that have each criterion type in the first three/five criteria, conditional on the criterion being present anywhere in the admissions arrangements. The final four columns show summary statistics for the position of the criteria type, again conditional on the criterion being present anywhere in the admissions arrangements.⁴⁵

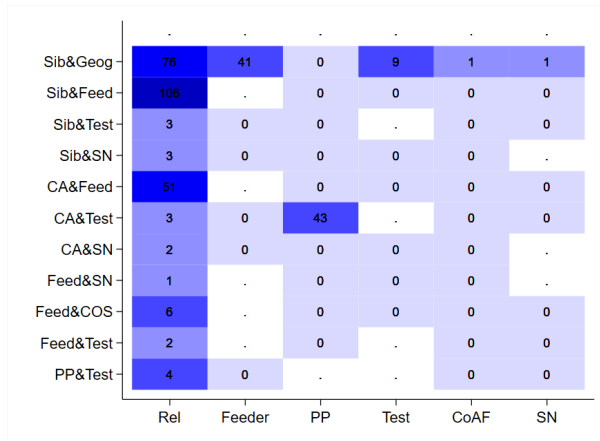
‘Sibling’ is very commonly in the first three criteria (93% of schools) and five criteria (95% of schools). Conditional on being somewhere in the admissions arrangements, ‘Sibling’ is almost always in the first five criteria (99.8%). In most cases, therefore, a younger sibling can be almost guaranteed entry to the same school as their older sibling. ‘Geography’ is common, but not as universal as ‘Sibling’. 68% of schools have a geographical criterion in the top three criteria, and 86% in the top five. Conditional on being present anywhere, 77% of schools have ‘Geography’ in the first three and 97% have it in the first five criteria. This suggests that geography also strongly determines admission to over-subscribed schools in England.

⁴⁵The mode refers to the most common position, where one is the first or highest position. The median is the middle of the distribution, the mean is the average, and S.D. denotes the standard deviation, or variation in the distribution.

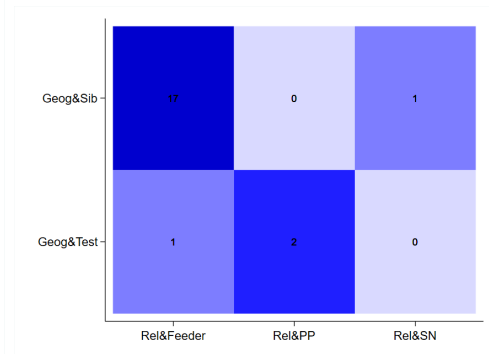
Figure 20: Combinations of types of criteria within criterion



(a) 2 criteria types combined



(b) 3 criteria types combined



(c) 4 criteria types combined

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

Other criteria types are less common, and typically less common in the first three criteria, although there is variation across criteria types. For example, ‘Special need’ is in the top three criteria for 45% of schools. Conditional on appearing anywhere in the admissions arrangements, ‘Special need’ is in the top three criteria for 93% of schools. This suggests that when a school chooses to include ‘Special need’, it chooses to meaningfully prioritise these pupils. ‘Child of Staff’ is the next most frequent criteria type, with 30% of schools including this in the first three criteria (40% in the first five). Conditional on appearing anywhere in the admissions arrangements, however, only 69% of schools have this criterion in the first three (compared to 93% for ‘Special need’). This implies that although ‘Child of Staff’ is used almost as frequently, it is given less importance in the criteria ordering than ‘Special need’.

Religious criteria are used by 14% of schools in the first three, but conditional on appearing anywhere, 93% of schools have the ‘Religious’ criterion type in the first three. Where religious criteria are relevant to a school, the school makes this an important criterion for admission. The same pattern is present for ‘Pupil Premium’, which is used by a minority of schools (5%) but is in the first three criteria for 89% of them, conditional on appearing anywhere. The ‘Test’ criteria type is even more striking, where 99.7% of schools that use this criterion have it in the first three positions.

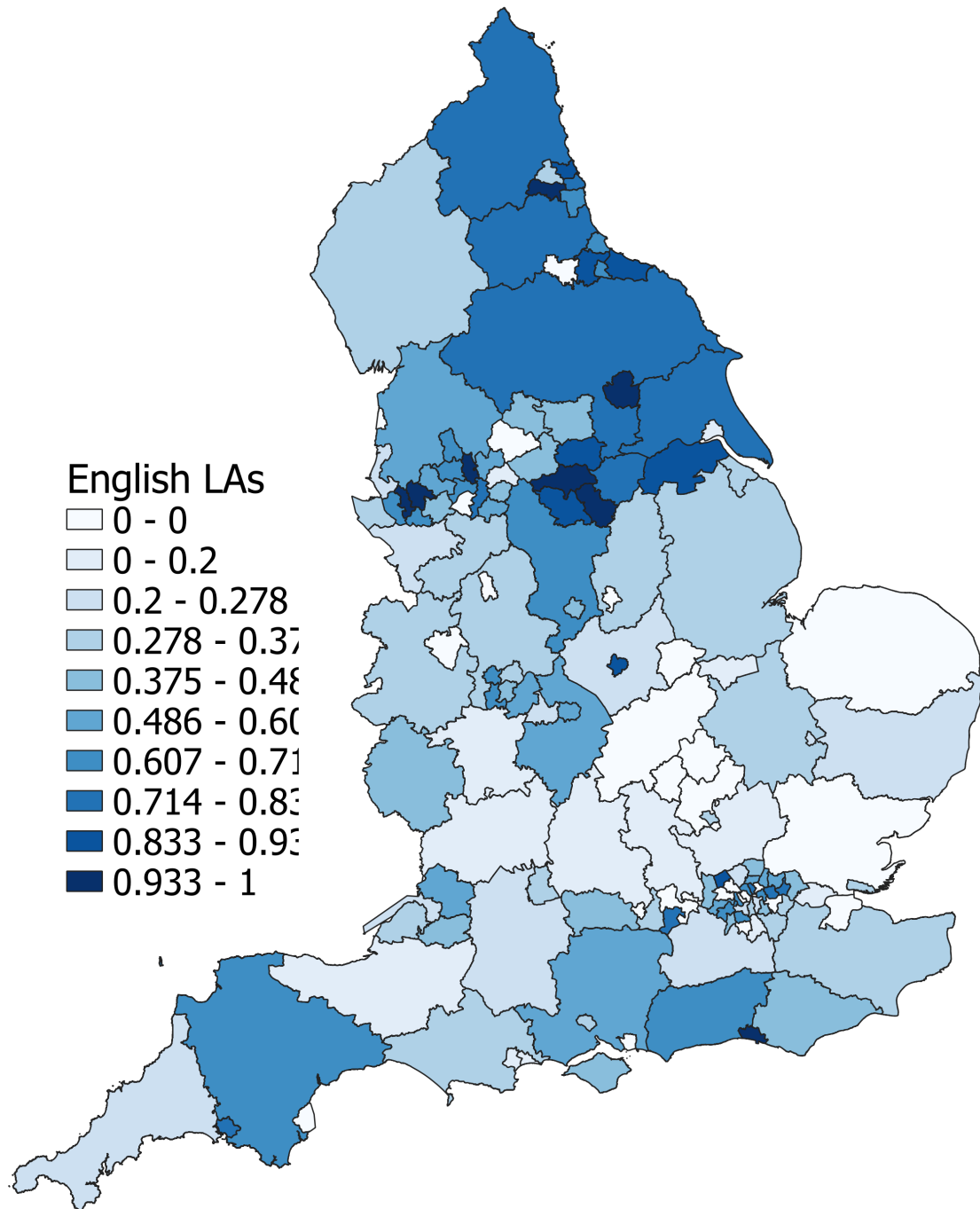
‘Child of Armed Forces’ appears to be less important, in the unconditional and conditional presence in the first three criteria. ‘Random’ is even less likely to feature in the first three criteria, unconditionally or conditionally. This is in line with the School Admissions Code, which states that admission authorities must not use random allocation as the main admissions arrangements in the case of over-subscription. Indeed, in Brighton and Hove (the most well-known case of the use of random allocation in school admissions in England) the lottery features in the tie-breaking rule within catchment area, rather than a criterion.

Appendix Table A14 shows the most common ordering of criteria within admissions arrangements. For clarity, ‘EHCP’ and ‘Looked After’ are excluded, and only the first eight criteria are used. ‘N’ refers to the number of schools that use the combination of criteria, where 155 is the most common. Combinations of criteria used by fewer than 15 schools are excluded from this table. The most common combinations are ‘Sibling’ followed by ‘Geography’ (155 schools) and ‘Special need’ followed by ‘Sibling’ followed by ‘Geography’ (147 schools). Indeed, ‘Sibling’ followed by ‘Geography’ feature in some order in the seventeen most frequent criteria orderings. This reinforces the picture that admissions arrangements in English secondary schools are dominated by the ‘Sibling’ and some form of ‘Geography’ criteria.

There is interesting variation across England in the percentage of schools that follow the same admissions arrangements within their LA. Figure 21 shows the variation in the percentage of schools in each LA that follow the modal (most common) admissions arrangements for that LA. These percentages exclude selective and faith schools, to concentrate on the behaviour of schools that would traditionally have all followed the LA admissions arrangements. Where there is no mode - where there is a lot of variation in admissions arrangements within the LA - the percentage is zero.

Figure 21 shows that across large parts of England, a low percentage of schools follow their

Figure 21: The percentage of schools with that follow the Local Authority modal admissions arrangements across Local Authorities in England



Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Note: The modal admissions arrangement is derived excluding selective schools and religious schools. The percentage of schools is calculated excluding these selective and religious schools to focus on the choice of admissions criteria for schools that would traditionally have followed the Local Authority admissions arrangements.

Table 6: The 15 LAs with the highest percentage of schools following the most common admissions arrangements in the LA

LA	% schools follow mode	% academy schools
Barnsley	100.0	87.5
Brighton and Hove	100.0	25.0
Bury	100.0	44.44
Gateshead	100.0	83.33
Knowsley	100.0	100.0
Rotherham	100.0	100.0
St. Helens	100.0	60.0
York	100.0	66.67
Wakefield	93.33	93.33
Leicester	92.86	42.86
North Lincolnshire	91.67	66.67
North Tyneside	90.9	18.18
Harrow	90.0	80.0
Sheffield	88.0	84.0
Redcar and Cleveland	87.5	87.5

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

LA mode admissions arrangement, or there is no mode. There are some LAs where almost all schools follow the mode, however. These are most noticeably concentrated in the North East of England, but there are cases across England. Table 6 shows the 15 LAs with the highest share of schools that follow the modal admissions arrangement. This is despite the high share of academy schools present in most of these LAs, although in the whole sample of LAs there is a significant negative correlation between the percentage of academy schools and percentage of schools that follow the modal admissions arrangement.

6 Design considerations for admission arrangements

In this section, we step back from the description of current admissions arrangement and discuss open questions and considerations raised by the data.

