

**DfES Five Year Strategy:**  
**Consultation on Proposals for Expanding Popular and Successful**  
**Schools and Adding Sixth Forms**

**Draft response from East Sussex County Council**

**Expansion of popular schools**

East Sussex County Council (ESCC) does not oppose in principle the expansion of popular schools. As in many LEAs, the East Sussex School Organisation Plan has included from its first edition a presumption in favour of locating new school places in popular and successful schools. However, the Plan also recognises that in applying this principle proper account must be taken of the effect of expansion on other schools, the implications for the opportunities available for pupils in those schools and the efficient use of resources, in particular capital resources. While the desire for speedier procedures may be understood, there must be sufficient time for these important factors to be properly and carefully considered.

Successive Governments have sought to resolve the ‘surplus places in neighbouring schools’ dilemma. Essentially, increased opportunity for some through extra places at a popular school may well result in reduced opportunities for others in a neighbouring school which suffers further decline as a result. The concerns about a ‘spiral of decline’ identified in the Secretary of State’s announcement on 18 November, with some schools already under pressure having to admit more challenging pupils while other more popular schools are able to claim that they are full, is but one reason why changes to the balance of places between schools cannot be a simple matter of ‘popular’ and ‘less popular’. Co-operative arrangements between schools to share challenging pupils are tried and tested in East Sussex as elsewhere, and sometimes work well, sometimes not.

LEAs in implementing their Education Development Plans will be seeking to help ‘less popular’ schools address the issues with which they are faced. Through the process of school places planning and the development of strategies for Building Schools for the Future, they will be considering whether less popular schools can be reduced in size or even closed. As with so much of the work carried out by LEAs with schools, this frequently depends upon collaboration between schools and an understanding of the need for all schools within an area to thrive. Individual school expansion proposals can cut across or undermine such collaboration, making it more difficult for the schools themselves and the LEA to ‘tackle any consequences’.

It is difficult to see how ‘compelling objective evidence’ of a damaging effect on standards overall in an area can be presented before the damage has occurred. As with the factors described above, there is a need for careful local judgement about the likely balance of benefit and harm arising from the proposals, and School Organisation Committees must be permitted to take this into account if there is not to be a growing imbalance of opportunity for students in an area.

There is insufficient consideration of the capital requirements of a policy to allow the expansion of popular schools. The consultation paper states in paragraph 7 that ‘There will continue to be dedicated capital available for secondary schools which want to expand under these arrangements’. However, the funding available is acknowledged by the Department to amount only to around 25% of the likely cost of a typical one form entry expansion project.

If LEAs are to make up the difference, this is likely to be at the expense of higher priorities already identified in their Asset Management Plan. As LEAs (with DfES encouragement) also now plan their capital programmes on at least a four year rolling basis, it will be difficult to accommodate funding for proposals which emerge in the course of a plan period. If the DfES exercises its discretion to make up the difference, and then effectively claws this back through reduced support for the LEA's overall funding, the effect will be the same.

Because the implications of an expansion of popular schools policy are more complex than they may first appear, it is important that the right amount of time is taken to consider proposals carefully. The proposals for a 12 week process are too tight for this, and given the capital requirements (and the regulations in the Code of Practice on the publication of admission numbers) this shortening is unlikely to bring forward the actual date from which additional places would be available. The apparent effect is to close down debate about changes which could have a profound effect on opportunities for many students in an area, and it is hard to see why this could be considered in any way desirable.

The draft guidance is silent on the need for consultation prior to making a proposal, and the information that governing bodies must provide in support of their proposal. As with our comments on the proposals for foundation schools, we believe that both are essential. They need not be excessively burdensome on governing bodies, but should be sufficient for all to understand the implications of what is proposed, and to allow for an informed local debate. We assume that the Department will issue guidance to governing bodies on making proposals, and would welcome the opportunity to comment on this.

The draft guidance is also silent on the need to make allowances for holiday periods in the calculation of deadlines. We assume that such allowances will have to be made, and this should be stated in the guidance to governing bodies and School Organisation Committees.

### **Addition of new sixth forms**

The number of schools qualifying under the criteria set out in paragraph 12 of the consultation paper is likely to be small. Nevertheless, where there is a proposal for a new sixth form this may have a significant impact on local patterns of provision, unless it forms part of locally agreed strategies and plans arising from Strategic Area Reviews and 14 – 19 area inspection reports.

The paper is remarkably silent on the role of the local LSC, which holds the duty to plan for the strategic provision of post-16 education and training in its area. By the time the proposed amendments come into effect, local LSCs will be well advanced with their programmes of Strategic Area Reviews, and the development of strategic plans arising from these. In recognition of the importance the DfES attaches to the strategic planning role of local LSCs, the guidance should require School Organisation Committees and Adjudicators to take into account these strategic plans in their consideration of new sixth form proposals.

Related to this, we welcome the references in paragraph 14 to the importance of partnership and collaborative working between providers. We suggest that governing bodies should be required to set out in any documentation in support of their proposals how they propose to achieve this objective, and that the guidance to School Organisation Committees should require them to satisfy themselves that it will be met.

We would make the same comments as in our comments on the popular school expansion proposals above on the importance of prior consultation and supporting documentation to be provided by governing bodies.

There is no mention at all in this part of the paper of the need to consider the capital implications of new sixth form proposals. Elsewhere in the existing guidance to School Organisation Committees there is stated the general principle that the Committee must satisfy itself that capital funding is available to implement a proposal before approving it. We assume that this applies equally to new sixth form proposals, but it would be helpful for this to be stated clearly in this part of the guidance also, especially as another proposal in the Five Year Strategy is that responsibility for capital funding of new sixth forms should transfer to the LSC.

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