

***Consultation***



**BEDFORD**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

# **A Vision for Education in the Borough**

**Consultation Draft – January 2012**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This document sets out Bedford Borough Council's vision for education in the Borough. The vision encompasses an extremely positive strategic role for the Council, which retains overall accountability to parents and children for standards of education in the Borough. We are committed to delivering real improvement and development for all children and young people through our focus on standards not structures as the key to high quality education. Central to the vision is the Council's view of all local schools as a "family" that works together to achieve improvements and resolve any difficulties. This involves schools collaborating and driving up standards overall, bringing benefits across all communities.

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

### **Increasing Control by Central Government**

Education policy has always been dominated by central government. This trend towards increasing central control has accelerated under the current government, which has put a lot of pressure onto schools to consider changing their status to become academies or university technical colleges (UTCs) and strongly encouraged the establishment of free schools. Similarly, education funding is largely under central government control, for example the current fair funding proposals are expected to limit the capacity of local authorities (LAs) to target funding on local areas of greatest need.

## Current Standards

The three year trend of performance compared with our statistical neighbours and national data is shown below. Whilst Bedford Borough (including previously as part of Bedfordshire) has historically under-performed in terms of educational attainment, current trends do show improving performance in most areas, although levels of attainment are still below those of our statistical neighbours<sup>1</sup> and leave us performing below the national average in the important areas of Key Stage 2 (KS2) and Key Stage 4 (KS4) results.

**Bedford Borough LA Educational Attainment Recent Trends**

Key Stage	Indicator		2009	2010	2011 <sup>2</sup>
					provisional
Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYSFP)	% Achieving 78 points or more and 6+ in Personal, Social and Emotional Development and Communication Language and Literacy Scales	Bedford Borough LA	46.7	54	55.8
		Statistical Neighbours	56.6	60.4	Not Available
		England (Maintained)	52	56	Not Available
KS1	Overall Average Point Score (Reading, Writing and Mathematics)	Bedford Borough LA	15.7	15.7	15.6
		Statistical Neighbours	15.6	15.6	15.7
		England (Maintained)	15.3	15.3	15.3
KS2	% Achieving Level 4 and above in both English and Mathematics	Bedford Borough LA	66.9	70.1	68.5
		Statistical Neighbours	73.3	74.6	75.2
		England (Maintained)	72	73	74
KS4	% Achieving 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent inc. English and Mathematics	Bedford Borough LA	48.1	50.8	56.0
		Statistical Neighbours	54.9	59.3	63.3
		England (Maintained)	49.8	53.4	57.9
KS5	Average Point Score per entry	Bedford Borough LA	202.3	204.5	208.8
		Statistical Neighbours	208.8	212.3	214.1
		England (Maintained)	211.7	214.4	212.4

Despite evidence of improvement, these outcomes are far from what we as a Borough would wish to see and what our parents and young people have every reason to expect. Many reasons have been expressed and many individuals hold strong views, but there is clear consensus that there is plenty of scope for improvement, and that this is achievable.

Ofsted published its children's services assessment for 2011 on 8 November 2011. Ofsted recognised that the very large majority of these services and institutions inspected are good or better; the improvement in Key Stage 4 and 5 results; and the successful second annual inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements. Overall, Bedford Borough Council's Children's Services were assessed as "performing well".

<sup>1</sup> Statistical Neighbours (SN) are other LAs identified by the DfE as being sufficiently demographically similar to Bedford Borough to enable meaningful comparison. (SN are Bromley, Hertfordshire, Kent, Milton Keynes, Northamptonshire, Stockport, Sutton, Swindon, Trafford and Warwickshire).

<sup>2</sup>The 2011 achievements in maintained schools including academies (excludes hospital schools, Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Provision)

## **Current Developments in Structure of Education/Schooling in the Borough**

We already have a “mixed economy” of schools and academies in Bedford Borough. There has been a pattern of diversity for many years including Voluntary Aided schools, Church Voluntary Controlled schools, Trust schools, and Foundation schools. Until very recently we had a single lower/middle/upper system. Primary and secondary schools have recently been created (Putnoe Primary School and the Mark Rutherford School with an additional entry point for some children aged 11) and Great Denham Primary School will open in 2012. The Bedford Academy pyramid will change to a primary/secondary arrangement, with the Academy to become a secondary school in 2014. The Catholic Federation is developing some similar proposals, and some schools are converting to academies with additional freedoms or are exploring the possibility of so doing. St Thomas More has recently become a teaching school and a free school has been given provisional approval by the Department for Education for opening on 1 September 2012. There may be Technical Academies and UTCs on the near horizon. The pace of increasing diversity can be expected to accelerate (at least in the short term).