A first issue is to what extent existing over-subscription criteria may be indirectly discriminating against groups of students. Clearly, and consistent with the School Admissions Code, prevailing over-subscription criteria, and resulting priorities, do not *overtly* socially discriminate against groups of students. But some criteria can nevertheless be discriminatory if they are likely to favour socially advantaged students over socially disadvantaged students because of the different typical circumstances that these students face. As an example, consider a high performing school located in a wealthy neighbourhood. Prioritising students on the basis of distance (for example, using a catchment area) will tend to favour socially advantaged students over their socially disadvantaged peers who live further away. The criterion is not discriminatory *per se*, but ends up reducing access to high quality schools to disadvantaged students. Past studies have raised

concerns about this risk (see e.g. [Coldron et al. \(2008\)](#)) or documented it in specific contexts ([West et al. \(2004\)](#), [Allen and West \(2009\)](#)).⁴⁶ Our future research will investigate this aspect more closely.

A second, related, consideration concerns to what extent schools strategise when selecting their over-subscription criteria and to what extent the decisions of neighbouring schools influence their decision. Previous authors have argued in favour of LA-wide common over-subscription criteria to avoid schools choosing their over-subscription criteria to attract a specific socio-economic group, in an environment where the socio-economic student composition is viewed as a quality indicator by some parents ([Coldron et al. \(2008\)](#), [Allen et al. \(2012\)](#)).

A third consideration concerns the societal values that are conveyed by admission arrangements. Access to education is a right. Education is publicly funded in England. Admission arrangements and, specifically, the priorities they imply, are a reflection of whom the Admission Authority thinks has a more ‘legitimate claim’ on a seat at their school. In that respect, our findings according to which geography is a prevalent criterion for admissions suggest that schools often place - perhaps unconsciously - greater emphasis on the value of community than access. A strong role for geography in the over-subscription criteria indeed means that everyone who lives in the same area (more or less) goes to the same school: kids can do homework together, can make school friends near their home, etc. These choices involve trade-offs: geographical proximity reduces access to students living further away, priorities for siblings facilitate the transport logistics of parents in areas where public transport may be scarce. It is important to recognise and make explicit these trade-offs to encourage a healthy discussion about societal choices that schools make. It is also important to recognise that there are ways to balance these trade-offs. Quotas for students eligible for the Pupil Premium (section 5.1.4), quotas for students outside the catchment area for schools prioritising students living in the catchment area, and the use of banding are all ways to promote a balance between conflicting objectives.⁴⁷

7 Conclusions

Almost all secondary schools in England have the flexibility to design their own admissions arrangements - the rules for allocating places when the school is over-subscribed. The design matters, as different choices about which pupils to prioritise affects access to preferred (often high performing) over-subscribed schools. Admissions arrangements can be designed to be relatively inclusive or exclusive (directly or indirectly) for particular groups of pupils.

Our analysis of all secondary schools’ admissions arrangements show that despite their new ‘freedom’, most schools follow traditional ways of prioritising pupils. For example, the most common criteria are having a sibling at the school and some variant of geographical criteria, for example living within a pre-defined catchment area. Geographical admissions criteria are likely

⁴⁶See [Prieto et al. \(2022\)](#) for an approach along those lines applied to the School District of Hillsborough County (Florida). As a complementary perspective, [Allen et al. \(2012\)](#) have used school enrolment data to assess the degree to which revisions to the Code have succeeded in preventing covert selection.

⁴⁷Another angle on this question is that priorities that are more closely aligned with parental preferences tend to make it easier to satisfy parents’ preferences, see [Cantillon et al. \(2022\)](#)

to be relatively exclusive, as they can establish or reinforce segregation across neighbourhoods and schools. This is because more affluent parents have the resources to buy admission to popular schools through the housing market. We note that the School Admissions Code rules out unfairly disadvantaging a child from any social or racial group “either directly or indirectly”. Despite the practical advantages that geographical admissions arrangements might bring, we suggest that policymakers and admissions authorities should consider whether using pre-defined or de-facto catchment areas *indirectly* disadvantages particular groups of pupils.

Some schools are moving away from a purely geographical priority, and these schools might provide templates for feasible ‘tried and tested’ designs. For example, some schools reserve a percentage of their places for pupils outside the catchment area. Our future work will explore the effect of adjustments such as these to provide schools with information about the likely consequences of reforming their admissions arrangements on pupil composition and attainment. Qualitative research could also usefully explore the process of change for the schools that divert from the traditional approach.

Banding - where the school admits an equal share of pupils from different ability bands - is another option that has been trialled in practice, and has a long history in Inner London. Previous research is unanimous that banding is associated with lower school-level segregation when implemented at the Local Authority level. This could be a feasible option for Local Authorities that have a strong commitment to balancing pupil composition across schools, learning from the experience of Hackney and Tower Hamlets. We note that co-ordination across schools in these Local Authorities has been possible despite the large number of academy schools.

Free schools have the most innovative admissions arrangements of all school types. This could be because, as new schools, they have a ‘blank slate’ and potentially less resistance from invested parties such as local homeowners. Alternatively, some free schools may also have a distinct ethos or mission that encourages inclusive admissions arrangements. In addition, free schools are provided with guidance for designing their admissions arrangements from the Department for Education. These guidelines prominently highlight the potential for innovative and socially inclusive practices for admissions, such as prioritising pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium and the use of random tie-breaking rules rather than distance tie-breaking rules. Our future work will study the effect of free schools (particularly the most innovative) on education outcomes for local education markets, such as equality of access and educational attainment.

The lack of adoption of the Pupil Premium criterion (aside from by free schools and selective schools) is striking. Despite explicit financial and implicit moral incentives to do so, only 5% of secondary schools in England give priority to pupils classified as disadvantaged by this measure. Even within this small group of schools, the Pupil Premium criterion is notional for most of them, as all selective schools condition the Pupil Premium criterion on achieving the required test score. We show that the composition of selective schools that have the Pupil Premium criterion is no more diverse, in fact slightly less so, than the composition of selective schools without it. We recommend that the Department for Education should consult on whether the Pupil Premium criterion should be *required* rather than optional in the School Admissions Code.

The information available to parents about school admissions arrangements is severely lacking in some areas of England. Catchment area and over-subscription information (where relevant) is not universally provided, and in some cases is even impossible to find. This is another area where guidance or regulation by the Department for Education could improve the school choice process and outcomes for parents. For example, it could be mandated that all admissions authorities are required to submit full details (including over-subscription and catchment area information) to their Local Authority, to be compiled for parents' easy reference.

The diverse landscape of school types and admissions arrangements in England is complex, but provides parents (in some areas) with meaningful choice, and researchers with interesting and useful case studies. The next stage of our research agenda, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, will use this diversity to study the effects of different admissions criteria. Through this next stage, we hope to provide admissions authorities, schools, and parents with information about the likely effect of reforming admissions on the chances of children from disadvantaged backgrounds attending highly effective schools, the test score gap between poor and more affluent students, and on school segregation.

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A Tables

Table A1: The number/percentage of secondary schools that were over-subscribed in the most recent year available before the 2020-2021 school year

School-type	N	%
All schools	1648	64.20
Non-selective school	1562	63.06
Selective school	86	95.56
Community	164	60.07
Voluntary Aided/Controlled/Foundation	221	69.06
Academy	1074	61.58
Free/Studio/UTC	103	73.57
Non-faith	1217	60.16
Faith	345	75.99
Ofsted: Outstanding	440	94.62
Ofsted: Good	904	66.13
Ofsted: Requires Improvement	144	34.62
Ofsted: Inadequate	42	23.2
KS4 quartile: lowest attainment	171	31.49
KS4 quartile: 2nd lowest	311	52.18
KS4 quartile: 2nd highest	428	69.71
KS4 quartile: highest attainment	597	93.57
LA-type		
Urban: London	303	75.19
Urban: non-London	439	64.56
Town	700	65.67
Rural	206	49.28
3 choices	664	56.85
4+ choices	984	70.34
Inequality: low	378	53.54
Inequality: medium	581	64.56
Inequality: high	689	71.7

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). The sample for this table is 2,567 schools where over-subscription in the previous academic year (entry in September 2019) was reported. Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Over-subscription information collected from Local Authority for the 2019-2020 school year.

Note: "Selective" schools are self-defined in Edubase as having a selective admissions policy, meaning admission depends on a pupil's test score. "Community" schools are maintained by the Local Authority. "Academy" schools include sponsored and non-sponsored academies. "Voluntary Aided/Controlled" schools are typically faith schools with more autonomy within the LA-maintained sector. "Free school" includes studio schools (6) and university technical colleges (11). "Ofsted" refers to the most recent full Ofsted inspection before the relevant school choice date (31st October 2019) including inspections made before academy conversion (missing for 82 schools). "KS4 quartile" refers to secondary school performance (attainment) in the 2018/2019 school year. Schools are divided into four equally sized groups (quartiles). Variables for school type, Faith, Ofsted and KS4 performance (attainment) exclude 163 selective schools. "Inequality" refers to the variation in secondary school performance (attainment) within the LA in the 2018/2019 school year. LAs are divided into three equally sized groups, with the "low" inequality group having the lowest variation in secondary school performance (attainment).

Table A2: Frequency of school admissions criteria types

School admissions criteria	All schools		Oversubscribed schools	
	N	% schools	N	% schools
Required	3245	99.91	1647	99.94
Sibling	3103	95.54	1570	95.27
Geographical	2862	88.12	1416	85.92
Special need	1571	48.37	753	45.69
Child of staff	1420	43.72	838	50.85
Feeder	1245	38.33	651	39.5
Religious	491	15.12	300	18.2
Test	351	10.81	210	12.74
Pupil Premium	170	5.23	96	5.83
Child of Armed forces/former student	69	2.12	34	2.06
Quota	410	12.62	267	16.2
Fair banding	103	3.17	67	4.07

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Over-subscription information collected from Local Authority for the 2019-2020 school year. The sample for the "Oversubscribed schools" columns is 1,648 schools that were recorded as oversubscribed, from a sample of 2,567 schools where over-subscription in the previous academic year was reported.

Note: An observation is a school - criterion pair. Each school is counted more than once if the school has more than one criterion. Admissions criteria are grouped to aggregate criteria types. 'Geography' includes catchment areas and distance measures (straight-line or travel time). Distance measures are included with the 'Geography' criterion wherever distance is included as a criterion in a school's admissions arrangements (despite acting as a tie-breaking rule in practice). Percentages will add to more than 100. "Special need" groups special circumstances, medical need, and international students (1 school). "Quota" and "Banding" are coded as the presence of these features across any school admissions criteria.

Table A3: Frequency of school admissions criteria types by school type (percentage)

School admissions criteria	Non-selective	Selective	Community	School type				
				VA/VC/ Foundation	Academy	Free	Non-Faith	Faith
Sibling	97.93	50.31	98.36	97.73	98.61	90.87	98.48	95.55
Geographical	88.36	83.44	96.07	77.83	90.02	80.37	93.32	67.12
Special need	49.79	21.47	70.49	46.85	48.43	39.73	53.26	34.93
Child of staff	44.73	24.54	33.77	33.5	46.12	66.67	45.3	42.29
Feeder	40	6.75	21.97	47.36	43.02	21.92	36.11	56.68
Religious	15.66	4.91	0	51.64	12.06	7.76	0.12	82.19
Test	6.09	100	0.66	5.54	6.84	7.31	5.72	7.71
Pupil Premium	1.36	78.53	0.66	0.5	0.88	8.68	1.28	1.71
Child of Army/former student	2.17	1.23	1.97	2.27	2.08	3.2	2.28	1.71
School has any quota	11.31	37.42	0.98	12.09	10.91	28.31	8.76	22.26
Fair banding	3.34	0	1.97	3.53	3.19	6.39	3.4	3.08

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

Note: An observation is a school - criterion pair. Each school is counted more than once if the school has more than one criterion. Admissions criteria are grouped to aggregate criteria types. Percentages will add to more than 100. "Selective" schools are self-defined in Edubase as having selective admissions arrangements, meaning admission depends on a pupil's test score. "Community" schools are maintained by the Local Authority. "Academy" schools include sponsored and non-sponsored academies. "Voluntary Aided/Controlled" schools are typically faith schools with more autonomy within the LA-maintained sector. "Free school" includes studio schools (6) and university technical colleges (11). Variables for school type and Faith exclude 163 selective schools.

