

# SENIOR SCHOOL CHOICES

## Guidance for Parents



FORRES SANDLE MANOR

INDEPENDENT PREPARATORY SCHOOL



## SENIOR SCHOOL CHOICE AND ENTRANCE PROCEDURES

### 1. When should we start to think about senior schools?

It is never too early to address this important question either in terms of financial planning or in terms of finding the “right” school. The more options you are able to explore the better. This is a time consuming business but it will help you to make an informed choice.

### 2. When should we register our child at a senior school?

Registration at a school enables you to place a foot in the door, to keep your options open. On payment of a fee (usually £50 - £100) you can reserve a place for your child subject to various qualifying criteria. There is no reason why you should not initially register your child at more than one school. The earlier you register, the less likely you are to be disappointed. However, although there are some schools where waiting lists operate several years into the future, many more fill up only in the months immediately preceding a year’s intake. Some schools don’t fill up at all. If you wish your child to go to one of the highly prestigious schools, register now. One or two schools prefer registration in a child’s infancy and one parent I know even tried to register his “son” prior to conception! Schools popular with FSM parents, Marlborough, Canford and Dauntsey's especially, are currently finding their places filling up early with waiting lists operating up to ten years in advance! This is especially true with girls. Having said that, it is becoming increasingly the case (at Marlborough for example) where lists are maintained and then some degree of competition introduced before CE-dependent places are offered. This is unsurprising as it allows such schools to have their cake and eat it, too! Of course, many parents register at more than one school which means that large sections of a school’s waiting list evaporate in due course. Don’t despair if you are only given a place on a waiting list, but do make sure that you have a firm place *somewhere* by the end of Year 7. Many schools ask for an increased deposit (sometimes as much as £1500) up to two years prior to a child’s transfer. However, if you have left things late, there are plenty of good schools at which early registration is not a necessity. Things vary; schools’ popularity fluctuates with the economy, social trends and changing circumstances. There are no hard and fast rules but it is as well to act sooner rather than later. There is often a significantly greater demand for day places as opposed to boarding places. It is helpful to all concerned to keep senior schools and ourselves in touch with your thinking and it is both unhelpful and can be embarrassing if you do not keep us informed.

### 3. How should we choose a school?

Choice of school is very much the parents’ responsibility and you will need to take into account a vast range of different criteria: Independent or Maintained? Day or Boarding? Single Sex or Co-educational? Geographical area? Urban or rural? Large or small? Traditional or Progressive? Academically rigorous or more gentle? Are sporting traditions important? The list is nearly endless. But the single most important criterion is: which school will be right for my child? This is a question which a number of parents fail to place at the top of their list. Few, if any, schools suit everyone and it is a serious error to regard academic results, social status, sporting

prowess or one's own memories as more important than an honest analysis of your child's specific needs.

Once you have decided which issues have a bearing on your future decision, come and see me and I shall make some recommendations and observations aimed at helping you to reach a wise decision. The Deputy Heads are both a source of good advice. This advice will take three factors into consideration:

- a) Parental priorities
- b) Our personal opinion
- c) The ability of your child

You can easily obtain prospectuses from schools (or ask us to arrange to have a selection sent to you) and when you have read the prospectuses and narrowed down the field, embark on your first visits. Telephone the school in question and make an appointment and, if your child is in his/her final two or three years at Forres Sandle Manor, take him or her with you if at all possible. It will, after all, be your child who will be educated at senior school - not you, and he or she should also be happy with your choice. Having said that, do please remember that it is your choice and remember that any senior school may look large and forbidding to a ten year old compared to the cosiness of FSM!

My own view is that Open Days can be worthwhile, but a personal visit will be more revealing and helpful.

Following initial visits it might be that you can make an immediate choice, or that you want to explore more options, or that you want to discuss the whole situation with me once more. Again, all this takes time and is another good reason for starting your search early.