## **Current Developments in Capital Funding**

The Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme was terminated by central government but the impact of the James Review is still to be finally determined. Current indications are that the government will be allocating most of the limited available capital funding on the basis of either basic need or condition, with any transformational work limited and centrally controlled. The clear direction is that there is likely to be insufficient capital funding to make further significant investment in our schools in the short to medium term beyond what is already planned.

## **Overall direction of travel**

All of these factors have led to great uncertainty. Where previously the Council had the power and authority to determine structures and working arrangements, it has increasingly been required to devolve some of this authority to individual institutions, each of which has ultimate responsibility to its own stakeholders. This will inevitably lead to tensions within the education sector, which the Council has diminishing authority to resolve even when it is best placed to do so.

In addition, much of the current debate is focused on structures rather than standards. Changing structures alone is unlikely in itself to improve standards, or not at least to the extent to which the Council aspires. The Council will always want, at all times, in all places, and as often as possible, to emphasise the overriding importance of improving standards.

The Council has a fundamental choice: it can either accept that it now only has responsibility for certain limited aspects of education, and react to events as they unfold; or it can work proactively within the limits of its authority according to law and regulation, as influencer and commissioner and in some circumstances provider, to take every possible step to ensure that children and young people receive the best possible education.

The Council believes that it can best serve the needs of its residents by taking the latter approach. This document sets out the issues to be addressed and the ways in which this can be achieved.

## **CURRENT ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED**

### **Objective and Role of Council**

The Council's overriding objective is that the best possible education is provided for every child and young person in the Borough.

The Council works in partnership with local schools in the provision of education in the Borough. This role encompasses supporting parents and families by promoting a good supply of strong schools with sufficient places so that there is fair access for all children across the Borough, making use of its democratic mandate by standing up for the interests of parents and children, supporting vulnerable children, supporting any Local Authority (LA) maintained schools with education attainment below the floor standard<sup>3</sup>, supporting schools wishing to collaborate, and developing its own self improving strategies.

Although the Council is not itself a direct provider of mainstream education, it exercises part of its strategic role by providing schools with a wide range of education related services. These services include admissions, statements, school improvement and music. In some cases the Council is required by law to provide the service (such as the coordination of admission arrangements); in other cases (such as the Music Service) it may be in the best interests of all concerned.

Governing bodies are responsible for the conduct of all school activities, and are accountable to their stakeholders (parents, staff, trustees, community and in the case of LA maintained schools to the LA). The Council views this aspect of local governance as essential to the proper management of schools and improving standards. The Council has for a long time fully acknowledged that it is no longer empowered to be directly involved with operational issues at individual school level, and will never seek to dictate to schools, unless required to by law or regulation.

The Council welcomes the Government's expressed desire to see as much power as possible devolved to local communities (the Localism agenda), and views this as a further stage in a long term trend to encourage schools, as far as possible, to take direct responsibility for the delivery of education provision within the school. But equally, the Council believes that it does have a lot to offer schools in delivering against their own goals and objectives. The Council does not wish to "contract out" education in its entirety, such that all schools are encouraged to convert to academies, and thus the relationship between the LA and its schools is reduced to a series of arms length commercial and administrative arrangements.

The Council views the Borough's schools as a family, and the Council's role will generally be to facilitate and enable and, where necessary and possible, to commission services. As with all families, some branches are closer than others, and different members will have different views and opinions. But the use of the term family in this context articulates something that the Council feels strongly, and knows is shared by the Borough's schools and their communities, which is that there is a common belief that by working together they will be best placed to deliver education across our collective communities. This is clearly demonstrated by the collaboration across the Bedford Borough Learning Exchange, in which all schools and settings, including the independent sector, are represented.

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<sup>3</sup> Minimum standard expected by the Department for Education at each Key Stage.

## **Improving Standards**

The Council maintains and will continue to develop a robust school improvement strategy, through which schools (and governing bodies) are provided with the necessary elements of support and challenge and then held to account for their performance. Although in recent years there has been a marked reduction in the Council's statutory powers and a general restructuring of education provision, sufficient resources have been retained and will continue to be retained within the Council's school improvement team to enable the provision of targeted support.