Table A4: Frequency of school admissions criteria types by school type (percentage)

School admissions criteria	School type							
	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate	Lowest attainment	2nd lowest	2nd highest	Highest attainment
Sibling	98	97.88	98.66	98.28	98.74	98.12	98.11	97.85
Geographical	84.36	89.98	89.69	87.98	89.62	91.66	88.8	84.95
Special need	48.91	49.76	51.15	49.36	56.94	50.34	45.61	47.45
Child of staff	60.55	43.81	32.82	32.62	29.45	37.82	48.18	59.95
Feeder	38.73	42.33	38.36	33.91	31	41.59	46.15	42.07
Religious	24.73	15.68	10.11	10.73	8.56	13.32	14.98	26.75
Test	10.36	5.96	3.63	2.15	2.24	5.11	6.88	10.08
Pupil Premium	1.45	1.24	0.95	1.29	0.42	1.08	1.48	1.61
Child of Armed Forces/former student	2.18	2.36	1.91	1.29	2.38	2.02	2.29	2.02
School has any quota	19.82	10.2	6.87	6.87	5.75	8.61	10.26	18.82
Fair banding	7.45	2.48	1.91	2.58	1.96	2.96	3.51	4.97

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

Note: An observation is a school - criterion pair. Each school is counted more than once if the school has more than one criterion. Admissions criteria are grouped to aggregate criteria types. Percentages will add to more than 100. "Ofsted" refers to the most recent full Ofsted inspection before the relevant school choice date (31st October 2019) including inspections made before academy conversion (missing for 82 schools). "KS4 quartile" refers to secondary school performance (attainment) in the 2018/2019 school year. Schools are divided into four equally sized groups (quartiles). Variables for Ofsted and KS4 performance (attainment) exclude 163 selective schools.

Table A5: Frequency of school admissions criteria types by Local Authority type (percentage)

School admissions criteria	Urban:		Local authority type				Inequality:		
	London	Urban: non-London	Town	Rural	3 choices	4+ choices	low	medium	high
Sibling	93.15	95.67	95.45	97.88	97.72	93.69	97.91	98.24	91.79
Geographic	85.69	83.46	88.72	95.57	89.79	86.7	90.19	87.12	87.46
Special need	51.61	49.34	47.79	45.47	45.8	50.54	43.77	53.37	47.64
Child of staff	57.86	28.61	47.25	42.39	41.1	45.94	35.94	50.34	43.92
Feeder	16.53	40.68	40.38	49.9	48.49	29.73	47.3	44.29	27.51
Religious	21.98	19.29	13.53	6.94	12.96	16.94	13.23	15.9	15.81
Test	14.52	8.14	12.3	6.94	5.91	14.95	4.63	6.24	18.62
Pupil Premium	5.24	5.12	6.12	2.89	2.55	7.5	1.21	1.46	10.94
Child of Army/former student	3.63	2.36	1.43	2.31	1.34	2.79	4.74	1.17	1.06
Quota	25	11.68	12.17	3.47	6.65	17.68	7.28	12.2	16.64
Fair banding	14.31	1.57	1.29	0.19	0.87	5.12	2.98	3.9	2.74

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

Note: An observation is a school - criterion pair. Each school is counted more than once if the school has more than one criterion. Admissions criteria are grouped to aggregate criteria types. Percentages will add to more than 100. "Inequality" refers to the variation in secondary school performance (attainment) within the Local Authority (LA) in the 2018/2019 school year. LAs are divided into three equally sized groups, with the "low" inequality group having the lowest variation in secondary school performance (attainment).

Table A6: Use of geographical admissions criteria

Geographical school admissions criteria	All schools		Over-subscribed schools	
	N	% schools	N	% schools
Catchment area (any position)	1827	56.23	907	55.04
Catchment area (top 3, if present)	1649	90.26	789	86.99
Distance tie-breaker	2933	90.27	1462	88.71
Distance tie-breaker & lottery tie-breaker	1813	55.8	924	56.07
Lottery tiebreaker only	104	3.2	63	3.82
Reserve places for out of catchment	23	1.26	14	1.54
	N	Median	N	% Median
Catchment area size (km ²)	1641	47.57	783	46.37
Maximum distance (km)	1096	2.94	1012	2.81

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Geographical data for the catchment areas collected by the research team from publicly available sources and freedom of information requests.

Note: An observation is a school - criterion pair. Each school is counted more than once if the school has more than one criterion. Admissions criteria are grouped to aggregate criteria types. Percentages will add to more than 100.

Table A8: Frequency of geographical school admissions criteria by school type (percentage)

Geographical school admissions criteria	School type								
	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate	Lowest attainment	2nd lowest	2nd highest	Highest attainment	
Catchment area (any position)	48.73	59.43	57.82	53.22	50.49	59.08	62.89	54.84	
Catchment area (top 3, if present)	84.7	90.87	94.72	95.97	93.89	94.53	90.99	86.03	
Distance tie-breaker	87.64	90.68	92.75	90.56	92.85	92.87	89.2	87.23	
Distance tie-breaker & lottery tie-breaker	53.45	55.84	54.2	61.8	59.75	55.18	52.36	53.76	
Lottery tiebreaker only	6.18	2.77	1.53	3.43	1.82	2.15	2.56	6.05	
Reserve places for out of catchment	2.24	0.99	0.66	1.61	1.39	0.46	0.86	2.21	
	Median								
Catchment area size (km ²)	56.08	48.52	34.82	21.22	23.28	41.27	58.57	73	
Maximum distance (km)	2.02	2.96	3.74	5.36	3.84	2.91	2.98	2.44	

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Geographical data for the catchment areas collected by the research team from publicly available sources and freedom of information requests.

Note: An observation is a school - criterion pair. Each school is counted more than once if the school has more than one criterion. Admissions criteria are grouped to aggregate criteria types. Percentages will add to more than 100. "Ofsted" refers to the most recent full Ofsted inspection before the relevant school choice date (31st October 2019) including inspections made before academy conversion (missing for 82 schools). "KS4 quartile" refers to secondary school performance (attainment) in the 2018/2019 school year. Schools are divided into four equally sized groups (quartiles). Variables for Ofsted and KS4 performance (attainment) exclude 163 selective schools.

Table A9: Frequency of geographical school admissions criteria by Local Authority type (percentage)

Geographical school admissions criteria	Local authority type							Inequality: high	
	Urban: London	Urban: non-London	Town	Rural	3 choices	4+ choices	Inequality: low		Inequality: medium
Catchment area (any position)	15.52	44.62	69.95	73.41	70.92	43.83	66.26	54.15	50.99
Catchment area (top 3, if present)	67.53	90.29	89.41	97.11	95.08	83.66	94.51	89.73	86.89
Distance tie-breaker	93.35	86.88	89.87	93.64	91.47	89.31	94.16	85.17	91.64
Distance tie-breaker & lottery tiebreaker	56.05	61.29	50.65	62.24	53.73	57.59	54.69	54.15	57.9
Lottery tiebreaker only	3.63	4.07	3.13	1.73	3.43	3.01	2.98	2.63	3.8
Reserve places for out of catchment	7.79	0.59	1.17	0.79	0.95	1.69	0.5	1.62	1.64
Median									
Catchment area size (km ²)	16.7	15.75	41.36	122.69	52.48	39.97	53.09	33.71	57.29
Maximum distance (km)	1.98	2.74	3.46	6.37	3.9	2.68	3.2	2.75	2.99

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Geographical data for the catchment areas collected by the research team from publicly available sources and freedom of information requests.

Note: An observation is a school - criterion pair. Each school is counted more than once if the school has more than one criterion. Admissions criteria are grouped to aggregate criteria types. Percentages will add to more than 100. "Inequality" refers to the variation in secondary school performance (attainment) within the Local Authority (LA) in the 2018/2019 school year. LAs are divided into three equally sized groups, with the "low" inequality group having the lowest variation in secondary school performance (attainment).

Table A10: Frequency of school admissions criteria types in first three criteria or five criteria

Admissions criteria	Unconditional				Conditional			
	Top 3 (%)	Top 5 (%)	Top 3 (%)	Top 5 (%)	Mode	Median	Mean	S.D.
Sibling	92.55	95.29	96.87	99.74	1	2	1.78	0.86
Geographical	68.1	85.9	77.29	97.48	2	2	2.58	1.47
Special need	44.8	47.66	92.62	98.54	1	1	1.71	1.24
Child of staff	30.17	39.81	69.01	91.06	3	3	3.16	1.77
Feeder	25.22	35.01	65.78	91.33	3	3	3.05	1.56
Religious	14.13	14.99	93.48	99.19	1	1	1.45	1.03
Test	10.78	10.81	99.72	100	1	1	1.03	0.24
Pupil Premium	4.65	5.23	88.82	100	1	1	1.75	1.12
Child of Army/ former student	1.32	1.79	62.32	84.06	3	3	3.48	1.77

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Over-subscription information collected from Local Authority for the most recent year available before the 2020-2021 school year.

Note: An observation is a school - criterion pair. Each school is counted more than once if the school has more than one criterion. Admissions criteria are grouped to aggregate criteria types. Percentages will add to more than 100. "Special need" groups special circumstances, medical need, and international students (1 school). "Quota" and "Banding" are coded as the presence of these features across any school admissions criteria. This table excludes the school admissions criteria that are required by the School Admissions Code from the count of 'top 3' and 'top 5' and position in the over-subscription criteria.

Table A11: The use of feeder school as a criterion

School-type	%	Rank	
		Mean rank	Mean position
All	38.33	3.02	0.55
Non-selective	40	3.02	0.55
Selective	6.75	2.64	0.55
Community	21.97	4.4	0.81
Voluntary Aided/Controlled/Foundation	47.36	2.82	0.43
Academy	43.02	2.98	0.56
Free/Studio/UTC	21.92	2.85	0.6
Non-faith	36.11	3.27	0.64
Faith	56.68	2.36	0.32
Ofsted: Outstanding	38.73	2.78	0.48
Ofsted: Good	42.33	3.1	0.56
Ofsted: Requires Improvement	38.36	3.02	0.57
Ofsted: Inadequate	33.91	3.03	0.58
KS4 quartile: lowest attainment	31	3.11	0.6
KS4 quartile: 2nd lowest	41.59	2.93	0.54
KS4 quartile: 2nd highest	46.15	3.12	0.56
KS4 quartile: highest attainment	42.07	2.97	0.51
LA-type			
Urban: London	16.53	2.46	0.45
Urban: non-London	40.68	2.92	0.52
Town	40.38	3.18	0.58
Rural	49.9	2.95	0.56
3 choices	48.49	3.24	0.59
4+ choices	29.73	2.72	0.51
Inequality: low	47.3	3.12	0.59
Inequality: medium	44.29	3.02	0.55
Inequality: high	27.51	2.91	0.51

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

Note: Observations are at the school level. "Rank" refers to the position of the feeder school criterion in the list of criteria, conditional feeder school being included. "Mean position" refers to the rank within the total list of criteria, conditional feeder school being included. For example, fourth out of eight criteria would have a value of 0.5. "Rank" measures are calculated from the first occurrence of feeder school in the list. This table excludes the criteria that are required by the School Admissions Code from the position in the admissions arrangements. "Selective" schools are self-defined in Edubase as having selective admissions arrangements, meaning admission depends on a pupil's test score. "Community" schools are maintained by the Local Authority. "Academy" schools include sponsored and non-sponsored academies. "Voluntary Aided/Controlled" schools are typically faith schools with more autonomy within the LA-maintained sector. "Free school" includes studio schools (6) and university technical colleges (11). "Ofsted" refers to the most recent full Ofsted inspection before the relevant school choice date (31st October 2019) including inspections made before academy conversion (missing for 82 schools). "KS4 quartile" refers to secondary school performance (attainment) in the 2018/2019 school year. Schools are divided into four equally sized groups (quartiles). Variables for school type, Faith, Ofsted and KS4 performance (attainment) exclude 163 selective schools. "Inequality" refers to the variation in secondary school performance (attainment) within the LA in the 2018/2019 school year. LAs are divided into three equally sized groups, with the "low" inequality group having the lowest variation in secondary school performance (attainment).