#### **4. What should we look for on our visit?**

Above all, it is the whole "instinctive feel" of your visit which will give you the best guide. Facilities are of secondary importance to the atmosphere of a place. The Headmaster or Headmistress is obviously important and you will want to feel at ease with him or her and confident in the Head's ability to lead the school. You should explore the philosophy of the school as well as its views on aspects of education which are important to you but, more important still, is your choice of Housemaster or Housemistress. This is the person who will set the tone of your child's environment more than anyone else. It is him/her who will be responsible for the day to day academic and social welfare of your child. It will be him/her whose personality and principles will shape the environment in which your child will mature and it is him/her with whom you will communicate on virtually all matters other than fees or the most serious disciplinary matters. Prior to each visit, you should telephone the Admissions Secretary and ask to meet at least two different Housemasters/Housemistresses. If at all possible, do some research beforehand and ask for them by name. Again I can often offer some advice in this respect.

During your visit, by all means look at the pupils but don't judge by preparatory school standards. Senior school pupils rarely look as well disciplined and innocent as prep school children! Long hair, bad complexions and apparent lethargy do not necessarily mean poor discipline, bad hygiene and unstimulating staff! Talk to the pupils - do they enjoy being at school? Ask to visit classrooms - are they bright, stimulating places? Make up your mind prior to your visit what you want to know and go armed with the questions which will reveal the answers. Useful questions might include:

- a. Will my child have a tutor and how does such a system work?
- b. How many pupils proceed into the sixth form and what courses are available?
- c. Do you monitor what pupils do in their free time?
- d. What, specifically, is your attitude to drugs, including alcohol and nicotine (be warned: times have changed....!)
- e. What progression is there in your disciplinary system?
- f. What careers advice are you able to offer?
- g. What is your policy on traditional teenage problems?!
- h. Who is available to my child should he/she become unwell, depressed or worried?
- i. What system of reporting to parents is there and can we meet our child's teachers regularly?
- j. For prospective boarders – roughly how many boys/girls of my child's age were in school last weekend? (This is an increasing problem: fewer and fewer schools have a really good core of full boarders).

There are, of course, countless other questions which might be as, or more, important.

#### **5. Local Gossip: Drugs and Drink**

Schools realise that dinner party gossip is the most important marketing arena for them. Reputations are important and there is nothing wrong in listening to the experiences and opinions of others. But don't set too much store by what others say. Judge for yourself. For example a "good" school for one parent's child might be quite inappropriate for another. "Good" is such an abstract term covering a multitude of vast, often seemingly contradictory definitions. Similarly, don't necessarily be put off where you hear drugs have allegedly been found. Every school has pupils who have experimented with drugs. Those schools which catch pupils with drugs and deal appropriately with them are often stronger and better schools than those who don't identify the problem in the first place. Of more importance is the school's attitude to and policy on alcohol - its use and abuse. Alcohol is a more dangerous (in terms of potential long term harm to your child) threat than drugs and yet some schools often appear to regard alcohol abuse as "normal". Find out what action a school takes to discourage drugs, alcohol and tobacco - their use and abuse.

#### **6. What testing takes place prior to admission to Senior Schools?**

Senior schools fall into four groups.

##### **Group One**

Schools such as King Edward VI, Southampton set and administer their own assessments at 11+ or 13+. Whilst we are pleased to advise and prepare children for

such schools, admission arrangements need to be conducted by parents. It is essential that we are informed when children are entered for such assessments, so that we can be sure that they have covered appropriate work by the appropriate date. To give a flavour of expectations of Group One schools, a brief resume of the King Edward VI School is given below:

School	11+ and 13+ Application procedure	Assessments	Assessment venue and date.	Eligibility
King Edward's VI School (KES)  <i>www.kes.hants.sch.uk</i>	Apply directly to the school. Application packs available early October. Applicants are assessed through the school's own entrance examinations, an interview and references from the Headmaster.	Verbal and non verbal reasoning (practice GS Assessments are on sale in WH Smith). Assessments in Maths and English are aimed at National Curriculum levels 4 + 5, with elements of 6. English inc. comprehension and writing. Maths checks basic number skills and investigative-type problems.	Interviews held in early January prior to testing; both at KES.	Academically selective co-ed independent day school 11-18 years.

