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Sue Harrison  
Director of Children's Services  
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20 January 2020

**Reference: Bedfordshire Schools Trust (BEST) Response to Central Bedfordshire Council's Schools for the Future (Shefford and Stotfold and surrounding area Cluster) Consultation**

Dear Sue

The Bedfordshire Schools Trust (BEST) comprises nine schools, a Teaching School and National Support School, a School Centred Initial Teacher Training Centre, two nurseries and a Charity. As such, it represents a community of approximately 6000 young people and their families and 600 staff members. Within the Shefford and Stotfold cluster of schools over 60 percent of pupils/students attend a BEST school.

Our response to the Schools for the Future (SFF) Consultation is outlined below. BEST did not respond to the SFF online survey, given the importance of this decision, the complexities involved and the need to have absolute clarity. Decisions directly impacting on the future of our children cannot be made in haste or with uncertainty.

BEST supports a move towards a two-tier Primary-Secondary model of education, implemented in a fully coordinated way. This would facilitate the recruitment and training of high-quality members of staff and align our schools to the national assessment framework delivering clarity for pupils and parents/carers. However, BEST does have a number of concerns with the plan as presented. To address these, we have structured our response, in terms of the stated aims of the plan: *'to make sure we have the right schools, in the right places, delivering the best education'*. (Schools for the Future Consultation, CBC 2019-20: p1)

- a. Right schools.** BEST believes that the plan does not reflect parental preferences, the best use of public funds or the quality of education provided over time. Referencing two BEST schools as examples. Firstly, Robert Bloomfield Academy (RBA) has a pupil admission number (PAN) of 240 pupils and year-on-year is significantly oversubscribed, possessing sizeable waiting lists. For 2020-21, the school currently has 274<sup>1</sup> first choice applications for the 240 available places. Yet, the proposed plan is to

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<sup>1</sup> The figures do not include second and third preferences, which are substantial. For 2020-21, the numbers for RBA and SWA are 70 and 61 respectively, for instance. Nor, do they include the significant number of applications from non-CBC families. For example, between 2017-18 and 2019-20, the numbers for RBA and SWA were 37-33-34 and 32-39-28 respectively.



reduce the PAN to 150 pupils. Incredulity is magnified, when one considers that RBA is graded Outstanding by Ofsted over three consecutive inspections. Secondly, Samuel Whitbread Academy (SWA) was expanded to meet CBC’s rising demand for pupil places through the Public Finance Initiative (PFI) and in partnership with CBC. Again, year-on-year the school is over-subscribed. For 2020-21, SWA has 457 first choice applications for the 400 pupil places available. SWA is graded Good by Ofsted. Yet, the proposed plan reduces the PAN at SWA to 210, causing significant disruption and leaving SWA to finance a PFI debt of approximately £1m per annum and rising annually at the rate of inflation (retail price index excluding mortgage interest payments - RPIX). In both cases, there will be many disappointed pupils and parents and demoralising, time-consuming and costly appeals processes.