Table A12: The use of pupil premium as a criterion

	Unconditional (%)	Conditional (%)	Rank	
All	1.48	4.03	1.62	0.37
Non-selective	1.13	0.45	2.55	0.48
Selective	7.98	71.78	1.48	0.36
Community	0.66	0.66	3.5	0.47
V.A./V.C./Foundation	0.5	0.25	4	0.43
Academy	0.74	0.18	3.16	0.6
Free/Studio/UTC	6.85	3.2	1.68	0.36
Non-faith	1.08	0.36	2.44	0.48
Faith	1.37	0.86	2.9	0.47
Ofsted: Outstanding	1.09	0.73	3.5	0.52
Ofsted: Good	1	0.35	2.48	0.51
Ofsted: Requires Improvement	0.76	0.38	2.6	0.41
Ofsted: Inadequate	1.29	0.43	2.67	0.56
KS4 quartile: lowest attainment	0.28	0.14	2	0.43
KS4 quartile: 2nd lowest	1.08	0.13	3	0.54
KS4 quartile: 2nd highest	1.08	0.67	2.27	0.5
KS4 quartile: highest attainment	1.21	0.67	3.5	0.58
LA-type				
Urban: London	1.81	3.63	1.58	0.38
Urban: non-London	1.18	4.2	1.72	0.37
Town	1.7	4.83	1.52	0.35
Rural	0.96	1.93	2	0.47
3 choices	0.6	1.95	1.68	0.4
4+ choices	2.22	5.8	1.6	0.36
Inequality: low	1.1	0.22	2.36	0.45
Inequality: medium	0.98	0.68	2.47	0.47
Inequality: high	2.13	9.27	1.47	0.36

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year. Note: Observations are at the school level. "Unconditional" refers to pupil premium as a criterion without condition (eg passing an admission test). "Conditional" refers to pupil premium as a criterion with condition (eg passing an admission test). "Rank" refers to the position of the feeder school criterion in the list of criteria, conditional feeder school being included. "Mean position" refers to the rank within the total list of criteria, conditional feeder school being included. For example, fourth out of eight criteria would have a value of 0.5. "Rank" measures are calculated from the first occurrence of feeder school in the list. This table excludes the criteria that are required by the School Admissions Code from the position in the admissions arrangements. "Selective" schools are self-defined in Edubase as having selective admissions arrangements, meaning admission depends on a pupil's test score. "Community" schools are maintained by the Local Authority. "Academy" schools include sponsored and non-sponsored academies. "Voluntary Aided/Controlled" schools are typically faith schools with more autonomy within the LA-maintained sector. "Free school" includes studio schools (6) and university technical colleges (11). "Ofsted" refers to the most recent full Ofsted inspection before the relevant school choice date (31st October 2019) including inspections made before academy conversion (missing for 82 schools). "KS4 quartile" refers to secondary school performance (attainment) in the 2018/2019 school year. Schools are divided into four equally sized groups (quartiles). Variables for school type, Faith, Ofsted and KS4 performance (attainment) exclude 163 selective schools. "Inequality" refers to the variation in secondary school performance (attainment) within the LA in the 2018/2019 school year. LAs are divided into three equally sized groups, with the "low" inequality group having the lowest variation in secondary school performance (attainment).

Table A13: The number of discretionary admissions criteria applied at the school-level

School-type	Mean	S.D.	p.25	p.50	p.75
All	3.47	1.02	3	3	4
Non-selective	3.46	1.01	3	3	4
Selective	3.71	1.25	3	4	5
Community	3.24	0.99	3	3	4
Voluntary Aided/Controlled/Foundation	3.63	1.07	3	4	4
Academy	3.48	0.98	3	3	4
Free/Studio/UTC	3.26	1.1	3	3	4
Non-faith	3.36	0.98	3	3	4
Faith	3.9	1.04	3	4	5
Ofsted: Outstanding	3.69	0.96	3	4	4
Ofsted: Good	3.49	1.04	3	3	4
Ofsted: Requires Improvement	3.27	0.94	3	3	4
Ofsted: Inadequate	3.18	0.95	3	3	4
KS4 quartile: lowest attainment	3.19	0.93	3	3	4
KS4 quartile: 2nd lowest	3.41	1.01	3	3	4
KS4 quartile: 2nd highest	3.52	1.03	3	4	4
KS4 quartile: highest attainment	3.73	0.97	3	4	4
LA-type					
Urban: London	3.5	0.99	3	3	4
Urban: non-London	3.33	1.01	3	3	4
Town	3.53	1.03	3	3	4
Rural	3.5	1.03	3	3	4
3 choices	3.46	1.03	3	3	4
4+ choices	3.49	1.02	3	3	4
Inequality: low	3.39	1.04	3	3	4
Inequality: medium	3.58	1.01	3	4	4
Inequality: high	3.45	1.01	3	3	4

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

Note: The number of criteria excludes those required by the school admissions code (EHCP and Looked After children) and excludes tie-breaking rules such as distance or random numbers, except for when a school's admissions arrangements includes distance as a criterion. "S.D." refers to standard deviation, "p.25" to the 25th percentile, "p.50" to the median, and "p.75" to the 75th percentile. "Selective" schools are self-defined in Edubase as having a selective admissions policy, meaning admission depends on a pupil's test score. "Community" schools are maintained by the Local Authority. "Academy" schools include sponsored and non-sponsored academies. "Voluntary Aided/Controlled" schools are typically faith schools with more autonomy within the LA-maintained sector. "Free school" includes studio schools (6) and university technical colleges (11). "Ofsted" refers to the most recent full Ofsted inspection before the relevant school choice date (31st October 2019) including inspections made before academy conversion (missing for 82 schools). "KS4 quartile" refers to secondary school performance (attainment) in the 2018/2019 school year. Schools are divided into four equally sized groups (quartiles). Variables for school type, Faith, Ofsted and KS4 performance (attainment) exclude 163 selective schools. "Inequality" refers to the variation in secondary school performance (attainment) within the LA in the 2018/2019 school year. LAs are divided into three equally sized groups, with the "low" inequality group having the lowest variation in secondary school performance (attainment).

Table A14: Common combinations of the first eight (discretionary) admissions criteria that were implemented by at least fifteen schools

N	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
155	Sib	Geog						
147	SN	Sib	Geog					
92	Sib&Geog	Geog	Sib					
91	Sib	CoS	Geog					
89	SN	Sib	CoS	Geog				
79	Sib	SN	Geog					
72	SN	Sib&Geog	Geog	Sib				
46	Sib&Geog	Geog	Sib	Geog				
35	SN	CoS	Sib&Geog	Geog	Sib	Feed		
34	Sib	Geog	Geog					
32	Geog	Sib	Feed	Geog				
32	SN	Sib	Feed	Geog				
30	Geog	Sib	SN	Geog				
28	Geog	Sib	Geog					
28	Sib	SN	CoS	Geog				
27	SN	Sib&Geog	Geog&Feed	Geog	Sib	Feed	CoS	
26	Sib&SN	SN	Sib&Geog	Geog	Sib			
25	SN	Sib						
24	Sib&Geog	Geog&SN	Geog	Sib&SN	Sib	SN&Feed	Feed	SN
23	Sib&Rel	Geog&Rel	Rel	Sib	Feed	Rel	Rel	
21	Geog							
21	SN	Sib	Geog	Geog				
20	CoS	Sib	Geog					
17	CoS	Sib	CoS	Geog				
16	SN	CoS	Sib&Geog	Geog	Sib			
15	Geog	Sib						
15	SN	Sib	CoS					
15	SN	Sib&Geog	Geog	Sib	Feed			
15	Sib	Feed	Geog					
15	Sib	Geog	Feed	Geog				
15	Test	Sib	CoS	Geog				
15	Test&PP	Test						

Source: Authors' dataset of secondary school admissions arrangements (3,244 schools). Secondary school admissions arrangements collected from Local Authority and school websites for entry to the 2020-2021 school year.

Note: The combination of criteria includes those required by the school admissions code (EHCP and Looked After children) and excludes tie-breaking rules such as distance or random numbers. 'Sib' denotes 'Sibling', 'Geog' denotes any geographical criteria (such as Catchment Area or distance), 'SN' denotes 'Special Circumstances' and/or 'Medical Need' (also one school that gives priority for International Students), 'CoS' denotes 'Child of Staff', 'Feed' denotes 'Feeder', 'Rel' denotes 'Religious', 'PP' denotes 'Pupil Premium', 'CoAF' denotes 'Child of Armed Forces' (also one school that gives priority to Alumni).

B Description of data collection and data

In this Appendix, we provide a further description of data collection and data sources.

The data collection has been conducted in September 2020 for the universe of public secondary schools in England⁴⁸ (3,244 schools). Data include relevant information, for the entry into Year 7, concerning each admission criterion, the order in which it is applied, the tie-breaking rule used when ties happen, and the existence of quotas. The primary source is information published in guidance booklets by the 150 Local Authorities in England⁴⁹ (See Figure 22 for an example). The absence of common patterns and structures in the booklets prevented the possibility to use webscraping, thus data collection was conducted manually, funded by the Keynes Fund and conducted by Min Zhang. When necessary, information collected from booklets has been integrated with information published by school websites. In case the relevant information was not included either on the booklets or on the school websites, we directly contacted individual schools.

At times, specific assumptions and simplifications have been necessary because of data limitations. In the following, we provide a detailed discussion of the main criteria. Tables A16 and A15 report the complete list of all criteria.

Order of admission criteria

EHCP and Looked After: The admission code policy requires that children with a statement of special education needs (EHCP) should have priority over others. As a consequence, we document that the first category in admission criteria is always “EHCP”. The second criterion is usually “Looked after”, which refers to children who are or were in public care. However, some of the religious schools that prioritise children of the affiliated religion give priority to looked after or previously looked after religious children. Thus, the religious schools often give priority to “Non-Religious Looked after” children only after the allocation of religious places.

