

GENERAL SYNOD**Schools Admissions Code****A background paper from the Secretary General**

1. The mission and ministry of every parish involves engaging with local schools and their communities. In Church of England schools, the partnership between church and school is a vital aspect of the life of both communities and fundamental to the mission of the church through education. Clergy are encouraged to play a full and active role in ensuring the school is well served and supported by the church. Clergy are normally ex-officio governors of a Church of England school and they and other members of the ministry team will be involved in regular leading of collective worship and providing support and encouragement to the school community as well as running after school clubs or other extracurricular activities.
2. For clergy with dependent children of school age, attending the local school is normally seen as the natural way of integrating with the local community and signifies a pastoral commitment to being a part of that community. However, for some clergy, as with many other families in tied accommodation, the transition to a new post can present challenges in securing a place at the local school, especially if it is over-subscribed which, statistically, is more likely for a Church of England school.
3. Securing the right school place for a child is the priority for every family. The admissions arrangements for any school are often hotly contended and every governing body of an oversubscribed school, as well as the clergy in the local church of schools that prioritise places on the basis of church attendance, will know the difficulties and highly charged emotions that come in administering a system fairly and ensuring that the arrangements are not abused.
4. The Government recognises the complexity of admissions arrangements and will want to ensure that any future revisions to the School Admissions Code (the Code) create a simpler, fairer and easier to implement arrangement rather than build in multiple layers for parents to navigate.

Provision for Service Personnel

5. The proposal put forward in GS 2073A is that Synod should call on the Secretary of State to amend the Code 'to grant those in tied accommodation the same rights to a school place for their children as is currently granted to military families and civil servants moving to the UK from a posting abroad'.
6. As at 1 July 2016, there were 185,310 serving members of the Armed Forces with 57,590 dependent children.
7. Using available data from the Experiences of Ministry Survey, it is estimated that there are approximately 3,000 Church of England clergy with dependent children.

8. We have not been able to estimate the numbers of dependent children for those of other denominations or faiths or the variety of workers who live in other forms of tied accommodation.
9. GS [] refers to Paper HC(17)1 on Clergy Wellbeing as envisaging the Military Covenant as a model for the Church of England in terms of assuring the wellbeing of clergy and their families.
10. Provisions in the Code that seek to reflect the Government's commitment to removing disadvantage for the children of service personnel take the form of:
 - permitting admissions authorities to adopt oversubscription criteria that prioritise children eligible for the service premium;
 - designating the children of service personnel admitted outside the normal admissions round as exceptions (amongst others) to admitting children above the 30-pupil limit for infant class size;
 - ameliorating the difficulties that can be caused by moving into a new area by requiring schools, when considering requests for places at the school against their oversubscription criteria, to treat the children of services personnel who will be moving into the locality as if they had already moved and to accept a Unit postal address or quartering area address and an official letter specifying the date of relocation as sufficient evidence of residence.
11. It is this last provision that Mr Robinson is proposing to mirror for clergy families and families in tied accommodation as a request from Synod to the Secretary of State. As his paper makes clear the introduction of this provision would not mean that such families were automatically entitled to a place in the school of their choice. It simply seeks to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in an application to a school in an area to which they are required to move.

Comment

12. While this proposal may not seem unreasonable in itself, Synod will want to bear in mind that the Government, in seeking to support the position of UK service families, is supporting those who provide a particular level of service to the State. The Church will rightly want to consider clergy wellbeing, to improve prospects for vocations, and may wish to give benefits to its clergy along the lines of the Military Covenant, but it is likely to be difficult to persuade either Government or the general population that the State should give particular benefits to clergy families or families of those in tied accommodation but who are not required or compelled to move with the same regularity as Service personnel.
13. Changing the arrangements in the Code, as suggested in this motion, might seem like a simple solution, but the practical outworking of such a proposal and the potential for confusion and misunderstanding in an already complex school admissions environment may alleviate one issue, but could cause other difficult pastoral issues.

14. As with all school admissions, where places in a school are oversubscribed, one child's offer of a place will always be at the expense of another's refusal. Synod will want to consider the way it may be perceived as possibly seeking privileges for clergy children that are not available to other families moving to an area. It will also want to consider the possible issue that could arise if a child of a family who had lived in a community for many years were refused a place because the child of a family due to be moving into tied accommodation in a few months' time were given priority.

William Nye
Secretary General

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