

## Questions to consider when visiting a school

### Before the visit...

#### ***Read the prospectus***

Most independent schools produce a prospectus, which sets out the style of education offered. Usually, a prospectus will include introductory, historical information about the school and its ethos and values. Typically, the curriculum and 'extra' or 'co-curricular' activities are included, with an indication of the choices available to pupils at each age and stage. Of great importance is the care and welfare of children and the guidance they receive throughout their schooling. In the case of Senior Schools, most prospectuses will provide information about how pupils are prepared for exams, guided through university entrance procedures and encouraged to take responsibility for their lives beyond school.

#### ***Visit the website***

While a prospectus is essentially a marketing brochure, each school's website will contain more detailed information – such as news of pupils' achievements inside and outside the classroom; admissions procedures; term dates and fee details.

#### ***Consider fees and affordability***

Fees should be given on each school's website, and they are usually quoted in both annual and termly amounts. Most commonly, schools in Scotland have three terms each year. Check whether the fee is "all inclusive" or whether a charge for "extras" applies, such as lunches and books and what optional extras would add to the cost – e.g. individual music instruction or school expeditions.

#### ***Arrange a visit***

Visiting a school is the only way to get a true 'feel' for what it can offer your child and to judge whether they will be happy there. All schools organise Open Mornings and events – often held on Saturdays in September, October or November, although you may wish to make an appointment during the working day too, to see the school "at work" and to see classes in process. Appointments can be made throughout term times and you should contact the School's Admissions Secretary or Registrar to arrange a suitable time to visit.

#### ***Find out about admissions deadlines, whether there are waiting lists and if early application is recommended***

In order that you can plan ahead, do not hesitate to ask the School's Admissions Secretary or Registrar any questions about making an application.

## **During the visit...**

### ***What are your first impressions of the school and its pupils?***

Pay attention to the intangibles as well as the tangibles. Many schools are rightly proud of their facilities and resources, but the buildings are not as important as what happens inside them. How do the pupils conduct themselves? Look at the children. Do they look happy? Are they friendly and courteous? Is their appearance smart? How do they interact with staff and visitors? Talk to them – are they confident and at ease when speaking to you? Look at the notice boards in the corridors as you walk around. What do they tell you about the life of the school? Are pupils encouraged to participate in co-curricular pursuits and charity fundraising events? Is pupils' work displayed prominently?

### ***What are staff like?***

The Head, guidance staff, and in the case of boarding schools, the housemaster/mistress are key individuals, as they will be responsible for your child's care and welfare. You should always expect and receive a warm, friendly welcome from a senior member of staff who shows a genuine interest in your child's needs and abilities. Notice how pupils react to the Head and senior staff. Is there warmth and respect? Be mindful that the Head or housemaster/mistress may not be there for the duration of your child's education, so it may not be wise to choose a school on the sole basis of liking them.

### ***What about the curriculum and co-curriculum?***

Is the curriculum broad? In Junior Schools, at what stage are computers and languages introduced? In which subjects do Junior School children benefit from specialist staff? In Senior Schools, are Physics, Chemistry and Biology taught as separate subjects? What proportion of pupils study languages and the arts? Are children streamed according to ability, and if so, from what age? What support for learning is available? What clubs and societies are on offer? Are outdoor activities, team and individual pursuits encouraged? What other opportunities exist for learning outside classrooms and laboratories?

### ***Are the exam results consistently good?***

Many parents want to know the answer to this question, but be aware that exam results and league tables do not tell the whole story, so they should be interpreted with care. Some schools are academically selective, so it is no surprise that their exam results are excellent. The majority of independent schools in Scotland are less selective, admitting pupils of mixed abilities, yet they still produce consistently good results. This suggests the quality of teaching is very good. Ensure you choose the right school for your child's abilities. Ask how many pupils leave at age 16 and 18. Where do they go? What percentage progress to higher education? What career paths do they follow?

More information about exam results and school leaver destinations can be seen online at [www.scottishschoolsonline.gov.uk](http://www.scottishschoolsonline.gov.uk)

### ***What size are the classes?***

Observe the number of children in each class you visit. Although most schools will have a 'ceiling' for classes at each age and stage, in practice many teaching groups are smaller. Remember, the pupil : teacher ratio is as important as the class size.