Aptitude test (quota): The school may choose to allocate up to 10% of the available places to children who have demonstrated an aptitude in the school’s specialist subject area(s).⁵⁰ Where children seek for admission to the school on the basis of their aptitude, they will be invited for a test or an audition. We placed the criterion of “Aptitude test (quota)” to the top of the admission criteria list, following the “EHCP” and “Looked after”.

Year 6: All pupils enrolled as year 6 student at designated primary schools (or the primary phase if the school is all-through) during the school year 2019-2020 will automatically transfer to the secondary school in 2020-2021. The year 6 pupils will be accommodated within the Published Admission Number (PAN). The PAN is shared between designated places for pupils who are currently enrolled in year 6 at the named primary school and new entrants to be admitted

⁴⁸The only exception is Isles of Scilly for which we did not find data on admissions arrangements. However, in Isles of Scilly there is only one all-through school, with five sites. Thus, we assumed that this school admits all the children on the islands.

⁴⁹Some authorities did not provide summary information in booklets, but provide individual weblinks to the documents containing the admission policy of each school (e.g., Bristol).

⁵⁰These usually include technology, sport, dance, music, and art.

for year 7 through the coordinated application process. Due to its automatic admission process, this criterion is also placed at the top of the admissions arrangements list.

The order of faith-related criteria: In the case where priority will be given to a proportion of PAN to pupils who are practising the named religion, the related categories for religious children would be moved to the top of the list of admissions arrangements, following the “EHCP” and “Looked after” children.

Prioritising the next criterion: When the school cannot accommodate all applicants meeting one of the criteria, the school determines those who meet the next criterion. This could be mentioned in the body of over admissions arrangements or in the notes. This practice was found to be a common arrangement in a few of Local Authorities (e.g., East Riding of Yorkshire; Stoke-on-Trent). We recorded this phenomenon, but no further adjustment for practice of prioritising the next criterion was made in the records of admission criteria.

Priorities

Special circumstances: Special circumstances usually include exceptional medical/social/psychological needs of children (or parents, depending on the practice across Local Authorities). Evidence must be provided from a medical consultant, social worker, or similar professional, and should indicate why the need makes it essential that the child attends the preferred school rather than any other. Note that this criterion should not be confused with the “EHCP” (special education needs) category. Criteria that can be considered to merge into the category of special circumstances are related to:

- Medical need: Children with a proven medical need
- Domestic circumstances: Pupils for whom there are exceptional personal/domestic circumstances presented by the parents that justify the admission to the school (in the school’s view) at the time of the application.

Feeder schools: Feeder schools are defined as schools reported to give priority to pupils who are currently attending one of the named primary schools. It is common that academies prioritise pupils who are attending one of the primary schools under the same academy trust; or for, religious schools, to prioritise pupils who are attending one of the primary religious schools in the own (and neighbouring) parishes. When a criterion is not identified as “Feeder”:

1. Priority is given to pupils who attend any of the state-funded primary schools within the Local Authority.
2. Priority is given to pupils who attend a primary school that shares the same religious character. This is recorded in a separate category: “Attend a religious primary” school.

3. Places are allocated in accordance with a quota system which is defined by proportions of the total number of pupils attending primary schools across the Local Authority area who are due to transfer to secondary school.

Catchment: At times, the definitions of catchment areas could be complex. In the following, we report some special considerations.

- Any catchment areas that are made up of catchments for named primary schools are still treated as “catchment” instead of “feeder school”.
- Catchment areas could be defined as areas within a radius of a certain distance around the school.
- Catchment areas may refer to selected postcodes.
- Catchment areas may be given different priorities to children living in the same catchment area.⁵¹ In cases like this, we recorded the catchment in two separate criteria to reflect the complexity of admission policy.
- When a school allocated a quota of PAN to applicants living outside the catchment, the criterion would be placed at the bottom of admissions arrangements.
- A criterion that involves children living in certain areas may not be treated as catchment. For instance, if:
 - The designated area (e.g., Local Authority, diocese, district) is too large to be considered a catchment area.
 - There is a proportional arrangement: the school allocates places to applicants in proportion to the numbers of applicants living in different areas. Anyway, by the proportional arrangement, the school does not prefer or discriminate pupils living in different areas. Although the school provides a list of areas, we do not consider it catchment.

Children of staff: In general, children of staff are given priority to the staff’s school. However, some schools limit the number of places that can be allocated to this group category. Because of the small number of pupils admitted under the category of children of staff, we did not document whether there was a quota applied to this category. Schools may give priority to children of founders/directors of the school, as well. The criterion for children of founder/director has been combined with the criterion that prioritise children of staff. When the admission policy specifically states the priority for children of founder/director over children of staff, we treated it as two separate criteria.

Pupil Premium: The term “Pupil Premium” in admission criteria refer to pupils who receive free school meals. The term “Child of Armed Forces” refers, instead, to pupils who are given

⁵¹For instance, Brookfield Community School reports to give priority to children living in the catchment area of Brookfield Community School whose home is south of a line formed by Shore Road, leading to Warsash Road, leading to Dibles Road over children living in the rest of the catchment area.

priorities because they are eligible for Service Premium or because their parents are or were in the Armed Forces. We include the criterion giving priority to children who are eligible for free school meals or service premium in the categories of “Pupil Premium”.

Distance: The distance criterion can be quite complex and contains the following separate categories:

- Distance (straight-line): The distance is measured in a straight line using geographical information provided by the Local Authority.
- Distance (travel route): The distance is measured in the shortest walking route or public roads.
- Relative distance: Relative distance is measured by the result of the shortest distance from home address minus the shortest distance to the nearest/next nearest school. The lower the ranking value, the higher the priority for a place. Depending on whether the distance is measured in straight line or in walking route, we created separate categories “relative distance (straight line)” and “relative distance (travel route)”.
- Nearest school: Priority is given to children who are applying for a place at the nearest school to their home address.

Day places: Schools may have day places and boarding places. For schools that offer both day places and boarding places, we record the admission criteria for day places. Instead, we record the admission criteria for boarding places if the school does not have day places.

Banding: Schools that use banding tests usually give priority to children who take the test over those who do not. This is not recorded as one of the criteria. However, we still record whether the school ran banding tests for the 2020-2021 admission.

Over-subscription status

When a clear indicator for over-subscription status is not available, we use other criteria to identify whether the school was over-subscribed. In the following, we report the main ones.

- We consider if places allocated on the allocation day are equal to or larger than the PAN that year.⁵²
 - The number of total allocations may exceed the PAN without the LA allocations or other specified reasons (such as settled appeals or accommodating multiple births). This is not uncommon, and the furthest distance measure might not be available. While there was no clear reason for why the school has exceeded its PAN, we had to treat it as over-subscribed.

⁵²This eventually excludes places allocated by LA, i.e., allocation to the school where it has not been possible to offer a space at their preferred schools

- The school would not be considered over-subscribed if the number of total allocations has exceeded the PAN only when the LA allocations were included.
- We consider if the number of refused application was larger than zero.
- We consider if the number of vacancies at National Offer Day was zero or smaller than zero.
- We consider if the number of children placed on waiting lists at the time of allocation was larger than zero.
- We consider if the number of appeals was larger than zero.
- We consider if the number of the first preferences was equal to or larger than the PAN that year.⁵³
- We consider if the number of first preferences expressed was larger than the number of first preferences allocated, which would suggest that some of the first preferences expressed were refused.

One concern is that Local Authorities may not provide the historical records of the PAN in published allocation summary for previous years. In this case, we use the PAN 2020-2021 and had to assume that the PAN did not change over the years. Note that when the number of total preferences/applications was larger than the PAN, the school was not necessarily over-subscribed, as parents are usually allowed to submit 3-6 preferences. However, when the number of total preferences/applications was smaller than the PAN, the school would be identified as under-subscribed. With available information, we sometimes had to make an educated guess.

However, there could still be some limitations. For instance, we could not identify over-subscription status when only the PAN and the number of total applications were available. Similarly, it is not realistically possible to make educated guess on over-subscription status when the information of the numbers of allocated places was not provided and the number of first preferences is smaller than the PAN and the school did not receive appeals. The information of the numbers of allocated places is crucial to understand the allocation records. Without such information, it is unreasonable to expect parents to make an informed decision. Note also that when under-subscription status was made clear for an under-subscribed school and the furthest distance offered was provided for some of the schools in the same local council area, we could assume that the schools with the distance information were over-subscribed even though there was no other information that can be used to identify over-subscription status other than the distance.

Further considerations on distance: A number of under-subscribed schools provided the furthest distance of the last child admitted. We recorded the distance measures regardless of over-subscription status.

⁵³Note that it is the number of the first preference, not the number of total preferences/applications. This indicator could be less reliable since after receiving the offer from the first preferred school, parents still hold the right to reject the offer

Note that schools in rural areas, especially if under-subscribed, could have massive values for distance to the last child admitted.⁵⁴

A few Local Authorities did not provide a unit of measurement. We do not know if the distance was measured in kilometres, miles, or metres. One possible solution to this issue is to refer to the unit of measurement used for transport and assume that the Local Authority would keep it consistent.

Where a school was using banding and reported the distance for each band, we used the furthest distance from the school. Note that some Local Authorities listed the use of banding as the reason the furthest distance was not available for over-subscribed schools.

Where a school reported the distance from the school separately for pupils admitted under the faith criterion and those admitted under non-faith criteria, we took the furthest distance from the school of the non-faith pupils.

Where the distance measures were made available for both the initial allocation (in March) and the final allocation (in August), we used the distance taken at the initial allocation.

Sometimes the distance of the last admitted child is available, but the criterion under which the child was admitted was not entirely distance-based. We take note of these cases.

Note that Local Authorities may not provide the information of the criterion under which the last child was admitted. As a result, the absence of such information does not suggest that the distance refers to the criterion that was entirely distance-based.

For schools that run proportional allocations to different catchments and provide the maximum distance allocated for each area under the catchment criterion, we record the smallest value (i.e., the most restricted) as the home-school distance.

The distance figures provided by Local Authorities across England do not have the same precision, ranging from 1 to 4 decimal places.⁵⁵

Distance unavailable: The records of furthest distance offered can be available for other years, but not for 2019. The following conditions may explain why an over-subscribed school may not have the distance of the last admitted child available:

- The school is not maintained/controlled by the Local Authority. Local Authority may provide the information regarding the distance of the last admitted child only for community schools and voluntarily controlled schools (e.g., Bristol). Parents are required to contact the school to get the information of previous allocation
- The school is a selective school
- The criterion under which the last place was offered was not distance-based (e.g., random allocation, feeder schools, sibling, children of staff, catchment, religiosity).

⁵⁴For example, in an extreme case, Onslow St Audreys School in Hertfordshire (over-subscribed in 2019) reported 158733.04 metres

⁵⁵One school, for instance, is simply recorded > 20 for the distance. In a case like this, we replaced > 20 with 20 in order to keep the numeric storage type.

Distance pin: Most of the schools, while applying the distance-based criteria or tiebreakers, measure the distance between home address and the school site. But this does not apply in all cases. In addition, a few schools measure the distance between the home address and multiple nodal points.

Religious schools

In the following, we report some considerations related in particular to religious schools.

Siblings: As for non-religious schools, prioritising siblings is also a common practice for religious schools. However, religious schools often list the preference for siblings in notes or in tie-breaking rule rather including it directly as one of admissions arrangements. We take note of this specificity. When the admission policy of a religious school does not mention the sibling-related criteria in the booklet published by Local Authority, we always double-checked on the admission document retrieved from the school website. Occasionally the booklet might have left out the preference for siblings by mistake because the preference was not listed in the section of admissions arrangements. The same issue was also found, albeit less frequently, for the preferences for living in a certain parish and attending feeder school.

