

Department of Community Services

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Date: 31st August 2004

Dear Ms Maguire

REVIEW OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PLACES IN STEVENAGE

I am writing to confirm Stevenage Borough Council's response to your consultation on a review of primary school places in Stevenage.

Firstly, I should like to thank your officers, Mr Lindsay Martin in particular, for the time spent in briefing Borough Council Members and Officers. Mr Martin attended a meeting of our Partnership and Community Scrutiny Panel and a subsequent meeting of our Scrutiny Overview Committee in July. The issues were discussed in some detail at these meetings and this has helped to inform our response as set out in this letter.

The Borough Council does not feel that the preferred options set out in your consultation document are in the best interests of the Stevenage children and their families that they affect for the reasons stated in this letter.

Furthermore, the Council feels that the consultation has been unsatisfactory both in content and timing. Those in the south of the town have been offered no choice; those in the centre have been heavily led towards one option. The consultation document did not, in our view, set out the issues in an even handed way and was heavily weighted towards the County Council's preferred options. It would have been much better if people had been asked what size and type of schools they wanted before being given very specific proposals.

The Council believes that there is a strong case for greater investment in education in Stevenage and challenges whether the projected number of primary school places stated as being needed will help to raise educational standards.

The ODPM index of deprivation 2004 shows a high level of education, training and skills deprivation in Stevenage compared with the rest of the County. Educational achievement levels are lower than they are for the county in general. The Bedwell area and parts of the Broadwater area are amongst the 20% most deprived areas in England for education, training and skills (Source: Source: ODPM 2004 – details attached).

The Community Strategy for Stevenage clearly identifies raising educational achievement in the town as a key priority. Improving on measures such as raising GCSE scores and the numbers entering higher education will not be achieved and sustained without the required resources at primary level.

You state in your consultation document:

“The County Council considers that the level of surplus places in the centre and the south needs to be reduced to support schools’ improvement efforts and to enable them to operate more efficiently and effectively.”

At first sight, this seems to imply that the County Council is claiming that bigger schools will result in improved levels of educational attainment. The Council refutes this and believes that smaller pupil/teacher ratios are one of the keys to improving standards. Lindsay Martin conceded at a meeting with members of this Council on 26th July that the County Council was not claiming that there was a causal relationship between school size and performance of pupils but that it had taken into account that larger schools could provide a wider range of staff skills and activities, were more financially robust and made more efficient use of buildings. On the contrary, primary schools in Stevenage have been making good educational use of any extra space that has resulted from falling rolls. Examples include ICT., music and libraries.

Reading between the lines, it would seem that financial considerations, not educational considerations, are driving this review. We would be interested to know the comparative level of funding per primary school pupil in Stevenage and that in each of the other nine Hertfordshire districts. We would also be very interested to know what is considered to be the minimum viable size of a primary school in Stevenage and that in other districts.

The Borough Council is concerned that the same pupils who may be affected as a result of this review will also have their later education disrupted following the anticipated review of secondary education. What connections are being made between the two reviews? A holistic review with the overarching aim of raising educational attainment in Stevenage is preferred.

The Borough Council believes that more time is needed for alternative proposals to emerge and calls upon the County Council to defer a decision on these matters when it meets on 11th October 2004. This will allow time for a wider range of options to be presented to the public in a fair and even handed manner. Important factors such as safe and desirable walking and cycling routes and bus routes must be taken into account. Far from promoting the ‘community cohesion’ referred to in your consultation document, these proposals have undermined public confidence and belief that the County Council is genuinely committed to raising educational standards in Stevenage.

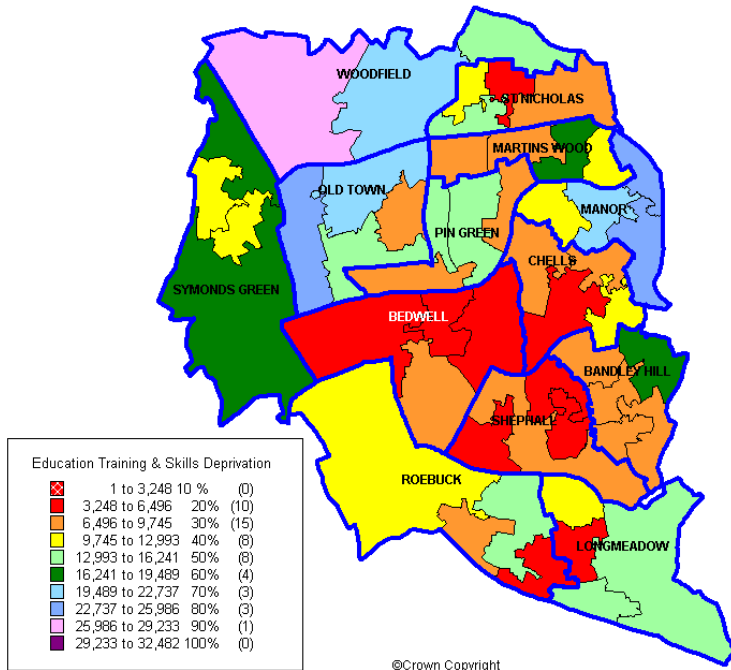
In summary, the Borough Council calls upon the County Council to address head on the disparity between educational standards in Stevenage and those in the rest of Hertfordshire. The County Council needs to invest more money on education in Stevenage than in other parts of Hertfordshire to this end.

Yours sincerely,

JOHN BENTLEY
Head of Community Development

Cc: Caroline Tapster, Chief Executive, Hertfordshire County Council
John Harris, Director, CSF, Hertfordshire County Council
Justin Donovan, Assistant Director, CSF, Hertfordshire County Council

Education Training & Skills Deprivation 2004 Mapped By Super Output Areas



Those in the red area are in one of the 20% most deprived areas in England for education, training and skills (Source: ODPM 2004).