### Group Two

Many independent senior schools now use the ISEB Common Pre-Test to reserve or secure a place prior to the child taking their Common Entrance (CE) examinations, which are centrally set by the Independent Schools Examination Board. The Common Pre-Tests are taken when a pupil is in Year 6 or Year 7 and are an age-standardised measure of ability and attainment. They are commissioned from GL Assessment and are online and adaptive. The tests include Verbal Reasoning, Non-Verbal Reasoning, English and Mathematics. They are in a multiple-choice format and take approximately two-and-a-half hours to complete; the tests can be taken together or at separate times either in the candidate's own school or at the Senior School for which he or she is entered.

A list of Senior Schools which use the common pre-tests to assess candidates for entry can be found at: <https://www.iseb.co.uk/getmedia/74a04c0d-0651-4639-996e-3901db330542/Documentation-CPT-Senior-Schools.pdf.aspx>

The CE examination papers are taken at FSM in June and then sent to the chosen Senior School for marking. CE examination papers are set for three age groups: 11 +, 12 + and 13 +. The Common Entrance is increasingly reacting to the developing needs of senior school exam preparation and our priority is to prepare children for the examinations required by Senior Schools. For Humanities, extended essays or enquiries are produced coupled with a presentation to Senior Schools and parents. *Please note that Common Entrance 13 + papers should not be confused with other*

*papers set by other selective schools at the same ages and known by the same terminology.*

### **Group 3**

Grammar and similar schools often (but not always) accept children at 11 +, 12 + or 13+ plus via selective, but essentially objective, assessments (**NOT Common Entrance**). Those who seek places at such schools face considerable competition. Children are faced with having to pass challenging tests of academic potential. Most such schools use standard verbal or quantitative reasoning papers which endeavour to measure objectively a child's intelligence, as well as tests in English and mathematics. In borderline cases, some schools use the creative writing paper as a 'tiebreaker'. In this instance, where there is a 'tie', whether a family lives within the given catchment area is relevant to chances of success.

Whilst Forres Sandle Manor will offer opportunities for practice and familiarisation in order to prepare children for such testing, it is widely agreed that "cramming" is not necessarily in the child's best interest and steps are currently being taken by many selective schools to ensure that test scores cannot be artificially inflated by excessive additional coaching. That is not to say that practising at home with on-line sample tests is necessarily a bad thing. However, we have been directly in touch with our local selective schools and have been told categorically that more preparation than we currently offer would "do more harm than good". Recent research has shown that there comes a point at which over-familiarisation can actually lower the score achieved.

A summary of our local 11 plus grammar schools are given in the table below:

School	11+ Application procedure	Assessments	Assessment venue and date.	Eligibility
South Wilts Grammar School for Girls (SWGS) <a href="http://www.swgs.wilts.sch.uk">www.swgs.wilts.sch.uk</a>	Via your Local Education Authority and coordinated by Wiltshire County Council. In the September prior to the year of entry, complete your County's Common Application Form and return to your 'home' Authority. Also complete SWGS Supplementary Application Form.	Multiple choice tests in National Curriculum Key Stage 2 Maths (MA), English (En) and Verbal Reasoning (VR).	Takes place at SWGS on a Saturday in September of Year 6, prior to entry into Year 7.	Parents of girls from any area within reasonable travelling distance of the school may apply.
Bishop Wordsworth's School (BWS) <a href="http://www.bws.wilts.sch.uk">www.bws.wilts.sch.uk</a>	Via your Local Education Authority and coordinated by Wiltshire County Council. In the September prior to the year of entry, complete your County's Common Application Form and return to your 'home' Authority. Also complete BWS Supplementary Application Form.	Multiple choice tests in National Curriculum Key Stage 2 Maths (MA), English (En) and Verbal Reasoning (VR).	Takes place at BWS on a Saturday in September of Year 6, prior to entry into Year 7.	Parents of boys from any area within reasonable travelling distance of the school may apply.
Bournemouth School for Girls (BSG) <a href="http://www.bsg.bournemouth.sch.uk">www.bsg.bournemouth.sch.uk</a>	Via your Local Education Authority and coordinated by Bournemouth Local Authority. In the September prior to the year of entry, complete your County's Common Application Form and return to your 'home' Authority.	Multiple choice tests in National Curriculum Key Stage 2 Maths (MA), English (En) and	Takes place at BSG on a Saturday in September of Year 6, prior to entry into Year 7.	Parents of girls from any area within reasonable travelling distance of the school may apply.

