

ANGUS COUNCIL

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

22 AUGUST 2000

AGE AND STAGE RESTRICTIONS AT STANDARD GRADE AND HIGHER

REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

This report seeks Committee approval of guidelines for schools on the presentation of pupils for Standard Grade and Higher examinations.

1 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Education Committee approves the appended Guidelines for Schools.

2 BACKGROUND

The attached Guidelines (Appendix) detail the background to the relaxation of Age and Stage restrictions on the presentation of pupils for external SQA examinations at Standard and Higher Grades. An earlier draft of these Guidelines was discussed at the meeting of the JCC (Teachers) on 15 May 2000 and a small number of minor amendments proposed by the JCC have now been incorporated into the text. The JCC is supportive of the Guidelines, and it is recommended that the Education Committee should now endorse them and authorise their issue to schools.

3 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Any additional costs associated with these proposals will be met from each school's devolved budget.

4 CONSULTATION

In accordance with the Standing Orders of the Council this report has been the subject of consultation with the Chief Executive, the Director of Law & Administration and the Director of Finance.

Jim Anderson
Director of Education

No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report.

APPENDIX

JAA/CJ

ANGUS COUNCIL - EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

AGE AND STAGE RESTRICTIONS AT STANDARD GRADE AND HIGHER
GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOLS

1 Background

- 1.1 In August 1998 SOEID issued a consultation paper outlining three possible options for relaxing what had been until then fairly rigid constraints on the age and stage at which pupils could be presented for Standard Grade or Higher examinations.
- 1.2 The consultation paper made it clear that the government's preferred option was
a limited relaxation of age and stage restrictions by one year at both Standard Grade and Higher
- 1.3 This government preferred option allows for Standard Grade examinations at all levels to be undertaken by individual pupils in S3. It also allows for the external assessment elements of Higher Still courses to be undertaken in S4.
- 1.4 In a press release in March 1999 (confirmed to head teachers by SQA in June 1999) the government announced that its preferred option was being adopted.

2 Consultation with Head Teachers

- 2.1 It is important to stress the government's view that its decision to relax previous restrictions must be accompanied by **clear guidance to head teachers on the value of the 5-14 programme (including Level F) and a reaffirmation that two-year Standard Grade courses are considered the most appropriate provision for the great majority of pupils in S3/S4.**
- 2.2 Discussions with secondary head teachers since June 1999 have indicated limited enthusiasm for any radical changes to previous practices, particularly in the near future.
- 2.3 In August 1999, the Council's Secondary Timetabling Group (a working group of senior staff in secondary schools) was asked to identify the issues requiring to be addressed. The group has discharged this remit and the issues raised have been shared with all secondary head teachers.

3 Issues to be Addressed

3.1 Course Choice/Curricular Guidance

- before the recent relaxation there was provision for exceptional presentation of an individual candidate; this provision remains and there is an expectation that when there is a genuinely exceptional reason for presenting a candidate earlier than normal, then a school will find an appropriate solution based very much on the individual circumstances of the case
- in addition, there is already considerable experience in secondary schools of using National Qualifications (formally National Certificate modules) as an alternative to Standard Grade for pupils with significant learning difficulties, and these arrangements continue to be endorsed

- if a fast-track group of pupils were to be presented, for example, in a number of Standard Grade subjects in S3 then Guidance staff would have to ensure that adequate arrangements were in place to cater for the personal development of each of these pupils; issues about emotional maturity may weigh as heavily with teachers and parents as would those relating to intellectual maturity
- schools would require to decide whether the relaxation of restrictions should be applied only to individual pupils in specific subjects or to individual pupils in a group of subjects
- course choice at S2/S3 and beyond would inevitably become more complex
- most important of all, schools must consider the needs of the whole child

3.2 Curriculum Planning/Timetabling

- care would be required to ensure that a continuous curricular experience was available in S4 to any pupils offered a fast track Standard Grade in S3
- even with a small number of pupils placed on a fast track there would be some resource implications, particularly in terms of staffing resources and efficient timetabling
- some subjects may lend themselves to fast tracking more readily than others; this in itself may pose practical problems - eg with some pupils following a part S3/part S4 curriculum at any one time - as well as possible future difficulties in terms of university entrance (if - eg - a particularly popular university course has become used to insisting on a specific number of Highers at a given grade all at one sitting)
- although medium and large secondary schools may be able to make effective and efficient timetabling arrangements for groups of pupils to sit core subjects such as English and Mathematics in a fast track, smaller schools will find this difficult and all schools are likely to experience difficulties in making fast track provision for subjects outwith the core - at least without a major impact on the efficiency of the school timetable
- the option of presenting pupils twice for Standard Grade (once in S3 at the lower of two overlapping levels and once in S4 at the higher level), although not entirely within the spirit of the relaxation, nevertheless is a superficially attractive and creative way of taking advantage of the relaxation now offered. However, the fee for presenting these pupils is effectively doubled (from £17.75 per pupil per subject in 2000 to precisely twice that figure). In these circumstances, with an average S4 year group of some 1,400 pupils each being presented for 7 or 8 Standard Grades, the total additional cost (maximum) of £186,375 per annum is prohibitive and does not seem likely to represent good value for money for the Council
- any additional costs incurred by a school which makes use of the Age and Stage relaxations must be borne by that school's devolved budget.

4 **Advice to Head Teachers**

- 4.1 Given that the previous restrictions have been relaxed by the government, the Council does not believe it would be appropriate to attempt to re-impose them. Some autonomy is therefore advocated for schools - provided meaningful consultation takes place with all key stakeholders, including pupils, parents and - through the established school-based consultative mechanism - with staff.

- 4.2 It will also be desirable for each school to be aware of developments in neighbouring Angus schools. Head teachers will therefore be requested to incorporate a brief summary of any proposed steps to be taken to relax Age and Stage restrictions as part of their annual reports - to be shared with the Director of Education and colleagues in other Angus schools prior to implementation.
- 4.3 There should be no undue haste in moving to relax previous restrictions and a cautious approach is strongly recommended, particularly until staff are more familiar with Higher Still.
- 4.4 The needs of each pupil should be viewed holistically and over a minimum of 2 years before recommending to that pupil (and her/his parents) any fast-track Standard Grade presentation in S3 or fast-track Higher Still presentation in S4.
- 4.5 Any additional financial costs accruing as a direct result of a school's decision to relax Age and Stage restrictions must be borne by that school's devolved budget.

Jim Anderson
Director of Education

August 2000