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Introduction

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The National Children's Bureau is a leading children's charity working to build a better childhood for every child. We champion children's right to be safe, secure and supported, by using evidence and our expert knowledge to influence government policy, and help practitioners to do the best job possible, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people.

NCB advocates a school system that works for every child and offers true equality of access for children from all backgrounds and in all circumstances. Having carefully considered the Government's proposals in 'Schools that Work for Everyone', NCB has serious concerns about the government's plans to expand selective schools and the implications this expansion could have for some of our most vulnerable groups of young people. This includes children growing up in poverty and disadvantage, looked after children, disabled children and those with special educational needs (SEN). NCB would like to see further clarity from government on how they plan to address the specific needs of these children.

Considering the contents of the Green Paper it is unclear how **children growing up in poverty or lower-income households** will be afforded equal opportunities to attend selective schools alongside their peers from more affluent homes. NCB welcomes the commitment from government to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, including those who do not qualify for free school meals. However, we remain concerned that the proposals for selective school expansion will have limited impact on improving outcomes for this group.

We know that around 40% of the gap in academic attainment between the most and least advantaged children already exists by age 5. This differential in attainment is compounded as children progress through primary education. By age 11, the attainment gap has widened to 60%, at which point poorer children often demonstrate less academic ability than their peers from more affluent homes (Grammar Schools and Social Mobility, EPI, 2016, p.6). Consequently, any policy of selection to improve chances for this group at age 11 or beyond will be limited to benefiting only a small number of already high-achieving children who are able to compete with their more affluent peers. This is obviously fundamentally problematic for a policy that is designed to improve outcomes for the whole of this group.

NCB recognises that Government has included a proposal that any new selective schools must take a proportion of disadvantaged pupils to give children from this group opportunities to attend (outlined on p.25 'Schools that Work for Everyone'). However, we remain concerned that the practical challenges around requiring selective schools to take a pre-set percentage of children entitled to the pupil

premium, or other children from disadvantaged backgrounds, into each cohort have not been properly considered. Selective schools, by their very nature, are designed to take pupils based on academic merit. As already noted, in many instances, children entitled to the pupil premium, or other children from disadvantaged backgrounds, will be significantly behind their peers academically at age 11. If selective schools were required to take a set proportion of pupils from this group it is likely that within the selective environment they would end up at the bottom of their year group, behind their more affluent peers in terms of ability. NCB is concerned that despite attempts to widen opportunity for this group, without further consideration of how this would work in practice, such proposals could actually result in disadvantaged children being streamed together, segregated from their more affluent peers, at the bottom of selective schools.

NCB is also disappointed that the Green Paper completely fails to address how its proposals to expand selective schooling will impact on **disabled children and those with special educational needs (SEN)**. Furthermore, it is unclear how the government will ensure that these children will be afforded the same opportunities as other children to attend selective schools should this policy be rolled out.

Looking at the existing system, disabled children and those with SEN are far less likely to attend selective schools than their peers. Only around 5% of children at existing grammar schools have additional needs compared to around 14% in non-selective mainstream schools. It is not uncommon for grammar schools to admit less than 1% of children with additional needs, and nationally only 0.1% of children in selective schools have a statement or Education, Health and Care plan. NCB is concerned that if this situation were replicated across England, the expansion of selection could result in a significant reduction in choice of school for families. This would place far greater pressures on non-selective schools to meet additional needs. Many schools are still not fully accessible and a further reduction in choice would run counter to government's intention to create an education system that 'works for everyone'.

Finally, NCB is discouraged by the fact that the Green Paper fails to address how **looked after children** will be provided opportunities to access selective schools. Looked after children are some of the most vulnerable in society and often have to overcome multiple hurdles of disadvantage to achieve in their learning and reach their potential. Introducing a further element of selection will only increase barriers for this group of children to achieving equal access to high quality education alongside other children from less challenging backgrounds.

Rather than focusing on expanding selection at age 11, NCB would support further investment into the development and expansion of early years education for all children. Investment in early years is key to minimising the attainment gap and putting all children on an equal footing as they enter mainstream schooling at age 5. Investment in early years would be far more effective in promoting social mobility and improving life chances for all children than pushing a policy of selection at age 11 and beyond.

Furthermore, NCB is aware from recent research we have conducted into children missing education (forthcoming) that there is currently a lack of adequate school places and appropriate educational provision for children, and local authorities are struggling to meet demand. It is of concern that the lack of adequate school

places in an area can result in children dropping out of education for long periods of time or altogether. NCB believes the government should focus on ensuring there are enough adequate places for all children before pursuing any further policy of selective schooling.

In light of the concerns outlined above, NCB believes that unfortunately the proposals for selective schools expansion do not, as they suggest, 'work for everyone'. They fail to address the needs of the most vulnerable groups of children in society and were they to be implemented in their current form, look likely to exacerbate social divides rather than increase social mobility. NCB advocates a school system that works for every child and offers true equality of access for children from all backgrounds and in all circumstances. As such, we cannot support the government's proposals to expand selective schools at this time.

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