- b. **Right places.** BEST is highly sceptical of CBC’s pupil place forecasts. Getting these wildly inaccurate, as per BEST’s experience, has a damaging impact on the quality of education. The forecasts continue to change, which one might expect to a degree, but they are significantly inaccurate. To illustrate, with regard to another two BEST schools. In recent years, in response to pupil place demand, CBC requests and at significant cost to the public purse, Etonbury Academy (ETA) expanded its capacity from 360 to 1260 pupils, with year group sizes doubling from 90 to 180 pupils. However, the introduction of Pix Brook Academy (PBA) in 2019-20 has split the intake in two. The impact on ETA has been to both reduce the number in Y5 to 157 in 2019-20 and the number of first choice applications to 86 for 2020-21. Significant excess capacity is/will be available in both year groups. PBA is currently being built to meet a CBC identified (and signed-off by the Secretary of State) shortfall in pupil places of 184 in 2019-20; 226 in 2020-21; and 374 in 2021-22 (CBC PBA support letter, 21 November 2016). These numbers are not there. PBA has 61 pupils in 2019-20, 118 first choice applications for 2020-21 and significant spare capacity. However, according to the forecasts there should be a demand of 184 pupils in one year group and 226 in the other. Even if one accepts CBC’s figures as being accurate, there are already sufficient Secondary pupil places in the system until 2023. Any expansion prior to 2023, by any school would create further surplus pupil places, unnecessary costs and potentially undermine the quality of education provided by existing ‘Good’ and ‘Outstanding’ schools.
- c. **Delivering the best education.** With respect to BEST schools, comparing pre- and post- two-tier figures, the two-tier change results in a fall of 990 pupils at an annual net loss of £4 822 860<sup>2</sup>. This would seriously destabilise BEST and undermine the progress made over the last three years. Schools within BEST would be impacted on in different ways, with it being very severe in some cases. With respect to PBA (which is a new Free School, not due to open on its permanent site until September 2020), when this plan comes to fruition there would be a fall of 510 pupils at an annual net shortfall of £2 176 170. Funds were applied for and granted by central government to provide education for 1260 pupils not 750<sup>3</sup> as described in the CBC plan (or 780<sup>4</sup> as on the CBC website). Such extreme change, in such a short time frame will inevitably impact on the quality of education.

For these reasons, BEST does not believe that the plan fulfils its stated objectives of *‘the right schools, in the right places, delivering best the education’*. Moreover, we suggest that implemented in this way, the plan will destabilise schools and damage educational provision across the Shefford and Stotfold area. However, we do believe that the two-tier transformation may be successfully achieved once there is surety

<sup>2</sup> To offer clarity and discuss facts, the figures compare all schools at full capacity, in all year groups, once the plan has been implemented. Of course, in practical terms during the transition period the numbers will be different. The net loss figure would be offset to a degree by any realised growth in Sixth Form numbers. However, against any reduction, the costs of staff relocation – with protected salaries - and redundancy payments must be considered. Approximately 83 teaching staff across BEST would be directly impacted on by the proposed plan.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Have your say’. (CBC, 2020, p 4)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.schoolsforthefuture.co.uk/plans/shefford-stotfold/proposed-changes>, accessed 17 January, 2020.



in pupil numbers and sufficient time is allowed to ensure due diligence is efficiently and effectively completed.

Since Spring 2018, BEST has worked with CBC on the SFF project. Over this time a number of plans have been considered. Yet, only one is presented. As described and for the reasons outlined, we cannot support this plan. It is insufficiently developed. Further, it is difficult to understand and almost impossible to adequately prepare for in the timescales envisaged. The impact on others, of a school implementing a significant age range change in 2021, when we are part way through a public consultation in 2020 does not seem sensible. Consequently, to support a way forward, BEST strongly proposes a return to the original, agreed and coordinated SFF Plan of:

- i. September 2022 – Lower schools retain Y4 into Y5
- ii. September 2023 – Lower schools retain Y5 into Y6
- iii. September 2024 – All secondary schools admit new Y7 cohort.

*(Schools for the Future, CBC, 02.10.18: p23)*

This position of all schools moving in unison is supported by the consistent feedback BEST has received through individual schools, Open Evenings and an Online Survey (with 4119 responses, 85.2% in support). Feedback has repeatedly emphasised the need for more detailed and comprehensive information, the importance of getting the process right and that this will take time. The proposed approach would provide time to gain surety over the demand for pupil places, consider all the implications of change and do just that: get it right for our children, they deserve no less.

Yours sincerely



Ilona Bond  
Chair, Trustees



Alan Lee  
CEO, BEST

**Cc:**

Arlesey, Shefford, Stotfold and Langford Councillors  
Councillor Sue Clark, Executive Member for Families, Education and Childcare  
Dame Kate Dethridge, Regional Schools Commissioner, NWLSC  
Joe Farrell, Department of Education  
Joceline Perrot, New Schools Network