All schools are capable of self-improvement. Central government is clear that the primary responsibility for school improvement rests in each school with the Head teacher and the governing body. It is increasing the pressure on schools to improve performance by lifting the floor standards across Key Stages and introducing the English Baccalaureate, which will in time be a key indicator of school performance at Key Stage 4. Schools that lack sufficient internal capacity for the necessary level of self-improvement may obtain appropriate support as part of a trust or other collaborative arrangement. The LA or a teaching school may provide additional capacity.

The Council's school improvement team assesses the current standards of each school, and uses these assessments to direct resources towards individual schools and curriculum areas currently in most need of improvement. Schools causing concern are expected to produce improvement plans with direct support from the school improvement team.

Because of the importance of standards in schools to the Council, the school improvement team is itself also held to account for its work. This process principally involves intensive internal review and scrutiny, but could also include inviting Head teachers and chairs of governors of any maintained school to explain their current performance to the LA. Whilst the LA has no power to require this, the Council believes that such an approach is fair to all concerned, and a key element of maintaining democratic accountability.

Through this approach, the LA is able to provide significant value to its communities through its ability and capacity to help maintained LA schools facing particular challenges. Without this, it may be inevitable that there would be some schools assessed by Ofsted as needing special measures to secure the necessary improvements. Unless the necessary improvements could be secured within a short time (usually a year), the Department for Education (DfE) has powers to close a school, with the resulting potentially traumatic impact on the education of the pupils in that school at that time, and on the wider community.

## **Responding to Increasing Diversity**

There are currently a range of different governance models (Church Voluntary Aided/Controlled federations (both hard and soft), trusts, academies and possibly a free school) and school structures (primary/secondary and lower/middle/upper) within the Borough. The Council believes that no single structure or governance model will necessarily be right for every part of the Borough, and will therefore make every effort to accommodate and support different governance models and structures. All governing bodies will of course continue to be accountable to their stakeholders, whichever governance model is chosen, and it is particularly important that all governing bodies are properly representative of the communities that they serve.

The Council is concerned about the potential impacts of academies/free schools on other schools that continue with their existing governance arrangements. In relation to academies, which will be converted from existing schools, this concern is partly financial, whereby the funding available to the Council to help other schools causing concern or

otherwise needing support will be greatly reduced. Economies of scale may also be lost, leading to less productive use of available resources. It is also partly related to the concern that by making use of additional powers, such as those relating to admissions policies, the creation of academies will make it more difficult for the LA to support a coordinated and cohesive Borough wide strategy for the development and improvement of education across the Borough. In relation to free schools, which will be new establishments, the Council is concerned that they will create additional (and currently not needed) school places, and extract pupils and hence funding from existing schools, thus potentially damaging existing schools' sustainability and financial viability to the detriment of current and future pupils and their communities.

### **Investing in our Schools**

All clusters have aspirations for investment in their schools, and the extent to which the Council can deliver against these will always be limited by funds available. Except where new schools are required to be built for new housing developments, the Council has historically been primarily reliant on central government to provide significant capital investment funding.

The overriding priority is investment that will have a clearly demonstrable impact on improving educational standards. Within this overarching goal, current priorities are LA maintained special schools, where the premises are clearly not suitable for purpose, and assisting clusters with the restructuring necessary to implement local solutions clearly designed to improve standards where resources allow, and some investment on this basis is included in the Council's current Capital Programme.

In selecting individual projects to take forward, the Council aims to formulate and communicate clear decision making criteria and apply these as transparently as possible. The Council is identifying approaches to procurement that will be able to maximise the value for money of these investments from the available funding.

As we know, the Council currently has very limited resources available, and, in the immediate future, there will be a focus on supporting requirements for new school places and essential maintenance of the schools estate.

### **CONCLUSION**

This document sets out a vision for continuing improvement in education in Bedford Borough. It demonstrates that, against a background of diminishing authority and growing diversity, the Council is still able to produce a coherent picture of development of successful schools and academies serving the needs of our children and young people. Further, it provides a frame of reference within which individual schools and academies, and their clusters, and families and parents and other stakeholders, can see where they currently stand and how they should plan for the future.