		Verbal Reasoning (VR). English essay.		
Bournemouth School for Boys (BSB) <i>www.bournemouth-school.bournemouth.sch.uk</i>	Via your Local Education Authority and coordinated by Bournemouth Local Authority. In the September prior to the year of entry, complete your County's Common Application Form and return to your 'home' Authority.	Multiple choice tests in National Curriculum Key Stage 2 Maths (MA), English (En) and Verbal Reasoning (VR). English essay. (Practice GS Assessments are on sale in WH Smith).	Takes place at BSB on a Saturday in September of Year 6, prior to entry into Year 7.	Parents of boys from any area within reasonable travelling distance of the school may apply.

Parents should inform us in writing of their intention to enter their child for such an assessment. We offer familiarisation sessions to candidates during Activities in the summer and autumn term prior to assessment. We are able to advise parents of the likelihood of success should they wish to consider the non-fee paying selective option. One further point.....there is a system whereby parents can appeal against unsuccessful outcomes. The school will ONLY initiate such an appeal in the event that the scores attained in the assessment differ markedly from our expectations AND if we feel that the candidate would cope easily within a grammar school environment upon all the evidence we have available.

#### **Group Four**

Local maintained schools are also an option. At The Burgate School, for example, it is often necessary to take up the place at 11+ or risk not being allocated a place at 13. However, selective examinations are not required.

***I cannot stress too highly the need for you to keep us informed, especially if you have entered your child for an examination other than the Common Entrance. The Deputy Head (Academic) sends out letters with reply slips to Years 5, 6 and 7 (with a confirmation letter in Year 8); please complete and submit the slips, even if you have done so countless times before.***

#### **7. When should our child leave Forres Sandle Manor?**

The vast majority of children remain at the school until they are thirteen, although some leave at eleven or twelve. It is important that the value to a child of the final two years is not under-estimated. The school is designed to educate children up to the age of thirteen and to leave earlier inevitably means that children will not have enjoyed the full benefit of what the school has to offer. The final year, for example, will often see children assume some responsibility; they will be at the top of the tree, with the benefits which that brings. It is remarkable to witness the change in children during years 7 and 8 and those parents who doubt the value of the final two years are very welcome to come and meet our senior children. We are proud of them. However, there are occasionally good reasons for leaving at eleven or twelve, although it is a

decision which needs to be taken very carefully. It is of the utmost importance that the individual needs of the child concerned are given a higher priority than the financial needs and desires either of the senior school or of ourselves. Certain schools should be regarded with suspicion if they push too hard for children to transfer only at eleven or twelve rather than thirteen. Do not necessarily believe Heads who tell you that “your child will be much better off coming to us at eleven” or “we might not be able to find a place if she comes at thirteen”!

Three factors only should influence your decision about leaving early: finance, availability of places and the maturity of your child. Regarding the latter, it is true that some girls who mature early can grow out of the school before they are thirteen; the best way to find out whether this is likely to be the case is to ask your daughter’s opinion: if she wants to leave, believe her!

A section on the scholarship examination follows and individual schools’ own tests will obviously vary dramatically. Assessments for the maintained sector are rarely based on a syllabus but are more frequently based on objective testing - more of which later.

#### **8. Will our child pass Common Entrance?**

You will never get a guarantee! But, if there has been close communication between us there should at least be no surprises. There are obviously risks in aiming high and it is up to the parent to decide the extent of the risk to be taken. It is our job to keep you informed as to the likelihood of success. But “getting in” should not be the only criterion: once in, will your child survive and thrive?