Inconsistent religious characters: At times there could be some inconsistencies. For instance, we found that two schools report prioritising religious children but do not actually have religious character/ethos according to the administrative records. We decided to leave these two schools as non-religious.

Tie-breaking and degree of religiosity: Religious schools may use the degree of religious commitment as a criterion or tiebreaker, usually assessed by attendance at religious services or meetings, proof of initiation rites, or status of parental involvement in the religious institution. We did not differentiate the types of religious commitment, and we only consider one general “Religious” admission criterion.

Other considerations: In the following, we report a handful of other specifics.

- Religious schools may prefer religious pupils who practice religion at named places of worship over those who worship somewhere else. This does not refer to catchment or feeder schools, but solely the place of worship. We did not incorporate the preference for place of worship when coding the admission criteria.
- After filling the places allocated to baptised catholic children, most of Catholic schools prioritise Baptised Eastern Christian Church children over children of other denominations. This criterion is a common practice of catholic schools and is seen only in catholic schools, not in schools of other religion. However, we do not consider this further distinction.
- A handful of religious schools prioritised children whose parents work at a named place of worship. This is distinguished from the category of “child of staff”. However, we do not consider a separate criterion, and we treat it just as “Religious”.
- Children of at least one religious parent were identified as “Religious” (even though the religiosity of the child may be not certificated).

Unusual individual cases

In the following we report some unusual individual cases and omissions, that we documented and required us to exclude them or make particular assumptions.

- The Five Islands Academy is the only one school (with five sites) in the Isles of Scilly; the school does not have admissions arrangements. As a result, we did not collect admission data for the Isles of Scilly.
- The admission policy data for Year 7 2020-2021 entry is not available for Southend-on-Sea. We use the 2021-2022 policies instead. ⁵⁶
- Three Local Authorities have available information of distance of last place offered for other years but not for 2019: Essex, Southend-on-Sea, Torbay.
- It was unclear whether the distance data provided by Liverpool council refer to 2019-2020 or 2020-2021; the header merely says “last year”. The records of over-subscription status and distance of the last child admitted were published on the webpage for each school. Thus, We treated the distance data of Liverpool for the 2019-2020 intake at the current stage.
- The school allocation summary in Wiltshire appeared to use a mixture of different units of measurement for the distance of last place offered in the 2019 admission. The document published by Wiltshire council did not describe the unit of measurement.
- One school, Elizabeth Woodville School in Northamptonshire, in 2019 was over-subscribed for south campus (the distance of the last place offered was available and under-subscribed for north campus). The admission policy applied to both south campus and north campus, although the campuses did have different catchment areas and feeder schools. We considered the school as over-subscribed and obtained the distance from the over-subscribed south campus.
- The 2020-2021 admission policy of Ortu Hassenbrook Academy in Thurrock reported on the booklet by Thurrock council “Secondary Admission Information September 2020” (page 26-27) is inconsistent with the policy document retrieved from the school website. We took the admissions arrangements from the booklet.
- One Degree Academy in Enfield was dropped from the records of admission policy due to no intake for Year 7.
- There are few schools that closed without a secondary successor by the admission date of 2020-2021 Year 7 entry but published their admission policy in the council website. Their admission criteria are still included in the data.
- Few schools have been closed with a successor due to amalgamation by the admission date of 2020-2021 Year 7 entry (and were included in the spreadsheet). We kept the records of admission policy of both the closed school and its successor.

⁵⁶There are currently 12 secondary schools in Southend-on-Sea.

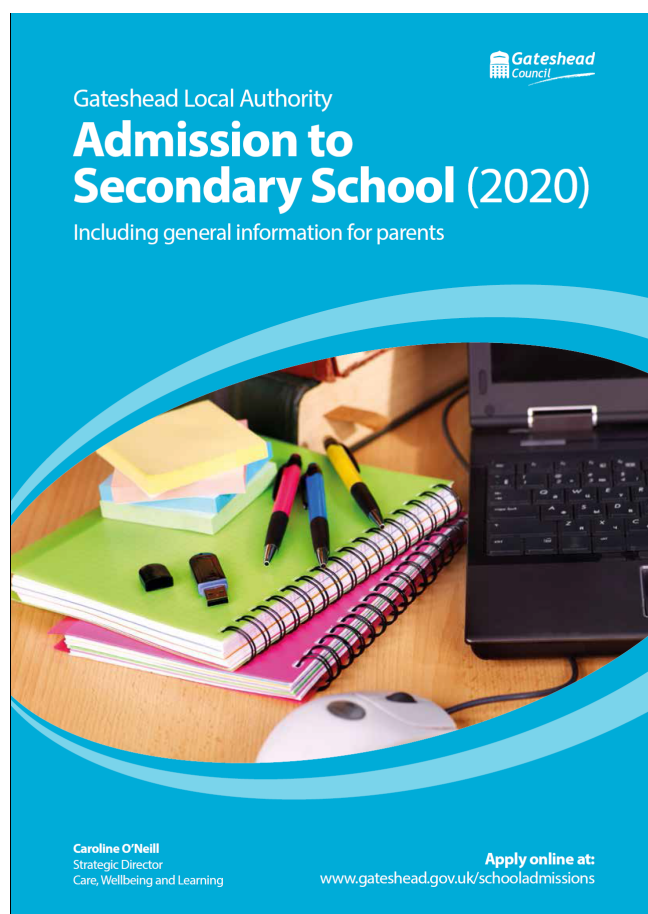
- There are few new schools that planned to open in September 2020 and published their admission policy in the council website but then delay opening until September 2021. We recorded them in the data.

Linked datasets

Our collected dataset has then been linked to data on school admissions to school level data provided by the Department for Education. These latter include:

- School location defined by British National Grid
- Proportion of free school meal pupils
- School type
- Ofsted rating (at last inspection)
- School performance indicators including Progress 8 and Achievement 8 scores

Figure 22: Example of a guidance booklet



Note: The figure shows an example of a guidance booklet published for entry to the 2020-2021 school year by the Local Authority of Gateshead.

Table A15: Non-Faith Criteria

Criterion	Explanation
EHCP	Children with Education, Health and Care Plans
Looked after	Children in care of a local authority, or who were cared for previously, or provided with accommodation but ceased to be so due to adoption, child arrangement, or special guardianship order
CA	Children who live in catchment area
Child of staff (more than two years; fill vacancy)	Children of staff who have been employed at the named school for two or more years at the time at which the application for admission to the named school is made, and/or staff recruited to fill vacant posts for which there is a demonstrable skill shortage; Children of directors/founders.
Child of staff (more than two years) & feeder	Children of staff who have been employed at the named school for two or more years and who are attending one of named feeder primary schools

Table A15 Continued: Non-Faith Criteria

Child of staff (more than two years) & CA	Children of staff who have been employed at the named school for two or more years and who live in the catchment
Child of staff	Children of staff employed at school at the time of application
Sibling	Children with a sibling attending the school at the time of application
Feeder	Children who attend a feeder school
CA & feeder & sibling	Children who live in the catchment area and who attend primary schools within the catchment area and who have a sibling at the academy at the time of admission
CA & sibling	Children who live in the catchment area with a sibling at the school at the time of admission
CA or sibling	Children who live in the catchment area or have a sibling at the school at the time of admission
CA & feeder	Children who live in the catchment area who attend the one of the named feeder schools within it
CA or feeder	Children who live in the catchment area or attend the one of the named feeder schools within it
Feeder & sibling	Children who attend a feeder school and who have a sibling at the school at the time of admission
Sibling & X-miles	Children who have a sibling at the school and who live within x miles of the school
Feeder & X-miles	Children who are attending of the named feeder primary schools and who lives within x miles of the school
Selected post-codes	Children residing with selected postcodes
Special circumstances	Children for whom the Governing Body accepts that they have proven, exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances, and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant
CA & Special circumstances	Children living within the designated area with proven exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances, and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant
Sibling & Special circumstances	Children who have a sibling at the school and proven exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant
Feeder & Special circumstances	Children who attend one of the named feeder schools and who have proven exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances, and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant

Table A15 Continued: Non-Faith Criteria

Medical need	Children with a proven medical need and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant
Medical need & CA	Children with a proven medical need and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant
Domestic circumstances	Pupils for whom there are exceptional personal/domestic circumstances presented by the parents that justify at the time of application, in the school's view, admission to the school
Resource base	Up to x places are allocated to the Resource Base by the Local Authority, who administer these admissions
LA (quota)	Up to x children resident in the Local Authority
Aptitude test (quota)	Up to 10% of the intake who most clearly demonstrate an aptitude in a specialist area by a test administered by the school
Test score (rank)	For selective schools: Applicants who achieve the qualifying test scores in this category will be ranked by test score
Test & top (quota)	For selective schools: Up to x places will be allocated to the applicants in the top of x selective places in the entrance test
Test & top (quota) & CA	For selective schools: Up to x places will be allocated to the applicants in the top of x selective places in the entrance test and residing within catchment area
Test & feeder	For selective schools: Applicants who achieve the qualifying test scores and attend one of the named feeder primary school
Test & CA	For selective schools: Applicants who achieve the qualifying test scores and live within the school catchment area
Test & CA & sibling	For selective schools: Applicants who achieve the qualifying test scores, live within the school catchment area, and have an older sibling at the school
Test & sibling	For selective schools: Applicants who achieve the qualifying test scores and have an older sibling at the school
Test & child of staff	For selective schools: Applicants who achieve the qualifying test scores and whose parents work at the school
Test & distance (straight line)	For selective schools: Applicants who achieve the qualifying test scores in this category will be ranked by the straight-line distance from home address to school
Pupil premium	Children attracting the Pupil Premium/free school meals (this may be limited to no more than x pupils in this category)
Pupil premium & CA	Children attracting the Pupil Premium/free school meals who reside within the catchment area
Pupil premium & test	For selective schools: Applicants attracting the Pupil Premium/free school meals who achieve the qualifying score
Pupil premium & test (quota)	For selective schools: Up to x places allocated to applicants attracting the Pupil Premium/free school meals who achieve the qualifying score

Table A15 Continued: Non-Faith Criteria

Pupil premium & CA & test	Children attracting the Pupil Premium who achieve the qualifying score and live within the school catchment area
Child of Armed Forces	Children of members of the UK Armed Forces or children attracting Service Premium
Child of Armed Forces & test	For selective schools: Children who achieve the qualifying test scores and attract Service Premium or whose parents are/were members of the UK Armed Forces in the local area
Child of Armed Forces & CA	Children of members of the UK Armed Forces or children attracting Service Premium; and children reside within catchment
Child of Armed Forces & sibling	Children of members of the UK Armed Forces or children attracting Service Premium; and children have a sibling at the school
Child of Armed Forces & CA & sibling	Children of members of the UK Armed Forces or children attracting Service Premium; and children reside within catchment and have a sibling at the school
Distance (straight line)	Children living nearest the school by shortest straight-line distance
Distance (travel route)	Children living nearest the school according to the shortest walking travel route/public roads
Nearest only school	Children for whom the preferred school is their nearest school offering a secondary education
CA & Nearest only school	Children residing within the catchment for whom the preferred school is their nearest school offering a secondary education
Sibling & only school available	Children for whom the preferred school is their nearest school offering a secondary education and who have a sibling at the school at the time of admission
Sibling at feeder	Children who have a sibling at a feeder primary school at the time of admission
Sibling at a linked secondary	Children who have a sibling at a linked secondary at the time of admission
Sibling at feeder or linked secondary	Children who have a sibling at a linked secondary or at a feeder primary school at the time of admission
Sibling or Child of staff	Children who have a sibling at the time of admission or whose parents work at the school
Multiple births	Children of multiple birth who apply for the schools together