Generally speaking, classes in Primary stages tend to be small with larger intakes at Secondary levels. Subject groups in Senior schools can also be small, giving pupils specialist tuition and individual attention. Try to find out about the learning environment – is it purposeful, are the children well behaved and keen to learn?

Further information about pupil : teacher ratios in independent schools in Scotland can be found in the Scottish Government's Independent Schools Census at [www.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.scotland.gov.uk) Pupil : teacher ratios are consistently lower than average, ranging from 8 to 11 pupils per teacher, depending on the age of the children.

### ***How is good conduct and discipline maintained?***

Ask how good conduct is promoted and maintained at the school. How are any problems resolved? How are parents informed and involved? Does the school foster a "partnership" with parents, to ensure that there is a consistent approach at home and school?

### ***How does the school keep parents informed about children's progress?***

Ask how the school will communicate with you about your child's progress. What level of homework should your child expect? How will teachers keep in touch with you? How frequently are reports and newsletters written and parents evenings held? Is there a parents' association or a channel through which parents can express their views? You should receive a regular supply of information from the school and know the procedures to follow if you have any worries or concerns.

### ***How important are the buildings and equipment?***

Evidence of well equipped classrooms, laboratories, studios and sports facilities will give you a strong indication that a school is forward looking in preparing pupils for the modern world – but remember that the quality of teaching is the most important factor.

### ***At day schools, consider the practicalities - such as transport, before and after school care and lunch arrangements***

Do safe and secure buses transport pupils to school from outlying areas? Is parking available at or near the school? Does the school offer facilities before and after school? What activities can children participate in after school? Is there a dining hall or cafeteria that provides nutritious meals?

### ***At boarding schools, what are the bedrooms and common rooms like?***

If looking at boarding schools, ensure you visit some of the residential accommodation. Are the bedrooms warm and comfortable? Look for signs of personalisation – photos, posters, mementos and cuddly toys. Don't be put off by untidiness – it suggests pupils are "normal" teenagers and that house rules are not needlessly strict. Ask what activities are offered at evenings and weekends to occupy boarders. What are the arrangements for seeing parents or guardians? Ask about catering. If your child has particular dietary requirements you need to be sure the school can meet them. How will your child be looked after if they are ill?

## **After the visit...**

Your visit to a school is bound to generate further questions and you should not hesitate to contact the school again, once you have had time to reflect and to read the information you have received.

Typically, following a visit, many parents want to know about the next stage of the admissions process. What will happen after you submit your application form? When will your child be interviewed or asked to sit an entrance assessment or exam? What are the probable dates and timescales? What will the assessment or exam include? Many parents ask how they can help their child to prepare for it. Will there be an induction day? Some schools have produced written guides that explain what happens step by step, or this information may be given on the website.

Perhaps you are wondering whether financial assistance is available and how to make an application. If so, do not hesitate to ask. There are likely to be firm deadlines for submitting bursary applications – usually in the autumn term before the School's Awards Committee meets to consider all applications received. If applying for financial assistance, you should expect to be asked to complete a detailed form, giving information about both your income and assets. This allows schools to ensure awards are made to families whose need is greatest.

Your decision to choose an independent school is an important one that requires long term financial commitment. Schools are aware of this and sensitive to it, so you should not hesitate to ask any questions.

## **Useful Reference Sources...**

### ***Profiles of Independent Schools in Scotland***

Information about individual schools is available to view online at the website of the Scottish Council of Independent School's at [www.scis.org.uk](http://www.scis.org.uk)

### ***Exam Results and School Leaver Destinations***

Information compiled by Learning Teaching Scotland about exam results and school leaver destinations can be seen online at [www.scottishschoolsonline.gov.uk](http://www.scottishschoolsonline.gov.uk)

### ***Pupil : Teacher Ratios***

A summary of the latest Independent Schools Census, including details of pupil : teacher ratios can be seen at [www.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.scotland.gov.uk)

### ***Inspection Reports***

All schools in Scotland are inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE). Inspection reports can be seen online at [www.hmie.gov.uk](http://www.hmie.gov.uk)

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