Don’t be fooled by talk of pass marks! Every school is likely to maintain as high a standard as possible, but no school wants empty places. The “pass mark” is very often dependent on the market and, as such, is liable to fluctuate from year to year. Of course, many schools use the examination to ensure that minimum standards are maintained, but the increased tendency for schools to give grades rather than marks portrays their need to be able to structure the academic field as they require.

The other point worth making here is that it is dangerous to compare one school with another. Certainly in a non-scientific subject, the variation in marking can be quite extraordinary depending upon the priorities of the examiner and the needs of his/her school. I have known a child obtain a B Grade in English when they were one of our weaker candidates and, in the same year, a child gain a D Grade from a different school when they were really exceptionally talented. Similarly we have seen the same English paper gain different grades from different schools. Keep closely in touch with us and, consequently, with your child’s performance. Incidentally, it is our policy that ALL Year 8 pupils sit CE, even if they have previously won an Award or been offered an unconditional place.

#### **9. Why do some schools offer pre-assessment?**

More and more selective independent senior schools offer pre-assessment days, often one or two years in advance or in February prior to 13 plus Common Entrance. They are designed to provide parents with an indication of whether the child is likely to be



successful in CE. This can be very useful because it can mean avoiding failing at the more formal hurdle of CE and it can provide the chance to seek an alternative before arriving at that hurdle. However, few senior schools commit themselves either way although reassurance can sometimes be acquired. At FSM we believe strongly in exerting pressure on senior schools to provide clear guidance on the likelihood of 'passing'.

#### **10. Should we have an alternative school?**

If there is any doubt whatsoever about your child passing Common Entrance, do please have an alternative school in mind. Again, I am always ready, willing and able to provide advice. If a child does fail the examination, his/her papers will be sent to the alternative school for them to assess.

#### **11. Can our child sit a scholarship?**

Yes! Each year Forres Sandle Manor children sit scholarships of all kinds and most years we pick up some awards. We may advise you quite early in your child's career at Forres Sandle Manor if we feel that he or she would benefit from undertaking scholarship work even if an eventual award is unlikely. But this may also be a late decision. The demand for scholarships is extremely high and there is considerable competition. Even for the less academic schools, the standard required by a potential scholar needs to be high and academic awards at all schools are highly coveted. If you need a scholarship to enable your child to remain within the independent sector, do please come and see me to discuss the possibilities.

Senior schools organise themselves into 4 groups, each one of which holds its scholarship examination at a different time. This enables certain children to be entered for an award at more than one school although the tactics and organisation of such a campaign need to be considered very carefully indeed. Thankfully, an increasing number of schools are subscribing to the Common Scholarship paper which makes life easier all round! Again, please let me know if you would like to discuss this.

Most schools keep a small number of places open in case those who win scholarships are not already registered. This can be a way of securing a place when one is not otherwise available. But it is a long-shot and cannot remotely be relied upon!

#### **12. Information Transfer**

Senior schools almost always request reports on prospective pupils. Sometimes these are not required until a child is firmly registered and a provisional place offered by a school, but other schools ask for information prior even to a child being registered. Parents should know that we supply such information upon request although we will always ask parents prior to supplying other documents produced by other professionals (medical reports, for example). We hope that parents will understand our wish for confidential reports on children to remain confidential. In the event that a parent wishes to gain access to such reports, we would be grateful if we could be informed when a child joins us.

### **13. Conclusion**

This paper can only give an impression, a set of guidelines and experiences. Ultimately the choice of school is your responsibility. It is our job to be on hand to provide you with all the advice, expertise and informed choice in the best interests of your child. The Deputy Head (Academic) and I are always willing to assist you during your deliberations and many other members of staff will be happy to provide you with the benefit of their wide experience of senior schools. For example, if you think that your child would benefit from taking a specific scholarship award, talk in the first instance to the relevant FSM Head of Faculty.

***Please make good use of us and always let us know in writing once you have made decisions – whether preliminary or otherwise – and whenever you change tack!***

J Wells  
Headmaster

W Peak  
Deputy Head (Academic)

August 2019