



**BEDFORD
FREE SCHOOL**
SERVING BEDFORD & KEMPSTON

Bedford Free School's response to Bedford Borough's Vision for Education



Introduction

First of all, we are extremely grateful for the opportunity to submit a response to the Borough's "A Vision for Education" document, and to contribute to the on-going discussion about the direction the Council should take in this area in the future.

Prior to the cancellation of the Building Schools for the Future programme in July 2010, there was a clear and strong vision as to how schools in the Borough should and would look. The Council took a brave stand regarding how it believed schools should be run and organised for the benefit of students.

It was understandable that a rethink was needed when the investment was withdrawn, and it is good to see the Borough start the process of considering what the educational environment should look like in Bedford & Kempston.

Our response

We agree wholeheartedly with many aspects of the document.

- The Council should retain a strong strategic role in raising standards and outcomes for local children
- We fully endorse the view that they should focus on standards not structures
- We support the Council's stance that sees "all local schools as a family that works together to achieve improvements and resolve any difficulties".

However there are also significant parts which we disagree with or feel that a different or stronger emphasis should have been made.

As our contribution to the Council's consultation on its vision, we outline below our vision for the Borough's education and a few key areas where we wish to add to or differ from the positions taken in the Council's document.

Our vision for Education in the Borough

- **The Council will work to ensure that the Borough is the best place in the country to educate children** – to ensure they have the best life chances possible, particularly given the ever growing global competition for jobs and investment.
- **We believe that only by being bold and ambitious can we create the atmosphere of high expectations and achievement that is required for this to happen.**
- **The Council will take on a role of the strategic Children's Champion** – creating the conditions where the best educational providers are based in Bedford and serving the local community to the benefit of all, to ensure the best outcomes for every child.
- **The Council will not necessarily be involved with running schools or providing services itself, apart from where there is clear and genuine demand for it to do so** – as this would create a conflict of interest with its role as an independent Children's Champion.
- **To ensure schools and other educational organisations can operate as a family, the Council will be concerned with standards, not structures, and so be both structure- and provider-neutral** - it will not distinguish between the kinds of schools and organisations that work in the Borough, but focus on ensuring the very best are involved in the mission to transform outcomes for our children.
- **The Council will use every opportunity to increase the capital available to the local educational system** – by encouraging better use of existing funds, as well as seeking out additional funds from national Government and elsewhere. It will be better placed to do this by being neutral regarding structures and providers.

Additional comments

Confusing language regarding the status of Bedford Free School

Firstly, we are concerned as to why the document refers to Bedford Free School in such uncertain terms:

“...a free school has been given provisional approval by the Department for Education for opening on 1 September 2012.”

“There are currently a range of different governance models... possibly a free school...within the Borough.”

For the purposes of clarity: ***there is no doubt regarding the opening of Bedford Free School.***

Whilst there was a period of uncertainty in early 2011, when the free school was still seeking a site, approval to open was granted in May 2011. The school has been actively recruiting students since September 2011, and is currently carrying out its Statutory Consultation prior to signing a Funding Agreement with the Secretary of State.

All of this has been known to council officers, who we have kept informed since first meeting with them in the summer of 2010. We are concerned that comments such the above reflect either an attempt at party political spin or to create confusion within the Council team – neither of which we feel are appropriate in a document as important as the Vision for Education.

Central government control & the Council’s influence over local schools

Whilst it is true that over time more, if not most, schools will have a direct funding relationship with central government, **we do not believe that the Council should wash its hands of what local children experience in schools in the Borough.** Indeed, it cannot do that as it retains accountability for educational outcomes. We were pleased to note that in the “overall direction of travel” section the Council says that it will work to proactively raise standards within this new world.

Unfortunately, the Vision document then goes on to list the areas where it perceives that it does not have control - it even states it is acting “against a background of diminishing authority”. It gives the distinct impression that the Council will not use its continuing and significant influence, both legal and moral, to ensure that local outcomes catch up with national standards and then start to become internationally competitive. This is a wasted opportunity to make the case on behalf of the Borough’s children for a world-class education system.

Improving standards, increasing diversity and capturing funds for investment

We have already stated that we agree with the Council that it should focus on standards and not structures. We also agree that existing standards are unacceptably low at all key stages, and against national standards and our statistical neighbours. Indeed, it is for these reasons that Bedford Free School has been set up – to add improvement capacity to the local system and benefit local children.

It is with regret then that the Vision document outlines a school improvement service that seems reactive rather than proactive in its approach. Also, despite having stated up front that it is interested in standards and not structures, it singles out some governance structures – in particular free schools – as being of concern, due to the potential impact it feels they may have on funding and investment in other schools.

We see the situation very differently – **the council should view new developments as a way of gaining extra money into the Borough’s education system.** It can do nothing about previous promises of funding lost (like

Building Schools for the Future); it can do everything to ensure Bedford gains at least its share of what will be available over time.

For example, Bedford Free School has successfully secured significant funding to procure and refurbish a site. We chose to procure Bedford College – rather than a national project management company - to project manage most aspects of the school's opening programme. We are attracting applications for places from parents who currently educate their children outside of the Borough's schools – including private schools.

All of this means *extra* money coming into the local education system – and it has been a deliberate goal of ours from the start.

Indeed, we stated in our earliest conversations with the Mayor, Council members and officers that our preferred solution was to use our capital funding to procure an existing school site, to manage their fears of excess capacity and to fund improvements in other existing schools. We were surprised and disappointed that this offer was not taken up.

The amount of devolved capital from central government available for the foreseeable future is likely to remain low, and so we hope the Council will be neutral towards other new developments like us that will surely happen.