Table A15 Continued: Non-Faith Criteria

CA & multiple births	Children of multiple birth who reside within the catchment and apply for the schools together
Rural	Children who live in a rural parish; rural parish being defined as a place having a parish council but no town council
Alumni	Children of former students
Year 6	Children on roll in Year 6 will automatically transfer to Year 7 and therefore are not required to submit the school as a preference
International	This is for children who demonstrate they have benefitted from a strong and positive influence of a language and/or culture other than English
Autism or hearing impairment	Places will be allocated to children with autism or hearing impairment
Boarding need	For schools that offer only boarding places: children with a statement of a boarding need
Others	All children who do not meet oversubscription criteria and have listed the school as a preference
Random	Random allocation will be used to decide who has highest priority for admission. The random allocation process will be independently verified (or by local council)

Table A16: Faith-Related Criteria

Criterion	Explanation
Religious looked after	Religious children who are in the care of a local authority (children in care) or provided with accommodation by them (e.g. children with foster parents) and religious children who were previously looked after
Religious	Children of religion affiliated with the preferred school (with a confirmation signed by a local religious leader)
Religious & CA	Religious children who live in designated areas
Religious & CA & sibling	Religious children who live in designated areas and have a sibling attending the school at the time of application
Religious & feeder	Religious children attending a designated feeder school
Religious & CA & feeder	Religious children who live in designated areas and attend a designated feeder school
Religious & sibling	Religious children who have a sibling attending the school at the time of application

Table A16 Continued: Faith-Related Criteria

Religious & feeder & sibling	Religious children who have a sibling attending the school at the time of application and attend a designated feeder school
Religious & CA & feeder & sibling	Religious children who (1) live in designated areas (2) attends a named feeder school (3) have a sibling attending the school at the time of application
Religious & CA or Feeder	Religious children who live in designated areas or attend a designated feeder school
Religious & general religious primary	Religious children who currently attend a religious primary schools (unspecified)
Religious & CA & general religious primary	Religious children who (1) live in designated areas and (2) currently attend a religious primary schools (unspecified)
Religious & CA & sibling & general religious primary	Religious children who (1) live in designated areas (2) have a sibling attending the school at the time of application and (3) currently attend a religious primary schools (unspecified)
Religious & sibling & general religious primary	Religious children who (1) have a sibling attending the school at the time of application and (2) currently attend a religious primary schools (unspecified)
Attend a religious primary	Non-religious children who currently attend a religious primary schools (unspecified)
Attend a religious primary & sibling	Non-religious children who (1) have a sibling attending the school at the time of application (2) currently attend a religious primary schools (unspecified)
Attend a religious primary & sibling & CA	Non-religious children who (1) live in designated areas (2) have a sibling attending the school at the time of application (2) currently attend a religious primary schools (unspecified)
Attend a primary of other denominations or religions	Non-religious children who attend a primary school of other denomination and world faiths
Religious & special circumstance	Religious children for whom the Governing Body accepts that they have proven, exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances, and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant

Table A16 Continued: Faith-Related Criteria

Religious & special circumstance & feeder	Religious children (1) for whom the Governing Body accepts that they have proven, exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances, and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant, and (2) who attend one of the named feeder primary schools
Religious & special circumstance & sibling	Religious children (1) for whom the Governing Body accepts that they have proven, exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances, and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant, and (2) who have a sibling attending the school at the time of application
Religious & special circumstance & CA	Religious children (1) for whom the Governing Body accepts that they have proven, exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances, and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant, and (2) who live in designated areas
Religious & special circumstance & CA & sibling	Religious children (1) for whom the Governing Body accepts that they have proven, exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances, and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant, (2) who live in designated areas, and (3) who have a sibling attending the school at the time of application
Religious & child of staff (two years or fill vacancy)	Religious children of staff appointed by the Governors to permanent positions at the school for two or more years at the time at which the application is made, and/or the member of staff is recruited to fill a vacant post for which there is a demonstrable skill shortage
Religious & child of staff	Religious children of a member of staff
Religious & child of staff & feeder	Religious children of a member of staff who attend a named feeder primary school
Religious & Aptitude test (quota)	Up to 10% of the PAN allocated to religious children and most clearly demonstrate an aptitude in a specialist area by a test administered by the school
Religious & test	For selective schools: Religious children who achieve the qualifying tests scores
Religious & test & CA	For selective schools: Religious children who (1) achieve the qualifying tests scores and (2) live in designated areas
Religious & test & CA & feeder	For selective schools: Religious children who (1) achieve the qualifying tests scores, (2) live in designated areas, and (3) attend a named feeder primary school
Religious & test & sibling	For selective schools: Religious children who (1) achieve the qualifying tests scores and (2) have a sibling attending the school at the time of application

Table A16 Continued: Faith-Related Criteria

Religious & pupil premium	Religious children who attract Pupil Premium / free school meals
Religious & child of Armed Forces	Religious children who attract Service Premium or those of members of the UK Armed Forces
Religious & pupil premium & test	Religious children (1) who attract Service Premium or those of members of the UK Armed Forces; (2) who achieve the qualifying test scores
Religious & pupil premium & CA	Religious children (1) who attract Pupil Premium / free school meals and (2) who reside within the designated area
Religious & pupil premium & test & CA	Religious children (1) who attract Service Premium or those of members of the UK Armed Forces; (2) who achieve the qualifying test scores; and (3) who reside within the designated area
Religious & distance (straightline)	Religious children living nearest the school by shortest straight-line distance
Religious & distance (travel route)	Religious children living nearest the school according to the shortest walking travel route/public roads
Religious & Nearest school	Religious children for whom the preferred school is their nearest school offering a secondary education
Religious & Nearest school & sibling	Religious children (1) for whom the preferred school is their nearest school offering a secondary education; (2) who have a sibling attending the school at the time of application
Other denominations	Children of other denominations whose membership is evidenced by a minister of faith leader
Other denominations & feeder	Children of a recognised denomination who are attending one of the named feeder primary schools
Other denominations & sibling	Children of a recognised denomination who have a sibling attending the school at the time of admission
Other denominations & feeder & sibling	Children of a recognised denomination who attend one of the named feeder primary schools and have a sibling attending the school at the time of admission
Other denominations & CA	Children of a recognised denomination who live in the catchment

Table A16 Continued: Faith-Related Criteria

Other denominations & CA & sibling	Children of a recognised denomination who live in the catchment and have a sibling attending the school at the time of admission
Other denominations & general religious school	Children of a recognised denomination who attend a religious primary school
Other denominations & general religious school & sibling	Children of a recognised denomination who attend a religious primary school and have a sibling attending the school at the time of admission
Other denominations & test	Children of a recognised denomination who achieve the qualifying test scores
Other denominations & test & sibling	Children of a recognised denomination who achieve the qualifying test scores and have a sibling attending the school at the time of admission
Other denominations & test & CA	Children of a recognised denomination who achieve the qualifying test scores and live in the catchment
Other denominations & child of staff	Children of a recognised denomination who achieve the qualifying test scores and live in the catchment
Other denominations & child of Armed Forces	Children of a recognised denomination who attract Service Premium or whose parents are/were in the UK Armed Forces
Other denominations & special circumstances	Children of a recognised denomination for whom the Governing Body accepts that they have proven, exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances, and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant
Other denominations & distance (straight line)	Children of a recognised denomination living nearest the school by shortest straight-line distance
Other denominations & distance (travel route)	Children of a recognised denomination living nearest the school by shortest travel distance

Table A16 Continued: Faith-Related Criteria

Other religions	Children of any recognised world faith community whose membership is evidenced by a minister of faith leader
Other religions & CA	Children of any recognised world faith community who live in catchment area
Other religions & CA & sibling	Children of any recognised world faith community who live in catchment area and have a sibling attending the school at the time of admission
Other religions & feeder	Children of any recognised world faith community who attend one of the named feeder schools
Other religions & sibling	Children of any recognised world faith community who have a sibling attending the school at the time of admission
Other religions & feeder & sibling	Children of any recognised world faith community who attend one of the named feeder schools and have a sibling attending the school at the time of admission
Other religions & child of staff	Children of any recognised world faith community whose parent works at the school
Other religions & general religious school	Children of any recognised world faith community who attend a religious school
Other religions & general religious school & sibling	Children of any recognised world faith community who attend a religious school and have a sibling attending the school at the time of admission
Other religions & special circumstances	Children of any recognised world faith community for whom the Governing Body accepts that they have proven, exceptionally strong special, medical/social/psychological circumstances, and non-placement at the school would not be in the best interest of the applicant
Other religions & distance (straight line)	Children of any recognised world faith community living nearest the school by shortest straight-line distance
Other religions & distance (travel route)	Children of any recognised world faith community living nearest the school by shortest travel distance

C Do parents have enough information?

Making school choices is a time-consuming task for parents in England. The publicly available information available to parents is vast, including school performance tables provided by the Department for Education (including information on staffing, funding, and pupil composition in

addition to attainment and pupil progress measures) and school inspection grades from Ofsted. In some areas of the country, however, parents would find it very difficult to find full information about school admissions arrangements.

This is a crucial factor in parents' choices: given the restricted choice list length in England, parents want to avoid 'wasting' choices on over-subscribed schools where they have no chance of being admitted, given the admissions arrangements (Walker and Weldon (2020)). Even with an unrestricted school choice list, providing full information about admissions arrangements to parents would reduce the complexity and time involved with making school choices. This section describes some challenges that we faced when collecting schools' admissions arrangements. These challenges would be likely to be even greater for parents making school choices for the first time. This section will show that in some areas of England, parents do not have good enough information about schools' admissions arrangements. Information can be either incomplete, unclear or incorrect.

C.1 Central provision of admissions criteria

"The School Admissions Code makes it clear that all admissions authorities (including individual schools operating outside LA control) are required to publish a copy of their arrangements on their website (DfE, 2012)." (Morris (2014)) Although not required by law, in most cases (67%), the LA collates information for all schools (whether the schools are LA-maintained or not) to provide to parents in one document. Secondary school booklets published by LAs, if any, vary remarkably regarding the complexity of information provided. Some authorities did not provide booklets that summarise school information, but offered individual weblinks to the documents that contained the admissions policy of each school. Parents living in these LAs would have to access to every single document for the information required for school admission.

C.2 The provision of over-subscription information

LAs are expected to publish information of whether the school was over-subscribed in the past years to aid parents' decision-making. LAs have not made it easy to inform parents if a school was over-subscribed or not. Only a few LAs explicitly stated the records of whether a school was over-subscribed. The information provided by most LAs is at best obscure and at worst misleading. The provision appears to be slightly better than in the early 2000s, when 42% of schools provided insufficient information to determine over-subscription (Coldron et al. (2008)).

A few LAs (e.g., Camden, Barking & Dagenham, Newham, Lancashire) provided the Published Admission Number (PAN) and the number of applications made last year as the reference to the over-subscription status of local schools. Figure 23 shows the information provided by Camden, for example. This information is insufficient to determine whether each school is over-subscribed, however. This is because each parent can list up to six preferred schools, and the number of applications reported by Camden (and others) is the total number of these. During the school allocation process, however, once a pupil has been allocated to a school, their remaining choices are no longer relevant. For example, if a pupil makes six choices, and is

Figure 23: Incomplete information about over-subscription: Secondary school allocation statistics: Camden, 2018, 2019

School	No. places in 2019	Number of applications		Looked after children		SEN allocations		Siblings		Social/medical	
		2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018
Acland Burghley School	178	739	608	1	0	6	13	45	34	3	0
Camden School for Girls	120	684	607	1	2	2	2	28	26	4	0
Hampstead School	210	621	643	0	0	11	12	66	69	0	1
Haverstock School	180	331	435	1	0	4	5	48	35	0	0
La Sainte Union	180	422	438	0	0	0	0	*	*	*	*
Maria Fidelis	150	390	366	0	0	7	5	*	*	*	*
Parliament Hill	180	668	618	1	1	2	2	32	33	0	1
Regent High	180	355	367	0	0	4	7	48	47	1	0
UCL Academy	180	1087	1090	0	1	11	9	75	59	0	1
William Ellis	130	479	505	2	1	4	1	28	23	0	2

* Please contact the school directly for this information

Source: Booklet “Secondary Schools in Camden 2020”, p52.

Figure 24: Incomplete information about over-subscription: Secondary voluntary aided schools allocation statistics: Bury, 2019

School	Agreed Admission No for Sept 2020	No. of First/All Preferences for the school in 2019	No. of children on intake list for Sept 2019	Number of successful appeals
Bury C of E High	162	191/497	163	1
Manchester Mesivta Jewish School	40	51/53	50	0
St. Gabriel's Roman Catholic High	210	289/561	219	10
St. Monica's Roman Catholic High	230	209/397	221	-

Source: Booklet “Transfer to Secondary School”, Bury, 2019, p9.

allocated to their second choice school, then four of their choices become irrelevant - they do not affect the over-subscription status of those four schools. The ratio of total applications to PAN might be indicative of the popularity of the school, and so useful to parents in some way, but it does not necessarily equate to over-subscription.

Information may be insufficient even when the LA provides the final number of allocated places for each school. Figure 24 provides an example. In this case, the number of pupils admitted for some schools is greater than the PAN (‘Agreed Admission No for Sept 2020’). Around England, it is not uncommon that schools admitted more pupils than their admission number due to over-subscription in the area or successful appeals; this does not necessarily suggest that these schools were over-subscribed. Parents therefore require concrete information about whether schools have been over-subscribed in the previous year(s).

The school allocation breakdown statistics for Tameside in 2019 (Figure 25) are an illustrative example of the problems parents may face when interpreting the information. First, there are

Figure 25: Incomplete information about over-subscription: Secondary school allocation statistics: Tameside, 2019

SECONDARY 2019

SCHOOL	NO	1ST	SIB	LAC	SEN	EFC	2ND	3RD	OTHER	EXTRAS	TOTAL	PLACES	CRITERIA	DISTANCE
ALDER	180	175	52	5	1	1	4	1			180		4	1.234
COPLEY	150	95	41		1		25	10	4	26	160			
DENTON CC	330	189	73	4			27	5		14	235	95		
DROYLSDEN	180	152	36	4	1	1	25	3			180		5	1.441
GREAT ACADEMY	270	140	65		2		34	12	5	69	260	10		
HYDE TECH	240	204	62	4			23	2	2	9	240			
LAURUS RYECROFT	150	128	7	3			20	1	1		150		5	1.317
LONGDENDALE	180	135	55	4			38	3	4		180		5	3.065
MOSSLEY HOLL	180	177	55	8		2	1		2		180		4	1.596
RAYNER STEPHENS	180	94	25	1			7	2	1	8	112	68		
ALL SAINTS	150	100					13	7	2	5	127	23		
ST DAMIANS	165	154					11				165		9	1.06
ST T MORE	150	148					2				150		5	2.601
Resource Bases	1	1									1			
AUDENSHAW	210	185	30	4			18	3	4		210		6	1.974
FAIRFIELD	195	177	40	1	2		13	4	1		195		4	2.758
WEST HILL	170	157	31	3	1		9	4			170		5	6.431

Source: [Tameside council](#), accessed on 22nd June 2020.

no references to what the acronyms stand for.⁵⁷ Second, as in Camden, over-subscription status can only be inferred rather than known.⁵⁸ Third, there is no distance unit for the distance cut-off that was used for the distance tie-breaking rule.⁵⁹ Last, it is unclear if the available places and the distance refer to the outcomes in March (i.e., the initial allocation) or in September (i.e., the final allocation).

Section 5.1.2 showed that 90% of schools use either distance (normally from home to school) as a criterion and/or as a tie-breaking rule. Information on the ‘de-facto’ catchment area for these schools is therefore crucial information for parents. As in Tameside, however, this information is not readily available in most LAs. In some cases the unit of the distance measurement (miles, kilometres, or metres) is omitted.⁶⁰ In some cases, the Local Authorities did not incorporate the distance measure and/or over-subscription status in their composite prospectus and as a result, parents may find it difficult to gain such crucial information from the LA website.⁶¹

⁵⁷As seasoned users of school admission booklets, we may make educated guess and decode the key information (for example, ‘NO’ represents the PAN; ‘1ST’ refers to the number of offers allocated to the first preference; ‘LAC’ refers to children in public care; ‘TOTAL’ refers to the total number of places offered; ‘DISTANCE’ refers to the furthest distance to the last pupil admitted, etc).

⁵⁸We could only estimate if the school was over-subscribed in 2019 from the column ‘PLACES’ (i.e., the number of places still available).

⁵⁹We discovered that it was measured in miles through a school website where the school provided the 2019 admission outcome.

⁶⁰In these cases, we had to retrieve the historical records or refer to the documents from school websites in order to decipher how the distance was measured.

⁶¹For example, while the information of 2019 admission allocation outcome for Northumberland published on the booklet was not adequate to determine over-subscription status, let alone the cut-off distance, we had to

C.3 The provision of catchment area information

The previous section showed that despite the importance of home-school distance in schools' admissions arrangements, information about the distance cut-off for previous years is often difficult to obtain. This can also be true where schools have a formal rather than (or in addition to) 'de facto' catchment area by distance. There is variation across England. Typically, LAs where most schools have a catchment area provide the information centrally, and often digitally. This perhaps represents historic co-ordination across schools that has persisted despite the rise in academy schools. In other LAs, however, catchment area information is not provided centrally, provided partially, or not provided at all. For a minority of schools, the information is not available despite direct enquiries, or incorrect (the admissions arrangements includes a catchment area, but the school does not operate a catchment area).

Table A17 shows that over 90% of LAs contain at least one school with a catchment area. Around three-quarters of LAs contain a non-faith school with a catchment area, which the LA would traditionally have maintained and therefore provided information for. The remaining rows of Table A17 show the percentage of LAs that contain a non-faith school with a catchment area with certain information provision. 59% of these LAs provide full catchment area information centrally, either in their LA admissions booklet or on their website. Another 29% provide catchment area information for some schools centrally. This leaves 12.5% of LAs that provide no information to parents about schools' catchment areas.

LAs vary in the provision of catchment area information, from lists, to hand-drawn maps, to interactive maps. Table A17 shows that 38% of LAs with at least one non-faith school with a catchment area provide full information interactively online, through interactive maps or online look-ups between home address and school catchment area. Another 15% provide digital catchment area information for some schools. At the other extreme, almost 10% of LAs contain schools where catchment area information is not possible to find without contacting individual schools (and sometimes not possible even then) or is incorrect. For example, one admissions arrangement mentioned a catchment area (without information). When we contacted the school, we were told that the school does not have a catchment area.

C.4 Complexity of admissions arrangements

Schools that control their own admission process may have over-complicated admissions arrangements that are difficult for parents to interpret. This matters because parents need to understand the admission criteria, especially those of popular schools that are usually over-subscribed. Overly complicated or unclear admissions arrangements are a potential obstacle for parents to make informed decisions. One example of this is from The London Oratory School, 2019, shown in the quote below.

The oversubscription criteria below will be applied in order of category. Within Category B each criterion is applied in the given order to determine which applications

retrieve a published response to a FOI request (ref 5667) to obtain the records.

Table A17: The provision of catchment area information by Local Authorities in England

Percentage of LAs	%
At least one school has a catchment area	90.67
At least one non-faith school has a catchment area	74.67
<i>Given at least one non-faith school has a catchment area</i>	
Catchment area information for all non-faith schools centrally	58.93
Catchment area information for some non-faith schools centrally	28.57
Catchment area information for all non-faith schools digitally (interactive maps or look-up)	38.39
Catchment area information for some non-faith schools digitally (interactive maps or look-up)	15.18
At least one non-faith school with incomplete/incorrect information (without emailing schools)	9.82

go forward for consideration against the next criterion. This means those who meet criterion 1 are carried forward for assessment against 2, then those meeting both 1 and 2 are carried forward for assessment against 3 and so on to produce a ranked list.

Category A

Catholic Looked After boys and Catholic boys who have been adopted or made subject to child arrangements orders or special guardianship orders, immediately following having been Looked After.

Category B

Catholic boys from practising Catholic families with a Certificate of Catholic Practice. Within this category, the following candidates will have priority:

1. Candidates who have a sibling at the school on the date of admission to the school. Candidates meeting this criterion will be placed at the top of Category B.
2. Candidates who are a sibling of a former pupil. Candidates meeting this criterion will be placed at the top of Category B after any candidates meeting (1) above.
3. Candidates who at the time of application attend the Oratory Primary School, Bury Walk, Cale Street, SW3 6QH.

Candidates meeting this criterion will be placed at the top of Category B after any candidates meeting (1) and/or (2) above.

Category C

Other Catholic children.

Category D

Other Looked After and previously Looked After Children.

Category E

Catechumens and members of an Eastern Christian Church.

Category F

Any other children.

Source: The London Oratory School, Hammersmith & Fulham, 'Moving up, A guide for parents with children transferring to secondary school in 2020', p.44.

A version that could be more straightforward for parents to understand follows:

Category A

Catholic Looked After boys and Catholic boys who have been adopted or made subject to child arrangements orders or special guardianship orders, immediately following having been Looked After.

Category B.1

Catholic boys from practising Catholic families with a Certificate of Catholic Practice, with a sibling at the school on the date of admission to the school.

Category B.2

Catholic boys from practising Catholic families with a Certificate of Catholic Practice, who are a sibling of a former pupil. Category B.3

Catholic boys from practising Catholic families with a Certificate of Catholic Practice, who at the time of application attend the Oratory Primary School, Bury Walk, Cale Street, SW3 6QH.

Category C

Other Catholic children.

Category D

Other Looked After and previously Looked After Children.

Category E

Catechumens and members of an Eastern Christian Church.

Category F

Any other children.

This section has shown that in some areas of England, parents do not have good enough information about schools' admissions arrangements. Information can be either incomplete, unclear or incorrect. LAs should follow best practice and provide parents with sufficient information to make informed school choices easily.



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